

Eternal Punishment in First Century Jewish Thought

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Background to Jesus' Teaching

This paper looks mainly at extra-biblical sources, not in order to find answers about the Christian doctrine on hell, but to discover the questions which New Testament authors were answering. The aim is not to discover the beliefs of NT authors, but to know what beliefs influenced their hearers and readers. This will help us understand the influences that NT authors were addressing and how they expected their hearers and listeners to understand the vocabulary they used.

We can safely assume that they were aiming to communicate accurately to the audience of their time, so they had to interact with ideas of the time and use vocabulary in the sense in which it was understood at the time. If they used words or concepts that were in wide circulation, such as Gehenna or punishment by fire, they knew that their contemporaries already had an idea of what these words meant. If the meaning they wished to convey was different, they would have to make this clear. Therefore, if they did not indicate that they were using these terms with a different meaning, then we can assume (like their audience would have) that they used these terms with the same meaning as their contemporaries.

We also need to know what questions were being debated at the time. Anyone walking into a conversation knows the dangers of misunderstanding what they hear. We can be misled by hearing an answer without knowing the question, or by hearing only one speaker in a phone conversation. The NT represents a response to questions and convictions that are found in extra-biblical literature.

To a modern reader, the Jesus traditions in the Gospels present a confusing and contradictory depiction of hell. Jesus appears to emphasize the horror of eternal penalties in hell without relating this to God's love which he apparently also emphasizes. At a rough count, the four Gospel writers devote sixty-six verses specifically to Jesus' teaching on the love of God and forty-five verses specifically to Jesus' teaching on hell. Given this combination, we would expect Jesus to emphasize that punishment for evil is linked to God's love though his justice. Although we do find occasional teaching on the justice of hell, most of Jesus' emphases concern the horror of hell, and the fact that even Jews can go there.

The details about hell in the gospels also appear contradictory. Punishment is described as consisting in torment by maggots,¹ fire and (paradoxically) darkness,² and it is likened to the valley of Gehenna—a place for burning rubbish outside Jerusalem.³ These instruments of torture are said to be “eternal,” and one verse says that the punishment of hell is as eternal as the reward

¹ Isa 66:24; cf. Mark 9:48.

² Matt 25:30, 41.

³ Matt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5.

of the saints.⁴ However, punishment is also described as destruction—Greek *apollumi*, usually translated “destroy” or “perish”—in all four gospels.⁵

This paper will find that most of the vocabulary used by Jesus was already in wide use before the first century—as noted in varying detail in previous studies. The major part of this paper will look at the debate about hell within Judaism during the early first century, which has not previously been investigated thoroughly. The data is sparse, but the various sources are in agreement. We find that Jesus’ teaching concentrates on two issues in particular that Jews were in disagreement about: whether any Jews will go to hell, and whether anyone can be reprieved from hell after being sufficiently punished.

Apocalyptic Judaism

Dating sources is difficult, but by scholarly consensus the following come from the material which can be dated before the first century. We must always be aware that Christian editors may have inserted details because, apart from the few fragments preserved at Qumran, we rely on late copies.

First Enoch

The books that make up 1 Enoch contain several references to hell. Qumran contained fragments from an estimated 15 separate copies of 1 Enoch. This large number of duplicate copies suggest that the book was widely circulated and well known at the time.

Some of the references to hell occur in Book 2 (chapters 37–71, “the Similitudes”) which some scholars regard as originating later than the NT and perhaps influenced by Christian thought. However, there is now a growing consensus that it is pre-Christian. The fact that no fragments were discovered at Qumran can be regarded as a coincidence with low statistical significance, and the Son of Man mentioned in this section would have been described differently if these passages had a Christian origin. Nevertheless, one should still be cautious about passages from this section.

Almost all the vocabulary and ideas about hell that are used by Jesus in the Gospels are already used by Enoch. He describes a place which is prepared for the Watchers (i.e. the angels who sinned in Gen 6:4) where human sinners are also sent: **[BL 1-11]**

- It is full of fire (10:13; 21:3, 7; 54:1; 91:9; 103:7; 108:4–5).
- It is dark, despite the fire (22:2; 103:7; 108:4, “something like an invisible cloud . . . completely dark yet I could not see the flame”⁶).
- The fire is associated with torment (10:13, “into the bottom of the fire—and in torment”; cf. 108:5).
- The fire is destructive (10:13–15, “into the bottom of the fire . . . they will burn and die . . . destroy all the souls”; 91:9, “into the judgment of fire, and perish”; 38:5–6, “shall perish . . . their life is annihilated,” though fire is not mentioned here).

⁴ Matt 25:46.

⁵ Matt 10:28; Mark 12:19; Luke 13:3; John 3:16.

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this section (“Apocalyptic Judaism”) are from Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*.

- The inhabitants will suffer torment and pain (10:13; 21:10; 22:11; 103:10; 108:5).
- Torment and destruction can both occur to the same persons (10:13–16; 103:10, “tortured and destroyed”).
- The destruction is described as “to all generations” or “forever” (10:13; 91:9, “thrown into the judgment of fire, and perish . . . in the force of the eternal judgment”).
- By contrast, the Watchers (i.e. fallen angels) are imprisoned forever, and not destroyed (10:13; 21:6, 10, “ten million years . . . detained here forever”).
- It is in a valley or abyss (10:13; 27:1; 54:1, 5).
- The name “Gehenna” is not used.
- Worms (i.e. maggots) are mentioned once (46:4–6, though this may have been subject to Christian editing).⁷ **[BL 1-11]**

A useful summary of all this is found in the following passage from the book of the Watchers which is generally dated to the 2nd or 3rd century BCE. The Watchers are imprisoned forever while the sons of the Watchers (who are half human) share the fate of other humans—i.e. torture followed by destruction—while the righteous experience eternal joy.

[EXT]In those days they will lead them [the sons of the Watchers] into the bottom of the fire—and in torment—in the prison (where) they will be locked up forever. And at the time when they will burn and die, those who collaborated with them will be bound together with them from henceforth unto the end of (all) generations. And destroy all the souls of pleasure and the children of the Watchers, for they have done injustice to man. Destroy injustice from the face of the earth. And every iniquitous deed will end, and the plant of righteousness and truth will appear forever and he will plant joy. (10:13–16)**[/EXT]**

Sibylline Oracles

Books 3–5 of the Sibylline Oracles are pre-Christian Jewish works. Books 1–2 also appear to have pre-Christian Jewish origin but have suffered a lot of Christian editing. Nevertheless they help to confirm that the gospels are using terminology about hell that is already well-known. **[BL 1-4]**

- Tartarus, which is well-known in Greek mythology as a place of darkness,⁸ is referred to by these Jewish authors (1.101; 2.303; 4.186).
- Gehenna is named; twice it is used alongside Tartarus (1.103; 2.292; 4.186).
- Hell is described as both full of darkness (2.292) and flames (1.103) and the two images are merged (4.43, “the gloom in fire”).
- Gnashing of teeth is mentioned (2.305, 332), though this is in a section containing Christian editing (cf. 2.312, 344). **[BL 1-4]**

Many of these features are seen in the following significant passage that tells us their punishment is severe though proportional—it is three times what they deserve. (It should be noted that this passage has clearly suffered some Christian editing.)

