

## On the Word “Hell” as Used in Some Bibles

By Richard Joseph Michael Ibranyi

The Latin word for the underworld is *Infernus*, the Hebrew word is *Sheol*, the Greek word is *Hades*, and the Germanic word is *Hell*:

*World Dictionary*: **Infernus**: 1. Infernus, inferni (masculine noun) inhabitants of the lower world. 2. infernus, inferna, infernum (Adjective) lower, under; underground, the lower regions.”

*Wikipedia*: “**Sheol** (/ˈʃiː.ooəl, -əl/ *SHEE-ohl, -əl*; Hebrew: שְׁאוֹל *šə’ōl*) in the Hebrew Bible... Although not well defined in the Tanakh, Sheol in this view was a subterranean underworld where the souls of the dead went after the body died. Within the Hebrew Bible, there are few – often brief and nondescript – mentions of Sheol, seemingly describing it as a place where both the righteous and the unrighteous dead go.”

*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: “**Hades**: ...2. The underground abode of the dead in Greek mythology.”

*Wikipedia*: “**Hell**: The modern English word hell is derived from Old English *hel, helle* (first attested around 725 AD to refer to a nether world of the dead) reaching into the Anglo-Saxon pagan period. The word has cognates in all branches of the Germanic languages, including Old Norse *hel*.”

Hence the word “hell” as used in many Bibles literally means the underworld and thus does not necessary mean the place where the damned are. It also included the Limbo of the Fathers which only existed during the Old Testament era and includes purgatory which still exists. Therefore, places in hell are as follows:

- The hell of the damned, which exists forever
- The hell of the Limbo of the Fathers, which only existed during the Old Testament era, and was also known as Abraham’s Bosom
- The hell of Purgatory, which existed during the Old Testament era and exists during the New Covenant era.

Every place in hell is under the dominion of the Devil and thus even the Limbo of the Fathers and Purgatory, and therefore every place in hell is a prison. But the Devil only has a passive claim on the elect in Purgatory and the Limbo of the Fathers. The Limbo of the Fathers was a peaceful and joyful place where no sins were committed and no devils and damned humans resided.

Because the most common meaning of word hell is the place where the damned are (the hell of the damned), it is not prudent to use the word hell in the Bible. And, more importantly, it is a mistranslation of the Hebrew, Latin, and Greek texts.

The use of the word hell, then, for all three places can cause confusion because most people believe the word means the hell of the damned. For example, the following English translation of Genesis 37:35 could be taken to mean that Jacob wants to go to the hell of the damned to mourn for his son Joseph, who he believed was dead. And thus it could be taken to mean that he believed Joseph was in the hell of the damned:

“I [Jacob] will go down to my son [Joseph] into hell, mourning.” (Gen. 37:35)

Because we know that Jacob and Joseph were faithful and just, we know that the word hell means the place in the underworld where the elect are, known as the Limbo of the Fathers. But if words such as the “underworld” or the “lower regions” were used, then there would be no confusion as these words incorporate all the places without specifying which place. The reader would then need to know more information about the person spoken of or see if other words in the text are more specific as to which place is referred to. And that is precisely the word used in the Latin text: *infernus*, which means “lower regions” or “the underworld”:

*World Dictionary*: Infernus: 1. Infernus, inferni (masculine noun) inhabitants of the lower world. 2. infernus, inferna, infernum (Adjective) lower, under; underground, the lower regions.”

For example, the Latin text for Genesis 37:35 is as follows, followed by the correct English translation:

“Et ait descendam ad filium meum lugens in infernum.” (Gen. 37:35)

“I will go down to my son into the underworld (or lower regions), mourning.” (Gen. 37:35)

The word underworld incorporates all the places in the underworld and thus the place where the damned are cannot be implied, which would be the case if the word hell were used because most people believe that hell is the place where the damned are. Knowing that Jacob and Joseph were faithful and just, we know that the place in the underworld that Jacob is referring to is the Limbo of the Fathers.

Hence the English translations of the Bible should use the word “underworld” or “lower regions” for the Latin word *infernus* instead of the word hell. Another good English translation would also be to use the Hebrew word *Sheol*. I use the English word “the underworld” in the Catholic Bible I revised.

There is a specific Hebrew and Greek word for the place in the underworld where the damned are. The Hebrew word is *gehenna*, and the Greek word is *tartarus*.

*Encyclopedia Britannica*: **Gehenna**, also called Gehinnom, abode of the damned in the afterlife in Jewish and Christian eschatology.”

*Wikipedia*: **Tartarus**: In Greek mythology, Tartarus (/ˈtɑːrtərəs/; Ancient Greek: Τάρταρος, Tártaros)] is the deep abyss that is used as a dungeon of torment and suffering for the wicked... Tartarus is the place where, according to Plato's Gorgias (c. 400 BC), souls are judged after death and where the wicked received divine punishment.”

