



Drawing by Linda Huff.

GEHENNA

The Topography of Hell

by Lloyd R. Bailey



Photograph by Kenneth G. Hoglund.

The Greek noun *gehenna*, usually translated as hell in the English New Testament, is used in a bewildering variety of ways in ancient sacred literature. In the Bible and related literature it occurs in three senses: as an ordinary geographical location in Jerusalem; as an extraordinary place of punishment for the wicked, located in the area of Jerusalem; and as an otherworldly place of punishment for the wicked after death.¹ Eventually the name Gehenna for the geographical valley became a term for the underworld. When and how this transfer took place is examined below.

Three Senses of Gehenna in the Bible

I would like first to consider the three ways in which the word Gehenna is used in the Bible.

As an ordinary piece of real estate in the environs of Jerusalem. In the Hebrew Bible, Gehenna is variously designated as "the valley of the sons of Hinnom" (2 Kings 23:10), "the valley of the son of Hinnom" (Jeremiah 7:31), or simply as "the valley of Hinnom" (Nehemiah 11:30). In

Sanctuaries to underworld deities were located in low places. Occasionally altars were equipped with pipes so that sacrificial blood could be channeled to the gods below. The imaginative drawing above shows a ritual ceremony being performed in a sanctuary situated in the deep valley of Hinnom. The photograph shows the modern-day Hinnom valley (the southern end of Wadi er-Rababi), looking southeast. To the left are the slopes of Mount Zion. Part of Ketef Hinnom is visible at the far right.

the last of these forms, in Hebrew, it is *gē-hinnōm* (pronounced gay-hinnóm), and is a compound of *gē* (valley) and *hinnōm* (of uncertain meaning—possibly a family name—or it is derived from the verb "to sleep" or from the verb "to wail," both in relation to death). This may become, in Greek, *gai-enna* (Septuagint) or *gé-enna* (New Testament), which is anglicized as the familiar Gehenna.

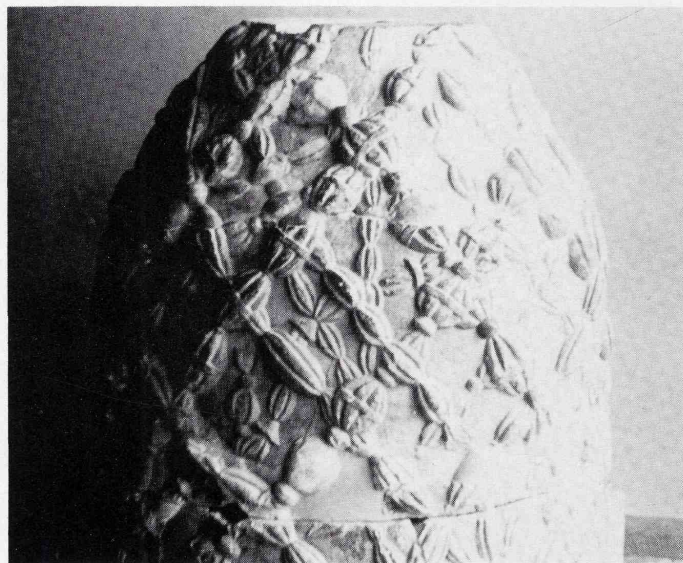
It is sometimes identified by modern geographers as the valley just east of the walls of the Old City (the Wadi Kidron), or the valley just to the west (the Wadi er-Rababi),

or with their confluence just to the south (the Wadi en-Nar). Majority opinion seems to favor the second of these identifications.

As an extraordinary place of punishment for the wicked in the future, again in the immediate environs of Jerusalem. This point of view was slow in arriving upon the scene of Israel's thought. In condemning the valley as a site of idol-worship, the prophet Jeremiah (seventh century B.C.E.) anticipated that it would become a "valley of Slaughter" for those who worshipped there (Jeremiah 7:30–34). A late addition to Isaiah believed the present enemy (possibly Greece but typified as the Assyrians) would be destroyed with fire in the valley, which here is called Topheth (Isaiah 30:29–33). The so-called Third Isaiah anticipated a climactic slaughter of the wicked, in full view of the righteous, presumably in the environs of Jerusalem (Isaiah 66:24). Joel, perhaps making a pun on the name of the "Valley of the Cheesemakers" (the Tyropoeon Valley, which splits the city), called it "the valley of Decision" (from the verb "to cut" [as in cheese] or "to decide"), where multitudes would be judged in days to come (Joel 3:2, 12, 14). The Maccabees (in the second century B.C.E.) chose the valley as the place in which to burn the corpses of their enemies.

