



IS CHRISTIAN HELL ROOTED IN JEWISH *GEHINNOM*? A HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

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Abstract

This paper investigates the historical and theological relationship between Jewish *Gehinnom* and the Christian doctrine of hell. The study explores whether Christian understandings of eternal punishment originated from the Jewish concept of *Gehinnom* or developed independently through later theological influences. Beginning with the Old Testament background of the Valley of Hinnom (*Ge-Hinnom*), the research traces its transformation from a geographical location associated with idolatry and divine judgment into an eschatological symbol of punishment in Second Temple Jewish literature. Particular attention is given to apocalyptic writings, rabbinic traditions, and the teachings of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, where the term *Gehenna* becomes central to discussions of judgment and the afterlife. The paper further examines how early Christianity inherited Jewish eschatological concepts while reshaping them through Hellenistic influences and patristic theology. It highlights the similarities and differences between Jewish *Gehinnom* and Christian hell concerning duration, purpose, location, and theological interpretation. While Jewish traditions often viewed *Gehinnom* as temporary and purificatory, Christian theology increasingly emphasized eternal punishment and separation from God. Through historical, biblical, and theological analysis, the study argues that Christian hell is substantially rooted in Jewish *Gehinnom* but evolved into a more systematized doctrine within Christian thought. The research contributes to broader discussions on eschatology, divine justice, and the development of afterlife beliefs in Judeo-Christian tradition.

Keywords: *Gehinnom*, Christian Hell, Judgment, Eternal Punishment, Eschatology.



Introduction

The doctrine of hell remains one of the most debated themes in Jewish and Christian theology. While Christianity traditionally teaches eternal punishment for the wicked, Judaism developed more diverse views concerning divine judgment and the afterlife. Central to this discussion is the concept of *Gehinnom* (*Gehenna*), a term that appears in Jewish literature and later becomes prominent in the teachings of Jesus Christ. The question therefore arises: Is the Christian doctrine of hell rooted in Jewish *Gehinnom*? The term *Gehinnom* (in its rabbinic Hebrew vocalization of the Aramaic *Gehinnam*) or *Gehenna* (Greek translation) developed from the name of a topographical landmark, a valley on the border of the City of David (Milikowsky, 1998). This valley is generally called *gy'bnhnm* (that is, valley of the Son of Hinnom) in the Bible, but occasionally simply *gy' hinm*, which is almost identical to the rabbinic word. The translation of the valley to “valley of Hinnom” is a metaphorical use of the name of a valley outside Jerusalem. The valley has an ignoble history, in which human sacrifices had been offered to Molech and other idols and these were generally the sacrifice of infants and children who were often burned to death in fires or hot coals kindled before the idols (Jeremiah 7:31; 32:35). During the course of the Judaeen monarchy, it was also noted that the place became the center for pagan occultic activity and this could be evidenced in Isaiah 30:33, which explains that Assyria is destined for *tofet* (valley of Hinnom), where ‘his fire-pit has been made both wide and deep with plenty of fire and firewood’ (Bademosi, 2024).

The valley was also a place set apart to dispose of the dead, mass corpses during war or invasions and the first heavy rains would wash the remains into the Dead Sea, “the lake of fire”. But in later times, rubbish was burned in the valley, and the unclean, that is, those with communicable diseases or illness such as leprosy, were forbidden to cross the valley and enter the city of Jerusalem. According to Hengel (1974), the word *Gehinnom* or *Gehenna* appears often in Jewish texts of the Hellenistic and Roman as well as in the Intertestamental. However, it has been concluded according to Jeremias that *Gehinnom* is the ‘place of punishment in the last judgment’ (Jeremias, 1964). It is therefore referring to hell in the Judeo-Christian tenet. The concept is also found in the Old Testament and Talmud figuring as a place of punishment for the wicked after the resurrection.

In the prophecies of Jeremiah, it is in this valley that the wicked will receive their retribution. ‘... It will no longer be called the *tofet* and the Valley of the Son of Hinnom but the valley of Slaughter’ (Jer. 7:32). It is viewed in the introductory phrase of the biblical passage mentioned that ‘days are coming’ carries an eschatological overtone and since the wicked are punished in the valley, which is not limited to those who served the pagan gods there (Milikowsky, 1988). Jeremiah seems to testify to an early tradition that associated this valley with future retribution. *Gehinnom* is thus the name of a place of retribution in the eschatological future associated with a specific geographical location.

