

Hades, Tartarus and Gehenna



“Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen 18:25)

Hades, the abode of the dead, is not a place from which anyone has brought back an eye-witness account. Any knowledge about it comes from revelation and tradition, sources that, in the main, the modern world has rejected. The suggestion that Hades might be a real place at all is counter-cultural. Still, not to allow that there might be other kinds of knowledge than what science makes room for is to board up the windows.

Many people do not believe that anything spiritual happens after death: the sense of being alive comes from the electrical activity of the brain’s neurons, which somehow create an illusion of being conscious, and the illusion ceases when the activity ceases. Others – neither atheists nor firm believers – are less sure. Is the end of life really just a return to nothingness? If it is not, what awaits us? Theologians, who ought to know, are divided. Some hold that ‘hell’ (still a common word in discussion) is a place where the damned are or will be in constant torment, a divinely ordained, everlasting Auschwitz, to which, at the resurrection, even many victims of the earthly Auschwitz will find themselves awaking. Others hold that the torment will eventually end, after which its occupants will either be annihilated or admitted to heaven. Still others find it difficult to believe there is any such place.

The present discussion draws on what the Bible says on the subject, with some account taken of the traditions of the ancient Greeks and Babylonians. There are therefore copious reference to biblical texts. Looking them up for oneself should repay the effort. The biblical sources are diverse: some validate elements of oral tradition, some record insights communicated through visions or a voice, or through the Son of God while he lived amongst us, some report, in letter form, insights whose origin is not specified. The period from around 1900 BC to AD 100 was a time of special revelation in history, in the light of which man was to live until the Son returned.

Terminology

The places of the dead go by various names. The Old Testament, written in Hebrew, refers mainly to a place called *Sheol*, or ‘the pit’. Its New Testament equivalent is *Hades*, the word used when Peter quotes a Greek translation of a psalm referring to Sheol (Acts 2:27).

Abaddon appears only in the writings (Job, Psalms and Proverbs) and refers to the place that the Greeks called *Tartaros*, deeper than Hades. The New Testament term *Gehenna* renders the Hebrew place name *Ge Hinnom*, Valley of (the son of) Hinnom, immediately south of the walls of Jerusalem.

‘Hell’, a word of Germanic origin, owes much of its present meaning to theological commentary. Its connotations of demons, fire, damnation and torment have little basis in the biblical texts. Paintings and literary works, from Dante’s *Inferno* to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, have also added to the imagery. Commonly translating both Hades and Gehenna, the word is imprecise as well as emotive, and best avoided.

Sheol/ Hades

Sheol is the underworld, the place where the spirit goes when it leaves the body. Everyone goes there, the righteous and the unrighteous. According to Ecclesiastes, man suffers the same fate as the beasts: all have the same spirit, and all return to the dust from which their body originated, while their spirit returns to God. The dead are unconscious. ‘The living know they will die, but the dead know nothing. ... There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol.’ (Ecc 9:5, 10) They have no remembrance (Ps 6:5). However, the dead can be roused into consciousness on occasions (Isa 14:9) and can be summoned by witchcraft (I Sam 28:15). In due time, some among the dead will suffer torment (Lu 16:19ff). The ‘pangs of Sheol’ in Psalm 116 refer to the throes of dying rather than to what is experienced after death.

In the book of Numbers we read how certain men rebelled against Moses and Aaron. In the ensuing confrontation the ground under the rebels split apart and they ‘went down live into Sheol’ (Nu 16:33). Sheol was a region of darkness under the earth.



The rift that opened up in 2006 at Dabbahu, northern Ethiopia.

Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, likened her conceiving a child after years of barrenness to the resurrection of the dead (to which there are numerous references in the Old Testament). “Yahweh kills and

brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.” Death is a descent back into the dust (I Sam 2:8, Job 17:16). In other places it is associated with water (e.g. Job 26:5, Ps 88:6).