⁷ First Enoch 46:4–6: “This Son of Man . . . shall loosen the reins of the strong and crush the teeth of the sinners. He shall depose the kings from their thrones and kingdoms. For they do not extol and glorify him, and neither do they obey him, the source of their kingship. The faces of the strong will be slapped and be filled with shame and gloom. Their dwelling places and their beds will be worms.”

⁸ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 736–9.

[EXT] . . . below dark, dank Tartarus. In places unholy they will repay threefold what evil deed they committed, burning in much fire. They will all gnash their teeth, wasting away with thirst and raging violence. They will call death fair, and it will evade them. No longer will death or night give these rest. Often they will request God, who rules on high, in vain, and then he will manifestly turn away his face from them. For he gave seven days of ages to erring men⁹ for repentance through the intercession of the holy virgin.¹⁰ (2.303–12)/[EXT]

Jubilees and Judith

The Book of Jubilees (first–second centuries BCE) similarly describes the fate in Sheol as “darkness” (7.29) and destruction (7.28; 22.22–23), though this is also mixed with torment: “with devouring burning fire . . . will be destroyed . . . always be renewed with eternal reproach and execration and wrath and torment and indignation and plagues and sickness” (Jubilees 36.10).¹¹

Judith dates from the 1st or 2nd century BCE and is more interested in nationalistic fervor than theology. While decrying the enemies of Israel, Judith asserts:

[EXT]Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment; he will send fire and worms into their flesh; they shall weep in pain forever. (Jdt 16:17, NRS)/[EXT]

The word here translated “in pain” (ἐν αἰσθήσει from αἴσθησις) normally means “wisdom” or “understanding.”¹² Older translators understood it here to mean “in feeling” (as in KJV and Douay). This was influenced by the Vulgate translation *sentiant* from which came the concept of eternal sentient suffering. However, “sentient weeping” does not make much sense, because what would be the point of punishment by non-sentient weeping? The Latin is presumably influenced by the normal LXX use of αἴσθησις to mean “knowledge” or “wisdom” (e.g. Prov 1:4, 7; Phil 1:9).

But in Greek literature αἴσθησις is commonly used for “perception”—i.e. the experiences of the senses.¹³ The closest analogue in terms of grammar and context in the LXX is 1 Esdras 1:24 [22]: “[they] did wickedly against the Lord . . . they grieved him *exceedingly*” (KJA); “. . . grieved the Lord *deeply*” (NRS); “. . . they *conspicuously* grieved him” (NETS). Judith is therefore more likely to be referring to the degree of weeping or the sensations such as pain that cause the weeping rather than the concept that someone is “sentient” while weeping.

⁹ This may refer to the seven days during which the wicked see the rewards of the righteous before they go to hell. This is not described in detail until 4 Ezra 7:75–101 (a late 1st century work), but Richard Bauckham conjectures that this was based on an earlier Jewish concept (Bauckham, “Early Jewish Visions of Hell,” 361).

¹⁰ Terry, *Sibylline Oracles*, reads: “. . . repentance through signs by the hands of a virgin undefiled.” This is less obviously Christian but it is nevertheless unlikely to be part of the Jewish original. Some regard this as part of a paraphrase of *The Apocalypse of Peter*—see Lightfoot, *The Sibylline Oracles*, 94–106. However, the similarities are few and consequently the direction of influence (if any) is difficult to decide, and there are many other closer parallels—see the list in Bremmer, “Tours of Hell,” 311–3.

¹¹ Partly preserved at Qumran on 4Q223_224 f2ii:52--iii:1.

¹² E.g., “for they [the false gods] have no *sense*” (Letter of Jeremiah 1:41 NRSV); “filled with the spirit of *wisdom* and perception” (Exod 28:3 Brenton); “piety toward God is the beginning of *discernment*” (Prov 1:7 LXA).

¹³ Liddell, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 42.

Common Features in Intertestamental Literature

We can see that the images and concepts of hell in early Jewish sources are virtually uniform, despite the wide range of this literature. Jubilees comes from a very conservative Jewish group with a particular emphasis on Bible chronology; Enoch from an apocalyptic group which introduces fantastic visions of underground and celestial geography; and the authors of Sibylline oracles are happy to integrate Greek ideas in order to communicate to Hellenized Jews. Despite this variety of origins, they all agree that: **[BL 1-4]**

- Hell is a place of both flames and darkness.
- In hell both torment and destruction are experienced.
- A variety of names are used: Sheol, Gehenna, Tartarus, the Valley.
- Sinners are punished for eternity and the righteous are rewarded for eternity. **[/BL 1-4]**

This consensus is very significant, because it is difficult to infer these details from the Old Testament, even from the text which inspired them most at the end of Isaiah:

[EXT]For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the LORD; so shall your descendants and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the LORD. 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. (Isa 66:22–24, NRSV)**[/EXT]**

The concepts found in intertestamental Judaism that are not explicit in the Hebrew scriptures include: **[BL 1-2]**

- Punishment will be eternal.
- The place of the dead is the mythical Tartarus and/or the physical valley of Hinnom (Gehenna). **[/BL 1-2]**

This latter identification was a good match with the passage in Isaiah because it was close to Jerusalem (where Isaiah presumably envisioned they would come to worship God), and the physical location was literally characterized by fire and maggots.

Qumran Judaism

Although the above documents were found at Qumran in fragmentary form, these books did not represent the particular doctrines of this sect. Their distinctive doctrines are found particularly in the War Rule (1QM), Community Rule (1QS), Thanksgiving Hymn (1QHa) and Damascus Document (CD), along with and their commentaries and worship documents (the Peshirim & Hodayot) though these latter two do not specifically refer to hell. All of these were written before the first century CE.

These documents mirror most of the beliefs about hell found in other Jewish literature of the time: **[BL 1-4]**

- Hell is a place of burning (CD 2.5; 1QM 14:17–18; 1QS 2:7, 15; 4:13; 1QHa 4:25, 19; 4Q174 fl_3ii:1).
- At the same time it is a place of darkness (1QM 14:17, “fire burning in the dark places of the damned”;¹⁴ 1QS 2:8, “eternal flame, surrounded by utter darkness”; 4:13; 4Q287 f6:4;

¹⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls are from Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *Dead Sea Scrolls*.

4Q418 f69ii:7). This is especially significant at Qumran because their enemies are called the Children of Darkness (e.g. 1QS 1:10).

- Being in hell presumably involves torment, but there is no specific reference to this, except that the angels will afflict them (1QS 4:12).
- The result of being in hell is eternal destruction. (CD 2:6; 1QS 2:15; 4:14; 5:13; 1QHa 14:21–22, “a fire which burns up all the men of guilt completely”; 4Q174 f1_3ii:1–2, “consuming fire and destroying all the children of Belial”; 4Q287 f6:6,9; 4Q286 f7ii:10; 4Q418 f69ii:6,8; 4Q491 f1_3:4 “eternal annihilation”; 4Q496 f3:5).

