



To the north and east in Mesopotamia, people believed that the souls of the dead migrated to an underworld whose geography resembled an ancient walled city. Good and evil, high-born and lowly, all descended to this shadowy, scary, dark, inescapable realm. For the Egyptians to the south, the newly departed faced a ritual trial of judgment. Bad people who failed the test were

rebuild Jerusalem. After that, the Greeks ruled and tried to impose their culture and religion. So it's not surprising that some Jews adopted Persian and Greek ideas of the afterlife. In fact, the Pharisees may have picked up their name from the old word for Persian—*Parsi* or *Farsi*. For Jews who embraced some mixture of Persian and other ideas into their vision of the after-

other words, who was going to hell? People just like the Pharisees! The judgment they so freely pronounced on others, Jesus turned back on them.

And who, according to Jesus, was going to heaven? The very people whom the Pharisees despised, deprived, avoided, excluded, and condemned! Heaven's gates opened wide for the poor and destitute who shared in few of life's blessings; the sinners, the sick, and the homeless who felt superior to nobody and who therefore appreciated God's grace and forgiveness all the more; even the prostitutes and tax collectors! In other words, all the people the Pharisees were careful to avoid were exactly the ones who would someday be welcomed into heaven! Imagine how this overturning of traditional language of hell must have shocked everyone—multitudes and Pharisees alike.

AGAIN AND AGAIN, Jesus took conventional language and imagery for hell and flipped it. We might say he wasn't so much teaching about hell as he was *un-teaching* about hell. In so doing, he proposed a vastly different understanding of the afterlife. But far more important and radical, he proposed a transformative vision of God. God isn't the one who condemns the poor and weak. God isn't the one who favors the rich and righteous. God isn't the one who ordains the rich to be in the castle and

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then devoured by a crocodile-headed deity, and good people who passed the test settled in the land beyond the sunset.

To the west, the Greeks had a more elaborate schema. Although there were many permutations, in general souls were sorted into four groups at death: the holy and heroic, the indeterminate, the curably evil, and the incurably evil. The incurably evil went to Tartarus, where they would experience eternal conscious torment. The holy and heroic were admitted to the Elysian Fields, a place of joy and peace. Those in-between might be sent back to Earth for multiple reincarnations until they could be sorted into a final category.

Then there were the Persian Zoroastrians to the east. In Zoroastrianism, recently departed souls would be judged by two angels, Rashnu and Mithra. The worthy would be welcomed into the house of Ohrmazd, the Zoroastrian version of heaven. The unworthy would be banished to hell, the realm of Ahriman, a Satanic figure.

A large number of Jews had been exiles in the Persian Empire in the 6th century B.C.E., and the Persians ruled over the Jews for about 150 years after they returned to

life, the heaven-bound could be easily identified. They were like the Pharisees—religiously knowledgeable and observant, socially respected, economically prosperous, and physically well-off. The hell-bound were just as easily identified: the opposite of the Pharisees—uninformed about religious lore, careless about religious rules, socially suspect, economically poor, and physically disadvantaged.

Jesus clearly agreed with the Pharisees that there was an afterlife. Death was not the end for Jesus. But one of the most striking facets of his life and ministry was the way he took the Pharisees' understanding of the afterlife and turned it upside down and inside out.

Who was going to hell? Rich and successful people who lived in fancy houses and stepped over their destitute neighbors who slept in the gutters outside their gates! Proud people who judged, insulted, excluded, avoided, and accused others! Hypocrites who "strained out gnats and swallowed camels!" In



the poor to be in the gutter. God is the one who loves everyone, including the people the rest of us think don't count. Those parables we've used to scare people about hell, it turns out, weren't intended to teach us about hell: They used the language of hell to teach us a radical new vision of God!

Jesus used fire and brimstone language in another way as well. He used it to warn his compatriots about the catastrophe of following their current road—a wide and smooth highway leading to another violent uprising against the Romans. Violence won't produce peace, he warned; it will only produce more violence. If his compatriots persisted in their current path, Jesus warned, the Romans would get revenge on them by taking their greatest pride—the temple—and reducing it to ashes and rubble. That's why he advocated a different path—a “rough and narrow path” of peace and reconciliation instead of their broad highway of hate and violence.

The Pharisees rejected both Jesus' alternative portrayal of God and his warnings about a violent uprising. In fact, the Pharisees joined with the Zealots and became leaders in a rebellion against the Roman Empire in 67 C.E. Their grand scheme succeeded for a time, but then in 70 C.E., the Romans marched in and crushed the rebellion. Just as Jesus warned, Jerusalem was devastated and the temple was destroyed. The nation was even worse off after its revolution than before.

And that's when the Pharisees changed. In many ways, after their failed revolution, they followed a path more like the one Jesus had taught, and they showed that it wasn't too late for even Pharisees to change.

In that outcome, we see the real purpose of Jesus' fire-and-brimstone language. Its purpose was not to predict the destruction

# HELL

## and the Love of God

Where do our ideas about hell come from?

by CHRISTIAN PIATT

**I GREW UP IN THE BAPTIST CHURCH**, memorizing scripture as part of our “sword drills” and arming myself with the necessary tools to convert my friends to the side of righteousness. I was taught that the Earth was 5,000 years old, that scientists fabricated the fossil record to fit their agenda, and that some people—really, most people—were going to hell.

