



QUENCHED

What Everyone (Especially Christians) Should Know About Hell...



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For those who instill fear...

For those who are afraid...

And for the God whose perfect love is the greatest remedy...

Table of Contents

| <i>Chapter</i> | <i>Title</i> | <i>Page</i> |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| | Introduction | 4 |
| One | One Hell of a Question | 6 |
| Two | Finding the Beginning | 10 |
| Three | “Hades” in Context | 15 |
| Four | The Unquenchable Fire | 21 |
| Five | Could It Be...Hmmm... Satan? | 27 |
| Six | Why It’s Hard to Let God of Hell | 31 |
| Seven | The Uncharted Way Forward | 34 |

Introduction

In 2007, a friend challenged my devotion to one of Christianity's most widely-held doctrines. He asked me to reconsider my position on the doctrine of Hell. His challenge led me to research Hades, Gehenna, Tartarus, and Sheol (the Greek and Hebrew words that have been translated to read "Hell" in our Bibles).

I initially intended to prove to my friend that there was indeed a Hell, and that God would really send non-Christians to suffer there for eternity. Instead, my research led me to ask questions that I had never asked, to wonder things that I had never dared to wonder, and to draw conclusions that were far outside the bounds of orthodoxy.

At first, I kept my findings to myself. I was afraid that my church would force me to leave my position in leadership if they learned of how my beliefs had evolved. (I ended up leaving on my own without ever sharing my beliefs about the afterlife with anyone at the church.)

My "Hell" findings remained housed in my heart and mind until 2010 when I launched an anonymous blog called "Jesus Was A Heretic, Too". I wanted to make peace with the Christianity that didn't seem to have a place for me anymore, and for reasons that I don't quite understand, I felt that the blogosphere would be a good place to do it.

Through the magic of Google, my blog posts about Hell were discovered and suddenly-- I had an "audience". I organized the posts about Hell into a series called "One Hell of a Lie," changed the name on the blog to my own (thereby jettisoning my anonymity) and began to write boldly about the theological questions that most of us are afraid to ask.

Nowadays, the blog is called the "Diary of a Christian Universagnosticistal". I write about theology and religious pluralism, and I've found a welcoming spiritual space in expressions of Unitarian Universalism.

This book is mostly a compilation of the posts about Hell and Satan that started it all. (Chapters one and two were written specifically for this book. The other five chapters are versions of older blog posts. They have been expanded for clarity and edited to read more formally than their bloggy predecessors.)

This book began with one conversation and took shape through a series of many others. I hope it's a conversation starter for you as well-- a conversation starter that will help you and those around you to rethink your assumptions about God, Jesus, theology and the afterlife.

Enjoy.

1 *One Hell of a Question*

“I just don’t believe it, Crystal-- and frankly, I can’t believe that *you* believe it.”

My friend Charles and I had been on the phone for more than an hour. He was a former Christian turned agnostic who was skeptical of organized religion in general. I was a lay minister who enjoyed apologetics. We were talking about the afterlife when the subject of Hell emerged.

“I have daughters. They screw up all the time, but I would never harm my daughters-- let alone incinerate them. Never. How can someone claim to love you and then torture you? Is this God’s only recourse for correction?”

I was extremely frustrated. “Charles, if we break the law in our city, we go to jail. How can we accept the consequences of our actions in this life without acknowledging that there will be consequences in the afterlife?”

Nothing I said mattered to him. I couldn’t quote enough scripture to convince him that Hell was real, or justified, or God’s will. We had reached a stalemate.

“I bet if you searched hard enough, you’d find the controlling, sadistic puppet master at the root of this *Hell* thing. And I bet you he’s human—just like you and me.” Charles was the king of sarcasm. I could hear the smirk in his voice, but I was not amused. I couldn’t believe his pridefulness.

We had talked about scripture and theology, morality and reason, sin and justice. I was tired of defending my beliefs... tired of trying to explain God’s plan to balance the scales in this world and in the next. I was ready to throw in the towel. I needed some sleep.

“It’s eleven o’clock,” I said with exhaustion. “I’m going to bed.” We hung up. I prayed for him and climbed into bed, but I didn’t get any sleep that night. Despite my inability to agree with his arguments, I couldn’t escape a few powerful things about Charles’ position-- things that could not be easily dismissed.

For instance, I had never heard God described in the way that Charles talked about him. A torturer? I thought about this for hours...

