

Heaven, Hell and Life After Death

Preface

by Fergus Pearson, vicar of St John's.

Mark's paper reveals a profound reverence for God and his grace, and he has tackled very contentious issues with clarity and great thoroughness. I want to commend much of what he says without reservation, while at the same time I have questions at other points in his paper. There is one main area where I firmly disagree with Mark. Rather than try to vet what he says, however, I thought it best – as 21st Century Bible is part of the Ministry of St John's Church - to add my own comments in this preface and to send out Mark's paper as it stands.

Readers must weigh up the issues. Hopefully this dialogue will lead people to go back to Scripture to think and pray again about these very important, but very difficult matters.

Mark and I are both working from the same foundation – that the Bible in its entirety is God's word written, and that it is the functional authority to which we must submit. Our differences lie in how we practically manage the task of reading and interpreting the Bible.

We welcome responses to this paper. Take this as an invitation to email us with your thoughts or questions. After a few weeks Mark and I will meet together and look at these responses, and then post any further thoughts we have on this web page.

So, to the point where we disagree.

What do those who reject Christ consciously experience after judgement?

On page 19, on the fate of those who reject Christ, Mark says that 'eternal conscious torment is not part of the punishment'. He agrees that the destructive fire is eternal and that the judged sinner is eternally punished. But he argues that after the point at which God's justice is satisfied, the sinner – who's body and soul have disintegrated – is still undergoing "punishment" but since they are now "smoke and ashes" they are no longer aware of anything.

I think the method Mark employs is not always secure, and I would suggest that on this particular subject it leads him away from what seems to be the Bible text's intent. In order to pull together content from different parts of the Bible into a coherent whole, Mark sometimes seems to me to treat the words rather more like data to be clinically analyzed than words in sentences and paragraphs with all their literary, rhetorical and contextual power. In addition to this, I think he sometimes treats similar words or ideas from different parts of the Bible without giving due weight to the fact that they were written at different times and by different human authors. I would insist that while the Bible is entirely the work of its divine author, God, it is also entirely the work of its human authors with all their cultural and historically-rooted understanding.

A pertinent example of Mark's approach is his treatment of the fiery judgement on Sodom and Gomorrah. On p5 he states that

“... fire involves burning an object, which disintegrates to produce ash and smoke. If the 'object' is living the experience is painful until a certain level of disintegration has been reached.”

Mark then allows this factual description of burning to fix the meaning of every further mention of fire and burning – and of Sodom and Gomorrah - that he cites. So his basic premise is that because “only the 'ashes' ... remain” (p19) the judged sinner, although in theory continuing to be punished, is no longer conscious of the continuing torment.

I wonder if what Mark ends up doing is elevating a natural observed phenomenon into a mechanistic theoretical principle of interpretation. I would suggest that the use of words in the Bible cannot be fixed into a definition that can then be applied by rule. This may perhaps be done with case law, or with a technical manual, but it cannot be done to the kinds of literature that make up the Bible without going against the grain of the Bible's nature.

It may be that Mark's extra-biblical definition of burning has become an assumption that has clouded his reading of the plain statements about eternal consciousness in some passages, and so he is not able to take them at face value.

Let me briefly work through one passage to try to bring out its meaning. In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus speaks of himself, the Son of Man, coming “in his glory... All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...” (v31-32). In v41 he says to the 'goats', “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (v41). The picture finishes with, “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (v46).

Whether or not this is “the only or final judgement” (p10), and whether or not Mark's connection of this passage with Ezekiel 28:18-19 (p7) is correct, in my view the force and purpose of Jesus's intent in telling the story of Matthew 25 cannot be denied.

What is conveyed here through picture language is that the worst possible fate awaits “the accursed”. It seems to be the worst possible fate exactly because it is presented as the fate prepared for the devil and his angels. This fate is described as “eternal fire” (v41) and “eternal punishment” (v46). Two things are emphasized in particular: that the fate is 'eternal', and that these people enter it. It is difficult to imagine that these words are not intended to convey the idea that the 'goats' go through a horrific experience for eternity. Part of the reason these verses have been penned, it seems, is precisely to warn us of this fate, of this worst of all possible experiences.

Let me commend Mark's paper to you again. Read it, and my comments, with the Bible in your hand and prayer for understanding. May God give each of us a heart keen to come to Christ and stay with him as our only hope in the face of death. And may we have this same heartfelt desire for others too.

HEAVEN, HELL & LIFE after DEATH

INTRODUCTION

What happens to us and those we love when we die? This profoundly affects us all. The atheist says we disintegrate into compost and our consciousness ceases forever. Some religions claim we are on a treadmill of life, death and rebirth into successive bodies. The Bible says neither is true - apart from a few notable exceptions we die once and then face judgement. (Heb 9:27) What this means in practice has been debated over the centuries and between different Christian traditions. Four difficulties have been:

- references to the afterlife are scattered throughout the Bible. It is a matter of finding pieces for a jigsaw puzzle.
- how much in the Bible is symbolic and how much is literal.
- a failure to apply clear whole-Bible logic to the Bible passages concerned, and
- the influence of non or anti Biblical philosophy and theology on our understanding and Bible translations. Historically Greek philosophy has had a major impact on theology.

However, this is not a review of the various positions on these issues by different church traditions over the centuries. That would be a massive task. My approach in this paper is to look at the Bible as a whole and in the light of the history of Bible times. I try to apply logic. I avoid non-Biblical philosophical and other preconceptions as much as possible. I fully accept that the Bible has symbols, figures of speech etc. However, I believe God has generally spoken in everyday speech and as a general principle I see no reason to take passages non literally unless this is indicated by the context or by other passages in the Bible. I believe that this approach untangles some of the difficulties and many of the Bible accounts then become reasonably straightforward. For Christians there is every reason to look forward to life after death. Perhaps the most contentious issue amongst Bible believing Christians at present is the ultimate fate of unbelievers and those incapable of rational thought. I pay special attention to this issue at the end of this paper.

All Bible quotations are from the NRSV unless stated otherwise.

OLD TESTAMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Sheol Throughout the Old Testament the main word for the world of the dead is Sheol. This is often misleadingly translated "grave" in some English versions. "Sheol" is found 63 times from Genesis to Habbakuk. The first reference is Genesis 37:35:

Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son [Joseph] many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to **Sheol** to my son, mourning."