Hades is not the only abode of the dead. At the end of the millennium Hades gives up the dead under the land, and the sea gives up the dead that are in the sea (Rev 20:13). The sea is here the equivalent of the terrestrial underworld (Jon 2:2f).

When Christ tells Peter that he will build his church and the ‘gates of hell will not prevail against it’, the word is *Hades*, as it is when Paul quotes Hosea: ‘O death, where is your sting, O Hades, where is your victory?’ Christ, the firstborn from the dead, has ‘the keys of Hades and of death’ because he was without sin and gave up his life as a ransom, allowing him to enter Hades and rescue many from it.

Those who die in Christ are said to ‘sleep’ (I Cor 15:6, 18, Eph 5:14, I Thes 4:13), a metaphor for non-consciousness. Their state is the same as that of others who have died, but before God they have a different status: having accepted the Saviour, they have passed from death to life (Jn 5:24, 8:52). They are not resurrected individually and immediately but as one body on ‘the last day’. They will not go through a second death (discussed below) but will receive life in its fullness. The verb ‘die’ is never used.



The passage to the underworld excavated at Tel Mozan, Syria. The bones of dozens of sacrificed animals were found in the pit. Texts show that they were used to purify the supplicant (often the king) before he summoned up the spirits from below.

Abaddon/ Tartarus/ the abyss

Before ascending into heaven, Christ descended into the ‘lower parts of the earth’ (Eph 4:9), visiting there the spirits of those who had perished in the flood-cataclysm. Peter calls this lowermost region Tartarus (II Pet 2:4). In addition to holding the then world’s entire population, the prison also held the angels who had copulated with women (Gen 6:2, Jude 6) and their demigod offspring the Giants.

The forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of Christ’s crucified body was preached even to the dead. Despite their former failure to repent, they were granted, tens of thousands of years later, a second chance. Judged in the flesh just as he himself had been put to death in the flesh (I Pet 3:18), they were granted an opportunity to live with him in the spirit (I Pet 4:6). Death was not necessarily the end. At last it became comprehensible why mankind was not immediately terminated with Adam, and Eve still allowed to bear offspring under the same sentence. The gospel had retrospective effect as well as affecting future generations.

Paul too implies that Christ visited Tartarus, calling the place the abyss (Rom 10:9), the term used in the Apocalypse (*abussos* literally meaning ‘bottomless’). Christ descended deeper than Hades, so that, ascending far above the heavens, he might fill all things (Eph 4:10). Some responded to his message, for ‘when he ascended he led captivity captive’; he liberated them from their prison as first-fruits of his victory. They became ‘the firstborn enrolled in heaven’ (Heb 12:23). The festival of first-fruits, which took place on the day after the weekly sabbath following the Passover (Lev 23:9ff), the same day as that resurrection (Matt 28:1), was a

celebratory foreshadowing of this harvest (I Cor 15:20). Some were also released from Hades, including a number of Jews (Matt 27:53). The repentant thief on the cross was also promised an immediate place in paradise (Lu 23:43).

The abyss is the dwelling place of demons, visualised as connected to the world of the living by a shaft (Rev 9:1). Demons are depicted in the art of many ancient peoples, from Mesopotamia to South America. Their appearance is part human, part animal: for instance, the ‘scorpion men’ of Babylonia had a human head, the talons and hindquarters of a bird and a scorpion tail. In the Bible they are unfettered spirits of the antediluvian world come up from Tartarus. Having formerly had bodies, they look to take over the minds and bodies of the living. Even possession of a pig’s body is preferable to returning to the abyss. In the future they will suffer torment, as they are aware (Matt 8:29). The abyss is not currently the dwelling place of Satan. He is the ‘ruler of this world’ (Jn 12:31), cast down from heaven only as far as the earth’s surface (Rev 12:9). He prowls about like a roaring lion, looking for people to devour.