A good summary is found near the start of the Community Rule. After an extended Aaronic blessing for the Sons of Light comes a reversal of it for the Sons of Darkness:

[EXT]May you be damned without mercy in return for your dark deeds, an object of wrath licked by eternal flame, surrounded by utter darkness. May God have no mercy upon you when you cry out, nor forgive so as to atone for your sins. May He lift up His furious countenance upon you for vengeance. May you never find peace through the appeal of any intercessor. . . . Damned be anyone initiated with unrepentant heart, who enters this Covenant, then sets up the stumbling block of his sin, so turning apostate. . . . God’s anger and zeal for His commandments shall burn against him for eternal destruction. (1QS 2:7–15)[/EXT]

The Qumran material takes for granted much that is found in intertestamental Jewish literature. They are keen to make two points: that hell is inescapable, and that fellow Jews can go to hell. There is a strong emphasis that hell results in complete and inescapable destruction “without remnant or rescue” (1QS 4:14) or “without remnant or forgiveness by the fierce anger of God for all eternity” (4Q287 f6:9; 4Q286 f7ii:10). It is not surprising that the Children of Darkness will go to hell, but we learn that hell is also for those who joined themselves to the Children of Light and then fell away (1QS 2:12–17). This means that the Qumran sect has no difficulty with the concept that fellow Jews or even former members of their elite sect will go to hell.

We find the reasons for these emphases when we look at rabbinic sources which take an opposite stance on these two issues. This suggests that the Qumran sect wishes to emphasize these points to counter the widespread rabbinic teaching.

Rabbinic Sources

Early first century rabbinic teaching is difficult isolate from the later sources.¹⁵ When the dating of rabbinic material is taken seriously, there are very few traditions that we can safely use, especially in the area of theology. Written traditions from this time were concerned mainly with *halakhah*—i.e. discussions and rulings about how to obey the commandments. The discussions about everything else (normally referred to as *aggadah*) were not regarded as equally important and were not committed to a fixed form as early as *halakhah*.

This does not mean that we cannot know the theology of Jews from the early first century, but it does mean that it is difficult, and consequently many studies have neglected this area. This is typified by Fudge's *The Fire That Consumes* which includes a very good survey of background

¹⁵ Although “Rabbi” did not become an official and consistent title until after 70 CE, it is still a useful term for describing the beliefs of the precursors of these Rabbis, as preserved in what is commonly called “Rabbinic” literature.

literature, and a glance at the "Ancient Document Index" finds several columns of references to intertestamental literature but there is only a single reference to rabbinic literature.

Halakhic literature has been found to be reliable with regard to the dates of attributions. That is, if it says that a certain rabbi said something, then it is most likely that he (or, occasionally, someone else from the same time period) did say it.¹⁶ This is in contrast to Aggadic literature such as the Midrashim and Targums which may contain early traditions but they have been edited and re-attributed without concerns about preserving the exact original wording or source. We must therefore (regrettably) avoid the Aggadic literature. However, Halakhic literature often contains Haggadic material, and we can find a few important traditions which give us insights into the rabbinic concepts of eschatological punishment. However, we cannot always trust the attributions of Aggadic material even within Halakhic literature, so we will need to justify the early origin of each of these traditions.

Mishnah is the earliest written compilation of Halakhic traditions (completed about 200 CE) and Tosephta is a similar collection committed to writing about a century later. The Talmuds are Halakhic commentaries on Mishnah and often contain first or second century material which was included in neither of the earlier collections—though these must be used with extra care. The oral traditions preserved in this literature were fixed and passed on verbatim, even when the words were no longer understood. For example, R. Joshua b Hananiah, at the start of the second century, passed on a tradition concerning cattle which are “*shelashit*” even though he did not know what this meant; someone else had to explain it (m.Par 1.1).

Traditional Theology of Yohanan ben Zakkai

More than seventy passages in Halakhic literature (i.e. Mishnah, Tosephta, and the Talmuds) refer to Gehenna, though only two of them include material which may arguably originate from the first century. However, this widespread use of the name “Gehenna” implies that such usage was already common by the time of Jesus. It is impossible to imagine that rabbinic terminology would have been so heavily influenced by Jesus or by the Sibylline Oracles, which are the only two surviving sources that use “Gehenna” before the first rabbinic source used this term. This is a salutary reminder that the precursors of rabbinic theology have been largely lost. Unlike apocalyptic Judaism and Christianity, their beliefs were not generally written down but were passed on in preaching and personal teaching. The following few surviving traditions represent scraps from a vast community of oral theologians.

The earliest rabbi who spoke about hell in a datable source is Yohanan ben Zakkai. The following tradition is a biographical story, so we should be initially dubious about its historical value. This form of tradition is more interested in storytelling than in accuracy, and like Christian hagiography, honorific stories about the rabbis were written long after their lifetime.

[EXT]And when R. Yohanan b. Zakkai fell ill, his disciples came in to pay a call on him. When he saw them, he began to cry. His disciples said to him, “Light of Israel! Pillar at the right hand! Mighty hammer! On what account are you crying?” He said to them, “If I were going to be brought before a mortal king, who is here today and tomorrow gone to the grave, who, should he be angry with me, will not be angry forever, and, if he should imprison me, will not imprison me forever, and if he should put me to death, whose sentence of death is not for eternity, and whom I

¹⁶ Stemberger explains that named attributions are generally reliable. Even when they are inaccurate, they tend to point to the correct time period. This is the conclusion of Neusner’s studies of extensive text units. See Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash*, 57.

can appease with the right words or bribe with money, even so, I should weep. But now that I am being brought before the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he, who endures forever and ever, who, should he be angry with me, will be angry forever, and if he should imprison me, will imprison me forever, and if he should put me to death, whose sentence of death is for eternity, and whom I cannot appease with the right words or bribe with money, and not only so, but before me are two paths, one to the Garden of Eden and the other to Gehenna, and I do not know by which path I shall be brought, and should I not weep?" They said to him, "Our master, bless us." He said to them, "May it be God's will that the fear of Heaven be upon you as much as the fear of mortal man." His disciples said, "Just so much?" He said to them, "Would that it were that much." (b. Ber. 4:2, l.2)¹⁷[/EXT]

One reason for giving credence to this story is that Yohanan is expressing a theology which (as we will discover) was no longer normative when this story was recorded. After 70 CE it might well be regarded as heretical, though before 70 CE (i.e. during Yohanan's earlier career) it was an acceptable point of view that would have been regarded as traditional or already old-fashioned by most hearers.

He clearly believes that there are only two options: Gehenna or Paradise (the Garden of Eden). And he believes that he, a relatively good Jew, is not assured a place in Paradise. By the time the story is recorded (long after Yohanan's lifetime), Jews believed that they all went to heaven except for a few heinous sinners who couldn't really be regarded as within the covenant. That is why his disciples in this story express no real concern for Yohanan, and assumed he was merely being humble. Instead, this proof of his humility and holiness prompted them to ask him for a blessing. Therefore, although his theology had been superseded by the time this story was recorded, it was still acceptable to record it because it could be regarded as a sign of spectacular humility by Yohanan.

Therefore it is likely that this story preserves the actual theology of Yohanan, but this has been subverted and transformed into a story of humility and a reminder to live in the constant fear of God. Yohanan, therefore, believed that God sent imperfect Jews to hell, forever—a view which most Jews even in his own time had already rejected.¹⁸

How Long Did Torment Last in Hell?

The tradition of Yohanan emphasizes the eternal nature of punishment in hell but does not tell us what this punishment consists of. Does this refer to eternal torment (as in later Christian interpretations of Jdt 16:17) or eternal destruction with no chance of remission (as in all extant early non-rabbinic Jewish sources)?¹⁹ The Yohanan tradition is unclear but other traditions give a clear indication that rabbinic teaching agreed with other Jewish sources in this regard.