"Am I worshiping a torturer?" I would silently think those words before quickly pushing them out of my mind. "The devil is the author of lies," I said to myself in response to that thought. "God is love and this *torture* thing is a lie designed to turn me away from God's truth."

I wrestled with this all night, but my internal dialogue didn't satisfy the tension I felt in my gut. I suddenly understood how Charles could have trouble reconciling those two radically different depictions of God. His struggle resonated with me because I was having the same problem for the first time in all of my years as a Christian. "Does this make sense?" I continued to think about the *lover vs. torturer* question, but with no answer.

In the weeks after our discussion, there were several questions about Hell that plagued my mind. For instance, Charles pointed out that Jesus told the disciples to forgive their trespassers as many times as necessary in the interest of maintaining those relationships¹-- but the traditional Hell doctrine seemed to depict a God whose forgiveness was both limited and conditional.

Charles also asked me why the Bible didn't talk more about "unsaved" children or the fates of adults who lacked the mental capacity to believe in Christian doctrine. "If eternal torture awaits the unsaved," Charles inquired, "then why didn't God talk more clearly about his plan for those who lack the intellectual capacity to choose the right religion?... And if a woman were to approach me yelling 'Help! My husband is demanding, and he hurts me when I don't obey him,' I would tell her to leave as quickly as possible... but your religion says the same of God while telling people to run toward him. Why?"

Suddenly, I boldly wondered: *Is a God who threatens eternal punishment for temporal disobedience any different than an abusive husband? Am I wrong for telling people to run toward my depiction of God? Is this theology harmful?* These were things that I'd never considered before, but I lacked the answers I so desperately wanted. And the questions didn't stop. I would never have admitted it to Charles at the time, but I suddenly had more questions than answers.

For instance, I believed that the only guaranteed road out of Hell was the Protestant Evangelical way. This involved repentance of sin and asking for Jesus Christ's free gift of salvation. I also believed that Jesus could return to rapture the Church at any time-- however, I also knew that only around 7% of the world's inhabitants were Protestant Evangelicals. (That's roughly 550 million people.) I wondered if God would really destroy more than 90% of the world's population in the twinkling of an eye.²

Furthermore, I wondered what had become of the non-Christians who died in generations past—a seemingly infinite number of people! Had God destroyed them, too?

I thought about the places in the world where people are sentenced to death for converting to Christianity. Would God burn people eternally for what they were afraid to believe? Would God burn the infidel mother who refused to convert because she feared for her own life or for the lives of her children? Wouldn't an all-knowing, merciful God be more understanding than this?

And what about people who live in the far corners of the earth and have not heard the Gospel? Romans 1:20 seemed to be the only verse that alluded to salvation for them. Why wouldn't God give clearer instructions for a world with a population that he knew would outnumber his chosen few? Wouldn't God want us to understand his will? Wouldn't he want us to represent him well with clear answers about who would be tortured eternally and who would not?

Overwhelmed with uncertainty about these matters, I decided to test the waters with my friend Monica over dinner one night.

"Do you ever think about Hell? I mean—really think about what the Bible says about it?" She laughed and playfully rolled her eyes. "No. I'm going to heaven. I don't need to think about Hell." (Yes. She really said that.)

I responded: "I've been thinking about it. I want to know more, but I don't know where to start digging for information." Suddenly, I had her attention. I whispered sheepishly, "Monica, I used to be sure about this stuff, but now I think I should get a better handle on it. There are things I once believed I knew, but I am not so certain of anymore." She was the first and only person that I had told about my uncertainty. I was embarrassed to admit that I was having such doubts.

Monica looked me in the eyes and said with a steady tone, "Crystal, you should avoid the temptation to try and discredit God's Word with humanistic reason. Remember: The Bible says that God confounds the wise."

God confounds the wise. I had used that verse of scripture in conversations with others—even with Charles. I realized that I had used it in the past to discourage others from wrestling between faith and reason. I had always told people to side with faith— often against my own best judgment. And I had always sided with faith myself. Had I done myself a disservice?

I decided to pull out my study tools and try to piece together an understanding of the afterlife, but I found that I still needed more information. I found that my studies were limited because every commentary I owned, every resource I consulted, and every voice I listened to at the time already agreed with my previous points of view. This was not by accident—over the years I had made it a habit to dismiss arguments that did not fit my own preconceived notions about God and doctrine. I believed that any exploration outside my realm of beliefs was only acceptable when done for the purpose of apologetics. Intellectual exploration was fine, as long as it led back to square one... back to the orthodoxy of my tradition. It became clear to me that I had been trapped in an echo chamber. For the first time in my life, I saw this as a problem.