Tartarus is so named after the god, or angel, who keeps charge of this deepest region (likewise Abaddon is a place in Job 26:6 but a person in Rev 9:11). According to the Greeks, the supreme god in the beginning was Ouranos (or Uranus), a name that simply meant ‘Heaven’. He was married to Gaia (‘Earth’), at a time when there was no divorce between the domains: the God of heaven lived on earth. However, as in the traditions of other peoples, men became wicked and rebellious. Many of Ouranos’s sons, called Titans, were involved in their rebellion. Eventually a Titan named Kronos emasculated Ouranos with a knife and reigned on earth in his place. But he could not rest. Haunted by Gaia’s prophecy that one of his sons would overthrow him, Kronos swallowed his own sons as soon as they were born – including Poseidon and Hades – and imprisoned them in his stomach. It was to no avail. Unbeknown to Kronos, there was another son, Zeus, and when he reached manhood Zeus forced his father to vomit up his children. War broke out between the Titans headed by Kronos and the younger gods headed by Zeus. Great boulders (i.e. asteroids) crashed down from the heights of heaven and crushed the Titans. Sea and earth resounded with the clamour, the firmament groaned, torrential rain flooded the earth. Some men tried to escape to the hilltops but were overwhelmed by the waters. Only one couple, righteous and God-fearing, survived, floating in a wooden ark or chest, and eventually they came to land on Mount Parnassus. The defeated Titans were chained up in Tartarus, Poseidon was allotted the dominion of the ocean, and Hades (another god) was allotted the dominion of the underworld.

The parallels between the two traditions, Greek and Hebrew, are striking. Since the Greeks and Israelites were too remote from each other for borrowing to be plausible, and culturally too disparate, it must be that both traditions had the same root. Ouranos was the God of heaven, Kronos was one of his sons. In the Hebrew tradition the son assumed the form of a legged serpent (a dragon or lizard) and rebelled against his father. In consequence, his offspring (Gen 3:15; Jn 8:44, Eph 2:2) were destined to be at enmity with the primeval woman’s offspring, though eventually one of her descendants was to bruise his head. In the Greek tradition the dragon, called Typhon (or Python), was the result of Gaia mating with Tartarus. Zeus, whose name also meant ‘Heaven’, seemed to be the same deity as Ouranos, but he was a new ruler of the world, a son of Kronos rather than of Ouranos, one who falsely presented himself as having defeated the dragon long before the present age. The Titans – ‘the

former gods' in Hesiod's phrase – were brothers of Kronos, fellow sons of Ouranos. In order to have intercourse with women, they also had abandoned their proper places in heaven, and the Cyclopes were the giants born of their union (cf Gen 6).

Hebrew	Sumerian	Greek
Elohim (God)	Anu/Elil	Ouranos
Sons of Elohim (angels)	Anunnaki (first gods)	Titans
Pre-Flood men	Pre-Flood men	Pre-Flood men
Nephilim (giants)		Cyclopes
Serpent	Tiamat	Kronos
Seed of the Serpent	Qingu	Typhon
Seed of Eve	Marduk	Zeus
Sons of Elohim	Igigi (later gods)	Olympians
Angels imprisoned in the abyss	Anunnaki imprisoned in the underworld (Kur)	Titans imprisoned in Tartarus
Post-Flood men	Post-Flood men	Post-Flood men

There are also striking parallels with the traditions of the Sumerians and their successors the Babylonians and Assyrians (see table). In their view of the cosmos, heaven and earth each had three levels. The highest level of the earth was the land of the living, the middle level the world of the dead, and the lowest level the place where deities known as the Anunnaki were held. Before the cataclysmic battle with the dragon (Tiamat), the Anunnaki resided in heaven; thereafter they resided in the equivalent of Tartarus. The Sumerian ziggurats were edifices that simulated the different tiers of heaven and earth, with a stairway above ground leading up to the city of God and a shaft at the foot of the ziggurat connecting to the city of the dead. In later designs all six levels of the cosmos were incorporated into the tower, plus a seventh for Marduk, the Zeus-like saviour and king of kings.