The inhabitants of Sheol were the souls of both believers such as Jacob and unbelievers such as the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14. Some have suggested that only unbelievers went to Sheol and that references to believers such as Jacob doing so only express their unfounded fear of going there. However, it is clear that throughout the Old Testament believers were also expected to go to Sheol, e.g. Ecc 9 v 10, which was written for and about believers:

Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might;
for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol,
to which you are going.

Another term for Sheol is "the pit":

Isaiah 14:15 But you are brought down to **Sheol**, to the depths of the **Pit**.

Yet another term is "Abaddon" or "destruction", although Abaddon may refer to a section of Sheol.

Job 26:6 **Sheol** is naked before God,
and **Abaddon** has no covering.

Sheol is very much "down". This means a literal Underworld as is shown by the story of the Witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28. In this passage the ghost of Samuel comes "up out of the ground". In Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16 God punishes the rebels by sending them down alive into Sheol (vv 31-33).

Some have claimed that in the Old Testament conditions in Sheol were much the same for all the dead. However, all the surrounding cultures had very similar ideas of what happened to the dead and their Underworlds were divided into compartments. The best known is the Greek Hades, which was said to be divided into various more or less pleasant sections. According to Greek legend the dead were first judged and then sent to the appropriate section. The Old Testament gives very little detail about this. However, the fact of compartments is confirmed by Proverbs 7 v 27:

Her house is the way to Sheol,
going down to the **chambers** [plural] of death.

Arguing that conditions were the same in all parts of Sheol is an "argument from silence", which is logically dangerous.

Sheol had "gates" or entryways into it through which the dead passed, normally called the "gates of death", e.g. Psalm 107 vv 17,18:

Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the **gates of death**.

Once through the gates and in Sheol it was virtually impossible to return. Job 7 vv 9,10:

As the cloud fades and vanishes,
so those who go down to Sheol do not come up;
they return no more to their houses,
nor do their places know them any more.

In general Sheol was a place of darkness (e.g. Ecc 11 v 8); rest, quietness, and sleep (e.g. Job 3 v 13); where those of earthly rank could no longer oppress others (e.g. Job 3 vv 18,19). However, there was still a level of consciousness (e.g. Isaiah 14 vv 9,10). In the Old Testament Sheol and fire are not mentioned together. However, in other cultures and later Jewish thought sinners suffering in fire was a part of what happened in the Underworld. Because this idea is not mentioned directly in the Old Testament we

need to be cautious about it.

Sheol and Hades

Between 300 & 200 BC the Old Testament was translated into Greek. The translation was called the Septuagint. Whenever the translators met the word Sheol they translated it as "Hades", i.e. the Greek term for the Underworld. In the New Testament this tradition is continued with various references to "Hades", often quoted directly from the Septuagint. This shows that the New Testament Hades and the Old Testament Sheol are the same. However, it does not imply that all the Greek myths about Hades are true any more than it implies that all the Jewish myths about Sheol are true.

Resurrection in the Old Testament

According to the Old Testament Sheol was not the final destination of the human soul. Instead it was an "intermediate state", albeit a long lasting one. Isaiah 26 v 19 reads:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a radiant dew,
and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

Daniel 12 v 2 indicates that resurrection includes both the righteous and unrighteous, but with very different consequences:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,
some to everlasting life, and
some to shame and everlasting contempt.

In the New Testament Jesus showed that resurrection was implicit from the beginning. In Matthew 22 v 32 he quoted Exodus 3 v 6, which on first sight appears to have nothing to do with resurrection:

He [God] said further [to Moses], "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

The logic seems to be that God was still the God of the patriarchs even though they were dead, i.e. in Sheol. The promises he had made to them in Genesis were still outstanding. In order for God to keep his word he would have to resurrect the patriarchs. Nothing less would do.

Judgement Fire

Following Noah's flood God promised never again to judge the world by a universal flood. (Genesis 9 v 11) From then on fire was the ultimate means of judgement and many passages talk about fire. In simple terms fire involves burning an object, which disintegrates to produce ash and smoke. If the "object" is living the experience is painful until a certain level of disintegration has been reached. The prototype was the judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18 & 19) and there are references to this judgement throughout the Bible. It seems as if there was a volcanic eruption which included burning sulphur falling on the area. It is quite possible that afterwards the Dead Sea was covered with burning bitumen (which floats) and it would literally have been a lake of burning sulphur if the bitumen was mixed with sulphur. There is good evidence that the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah were still alight at the time of Christ. The Jewish philosopher Philo writing at about that time in his work, "Of Abraham", wrote this intriguing extract about the judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah:

And a most evident proof of this is to be found in **what is seen to this day: for the smoke which is still emitted**, and the sulphur which men dig up there, are a proof of the calamity which befell that country...

A second important passage is Daniel 7. In this highly symbolic passage a "river of fire" is flowing out from before God's heavenly throne. The purpose of the fire is for the disposal of a "beast" representing a Gentile empire (Daniel 7 vv 11 & 23).

Gehenna

In the Old Testament Jerusalem was built on a ridge surrounded by three valleys. The southern valley was called the Valley of Ben Hinnom and this became called Gehenna. Some of the Kings of Judah promoted the human sacrifice of infants (e.g. 2 Chronicles 33 v 6) and this was done at Topheth in Gehenna. Gehenna became a place of uncleanness and the city rubbish dump where fires smouldered night and day. It was also a place for the bodies of criminals who did not have a proper burial. In the Bible it is associated with judgement.

One of the matters dealt with in Isaiah was God's judgement on the king of Assyria. This happened outside the walls of Jerusalem in the time of King Hezekiah. Isaiah 37 v 36 describes this:

Then the angel of the LORD set out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies.

Isaiah 30 v 33 provides a poetic description of their mass incineration at Topheth:

For his burning place [lit. Topheth] has long been prepared;
truly it is made ready for the king,
its pyre made deep and wide,
with fire and wood in abundance;
the breath of the LORD,
like a stream of sulphur,
kindles it.

