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The Concept and Purpose of Hell: Its Nature and Development in West Semitic Thought

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Abstract

A number of currents of thought gradually coalesced into the Judaeo-Christian conception of “hell.” This article attempts to relate them. The earliest traceable ideas involve a disembodied, subterranean existence of the common dead, or in exceptional cases total annihilation. Deceased kings were deified and continued to be involved in the affairs of the living, as in the Ugaritic funeral and *kispum* text KTU 1.161. This was parodied in Isaiah 14, which also indicates that such a belief was current, if criticised, in Israel-Judah. The theme of cosmic rebellion, wrongly traced to text KTU 1.6 i 43–67, actually emerged in such passages as Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28 and post-biblical derivative texts. The arrogant royal figure of such passages merged with the developing figure of Satan. The tradition of child sacrifice in Israel-Judah, performed at the *tophet* in the Valley of Hinnom, also contributed to the geography of hell in its Greek form *Gehenna*.

Keywords

annihilation, child sacrifice, fallen angels, Gehenna, hell, Sheol, theodicy

The theme of this issue, “the uses of hell,” suggests a utilitarian basis for the growth of conceptions and beliefs concerning the hereafter, as though an unconscious moral imperative underlay them. I suspect, however, that a variety of motives, certainly largely unconscious in origin, is to be discerned in the history of the idea, and the notion that the place, once conceptualized and thus reified in the minds of the ancients, could be put to good use in the inculcation and enforcement of social mores was more probably an unintended consequence than a driving force. There is also reason to think of a number of independent motifs, coalescing in the final Judaeo-Christian conceptions of hell. Each

contributed its own functional or purposive aspects, and the present paper seeks to identify them and assess their contribution to the whole.

When we examine the evidence from West Semitic religion, to which I shall largely limit my discussion for practical purposes, it appears to correspond very closely in terms of its broad architecture to similar attitudes and conceptions from the surrounding region — Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia (and it is even worth asking whether we have here a pan-Mediterranean tradition with local variations: there was certainly early cross-fertilization of ideas, accompanying the widespread trade networks already attested by the early second millennium) — we find that the cosmos was generally imagined to be three-storied in construction. Even later multi-storeyed systems were only elaborations of the simpler model. In this structure, a disc-like habitable world divided the upper realm of sky and heavens (populated by the stars and weather systems, and their controlling deities) from the subterranean zone (source of rivers, the foundations of the mountains, and the dwelling place of the dead and of the infernal divine powers associated with them). The whole spherical form was embraced by the cosmic deep, itself conceptualized in almost amniotic terms.¹ In some variations, such as that exemplified in the Babylonian world map, to which Nanno Marinatos refers in considering early Greek thought, the realms of the dead appear to have lain *beyond* the ocean.

It is worth remarking that we should not look at our scraps of evidence as proofs of the canonical status of the various images used: for all we know, much of the surviving material represents speculative and exploratory ideas, always in a state of flux and development. And “hell” in the late Christian sense of the term, with everlasting fire, appears only towards the end of the process outlined here.

Creation was achieved according to a number of metaphors, perhaps the most spatially explicit being that of the *Chaoskampf*, exemplified by the *Enuma Eliš* narrative from Babylon, in which the boundaries of the cosmos were determined by the shape of the dismembered cadaver of

¹) For a thorough survey of the broad structures and metaphorical representations of the underworld in Ugaritic and Israelite thought see Tromp 1969. For a critique of a perceived tendency to see the *Chaoskampf* at every corner see R. Watson 2005, and for critique in turn of this, see Wyatt 2008. On cosmology in general see Wyatt 1996:19–115; 2001:53–157.

Tiamat. The merest echo of this persists in the account of Genesis 1, where the term *bārāʾ* (commonly translated “created” but retaining the sense of cutting asunder) hints at the original use of a sword to accomplish the divine purpose. Ugarit has not thus far provided an exemplar of this myth, though the so-called *Baal Cycle* (KTU 1.1–6, 10–11) is an example of the application of various motifs from the tradition to royal ideology (Wyatt 2005:151–89). But the Ugaritian is broadly in line with the biblical evidence. For our ulterior purpose, it is worth noting that the construction of the underworld as an integral part of the overall “cosmos” from a prior order of reality which in Mesopotamia at least was divine,² has important implications for understanding it as equally integral to any theological assessment of the nature of the various stages of human experience, including death and its sequel. That is, the existence of death and the underworld was factored into the construction of the world, and not conceived of as a later development, something whose existence could be called into question, as in later thought (e.g. Genesis 3, a fairly late composition in the Old Testament, in which death appears to enter into a previously immortal world).³ The tendency of much modern biblical scholarship to deny this “pagan” conceptual framework is unfortunate.