Left: ziggurat at Ur, following the typical 3rd millennium design. Right: reconstruction of Nebuchadrezzar's ziggurat at Babylon, from the 1st millennium BC. The uppermost level was always occupied by the god who owned the city – Suen in the case of Ur, Marduk in the case of Babylon.

The stairway of the ziggurat also had two subsidiary stairways leading at right angles to the main one, so that, seen from above, the stairways formed a cross. Jacob saw something like a ziggurat in a dream when he journeyed to Mesopotamia to find a wife. A stairway (not 'ladder') led from earth to heaven, and on it angels of God ascended and descended, just as gods were believed to do in the polytheistic system. When Jesus said that his hearers would see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on himself, he was saying that his death on the cross would open up the way to heaven (Jn 1:51). It was an event of cosmic significance. Through him God effected the reconciliation of earth and heaven, so that all things might be united in him (Col 1:19f, Eph 1:10).

Geological history

These understandings may seem unreal from a vantage point that limits the cosmos to what is physical and measurable. We see only what our minds are willing to see, and the Sumerians, the Hebrews, the Babylonians and the Greeks saw things very differently. They believed that the world of gods and demons was as real as the visible, if not more so, and lived accordingly, sacrificing to them, invoking them, living in fear of them. In many parts of Asia, Africa and South America this outlook still prevails.

Nonetheless, belief in the existence of Hades and Tartarus is not incompatible with what science has discovered about the world. The cataclysm of which the traditions bear witness has its geological counterpart in the event which destroyed the earth at the end of the geological era called the Hadean. Whether the earth was populated then is beyond the reach of science, but we do know that it was eventually pulverised by asteroids ('boulders from the heights of heaven'), flooded by water and buried by erupting magma. The original world was subducted and became an underworld. In its place new continents formed. The fossils buried in sediments record the progressive recolonisation of the new continents by bacteria, algae, plankton, flora and fauna.

The earth before the cataclysm had three tiers: the land on top, beneath that a vast ocean called the deep, and beneath that, an initially undifferentiated interior whose temperature increased with depth. The subterranean deep – the 'abyss' in the Greek version – was the source of the rivers and springs; it kept the ground moist.

Over time, the energy released by thermonuclear fusion caused the interior to heat up and differentiate chemically into mantle and core, until the waters burst through the land (Gen 7:11). The world was thrown into chaos. Those who died and were buried in the ground before the cataclysm joined those who perished during it, as they entered an abyss now largely emptied of water and filled with magma. The Greeks called the reconstituted region Tartarus; modern geologists call it the aesthenosphere, the uppermost mantle beneath the present crust. It is truly bottomless – there is no sharp boundary between it and the mantle lower down. Meanwhile new land formed volcanically on top of the old. So the earth after the cataclysm also had three tiers: the crust, the mantle, and the iron core. Tartarus lay underneath the crust, Hades within it.

Obviously, although Tartarus and Hades have a physical location, they do not, as places of the dead, have a physical form. The angels and demons in Tartarus, the dead in Hades, are

invisible. The same is true of heaven, which as the dwelling place of God has no physical form. But it is still appropriate to say that heaven is above, Hades and Tartarus below (Eph 2:20).