At the end of Isaiah we have another important passage, Isaiah 66 vv 23,24:

23 From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
says the LORD.
24 And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

This seems to refer to a future time when all mankind will worship God in Jerusalem as is described elsewhere in Isaiah and other prophetic books. The most obvious understanding of verse 24 is: As the worshippers leave Jerusalem they see the dead bodies of the rebels against God on the city rubbish dump being eaten by worms and consumed by slow fires. Needless to say there are different interpretations of this including whether the bodies are in fact consumed or whether they are merely immersed in worms and fire. The Targum (translation into Aramaic) translates "worm" as "soul" thus reading "their soul shall not die".

The Devil and Ezekiel 28

Ezekiel lived and prophesied at the time when Babylon ruled the Middle East. Ezekiel 27 describes the overthrow of Tyre. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon conquered Tyre in 572 BC. He installed client "kings" to rule on his behalf. When Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC his successor Evilmerodach used "princes" (i.e. a general term for ruler) to rule Tyre and from then on there was no human King of Tyre. Ezekiel 28 vv 1-10 is addressed to the "prince" of Tyre who is described as a "man" (v 2). This prophecy is therefore compatible with the historical background. Ezekiel 28 vv 11-18 is by contrast addressed to the "king" of Tyre. It is too long to quote in full. The following extracts from the NIV make my point. (In this case the NRSV does not provide a literal translation.)

- 13 You were in Eden, the garden of God...
- 14 You were anointed as a guardian cherub...
- 15 You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you...
- 17 ... I threw you to the earth...
- 18 So I made a fire come out from you and it consumed you, and I reduced you to ashes...
- 19 ... you have come to a horrible end and will be no more.

In 1 Samuel 8 v 7 God is described as Israel's "king" so the word "king" does not have to refer to a human. The extracts from Ezekiel 28 above make little sense unless the subject is a fallen cherub who was at one time in the Garden of Eden. The obvious candidate is the Devil. This being is said to be burnt to "ashes", which implies that non material beings can also be "burnt" in a meaningful sense, though presumably not by fire as we know it.

Two other explanations are:

- that the passage is not meant to be taken at all literally;
- that the passage can mean that the cherub was involved in the judgement on a human king, although this requires adding words that are not in the original.

Nothing in the Bible suggests the need for such alternatives. However, if one holds prior beliefs, e.g. that prophecies must be about humans or that spirits cannot be destroyed, then inevitably one must look for such alternatives.

Psalm 112

This psalm describes the contrasting fates of the righteous and the wicked. Notable for the purposes of this paper is verse 10:

The wicked see it [the fate of the righteous] and are angry;
they gnash their teeth and melt away;
the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

Note the description of them gnashing their teeth. This term reappears in the Gospels.

Heaven in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament Heaven is plural - the Heavens. How many is not said. From our scientific point of view we might think of three - the atmosphere, outer space, and the spiritual heaven where God and the angels reside. In 1 Kings 8 v 27 Solomon refers to

the "highest" heaven. Heaven is God's domain and His throne is there (Psalm 11 v 4). God is the God of Heaven (especially when talking to pagans), e.g. Jonah 1 v 9. However, the only men that the Old Testament states are in heaven are Enoch and Elijah, both of whom ascend to heaven without dying. (Genesis 5 v 24 & 2 Kings 2 v 11.) These are notable exceptions to the general rule that the dead were in Sheol.

The Meaning of Death in the Old Testament

Genesis 2 v 7 reads:

Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

This provides for a threefold division: the dust = body; the breath = spirit; the "living being" [Hebrew Nephesh] = soul. Some believe that breath = spirit and/or soul, i.e. the two English words mean the same in this context and the word nephesh is added to make the point that the man was then alive. Death means the disintegration of the human being. Ecclesiastes 12 v 7, referring to old age and death reads:

and the dust [body] returns to the earth as it was, and the breath [spirit] returns to God who gave it.

This implies that the spirit returns to heaven whereas the various passages considered above say the soul went down to Sheol. This implies that spirit and soul are not the same. There is no explicit statement in the Old Testament about the immortality or otherwise of the soul unless one accepts the Targum mentioned above (p5).

"Sleep" as a Metaphor for Death

Daniel 12 vv 1-2 reads:

"At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2 Many of those who **sleep** in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

"Sleep" here is a metaphor for death. This term is used more frequently in the New Testament, but what is written here is relevant to the whole Bible. Literal sleep is a state of bodily rest when the mind is disconnected from the body. The mind continues to work by dreaming, but the body is not involved in what happens in the dreams. This metaphor fits with the rest of Old Testament teaching on the state of the dead: their bodies are at rest while their souls continue to function independently. Some have taught that "sleep" implies oblivion, i.e. the person dies, is then totally unaware of anything and eventually wakes up at the resurrection not being aware of what has happened in the meantime. However, there is no logical need for this interpretation and to the contrary it ignores the dreaming aspect of sleep. Other passages in the Bible clearly indicate that the souls of the dead are aware.

INTERTESTAMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

By the time of the New Testament the rabbis had developed their views of the Afterlife far beyond the limited data of the Old Testament, although based to a considerable extent on various passages. There seems to have been some outside influence

including from Greek philosophy, especially Platonism. Amongst other things Plato taught that the soul was immortal. There were numerous and sometimes inconsistent stories, some of which seem obviously ridiculous to our 21st Century ears. I can give only the barest outline here: The Valley of Ben Hinnom was said to be the site of a gate into a vast subterranean country called Gehenna which was full of darkness and fire. This was the part of the Underworld devoted to dead sinners. The righteous souls went to Paradise or "Abraham's Bosom", where they enjoyed a "feast", which was seen as spiritual rather than literal. Each dead soul had his/her good and bad deeds balanced and this led to his/her destiny. Paradise was in heaven or possibly underground. Surprisingly Paradise and Gehenna were separated by a very small space. Two similar stories said that Abraham or an angel intercepted circumcised Jewish sinners on their way to Gehenna and brought them safely to Paradise. After a certain period there would be the Day of the Lord when God would intervene to punish his enemies and renew the earth. The Messiah would reign in a time limited Messianic kingdom. (Compare Christian ideas of the Millennium.) Finally there would be the final Day of Judgement involving resurrection and final judgement, with the resurrected people going either to Paradise where they feasted or Gehenna where they were punished. Whether this punishment was forever or time limited varied according to the sinner.

