## A Definitive Study of Gehenna, Sheol, and Hades

By Richard Frohmader

[April 1980]

The tie that binds together the one Hebrew and two Greek words of our topic seems to be the rather consistent and yet at times not so consistent rendering of these terms in the KJV as "hell." However, our approach to this topic will not concentrate on the scriptural definition, significance and bounds of the English word hell because this of necessity would involve a study of many other words and phrases in Scripture. Rather, we will confine ourselves to a study of the use and significance of the three words named in our topic heading as they are used in Scriptures with perhaps just a few passing references to their use in secular literatures.

First of all, we should be aware that there is a very close connection between the Greek word "*Hades*," which is used eleven times in the NT and the Hebrew word *Sheol* which is used 65 times in the OT. For in every case but one in the LXX translation of the Hebrew OT Sheol is translated Hades. The one exception is in II Samuel 22:6 where the LXX translates *thanatos* instead. Also in those cases where a NT reference is made to an OT quotation (Cf. I Cor. 15:55, Ps. 16:10), Hades is the regular translation of Sheol. Thus we are safe in saying as most dictionaries also make clear, that Hades and Sheol are equivalent terms.

*Gehenna* on the other hand as used in the Bible, has a slightly different connotation and usage as we intend to develop in this paper, although at times the significance of this term and the other two terms may also be nearly interchangeable.

It is perhaps noteworthy that a study of these words and their real meaning in Holy Scriptures can give us a good example for our contention that a dictionary is not always the best place to turn when you want a reliable definition or a word used in the Bible. Or stated positively, usage and context should always be an important determining factor in learning the real meaning of a word, for us who consider the Bible to be God's inspired and inerrant Word. When a word is used only once or twice in the Bible, this of course handicaps our application of this principle. But we have no such difficulty with the words under study here.

As a part of our study of these terms we can also perhaps learn a little something about the comparative accuracy and reliability of the various translations of Scriptures commonly used in our midst. I have prepared a table appended to this paper showing the word used by the various translators each time these particular words of our topic occur in the Bible. My selection of translations was designed to include some of the most popular and respected translations both conservative and liberal in background. I am sorry if in the process I perhaps neglected your favorite translation, but I had some good personal reasons for making the selections I did and space on the page allowed me to make only five comparisons. You, of course, are free to make any further comparative additions that you might like and draw your own conclusions from them.

Of the five selections presented in this table you will note that Luther is the most consistent, translating *Hölle* in nearly every case except in those troublesome passages of Genesis where aged Jacob speaks of himself being brought down to Sheol by grief and mourning, plus a few cases in the use of Gehenna where the description of hell is emphasized or strengthened a bit. The KJV uses four different terms to express the thought of these words under study here, namely grave, hell, hellfire, and pit. Though at first glance this might appear to reflect a rather wide variety of meaning, careful study will show that all four words cover essentially the same thing namely, the condition of people after death at times without much emphasis being given to the judgment meted out upon them.

The kind of consistency of translation reflected by the RSV which in nearly every case involving the terms Hades and Sheol merely puts these foreign words into English with no attempt to explain their significance to the reader is to me a colossal cop out. Inasmuch as a translation should transmit accurate meaning and content to the reader, the use of words in a difficult situation without any real meaning or content to the normal reader is to me an avoiding of responsibility. No doubt their defense is that there is no single word

in English to reflect the scope of meaning reflected by the original terms involved. This may indeed be true. However, I find it far more preferable to use a variety of terms reflecting the context and usage in each case and risking the charge of being inconsistent than to do as the RSV has done and use a collection of letters that make up a word which has absolutely no meaning or content to the average reader.

A further comparison of the various translations in this table shows that for Gehenna nearly all of the translators are in essential agreement with "hell" or "hellfire" in some form being the favored translation. But in the translation of Hades and Sheol there is a fairly wide disagreement as to what exactly is meant between KJV, Beck, and the NIV in a number of cases. To begin with, there is full agreement between the three (KJV, Beck, and NIV) in those 31 passages where KJV translates Sheol as grave. However, in the 31 other passages where KJV translates Sheol as grave in 24 of those cases, death five times, depths once, and destruction once. In those same 31 instances Beck uses grave 21 times, hell four times, netherworld three times, death once, place of the dead once and underworld once. The interesting thing is that where Beck disagrees with the use of grave or hell as the best choice of terms, in nearly every case is *not* the same place where the NIV choice of terms. This can only mean that the context in these cases does not clearly point to a specific translation and that leaves it up to the translator to supply his own interpretation and that often differs.