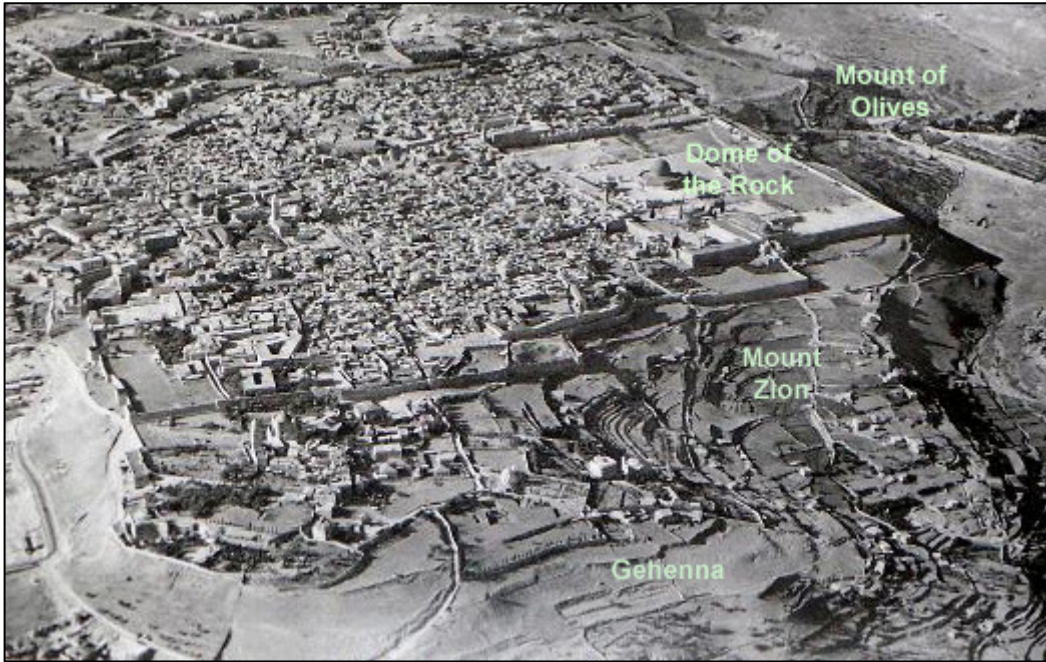
Pauline references to 'the heavenlies' (*ouranios*, the adjective used as a noun and often translated with the implied noun added, 'heavenly places') refer to heaven's different levels. Paul, who was once taken up through the heavenlies, implies that there are three, the highest being 'paradise', where God himself dwells (II Cor 12:2f). Only after Christ's victory was the Devil expelled from that garden (Lu 10:18, Rev 12:7-9). To repeat: there is more to the world than what is visible. The struggle in which his followers engage is not with mere blood and flesh, but with the world-powers of the darkness of this age, and these spiritual forces of evil are in the heavenlies (Eph 6:11f). Not all, but some of the sons of God (or 'angels') have always wanted power over human beings, even after some of them were thrown into Tartarus. Hence it was in Sumer (geographically, southern Iraq) that men first set up structures of government over their fellow men, and Sumer was where the polytheistic religions of the Near East originated; Babel, later named Babylon, was its capital city and the location of the first ziggurat. The spirits will focus their activity wherever there are structures of power and authority, in the church as well as outside.

Gehenna

The Valley of the son of Hinnom runs outside the capital city of the Messiah, immediately south of Mount Zion. Who Hinnom was, or who his son was, is unknown; the name predates Israel's conquest of Canaan and is introduced without explanation (Jos 15:8). In the 8th century Ahaz, king of Judah, made offerings there to the fire-god Molech and even burnt his sons as offerings. Molech, whose name meant 'King', was ruler of the demonic underworld, the equivalent of Abaddon. Two generations later Manasseh repeated the abomination. After the Babylonian Exile the valley became a place where garbage was burnt, along with the corpses of animals and criminals, if they were not simply left to rot. There were always fires burning somewhere in the valley.

Apart from one instance when James warned about the power of the tongue to do evil (Jas 3:6), the only person in the New Testament who spoke of Gehenna was Jesus himself. In relation to Hades he said little, for enough was already known. About the Valley of Hinnom he revealed things that the Old Testament prophets saw only dimly, concerning what this wasteland of refuse and death would become in the future. It would be a furnace into which the body would be thrown after the final judgement and in which the soul would be destroyed (Matt 5:22-30, 10:28). The sentence would be irrevocable: the maggots that destroyed the body in the grave would not die; the fire that destroyed the soul in Gehenna would not be quenched (Mk 9:44). He himself would be the one who pronounced sentence (Lu 12:5).