NEW TESTAMENT CONSIDERATIONS

The Gospels - Gehenna

Unlike the Rabbis' attempts to flesh out the Old Testament passages, Jesus seems to have provided relatively few details about heaven and hell. He seems to have been more concerned with warning his hearers that to please God they must repent and follow/believe in him. Both John the Baptist and Jesus made it clear that Jews, including the pious Pharisees, had no automatic right of entry to Paradise. E.g. Matthew 5 v 20:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

At various places in the gospels Jesus warned his hearers that they were at risk of being: burnt like rubbish/thrown into Gehenna. However, there is no record of him defining where Gehenna was beyond quoting Isaiah 66 v 24 in Mark 9 v 48, which implies it was outside the gates of Jerusalem.

In Matthew 10 v 28 he warned:

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell [Gehenna].

This implies that Gehenna is more than just a rubbish tip used for burning dead bodies. It is a place for destroying both bodies and souls, which in turn implies it is a place of final judgement. The term "destruction" is used here of both body and soul implying that just as the body can be destroyed, e.g. by burning, so can the soul. This is one of the strongest grounds for believing that during the final judgement the conscious suffering of the soul eventually comes to an end, just as when a body is destroyed the physical suffering eventually ends. (The human spirit is not destroyed because it returns to God who gave it. See my comment on Ecclesiastes 12 v 7 on p 7.) The word "destroy" [Gk *apollumi*] is said by many to include the meaning "torment" and that this meaning applies to this verse. However, elsewhere in the New Testament outside the context of judgement it has the usual meaning of "kill, perish lose etc." A different word is used for

torment [Gk basanizo]. I suggest there is no need to change the meaning of apollumi in the context of judgement. If torment had been meant the word basanizo would have been used. Because this is such an important point I have listed all the references to "destroy" in the New Testament in an Appendix.

In Matthew 13 there are a series of parables which speak of the mixture of believers and unbelievers in the present age and their separation into different situations at a judgement at the end of the age. E.g. Mat 13 vv 39-43:

... the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

This shows that the unrighteous are in considerable distress when put in Gehenna, though nothing is said about whether this is permanent. The imagery is of weeds being burnt up, not criminals being tormented, so the implication is that the distress is temporary and related to being burnt up. The righteous by contrast "shine like the sun", just as Jesus shone like the sun at his transfiguration (Mat 17 v 2).

Gehenna is also said to be "dark" in other parables, e.g. Mat 22 v 13 and 25 v 30.

In Matthew 25 vv 31-46 Jesus provides detail about the judgement of the "nations" (Gentiles - same word as in Gal 2 v 9) at his second coming. (For various reasons I do not believe this is the only or final judgement, but my reasons are beyond the scope of this paper.) At the end of the passage the unrighteous are sent to "eternal punishment" in "the fire prepared for the devil and his angels". I suggest that "eternal punishment" does not have to mean "eternal torment", though it could do. My reasons are given below on page 16 where I discuss the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Many Jews believed that the angels were created and the Devil and his angelic allies fell on the second day of creation (the only day that was not pronounced "good") or possibly on the fifth. They believed that the fire to punish them was prepared immediately afterwards. However, the only Bible reference I know of that seems to describe a fire prepared specifically for the devil is the Ezekiel 28 passage I discussed above. If this is right, it again suggests that the "fire" is designed primarily to destroy, with the conscious torment (but not the punishment) being limited in time.

Mark 9 vv47-48

Jesus said: "And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, 48 where their **worm never dies**, and the **fire is never quenched**."

This quotation from Isaiah is sometimes used to support the idea that sinners suffer consciously in Gehenna for eternity without any end. However, Jesus did not say this. He spoke about worms and fires, not souls. We cannot be sure whether he agreed with the Targum mentioned above (p5), but if he had we might expect him to have confirmed that translation by saying, "where their soul never dies..."

The Gospels - Hades/Sheol

In the gospels Jesus mentions Hades/Sheol on four occasions that I am aware of. It seems likely that Jesus normally spoke in Aramaic or Hebrew (exactly which is

disputed) because several times his Aramaic/Hebrew words are quoted. If this is right "Hades" is a translation of "Sheol".

The first reference to Hades/Sheol is Matthew 12 v 40:

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

Although Hades/Sheol is not specifically mentioned, to his hearers would have been a straightforward reference to him descending to Sheol, which was situated inside the earth. (In the Creed we say, "He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again.")

The second reference is Matthew 16 vv 17-19:

Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter [Gk Petros], and on this rock [Gk Petra] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

In the Old Testament the name "Rock" is given to God, e.g. Psalm 31 v 2. In the New Testament the name Petros is consistently given to Simon Peter. In the New Testament the term Petra is either used of a literal rock, e.g. Mat 27 v 60 or of Jesus - see Rom 9 v 33; 1 Cor 10 v 4; and 1 Pet 2 v 8. In 1 Corinthians 3 v 11-12 states:

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

In the immediate context of Matthew 16 the use of Petra is ambiguous - it could apply either to Peter or to Jesus. However, in my view it is both more consistent with the rest of the Bible and it makes more sense if it is applied to Jesus who is God as well as man. I therefore suggest that a loose paraphrase of verse 18 could be: "Simon, I am calling you after myself - the Rock of the Scriptures. All my people will have their lives built on me - the Rock. To enable this to happen I will take control of the Gates of Sheol so that the dead who believe in me can join me. However, to you will be given the privilege of opening the way to Heaven through your confession that I am the Messiah."

The third reference is Luke 16 vv 19-31, the story of the rich man and Lazarus. There is some dispute about whether this is or is not a parable. It is said that the introduction suggests it is a literal story. However, the Parable of the Shrewd Manager immediately before in Luke 16 starts exactly the same way; "There was a rich man..." , so there is good reason to suppose it is a parable. The purpose of the story is to make a point about the lack of impact Jesus' resurrection would have on the Jews. It is therefore important for both these reasons to be cautious about using this story as a foundation for teaching on the nature of Hell. To Jesus' hearers the story was about a wicked man who was suffering in the hot nasty section of Sheol, as described by the Rabbis, but who was able to communicate with the righteous Abraham in the nice section. It may be that these details were an accurate description of parts of Sheol. It is also possible that Jesus was telling a parable using a traditional but not entirely accurate backdrop. It is noteworthy that Jesus referred to Hades/Sheol, not Gehenna. It seems the story is about what happens after the rich man's death, but before his ultimate judgement. Bearing in mind all of the above, I believe it is crucial not to use this story to try to prove anything about the eternal destiny of the unrighteous.