A tradition by Akiba in the early second century is based on a received belief that torment lasts only twelve months before destruction in hell:

[EXT]Also he [Akiba] would list five things which [last for] twelve months:

¹⁷ Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud*.

¹⁸ We should not be confused by the beliefs of R. Yohanan in b.RH 16b-17a where he believes in the three groups referred to by Hillel & Shammai. "Yohanan" (without a patronym) in the Babylonian Talmud refers to a second generation Amora (i.e. late 3rd century), and not Yohanan b. Zakkai.

¹⁹ 1 Enoch 10:13-15; 91:1; Jubilees 36:10; CD 2.6; 1QS 2.15; 4.14; 5.13; 1QHa 14.21; 4Q174 fl_3ii:1; 4Q287 f6:6, 9; 4Q286 f7ii:10; 4Q418 f69ii:6, 8; 4Q491 fl_3:4; 4Q496 f3:5.

the judgment of the generation of the Flood is twelve months;
the judgment of Job is twelve months;
the judgment of the Egyptians is twelve months;
the judgment of Gog and Magog in the time to come is twelve months;
and the judgment of the wicked in Gehenna is twelve months,
as it is said, *It will be from one month until the same month [a year later]* (Isa 66:23). (Mishnah *Eduyyoth* 2.10)²⁰[EXT]

We should not conclude that the concept of punishment for twelve months originated with Akiba, because it is also found in earlier traditions (see below). Akiba is here attempting to find a scriptural foundation for this idea, and does so in two ways. First he connected it with other periods of twelve months which were concerned with judgment. Then secondly he used an exegesis based on Isaiah 66.23–24.

Isaiah said that at the end of time, people would come from all over the globe to see the dead corpses of God's enemies “From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath” (Isa 66:23 NRS). Akiba's reasoning was, presumably, that the population of the earth cannot turn up weekly or even monthly at Jerusalem, so this must mean “on one particular Sabbath or New Moon, and then the same one annually.” He does not mention the problem that, according to this text, these corpses are not destroyed, but another exegete did deal with this, as we see next.

Other Commonly Accepted Beliefs about Hell

The foundational principle about hell was that “we” do not go there. For sects like those at Qumran, this meant none of their members would go to hell; but for mainstream Judaism this meant that no Jews would go to hell. This is stated bluntly in an early saying in Mishnah: “All Israelites have a share in the world to come” (m. San. 10.1). However, this is the start of a long section which lists and discusses the many exceptions to this general rule, because it is clear that even Jews sometimes deserve to go to hell. Conversely, all Gentiles were expected to go to hell, but some rabbis (such as Joshua ben Hananiah in the early second century) thought there were exceptions to this too.

The theology of hell is discussed much more fully in Tosephta than Mishnah. The traditions are helpfully grouped at Tosephta Sanhedrin 13.1–5. Most of this discussion cannot be dated in detail, but the logic shows us which layers come before others, and how they are related to those that can be dated. This allows us to identify the earliest layers and we will find that some portions originated in the early first century or earlier.

When both sides in a debate assume that the other holds certain beliefs, then those beliefs must already be fixed and generally accepted. So if (as in this debate) opposing second-century teachers both assume that a belief is generally held, it must date back to at least to the first century though not necessarily before 70 CE. Theology changes slowly, though change can be prompted by a significant event such as the destruction of Jerusalem. However, when these common beliefs are held by people who taught both before and after this destruction (such as Yohanan ben Zakkai), or by conservatives who are famous for not changing their views (such as Eliezer ben Hyrcanus), or by those who did not survive the destruction (such as the Shammaites), we can assume these views also held sway before 70 CE.

²⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the Mishnah are from Neusner, *Mishnah*.

The School Dispute in this section (t. San. 13.3) will be analyzed in more detail below and the others will be analyzed first. In the following, left-most aligned text indicates the likely earliest layer and indents indicate additions by succeeding editors, as discussed below:

[EXT]t. San. 13.1:

Minors, children of the wicked of the Land [of Israel] have no portion in the world to come,

as it is said, *Behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, and all the proud, and all who do wickedly, shall be as stubble* (Mal 4:1)—the words of Rabban Gamaliel [II].

R. Joshua [b. Hananiah] says, “They come into the world to come. For later it says, *The Lord preserves the simple* (Ps 116:6), and further, *Hew down the tree and destroy it, nevertheless, leave the stump of the roots thereof in the earth* (Dan 4:23).”

Said Rabban Gamaliel, “How shall I interpret, *He shall leave to them neither root nor branch*” (Mal 4:1)?

[Joshua] said, “That the Omnipresent will not leave for them [the merit of a single] religious duty or the remnant of a religious duty, or for their fathers, for ever.”

t. San. 13.2:

Another interpretation: *Root*—this refers to the soul. And *branch*—this refers to the body.

And the children of the wicked among the heathen will not live [in the world to come] nor be judged.

R. Eliezer [b. Hyrcanus] says, “None of the gentiles has a portion in the world to come, as it is said, *The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the gentiles who forget God* (Ps 9:17). *The wicked shall return to Sheol*—these are the wicked Israelites. [*And all the gentiles who forget God*—these are the nations.]”

Said to him R. Joshua, “If it had been written, *The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the gentiles* and then said nothing further, I should have maintained as you do. Now that it is in fact written, *All the gentiles who forget God*, it indicates that there also are righteous people among the nations of the world, who do have a portion in the world to come.”

t. San. 13.4:

The Israelites who sinned with their [own] bodies and gentiles who sinned with their [own] bodies go down to Gehenna and are judged there for twelve months.

And after twelve months their souls perish, their bodies are burned, Gehenna absorbs them, and they are turned into dirt. And the wind blows them and scatters them under the feet of the righteous, as it is written, *And you shall tread down the wicked, for they shall be dust under the soles of the feet of the righteous in the day that I do this, says the Lord of Hosts* (Mal 4:3).

t. San. 13.5:

But heretics, apostates, traitors, Epicureans, those who deny the Torah, those who separate from the ways of the community, those who deny the resurrection of the dead, and

whoever both sinned and caused the public to sin—for example, Jeroboam and Ahab,

And those who sent their arrows against the land of the living and stretched out their hands against the *lofty habitation* (Ps 49:14) [i.e. the Temple],

Gehenna is locked behind them, and they are judged therein for all generations,

since it is said, *And they shall go forth and look at the corpses of the men who were transgressors against me. For their worm dies not, and their fire is not quenched. And they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh* (Isa 66:24).

Sheol will waste away, but they will not waste away, for it is written, *and their form shall cause Sheol to waste away* (Ps 49:14).

What made this happen to them? Because they stretched out their hand against the *lofty habitation*, as it is said, *Because of his lofty habitation*, and lofty habitation refers only to the Temple, as it is said, *I have surely built you as a lofty habitation, a place for you to dwell in forever* (1 Kgs 8:13). (Tosephta Sanhedrin 13.1, 2, 4, 5)²¹[/EXT]

The indents indicate the growth of this tradition in at least three stages.²² The earliest layer is coherent by itself, and its unity is indicated by a clear internal structure:

[EXT]Children of the wicked of the Land [of Israel] have no portion in the world to come, And the children of the wicked among the heathen will not live nor be judged.