Climbing Outside the Box

After a great deal of reflection, I remembered that the scriptures teach us to love God with our hearts, souls, and *minds*³. Intellectual love is grounded in curiosity and promotes an ever-expanding realm of knowledge. We are taught to seek God continuously, to ask for wisdom with a sense of expectation⁴, and to knock relentlessly⁵ at the door of the Wise One. Most astoundingly, we are told to worship God in spirit and in *truth*⁶. We are told to desire truth because God desires truth, and that God *is* Truth. Seeking God and seeking truth are not sins. The intellectual pursuit of truth is the will of God for humankind.

When I realized that God expects humankind to explore, I became curious about his will for that exploration. What would God expect me to do if I ever learned an uncomfortable truth? And beyond God's expectations, I wondered: What would the interpersonal consequences of such a study be? Would I be blackballed for asking too many questions? Could I be ostracized for reaching the wrong conclusions?

Those thoughts were too uncomfortable to entertain, but I knew that I wanted to know more about what I was teaching the children in my Sunday school classes and the homeless men and women on the street. I needed to prepare myself for future conversations about eternal damnation. It was my responsibility to know more.

With great curiosity, I decided to pursue the study of Hell. I decided that if I could not find sufficient evidence to discredit my belief in Hell, then I would continue to accept Christianity's traditional teachings about the afterlife. But if I found good reason to reconsider my position, then I would do so. I knew that God was tough enough to withstand my questions—so I decided that I was going to ask them boldly, without holding back.

In the months that followed, I began to research the afterlife for myself. I hope you'll let down your guard for a short while and review the information with curiosity and objectivity.

2 *Finding the Beginning*

In the world of commerce, the chain of production begins with an idea, which leads to an invention, which leads to manufacturing, marketing, and eventually the marketplace. This process culminates when the consumer purchases the product. The purchaser is known as the *end user*, or the person who uses the product at the end of the production cycle.

As end users, most of us aren't as interested in the process of production as we should be. We don't usually know how our shoes were manufactured or where the materials for our car seats originated. We simply enjoy the benefits of the products we use.

However, there is a growing segment of end users who are researching the origins of the products they buy. Those who undertake such research will tell you that it isn't enough to buy products that have been wrapped in recyclable materials by the manufacturer. They want to dig deeper to find out if the animals involved were treated humanely and if the company's employees were treated well. They may even want to know if the manufacturer's suppliers used recyclable materials. These end users reach deep beyond the surface (or the wrapping) to make sure their choices meet the gold (or green) standard.

Like the world of commerce, the Christian religion is mostly a culture of *end users*. We enjoy the many beautiful elements of our faith, but are usually unaware of their origins. The average church member is unaware of how the Bible came into existence. We don't typically know the names of the church fathers (or what a church father is), or the difference between a Sadducee and a Pharisee. We don't usually know where our doctrines came from, or who was involved in deciding what would be orthodox and what would be considered heresy.

As religious end users, we read our Bibles through the lenses of our own modern Western experiences and cultures, instead of reading them through a first-century Eastern lens. We are interested in what our faith means to us *now* and what it will mean for us in the future.

I am proposing that we must reach beyond our modern doctrines about Hell to find out how they came into being. We must take a trip to Christianity's manufacturing plant and

examine the machines therein. In doing so, we must step out of the role of the end user and step into the role of the supplier's examination crew. We will examine the earliest components of the "Hell" concept and reconstruct them again. This will help us to decide if our current understanding of Hell is contextually accurate.

Journey to a Foreign Land

Like most Christians, I originally began my study of Hell by examining first century Jewish theology. I did this for two reasons:

First, I assumed that everything I needed to know could be found between the two covers of my Bible. My worldview didn't offer space for an ancient narrative that began outside my tradition.

Second, I believed the first century Jewish Christians passed their beliefs about Hell on to the early Church, and that the early Church passed their beliefs on to the Catholic Church. The Protestant Church, from my former understanding, carried on most of the beliefs held by the Catholic Church—and the modern Protestant Church to which I once belonged had carried on the tradition as well. However, during my research, I discovered that although the early Church is a good place to start, its resources only offer a shallow exploration of the topic.