Early pseudepigrapha books, like Enoch have positioned *Gehinnom* as a place for divine retribution against the wicked in the future. Although, there have been arguments on the fact that there was no name of valley mentioned in this book, they have most times resulted in the conclusion that there is definitely the statement regarding to as ‘accursed valley’ (1 Enoch 27:1-2), next to the mountain in the ‘middle of the earth’ (1 Enoch 26:1), where the wicked will be punished after the future judgment. 1 Enoch 90:26 also gave an example telling of an abyss full of fire next to ‘that house’, the house built for the ‘Lord of the sheep’ (1 Enoch 89:50), where the blinded sheep are cast after judgment. (Foresman, McCraw and Arp, 2015). According to this book, Enoch, *Gehinnom* is a valley that is next to the Temple, and it means the specific place where the wicked will receive their just retribution after the future judgment. Therefore, *Gehinnom* is not a place within a geographical context, but the name of that fearsome place where the wicked and offenders will be punished after the great day of judgment, which is ascribed to be Hell. The word ‘Hell’ is derived from an Anglo-Saxon word *hellia* (derived from the Old English, Old Norse, Old High German, *hel*, *helle*, circa. 725 AD) which is used in the King James Version of the Bible to capture the Jewish concept of ‘*Gehinnom* or *Gehenna*’ as the final destination of the wicked (Aries, 2015). The concept of Hell is used twenty-three times in the New Testament, although there are sections in the Greek New Testament where other Greek concepts like Tartarus or Hades were used or the Hebrew concept of *Gehinnom*. Michael A. Peters (2019) remarked that the Christian concept of Hell inherited and fashioned, is a theological combination of the three ancient concepts derived from Hebrew and Greek mythology and theology, even though they have different origins and meanings.

Therefore, the notion of Hell predates Judeo-Christianity by thousands of years by Egyptian and sources of Jewish mysticism such as the *kabbalah*. This *Kabbalah* mentions seven different divisions of Hell including, *Gehinnom* and *Sheol*, etc. (Foresman, et.al (2015). History and doctrine of Hell have played a central theological role in Christian



(and other Abrahamic religions) religious life and education as the place of eternal damnation where evil souls are punished. Thus, it serves as the substantial part of holding firm the moral tradition and Christian mythology that educated the populace and provided the moral basis for law, justice and order within institutions that comprised society. Theories of Hell were depicted as nightmarish visions that embellished early scriptures, church decorations, painting, among others, and later became a source and warrant of reinforcing the moral teaching of the Church, but became the basis of medieval control of people in the monasteries (Benjamin, McCraw and Arp, 2015).

Hell is generally conceived as a place that is beneath the earth, where the wicked would be punished for eternity and there would be both physical and psychological torment (Shariff and Akinin, 2014). Psychologically, people would conceive knowing that they had lost the opportunity for salvation and physically continues to face the inflictions of the Devil and his demons. Hell, in philosophy is abstract and it connotes the abode of those that denounce and deny Christ and heaven remains the promised reward for all who accept Christ and do his will. Hell, in Catholicism is the state of definite self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed which occurs by the refusal to repent of mortal sin before one's death. Since mortal sin deprives one of sanctifying grace (Downey, 2003). The Catholic view of hell is centered on *Sheol* and *Gehinnom* (*Gehenna*) in Judaism. Therefore, the church regards *Sheol* or *Hades* as the same as Hell the place where Jesus descended to after death.

Hell, according to Lazar Puhalo (2016) is one of the most difficult concepts in Judeo-Christianity and it is made a more difficult concept by two factors. The first is that, there is no such concept in Hebrew Scripture, the Christian Old Testament. The second is the fact that in many instances, the Orthodox Christian understanding of hell has been submerged by an idolatrous and pagan "folk religious image of it". Many scholars have argued that Jesus never referred to hell directly during his teachings and life but he used *Gehenna* (*Gehinnom*), which does not refer to a place of eternal torment but to a notorious valley just outside the walls of Jerusalem, believed by many Jews at the time to be the most unholy, god-forsaken place on earth (Baker, 2010). Hell is then characterized and described as a place with heat, bondage, darkness, thirst, worms, pain, flogging, fire, and silence. But the two major features of hell as mentioned in the Christian scriptures are fire and darkness, as well as pain (gnashing of teeth) according to Freedman (2008).