The Israelites who sinned with their [own] bodies and gentiles who sinned with their [own] bodies go down to Gehenna and are judged there for twelve months.

For those who both sinned and caused the public to sin—for example, Jeroboam and Ahab—

Gehenna is locked behind them, and they are judged therein for all generations. [/EXT]

The second layer includes sayings by some named scholars whose ministry spanned from about 80–120 CE. The existence of a third layer is revealed by comparing the tradition in 13.5 with a version preserved in the Babylonian Talmud (b. RH. 17a) which lacks the paragraph about the “lofty habitation,” presumably because it was added later. This third layer concerns those who destroyed the Temple—they were added to the list of the most heinous sinners.

The possible time period for the second layer spans from the late first to early second century. However, the most likely time period for the third layer is also the late first century (immediately after 70 CE) or possibly the early second century. It is unlikely to originate after the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–6 CE) because the tradition identifies the destroyers of the Temple (i.e. those who destroyed it at 70 CE), and not the destroyers of Jerusalem (in 136 CE). This means that the second layer must be dated at the early end of its possible range—at the end of the first century.

If the scholars in the second layer made their comments at the end of the first century, this means that the material they were commenting on must have been already fixed, and therefore

²¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the Tosephta are from Neusner, *Tosefta*.

²² Unfortunately there is not room in this paper to fully justify these conclusions about editing. More details will be available in a forthcoming volume of my *Traditions of the Rabbis in the Era of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004).

originated in the early first century or earlier. It also means that doctrines which they assumed to be generally accepted must also date back to at least the early first century. This tells us that the following beliefs about hell were generally accepted before 70 CE: **[BL 1-6]**

- Only the utterly wicked of Israel will go to hell (13.1: at the end of the first century they debated if their underage children also shared this fate).
- Bodies and souls will be destroyed in hell (13.2: this was a later addition probably in the early second century, to counter Joshua's novel interpretation, but it would not be an effective counterargument if it wasn't recognized as a traditional belief).
- All Gentiles will go to hell (13.2: at the end of the first century they debated whether perhaps some were too good for hell).
- "Gehenna" is a designation for hell (13.3: to be discussed below).
- Evil Israelites and the Gentiles in hell will be burned to ash after twelve months of torment (13.4: not debated, but datable by the "lofty habitation" in 13.5).
- Corpses of heinous sinners will remain on view forever, as in Isaiah 66:24 (13.5: "lofty habitation" was added as a response to the destruction of 70 CE). **[/BL 1-6]**

These beliefs cohere with those found in non-rabbinic Jewish writings that we looked at above. Both apocalyptic groups and the Qumran community assumed that anyone outside their group would go to hell, whether or not they were Jews—which is roughly equivalent to believing that the sinners of Israel go to hell as well as Gentiles. These groups also believed that the fire of hell would destroy those who went there.

The single novel element is the attempt to deal with the fact that Isaiah 66:24 describes corpses that are *not* destroyed. The earliest layer identifies an especially heinous group of sinners who "are judged for all generations." A later comment explains that their corpses are eternally preserved unlike the corpses of normal sinners that are burned to ash.

New Rabbinic Theology about a Third Group

The one aspect of hell that was not explored outside of rabbinic literature is the problem of those believers who are neither perfectly good nor perfectly evil. Sects like those at Qumran or those who wrote apocalyptic literature could assume that all their members were sufficiently perfect to warrant heaven, and they were happy to consign everyone else to hell.

The teachers in majority Judaism, however, could not come to this easy conclusion. Their congregations and followers included many ordinary fallible people who sincerely tried but failed to live out all the commandments. So they had to consider the fate of those who were not yet perfect. A debate about this is preserved in the School Disputes in Tosephta Sanhedrin 13.3.

The School Disputes is a list of about three hundred points of disagreement between the Schools of Hillel and Shammai who flourished in the early first century. The original list has not survived, but it is cited frequently, and the regularity of its form means that it is usually possible to identify elaborations or explanations that have been added later. One of these disputes concerns who will go to hell, and for how long. In the following, left-most aligned text indicates the likely oldest layer (as analyzed later) and italics indicate citations of Scripture:

[EXT]The School of Shammai says:

There are three groups, one for *eternal life*, one for *shame and everlasting contempt* (Dan 12:2)—these are those who are completely evil.

An intermediate group go down to Gehenna and scream and come up again and are healed,

as it is said: “*I will bring the third part through fire and will refine them as silver is refined and will test them as gold is tested, and they shall call on my name and I will be their God*” (Zech 13:9).

And concerning them did Hannah say, “*The Lord kills and brings to life, brings down to Sheol and brings up*” (1 Sam 2:6).

And the School of Hillel says: “*Great in mercy*” (Exod 34:6)—He inclines the decision toward mercy,

and concerning them David said: “*I am happy that the Lord has heard the sound of my prayer*” (Ps 116:1), and concerning them is said the entire passage. (Tosephta Sanhedrin 13.3)[/EXT]

The original tradition was as brief as possible in order to aid memorization. There was no need to include the Bible texts and their exegesis, because these could be regarded as implied and easy to remember. Proof-texts were later added to many of these disputes though it is likely that these were the actual proofs originally used by the Schools. We can conclude this because in many cases (as here) the Shammaite viewpoint is given a stronger foundation than the Hillelite one. It is unlikely that anyone would invent strong arguments in favor of the Shammaite position after 70 CE because the only rabbis who survived were Hillelites. All later rabbinic theology and practice was based on the opinions of Hillel, and the opinions of Shammai were preserved merely for historical interest, rather like the views of Marcion in Christianity. So it is unlikely that anyone would invent support for the Shammaite positions after their demise. Consequently it is also likely that the support given for the Hillelite position can also be traced back to the original Schools. However, the exegeses added to these texts were unlikely to have been remembered and recorded verbatim, in the way that the wording of the original summaries were remembered.

Because this is such an important passage, it is worth examining a very literal translation alongside the Hebrew. In the following (as previously), left-most aligned text indicates the earliest layer and italics indicates quotations from Scripture. Also, [brackets] mark unique sections in Zuckerman (based mainly on the Erfurt MS) and {braces} indicate unique text at Mechon-Mamre.org (based mainly on the Vienna MS).²³

[TABLE: 2 COLS]

The House of Shammai says:

there are three groups

one *for eternal life* to come

and one *for shame, for eternal contempt*

The one *for eternal life*—

these are the perfectly righteous.

בית שמאי אומרים

שלוש [ה] כתות הן

אחת לחיי הע[ו]לם [הבא]

[ואחת לחרפות לדראון עולם]

[אחת לחיי עולם]

[אלו צדיקים גמורים]

²³ Zuckerman and Liebermann, *Tosephta*; Mechon-Mamre.org accessed 23 May 2014.

