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## **Is the Valley of Hinnom an Image of Damnation?**

Many authors have described the Biblical pericopes related to damnation. They have analyzed the problem of hell, asking questions about its existence, about what can be found there, and about what souls experience in hell. Other researchers have put into question the eternity of hell, instead suggesting that it is transient and that God will redeem all people in the end. This article's purpose is not to focus on whether or not the reality of hell exists, but on where thinking about it came from. What image preceded thinking about hell? What was Gehenna, and how was it understood in both the Old and New Testaments?

There is no extended work on the subject of Gehenna in the scientific literature.<sup>1</sup> Vincente Vilar Huesco dealt with this topic cursorily in his article “La Gehena, el seno de Abraham y el juicio particular la literatura judía precristiana,” Madrid 1955. In addition to describing the geographical place of Gehenna, the Spaniard also focuses on pre-Christian

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<sup>1</sup> There is only brief information about the geographic location and significance of the Valley of Gehenna in Biblical dictionaries. However, there is not a single monograph that pertains solely to that valley and contains a detailed description of it.

texts related to the valley of Gehenna in which he found references to eschatological times, the eternal fire, and destruction.<sup>2</sup>

One can with increasing frequency hear that hell was invented by the Church as a tool of control used to frighten the faithful. However, it is worth asking if hell really is just the product of someone's imagination and the translators of the Bible wanted to fool the faithful by writing about it; if there exists any evidence in favor of the existence of hell; and if Jesus Christ spoke about eternal damnation and warned of the reality of hell.

The theological term "hell" means an eternal punishment for one's sins. In the Old Testament, the term *sheol* was used to refer to a reality similar to today's understanding of hell, while the Greek *hades* and *Gehenna* are used in the New Testament. However, neither *sheol* nor *hades* precisely describes the same state as *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was the ultimate place where one served one's sentence,<sup>3</sup> while *sheol* and *hades* were terms describing the place where the souls of the deceased were held.

According to the *Biblical Encyclopedia*, *sheol* is a Biblical term describing hell. It also means power, strength, a monster that can destroy the living, and the dark underground world where the souls of the deceased descend. In this last meaning, it is the "equivalent of Hades and Tartar."<sup>4</sup> However, the Old Testament *sheol* is not a place of punishment; only the New Testament *Gehenna* is such a place.<sup>5</sup>

Most frequently associated with Greek mythology, *Hades* was the name of one of the gods of the Greek pantheon; he was the god of the underworld. It was also the place where the deceased divided into three parts stayed. Tartar was the place of punishment for wicked deeds on earth; the damned there experienced eternal torments.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. V. Vilar Huesco, *La Gehena, el seno de Abraham y el juicio particular la literatura judía precristiana*, [in:] *XV Semana Bíblica Española*, Madrid 1955, p. 269–303.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. F. Rienecker, G. Maier, *Leksykon biblijny*, red. nauk. wyd. pol. W. Chrostowski, Warszawa 2001, p. 604.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Encyklopedia Biblijna*, red. P. J. Achtemeier, Warszawa 2004, p. 1183.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 375–376.

<sup>6</sup> "The concept of eternity as continuity without a beginning or end, without the passage of time, comes from Greek thought, not from the Bible" (F. Rienecker, G. Maier,

The translation of any literary text is a challenge, because never can what was written in the original language be fully reproduced in another. And such is the case with the New Testament term γέεννα. In most cases, this term is translated as “hell” in Polish. In recent years, translators have not tried to replicate γέεννα in their native language. Instead, they have left it as the original *Gehenna*. What is Gehenna? What significance does it have now, and what significance did this term have in the Semitic culture of Israel? This article seeks to concisely answer these and many other questions.

