

Jewish fables about Gehenna

by Douglas E. Cox

Many Bible scholars assume that when Jesus mentioned "Gehenna," he referred to the common idea of "hell," a place of unending infernal misery for the wicked.

To support the traditional belief, these Bible scholars have investigated the meaning of "Gehenna," hoping to show how the word was interpreted by Jews in the time of Jesus. They claim that the use of the word by the Jews, reveals the use that Jesus made of it.

The truth is, in the time of Jesus, the Jews were divided in their opinions about a resurrection, and an afterlife. For example, Luke mentioned that the Sadducees denied the resurrection, or belief in angels and spirits. [Acts 23:8]

Jesus condemned the Scribes and Pharisees, and accused them of transgressing the commandment of God by their traditions. [Matthew 15:3] The beliefs and superstitions of Jews about "Gehenna" in the first century would prove little about the use made of it by Jesus, who most likely would have based his comments on the meaning given to it by prophets such as Jeremiah.

In his epistles, Paul warned about Jewish fables prevalent in his time. Many of these "fables" were about the afterlife, and the destiny of both the righteous and the wicked, and about Gehenna.

Paul's view was that ultimately all will worship God, whether in heaven, in the earth, or under the earth. By referring to "things under the earth," Paul made no provision for belief in the idea of the unending infernal torment of the wicked. Such a place of unending torments can't be in heaven; it can't be in, or on the earth; and it can't be under the earth either. Where else could it be located? Paul wrote:

Philippians 2:5-11

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above

every name:

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In his letter to Titus, Paul warned against deceivers and vain talkers, especially those who were among the Jews.

Titus 1:10-11

For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision:

Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake.

Paul specifically warned Titus to beware of "Jewish fables."

Titus 1:13-16

Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith; Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth.

Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.

They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.

Examples of "Jewish fables" are found in a group of books called the Pseudepigrapha, including works such as The Books of Adam and Eve, Life of Adam and Eve, The Apocalypse of Moses, The Apocalypse of Adam, 1 & 2 Enoch, The Apocalypse of Abraham, Revelation of Moses, The Book of Jubilees, The Letter of Aristeas, The Book of the Apocalypse of Baruch (aka: 2 Baruch), The Damascus Document, etc. Among these, 1 Enoch contains sayings about Gehenna.

Other examples of "Jewish fables" are found in the Jewish Targums and Talmuds. Targum refers to Aramaic translations or paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh; the earliest ones date from the second or first centuries AD, and were written in the decades following the destruction of Jerusalem. Talmud or Gemara refers to rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history. This body of literature includes the Mishnah, which is a compilation of legal opinions and debates.

Typically these Jewish writers tried to adapt the Scriptures, to incorporate the geocentric cosmology of the Greeks, and Greek ideas of the immortality of the soul, and other pagan ideas about infernal torment of the wicked, into their religion.

Paul wrote to Timothy, that "in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits." [1 Timothy 4:1-5]

The influence of those "seducing spirits" extends to our own time, as modern scholars, hoping to support traditional ideas about hell, study the Jewish fables about Gehenna. We can see what

some of those "seducing spirits" taught, in the following quotes from Jewish writings, collected by Andrew P. Peabody of Cambridge University, Mass., for Bernard Whitman. [1]

Targum of Jonathan:

"Abram saw gehenna belching forth smoke and burning coals, and sending up sparks to punish the wicked therein."

"The wicked are to be judged, that they may be delivered to eternal burning in gehenna."

"Like embers in the fire of gehenna which God created the second day of the creation of the world."

"The earth from which springs forth food, and beneath which is gehenna, the cold of whose snow is changed so as to become like fire."

"Thou shalt see them descending into the earth to gehenna."

Medrasch Thillium, Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph:

"Circumcision is regarded with favor; for the holy and blessed swear to Abram that no one who was circumcised should descend into gehenna."

Pierche Eliezer, Eliezer the great:

"On account of the sabbath Adam was delivered from the condemnation of gehenna."

"Whosoever confesses his transgressions and forsakes them is delivered from the condemnation of gehenna."

"The holy and blessed God has dealt with me in truth and goodness, and delivered me from the condemnation of gehenna."

"All angels and seraphim shall not deliver the wicked from the condemnation of gehenna."

Rabbi Hoschiakia:

"Hereafter Abram will sit at the gates of gehenna, and will suffer no circumcised Israelite to descend thither; but what will he do with those who have sinned beyond measure? He will restore to them their foreskin, and they will descend into gehenna."

"Before paradise gehenna was created; gehenna on the second day, paradise on the third day. This is the edge of the sword which turns every way, and which being directed towards them hereafter sets them on fire."