The one <i>for shame, for eternal contempt</i> —	[אחת לחרפות לדראון עולם]
these are the perfectly evil (Dan 12:2).	א{י}לו רשעים גמורים
The balanced of them go down	שקולין שבהן יורדין
to Gehenna and squeal	לגיהנון ומצ{ט}פצפין
and rise from there and are healed.	ועולין {הימנה} ומתרפאין
As it says (Zech 13:9):	שנאמר
<i>I will bring the third through fire</i>	והבאתי את השלישית באש
<i>and refine them like silver is refined</i>	{וצרפתים כצרף את הכסף}
<i>and test them like gold is tested</i>	{ובחנתים כבחון את הזהב}
<i>They will call on my name</i>	{הוא יקרא בשמי}
<i>and I will be God to them.</i>	{ואני אהיה לו לאל}
And about them Hannah said (1 Sam 2:6):	ועליהן אמרה חנה
<i>The Lord is killing and making alive</i>	יי ממות ומחיה
<i>bringing down to Sheol and he brings up.</i>	{מוריד שאול ויעל}
And the House of Hillel says (Exod 34:6):	ובית הלל אומרים
<i>And great in mercy.</i>	ורב חסד
He inclines toward mercy.	מטה כלפי חסד
And about them he/David says (Ps 116:1):	ועליהן {הוא} א[ו]מר {דוד}
<i>I love the Lord because he hears</i>	אהבתי כי ישמע {יי}
and the whole passage speaks about them.	ועליהן נאמר {ה} כל הפרשה [כולה]

[/TABLE]

When analyzing this passage we have to bear in mind the extreme abbreviation used by rabbinic traditions. Originally they were preserved by the oral recitation of a community of scholars, so brevity was very important. The words were designed to remind the scholar about what they already knew, rather than communicate to someone who did not already know about the subject. When they were written down, explanations could be added, but this had to be done without changing the original words. These additions themselves were also very brief, and later editors commonly added further explanations to them.

In this passage we can see at least two further layers of editing. The original school dispute was:

[EXT]The School of Shammai says: The balanced of them go down to Gehenna and squeal and rise from there and are healed.

The School of Hillel says: *And great in mercy.* He inclines towards mercy.**[/EXT]**

A later editor added the introduction about the other two groups and proof-texts from Zechariah 13:9, 1 Samuel 2:6, and Psalm 116:1.²⁴ This may have been done in two stages, because the passage would look well balanced and less confusing with only two texts and no introduction. In the following, the additions are indented:

[EXT]The School of Shammai says: The balanced of them go down to Gehenna and squeal and rise from there and are healed.

And concerning them Hannah said (1 Sam 2:6): *The Lord is killing and making alive.* The School of Hillel says: *Great in mercy* (Exod 34:6)—He inclines towards mercy.

And concerning them David says (Ps 116:1): *I love the Lord because he hears.*[/EXT]

These two original proof-texts are both cryptic, so we are not surprised that a third editor extended them further. He continued the first so that it included some more significant words: “. . . *bringing down to Sheol and he brings up.*” And he added a comment to the second: “The whole passage speaks about them.” This tells the reader to examine the wider context of the words that are actually quoted:

[EXT]I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. . . . The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the LORD: “O LORD, I pray, save my life!” Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. . . . when I was brought low, he saved me. . . . For you have delivered my soul from death . . . I walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I kept my faith, even when I said, “I am greatly afflicted.” (Ps 116, NRSV)[/EXT]

Even with these additions and explanations, it is still not clear what the exact distinction was between the two Schools. However we do know what united them because it is stated in the introduction which was added at the beginning of the Shammaite response:

[EXT]There are three groups: one *for eternal life* to come, and one *for shame, for eternal contempt*. The one *for eternal life*: these are the perfectly righteous. The one *for shame, for eternal contempt*: these are the perfectly evil.[/EXT]

Although this occurs immediately after “The School of Shammai says,” it must nevertheless be regarded as an introduction to the views of both Schools, because it tells us there are three groups, but describes only the two groups found in Daniel 12:2. The summaries by both Schools, on the other hand, each give an opinion concerning a single group. We can safely conclude that both Schools agree about the first two groups, and they state only their differences, which concern the third group.

Therefore both Schools believed that God's judgment would result in three groups: the absolutely good would go immediately to eternal life and those who were absolutely evil would go to eternal contempt, as stated in Daniel 12:2. However, many people were somewhere in the middle, and this third group had a different fate.

It is likely that this view, which was common to both of these schools, was the view held by the majority of Jews in the early first century. The leaders of the Schools of Hillel and Shammai were not many—on one occasion they all met in one room (m. Shab. 1.4)—but they had a huge influence. This influence was possibly exaggerated in the history of the survivors, because there were few or no survivors of any School except the Hillelites after 70 CE. However, even if there

²⁴ It is unlikely that the original Shammaite tradition included the proof-text from 1 Samuel 2:6, because R. Eliezer uses this same text at the start of the second century to argue the opposite—that that Korah will not be released from hell—without explaining why the Shammaite exegesis is wrong (see m. San.10.3). Equally, the tradition in t. San. 13.3 does not interact with Eliezer's use of the text. It is likely that they both arose independently, but the Shammaite use was little known till it was recorded here.

were other influential Schools at the time, it is likely that they held this same common view, because otherwise we would expect a defense against that other view too.²⁵

The Sadducees, who rejected all ideas of resurrection, presumably had no belief in hell, but they had little influence on the people. We know this from the gospel writers and Josephus (Acts 23:8; *Antiquities* 18:12–17; *Wars* 2:163–66) and the influence of rabbinic teaching is confirmed in excavations of normal houses of the time. These excavations reveal a widespread occurrence of stone vessels which is surprising, given their relative expense and weight compared to ceramic vessels. The only plausible explanation is the rabbinic insistence that stone vessels do not pass on impurity.²⁶ Similarly the discovery of immersion pools in the foundations of almost all excavated houses implies that households took seriously the rabbinic rules about daily immersion.

Distinctive Beliefs of the Hillelites

The tradition we examined above (t. San. 13.3) tells us very little about what the Hillelite view actually was. We know that the Shammaites believed the third group went down to hell for a while and then went to heaven. We might assume that they went to hell for a proportionate time, or that they were tormented in a proportionate way while down there, though we do not know this.

The opposing Hillelite position is stated briefly and ambiguously, with a generalized reference to Psalm 116. This Psalm includes phrases which might imply that the Psalmist went to hell and was released: “The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish . . . you have delivered my soul from death” (v. 3, 8).²⁷ On the other hand, the Psalm might merely mean that he was rescued before going to hell: “For you have delivered my soul from death . . . I walk before the LORD in the land of the living” (v. 8–9).

Rabbis in later centuries were also confused by the ambiguity of the Hillelite response. Discussions in the fourth century concluded that Hillelites thought only the worst of this middle group went to hell, while the Shammaites thought that all of the middle group went to hell (b. RH. 17a). There is, however, an early tradition which helps to clear up this ambiguity and give us a clearer view of Hillelite beliefs.

Do the Middle Group Really Need to Go to Hell?

Yohanan ben Zakkai is regarded as the re-founder of Judaism after its near demise at 70 CE. Although he was keen to be regarded as someone who represented and interacted with all Judaism,²⁸ he was clearly a Hillelite. The form of Judaism that he re-established followed

²⁵ The Sadducean view was, of course different. But Pharisees tended to ignore Sadducees and other outside groups in their debates, rather like modern-day Protestants tend to ignore Catholic views when debating with each other.

²⁶ Magen, *The Stone Vessel Industry*.

²⁷ This is presumably Danby’s conclusion because he says in *Tractate Sanhedrin*, 123, “see especially vv. 3–4.”