## 1. Geographic Location

The Valley of Gehenna (the Valley of Hinnom, the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom) is located in the center of the city of Jerusalem. A cemetery where Polish soldiers of World War II are interred is located on its slope. To the east of the city is Kidron Valley (also known under the name of the Valley of Josaphat<sup>7</sup>). Tyropoeon Valley (also known as the Central Valley and the Valley of Cheesemakers<sup>8</sup>) runs through its center. These are Jerusalem’s main valleys. The beginning of the Valley of Gehenna is near the Jaffa Gate to the west of the city. On the south side, Gehenna stretches alongside Hezekiah’s Wall,<sup>9</sup> which links up with Tyropoeon Valley and Kidron Valley around the Pool of Siloam near the Dung Gate. During Biblical times, the Valley of Hinnom stretched below the line of the city walls from the west to the southeast. The three most important valleys

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*Leksykon biblijny*, op. cit., p. 850).

<sup>7</sup> The Valley of Josaphat’s name probably has nothing to do with the Biblical King of Judah Jehoshaphat. The term could refer to the Biblical translation of the name Josaphat, which means “God has judged” (cf. *ibidem*, p. 328).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. D. Bahat, *Atlas biblijnej Jerozolimy*, oprac. wyd. pol. W. Chrostowski, przekł. E. Czerwińska, Warszawa 1999, p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> According to a map drawn in 1908 by Paton, which can be found in: D. Bahat, *Atlas biblijnej Jerozolimy*, op. cit., p. 14. According to other data, this wall was called the First Wall.

(the Valley of Cheesemakers, Kidron Valley, and the Valley of Gehenna) meet at one point near the Pool of Siloam.

In ancient times, many cities were built on hills. Thus valleys were located at the feet of cities. Cities were intended to better protect cities. As one can see, the topography of Jerusalem did not deviate from these rules of founding cities. In order to get to the city from the south side, one had to go through the Valley Gate or the Dung Gate<sup>10</sup> and, according to Sacred Scripture, also through the Potsherd Gate.<sup>11</sup>

However, the Valley of Gehenna also played another role, one that was not laudable and that cloaked its name in infamy for centuries: it was a garbage dump for Jerusalem's inhabitants. It was also a place of punishment for convicts. The bodies of the deceased who were denied a burial were thrown there. The *tofet* – the place where humans, usually children, were given as sacrifices to Moloch or Baal – was also located there.

## 2. Baal and Moloch: To Whom Were the Sacrifices Given?

Baal was probably a Phoenician deity, the lord of lightning and the sky. However, researchers are not in agreement as to if Baal was the function of some deity in the pantheon. It is not known who or what Baal exactly was, as in the Sacred Scriptures this term appears only in the context

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> There is one piece of information about this gate in the Sacred Scriptures; it is found in the Book of Jeremiah: “and go out toward the Valley of Ben-hinnom, at the entrance of the Potsherd Gate; there proclaim the words which I will speak to you” (Jeremiah 19:2). The prophet Jeremiah was to take with him the elders of Israel, buy clay vessels, and break them near that entrance, after which he would transmit the prophecy. This concerned the failure and destruction of the nation that had abandoned God and sacrificed children. Just as these vessels could not have been glued together, the Lord would destroy Israel. The prophecy also concerned the place known as *tofet*.

of the destruction of altars, Asheras,<sup>12</sup> and shrines devoted to Baal. We learn nothing more about him from the Bible.

The term Moloch, however, has been studied in greater depth. It was a deity worshiped in Semitic paganism as the ruler of the underworld. Nonetheless, this term causes many problems, because vowels are not used in the Old Testament texts. Depending on which vowels are added to the consonants, we receive many diverse meanings of this term. The most popular is “the king of humanity” and “the king of the city.” Worship of Moloch did not take place on the Temple Mount; it took place beyond the city walls in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom. The *Tofet*, where human sacrifices were made, looked like the skull of a corpse. Victims were thrown into its oral cavity, and smoke came out of its eye sockets and mouth. The victims were thrown in there live. Such human sacrifices were made in the Canaanite and Phoenician religions. The purpose of doing so was the desire to ask the gods for better harvests and blessings, moving away misfortunes, or to make the deities more benevolently inclined towards them.

