

So Let's Talk A Little Bit About The Word "Hell"

Description

This article is the 4th part of a 9 part series on Universal Restoration vs Eternal Torment (hell). I recommend reading [the introduction](#) first if you haven't already. (*link below*)

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The Greek and Hebrew Words for "hell"

There are four words in the bible that have been translated "hell". The first two are the words "[Sheol](#)" and "[Hades](#)".

Sheol

According to Strongs Exhaustive Concordance, the definition of Sheol is:

1. sheol, underworld, grave, hell, pit
 1. **the underworld**
 2. Sheol – **the OT designation for the abode of the dead**

Notice there is nothing about torment here. There's nothing at all because that's not what these words mean. As you can see from their definitions, they simply mean the place of the dead; nothing more, nothing less.

Sheol in the old Testament was the place where BOTH the wicked and righteous went. This is seen in Genesis. This next verse is Jacob's response to Joseph's requirement that his youngest son Benjamin must go to Egypt.

Genesis 42:38

38 But Jacob said, “My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair **down to Sheol** in sorrow.”

Jacob was one of the patriarchs and he said he would go “down to Sheol in sorrow.” Again, that’s because Sheol is simply death or the place of the dead, not punishment.

Hades

And the definition of Hades is:

- name Hades or Pluto, the god of the lower regions
- Orcus, **the nether world, the realm of the dead**
- later use of this word: the grave, death, hell

Hades is the exact same as Sheol. This can be seen because in Revelation, because Hades is thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 20:14

14 Then death and **Hades were thrown into the lake of fire**. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

So if hell has the lake of fire, then Hades can’t be hell because Hades was thrown into the lake of fire. You can’t throw something into itself because that’s impossible.

The only place that might allow Hades to be hell/torment is the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. However, since it’s likely just a parable and since Jesus clarified that the rich man was in torment right after saying he was in Hades, I think the stated definition stills stands

Both Sheol and Hades are like saying someone today saying “*six feet under*”. The expression simply tells you he’s dead. It doesn’t tell you where he went, just that he’s dead.

The King James Version (*inaccurately*) translated both of these words “hell” many times. However, virtually every modern translation has corrected this error. The words are well known enough that some translations simply say “Sheol” or “Hades” and leave it at that. Most other versions translate them as “the grave” or something similar because it more accurately captures the original meaning of the words.

In fact, if you do a word search in the Old Testament for “hell” in the NASB, ESV, NIV, or many other popular translations, you won’t find the word hell.

That said, there are definitely places where the Old Testament talks about reward and punishment in the afterlife. To get both in a single verse:

Daniel 12:2

2 “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting (olam) life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting (olam) contempt.

So we know they believed in reward and punishment after death. But remember that’s not Sheol or Hades. Sheol and Hades were simply the place dead people “hang out”. (*If you read Revelation, they are there awaiting either judgment or resurrection depending on their faith or lack thereof*)

Tartaroo

The third word that’s translated “hell” is the word “[Tartaroo](#)”.

It’s only found once in the entire bible, and it’s only used to describe the fate of angels. So that’s not really applicable to humans. It’s a word imported from Greek mythology that does speak of a place of punishment in the afterlife.

Gehenna

The last word that’s translated as “hell” is the word “[Geenna](#)”, which is more commonly known as “Gehenna”.

Strong’s definition is:

Hell is the place of the future punishment called “Gehenna” or “Gehenna of fire”. This was originally the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned; a fit symbol of the wicked and their future destruction.

When I learned this I just about had a fit.

Gehenna is a PROPER NOUN!!!

It's like the Sahara Desert, the Mediterranean Sea, or the Great Barrier Reef. You just saw in the definition from Strong's that it refers to a valley south of Jerusalem. If you Google the Valley of Hinnom, you can find maps with its location.

In fact, here's a picture of the Valley of Hinnom (*Gehenna*) in present day Israel.



It's a real place in Israel today.

So what we have here is HUGE problem with the translation. Pretend you were translating a novel into a new language. You wouldn't just turn every instance of "the Sahara Desert" into "Hell" would you?