Various events were to precede his return to earth: famines and earthquakes, persecution, false prophets, the preaching of the gospel throughout the world, the darkening of the sun and moon, asteroids falling, the gathering up of the elect (Matt 24:3-31). After these things, he would return to Jerusalem in glory, and gather before his throne all the world's inhabitants that had survived the wrath of God (Isa 4:3, 13:12, 24:21-23, Matt 25:31-46, I Pet 4:5). Those who had worked to relieve suffering would be granted everlasting life; those who had cared



Aerial view of Jerusalem in the early 20th century.

only for themselves, would be condemned to ‘the everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels’ – both the angels imprisoned in Tartarus and the angels in heaven that had accepted sacrifices when men invoked them in polytheistic religions after the cataclysm. The place of fire was Gehenna, the actual valley south of Jerusalem, blazing like the coal fields of Jharia or the lava fields of Hawaii. John the Baptist said of him, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” The picture is one of destruction rather than torture, where what is worthless will be consumed (Heb 6:8, Phil 3:19). Similar imagery is employed in the parable about the vinedresser (Jn 15:6).

The Apocalypse also refers to Gehenna, using the term ‘lake of fire’. Again, it is a natural phenomenon, involving ‘sulphur’ (any volcanic matter). Smoke rises up from the abyss as from a great furnace (Rev 9:2), evoking both the smoke that went up from the valley around Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:28) and the smoke billowing up from Mount Sinai (Ex 19:18). Both places were associated with volcanic activity. Gehenna is also the furnace in Jesus’s parable about the final harvest, when his angels gather all who have practised immorality and throw them into the fire (Matt 13:42).

The lake does not exist at the present time. It will be kindled (Isa 30:33), and burn to the depths of Sheol (Deut 32:22). The foundations of the mountains will melt. On that day, Christ – ‘whose fire is in Zion, and his furnace in Jerusalem’ (Isa 31:9) – will stand on the Mount of Olives, as the hill is split in two from east to west (Zech 14:4). The fissure will destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock that occupy the site of the old temple. The surrounding hills and valleys will be levelled and Mount Zion, on which David built his city (distinct from the hill now called Mount Zion), will rise above them as the highest of the mountains (Isa 2:2, 40:4). It is here that the king of all the earth will set his throne and his temple, with Gehenna

bounding it on the south. He will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem (Zech 8:3). Year after year all humanity will come to worship him (Ps 102:16-22, Isa 2:3, Zech 14:16, Isa 66:23).

And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men 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.

When he warned about the horrific finality of Gehenna he was alluding to these concluding words of Isaiah. Some corpses would be in full view of those who were spared, the flames a continual reminder of what would befall those who did not acknowledge him.

Torment, but not forever

The Apocalypse warns:

If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the Lamb. The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.

What the beast is, and what its image is, will be apparent soon enough. The Lamb is Jesus Christ, the fire and sulphur the flaming valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem, being the resurrected saints of the old-covenant Israel and the new-covenant Church, comes down as a bride adorned for her husband – the dwelling place of God is a people rather than a building. Outside, in the darkness, 'where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth,' are 'the sorcerers and the fornicators and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone that loves and does what is false' (Matt 8:12, Rev 22:15). Again, this place of outer darkness is the lake of fire (Matt 13:42). Into it are thrown all workers of evil, including the beast and the false prophet, worshippers of the beast, and the Devil.