The term *tofet* is used in four places in the Old Testament: 2 Kings 23: 10, Jeremiah 7: 31, and twice in Jeremiah 7: 32. The pericope from the Book of Jeremiah concerns lament over Jerusalem as a result of its idolatry. The previous verses of the prophet contain the Word of God about obedience to the Law and about the rejection of the Chosen People by God.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. History of the Valley of Gehenna

The Valley of Gehenna is mentioned several times in the Sacred Scriptures, although it is not given a major role in the holy books.

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<sup>12</sup> Ashera was the name of a goddess worshiped in Phoenician-Canaanite areas. She was the wife of Baal, the god of fertility. Her symbol was placed next to the altar for the worship of Baal, which often was a tree, wooden pole, or statue. The term *ashera* refers to the same goddess (as her name), but also to what she had presented and symbolized (cf. *Nowy leksykon biblijny*, red. F. Kogler, R. Egger-Wenzel, M. Ernst, red. naczelny wyd. polskiego H. Witczyk, tł. z jęz. niem. Ł. Siemieniec, Kielce-Freiburg 2011, p. 44–45).

<sup>13</sup> No equivalent of the term *tofet* appears in the New Testament.

Whenever the Old Testament refers to the Valley of Gehenna, it has the uninhabited geographical place known to all inhabitants of Jerusalem in mind. When, then, did this area receive such an ill reputation in Jesus' time? Why did Jesus' contemporaries associate the Valley of Gehenna with suffering? Why did Christ Himself use the term Gehenna in the allegorical sense? The answer to these questions can be found in the rule of certain kings of Judah.

After the Kingdom of Judah was separated into North and South Kingdoms in 931 BC, rulers who introduced idolatry occupied the thrones of both kingdoms. The Kingdom of Israel first fell victim to the ruler who rejected worship of Yahweh. King Ahab<sup>14</sup> and his wife Jezebel, who supported worship of these idols, should be mentioned here. It was because of them that worship of foreign deities also moved to the South Kingdom. In the Kingdom of Judah, the problem of idolatry and the giving of sacrifices to idols increased during the rule of Queen Athaliah (Ahab's sister or daughter<sup>15</sup> who married Jehoram, king of Judah), especially when Ahaz and Manasseh occupied the throne.<sup>16</sup>

During the rule of King Ahaz, son of Jotham, in 734–728 BC<sup>17</sup> the kingdom found itself in a difficult situation. Despite the warnings of the prophet Isaiah, he did not form an anti-Assyrian coalition together with Pekah, the king of Israel, and Resin II, the Syrian king. Furthermore, Ahaz's kingdom was harassed by the Edomites, Philistines, as well as by his would-be allies. The kings of Israel and Syria wanted to place another king on the throne of Judah, one who would accept their proposal. When Ahaz learned of this, he asked the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-Pileser

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<sup>14</sup> He ruled in 871–852.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Nowy Leksykon Biblijny*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, the worship of foreign gods had appeared in Israel before the kingdom was divided into north and south. This had occurred during Solomon's rule. His policy of increasing his influence was related to marrying the daughters of rulers with whom Solomon had entered into political contacts to avoid wars. Solomon's wives introduced worship of idols, so the king himself worshipped them. As a punishment, God declared that the kingdom would be divided.

<sup>17</sup> *Encyklopedia Biblijna*, op. cit., p. 12, says that Ahaz probably ruled in 735–715 BC.

for help. Ahaz offered him various good as well as a large sum of money in exchange. The help came. Wanting to buy the grace of the Assyrian king, Ahaz sacrificed his son. Because of this act, the king of Judah became a vassal of Assyria. In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus writes that the gifts for the Assyrian king came not only from the royal treasury, but also from the temple treasury. Ahaz banned making sacrifices to God in the temple. He has gone down in history as the first king who served Moloch and gave offerings of incense in the Valley of Hinnom.