The common understanding and belief of hell in the society before the 12th and 13th centuries connote that there is a place of punishment for those souls judged as unrighteous by God and this also seems the prevailing perception of the Church (Chan and Sprinkle, 2011). It is to be noted that this belief about the after-life has become the determinant of one's life. The understanding of it then changes over the course of centuries and the meaning became widened. To many in the contemporary society, hell is not only for eternal punishment but now means a state of suffering, difficulty, pain, disappointment (Gabriel, 2022), agony, scarcity, anxiety, hatred, anger (Oladeji, 2022), hunger, poverty (Akinyemi, 2022), delay, lie, etc. For example, Peter Usman, a victim of kidnappers narrated his freedom and said "I saw Hell in the Kidnappers' Den" (David, 2023); In *This Day* newspaper, it is recorded that a man named Josef Omorotionmwan (2023) lamented that "Hell is here in Nigeria", he described the suffering by Nigerian workers as hell and on the new challenge facing Nigerians about the Naira scarcity.

The Historical Background of *Gehinnom* in the Old Testament

According to (Bademosi, 2024), Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean, including the regions like Persia (that is now Greece, Turkey, Iran), Lebanon (which was Ancient Ugarit Northern part of Canaan, across Jordan river), Ancient Assyria (Syria), Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, and Canaan (Israel) Palestine, are all the powerful nations surrounding the nation of Israel. These regions have influenced the literature myths, folktales, customs, traditions, norms, legends, arts, civilization of the Jewish people. Egypt for example, has great and voluminous historical influence on the Israelites. Their sojourn in Egypt during slavery contributed to the nation's foundation myth (Deut.26:5-10). Many authors like Lambert and Morgan (1990), Cohen (1993), Rob Bell (2011), Ammar Annus (2013), Gardiner (2013), and among many more, gave explanation that surviving texts from the Ancient Near East reveal a cosmology that included a dark underworld realm. Although the contrary gods live permanently without joy, and there is only dust to eat and drink in the underworld. This place or land also served as a great warehouse for dead mortals. It was not conspicuously a place of punishment, but hints of judgment and retribution are already evident.

The place of retribution thus exists and has been established in the literature of the Ancient near East world. The books cover the Mesopotamians (Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians), the Hittites and the Canaanites or Ugarits. But it can be generally difficult to establish a comprehensive definition of the otherworld among such a wide variety of cultures and kingdoms as those that comprise the ancient Near East, because evidence



from them is sparse and generally agrees on basic notions. Documentation for a cultural group's earliest ideas about hell is usually found within its cosmogonic mythology. As in almost all the ancient mythologies in the Ancient Near East, the gods lived in a place in the sky (i.e. a heaven). The concept of underworld in the Ancient Near East has many similarities with the concept of *Sheol* in the Old Testament. Therefore, it can be said that *Gehinnom* does not match the in-depth analysis of Christian Hell but rather has similar and most appropriate analogy with Old Testament *Sheol*.

The valley of Hinnom is "the scene of one of Israel's most terrible lapses into pagan customs" in the history of Judah (Jeremias, 1964). During the reign of King Ahaz, fire worship was instituted, and in this valley, children were burned alive in the fire as a sacrifice to the god Molech. It is stated in [2 Chronicles 28:3](#) that Ahaz "burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his sons in the fire" (c.f. [2 Kings 16:3](#)). Two generations later, Manasseh took the throne, and like his grandfather Ahaz, "he sacrificed his sons in fire, in the Valley of Ben Hinnom" (33:6; c.f. [2 Kings 21:6](#)). [Jeremiah 32:35](#) tells us that "they built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molech," something the Lord "never commanded, nor did it enter [His] mind, that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin." This demonic act of sacrificial slaughter "filled Jerusalem from end to end" with the blood of innocent children, and provoked the Lord to such anger that he said, "I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle" ([2 Kings 21:12, 16](#)).

This *Gehinnom* valley was chosen as the location for such abominable practices is not hard to imagine. According to Lloyd Bailey (1986), "an altar [or pillar], in the ancient Semitic world served to connect the realm of the worshipper with that of the deity." We see examples of this elsewhere with the story of Jacob and his heavenly dream at Bethel. When Jacob awoke from his dream, he set up a pillar in the place where he lay and proclaimed that "this is the gate to heaven" ([Gen. 28:17](#)). "Underworld deities, on the other hand, could be contacted most efficiently through altars in low places: ravines, crevices, or caves." In fact, Bailey goes on to say that within these Semitic cultures, these "altars were sometimes supplied with pipes so that the sacrificial blood could be channeled to the underworld deities who were thought to dwell just beneath them."⁷⁶ This is perhaps why we read in places such as [Isaiah 57:5-7](#) condemnations of "those who sacrificed in valleys and who poured out liquid offerings there to an underworld deity."