I think we are further safe in concluding from this comparison of translations that both Beck and the NIV translators feel that "hell" is too strong a term for the accurate translation of Sheol in nearly all cases, and of course the RSV fully agrees with this. Thus these translations are in plain disagreement with Luther most of the time and with the KJV about half of the time. No doubt we could draw a number of other interesting conclusions from our study of this table of comparative translations but I will leave further conclusions of this type to your own study.

This variety of translations for the OT Hebrew term Sheol merely underscores the difficulty that exegetes, lexicographers and translators have had down through the ages in trying to determine the exact derivation of this term as well as its general and particular significance. Since Sheol is the most frequently occurring term in the Bible of the three terms under study for this paper, let us begin with a careful examination of the word Sheol.

Brown, Driver, Briggs, Hebrew Lexicon of the OT 1952 ed. indicates possible derivation of this word as שאל – place of inquiry, or a שאל – a hollow place, but concludes: "most now refrain from positive etymology." This account then goes on to give four possible meanings based on usage.

Luther derived the term from  $\forall \forall$  – meaning to demand, hence the unsatiable place, the place which continually craven victims, basing this in part on Prov. 27:20 and Prov. 30:13-16.

Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia, Vol. 5, calls Sheol "the Hebrew word most frequently used for the place where the dead were believed to dwell" and also indicates that its etymology is in doubt. This same commentary goes on to say: "The Hebrews evidently shared with their pagan neighbors a concept of the region occupied by the dead as a shadowy underworld existence. A number of obvious parallels exist between the Biblical descriptions and references in extrabiblical literature." It further states that: "Sheol is a place of continued existence rather than annihilation and it does not lie beyond the reach of God. Ps. 139: 8 - If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! Job 1126:6 - Sheol is naked before God, and *Abaddon* has no covering. Thus there springs the hope mentioned several times in the OT that God will rescue His people from Sheol. In the OT little distinction is made between the lot of the good man and the evil man in Sheol. This distinction developed later, during the intertestamental period."

This commentary concludes with the observation: "An important question regarding Sheol is this: At death did the OT believers go to such a place of gloom or did they go to be with the Lord immediately? The former view was prevalent in the Early church which also held that Christ at His death descended into Sheol (Hades) to bring the OT believers to heaven with Him. The latter view is held by those who believe that Sheol concept was held by the Israelites in common with their pagan neighbors until God gradually revealed more and

more information about the life after death, climaxing His revelation in Christ who brought life and immortality to light. Both views19contain considerable difficulties".

Yes, difficulties do exist, many difficulties in determining the exact meaning of the word Sheol. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 1, pp. 787-788 under the topic heading: "Abode of the Dead" implies that the Hebrew OT concept of death and the hereafter was an outgrowth of their contact with other peoples and religions. Almost every detail of the Hebrew concept of death and the abode of the dead can be paralleled in Mesopotamian, Canaanite and Persian literature, states this dictionary, from which they draw the unwarranted conclusion that: "this shows that the Biblical writers were simply drawing on traditional Semitic folklore and not inventing any new or original conceptions." Though perhaps one cannot argue about the existence of parallels in other literature, we do not have to agree that the OT writers therefore copied their thoughts from elsewhere. These parallels can be explained in many other ways even by the possible copying of Hebrew sources by these other people!

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible further points out that six different words occur in the Hebrew OT to describe the abode of the dead, namely: 1) שָׁחַת (dich or pit, Job 33:18; 2) – the pit, Ps. 28:1; 3) – death, Job 28:22; 4) – לאַרָץ – the earth, Ex. 15:12; 5) – אַבדּוֹן – gerdition, Job 26:6; 6) – אָרָץ – Sheol.

"Of these terms the last term, Sheol, is the most frequently used and is also the word that does not have a comparable concept in other Semitic language and literature." This article concludes with the statement which we simply do not accept that: "Nowhere in the OT is the abode of the dead regarded as a place of punishment or torment. The concept of an infernal hell developed in Israel only during the Hellenistic period, probably under the influence of Iranian ideas." Sic!

I quote some of these items just to demonstrate the wrong ideas and confusion to which a person can be subjected if he is dependent on dictionaries alone for help in defining a certain word or concept.