But that's what our Bible translators have done.

The Valley of Hinnom is also known as the "Valley of Ben-Hinnom" (*or the "Valley of the sons of Hinnom"; the same place*). It first appears in the book of Joshua where it's used as a landmark for determining the boundaries of the twelve tribes' territories.

The Valley of Hinnom (*Gehenna*) in Israel's History

The first place it's mentioned is in Joshua where it's used as a landmark for a border.

Joshua 15:8

Then the border went up **the valley of Ben-hinnom** to the slope of the Jebusite on the south (that is, Jerusalem); and the border went up to the top of the mountain which is before the valley of Hinnom to the west, which is at the end of the valley of Rephaim toward the north.

However, it's best known for what went on there during the time of Kings.

2 Chronicles 28:1-3

1 Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem; and he did not do right in the sight of the LORD as David his father had done.

2 But he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel; he also made molten images for the Baals.

3 Moreover, **he burned incense in the Valley of Ben-hinnom and burned his sons in fire**, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had driven out before the sons of Israel.

Ahaz' grandson Manasseh did the exact same thing a few chapters later.

2 Chronicles 33:6

6 **He made his sons pass through the fire in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom**; and he practiced witchcraft, used divination, practiced sorcery and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking Him to anger.

The prophet Jeremiah leaves us with no doubt about God's opinion of these detestable practices

Jeremiah 32:35

35 "They built the high places of Baal that are in the valley of Ben-Hinnom to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which **I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination**, to cause Judah to

sin.

And also:

Jeremiah 7:30-31

30 “**The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes**, declares the Lord. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it.

31 They have built **the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.**

*(**Sidebar:** It sounds like to me that God doesn't like the idea of children being burned alive. He calls it an abomination. But what about unbelieving children? The Bible is very clear about who is saved and who isn't.*

1 John 5:12-13

12 *He who has the Son has the life; **he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.***

13 *These things I have written to **you who believe in the name of the Son of God**, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

Unbelieving children don't make the cut.

However, the traditional view of Eternal Torment in hell says that those children will be “burned with fire” for all eternity. However, God calls putting children through the fire an abomination which didn't even enter into His mind.

Maybe it's different because it's God? Maybe He can do it and we can't? Or maybe the fire of hell is different from fire on earth and God is okay with putting children through the fire of hell, even though on earth it's an abomination which didn't even enter into His mind...

But I digress.

End Sidebar.)

Many scholars say that the Valley of Hinnom was basically a big burning trash heap in Jesus' day. They say that Jews would throw all the garbage from the city there (*including dead bodies that weren't buried*) and it would be burned. Because they were constantly throwing trash on the pile, the fire didn't go out. It just burned all the time because the fire was constantly fed.

On the surface, it certainly sounds like a good picture of eternal torment in hell. The fire never went out

and the dead were thrown there, rather like the spiritually dead (*unbelievers*) are traditionally thrown into eternal torment into the lake of a fire. Additionally, in the old days people (*children*) were burned in the fire or the Valley of Hinnom.

So the metaphor certainly fits.

But is it correct?

There's very good reason to think that's wrong, and the Valley of Hinnom wasn't a big burning trash heap. We'll get to that further in this article.

So now that you know what the Valley of Hinnom is, let's look at one of the famous places where it's used in the Bible.

The Sentence of "Hell" (*The Valley of Hinnom*)

Matthew 23:33 (*Jesus is speaking of the Pharisees*)

33 "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape **the sentence of hell the Valley of Hinnom?**

Notice that Jesus talks about the "Sentence of the Valley of Hinnom". Many other translations say the "judgment" or "condemnation" of the Valley of Hinnom. It's all the same thing and refers to a sentence being handed down by a judge for a crime.

So what was the Sentence/Judgement of the Valley of Hinnom?

In this verse, Jesus was talking about a real place the Pharisees were familiar with. It had a real place in Israel's History and by reading the Bible, you can see what that place is.

This is the word of the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah:

(Note: remember that Topheth is a place in the Valley of Hinnom. It's where the children were sacrificed.)