Manasseh's grandson Josiah later took the throne, and we read of his sweeping reforms in [2 Kings 23:1-25](#). He led the nation in her reformation, and "desecrated Topheth, which was in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, so no one could use it to sacrifice his son or daughter in the fire to Molech" (v.10). Topheth is the "place of fire" or "fire altar" within the Valley of *Gehinnom* where the child sacrifices took place (Bailey, 1986). Josiah's servants also took all the articles made for Baal-worship and "burned them outside of Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron Valley" (v.4) which was adjacent to the Valley of Hinnom. By way of desecration, he took human bones and scattered them in the places used for pagan worship (vv.13-14). Papaioannou points out that the "corpses and the bones of the dead were considered unclean, and this act signified the defilement of the sites so that they would not be used again for any kind of idolatrous worship" (Papaioannou, 2013). The author of 2 Chronicles records the same events but adds that Josiah took the bones of the dead pagan priests and burned them "on their altars, and so he purged Judah and Jerusalem" of their sin (34:1-7). An act of desecration was also an act of purification.

So radical was Josiah's reformation that it moved the heart of God. "Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did – with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength" ([2 Kgs. 23:25](#)). But nevertheless, the Lord said that because the great sins of Ahaz and Manasseh "provoked [him] to anger by all that their hands have made, [his] anger will be poured out on [Judah] and will not be quenched" ([2 Chr. 34:25](#)). As an act of mercy, however, the Lord promised Josiah that he would not witness the disaster that would befall Judah ([2 Kgs. 22:20](#); [2 Chr. 34:28](#)).

Development of *Gehinnom* in Second Temple Judaism

Gehinnom is not considered a physical location with geographical coordinates. Instead, it is understood as a spiritual realm or state of being. Its association with the Valley of Hinnom in Jerusalem is primarily symbolic, as the valley's history and associations with death and destruction influenced the conceptualisation of *Gehinnom*. Nevertheless, the geographical location of *Gehinnom* which is the Valley of Hinnom, today called Wadi er-Rababi, is a narrow gorge that runs from the southwest side of Jerusalem towards the Kidron Valley in the east. In the Old Testament, it was called the Valley of Hinnom and also referred to as the "Valley of the sons of Hinnom" (Bailey, 1986).



Aside from the history already surveyed, the term *Gehinnom* shows up in Jeremiah where it is portrayed as a place where the apostate Jews will be completely destroyed by God. The first instance is in [Jeremiah 7:29-34](#) where the Lord tells the prophet of his anger that burns against Judah. He is provoked to anger because “the people of Judah...have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire” (7:30-31). Then in language of terror and dread, Jeremiah prophesies the destruction to come: “The days are coming...when the people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room” (7:32). Their corpses will be left to rot, and “will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth” (7:33). The intense language of slaughter and of exposed dead give us the imagery of a bloody “battle scene...and one of utmost desolation” (Block, Morgan and Peterson, 2004).

This language of *Gehinnom* is picked up again in [Jeremiah 19:1-15](#), and we see a starkly similar picture as we saw in 7:29-34, except with a few additional details. Jeremiah goes out to the *Gehinnom* valley and prophesies directly towards the “kings of Judah and the people of Jerusalem” (19:3a). Interestingly, he seems to employ language similar to the words in [2 Kings 21:12](#), where the Lord says, “I am going to bring such disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle” ([Jer. 19:3b](#)). Again, the prophecy says that the valley will be called the “Valley of Slaughter” (19:6), “where those Israelites who offered their children as sacrifice to false deities will themselves be slaughtered.” There won’t be enough room to bury the dead, and the unburied will be left as food for the birds and wild animals (19:7). What Jeremiah says different here is that the people will “fall by the sword before their enemies,” which introduces explicit warfare imagery (Block, et.al, 2004). Additionally, he says the people will turn on each other in cannibalistic fashion “during the stress of the siege imposed on them” (19:9). By using a visual illustration, as many prophets did to enhance their prophecy, Jeremiah breaks a clay jar in front of the people and says, “This is what the Lord Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter’s jar is smashed and cannot be repaired” (19:11). Not only is this a desolation of the people of Judah, but of the entire city of Jerusalem (19:12-13). So great is the destruction that will befall the nation that it will be irreparable.