²⁸ For example, even in disputes between Pharisees and Sadducees he is keen to stand as an outsider, even if his conclusion sides with the Pharisees. Yohanan stood up against the Zealots (ARNb.31), pagan critics (y. San. 1.2–4, 19b-d), Sadducees (b.BB.115b-116a; b.Men.65ab) and both Pharisee and Sadducee (m. Yad. 4.6—though he finds a proof to bolster the Pharisee viewpoint).

Hillelite rulings in almost every detail. This confirms later traditions which regarded him as a disciple of Hillel.

His theology of hell and judgment is found in a parable that is attributed to him. This parable is very similar to some parables Jesus told. In the following, italics indicate the details that are *not* found in related parables of Jesus.

[EXT]said R. Yohanan b. Zakkai, “The matter may be compared to the case of a king who invited his courtiers to a banquet, but he didn’t set a time. The wise ones among them got themselves adorned and waited at the gate of the palace, *saying, ‘Does the palace lack anything?’ [They can do it any time.]* The foolish ones among them went about their work, *saying, ‘So is there a banquet without a whole lot of preparation?’* Suddenly the king demanded the presence of his courtiers. The wise ones went right before him, adorned, but the fools went before him *filthy from their work*. The king received the wise ones pleasantly, but showed anger to the fools. He said, ‘These, who adorned themselves for the banquet, will sit and eat and drink. Those, who didn’t adorn themselves for the banquet, *will stand and look on.*’” (b. Shab. 153a)²⁹[/EXT]

The similarity with parables of Jesus are striking, and far beyond a coincidence—especially the version in Matthew 22:2–15.³⁰ The following details are not found in that parable, though many are found in related parables: [BL 1-5]

- The king announces a banquet without setting a time so some get ready and some do not. This is close to the version in Luke 14:17, where the actual time is only announced later but none of the original invitees are ready.
- Those who are ready sit outside the door. This is close to the parable of the virgins who sat ready at the door of the wedding feast (Matt 25:1–13).
- Yohanan’s two groups are called wise and foolish. This is also similar to wise and foolish virgins (Matt 25:1–13).
- The king announced the start without any warning. This kind of surprise is featured in various parables of Jesus (Luke 12:36, 39, 46; Matt 24:36, 43, 48; 25:13).
- Yohanan’s badly-dressed guests have to stand and watch, but in Jesus’ version he is thrown out. This is the only significant detail which is entirely unparalleled in gospel records of Jesus’ teaching. [BL 1-5]

We can find elements of this parable in several parables of Jesus. The foolish virgins were kept out a feast because they weren't ready (Matt 25:1–13); the householder who doesn't recognize his late guest and keeps his door shut (Luke 13:25–28); the Lukan parallel where the actual time is unknown until just before (Luke 14:16–24). We do not have a large body of parables by Yohanan, like we do for Jesus, so we do not know if these elements featured in his other parables.

The crux of both the parables of Yohanan and Matthew 22 lies in the badly-dressed guests. Among all the similarities between the parables of Jesus and Yohanan, this detail stands out starkly different. In Yohanan's version they are punished by being made to stand and watch while the well-dressed guests sit down and feast but in Jesus’ version he is thrown out. This is consistent with details in related parables: the late guest is told “I do not know where you are from” and is left outside; the foolish virgins arrive to find the door shut and they cannot enter

²⁹ Based on Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud*.

³⁰ In Luke 14:15–24 the story ends before the actual banquet.

(Matt 25:10–12); the guest in Luke's version of the banquet who “shall not taste of my dinner” are left outside. The implication in these parables is that those who do not enter the hall are going to hell: “into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 22:13); “depart from Me, all you evildoers . . . to weeping and gnashing of teeth (Luke 13:27–28); “I never knew you” (Matt 25:12; cf. Luke 13:27 in a similar context).

Yohanan's message is that Jews who are not ready for the day of judgment will find themselves in a second-rate heaven, where they will not fully enjoy the eschatological banquet along with the others. This coheres with the view of Yohanan that we saw before (in b. Ber. 28b) where he speaks about only two destinations—heaven or eternal hell. If the Hillelites believed that the middle group went to a second-rate heaven, then only the utterly evil will go to hell, and they will stay there.

This contrasted with the teaching of non-rabbinic Jews.

Contrasting Rabbinic Theology with Qumran and the Gospels

We have found many similarities between Judaism and the Gospels with regard to the theology of hell and the vocabulary used to express it. But we have also identified a rift in Jewish theology concerning those who are not utterly evil but are not good enough for heaven. The apocalyptic sects and the Qumran sect were not concerned about this group because they could assume that all of their members were worthy of heaven. But the theology of majority Judaism had to deal with the problem of “average” people who weren't evil though they didn't keep the Law perfectly.

The Shammaites concluded that this third middle group went to hell for a brief punishment and then went up to heaven. The Hillelites concluded that they went straight to heaven but didn't enjoy its full benefits, at least to start with.

Qumran Judaism

Qumran Judaism and the gospels both disagree with this novel teaching. They do so by emphasizing: **[BL 1-2]**

- There are only two groups at the Judgment.
- Those who go to hell cannot leave there. **[/BL 1-2]**

At Qumran they divided humanity into the Sons of Light (themselves) and the Sons of Darkness (everyone else). At the start of the Community Rule, they describe the fate of all those who fail to keep their strict version of Judaism:

[EXT]The judgment of all who walk in such ways will be multiple afflictions at the hand of all the angels of perdition, everlasting damnation in the wrath of God's furious vengeance, never-ending terror and reproach for all eternity, with a shameful extinction in the fire of Hell's outer darkness. For all their eras, generation by generation, they will know doleful sorrow, bitter evil, and dark happenstance, until their utter destruction with neither remnant nor rescue. (1QS 4:12 14; duplicate at 4Q257 5:12–13, and the ending is similar to 4Q286 f7ii:10)**[/EXT]**

This emphasis concerning the two groups is unsurprising, given that this is sectarian literature. However the emphasis on the eternal nature of punishment in hell is unexpected, given the fact that they believe that punishment in hell results in destruction. It becomes more understandable when we realize that a large proportion of their rival Jews were teaching that

most of those who go to hell will stay there for only a short period, and will soon be released to go to heaven. The Qumran Jews therefore emphasized that their punishment is: **[BL 1-7]**

- “everlasting . . . never-ending . . . for all eternity, with a shameful extinction . . . for all their eras, generation by generation, . . . until their utter destruction with neither remnant nor rescue.” (1QS 4:12–14)
- “eternal destruction” (1QS 2:15)
- “eternal destruction with none spared” (1QS 5:13)
- “eternal annihilation” (4Q491 fl_3:4; 4Q496 f3:5)
- “[disgra]ces of destruction wi[thout remnant . . . for all eternit]y. (4Q286 f7ii:7)
- “eternal destruction . . . the children of evil will no longer exist” (4Q418 f69ii:4–8)
- “burn [the damned of Sh]eol, as an [eternal] burning” (1QM 14:18) **[/BL 1-7]**

Gospel Traditions

There is no room in this paper to examine the gospel traditions properly, except to confirm the same emphasis as found at Qumran. Jesus in the Gospels is concerned to deny the same two novel ideas by affirming: judgment results in only two groups; punishment in hell is eternal and not temporary.