The final reference is Luke 23 v 43. Jesus is on the cross and says to the repentant criminal who is being crucified beside him:

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

"Paradise" literally means garden, but to the Jews of the time it was another term for the place of the righteous dead. The repentant criminal would have understood that he and Jesus would both die that same day and end up together in the nice part of Hades/Sheol, which as exemplified above was in "the heart of the Earth".

The Gospels - Resurrection & Tombs

John 5 vv28-29 reads:

[Jesus said] ... for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and will come out — those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

This can be taken in more than one way. It may be taken as a statement about "all who are in their graves". When Jesus said these words he was in fierce debate with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Perhaps he was referring to the tombs outside the city walls and warning his hearers that some would rise to be condemned - in contrast to a belief that all properly buried Jews would rise to eternal life. I suggest this fits best with the context.

It may be taken as a general statement about "all" the dead throughout the world responding to Jesus' voice at the two resurrections. If so it cannot be taken entirely literally because many of the dead throughout the world are not in graves - many have been cremated or even eaten by animals so there are no physical remains left. It is therefore dangerous to build a doctrine of resurrection that in essence says that dead people "sleep" in their graves until their remains are called back to life by Jesus. If so many people, including Christian martyrs eaten by animals in the Roman circus, will not be there! It is also dangerous to build a doctrine that says that the first part of the sentence about "graves" is not entirely literal but the second part about "coming out" is. If it is a figure of speech then we must take it as such and look to other parts of the Bible for clarity.

The Gospels - Heaven

In the Gospels Heaven is God's home, the place where Jesus came from before his incarnation and where he will return - see especially John's gospel. However, little is said about it as a place for God's people after death. One reference is John 14 vv 2,3:

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

This passage is in contrast to previous passages in the Bible about the destination of the righteous. It implies that the disciples will not go to Sheol as earlier generations did, but instead will go to Heaven to be with Jesus. It is not stated whether this is after death or via bodily ascension. It is to be noted that going to Heaven is not an end in itself - it is so the believer can be with Jesus.

Acts and the Epistles - The Afterlife for Christians

From Peter's early sermons recorded in Acts 2 and 3 it is clear that Jesus had descended to Sheol (e.g. Acts 2 v 31), had risen again and was now temporarily in Heaven awaiting the time to return to Earth a second time for the "universal restoration". Since nobody knew when he would return the initial emphasis was on waiting for that event. However, believers still died and there remained the question of what happened to them in their Intermediate State before Jesus' return. In 2 Corinthians 12 vv 2-4 Paul writes about himself in the third person as follows:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. 3 And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

Here Paradise, which is the place of the righteous dead, is now stated to be in the "third heaven", which is consistent with the first heaven being the atmosphere and the second heaven being outer space. It implies that the Paradise section of Sheol had been emptied by Jesus after he descended to Sheol and when he rose again. The Gates of Sheol had indeed been forced. It also shows that there is much that God does not want us to know in this life.

In Philippians 1 vv21-24 it is clear that Paul expected to go to Heaven when he died:

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be **with Christ**, for that is far better; 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.

In 1 Thessalonians 4 vv 13-18 Paul writes to encourage the believers about their dead and Jesus' second coming. Verse 14 states:

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring **with** him those who have died.

This confirms that the righteous dead are now with Jesus in heaven, not Sheol.

1 Thessalonians 4 v 16-17 reads:

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; **and so we will be with the Lord forever.**

This takes us past the believers' intermediate state to their resurrection. The important thing to notice is that in this passage Paul does not state **where** they will be after the meeting in the air but **who** they will be with. This is often ignored in discussion about the Afterlife, which often centres on "Heaven" or "Hell". Some say they cannot believe in a God who excludes unbelievers from Heaven. However, it may make as much sense to say that unbelievers exclude themselves. If they do not want to be with Jesus on Earth, how much less will they want to be with him for eternity? Heaven could be less bearable than Hell as far as they are concerned.

The Resurrection Body

There are two important passages on this theme: 1 Corinthians 15 vv 1-54 and 2

Corinthians 5 vv 1-4. Of note is the fact that: "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (1 Cor 15 v 50) and, "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens... For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." (2 Cor 5 vv 1,4) This implies that the resurrection body is not just the first body rebuilt and preserved forever. This implies that our resurrection body is made in heaven and either replaces or "swallows up" our original body. It is a strong glorious body in contrast to our present weak mortal body. We receive our resurrection body at Christ's second coming. (1 Cor 15 v 23)

The Judgement of Believers

The New Testament makes it clear that believers will be judged. 1 Corinthians 4 v 5 shows that this is connected to Jesus' return:

Therefore do not pronounce judgment [on other believers] before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

This judgement is for reward according to the quality of life the believer has lived. (See 1 Cor 3 vv 10-15.) Some believe this is part of a more general judgement of mankind and occurs on the Earth in line with Matthew 24 vv 31-46, (the judgement of the "sheep" and the "goats"). I disagree with this analysis - these "sheep" seem to be too lacking in understanding to be Christians and they are contrasted with Jesus "brothers", who clearly are believers. I do not have space here to give a fuller analysis of this passage. Others believe that after meeting in the air Jesus and his newly resurrected people retire into Heaven for this judgement. This is in line with Jesus' promise to take his disciples to be with him in Heaven (John 14 vv 2-3 already quoted above).

The Marriage

The theme of the "marriage" of Jesus to his church is found in various places. This is the event Christians should all look forward to. In Jewish weddings the bridegroom went to meet the bride and escorted her back to his home for the wedding feast. This fits exactly with my analysis. In Ephesians 5 vv 22-33 Paul wrote a passage comparing human marriage with Jesus' marriage. Verses 25 - 27 read:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, 27 so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind — yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

When Jesus marries the church we will be without any moral blemish. It makes sense to think of the judgement of believers being a preparation for this event.

Jesus on Earth a Second Time

The New Testament clearly teaches that Jesus will return to Earth, e.g. in Acts 3 vv 19-21 Peter tells his fellow Jews:

Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, 20 so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may

send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, 21 who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets.