I remember waking up, shaking in my bed from dreams of the hungry flames of hell licking at my heels. My daily decisions were increasingly governed by fear and guilt rather than by love or a sense of what was right.

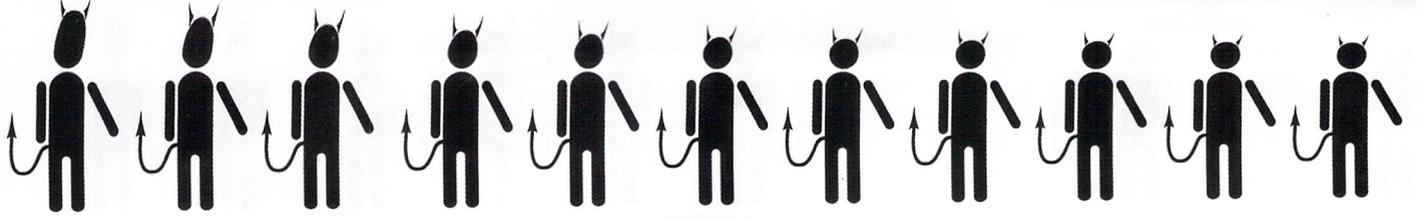
Where do our contemporary ideas about hell come from? First, we have to consider what it is we're talking about when we say “hell.” Is it effectively the same as the annihilation of the soul, when one ceases to exist, even in the spiritual sense? Is it less physical and more of a conscious torment, where we, bound by our sins, spend eternity aware only of our irreconcilable separation from God?

*Blue Like Jazz* author Donald Miller says, “If the religious fundamentalists are right, heaven will be hell. And almost nobody will be there.” Rob Bell, best known for his bestselling book *Love Wins*, stirred up a tidal wave of controversy not so much for suggesting there wasn't a hell, but for suggesting a loving God would ensure that such a place would sit empty.

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, the word “hell” appears 31 times. The phrase “the grave” is used 31 times, and “the pit” comes in at a distant third with three appearances. But all 65 instances of these words throughout the first 39 books of the Bible come from the same Hebrew word, Sheol.

In the Jewish tradition, Sheol is a resting place for

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the dead. While some believe this is the same as hell, there are indications to the contrary. In the ancient Jewish tradition, Sheol is a place of rest for both righteous and wicked, with no distinction.

In the New Testament, there are three words from the Greek that, when translated to English, are generally translated as “hell.” One is Hades, which appears 11 times. Another is Tartarus, which only shows up once. And the third is Gehenna, which comes up 12 times.

Greek culture believed in a place called Hades, which was the resting place for disembodied souls. We see evidence of this as far back as the 8th century B.C.E., in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Hades is described as an underworld, literally located underground; thus we can see the first indication of why we think of hell as such.

Hades includes multiple levels, including Elysium and Tartarus. Elysium, also called Elysian Fields, can be equated with our modern idea of heaven. Tartarus was the level of Hades where unrighteous souls dwelled. This correlates to our modern understanding of hell, where there is wailing, fire, and gnashing of teeth as those who displease God pay

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an eternal price for their disloyalty. For the Jews of the time, this pagan Hellenistic belief was appealing because it helped justify their faithfulness. It gave reasons beyond any earthly consequence for following the laws of the Hebrew scripture.

The third New Testament word for hell is Gehenna, which is actually Greek for two Hebrew words, *gee* and *Hinnom*. Translated literally into English, Gehenna means “the Valley of Hinnom.” This valley was notorious among the Jews, as it was the place where apostate Jews, worshipping the pagan god Baal and the Canaanite god Moloch, would go to conduct sacrifices. Here they would burn their offerings to Baal, which included birds, sheep, and in some cases even their own children. Because of this, Gehenna was considered to be eternally cursed. It was also the site where Jerusalem’s trash was taken to be burned. The site was considered so evil and repugnant that Jewish folklore told of a mythical gate in the valley that led directly down to a lake of fire.

DOES HELL EXIST? Perhaps. But the God of my understanding—the God revealed to me by the life and teachings of Jesus—is a God that seduces us, beckons us toward love and light. It is not a kingdom governed by fear and the avoidance of pain, but rather a kingdom in which the hungry are fed, the weak are empowered, and the desperate find hope.

We are reminded in 1 John 4:18 that there is no fear in love, and that perfect love drives out fear. We can be governed by one or the other, but we can’t cling to both. I choose love. ■

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of the universe or to make absolute for all eternity the clean-unclean categories of *us* and *them*. Its purpose was to wake up complacent people, to warn them of the danger of their current path, and to challenge them to change—using the strongest language and imagery available. As in the ancient story of Jonah, God’s intent was not to destroy but to save. Neither a great big fish nor a great big fire gets the last word, but rather God’s great big love and grace.

Sadly, many religious people still use the imagery of hell more in the conventional way of the Pharisees. Like Jonah, they seem disappointed that God’s grace would get the final word. If more of us would re-examine this fascinating dimension of Jesus’ teaching and come to a deeper understanding of it, we would see what a courageous, subversive, and fascinating leader he was, pointing us to a radically different way of seeing God, life, and being alive. ■

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