If we carefully study the passages where Sheol occurs in the OT we will find some of the following facts and truths. Sheol occurs in four places as a designation of locality, distinct from earth and in contrast with heaven. (Job 11:7-8 "Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than Sheol; what canst thou know?" Psalm 139:8 - "If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou are there." Proverbs15:24 - "The way of life is above to the wise, that he may depart from Sheol beneath." Amos 9:2 - "Though they dig into Sheol, thence shall mine hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, thence will I bring them down.") To render Sheol by "grave" in these passages simply would not be fitting!

In twenty-one places Sheol is described as a place beneath, very far beneath the earth, and those who go to Sheol go downward. E.g. (Gen. 37:35, 42:38, 44:29 and 31; Num. 16:30; Deut. 32:22; Ps. 86:13 etc.) Sheol is also the place where the judgement of God and His dire vengeance overtakes the evildoers. Korah's rebel band went down to Sheol in Numbers 16:30 and all the congregation of Israel witnessed this shocking spectacle. Yes, this event was also recorded to warn future generations. To proud Israel, to that people who often provoked God with their vanities, is held up for their warning a fiery Sheol in Deut. 32:22 - "A fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest Sheol." Sheol 'Consumes' those which have sinned in Job 24:19. "The wicked shall be turned into Sheol - Psalm 9:17 and in Sheol they are made to be ashamed and silent, Psalm 31:17. Against his wicked and treacherous enemies David prays: "Let death seize upon them, and let them go, down quick into Sheol." Those children of Belial who are enticing the son of the God-fearing to join them in their evil-doings are impersonating death and Sheol in Proverbs 1:12. Sheol is the place for harlots: Prov. 3:5, 7:27, 9:18. In Hosea 13:14 there is a promise of God's mercy that Ephraim's sin is hid, and that the Lord will ransom him from the power of Sheol and from death. This passage is quoted by St. Paul in 1 Cor. 15:55 and is interpreted as referring to the victory of Christ over death and the grave (Hades). While in Psalm 16:10 Christ is represented as victorious over Sheol and corruption, He is here shown as the conqueror of death and the entire realm of death, the prince or power of Sheol.

Now certainly in all of these passages we have presented to us what we ordinarily call "hell" including both the place and the condition of the damned. Not only is this a possible translation for these passages, in some cases it is almost a required translation. This leaves us then with the problem caused by that group of passages where believers of old connect their death with a descent into Sheol. (Job 7:9, 14:13, 17:13 and 16; Gen. 37:35, 42:38 and 44:29 and 31 and possibly several Ps. passages). Certainly the use of Sheol here cannot be construed as hell as we ordinarily understand the term since both Job and Jacob were faithful believers who had no reason to expect to suffer eternal damnation in hell. Yet death would also come to these believers as a part of the results of sin. It is apparent therefore, that the term Sheol can be used to describe just a state of death without considering the fate of heaven or hell which is an essential part of that state practically speaking. This in effect is what translators have tried to convey by the term grave, for this translation never refers to the physical hole into which a dead person is put, but the state of being dead. The Hebrew has a specific word for the grave itself, namely: "Cr". So the translation grave refers to the condition of being dead without reference to either where the body is or what judgement has ensnared the soul.

Our conclusion then is that Sheol in most cases can and should be translated as hell, but where the context clearly indicates that this is too strong a translation a lesser term such as grave used in the sense of a person being dead is an acceptable alternative.

Since we have already stated at the beginning of this paper that *Hades* is the NT counterpart of Sheol we would expect to find that much of what has been said of Sheol would apply also here and we will find this to be true. It is generally accepted though same doubt is expressed that  $\[0.5mm]\delta\eta\varsigma$  comes from the negative  $\alpha + i\delta\epsilon\[0.5mm]v$  "to see" or in other words "that which is not see," the abode of the dead. Some doubt is also expressed whether the I Cor. 15:55 passage should have Hades at all since some important MSS use the word *thanatos* instead but the other ten places listed are all certain. A careful-study of these passages again shows that as in the case of Sheol, at times this word clearly means hell with implications of awful judgement and at other times it is used in a more general way as the state of death which can include even believers.

A look at our table of comparative translations shows that Luther and KJV are quite agreed except in the doubtful I Cor. 15:55 passage where KJV uses grave. Once again the RSV hides its head in the sand translating Hades in nearly every case but 2 where it uses death. Beck and the NIV go their own way with Beck using death, hell, dead and grave and the NIV using death, depths, Hades, hell and grave. We have already discussed the possible variations that sometimes are necessary in connection with our discussion of Sheol. I must confess that I am somewhat let down by the NIV's handling of this word, I had expected better things of them!