As already stated some think this occurs immediately after Jesus meets his people in the air while others believe that it occurs after the Christians' judgement and wedding feast in Heaven. Since Christians will be "with him forever", it follows that Christians in their resurrection bodies will accompany Jesus back to Earth. They will then be fit to share in his rule and authority over both humanity and angels, e.g. 1 Corinthians 6 vv 2-3:

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? 3 Do you not know that we are to judge angels?

This contrasts with the popular idea that Christians will spend an eternity drifting around on clouds and strumming aimlessly on harps! In essence it is a restoration of Adam and Eve's original mandate to "fill", "rule" and "subdue" the Earth in Genesis 1 v 28. This time it is Jesus, the "last Adam" (1 Cor 15 v 45), and his bride, the Church, who will do this. 1 Corinthians 15 vv 22-28 confirms the need to "subdue" the Earth:

... all will be made alive in Christ. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

This shows that there is a period of time after Jesus returns to the Earth when there are still enemies to be subdued including hostile angelic powers and the last enemy, which is "death". Paul does not explain how long this period is - it could be brief or it could be a thousand years.

Acts and the Epistles - the Afterlife for Non-believers

Acts and most of the letters add little to our understanding of hell. There is silence about unbelievers in the Intermediate State, which implies that nothing much has changed. Presumably, on death unbelievers continue to go to Sheol/Hades. Paul in 2 Thessalonians 1 v 9 Paul writes that after Jesus' second coming unbelievers "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might". This is consistent with the gospels, but does not add much to our understanding.

Perhaps the most interesting passages are the parallel ones found in 2 Peter and Jude:

2 Peter 2 v 6: "... by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he [God] condemned them to extinction and made them an example of what is coming to the ungodly ..."

Jude 7: "Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire."

By combining these two passages we derive the following:

- Sodom and Gomorrah provide an example of what "is coming to the ungodly".

- They were reduced to ashes. As far as we know ashes do not experience pain.
- Nevertheless, they were still "undergoing a punishment" in Jude's day. (From Philo above we note that the fire was probably still burning in Jude's day.) The word "undergoing" is in the present tense. To our 21st century minds "punishing" ashes may seem ridiculous, but in Bible times it was presumably not so.
- Although the people concerned would undoubtedly have suffered pain during the initial stage of the burning, they were long dead. They cannot have still been suffering pain as a result of their continuing punishment in the "eternal fire". This suggests that "eternal punishment" need not mean eternal conscious torment.

Another verse to consider is 2 Peter 2 v 9:

...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.

The term punishment includes the notion of discomfort. However, it is unclear whether this refers to punishment before or after the final judgment and it is not stated how long the punishment lasts.

Revelation

Revelation is a tremendous book, but also a very difficult one. Even amongst Bible believing scholars there are numerous interpretations most of which seem to contradict each other. It is therefore necessary to be extremely cautious in using Revelation to derive teaching without support from the rest of the Bible. The problem seems to be that Revelation consists of a series of visions in what is known as apocalyptic style. It is often hard to know exactly what the visions represent and how literally we should take them. Similar types of visions are found in Daniel and Zechariah. All three prophets had a number of bizarre visions, which were partially explained by angels. However, even with the explanations there are difficulties. In particular commentators often skip from taking the visions literally to figuratively and back again according to their own theories, which can lead to circular reasoning. (I do not have space to explore this issue thoroughly.) Revelation contains over 500 references to the Old Testament, so a good knowledge of the Old Testament is very helpful! Revelation contains a number of references to Heaven, Hell and the Afterlife, so despite the difficulties we cannot ignore the book. I will try to pick out the passages that are particularly important for this paper.

In Revelation 13 John has a vision of an Unholy Trinity: a dragon (the devil), a "beast" with seven heads and ten horns who all non-believers alive at that time will worship as God (presumably the Antichrist), and a second "beast" (the "false prophet"). Revelation 14 vv 9-11 states:

Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, "Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, 10 they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name."

This passage is sometimes quoted in support of the idea of unending torment for all unbelievers in Hell. However, this does not follow logically for the following reasons:

- This refers only to those who take the "mark of the Beast". There is no reason to suppose that this includes all unbelievers who have lived at all times.
- It is the "smoke" that goes up forever - it does not say their torment is forever.
- Having no rest day or night does not mean forever. For a time Job had no rest day or night, but it did not last forever.

At the end of Revelation we are introduced to visions involving a "fiery lake of burning sulphur", which is the "second death". This reminds us of Gehenna, the Dead Sea at the time of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the river of fire in Daniel, all of which I have mentioned above. It has been commonplace to take this "lake" literally. However, if this were the case we should by the same logic expect the Antichrist to be a man looking like an animal with seven heads and ten horns! Revelation 20 v 10 reads:

And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

As far as I am aware this is the only direct reference to "eternal torment" (as opposed to "punishment") in the Bible. If we follow the logic of what the "eternal punishment" of Sodom and Gomorrah might mean (see pages 16-17) then it may be possible that it is the trio's ashes that are being "tormented".

Revelation 20 vv 11-15 tells of another and final judgement:

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. 13 And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; 15 and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

In this vision the dead inhabitants of Sheol/Hades and the sea are judged on the basis of their works. Presumably this includes all the unrighteous dead from the beginning of time to this point. However, it also includes a category of people who are in the "book of life". Who are these? Christians have been resurrected and judged previously. It is unclear, but it may include Gentiles who have never had the opportunity to hear God's word, but who nevertheless have had the law of God "written on their hearts". This is consistent with Romans 2 vv 13-16. It is also consistent with Acts 18 vv 26-28. There Paul tells the Athenians that God has always been close to all humanity and has hoped that, "...they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him..." This suggests that a few may have done exactly that and because of a personal faith they have been entered into the "book of life", despite their sins. I must make it clear that this does not imply there is any way of being saved without Christ. However, I suggest it may be possible to be saved through Christ without knowing his full identity at the time, just as a drowning man need not know the identity of the person who pulls him out of the water. Such a man would later on be only too keen to find out who had rescued him to thank him etc. The NT makes it clear in John's gospel and elsewhere that God the father and God the son are one - you can't have one without the other. E.g. "No one knows the father except the son and those to whom the son chooses to reveal him".