It is not surprising, then, that some who looked for a solution to present difficulties through divine intervention at the end time, suggested that the valley would be the place where the enemies of God would be destroyed. Thus 1 (Ethiopic) Enoch (second century B.C.E.?) described the destruction site as a city "at the center of the earth," surrounded by deep ravines (chapters 26–27). This would seem to describe Jerusalem, the religious center of the known world, with the valley of Hinnom outside its walls. The author noted "the accursed valley" where the wicked would be destroyed by God "in the days of judgment." (He could not name the valley, since he wrote from the perspective of the ancient hero Enoch, who lived prior to the founding of Jerusalem.)

As an otherworldly place of punishment for the wicked after death. This sense of Gehenna was sometimes thought to have been in existence since creation. Thus Jesus said that one ought not to "fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul: rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell [Gehenna]" (Matthew 10:28). The author of 2 Baruch reported that God had already shown Moses "the entrance to Gehenna" (59:10). The rabbis proposed that it had been fashioned either on the second or sixth day of creation (Genesis Rabbah, IV.6, IX.9—see Freedman 1977: 31, 68; Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 54a—see Freedman 1938a: 265–66) and that it had swallowed up the rebellious sons of Korah when Israel was in the Sinai wilderness (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 111b—see Freedman 1935: 764–69; compare Numbers 16: 31–32); that it was so immense that it extended beneath the surface of the entire world (Bab-



Many sanctuaries in the ancient Near East had an omphalos or umbilical stone. It has been suggested that these stones were modeled after meteorites that had crashed through the "gates" in the dome of the sky and thus had forged a link or umbilicus with the world beneath. This stone is from Delphi, Greece.

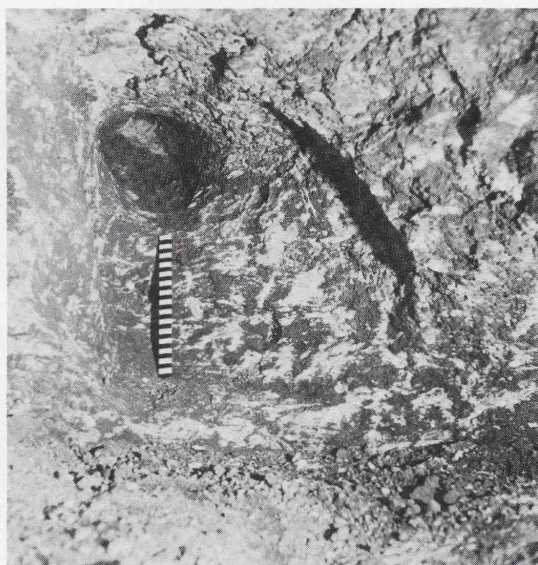
lonian Talmud, Pesahim 94a—see Freedman 1938a: 503); and that its fires beneath accounted for the warm springs that sometimes bubbled to the surface (for example, at Tiberias; see Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath 39a—Freedman 1938b: 182). While in this sense the term Gehenna is usually synonymous with the underworld (hell), some writers thought of the place as detached from earth beneath and they located it in one of the sevenfold concentric spheres of the heavens above (Babylonian Talmud, Tamid 32b—see Simon 1948a: 29).

Transfer of the Name Gehenna from a Valley to the Underworld

The geographical valley, therefore, gave its name, not to one place of punishment of the wicked, but to two: to a future, local, fiery place of punishment outside Jerusalem at the "eschaton" (last days), and to the ancient infernal realm beneath. That it might have given rise to the first of these is easy enough to see, as outlined above. But how does one explain the use of the term in the second sense? The traditional explanation for this seems to go back to Rabbi David Kimhi's commentary on Psalm 27 (around 1200 C.E.). He remarked the following concerning the valley beneath Jerusalem's walls:

Gehenna is a repugnant place, into which filth and cadavers are thrown, and in which fires perpetually burn in order to consume the filth and bones; on which account, by analogy, the judgement of the wicked is called "Gehenna."