Jeremiah 19:1-11

1 Thus says the LORD, "Go and buy a potter's earthenware jar, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests.

2 "Then go out to the valley of Ben-hinnom, which is by the entrance of the potsherd gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you,

3 and say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "**Behold I am about to bring a calamity upon this place**, at which the ears of everyone that hears of it will tingle.

4 "**Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods**, that neither they nor their forefathers nor the kings of Judah had ever known, **and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent**

5 **and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind;**

6 therefore, behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when this place will no longer be called Topheth or the valley of Ben-hinnom, but rather the valley of Slaughter.

7 "**I will make void the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem in this place, and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hand of those who seek their life; and I will give over their carcasses as food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth.**

8 "**I will also make this city a desolation** and an object of hissing; everyone who passes by it will be astonished and hiss because of all its disasters.

9 "I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they will eat one another's flesh in **the siege and in the distress** with which their enemies and those who seek their life will distress them."

10 "**Then you are to break the jar in the sight of the men who accompany you**

11 and say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "**Just so will I break this people and this city, even as one breaks a potter's vessel**, which cannot again be repaired; and they will bury in Topheth because there is no other place for burial.

So there you have it.

That's the sentence of the Valley of Hinnom. God prophesied through the prophet Jeremiah that Jerusalem would be destroyed and that He would "*break this people and this city, even as one breaks a potter's vessel*"

Verses 4 and 5 make it very clear the child sacrifices in the Valley of Hinnom were the main reason for this judgment.

To no one's surprise, this prophecy came true.

About 20 years later, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. The city fell after a long siege and the Babylonians basically laid waste to Jerusalem. 2 Kings 25:1-7 tells the story of the siege, but the next few verses tell us the results:

2 Kings 25:8-10

8 Now on the seventh day of the fifth month, which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem.

9 He burned the house of the LORD, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire.

10 So all the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem.

Didn't Jeremiah say something about breaking the city like a clay pot? And what happened to the walls?

So, there you go.

That's the Sentence/Judgment of the Valley of Hinnom: **The complete destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the death or enslavement of everyone who lived there.** So if Jesus said that the Pharisees were going to suffer the "*sentence of the Valley of Hinnom*", what did He mean? I think that's actually pretty obvious if you know Israel's history in the first Century.

So let's take a look.

In 70 AD (*around 40 years after Christ died*) the future Roman Emperor Titus laid siege to Jerusalem. The city fell and the Romans basically laid waste to Jerusalem. The first Century Historian Flavius Josephus – who was present for these events – wrote this in [Wars 7:1:1](#):

Now as soon as the army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury (*for they would not have spared any, had there remained any other work to be done*), [Titus] Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and Temple...

...it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it [Jerusalem] had ever been inhabited.

Josephus estimated that 1.1 Million Jews died during the siege. Interestingly, Titus reportedly refused to accept a wreath of victory. He said that the victory did not come through his own efforts but that he had merely served as an instrument of God's wrath. In [my article on Revelation](#), we talk about the destruction of Jerusalem quite heavily. You can check it out if you're interested, but fair warning it's about 25k words long. .

So the result of the siege of 70 AD was **the complete destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the death or enslavement of everyone who lived there.**

Does that sound familiar?

It's almost exactly what happened to Jerusalem the last time they were handed the "sentence of the Valley of Hinnom." In fact, I would make the argument it was even worse, and that's not surprising given the context of Jesus' warning to the Pharisees.

Matthew 23:29-38

29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous,

30 and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'

31 "So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

32 "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.

33 "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell the Valley of Hinnom?"

34 "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city,

35 so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

36 "Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.

38 "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate

YIKES!

What a warning and its fulfillment was equally terrible. It's amazing how looking at the context can illuminate a passage of scripture. And I don't just mean the nearby verses either. I'm talking about the historical context in which they were written.

One thing to note, there weren't any Christians in Jerusalem when the siege happened. God had warned them through a prophet to flee the city before Titus laid siege.

