

Word Study on Hell and Hades

γέεννα: pronounced “gě ěn ă” or more commonly “gě hěn ă” = in English, “hell”

Ἅδης: pronounced “hā dās” = in English, “Hades”

Read: 2 Kings 16:1-4, 21:1-9, 23:10

2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6

Jeremiah 7:30-34; 19:1-12; 32:35

γέεννα (hell) is found in:

Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33

Mark 9:43, 45, 47

Luke 12:5

James 3:6

Ἅδης (Hades) is found in:

Matthew 11:23

Luke 10:15, 16:23

Acts 2:27, 31

Revelation 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14

γέεννα is a Greek form of an Aramaic word/name given to the “Wadi er-rababi” (a “wadi” is a swamp-like area, or the area close to a swampy area) in South Jerusalem, which later acquired a bad reputation because sacrifices were offered in it to Moloch in the days of Ahaz and Manasseh (see 2 Kings 16:3 and 21:6)¹ Threats of divine judgment uttered over this sinister valley (see Jeremiah 7:30-34) are the reason why the valley of γέεννα (because of pronunciation difficulties in translating, sometimes called the “Valley of Hinnom” or “Gehinnom”) came to be equated, from the 2nd century B.C. onward, with the hell of the last judgment. “The name gehinnom thus came to be used for thefire of hell.”²

There is a sharp distinction between γέεννα and Ἅδης in the NT. The distinction is that “Hades receives the ungodly only for the intervening period between death and resurrection, whereas Gehenna is their place of punishment in the last judgment; the judgment of the former is thus provisional and the latter eternal (Mk 9:43). It is then believed that the souls of the ungodly are outside the body in Hades, whereas in Gehenna both body and soul, reunited at the resurrection, are [then] destroyed by eternal fire.” (Kittel, 658)

“γέεννα is pre-existent (Mt. 25:41). It is manifested as the fiery abyss...only after the general resurrection... and the last judgment... Those who fall victim to divine judgment at the last day will there be destroyed by everlasting fire. The ungodly are υἱὸν γέεννης (sons of gehenna), together with Satan and the demons (Mt. 25:41; 8:29; Rev. 19:20, 20:10, 14f., into which the ungodly, Satan, the beast and his prophet, death and hell are thrown).” (Kittel, 658)

The purpose of any descriptions of the torments of hell is only to “rouse consciences to fear of the wrath of the heavenly Judge (Mt. 10:28). The severity of the judgment of God on sin is expressed by Jesus in His threatening of γέεννα even to disciples who wound their brothers with contemptuous words (Mt. 5:22). No sacrifice is too costly in the war against sin (Mt. 9:43ff).” (Kittel, 658)

The above material is taken essentially verbatim from the New Testament Greek reference book cited below. The reference set to which it belongs is considered to be one of the premier sources on NT Greek word meanings, and Dr. Kittel, editor, is one of the leading authorities as are his associates who produced this great and authoritative volume set.

I have now a few comments to make. First off, the concept/place of gehenna is a revelation of God via a development of thought in and through Scripture,³ rather than something God just sat down and explicitly spelled out to one of his prophets, or provided to us through Jesus' words. There is no clear definition in a single spot, yet nonetheless a striking clear.

Also, hopefully it is clear that Hades is kind of like a holding place in the "in between period", between earthly death and the final judgment. Gehenna is the final place in which the ungodly, etc. will experience unimaginable eternal fire and torment forever.

To some this seems kind of harsh. Yet when we see the earthly results of evil,⁴ is this not a statement of how greatly God hates evil and sin? On top of that, Jesus himself, God in the flesh, threatened even his own disciples with it. Overall, the Christian Church of today down plays the severity with which God views sin and the consequences of it. From the preaching of many pulpits, a person might get the idea that Jesus just only loves us and only desires that we love him and each other. While that is true, this "cuddly, cute, fuzzi-ball" view of Jesus ignores the side of him that says he hates sin with a passion, a deadly passion for those who forever ignore him and his message in its entirety. His forbearance for our time on earth will give way to the judgement in final judgment.

It's interesting that in the 18th century there seems to have been too much focus on judgment and eternal fire with too little on love and grace, and that, conversely, in the 20th century there has been too much focus on the "teddy-bear" Jesus and too little warning about judgment and fire. Why do you suppose it is so difficult to see a balance, to see Jesus/God in his whole person and take him at his whole word?⁵

End Notes

1. Worshipping idols or other gods was one of the three worst things the Israelites could do! That would really tick God off!!! It violates the first and foremost of all the Commandments.
2. Kittel, Gerhard, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, volume 1, p. 657.
3. Another instance of thought development as opposed to outright explanation is the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Nowhere in Scripture is the term "purgatory" used or explained. However, this Roman Catholic doctrine claims to be based on a type of developmental theory, and that grounded in Scripture and as an answer to the question of what happens to a person between the point of death and the resurrection and Judgment Day.
4. Hitler, Nazism, Stalin, Communism, and the way greed of the world works to the detriment of the poor and down-trodden are just a few examples- name your own!
5. I have a theory drawn from the OT. When a people is prosperous and things are going well, people think they don't need God. Only when they are in trouble, do they cry out for help. In prosperous times, people don't want to hear about "judgment and fire." There is a consequence of this reality which I hope is not so subtle as to be missed. Material wealth and earthly security are much more of a grave spiritual danger than many realize. While it is not so with every individual, earthly wealth and security is a spiritual road block for many, if not most. Read 2 Timothy 4:1-8.