The judgement takes place at the beginning of the thousand years of Christ's reign, and a thousand years is the period during which the wicked suffer pain. Justice is administered on the earth and under the earth. At the end of this period, the Devil will be released. He will deceive the nations one last time and gather them for battle against Jerusalem. He will be defeated, and thrown into the lake, not now for isolation and torment but for destruction (Rev 20:10; the last part of this verse, in the future tense, looks forward from the writer's present time to the situation in 20:2). Then the lake itself will be no more, for the present heaven and earth will have passed away (Rev 21:1, marking the end of the paragraph).

The words translated 'forever and ever' are *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, literally 'to the ages of the ages'. The phrase is slightly ambiguous. Does it mean 'forever and ever', or for a duration as long as there are ages, which are necessarily circumscribed periods? Or perhaps it is an example of Hebraic hyperbole, to drive home the gravity of the warning (as in Matt 5:29, 19:24)? God is outside time and space; the ages are part of the creation (Heb 1:2, 11:3), and the old creation will not last forever. Nonetheless, God lives as if he were also in time and space, 'forever and ever,' and those who drink from the fountain of life and eat of the bread of

life will also live forever, *eis ton aiona*, heirs of the new creation (Jn 4:14, 6:51, 8:51). In Ephesians Paul speaks about the mystery of the gospel that was hidden since the beginning, literally ‘from the ages’ (3:9). The revelation of the mystery was ‘according to the purpose of the ages’ which he conceived in Christ (Eph 3:11), fore-ordained from the beginning. The present time is ‘the end’ (I Cor 10:11) or ‘consummation’ of the ages (Heb 9:26).

In the gospels the word *aion* always occurs in the singular. Commonly the reference is to ‘this age’, as opposed to the age to come. ‘World’ is a misleading translation. The ‘end of the age’ is not the end of the world but of the age of the gospel, prior to Christ’s return (Matt 12:32, 13:22, 39, 24:3).

The law of Moses provided for a slave in certain circumstances to be bound to his master ‘forever’, not meaning to all eternity but until one of them died (Ex 21:6). In Jeremiah Yahweh says that ‘a fire is kindled that shall burn forever’, referring to the day when the Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem’s palaces and Temple (15:14, 17:27, 52:13). Habakkuk speaks of the ‘everlasting mountains’ at the same time as prophesying that they will be scattered and levelled, foreseeing a time when Yahweh will shake the nations and every mountain be made low (Isa 40:4, Hab 3:6, Zech 14:10, Heb 12:26, Rev 16:18). Jude speaks of the angels being kept in ‘eternal’ chains, apparently ‘for ever’ (v 13). But it is forever ‘until [*eis*] the judgement of the great day’. Nor was the fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah ‘eternal’, as *aionios* is usually translated (v 7) – go to the land of Jordan and you won’t see any fire where the cities were (the south-eastern Dead Sea). As an example of what awaits the ungodly, they were turned to ashes (II Pet 2:6). It was the effects of the fire that were perpetual: the cities were never rebuilt. Thus, when the smoke from the burning of Babylon the Great goes up forever and ever (Rev 19:3), the sense is that it too will not be rebuilt. The penalty will be everlasting.

Everything depends on context. When the context is the everlasting life that comes from God, the meaning is ‘for all eternity’, and we know this because of the assurance that whoever accepts his salvation will never die. Where the context is torment in the lake of fire, the meaning is not necessarily ‘for all eternity’. The wicked servant is given over to the torturers ‘until he should pay all his debt’ (Matt 18:34). Other scriptures categorically state that the penalty of sin is death – ultimately complete destruction.

The condition of being alive is that of a body animated by spirit (Gen 2:7, I Cor 15:45), and the spirit is taken away when one dies. The logical opposite of eternal life is permanent extinction, not eternal life in another place (conceived of, somehow, as a state of being destroyed but never attaining destruction). Death occurs when body and spirit are severed, the one returning to the dust from which it came, the other returning to God (Ecc 12:7, Lu 23:46). That is what the word means. Some commentators draw a distinction between ‘physical death’ and ‘spiritual death’, as if the body could live apart from the spirit, but the Bible knows nothing of such a distinction. Pain may be suffered for a time, but ultimately there is only one kind of death: the loss of life.