The third instance, though absent of the term *Gehinnom*, is an unmistakable allusion to the same valley. In [Jeremiah 31:40](#), the prophet refers to the “valley of the dead bodies and the ashes” located near the Kidron Valley, which is right next to the Valley of Ben Hinnom. This Jeremiai reference is different from the prophecies in chapters 7 and 19, for the context here is one of salvation and redemption (31:23-40). It looks ahead to post-exilic times when the Lord brings his people back out of captivity with a “New Covenant,” and they will rebuild the city of Jerusalem (Jeremias, 1964). This is when the “valley of the dead bodies and the ashes” will become “holy to the Lord” (31:40). It is known from history recorded outside of Scripture and in [2 Kings 25](#) and [2 Chronicles 36:15-23](#) that shortly after Josiah’s death, “Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the people of Judah were taken into exile.” Jeremiah the prophet is believed to have been “a younger contemporary of Josiah.” In fact, it is likely that he would have been involved in Josiah’s sweeping reforms as a young prophet. Based on what we know from [Jeremiah 1:1-8](#), “the prophet received his prophetic call during Josiah’s thirteenth year, just as the latter had commenced his reform program [[2 Chr. 34:3](#)]. Jeremiah was quite young at the time of his call, which could mean that Josiah’s desecrations of *Gehinnom* would have been deeply impressed upon the young prophet” (Dennis, 2007).

In light of this background, it is quite likely that the grotesque imagery of a valley filled with dead bodies in [Jeremiah 7:29-34](#) and [19:1-15](#) would have had a deep impact on the people of Judah. The people had just recently been a part of Josiah’s radical reformation, and saw the valley desecrated with the bones of the dead. It is not hard to imagine why Jeremiah calls it “the valley of dead bodies” (31:40). His prophecy would have carried much force in the minds of the people, for it was a call to repentance or else they and the entire populace of Jerusalem “will become as deserted, desecrated and abominable as the valley of Hinnom after the reforms of Josiah”, a valley of slaughter.

Historically, it seems clear that Jeremiah prophesied the brutal destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, and this was fulfilled somewhat off-screen from the text. There seems, however, to be elements within Jeremiah’s prophecy that point to “a greater and more complete destruction brought about God himself...that goes beyond anything the Babylonians did.” There will be no room to bury the dead, “the land will become desolate,” and the “sounds of joy and gladness” and the “voices of the bride and bridegroom” will cease ([Jer. 7:34](#)). Coupled with the repeated use of the phrase, “the days are coming” (7:32; 19:6; 31:27,31,38), and with the redemptive tone in [Jeremiah 31:27-40](#), these elements may “suggest an eschatological event in the making.” To be sure, the emphasis is immediate



fulfillment in the eyes of Jeremiah, but a future fulfillment may be implied, even if it cannot be proven with certainty (Dennis, 2007).

By far the clearest allusion to the Valley of *Gehinnom* outside of Jeremiah is [Isaiah 66:24](#), which happens to be the *Gehinnom* text most alluded to in the teachings of Jesus in the gospels. Contextually, [Isaiah 66:1-24](#) is describing an eschatological battle scene outside of Jerusalem. The Lord protects the righteous within the city while utterly slaying the wicked who rebel against Him, by divine fire and sword. Then Isaiah says that the righteous “will go out and look upon the *dead bodies*” of the wicked, lying just outside of Jerusalem, where “their worm does not die” and the “fire is not quenched” ([Isa. 66:24](#) – emphasis mine). The image is of “a pile of corpses, victims in battle, ignominiously dumped in a heap and torched.” The *Gehinnom* Valley is not mentioned in this text, but the imagery has unmistakably strong ties with Jeremiah: a great battle resulting in massive loss of life, where the dead are left unburied and left to the irresistible consumption by scavengers. Yet, another connection can be made to the “Valley of Slaughter” in Jeremiah from [Isaiah 30:25](#) where it speaks of “the salvation of Israel and the destruction of her enemies on the Day of the Lord ‘the day of great slaughter.’”