Afterlife theories involving underworlds (or "Hells" as we currently understand them) actually predate Jewish thought, which means that a more thorough study requires us to ask where the first century Jews got *their* ideas. When we ask this question, we find that we cannot discuss first century Jewish thought without exploring the afterlife beliefs of the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible. (Judaism and the religion of ancient Israel were somewhat different.)

I further realized that in order to discuss Ancient Israel's views of the afterlife, I needed to explore the culture in which their beliefs were born. Theologians have long recognized that the Israelites did not exist in isolation, and that they were not always dominant players in their historical settings. They were a culture within a culture. They lived in real places with real people, and were subject to real cultural influences. Those places were Mesopotamia and Egypt; two ancient power centers with theocratic governments and deep-seated religious beliefs that are of great importance to the history of Israel.

The religious stories of Babylon and Egypt were so powerful and so culturally important that the Israelites crafted similar tales rival their neighbors. For instance, scholars have long marveled at an ancient myth in which a god created light on the first day, the "firmament" on the second day, the soil on the third day, followed by the heavenly bodies and humankind before resting at the end of his exploits. However, those scholars aren't reading the Bible.

They're reading the ancient Babylonian myth of the Enuma Elish which was written long before Genesis.

Throughout modern history, people have also studied the story of a worldwide flood sent by a deity to destroy everyone except one righteous man, a few other humans, and his meticulously-crafted boat. This man employed birds as messengers to tell him when the flood was over. However, the man in this story was not Noah. He was a mythological character named Ut-Napishtim, and his story is believed by many to predate the Noah story.

Additional parallels have been drawn between the Law of Moses and ancient Mesopotamia's Code of Hammurabi. Equally-striking resemblances exist between the Ten Commandments and a small section found in Egypt's Book of the Dead.

Israel has a long history of co-opting local ideas into its own understanding of the world. This should not be understood in a negative light. It is merely a part of what it means to live in a thriving culture. Just as globalization has changed what it means to be a citizen of the world in the modern era, culture-mixing was unavoidable in their world as well.

The Israelites' tendency to borrow existing myths about creation to build their own cultural identity shows us that they had real questions that stretched beyond their scientific capabilities. Much like us, the Israelites were curious about the issues that impacted their society, their families and their religions. This curiosity would have, of course, extended to their uncertainties about what happens to humans when we die. It was the Israelites' desire to understand the unknown and their urge to make sense of death that inspired their earliest theological explanations for the afterlife.

The Ancient Underworld

Contrary to popular Christian belief, the Israelites did not believe in any concept of "Hell" as we understand it today. They believed in a place called Sheol. The word *Sheol* means "the unseen place" or "place of the dead." This belief persists in many expressions of contemporary Judaism. Many Jews believe that each person (whether Jew or gentile) will undergo a purification in Sheol for 11 to 12 months (or less in some cases). After purification, souls are sent to live in eternity with the Creator. There have never been (and still aren't any) flames, devils, demons, or other ungodly spirits present in *Sheol* or the "place of the dead."

According to an article on Aish.com, Sheol isn't and wasn't a place of eternal punishment because "the Almighty's justice [would not be] served by punishing someone forever." God's justice would have been finite and appropriate, not overbearing and treacherous. One suggestion was that a punishment might've require the offender to stand in

the presence of God's unfiltered holiness and experience shame or embarrassment that we cannot fathom in the natural realm.⁷

Hades: The Man & The Myth

The concept of a torturous, demon-governed "underworld" was not popularized until around 400 years after the institution of the Jewish Law when Homer's myths about a god named Hades began to circulate. Hades, according to the ancient Greeks, was the "god of the underworld" and the brother of Zeus. His underground realm was named after him and was widely believed to be where souls went after death.⁸ Hades often fought with another god named Thebes who wished to free tortured souls from Hades' eternal captivity. Similar myths about a man named Tartarus began to circulate in 400 BCE. Tartarus also ran a scary underground abode for tortured souls, and yes... he named it Tartarus... after himself⁹.

It is important to note that the Jewish people maintained their beliefs about shadowy Sheol through the fourth century when Alexander the Great conquered Palestine. After the conquest, the Greek and Jewish societies merged into something called Hellenistic Judaism, a union that would last for 600 years. Although the Jews continued their minimal beliefs about the afterlife, Christianity (born in that Hellenistic society) did not. Christianity emerged in a society that was heavily influenced by Judaism and Greek myth.