This would mean that Jesus or the rabbis, in order to concretize their belief in a postdeath punishment of the wicked, compared the horror and destruction of that



The cultures of the ancient Near East felt a need to maintain avenues of contact between the physical and spiritual worlds. Evidence of one such connection was found during the excavation of Tell Dothan, shown in these previously unpublished photographs. Tomb number 1 (dating between 1400 and 1200 B.C.) contained 288 skeletons along with great quantities of ceramic vessels and bronze objects. In addition to its main entrance, the tomb had an auxiliary opening leading to the outside front of the structure (shown in the upper right of the photograph on the left and in the detail from the interior of the tomb in the photograph on the right). On the outside next to this opening the excavators found two large storage jars containing dipper juglets. Such an arrangement suggests the contents of the jars were poured into the opening that drains into the tomb, thus establishing a physical connection between the worlds of the living and the dead. Courtesy of Dothan II Publications.

state with the nearby city garbage dump. The modern consensus as to the correctness of Kimhi's explanation is illustrated by *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (Singer 1903: 582), which says that the valley became "a figurative equivalent of 'hell,'" and by *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Gaster 1962: 361), which suggests that the word Gehenna was used "in a metaphoric sense" in the ancient sacred literature. Kimhi's otherwise plausible suggestion, however, finds no support in literary sources or archaeological data from the intertestamental or rabbinic periods. There is no evidence that the valley was, in fact, a garbage dump, and thus his explanation is insufficient. What, then, is the connection between the eschatological Gehenna (valley of Hinnom) and the eternal fiery Gehenna beneath?

Is it a matter of geographical proximity? Arguably so, since some ancient writers perceived Jerusalem to be a microcosm: They fused together the ancient concept of a paradise for the righteous (Genesis 2), the concept of a sacred mountain in the far north where the deity dwelled (Psalm 48), and an eternal sanctuary in Jerusalem (Psalm 132) that had been built according to a heavenly blueprint. Thus, the writer of the apocalypse envisioned a "new Jerusalem" that would descend from heaven, be situated atop the sacred mountain Zion, and become a paradise for the righteous (Revelation 21). The valley of Hinnom, lying beneath the walls of the restructured city, might then suggest the underworld, which in ancient Semitic cosmology lay at the roots of the world-mountain. The connection between the two Gehennas, then, would be more than a metaphor for destruction—it would be a

physical result of the geography of the holy city, in which the valley above would extend down to the realm of the dead beneath, carrying along its name and fiery nature. Conversely, it might have been expected that the underworld, a place of fiery punishment from the intertestamental period onward (second century B.C.E.), would blaze up through the valley, and this might explain why the valley came to be regarded as the place of destruction of the wicked.

Regardless of the attractiveness of the geographical-proximity explanation for the transfer of the name Gehenna, one should not assume that the function of one Gehenna evolved from the other. Rather, the two places of destruction seem to have developed independently. On the one hand, the very old picture of the underworld (Sheol) as a vast, dark, tomblike cavern in which both righteous and wicked shared the same fate after death gradually evolved (under the influence of Persian eschatology and Greek anthropology) into an intermediate holding tank for the dead prior to a resurrection. It then became a place of fiery punishment for the wicked only, perhaps under the influence of the Greek Hades. On the other hand, the geographical valley evolved, under the influence of curses by the prophets because of forbidden cultic activity there, into a place for the disposition of the living wicked. It becomes a vital solution to the problem of a wicked, rebellious world.

There is at least one other explanation for the transfer of the name Gehenna from the valley to the underworld, and it has not been well recognized. It is based upon the fact that an altar, in the ancient Semitic world,

served to connect the realm of the worshipper with that of the deity. This is clear from the fact that Jacob, after his dream at Bethel, proclaimed that the spot was a "gate of heaven" and erected an altar there (Genesis 28:17). Sacred cities in Egypt were sometimes described as a gate, and the inhabitants of the city of Babylon explained its name in just this way (*bab*, "gate," plus *ili*, "of the gods"). The presence of an *omphalos* (umbilical) stone is widely attested at sanctuaries in the ancient Near East, and it has been suggested that they were patterned after meteorites that had crashed through the "gates" in the dome of the sky and thus had forged a link (umbilicus) with the world beneath.