According to some world-views, man’s soul is immortal. According to others, there is no such thing as soul or spirit: consciousness is an illusion of atoms. Again, the Bible supports neither doctrine (II Tim 1:10). In the beginning, God formed man’s body from the dust of the ground.

After God breathed into his nostrils he became a living soul. Like every animal, he had a dual nature, physical and spiritual, but what gave him life was the breath that came from God. Similarly with every generation: when an infant grows in the womb, it is God who forms the body and endows it with life (Ps 139, Ecc 11:5). Life is temporarily given. Although the first man was given the opportunity to become immortal, the serpent deceived Eve, and through her Adam. He internalised evil so that he knew what it was from within; his spirit became corrupt, so that he had to die. That was the logic of the penalty: once corrupted, the spirit could not be restored to a state of purity and guiltlessness. He needed a new, holy spirit. So, at the end of his life, the spirit was taken away and he returned to the dust. Terrible though the penalty was, it was not vengeful. Had everlasting torment been the consequence, it would have been a penalty that no substitutionary atonement could satisfy, 'for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world' (Heb 9:26). The justice of God would be a travesty of justice. But there is no mention of everlasting torment, either here or anywhere else in the Old Testament. Even scriptures that ask why the wicked prosper do not suggest that this is how the balance of justice will be righted.

The Apocalypse refers to two deaths, in the sense that there is an interval between the first and the second, not that they are different in nature. The paradox is that although 'the wages of sin is death' and therefore all must die, because all have sinned, nonetheless death is not necessarily the end. Adam did not immediately die. Nor do we. The judgement that now matters is not the judgement that God pronounced in the garden – on the flesh – but the judgement that follows death (Heb 9:27), relating to what we do in the years allotted to us in our state of reprieve. Death does not have to be the final sentence.

That is the point of the gospel. The judgement is brought forward into the here and now, so that the punishment for sin – torture and eventual extinction – can be anticipated, before it is too late. The penalty has been paid, so that anyone who repents and accepts Christ's atonement will not be hurt by the second death (Rev 2:11).

This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light.

John 3:19-21

For those who reject the offer of eternal life, the second death will merely be a confirmation of the first, of the penalty of Adam. The dead will be raised from Hades and judged according to their works. No one should imagine that he will be acquitted. 'Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trust in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in the injustice he has done he shall die.' (Ezek 33:13, Rom 2:4). The soul that sins will die (Ezek 18:4). It will forfeit the life it had on loan.

Thus there are also two resurrections. The first – not counting the resurrection of the first-fruits – will be when the seventh trumpet sounds and the dead in Christ are raised, at the beginning of the thousand years (Matt 24:31, 40, I Cor 15:22, 42ff, I Thes 4:16f, Rev 11:15, 14:16, 20:4). They are taken up to heaven until civilisation has drained the cup of the wine of the fury of the wrath of God. Then they will return with Christ to Jerusalem, to reign with him

in the cities of the world as kings and priests (Isa 35:10, Dan 7:18, Zech 14:5, Lu 19:17, I Cor 6:2, Col 3:4, Jude 14). The second resurrection will be when the rest of the dead are revived, at the end of the thousand years (Rev 20:5). Those who have done good will come out to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement (Jn 5:29).

Afterwards there will be a new heaven and earth, in which righteousness dwells (II Pet 3:13) and only righteousness. It will not be a dualistic universe, with good and evil each having their own territory, reconciliation forever uncompleted. The first heaven and the first earth will pass away. Having quashed every rule and every authority and power, Christ will deliver the kingdom to God the Father. 'For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.' (I Cor 15:25) The last enemy to be quashed is death. And when all things are subjected to him, the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things under subjection to him, that God may be all in all. The creation will have been gloriously reclaimed.