The Jews and Hellenists split in around 200 CE¹⁰, but the influence of Hellenism on their world is evident in the Bible to this day. For instance, the influence of Greek mythology is can be seen in 2 Peter 2:4 which is where Paul talks about God sending angels to a gloomy "Hell". The word used for Hell translates to "Tartarus" in Greek. Appearances of the word "Hades" are found in the New Testament, and can easily be attributed to the Hellenistic influence that would have existed when those biblical documents were written. Coincidentally, the words Sheol and Gehenna were also translated to "Hell" in the Bible. (We'll review all of those verses in chapter three).

Life Imitates Dante's Art

Hell became a thing of immense interest and terror in the 14th century when an Italian poet weaved a wildly imaginative tale called *The Divine Comedy*. Divided into three parts, Dante's epic story took the reader on a guided tour through the morbidly frightening annals of Hell, purgatory, and paradise (labeled *the Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* respectively). Filled with blood, fear, and gore, the tale's "Inferno" seemed to have it all— unforgettable imagery, sinners begging for mercy, and yes, an eternal oven with flames blaring.

The printing press had not yet been invented, so copies of the actual book were rare. People heard versions of the story, but were unlikely and unable to compare Dante's ideas

about Hell to the Jewish writings about Sheol for themselves. Over time, myth and religion again became inextricably intertwined leaving the church with morbid stories about the many “levels” of Hell and the various kinds of torture that exist there.

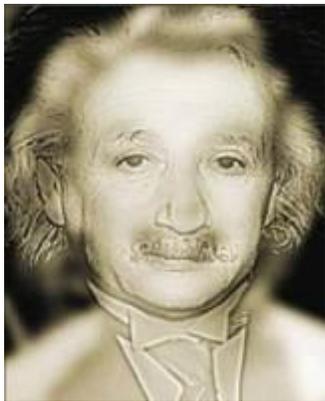
Around 200 years after the release of Dante’s inferno, the Protestant Reformation gave birth to a principle called Sola Scriptura (or “scripture alone”). Christians insisted on allowing their existing canon of the Bible to “interpret itself,” meaning that they didn’t want to use external sources to help them understand the Bible. They felt that Jesus alone could guide the Church through their interpretations of the scriptures.

In the 17th century, the King James Version became the translation of choice. The problem, however, was that the KJV Bible used the word “Hell” in place of “Hades,” “Gehenna,” “Tartarus,” and “Sheol,” making it literally impossible to know exactly what the writers meant, which references were literal, and which were figures of speech. The “Sola Scriptura” reformers were literally comparing one mistranslated word to another, compounding confusion, and developing faulty doctrines.

With that, an eternally fiery, extremely complex invention called Hell had infiltrated the Christian faith. This occurred despite ancient Israelite/Jewish teachings about Sheol and certainly without regard for what God may have thought about eternal torture. In many ways, we had built our first spiritual Frankenstein, and no one would fully understand the impact of our errors for many years to come.

For most Christians who believe in Hell, its complicated doctrinal history is not a convincing enough to read it as “myth”. I understand this. For most of us, theology is literally a life-or-death matter, and tradition cannot be easily dismissed. From that perspective, history is no match for the Bible interpretations that have been passed down to us by our predecessors. If you’re among those who are unconvinced, please don’t dismiss what you’ve read thus far. I will use the next three chapters of this book to expound upon the contextual meanings of the “Hell” verses. In doing so, I hope to renew your perspective on the concept of Hell. Open your mind and prepare to travel with me to Hades, Tartarus, Sheol and Gehenna.

3 *"Hades" In Context*



What do you see when you look at this picture? If you're close to the image, you'll see Albert Einstein, but from around 15 feet away, you'll see Marilyn Monroe.

I've decided to use this fun (and spooky) picture to demonstrate how our perspectives on the "Hell" verses have changed since they were first communicated nearly two thousand years ago. Jesus' audience was much closer to him spatially and culturally than you or I, and would have understood Him in a dramatically different way than any Western audience. Yes, the New Testament Jews would have had a visceral reaction to the original Greek words that are now translated as "Hell," but for reasons much different than the average Christian might.

I would like to use the next few pages of this book to change your perspective on several of the Hell-references in the Bible by revising your understanding of certain words and by challenging the expectations with which you approach the New Testament. My hope is that you will begin to read about "Hell" through the lens of the ancient Jews, and not that of the 21st century Christian church. With any luck, the "Hell" verses will begin to look as much like eternal torture to you as Albert Einstein looks like Marilyn Monroe.