Thayer, in his NT Lexicon begins with the usage in Homer and other Greek authors and defines the word just in a general way as "abode of the dead." Both Zondervan's pictorial Encyclopedia, Vol. 3 and Kittle-Gerhard Theological Dictionary of the NT, 1964 ed. have extensive articles on the word showing the relationship with the OT word Sheol and similar thought developments in secular literature of neighboring areas with Israel. From this these dictionaries develop quite a philosophy of so called thought or concept development among the Biblical writers as borrowed from these secular sources, most of which I am unwilling to accept because it conflicts with our whole concept of the inspiration of Scriptures.

A careful examination of usage indicates that like Sheol, Hades lies deep in the earth Matthew 11:23 and one goes down into it (Luke 10: 15). These same passages also picture the tragic fate awaiting unrepentant Capernaum which only the term hell would fit. It is obviously a place of punishment. In the parable of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus, Hades is the place where the rich man goes which is contrasted with heaven. Again hell with all the features of punishment for the damned is the clear concept set forth. The use of Hades by Peter twice in his Pentecost Sermon in reference to our Lord causes some exegetes a few problems. In Acts 2:27 Peter is quoting Psalm 16: 10 (Sheol) to indicate that the resurrection of Jesus was prophesied by David and indeed was fulfilled. Because it is unthinkable that Jesus' soul was in hell during the three day period of death before His resurrection, esp. when He had told the malefactor: "Today thou be with Me in Paradise!" we have the parallel use of Hades with Sheol here to designate the condition of being dead with no thought as to judgement or punishment. In the four cases in Revelation where Hades occurs, it is always coupled with the term death for which the concept of hell fits quite well. The final reference in Rev. 20:14 speaks of Hades as being cast into the lake of fire (Gehenna) at the final judgement implying thereby that Hades is only a temporary place which

will be destroyed at the end of the world most exegetes claim. However, this does not have to be understood in this way, for it can also refer to the final judgement after which all unbelievers, body and soul, will go into everlasting destruction and that from that point forward there will be no more souls entering hell.

Our conclusion then is that Hades is indeed a parallel to Sheol in meaning and content which in most cases refers to hell with judgement included but at times can be a bit broader in meaning leaving out the implication of judgement. Context in most cases will decide.

This leaves us with the final word, *Gehenna*, which is used 12 times in the NT. This word is derived from two Hebrew words which mean "Valley of Hinnon" which is the name of a ravine southwest of Jerusalem where in the days of the monarchy Molech worship had been practiced (cf. II Chron. 28:3 ff.)This Molech Worship involved the sacrificing of children by roasting them alive on the red hot statue. This very offensive form of idolatry led to the later use of this detested ravine as the garbage dump for Jerusalem as well as the place where the bodies of dead animals and criminals were dumped. Fire was used to consume what was dumped there and to purify the area. By transfer this name soon came to represent the fiery destruction of hell, the place to which all the wicked would be condemned for eternal punishment.

The fact that all five translations agree on the use of hell for this term in every case with only a slight variation in degree, namely an occasional "hellfire" instead of just hell, shows that there is little debate either as to the root meaning of this word nor on its use in Scriptures. This is the term that represents the final Judgement for evil, wicked people. It is interesting to note that only once is this term used in the NT outside of the Synoptic Gospels, namely in James 3:6 where the tongue symbolizing evil, malicious speech, is spoken of as being set on fire or instigated by Gehenna.

Jesus used the term Gehenna a number of times in His Sermon on the Mount warning that even evil mental and verbal transgression against others makes one liable to the sufferings of Gehenna (Matt 5:22, 29, 30). Perhaps the most revealing use of the term occurs in Matt. 10:28 (Cf. Lk. 12:3) where Jesus says "Fear not them which kill the body and are not able to kill the soul, but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna." The final uses of Gehenna in Mt. 23:15 and 33 both clearly require our understanding of this term as a place of final Judgement and torment. This usage also is popular in secular literature both before, during and after Biblical times.