Now all of that said, **I do think the Valley of Hinnom represents where unbelievers are punished in the afterlife.**

The traditional view holds that "hell" (*AKA the Valley of Hinnom*) is where the lake of fire is and I think there's precedent for that in Revelation. Remember that the Valley of Hinnom is a real location that's just outside of Jerusalem.

Revelation 14:9-11

9 Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand,

10 he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

Now, if you skip down to verses 19-20:

Revelation 14:19-20

19 So the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God.

20 And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood came out from the wine press, up to the horses' bridles, for a distance of two hundred miles.

We know that everyone with the mark of the beast will be thrown into the lake of fire (*which is in Revelation 20:4, which we'll get to soon*). That matches up nicely with the Beast's followers being "tormented with fire and brimstone" in 14:19 above. The "wine of God's wrath" combined with the "wine press trodden outside the city" certainly seems to point to the valley of Hinnom.

At the very least, the symbolism is definitely there.

A reasonable (*though not infallible*) argument could be that the Valley of Hinnom is the “location” of the lake of fire, at least in a spiritual/metaphorical sense. The metaphors are there and I don’t think its stretching scripture to run with that.

It certainly fits the traditional view of “hell”.

So it’s interesting that the Prophet Jeremiah tells us what will eventually happen to the Valley of Hinnom.

The Valley of Hinnom (*Gehenna/hell*) will be Holy to the Lord?

First, a little context:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

31 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,

32 not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.

33 “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

34 “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Speaking of the Jews, God says “*they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them*” makes it sound like they are all saved. The only time I know when that will happen is the End Times, in the New Heavens and New Earth. I could be wrong, but it would make sense.

Now let skip ahead a few verses.

Jeremiah 31:38-40

38 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when the city will be rebuilt for the LORD from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate.

39 “The measuring line will go out farther straight ahead to the hill Gareb; then it will turn to Goah.

40 “**And the whole valley of the dead bodies and of the ashes**, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, **shall be holy to the LORD**; it will not be plucked up or overthrown anymore forever.”

Does the “valley of the dead bodies and of the ashes”, sound familiar? That’s because it’s a description of the Valley of Hinnom where children were burned to ashes in fire. Yes, that Valley of Hinnom. The one that is translated as “hell” in your Bible.

It shall be Holy to the lord.

Or to condense verse 40 and translate it like a modern bible translator might: “*Hell will be Holy to the Lord*”.

I just don’t see how that’s possible... Unless it’s empty. This prophecy gives every indication of being about the end times because all the people “from the least of them to the greatest of them” will know God.

Or maybe Jeremiah was just talking about the literal valley of physical land outside physical Jerusalem.

Either way, it’s interesting.

But there’s still more.

The Valley of Hinnom (*Gehenna/hell*) probably wasn’t a trash dump as most Scholars suggest.

Why? let’s look.

“Gehenna is presented as diametrically opposed to ‘life’: it is better to enter life than to go to Gehenna... It is common practice, both in scholarly and less technical works, to associate the description of Gehenna with the supposedly contemporary garbage dump in the valley of Hinnom. This association often leads scholars to emphasize the destructive aspects of the judgment here depicted: fire burns until the object is completely consumed. Two particular problems may be noted in connection with this approach. **First, there is no convincing evidence in the primary sources for the existence of a fiery rubbish dump in this location** (*in any case, a thorough investigation would be appreciated*). Secondly, **the significant background to this passage more probably lies in Jesus’ allusion to Isaiah 66:24**

”

(Article by Peter M. Head, in the chapter “The Duration of Divine Judgment in the New Testament” in the book, “The Reader Must Understand”, p. 223, emphasis mine)

(We’ll get to Isaiah 66:24 in a minute.)

If there’s no evidence for the Valley of Hinnom being a burning trash dump, where did the idea of Gehenna as a fiery garbage dump come from?

“The traditional explanation for this seems to go back to Rabbi David Kimhi’s commentary on Psalm 27 (around 1200 C.E.). He remarked the following concerning the valley beneath Jerusalem’s walls:

“Gehenna is a repugnant place, into which filth and cadavers are thrown, and in which fires perpetually burn in order to consume the filth and bones; on which account, by analogy, the judgement of the wicked is called ‘Gehenna.’”