Ahaz's successor, his son Hezekiah, ruled the kingdom in 728–699 BC.<sup>18</sup> His rule has been described very positively in the Bible. He opened, rebuilt, and cleansed the temple, thus renewing worship. At his command, priests had to throw all the vessels that were used for idolatrous worship into the brook Kidron. He asked them to make petitionary sacrifices for the royal family and the entire nation. He made Passover the most important holiday and Jerusalem the central place of worship. Hezekiah destroyed other shrines located in his kingdom.

Meanwhile, Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah and his successor in Jerusalem, did not follow in his father's footsteps and thus has been harshly judged in the history of Jerusalem. Manasseh ruled in 699–643 BC.<sup>19</sup> He did not have as much courage as his father and became an Assyrian vassal.<sup>20</sup> As king, Manasseh overturned all of his father's religious reforms; he placed statues of Baal and Asherah, and he introduced child sacrifices to the Valley of Gehenna in the place called *tofet*.<sup>21</sup> He permitted the worship of the gods from neighboring countries. The height of paganism, however, was the introduction and construction of altars and statues of foreign gods inside the temple. Manasseh participated in magic and practices of sorcery.<sup>22</sup> The Second Book of Chronicles mentions

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<sup>18</sup> Other sources give 721–693 BC.

<sup>19</sup> *Nowy Leksykon Biblijny*, op. cit., p. 463.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. S. S. Montefiore, *Jerozolima. Biografia*, przekł. M. Antosiewicz, W. Jeżewski, Warszawa 2011, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> In light of contemporary research, the *tofet* was a furnace in the shape of a skull.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu w przekładzie z języków oryginalnych. Pierwsza i Druga Księga Kronik*, tłum., wstęp i koment. H. Langhammer, Lublin 2001, p. 357.

that the king had a conversion before his death and demanded that only Yahweh be worshiped. The book also mentions his noble deeds, such as the strengthening of the walls of Jerusalem or the reorganization of the army (2 Chronicles 33: 12–20).

## 4. Religious Reform

The rule of Josiah on the throne of Judah took place in 641–609 BC. The son of Amon became king when he was just eight years old because his father had been killed. Josiah's foreign ventures have been obscured by his state reforms.<sup>23</sup> Josiah conquered neighboring countries. Meanwhile, renovation of the temple began under Josiah's rule. In 622 BC, the Book of the Law was found. Thanks to it, worship was reformed. The king demanded that all shrines on high places and altars be destroyed: "Josiah also removed all the shrines on the high places near the cities of Samaria which the kings of Israel had erected, thereby provoking the Lord; He did the very same to them as He had done in Bethel" (2 Kings 23: 19). "He did likewise in the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon, and in the ruined villages of the surrounding country as far as Naphtali; he destroyed the altars, broke up the sacred poles and carved images and beat them into the dust, and tore down the incense stands throughout the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem" (2 Chronicles 34: 6–7). Within Jerusalem's city limits, Josiah demanded that the images of the idols be burned in the Kidron Valley and expelled the idolaters from the temple. Meanwhile, the pagan priests were killed.<sup>24</sup> The king wanted to centralize worship in the Temple in Jerusalem; for that reason, he destroyed all other forms of worship across the country. Josiah demanded that all false priests be killed, while all priests from the generation of Aaron and Levi were brought to Jerusalem. All of Josiah's reforms were undertaken under the leadership of the prophetess Huldah and were related to the prophets Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Nahum, and Habakkuk.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Encyklopedia biblijna*, op. cit., p. 419.

<sup>24</sup> S. S. Montefiore, *Jerozolima. Biografia*, op. cit., p. 45.



Another one of Josiah's successes was the holiday of Passover, which became a pilgrimage festival. From that point on, sacrifices of lambs were offered in Jerusalem. Previously, the holiday was a family holiday celebrated in homes and local shrines. As 2 Kings 23:21–23 notes, the first Passover celebration was celebrated during the eighteenth year of Josiah's rule. Then, the ruler dedicated a large number of animals to be sacrificed. Following the king's example, the princes did the same.