Clearly then of the three terms, Gehenna is the strongest term of those under study for this paper, without fail implying not just the state of death, but judgement and punishment of a lasting and even an eternal nature. Though Hades and Sheol may at times have slight tinges of this meaning, it is not essential to either of these other words. Yet surely for our general understanding "hell" is most often an acceptable translation for all three! As pastors it is important for us and our work that we look behind the simple words used in our English Bibles to the original text and to understand that original text may require us also as we found here, to go beyond our dictionaries to the usage of these words in Scripture itself. Let us never grow weary in our study of that inspired, infallible Word.

## Word Study, Forms of Hell

## Hades – ἄδης

Text	KJV	Luther	Beck	RSV	NIV
I Cor. 15:15	grave	Hölle	death	death	death
Mt. 11:23	hell	Hölle	hell	Hades	depths
16:18	hell	Hölle	hell	death	Hades
Lk. 10:15	hell	Hölle	hell	Hades	depths
16:23	hell	Hölle	hell	Hades	hell
Acts 2:27	hell	Hölle	grave	Hades	grave
2:31	hell	Hölle	dead	Hades	grave
Rev. 1:18	hell	Hölle	Hell	Hades	Hades
6:8	hell	Hölle	hell	Hades	Hades
20:13	hell	Hölle	grave	Hades	Hades
20:14	hell	Hölle	grave	Hades	Hades

## Gehenna – γέεννα

Text	KJV	Luther	Beck	RSV	NIV
Mt. 5:22	hellfire	höllishen Feuer	hellfire	hell of fire	fire of hell
5:29	hell	Hölle	hell	hell	hell
:30	hell	Hölle	hell	hell	hell
10:28	hell	Hölle	hell	hell	hell
18:9	hellfire	Höllishen Feuer	hellfire	hell of fire	fire of hell
23:15	hell	Hölle	hell	hell	hell
23:33	hell H	öllishen Verdamnis	hell	hell	hell
Mk. 9:43	hell	Hölle	hell	hell	hell
9:45	hell	Hölle	hell	hell	hell
9:47	Hellfire	Höllishen Feuer	hell	hell	hell
Lk. 12:5	hell	Hölle	hell	hell	hell
James 3:6	hell	Hölle	hell	hell	hell

Sheol – שֶׁאוֹל

Text	<b>KJV</b>	<b>Luther</b>	Beck	RSV	NIV
Num. 16:30	pit	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
:33	pit	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
Job 17:16	pit	Hölle	grave	sheol	death
Deut. 32:22	hell	Hölle	hell	sheol	death
2 Sam. 22:6	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
Job 11:8	hell	Hölle	netherworld	sheol	grave
26:6	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	destruction
Psalm 9:17	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
16:10	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
18:5	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
55:15	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave

Ps. 86:13	hell	Hölle	arouo	sheol	arovo
13. 80.13	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
			grave		grave
139:8	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	depths
Prov. 5:5	hell	Hölle	hell	sheol	grave
7:27	hell	Hölle	hell	sheol	grave
9:18	hell	Hölle	hell	sheol	grave
15:11	hell	Hölle	sheol (grave)	sheol	death
:24	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
23:14	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	death
27:20	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
Isa. 5:14	hell	Hölle	death	sheol	death
14:9	hell	Hölle	netherworld	sheol	death
28:15	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
:18	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
57:9	hell	Hölle	netherworld	sheol	grave
Eze. 31:16	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
:17	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
32:21	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
:27	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
Amos 9:2	hell	Hölle	Place of dead	sheol	grave
Jonah 2:2	hell	Hölle	underworld	sheol	grave
Hab. 2:5	hell	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
	-		0		0
Gen. 37:35	grave	Grube	grave	sheol	grave
42:38	grave	Grube	grave	sheol	grave
44:29	grave	Grube	grave	sheol	grave
:31	grave	Grube	grave	sheol	grave
I Sam. 2:6	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
I Kg. 2:6	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
:9	grave	Hölle	grave	grave	grave
Job 7:9	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
14:13	e	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
17:13	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	
21:13	grave	Hölle	0	sheol	grave
21:13	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
Ps. 6:5	grave	Hölle	grave		grave
	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
30:3	grave		grave	sheol	grave
31:17	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
49:14	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
:14	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
:15	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
88:3	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
89:48	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
141:7	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
Prov. 1:12	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
30:16	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
Eccl. 9:10	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
Song 8:6	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave

Isa. 14:11	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
38:10	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
:18	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
Eze. 11:15	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
Hos. 13:14	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave
:14	grave	Hölle	grave	sheol	grave