There are other allusions to destruction in a valley within Old Testament texts such as [Isaiah 30:33](#), [Ezekiel 39:11-16](#) and [Joel 3:1-21](#), but in each of these cases (as we saw with [Isaiah 66:24](#)), they do not mention *Gehinnom* by name. “This can only mean that the word *Gehinnom* had not yet developed into a byword for the punishment that God would inflict on the wicked in the eschatological future.” It seems to be the case, then, that *Gehinnom* in the Old Testament was a term only used in pre-exilic texts. Subsequent to Jeremiah, we do not hear of *Gehinnom* again in the rest of the Old Testament.

Rabbinic Understanding of *Gehinnom*

***Gehinnom* in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha Texts**

In Judith 16:17, the Lord Almighty will take vengeance of them in the day of judgement, to putfire and worms in their flesh; and they shall weep and feel their pain for ever. The book of Judith was written during the middle of the 2nd century BC (Charles, 1973). The contextsurrounding this passage concerns the return to Jerusalem after the exile. This passage fromJudith has language that is similar to that of Jesus when he refers to *Gehenna* in Mark 9:47-48and both the Judith and Mark passages use language that can be found in Isaiah 66:24. *Gehennais* not specifically mentioned here but only the day of judgment.

Sirach. 7:17 stated thus “Humble yourself to the utmost, for the punishment of the ungodly is fire and worms” (NRSV). The book of Sirach, also called Ecclesiasticus, can be dated to the early 2nd century BC (Charles, 1973). This quote is similar to the example given from Judith. Both books have an expectation that there will be punishment for the ungodly. Though the length of this punishment can be argued, there is a definite concept that the wicked are judged.

In Assumption of Moses10 10; and thou shalt look from on high and shalt see thy enemies in *Ge (henna)*. And thou shalt recognize them and rejoice, and thou shalt give thanks and confess thy Creator. The Assumption of Moses was written sometime between 3 BC and 70 A.D (Charles, 1973), is full of apocalyptic language that very much parallels that of the New Testament. In other literature (Isa. 66:24; 1 En. 90:26-27), the righteous are often able to see the place of punishment of the dead (Charles, 1973).

While there are many other texts in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (like First Enoch, Jubilees, The Sibylline Oracles, Second Baruch, Fourth Ezra (Second Esdras), etc.) that speak of judgment,the abyss, valleys, fire, and *Gehenna*, the ones listed above provide a good sample of *Gehenna* inextra-biblical texts. One way of interpreting this data would be to see the images of a fieryjudgment in valleys and the abyss as representative of an eschatological judgment and that theconcept of judgment in OT texts like Jer. 7, 19, 31 and Isa. 66 gave rise to the development ofthe *Gehenna* tradition. Therefore, Jesus and the pseudepigraphal books of the 1st century AD andlater used *Gehenna* as a metaphorical place of judgment for all the wicked (Bademosi, 2024).

Another way of looking at the evidence would be to note that the apocryphal books and the pseudepigraphal books dated before the 1st century AD never mention the word “*Gehenna*”and that there is no evidence specifically pointing to *Gehenna* as being a part of a commoneschatological judgment before the 1st century AD. This is furthered by the fact that in the OTreferences, *Gehenna* hadn’t taken on this meaning. While some would point to Jeremiah’s use of*Ge-Hinnom*, he uses *Ge-Hinnom* as a place of physical judgment upon Jerusalem. Joel’slanguage concerning the Valley of Jehoshaphat seems to fit better with the concept of judgmentin the New Testament (Dillow and Dillow, 2012).



***Gehenna* in the Teachings of Jesus**

Gehenna (*Gehinnom*) is recorded twelve times in the New Testament, seven times in Matthew, three times in Mark, once in Luke, and once in James. In nine of the eleven warnings Jesus gives concerning *Gehenna*, he is speaking to his disciples; the other two times he directs his speech towards the Pharisees (Powys, 2006). Even though there are many phrases and terms used to describe judgment by Jesus, only the texts where he specifically mentions *Gehenna* will be considered. Part of the struggle with understanding what Jesus meant when he used the term *Gehenna* is that *Gehenna* is never the subject of any lengthy discourse but it is always assumed that the original hearers would have known what Jesus was talking about (Dale, 2005). Since *Gehenna* is never specifically mentioned outside of the Bible before the time of Jesus, it has to be assumed that the Old Testament's use of *Ge-Hinnom* played an important role in the development of how Jesus and his audience understood *Gehenna*. There it is portrayed as a place where children were sacrificed by fire, where the people of Jerusalem who were overrun were thrown to decompose, and where the city's garbage was taken. It's this type of imagery that Jesus' original audience would have been familiar with.