Jesus, the Jews, and Hades

The word "Hell" appears 54 times in the Bible— 31 times in the Hebrew Bible and 23 times in the New Testament. The Hebrew Bible's references translate to "Sheol" which is the "place of the dead." As explained in chapter two, Sheol is and has always been understood by Jews as the soul's temporary place of purification before spending eternity with its maker. There are no demons, devils, or flames there. There are dozens of Hebrew Bible scriptures that

praise God for allowing our souls to emerge to his presence after descending to the depths of Sheol. (Many of these references can be found in the book of Psalms.)

What's interesting is that the word *Sheol* does not appear anywhere in the New Testament. This is because of the influence of Hellenism on Jews' language. The word "Sheol" was replaced with "Hades" in the minds and writings of first century Jews, as obviously shown in the following two comparisons from Young's Literal Translation:

COMPARISON #1

Original Hebrew Bible:

–For Thou dost not leave my soul to Sheol, Nor givest thy saintly one to see corruption.
(Psalm 16:10, KJV)

After Hellenistic Influence:

–Jesus' soul was not left to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. (Acts 2:31, KJV)

–Thou wilt not leave my soul to Hades, nor wilt Thou give Thy Kind One to see corruption.
(Acts 2:27, KJV)

You may have noticed that in this comparison, the New Testament writer has changed the word **Sheol** to **Hades**. This is more than merely a choice of wording. The spread of Hellenism, (of Greek thought and myth), had so pervaded the culture that it impacted the way people understood the underworld. For Christians, the concept of the afterlife had morphed from a dark void (Sheol) into a place governed by the Greek god Hades. The same shift is evident in the following verses:

COMPARISON #2

Original Hebrew Bible:

–Where thy plague, O death? Where thy destruction, O Sheol? (Hosea 13:14, YLT)

After Hellenistic Influence:

–Where, O Death, thy sting? Where, O Hades, thy victory?' (1 Cor. 15:55, YLT)

Exploring the Words of Jesus

In addition to its use in the Epistles, the word "Hades" is also used four times in the Gospels-- but again, I believe that we have misunderstood their intended meanings. (Note: Jesus probably didn't even actually say the word "Hades" as he is widely known to have spoken Aramaic and not Greek. But I won't go there today.) Let's explore the ideas about Hades as spoken by Jesus

in those four Gospel verses. First, we will examine two duplicate verses in Matthew and Luke which both say:

*“And you people of Capernaum, will you be honored in heaven? No, you will go down **to the place of the dead** (Greek: Hades). For if the miracles I did for you had been done in wicked Sodom, it would still be here today.” (Matt. 11:23, Luke 10:15, NLT)*

Some people believe that Jesus was telling all of Capernaum that they were going to be thrown into Hell after death. Others read this verse as a prophetic utterance about the future of an area that now lies in ruins. Regardless of what you may believe, there are three logical reasons why this verse isn't about a fiery, eternal judgment on Capernaum:

First, Jesus did more miracles in Capernaum than anywhere else in the Gospels. This means that despite His overall disappointment with that town, there had to be a few believers there. If Jesus destroyed all of Capernaum, wouldn't that also destroy the people who believed? And if he destroyed believers along with nonbelievers, would that jibe with Christianity's current beliefs about "personal" salvation? What does this mean for our current understanding of justice? Does it make sense when compared to what is currently taught about being personally "saved?"

Second, Jesus' words about Capernaum were consistent with what the Jews already believed and feared about Sheol. He told them that they would go down to the place of the dead, not into a place wrought with molten hellfire. This was a pronouncement of impending judgment-- or a threat that they would be cast into the world of the unknown, and the Jews fully understood what he meant.

Third, our minds are conditioned to add images to this verse that simply aren't there. Many Christians mentally insert a load of "end times" theology complete with infernos, smoke and judgment on the "unrepentant Jews" when reading the Capernaum judgment verses. A responsible, contextual reading of these words requires us to refrain from doing so. These verses, if they are to be taken literally at all, are about Sheol, and not modern Christianity's theological Hell. Let's examine another verse...

“And Jesus answering said to him, `Happy art thou, Simon Bar-Jona, because flesh and blood did not reveal [it] to thee, but my Father who is in the heavens. `And I also say to thee, that thou art a rock, and upon this rock I will build my assembly, and [the] gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:17-18, KJV)

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