“Kimhi’s otherwise plausible suggestion, however, **finds no support in literary sources or archaeological data from the intertestamental or rabbinic periods. There is no evidence that the valley was, in fact, a garbage dump, and thus his explanation is insufficient”**

(“Gehenna: The Topography of Hell,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 49/3 [1986], 188-89, by Lloyd R. Bailey. *Emphasis mine*).

G. R. Beasley-Murray made a similar observation:

The notion, still referred to by some commentators, that the city’s rubbish was burned in this valley, **has no further basis than a statement by the Jewish scholar Kimchi made about A.D. 1200; it is not attested in any ancient source.**

(*Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 376-377)

In fact, a recent archeological find makes it almost impossible for a “fiery trash heap” to have existed in the Valley of Hinnom. Archeologists have found a orderly landfill just outside Jerusalem in the Kidron Valley. You can read the full article [here](#).

Excerpts below. (*emphasis mine*)

Israeli archaeologists have stumbled upon the mother of all garbage dumps: a massive

landfill from early Roman times that may have been the result of the most sophisticated trash collection system in antiquity.

Layer upon layer of waste that was efficiently collected, piled up and buried some 2,000 years ago has been dug up on the slopes of the Kidron valley, just outside the Roman-era walls of Jerusalem.

Coins and fragments of pottery show **the landfill was in use for about seven decades, from the beginning of the first century CE until the period of the Great Jewish Revolt against the Romans, which ended with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE**, says Yuval Gadot, a Tel Aviv University archaeologist who led the dig.

It isn't that the people of ancient Jerusalem organized to collectively and obediently throw their dross over the city walls. **"It looks like there was a mechanism in place that cleared the streets, cleared the houses, using donkeys to collect and throw away the garbage,"** Gadot speculates

Please note, this system was in use for almost three decades before Christ's ministry and over three decades after. That means nearly the entire time Jesus was alive this sophisticated trash collection system functioned.

Also:

The landfill located on the eastern slopes of the city is not just impressive for its size: its **alternating layers of ancient trash and soil suggest there was a deliberate attempt to systematically cover the garbage** to prevent smells and deter scavengers, Gadot says.

Why would they have a sophisticated system for cleaning up the trash and covering it so it didn't smell, then also have a fiery, stinky garbage dump? It doesn't make any sense, especially considering the Jewish rules for ceremonial cleanliness.

Now, I'm not saying there *couldn't* have been a fiery burning trash heap in the Valley of Hinnom. However, the oldest evidence we have for that is from **1200 years** after the fact. That's 12 centuries; well over a millennia. It's possible, I just don't think it's likely.

So what about Jesus' words here:

Mark 9:47-48

47 If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into ~~hell~~ **the Valley of Hinnom**,

48 **where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.**

“Worm does not die” and “fire is not quenched” sounds like it supports the “fiery trash heap” theory. But does it? I don’t think so, because Jesus was quoting the prophet Isaiah.

Isiah 66:24

“Then they will go forth and look
On the corpses of the men
Who have transgressed against Me.
For their worm will not die
And their fire will not be quenched;
And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind.”

If you back up to Isaiah 65 and read through 66, you’ll see the judgement is directed at the disobedient Jews in Israel. (*rather reminiscent of the sentence of the Valley of Hinnom actually*).

Again – just like the sentence of the Valley of Hinnom – Jesus is referencing an Old Testament passage about God judging disobedient Israel. If you read the horrors that happened during the siege of Jerusalem, Jesus statement about missing those horrors (*because of disobedience to God*) would make much more sense.

Jesus’ many references to avoiding ~~hell~~ (*the Valley of Hinnom*) could simply be a warning to avoid the sentence of the valley of Hinnom. That sentence was carried out (*for a second time*) during the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. I think I could make a very strong case that was Jesus’ point.