A quick way to demonstrate the emphasis on the two groups at judgment, is to list those parables which hinge on this dualism: **[BL 1-21]**

- The closed door (Luke 13:22–30)
- The doorkeeper (Mark 13:33–37)
- The thief in the night (Matt 24:42–51)
- The unfaithful servants (Luke 12:32–48)
- The Sower and the Seeds (Mark 4:3–9; Matt 13:3–9; Luke 8:5–8)
- The Weeds in the Grain (Matt 13:24–30)
- The Net (Matthew 13:47–50)
- The Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6–9)
- The Tree and its Fruits (Matt 7:16; Luke 6:43–49)
- The Weather Signs (Luke 12:54–56; cf. Matt 26:2–3; Mark 8:11–13)
- The Talents or Pounds (Matt 25:14–30; Luke 19:12–27)
- The Wicked Vinedressers (Matt 21:33–41; Mark 12:1–9; Luke 20:9–16)
- The Two Builders (Matthew 7:24–27; Luke 6:47–49)
- The Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1–13)
- The Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1–10; Luke 14:16–24)
- The Wedding Garment (Matt 22:11–14)
- The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)
- The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)
- The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8–10)
- The Lost Sheep (Matt 28:12–14; Luke 15:4–7)
- The Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25:31–46) **[/BL 1-21]**

These do not all equally emphasize judgment itself but they indicate a constant emphasis in the Jesus traditions that you are either in or out, saved or lost, punished or rewarded, and there is no room for middle third group.

The second emphasis, that the consequences of going to hell are eternal, can be appreciated by looking at every tradition concerning the fires of hell. Although there is only one verse where it unequivocally says that the punishment itself is eternal (Matt 25:41–46), more than half of the passages refer to the eternal nature of the flames.³¹ One can, of course, quibble that the flames may be eternal but a person may only spend a short time there. However, if that was the intended meaning, what would be the point of mentioning that the flames are eternal? This detail is clearly stated in order to raise the level of threat, so the implication is that there is no escape.

Jesus therefore contradicts the new rabbinic theology of hell in the same way that Qumran does, and with very similar language. The Community Rule and War Rule are particularly concerned to emphasize that the fire burns forever in order to prove that the destruction is absolute. This is not a matter of burning away the bad bits in order to reveal the good. This burning leaves no remnant which can be redeemed for heaven. Jesus similarly speaks about hell as a final destination.

As well as contradicting the ideas of a third group, and the Shammaite idea that this third group may escape hell, Jesus also addresses the Hillelite idea that a third group may get into heaven by some subtle means.

The parallels between the parables of Jesus and Yohanan's parable of the surprise banquet are very striking. It is particularly significant that the one detail in Jesus' parables that consistently contradicts Yohanan is the fate of those who are foolish and badly dressed. This forms the climax and the main lesson in Yohanan's parable: be ready, or you may have a substandard position in heaven. Jesus appears to deliberately pick on this point in three similar parables: the foolish virgins are not let in; the late guests are not let in; the invited guests miss the banquet, and the badly dressed guest is thrown out. And in these parables the point is made stronger by references to hell such as “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 22:13; Luke 13:27–28).

Another emphasis in Jesus traditions that contradicts established rabbinic theology is that ordinary Jews can go to hell. A quick way to get a measure of this emphasis is to look at all the places where the gospels mention Hades or Gehenna. Only a third of these texts refer to sinners going to hell, and two thirds refer to ordinary unrepentant Jews.³² The Jews who are destined for hell, according to these passages, even include the better classes of society, like religious teachers and the rich (Matt 23:15, 33; Luke 16:23).

A final point of contrast with the rabbinic theology of hell lies in Jesus' attitude to the sins which deserve punishment in hell. In rabbinic theology only utterly evil Jews go to hell. In Jesus' theology the specific sins which are named as deserving hell include almost universal sins of unjustified anger (Matt 5:22) and lusts of the eye and hand (Matt 5:29–30; 18:9; Mark 9:43–45). In contrast, Jesus specifically welcomed gross sinners such as enemy collaborators and prostitutes so long as they repented. He regarded repentance as key to heaven instead of regarding sin as the key to hell (Matt 11:20–23; Luke 18:2–5).

This quick survey shows that Jesus criticized each aspect of rabbinic theology that departed from the traditional Jewish theology of hell that is found in non-rabbinic Jewish sources.

³¹ Eternal or unquenchable flames are referred to in Matt 3:10–12; 18:8; 25:41–46; Mark 9:43; Luke 3:9–17. But this aspect of the flames is not mentioned in Matt 5:22; 7:11; 13:42, 50.

³² Sinners go to hell in Matt 5:22; 5:29–30; 18:9; Mark 9:43–45. But no specific sin is referred to in Matt 10:28; 11:23; 23:15, 33; Luke 10:15; 12:5; 16:23.

Conclusions

The theology of hell and the vocabulary used to discuss it in Jewish literature between the testaments is virtually identical to that found in the gospels. Hell is a place where evil people are punished by both torment and by destruction. It is a place of both fire and darkness. It is called variously Gehenna, Hades, Tartarus, and “the Valley.”

Rabbinic literature indicates that the theology of hell was subject to debate and development during the early first century. The Pharisaic/rabbinic schools concluded that God’s judgment would divide people into three groups: the good, the evil and the in-between. They agreed that this in-between group would go to heaven, but some of them (including Shammaites) thought they would visit hell for some punishment first. Others (including Hillelites) believed the in-between group would not fully enjoy the benefits of heaven, at least for some time.

The literature of Qumran and the Gospels both emphatically rejected these new ideas in the rabbinic theology of hell. Both sets of literature emphasized that there were only two groups at judgment day, and that the effects of hell are eternal because the destruction is utterly complete. The gospels added a new teaching: that ordinary Jews can go to hell if they do not repent, and that even gross sinners can go to heaven if they repent.

The questions that Jesus’ generation were asking were: do people remain in hell for eternity, and is there a third group of those who aren’t evil enough for hell or good enough for heaven? The gospels’ emphasis on the two ways shows that Jesus rejected the concept of a third group and the idea that one could escape from hell. In one verse punishment is clearly stated as having eternal consequences (Matt 25:46) and other references to eternal features (such as “eternal flames”) imply that punishment in hell has no end.

No one in Jesus’ generation, as far as we know, was asking what hell was like, or where it was or what kind of punishment occurred there. They were all agreed that it was characterized by fire and darkness with pain of torment and eventual destruction. Contemporaries of the rabbis tended to emphasize the eternal consequences of hell more than others, in order to counter the idea that someone could visit hell for a short punishment.

Jesus used exactly the same terminology as his contemporaries, so we should assume that he meant the same thing that they did, except where he stated otherwise. This means the verse stating that “punishment” is eternal should be understood to mean that torment plus destruction is eternal—without any means of escape—because this is what his contemporaries meant when they used the same language.

The later church doctrine that this punishment consisted of eternal sentient torment resulted from the Vulgate translation of *αἰσθησις* as *sentiant*, though similar passages suggest the correct translation is: “they shall weep in pain forever” (Jdt 16:17 NRS). This doctrine was inspired by a misunderstanding of “eternal punishment” which would have been understood by all first century readers as a reference to torment followed by eternal destruction with no hope of redemption or resurrection.

Jesus did add one emphasis that is not seen in any contemporary Jewish literature: that ordinary Jews are liable for punishment in hell unless they repent and that even the worse sinner can escape hell by repentance. Therefore the unique emphasis of Jesus in the Gospels was that going to hell is determined not so much by the presence of sin but by the absence of repentance.