Therefore, when the Latin or Hebrew or Greek text uses the words *gehenna* or *tartarus*, it means the place in the underworld where the damned are. And the English translation must reflect this and thus not simply translate it as hell or as the underworld, as most English translations do. Take for example the incorrect English translation of Matthew 23:15:

“Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; because you go round about the sea and the land to make one proselyte; and when he is made, you make him the child of hell twofold more than yourselves.” (Mt. 23:15)

It is clear from the context that the place in hell that these Pharisees are going is the hell of the damned, and thus in context the word “hell” means the hell of the damned. However, the Latin text does not have the word *infernus* (the underworld) but is more specific. It has the word *gehenna*, which means the place in hell where the damned are:

“Vae vobis scribae et Pharisei hypocritae quia circuitis mare et aridam ut faciatis unum proselytum et cum fuerit factus facitis eum filium gehennae duplo quam vos.” (Mt. 23:15)

Hence the English should be as follows:

“...you make him the child of gehenna twofold more than yourselves.” (Mt. 23:15)

The English translation of 2 Pt. 2:4 is also not correct but is more specific about the place in hell that the fallen angels are:

“For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but delivered them, drawn down by infernal ropes to the lower hell, unto torments, to be reserved unto judgment.” (2 Pt. 2:4)

The lower hell, then, is the place in hell where the damned are. However, the Latin text does not say lower hell but gives the specific name for the place, *tartarum*:

“Si enim Deus angelis peccantibus non pepercit sed rudentibus inferni detractos in tartarum tradidit in iudicium cruciatus reservari.” (2 Pt. 2:4)

“For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but delivered them, drawn down by infernal ropes to tartarus unto torments, to be reserved unto judgment.” (2 Pt. 2:4)

I prefer to use the Hebrew word—“to gehenna unto torments,” as all the other Latin texts of the New Testament use the word “gehenna” instead of tartarus and because the Greek word tartarus is too closely associated with Greek mythology.

The following English translation of 2 Pter. 2:4 is also acceptable even though it is wordier because it gives the English definition of word gehenna or tartarus:

*Common English Bible:* “God didn’t spare the angels when they sinned but cast them into the lowest level of the underworld and committed them to chains of darkness, keeping them there until the judgment.”

To be precise, then, the word hell is not contained in the original text of the Bible. The words used are either *infernus* or *sheol* to mean underworld or lower regions or the word *gehenna* (in several places) or the word *tartarum* (in one place) for the place in the underworld where the damned are.

Hence, the most accurate English translation is to use the word “underworld” or “lower regions” for the Latin word “infernus” or the Hebrew word “sheol.” I will use the word “underworld” instead of “lower regions” as it is more concise.

And the more accurate English translation is to use the word gehenna or tartarus for the place in the underworld where the damned are. I will use the word gehenna, as it is a Hebrew word and thus not use the word Tartarus which is a Greek word that is too easily associated with Greek mythology. If one still wants to use the word hell in lectures or extra-biblical works, it should only be used to mean the place where the damned are and thus no qualifications have to be made such as saying “the hell of the damned” or “the place in the underworld where the damned are.”

In my works before this article (6-2022), I used the word hell to mean all three places in the underworld unless otherwise noted. But because the word hell is commonly believed to mean the place where the damned are, I will now use the word hell to mean the place where the damned are or I will use the word gehenna to avoid confusion. And I will use the word the underworld or sheol for all the places under the earth, in the lower regions of the earth, unless otherwise noted.

Lastly, on this topic, most English translations of the later version of the Apostles’ Creed are incorrect:

“I believe in God the Father... in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord who... suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died, and was buried, and descended into hell.”

Because most people believe the word hell means the hell of the damned, they may believe that Jesus did not go to the Limbo of the Fathers but went to the hell of the damned. But Catholics know that Jesus went to the Limbo of the Fathers to free them and thus the word hell means the underworld and more specifically the Limbo of the Fathers. And some, such as myself, hold the allowable opinion that Jesus also went to the place in the underworld where the damned are to chain up Satan and the other devils and thus limit their power. Hence, the word hell as used in this later version of the Apostles’ Creed means “the underworld.” And this is the correct translation of the Latin text which has the word “infernus”:

Latin: “Descendit ad inferos” = English: “descended into the underworld”

Hence the accurate Apostles’ Creed in English is as follows:

“I believe in God the Father... in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord who... suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died, and was buried, and descended into the underworld.”

*For the glory of God; in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Michael, St. Joseph, Ss. Joachim and Anne, St. John the Baptist, the other angels and saints; and for the salvation of men*

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**Mary's Little Remnant**

302 East Joffre St.

Truth or Consequences, New Mexico 87901-2878, USA

Website: [www.JohnTheBaptist.us](http://www.JohnTheBaptist.us)