So, if the Valley of Hinnom is represents “hell”/Eternal Torment, then it will be Holy to the Lord. If it’s not (*but rather a reference to judgement on the unfaithful Jews of Israel*) then it doesn’t call to mind Eternal Torment.

Either way, I don’t see Eternal Torment here.

The Jewish view of ~~hell~~ Gehenna

We won't look at this in detail now, but will cover it in detail in the article about [the early church fathers on Universal Restoration](#). However it's worth noting that the Jews never believed in eternal torment. The only group of Jews who ever believed in eternal torment were (*some of*) the pharisees of Jesus day.

That's it.

No one else in Jewish history did.

It's arguably a sin against good exegesis to say that Gehenna must refer to eternal torment when it didn't mean that for all of Jewish history. It only meant that to one sect of pharisees – and only that one sect of pharisees not all Jews – for one short period of time. We'll look into this more in the article on the early church fathers.

Now, let's talk about the words used for punishment in the New Testament.

Matthew 25:46

46 “These will go away into eternal (Aion) **punishment**, but the righteous into eternal (Aion) life.”

We've already talked about the meaning of Aion. But the word used for “punishment” is also interesting. I don't want to make too much of this because the word is only used twice in the entire New testament, but it's worth mentioning.

The word used for “punishment” here is the Greek word “[Kolasis](#)“. It comes from the root word “[Kolazo](#)” meaning “to lop or prune, as trees and wings”. The sense here is not punishment for punishment's sake (*That's a different word, which we'll get to in a minute*). Rather, the idea is to improve the person who is being punished as a tree is improved by pruning.

(For those who aren't gardeners, when you prune a tree you cut out anything that is making the tree weaker or anything that would prevent it from growing stronger. You remove the parts of the tree that aren't good for it, with the result that the tree as a whole is stronger and better off.)

The English word “discipline” is probably the closest to the meaning of Kolasis and Kolazo. Pruning would also be a good translation. Parents discipline their kids not to “get back at them” but rather to improve them. That's the sense of Kolasis.

So here is one way a Universalist would say this verse is properly translated:

Matthew 25:46

46 “These will go away into **pruning/discipline** of Ages, but the righteous into the life of ages.”

The Greek words allow for that translation without twisting the scriptures.

Now there is a word that does mean punishment for punishment’s sake. That’s the word “[Timoria](#)” which comes from the root word “[Timoreo](#)”. According to Strong’s, it means:

1. to be a guardian or **avenger of honor**
 1. to succour, come to the help of
2. **to avenge**
3. **in the NT, to take vengeance on one, to punish**

The sense here is punishment for punishment’s sake. It’s vengeance to “get back at” someone who wronged you. To quote an old movie, “*He sends one of your to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue*”.

Kolasis is focused on the good of the person being disciplined, whereas Timoria is focused on “getting back” at someone for a wrong.

Timoreo (*the root word*) is used twice in the Bible. Both times are in Acts and they both describe Saul’s treatment of believers before his conversion to Paul.

Acts 22:5

5 as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be **punished**. (Timoreo)

Acts 26:11

11 “And as I **punished** (Timoreo) them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

Again, this is vengeance for vengeance’ sake. Saul hated believers and just wanted them to die and suffer for their “blasphemy”. He didn’t have their good in mind (*like Kolasis*) he wanted to hurt them just to punish them (*Timoreo*)

The word Kolasis certainly leaves room for the lake of fire being a corrective measure designed to bring people to repentance. (*i.e. refiner's fire*) The meaning of a single word isn't enough to build a doctrine on (*like the duration of Eternal Torment being entirely based on Aion*) However, it allows for a "corrective lake of fire" rather than one designed for Eternal Torment via fire and brimstone.

And speaking of Brimstone...

Just to add an interesting tidbit about the meaning of the word. Brimstone is sulfur, and the word in the Greek is "[Theion](#)". Here's what Strong's has to say about its meaning:

1. brimstone
 1. divine incense, because **burning brimstone was regarded as having power to purify**, and to ward off disease

I'm not going to draw any theological conclusions from this definition. I'm not even going to comment... but isn't that interesting?