During the Second Temple period (516 BCE–70 CE), Jewish thought concerning the afterlife developed significantly. Influenced by apocalyptic literature, persecution, and expectations of final judgment, Jews increasingly viewed *Gehinnom* as a postmortem place of punishment. Texts such as 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra describe fiery punishment awaiting the wicked after death. Here, *Gehinnom* evolved beyond a physical valley into an eschatological reality. Apocalyptic Judaism introduced several ideas later reflected in Christianity:

- Resurrection of the dead
- Final judgment
- Separation of righteous and wicked
- Fiery punishment
- Eternal consequences

These developments created the theological environment in which Christian teachings about hell emerged. Rabbinic Judaism generally understood *Gehinnom* as temporary rather than eternal. Many rabbis believed that most sinners would remain in *Gehinnom* for purification, often limited to twelve months, after which they would enter the world to come. Only exceptionally wicked individuals were thought to face permanent exclusion from divine mercy. Thus, in Jewish theology, *Gehinnom* often carried a corrective or purifying function rather than endless torment. This distinction becomes important when comparing it with later Christian doctrines of eternal hell. The New Testament frequently uses the Greek term *Gehenna* (γέεννα), directly derived from the Hebrew *Gehinnom*. Jesus Christ employed the term more than any other figure in the New Testament. For example:

- Gospel of Matthew 5:22 warns about “the fire of *Gehenna*.”
- Gospel of Mark 9:43 describes *Gehenna* as a place “where the fire is not quenched.”
- Gospel of Matthew 25:46 contrasts eternal punishment with eternal life.

Jesus clearly inherited Jewish eschatological language. However, his teachings intensified the seriousness of final judgment. *Gehenna* became associated not merely with national judgment but with eternal destiny.

The Influence of Greek and Hellenistic Thought

Hades and Immortality: As Christianity spread through the Greco-Roman world, interaction with Greek philosophy influenced theological reflection on the afterlife. The Greek concept of Hades and Platonic ideas concerning the immortal soul contributed to later Christian understandings of eternal punishment. Consequently, medieval Christianity often portrayed hell as a place of everlasting conscious torment. This development differed somewhat from earlier Jewish notions of temporary purification.

Church Fathers and the Doctrine of Hell: Early Christian theologians such as Augustine of Hippo strongly defended eternal punishment. Augustine argued that hell must be everlasting because eternal life for the righteous is everlasting. Other thinkers, including Origen, proposed more restorative interpretations, suggesting eventual reconciliation. However, Augustine's perspective became dominant in Western Christianity. As a result, Christian hell gradually became institutionalized as eternal conscious punishment rather than temporary purification.



Theological Comparison between *Gehinnom* and Christian Hell

Aspect	Jewish <i>Gehinnom</i>	Christian Hell
Origin	Valley of Hinnom	Derived partly from <i>Gehenna</i>
Nature	Often temporary	Frequently eternal
Purpose	Purification and judgment	Purification and separation
Duration	Usually limited	Often everlasting
Location	On earth (physical place)	Debatable and controversial (beneath, part of heaven but mysterious)
Emphasis	Communal and covenantal	Individual salvation and condemnation
Imagery	Fire and cleansing	Fire, torment and exclusion

Conclusion

The investigation demonstrates that Christian hell is deeply rooted in Jewish *Gehinnom*. The Valley of Hinnom although began as a historical site associated with idolatry and judgment in ancient Israel. During the Second Temple period, Jewish apocalyptic thought transformed *Gehinnom* into an eschatological symbol of postmortem punishment. Jesus Christ adopted and intensified this imagery in his teachings on divine judgment. Early Christianity inherited Jewish concepts of *Gehenna* but gradually expanded them under theological and Hellenistic influences into the doctrine of eternal hell familiar in later Christian tradition.

Therefore, Christian hell did not emerge in isolation. It developed historically from Jewish *Gehinnom* while undergoing substantial theological reinterpretation. The relationship between the two concepts reveals both continuity and transformation in Judeo-Christian understandings of divine justice, judgment, and the afterlife. Nevertheless, many have also considered doctrine of Hell as mistranslation and misinterpretation of Old Testament *Gehinnom* through delving into different schools of thought on hell and its component.

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