"In that hour gehenna ascends upon the wicked. Woe to the world on account of the judgments thereof."

Maase Thorn, ascribed to Rabbi Hakkodesh:

"God admitted Hiram king of Tyre into paradise, because he had built the temple, and had been from the first a pious man; and he lived in paradise a thousand years; but when afterwards he began to be filled with pride and made himself a deity, he was expelled from paradise and descended into gehenna."

Talmuds:

"For those who observe the law, Paradise is prepared, but for transgressors, gehenna."

"While you apply yourselves with the greatest labor and trouble to the study of the law, and yet neglect to fulfil it, you will become heirs of gehenna at your death, while you have enjoyed no pleasure in this life."

"Heretics, traitors, apostates, epicurians, those who deny the law, and those who deny the resurrection of the dead, those who separate themselves from the doctrines of the congregation, and those who cause terror among the dwellers upon earth, and those who have sinned and caused many to sin, as Jeroboam the son of Nebat and his companions; these all descend into gehenna and are punished therein ages of ages, as it is written. And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me; for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh."

"That ungodly man, Turnus Rufus, asked Rabbi Akiba, if your God loves the poor, why does he not feed them? He replied, in order that we may be delivered through them from the judgment of gehenna."

"Whoever carefully celebrates the three feasts to be instituted every sabbath is delivered from three calamities, namely, from the distress at the coming of the Messiah, from the judgment of gehenna, and from the war of gog and magog."

"God will redeem my soul from condemnation to gehenna, and he has delivered my body from condemnation to gehenna."

"God hath set the one against the other, that is, gehenna and paradise."

"You will escape the judgment of gehenna, and your portion will be with Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah."

"The fire of gehenna does not prevail against the sinners of Israel so as to consume them, but they are sent down into it to be frightened and scorched awhile on account of their evil deeds; afterwards Abraham, who kept all the commandments and went down into the fire of the Chaldeans to sanctify the name of God, descends thither, and through his merits brings them forth from thence that he may establish the promise of the covenant."

The above sayings, which express "Jewish fables" and the doctrines of "seducing spirits," may be compared with the following somewhat similar sayings about hell, from the fourth book of the Qur'ân:

Qur'ân, an-Nisa' Palmer edition [1880]:

4.55-56

Do they envy man for what God has given of His grace? We have given to Abraham's people the Book and wisdom, and we have given them a mighty kingdom: And of them are some who believe therein, and of them are some who turn from it, but Hell is flaming enough for them. Verily, those who disbelieve in our signs, we will broil them

with fire; whenever their skins are well done, then we will change them for other skins, that they may taste the torment. Verily, God is glorious and wise.

4.95

And whoso kills a believer purposely, his reward is hell, to dwell therein for aye; and God will be wrath with him, and curse him, and prepare for him a mighty woe.

4.97

Verily, the angels when they took the souls of those who had wronged themselves, said, 'What state were ye in?' they say, 'We were but weak in the earth;' they said, 'Was not God's earth wide enough for you to flee away therein?' These are those whose resort is hell, and a bad journey shall it be!

4.115

But he who severs himself from the prophet after that we have made manifest to him the guidance, and follows other than the way of the believers, we will turn our backs on him as he hath turned his back; and we will make him reach hell, and a bad journey shall it be.

4.120

These, their resort is hell; they shall not find an escape therefrom! But those who believe, and do what is right, we will make them enter into gardens beneath which rivers flow, to dwell therein for aye,—God's promise in truth; and who is truer than God in speech? Not for your vain desires, nor the vain desires of the people of the Book. He who doeth evil shall be recompensed therewith, and shall not find for him beside God a patron, or a help. But he who doeth good works,—be it male or female,—and believes, they shall enter into Paradise, and they shall not be wronged a jot.

4.140

He hath revealed this to you in the Book, that when ye hear the signs of God disbelieved in and mocked at, then sit ye not down with them until they plunge into another discourse, for verily, then ye would be like them. Verily, God will gather the hypocrites and misbelievers into hell together.

4.169

Verily, the hypocrites are in the lowest depths of hell-fire, and thou shalt not find for them a help.

Both the Jewish Targums and Talmuds on the one hand, and the Qur'ân on the other, support the idea of a place of infernal torments deep in the earth. But Paul specifically included things "under the earth" in Philippians 2:10, and said everyone will be included among those who "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

References

1. Bernard Whitman. Letter VI; *Friendly letters to a Universalist on divine rewards and punishments* . Brown, Shattuck, 1833. p. 163-195.