An Addendum: Kill the Soul?

I wasn't sure where else to tackle this verse, so I've tacked it onto the end of this article. One of the verses that people use to talk about eternal torment is Matthew 10:28

Matthew 10:28

"Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather **fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell The Valley of Hinnom.**

The argument goes that since the soul is "destroyed" (*metaphorically speaking*) that the torment is eternal. In America today, we think of the soul as the part of us that survives death. However, that's **not** what the Jews thought about the soul.

The Greek word used there makes this perfectly clear. It's the word "?????" ([psuché](#)) and it means:

5590 *psyché* (from *psyché*, "**to breathe, blow**" which is the root of the English words "psyche," "psychology") – *soul (psyche)*; a person's *distinct identity(unique personhood)*, i.e. *individual personality*.

Our "psuché" is **not** the part of us that survives death and goes to reward or punishment. Biblically speaking, that's our Spirit. We know this partially because of Revelation 8:9

Revelation 8:9

8 The second angel sounded, and *something* like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood,

9 and **a third of the creatures which were in the sea and had life, (psuché)** died; and a third of the ships were destroyed.

Do animals have souls? That's my point. See, the "soul" here isn't our Spirit. Further, our soul and spirit aren't the same things, as one of the most popular verses in the whole Bible will attest.

Hebrew 4:12

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as **the division of soul (psuché) and spirit**, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Psuché doesn't equal Spirit. In fact, psuché is often translated "life" because that's more literally what it means.

If we look at a parallel passage, you'll see this better.

Matthew 16:24-26

24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.

25 "For **whoever wishes to save his life (psuché) will lose it; but whoever loses his life (psuché) for My sake will find it.**

26 "For what will it profit a man if he **gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? (psuché)** Or what will a man give in exchange for his **soul? (psuché)**

Oi Vey!

What a translation nightmare! (*because of a hard-to-translate word, not the translators*)

Verses 25 and 26 aren't talking about different things; they're talking about the same thing as verse 28! I hope you see here that Jesus wasn't speaking of our eternal "soul" (*Biblically, our Spirit*) that lives forever and goes to reward or punishment after death.

In the Bible, our soul is more like what we mean when we say "*it's good for the soul*", or "*it galled my soul*", or "*you will find rest for your soul*". We mean your "inner man". We mean the part of you that's truly you; your whole being.

The Hebrews believed the same.

Here's the Jewish concept of the soul (*based on the Hebrew word*) from the [TheBibleProject.com](https://www.bibleproject.com).

As you can see, in the Hebrew mind the soul is connected to the life of a person. It means "your whole physical existence" as the video says (~3:31). However, it doesn't refer to the part of person that survives after death. It only refers to your *physical* existence; not your *spiritual* existence.

In Hebrew the mind, it's the *spirit*, not the *soul* that survives death.

The destruction of body and soul means they will not only kill your body, but your whole *physical* existence too (*everything you are*). You can break someone's body without breaking their will/mind. To break both is to destroy a person utterly.

This "destroying everything a person is", happens to be a favorite plot of comic book villains. These villains often try to destroy a hero's family/friends/life and everything they cherish to metaphorically "break" them before finally killing them.

It's the same in Matthew 10:28

Remember that Gehenna – referencing Isaiah 66 – probably refers to God's judgement of Israel in 70 AD. If you read [my article on Revelation](#) where I quote historical accounts of the siege, you'll see that this complete destruction of the people's "nephesh" (*whole physical existence*) was absolute. They abandoned every human convention and did things so unspeakable, they're not fit to be put into print.

They were utterly destroyed; both in body and "nephesh"... just as Jesus predicted.

Conclusion

Even if we assume that eternal torment in the afterlife is real, It's hard to get there from hell the Valley of Hinnom. I'm not saying it's impossible, but it doesn't seem to fit with the historical facts or Biblical context.

The next article in this series is: [Scriptures That Support Universal Restoration](#) (*This article only looks at scriptures outside of Revelation; the ones in Revelation are a separate article*)