(Mat 11 v 27) Applying that principle means that the few Gentiles who "find" God in this way also automatically "find" the son even though the name Jesus may initially mean nothing to them. Just as for the rest of us, any faith would have to be more than just intellectual assent or religious devotion etc, but a living relationship of trust and obedience. A sure test of such a person would be that once "the way of God was explained more adequately" (c.f. Acts 18 vv 24-26) they would embrace it. Such people would be attracted to Jesus as soon as they heard of him (see John 3 v 21). Like other believers they would still face a judgement of their works, which in their case would be for reward not punishment. An example of such a person might be Steven Masood when he was a boy. His autobiography, "Into the Light", includes an account of his pre-Christian spiritual experiences as a boy being brought up in a Muslim family in Pakistan. If this is right it does not mean that evangelism is unnecessary. On the contrary it is far easier to become a believer through hearing the gospel than by "groping" for God. (See Romans 10 vv 12-15.)

As part of the judgement Death and Hades are thrown into the Lake. This is consistent with 1 Corinthians 15 v 26: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Many commentators take Death and Hades symbolically, but the Lake of Fire literally. This is inconsistent. You cannot throw a symbol into a literal lake. It is also noteworthy that symbols and places cannot literally be tormented. If the purpose of the Lake of Fire is to torment rather than burn up how can Death and Hades be tormented? If it is said that Death and Hades are, in this context, fallen angels then what is the "sea" in verse 13?

However one takes it, this passage seems to show that Hades is not the permanent home of the dead. Therefore even if the story of Lazarus and the rich man in Hades in Luke is meant to be taken literally (see above p11), it cannot be taken as an account of the rich man's eternal state.

Revelation 21 & 22 provides visions of the eternal state. (I shall not quote the whole passage.) Revelation 21 vv 3-4 reads:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals [Gk anthropos = men]. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

From now on the distinction between heaven and Earth seems to be abolished and for believers at any rate all is bliss. As before, the function of the church is to rule (22 v 5). The subjects of the rule are the nations (e.g. 21 v 24), presumably including the righteous survivors of the Millennium (See 20 v 3).

In this vision the Lake of Fire apparently continues in existence and it seems to be situated outside the gates of the New Jerusalem. Rev 21 v 8 & 22 v 14-15 read:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death...

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

These verses do not state whether the wicked people in the lake are whole and conscious or whether they are merely their remnants in the form of "ashes". It is

commonplace to take these final visions literally. However, if one does so one must accept that the New Jerusalem is 1,400 miles high (Everest is 5 miles high) and that pearls of enormous size - big enough to make an imposing city gate - are now available, etc. I think it makes more sense to take all the visions symbolically.

HELL - UNENDING TORMENT OR INCINERATOR?

Over the Christian era these have been the two main Christian views of Hell and the second death. In recent years this issue has become a live one for Evangelicals with prominent theologians on both sides. Historically, the first view has always been the majority view amongst orthodox Christians. Partly this has been how they have read the Bible. Partly it has been because the Platonist belief in the indestructibility of the soul has made incineration seem impossible. John Stott holds the second view and this has given it more weight than formerly.

The first view states that sinners end up in a fire, but with fireproof bodies that are capable of experiencing and enduring agonising pain into eternity. According to this view the many references to the "destruction" of sinners do not mean destruction at all. On the contrary they mean "painful preservation". The moral justification for this punishment is said to be that they have wilfully rejected and rebelled against a holy God and even in Hell continue to do so. This ultimate crime deserves the ultimate penalty of unending torment. This seems at odds with the idea of a God who is "love" (1 John 4 v 16), who even loves his enemies (Romans 5 v 8) and who takes no pleasure in the death of anyone (Ezekiel 18). Understandably it is a stumbling block to many non-Christians coming to faith because they find this idea inconsistent and revolting. This idea was also the inspiration for many of the torturers of the Inquisition. Their logic was that to save heretics from the awful fate of Hell they should give them a foretaste of the worse agonies they would experience after death. They hoped this would help at least some of them see the error of their ways and repent! To many people this makes God seem crueller than the Inquisition, which cannot be.

In my view the direct Bible evidence for this first view is surprisingly thin and it is an unnecessary interpretation of the Bible. Although there is no passage that definitely states this view is wrong, neither is there any passage that definitely states it is correct. The nearest we have to a direct statement of unending conscious torment is in the context of a vision in Revelation 20 involving the Unholy Trinity of the Devil, the Beast and the False Prophet. Because of the symbolism it is open to interpretation. E.g. if the beast's appearance is not meant to be taken literally maybe other parts of the vision are not. The passage in Ezekiel 28 may well mean that the devil in fact is reduced to unfeeling ashes in the "fire" (see p6 above). Even if Rev 20 v 10 does refer to three massively evil individuals suffering eternally, it is unnecessary to assume their punishment is shared by all lesser sinners.

The minority view has been that sinners end up in a "fire" that destroys them after a period in pain that is justly proportionate to their sins. In this case the second death is a development of the first death. The first death led to a partial disintegration involving mainly the body, whereas the second death leads to a complete disintegration of body and soul. Just as the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were punished perpetually so will all sinners be. However, eternal conscious torment is not part of the punishment. It is only the "ashes" that remain to be eternally "punished" and perhaps "tormented". In my opinion this view is far more consistent with the language of fire and destruction used throughout the Bible; it more closely follows the God given example of Sodom and Gomorrah; it is more consistent with the idea of God's ultimate aim being total unending happiness (e.g. Rev 21 vv 1-5); and it is also far more consistent with what we know of our God generally.

WHAT ABOUT BABIES, STILLBIRTHS ETC?

This is an issue that touches many of us. However, the Bible has little to say on the subject, perhaps because there is nothing we can do about it. However, there are a few relevant passages. I shall attempt a review, but because the matter is not clear I am not in a position to be at all dogmatic. Ultimately we need to trust the God of justice and mercy to act in accordance with his nature.

The first question is when does human life start? I have considered this in my earlier paper, "Abortion and Euthanasia", which is also available on the St Johns Hensingham website. While acknowledging contrary views, my conclusion was that it starts at conception. Furthermore it is generally accepted that children inherit the sinful nature of their parents. (See Psalm 51 v 5) Multitudes of embryos, foetuses and babies die and this is well before they are able to make a meaningful choice to sin or have a faith in God. What happens to them after they die? Many Christians believe that because they inherit Adam's sinful nature they also inherit his guilt and are eternally condemned and this includes suffering eternal torment. Others believe that the only other inherited penalty for Adam's sin that applies to them is physical mortality. A third position is that we simply do not know.