## 5. Jesus Christ and Gehenna

The term *Gehenna* (γέεννα) appeared only in the Old Testament for the first time. Previously, other names were used to describe the area, including: the Ben-Hinnom Valley, Ben-Hinnom, and Ge-Hinnom. The name comes from its first Canaanite owner.<sup>25</sup> The term גֵּיאַ בְּנֵי-הַיְנוֹם *ge wen-hinnom* used to describe the Ben-Hinnom Valley ten times in the Old Testament. This is always the name of an area outside the walls of Jerusalem, the description of an ordinary valley that had no significance to the city's inhabitants. The valley came to have ill repute only during the king's rule. Even the prophet Jeremiah cursed it (Jeremiah 7, 11; 9, 6; 32, 35). After a certain point, the term *Gehenna* came to be used to describe a place of punishment and damnation.

In the New Testament, the term γέεννα occurs twelve times, eleven of which are in Jesus' own statements. It is used once in the Epistle of James. When talking about Gehenna, Jesus never has the geographic place in mind. He warns His listeners against committing sins that may lead one to Gehenna, to the eternal fire, because from the days of the kingdom, especially starting with the rule of Ahaz, the Valley of Gehenna was associated with shame and with Israel's rejection of the one God, because it was that king who sacrificed his child to Moloch.

The Gospel in which Jesus says the most words related to damnation and the fires of hell is ascribed to St. Matthew. In the pericope Matthew

<sup>25</sup> *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu w przekładzie z języków oryginalnych. Pierwsza i Druga Księga Kronik, op. cit., p. 325.*

5:22–30, the term γέεννα appears a total of three times. This text is found in the Sermon on the Mount, just after the eight Beatitudes and the instructions that Jesus had given to His disciples. Next, Jesus explains the Fifth and Sixth Commandments. It is here that He warns against damnation and the fire of Gehenna. According to Jesus' words said while describing the Fifth Commandment, everyone who will be angry or insult one's neighbor will be answerable to a court. Meanwhile, he who calls his neighbor "Raqa" will be punished with fiery hell (a fiery Gehenna).<sup>26</sup> After these harsh words, Jesus instructs His listeners to make amends with their opponents in order for them to not be judged by their opponents. The judgment and earthly punishment that Jesus speaks of is related to judgment and the final punishment. First there will be a judgment, and then a court will issue a verdict, and then the person under question will be thrown into prison. A court, the equivalent of the Sanhedrin in heaven, and punishment, or hell,<sup>27</sup> awaits him who makes transgressions. In this case, Jesus uses a qualitative movement: "from an earthly and human court in the direction of God's eschatological court."<sup>28</sup> This is suggested not only by an earthly punishment and broadly understood anger, but also by a punishment after death.

Jesus warns of the fire of Gehenna in relation to the Sixth Commandment twice. Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. In Jesus' time, adultery was subject to the death penalty. One spoke of adultery when a woman was married (thus single) because she violated her wedding vows. A man who betrayed his wife did not destroy his marriage, but the woman's marriage. For this reason, Jesus tightens the Sixth Commandment. When He speaks of looking at a woman lustfully, He could have the destruction of a neighbor's marriage

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. C. S. Keener, *Komentarz historyczno-kulturowy do Nowego Testamentu*, red. nauk. wyd. pol. K. Bardski, W. Chrostowski, przekł. Z. Kościuk, Warszawa 2010, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> *Ewangelia według świętego Mateusza*, part 1: *Rozdziały 1–13*, wstęp, przekł. z oryg., koment. A. Paciorek, Częstochowa 2005, p. 222 (Nowy Komentarz Biblijny. Nowy Testament, 1.1).