It was usual, therefore, to place an altar as close as possible to the divine realm for which it served as the contact point.² Hence the desire to build a temple-tower (ziggurat) "with its top in the heavens" (so both cuneiform texts and Genesis 11:4). The one in the Mesopotamian city of Sippar was called "the house that connects heaven and earth" (*é-dur-an-ki*). Presumably, devotees of the sun-god assumed that there was a gate through the domed sky directly above the tower and that contact could be made with the deity through it.

Underworld deities, on the other hand, could be contacted most efficiently through altars in low places: ravines, crevices, or caves.³ The so-called Third Isaiah (57: 5–6) condemned those who sacrificed in valleys and who poured out liquid offerings there to an underworld deity

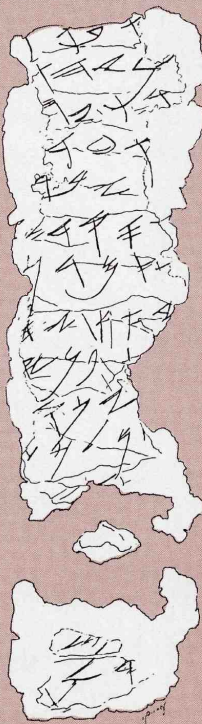
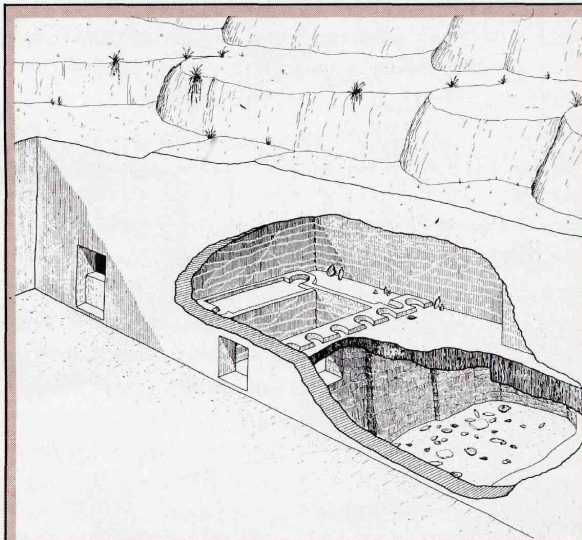
(Molech). Altars were sometimes supplied with pipes so that the sacrificial blood could be channeled to the underworld deities who were thought to dwell just beneath them. Therefore, since human sacrifice had been offered in the valley of Hinnom to the underworld deity Molech (2 Kings 23:10), the worshippers likely assumed that there was an entrance to the underworld at this location.

At last we come to the essential information that may solve the enigma of the twofold use of the term Gehenna. Altars, and the larger cult center of which they were the nucleus, sometimes gave their name to the divine realm for which they served as an entrance. A clear illustration of this may be found in the literature of ancient Mesopotamia. A cult center of the planet Mars (whom the Assyro-Babylonians called Nergal) was located in a city named Kutu (Cutha). This also was a designation for the netherworld over which he presided, as is made clear in the account of Ishtar's Descent:

To the Land of no Return, the realm of [*Ereshkigal*],
Ishtar, the daughter of Sin, [set] her mind. . . .
Forth went the gatekeeper (to) open the door for her:
"Enter, my Lady, that Cutha may rejoice over thee,
That the palace of the Land of no Return may be glad
at thy presence."
(obverse, lines 1–2, 39–41; Pritchard 1955: 107)

