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Hell

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Introduction

The mention of hell usually invokes imagery of a fiery place, below the earth, in which the wicked are tortured for eternity. Although this dominant model of hell owes much to the history of interpretation of Jewish and Christian scriptures, the reader of the Bible is hard-pressed to locate this specific depiction of hell in the Bible itself. There are a number of reasons for this apparent paucity of references to hell in the Bible. To begin, the concepts of the abode of the dead in ancient Judaism (e.g., Sheol, the Pit, Abaddon) did not refer to a lively afterlife per se, and these were not places in which a person received rewards or punishments. Instead, many of the ideas about the abode of the dead in the Hebrew Bible depict it as a generally unpleasant place in which all departed persons reside in a kind of shadowy existence. During the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, new ideas about the afterlife begin to develop within Judaism and Christianity, for a number of reasons. In particular, Hellenism allowed for greater exposure to ideas from other cultures. The social and political pressures of this period also led to internal developments within Second Temple Judaism, including the development of new genres of literature that addressed the changing concerns of ancient Judaism. The New Testament documents reflect a time period in which the Judeo-Christian concept of hell was in flux, containing conceptual breadth because of the dynamic cultural climate in which they were written. For instance, the association of eternal punishment with fire and torment emerged within the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature of the Hellenistic period. As a result of this development, the extent to which a New Testament text engages the idea of hell as a fiery place of punishment is often determined by the author's apocalyptic outlook. Investigations into the study of the topic of "hell" in the bible deal with the constellation of Hebrew and Greek words that are translated as "hell." Scholars are not only attentive to the way these words are used in the biblical texts, but also to the relationship between the ancient Jewish and Christian uses of these terms and the correlative concepts in surrounding cultures. In order to trace the history of the idea of hell within Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, research also considers the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha that discuss eternal punishment.

General Overviews

There are a number of general overviews that treat the topic of hell. The following representative works each offer some discussion of the relevant biblical texts in the course of their historical or theological overviews. Bremmer 2002 and Segal 2004 each treat the topic of hell within a larger conversation about the historical development of the concept of the afterlife. Despite their wide-angle lens, both give detailed treatment to the role of biblical texts within that history. Bernstein 1993 and Minois 1991 provide diachronic historical analysis and are focused more specifically on the topic of hell. Avery-Peck and Neusner 1995 and Nicklas 2010 are collections of essays that include treatments of specific texts or particular historical issues in the study of the afterlife. Vorgrimler 1993 also gives a diachronic historical view of the concept of hell, but it does so from the perspective of a systematic theologian, and is attentive to theological issues. Seymour 2000 deals with philosophical and theological tensions between the concept of eternal punishment and the theistic traditions in which they arise.