in mind.<sup>29</sup> That is why Jesus adds that if an eye or any body part is the source of sin, it should be removed: an eye should be plucked or a hand should be cut off and thrown off: “It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go up to Gehenna” (Matthew 5:29b). Jesus implores that we get rid of everything that leads us to sin, even if that thing is very valuable.<sup>30</sup> Jesus also speaks of the need to cut off one’s hand or leg and to pluck one’s eye out in Matthew 18:8–9 in the context of scandalizing children. The punishments of dismembering body parts or plucking one’s eyes out were commonly known and applied.<sup>31</sup>

The noun γέεννα appears once more in Matthew 10:28. This time, the term is not used as a caution against committing sins, but within the context of Jesus’ instruction for there to not fear the death of the body, only the death of the soul and God, Who can send souls to the eternal fire, to hell. The whole pericope in which the term γέεννα is used concerns courage during the persecutions of Jesus’ disciples. For Jesus, the term “death” means above all “death of the soul.” For Him, death was but a “dream” if the soul of a deceased person was pure and without sins that would condemn one to hell. Meanwhile, whoever lives in mortal sin is a dead person for Jesus, someone who is not alive and who condemned himself to eternal damnation to the fires of Gehenna. The term γέεννα has such a meaning in this place. Fear is to concern God only if someone sins and rejects Jesus, not acknowledging Him before other people (Matthew 10:32).

The last fragments of the Gospel according to St. Matthew (Matthew 23:15–33) in which the noun γέεννα appears are a warning to hypocritical, two-faced people. In both of these fragments, Jesus addresses the Pharisees, knowledgeable about Scripture. As the teachers of Israel, they

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Ewangelia według świętego Mateusza*, part 1: *Rozdziały 1–13*, op. cit., p. 226.

<sup>30</sup> In the understanding of the law at the time, the right side of the body was considered to be more important than the left. It is for this reason that Jesus here refers to the symbolic right side (right eye and right hand), in order to present drastic measures and radicalism in disposing of everything that can lead to sin and thus to the fire of Gehenna.

<sup>31</sup> *Słownik współczesnego języka polskiego*, red. nauk. B. Dunaj, Warszawa 2001, t. 2, p. 568.

seek to win over pagans.<sup>32</sup> However, when one person already becomes a co-religionist, they make him or her more deserving of the fires or hell than he or she were before going in the direction of their teachers. “Jesus exposes an upsetting contrast. The proselyte does not become a son of the kingdom, but instead a son of Gehenna (the expression ‘son of Gehenna,’ a person deserving of Gehenna, is typical of Judaism.”<sup>33</sup> How did this happen, and why did the Pharisees make their new believers more deserving of hell? The Evangelist did not provide us with a solution to this puzzle. Knowing the Pharisees’ behavior, one can speculate why Jesus judged them so harshly. According to Antoni Pacierek, the problem was that those who converted to Judaism became more zealous and fanatical in professing the faith than those who had converted them. Such an interpretation of the Law caused them to break with their former lives, including with their family. Their zealousness required of them complete obedience to the ritual Law.<sup>34</sup>

Next, Jesus speaks of the killing of the prophets by the ancestors of the Pharisees and those versed in Scripture who now decorate and worship the tombs of the killed: “Thus you bear witness against yourselves that you are the children of those who murdered the prophets; now fill up what your ancestors measured out! You serpents, you brood of vipers, how can you flee from the judgment of Gehenna?” (Matthew 23 : 31–33). By saying these words, Jesus predicted the future acts of Israel’s leaders. He predicted an unjust trial and His own death to which the Pharisees and scholars contributed. These words predict the future of Jesus, who shared the fate of prophets who lived before Him, Israel’s religious leaders who were deprived of life. Jesus heeded his listeners’ attention to a greater responsibility of those who should lead others to God.

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. przypis do Mt 23, 15 w: *Biblia Tysiąclecia. Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu w przekładzie z języków oryginalnych*, oprac. zespół biblistów polskich z inicjatywy benedyktynów tynieckich, wyd. 5, Poznań 2012.