In 2 Samuel we read the story of King David's adultery with Bathsheba which resulted in her having a baby to him. As part of God's punishment of David the baby dies. 2 Samuel 12 v 23 reads:

But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

This suggests that despite being conceived by an act of adultery the dead baby went to the Paradise section of Sheol. Romans 5 v 13 and 7 vv 9-11 read:

...sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law...

I was once **alive** apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived 10 and I **died**, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

The terms "alive" contrasted to "died" cannot mean physical death, but rather spiritual death. On the face of it these verses suggest that babies and young children are spiritually alive until they become aware of law and choose to break it, being deceived into thinking that sin is attractive. Some commentators take other views, e.g. that Paul the Pharisee felt he was spiritually alive although in reality he was dead and the law taught him the truth about himself. However, I see no reason why the text should not be taken at face value.

Another interpretation of the above is that the offspring of believers are saved but not that of unbelievers. There is some support for this in 1 Corinthians 7 v 14 which says that believers' children are "holy" whereas other children are "unclean".

FURTHER READING

Four books that I have found helpful have been:

Report by the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals
"The Nature of Hell" Acute (Paternoster Press)

Robert C Doyle "Eschatology and the Shape of Christian Belief" Paternoster
Press (A historical review.)

Arnold G Fruchtenbaum "The Footsteps of the Messiah" Ariel Ministries (A
comprehensive study of eschatology.)

John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible Available on the Internet.

Mark Quigley
St Johns Hensingham
2/11/06

APPENDIX

References to the word "destroy" in the New Testament

This is a list of all the 96 references to the words meaning destroy [Gk apollumi & olethros] with what I think are their obvious meanings, if the translation "destroy" is not used:

Verse	Comment
Mat 2 v 13	Destroy means kill
Mat 5 v 29	Means perish
Mat 5 v 30	Means perish
Mat 8 v 25	Means perish
Mat 9 v 17	Means perish
Mat 10 v 6	Means lost
Mat 10 v 28	See main text for my comment
Mat 10 v 39	Means lost
Mat 10 v 42	Means lost
Mat 12 v 14	Means kill
Mat 15 v 24	Means lost
Mat 16 v 25	Means lost
Mat 18 v 11	Means lost
Mat 18 v 14	Means perish
Mat 21 v 41	Means kill
Mat 22 v 17	Means kill
Mat 26 v 52	Means die
Mat 27 v 20	Means kill
Mar 1 v 24 "... there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"	On the face of it this means disintegrate / turn to ashes etc. If one has a prior belief that spirits cannot be destroyed then the meaning is unclear and presumably could mean torment. Since I believe spirits can be destroyed I see no reason to deviate from the usual meaning of destroy.
Mar 2 v 22	Means perish
Mar 3 v 6	Means kill
Mar 4 v 38	Means die
Mar 8 v 35	Means lose
Mar 9 v 22	Means kill
Mar 9 v 41	Means lose
Mar 11 v 18	Means kill
Mar 12 v 9	Means kill
Luk 4 v 34 In the story of Legion	As Mar 1 v 24
Luk 5 v 37	Means perish
Luk 6 v 9	Means kill
Luk 8 v 24	Means die
Luk 9 vv 24 & 25	Means lose
Luk 9 v 56	Means kill

Luk 11 v 51	Means die
Luk 13 v 3, 5 & 33	Means die
Luk 15 vv 4,6,8& 9	Means lose
Luk 15 v 17	Means perish
Luk 15 vv 24 & 32	Means lose
Luk 17 vv 27 & 29	Means kill
Luk 17 v 33	Means lose
Luk 19 v 10	Means lose
Luk 19 v 47	Means kill
Luk 20 v 16	Means kill
Luk 21 v 18	Means perish
Joh 3 vv 15 & 16	Means perish instead of having eternal life
Joh 6 v 12	Means lose
Joh 6 v 27	Means perish
Joh 6 v 39	Means lose
Joh 10 v 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy .	Means "make a mess"?
Joh 10 v 28	As Joh 3 v 16
Joh 11 v 50	Means perish
Joh 12 v 25	Means lose
Joh 17 v 12	Means lose
Joh 18 v 14	Means die
Act 5 v 37	Means die
Rom 2 v 12 All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.	Means perish. This is in the context of judgement, so if one does not believe souls can really perish it might have to mean something else, e.g. torment.
Rom 14 v 15	Means cause the ruin of
1 Co 1 v 18	Means perish
1 Co 1 v 19	Means bring to nothing
1 Co 5 v 5	Unclear. Probably means to afflict with disease perhaps to the point of death - in a similar manner to Job.
1 Co 8 v 11	Means cause the ruin of
1 Co 10 vv 9 & 10	Means kill
1 Co 15 v 18	Means perish
2 Co 2 v 15	Means perish
2 Co 4 vv 3 & 9	Means perish
1 Th 5 v 13	Means ruin
2 Th 1 v 9 These [wicked people] will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.	Means permanent complete disintegration owing to God removing his presence? (Compare Ps 104 v 29) If one believes that souls are indestructible then it might mean everlasting torment, though this is not what the text actually says.
2 Th 2 v 10	Means perish
1 Tim 6 v 9	Means ruin
Heb 1 v 11	Means perish
Jam 1 v 11	Means perish
Jam 4 v 12	Means opposite of save
1 Pet 1 v 7	Means perish

2 Pet 3 v 6	Means perish
2 Pet 3 v 9	Means perish
2 Joh 1 v 8	Means lose
Jud 1 v 5	Means kill
Jud 1 v 11	Means perish

Although it is possible to quibble with my translations, I think the point is clear. In many cases the idea of mental suffering is absent, often because the word refers to an inanimate object. In the rest the idea of suffering is incidental, but not essential. In none of the above is there the necessity to translate either word for destruction as "torment". However, if there is the prior belief (perhaps derived from Neoplatonism) that souls and spirits are indestructible then it has to mean something when applied to souls and spirits and it could mean their torment. I suggest a better and more Biblical understanding of this dilemma is the conclusion that souls and spirits are indeed destructible as the use of the word implies.

MQ