On the slopes adjacent to Mount Zion and the Hinnom Valley, in an area known in Hebrew as *Ketef Hinnom* ("The Shoulder of Hinnom"), new excavations some eighty meters above the floor of the valley have discovered two small silver amulets that can be dated to the end of the First Temple period. When found the amulets were in the form of small scrolls, each with a space in the middle through which a string could be threaded, thus allowing it to be worn on the body. When the scrolls were carefully unrolled—yielding plaques of 97 by 27 and 39 by 11 millimeters, respectively—similar inscriptions in ancient Hebrew script were revealed. (A drawing of the smaller plaque is shown here.) The texts were recently deciphered by Ada Yardeni and published by the excavator, Gabriel Barkay of Tel Aviv University; they are strikingly similar to the priestly benediction of Numbers 6:24–26—forms of which are also found in Psalms 4:7 and 67:2, as well as in an inscription on a pithos jar from Kuntillet cAjrud. The discovery of the amulets indicates that a form of the priestly blessing circulated as a popular blessing that possibly influenced the later "P" strand of Scripture. These exciting inscriptional finds are only part of a remarkable group of artifacts found in the repository of a burial cave. They are now on display in the Israel Museum and published in a new catalog, *Ketef Hinnom: A Treasure Facing Jerusalem's Walls* by Gabriel Barkay.

Eric M. Meyers



New excavations at Ketef Hinnom uncovered a burial cave (number 25) with a rich assemblage of artifacts. The isometric drawing of the cave shows the arrangement of burial benches, headrests, and objects. Of particular importance were the silver, inscribed amulets found in the cave. The smaller one is shown in this drawing. Both drawings are after figures from Gabriel Barkay's *Ketef Hinnom: A Treasure Facing Jerusalem's Walls* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1986).

Turning from Mesopotamia to Greece, I would point to a parallel development in the case of the river Acheron. Near it one might consult necromancers (those whose specialty in divination was summoning the spirit of the deceased from the underworld) in order to secure information (Herodotus, *The Histories*, V.92—see Godley 1963: 103–15). Such a location was favored because streams were thought to flow to the surface from the realm beneath and thus provided a point of access and contact with the dead. Acheron was also the name of the river that was thought to surround the underworld itself (Homer, *Odyssey*, x.513—see Murray 1966: 381). By the time of Sophocles (fifth century B.C.E.; *Antigone*, 805—Storr 1924: 377) and Virgil (first century B.C.E.; *Aeneid*, VII. 312—see Fairclough 1969: 25) it had become a designation for the infernal realm itself.

Conclusion

Did altars to underworld deities in the valley of Hinnom (Gehenna)—which likely were perceived as gates to the realm of such deities—lead to the transfer of the name from the valley to the netherworld? If so, it may well have happened during the monarchical period when such apostasy flourished. Although the latest explicit mention of the valley as a cult center is in the book of Jeremiah (before the Exile), the so-called Third Isaiah continued to condemn sacrifices to the god Molech in “low places” in the postexilic age. The earliest mention of the underworld under the name Gehenna, in the surviving documents, is found in the New Testament and in the early rabbinic literature. In the latter it occurs in the teachings attributed to Rabbi Shammai around the beginning of the Christian era (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah, 16b—see Simon 1938: 64; Tosephta, Sanhedrin 13:3—see Danby 1919: 123) and in those of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai within the first century thereafter (Babylonian Talmud, Berakoth 28b—see Simon 1948b: 173).

Even after the valley ceased to function as a cult center, it continued to be regarded as the location of an entrance to the underworld over which the sole God was sovereign. This is clear from the following statements in the Babylonian Talmud:

(Rabbi Jeremiah ben Eleazar further stated:) Gehenna has three gates; one in the wilderness, one in the sea and one in Jerusalem. (According to Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai's school:) There are two palm trees in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and between them smoke arises . . . and this is the gate of Gehenna? (Babylonian Talmud, cErubin, 19a—see Slotki 1938: 130–31)

Notes

¹A longer form of this paper was presented as the Presidential Address in 1982 to the Society of Biblical Literature, South-eastern Region.

²Israel's prophets protested the worship of astral deities “upon every hill”—Jeremiah 2:20 and Ezekiel 6:13.

³In the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh Epic, there is mention of an implement that fell through a crevice and landed in the underworld (tablet XII, lines 1–10, 63–64; Pritchard 1955: 97).

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