<sup>33</sup> *Ewangelia według świętego Mateusza*, part 2: *Rozdziały 14–28*, wstęp, przekł. z oryg., koment. A. Paciorek, Częstochowa 2008, p. 404 (Nowy Komentarz Biblijny. Nowy Testament, 1.2).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 404.

In St. Matthew's Gospel, there is one pericope in which all the uses of the term *γέεννα* in that book cumulate (9: 42–48). Like Matthew 18: 6–11, this text concerns scandal conceived in various ways: when one becomes the source of sin for another faithful person, and also when body parts become the sources of sin for a person. Jesus advises to get rid of one's hand, foot, or eye if it were to be the source of sin.

Of course, one can ask if Jesus really wanted the mutilation of a person's body. Certainly, He did not. After all, Jesus treated the human body with respect; He healed and resurrected people. Thus one can conclude that He was opposed to the doing of any harm, to the mutilation of oneself or of one's neighbors.<sup>35</sup> If Jesus had thought otherwise, then He would have tolerated the judgment and stoning of a woman who was found to be guilty of adultery (John 8: 1–11). And Jesus not only didn't permit lynching; He also absolved the woman of her sins. These statements are of a hyperbolic nature; their purpose is not to encourage anyone to mutilate him or herself, but instead to radically cut oneself off from sin and follow Jesus, who summons us to conversion and respect of the Mosaic Law in a new, deeper way.

## Summary

“The name *geenna*, from the Hebrew *gê-hinnôm* (the Valley of Hinnom located to the south of Jerusalem; today's Wadi er-Rababi), is described in the New Testament as a place of fire where heathens will be thrown after the Final Judgment. Thus Gehenna refers to hell.”<sup>36</sup>

Several facts concerning the Valley of Gehenna and explaining why the regions to the south of Jerusalem were not seen in a positive light were explained on the basis of New Testament texts. Idolatry, which spread in the ninth century before Christ; the sacrificing of children; the

<sup>35</sup> Bliźnim w nauczaniu Jezusa jest każdy człowiek. Wyrazem tego jest przypowieść o miłosiernym Samarytaninie zawarta w Ewangelii według św. Łukasza 10, 30–37.

<sup>36</sup> *Nowy Testament. Ewangelie i Dzieje Apostolskie. Tekst z komentarzem*, oprac. G. Vigini, przekł. komentarza T. Truś, Lublin 2000, p. 56.

unrelenting flame after the victims; the disposal of the bodies of people who were denied a burial; the disposal of garbage (which maintained the fire in the valley): all this has become symbolic of the reality of hell. Presently, the Valley of Gehenna has been cleaned of the past tragedy of children and the condemned, and there are no traces of the past throwing away of trash. However, the place's ill reputation has remained, because nobody builds any residences or commercial buildings there. It looks as if the place were still cursed.

The Valley of Gehenna, identified with hell, and the Valley of Josaphat, considered a valley in which God's judgment will take place, meet near the Pool of Siloam. This fact is also interesting for theological reasons: Jesus prophesied that during the Last Judgment God would separate the just from the unjust like the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:32) and will condemn those without mercy to the eternal fire (Matthew 25:41, 46). According to the beliefs of the Israelites that would occur in the Valley of Josaphat, and such a punishment would be eternal damnation in the Valley of Gehenna.

## Abstract

### Is the Valley of the Hinnom an Image of damnation?

The Valley of the Hinnom in the Old Testament always referred to a place south of the city walls. After the sacrifices of children made to Molech, this area was cursed. The people began to throw garbage and dispose of the bodies of convicts there while un fading fire burnt them. Unpleasant and acrid smoke constantly hovered over this area. The teaching of Jesus of Nazareth changed the meaning of the term Gehenna. Jesus used it to bring people to the reality of damnation. He pointed to the need for one's radical turning away from evil and sin in order to avoid this punishment. The valley of disgrace has become thus the image of eternal hell in Jesus' preaching.

## Keywords

Gehenna; γέεννα; valley; sacrifices of children; hell; eternal damnation

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