The *post-mortem* survival of human beings in the underworld in ancient thought was broadly homogeneous in the second millennium, with the sole clearly-documented exception of Egypt, where the idea of the judgment of the dead was already attested in the third millennium Pyramid Texts, from the fifth and sixth dynasties, as a well-established fate from which the king alone was exempt.⁴ In Mesopotamia, Ugarit, Israel and Greece, a shadowy wraith-like existence was endured, in which the deceased were likened to birds, or to people asleep, who would resent disturbance and interference from the living. The important feature is that this bare existence was common to all men, with the apparent exception in West Semitic thought of kings, who, perhaps under the cultural influence of Egypt, could look forward to some kind of divinity, as witnessed by the *Rapiuma* of Ugarit and their Israelite

² And Greece too, according to Hesiod, *Theogony* 119 (Tartarus), 123 (Erebus), 361 (Styx), 455 (Hades).

³ This is only explicitly so with reference to human beings.

⁴ See for instance PT 270, 486, spells uttered by the king.

counterparts the *Rephaim*.⁵ Dahood's valiant attempt to discern a beatific afterlife not only in the Hebrew Psalms,⁶ but in the older Ugaritic literature, is to be considered a magnificent failure.

Descriptions of the underworld and of its experience in antiquity were subject to ambiguity in the human reaction, ranging from dread to acceptance, and attempting to control the dimension by the application to it of metaphors drawn from the land of the living (for example, it was a city, a kingdom, with implications of order and justice, and so forth). Resignation seems to have been the overall assessment of most of the evidence, drawing attention to the few instances in which a protest was implicit in the depiction of abnormal deaths. Here are two examples of such a qualification, drawn respectively from Ugaritic and Hebrew literature: a dreadful fate (annihilation!) is the consequence of a dreadful crime.

- 1) Aqhat has dared to defy Anat, the goddess of war and hunting, by refusing her his bow, which she covets. He is given short shrift:

As Aqhat sat down to ea[t],
 the son of Danel to feed,
 above him (some) falcon[s] hovered,
 a flock of hawks[s] was watching.
 [Among] the falcons Anat hovered;
 above [Aqhat] she placed him.⁷

He hit him twice on [the skull],
 three times above the ear.
 He po[ured out] his blood [like] a murderer,
 like a slaughter[er (he brought him) to his knees].
 [His] life-breath went out like the wind,
 [like spittle] his vitality,
 as (his) dying breath from [his nostrils].

Anat [watched?] as his pulse stopped,
 [she looked on? as] Aqhat [died],
 and she wept for the ch[ild of Danel]:

⁵) For discussion see Rouillard 1995, 2005; Wyatt 2009 chapter 3.

⁶) Dahood 1981:XLII–LII. Cf. the later attempt by Spronk 1986.

⁷) Anat's hired assassin Yatipan.

“I understand
 that it was on account of your bow that I smote you,
 [and because of] your arrows that I st[ruck]⁸ you!”
 And the birds disappeared [].
 ...
 [The bow of Aqhat] came down into the midst of the waters;
 [the arrows of the hero] fell into the depths.
 Shattered was the bow [of Aqhat the hero²],
 shattered was “Precious,” [the bow of the son of Danel].
 Virgin Anat [came back²],
 [the Beloved of the Powerful One] returned.
 She picked up the quiver
 [] in his hands,
 as a singer a lyre in his finger<rs>.
 Like a chisel was her mouth:
 her teeth seized (him)
 and she devoured his [en]tails².
 She cleft him like the heart of a terebinth,
 and cut the cadaver in two.
 She divided his cadaver;
 She dismembered Aqhat.
 “He was put down like a mighty serpent,
 Like a huge viper in a sheepfold,
 (like) a dog deserving a stick I smote him.
 Now because of his bow I smote him;
 on account of his arrows I certainly struck him,
 yet his bow has not been given to me...”
 (KTU 1.18 iv 29–41, 1.19 i 1–16; Wyatt 2002:286–93, modified)

Here, if anything, is a fate worse than death visited upon Aqhat. We do hear later that his father Danel recovered the dismembered scraps of his corpse, and buried him. But for a moment, he was threatened with utter annihilation. And this is to be seen against the immediate context, in which Anat had offered him immortality of a new kind in exchange for his bow, which he had rejected out of hand as a preposterous notion.⁹

⁸) For this rendering cf. Wyatt 2007:157 and n.5, following the insight of W. G. E. Watson 2004.

⁹) KTU 1.17 vi 25–38:

- 2) A composite narrative in Numbers 16 describes the death of a group of dissident priests, who had challenged Moses' authority.¹⁰ The climax of the second story (Numbers 16:31b–32a, 33–34) ends thus:

Then the ground beneath them split open; and the underworld opened its mouth and swallowed them and their families. . . . And they and all who were with them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the community. And at their cries all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, "We do not want the underworld to swallow us!"

The implicit personification in the mouth metaphor applied to the "underworld," or "earth," is to be noted. "Belial" (usually construed as "Worthlessness": *b'li ya'al*) was a name of the underworld. Here the verbal form *bāla* ' is used of the mouth of the underworld, suggesting

"Ask for life, O hero Aqhat:
 ask for life and I shall give (it) you,
 immortality and I shall bestow (it) on you:
 I shall make you number (your) years with Baal:
 With the son of El you shall number months.
 'Like Baal he shall live indeed!
 Alive, he shall be feasted,
 he shall be feasted and given to drink.
 The minstrel shall intone and sing concerning him.' "

[And she] said to him:
 "Thus shall I make Aqhat the hero live!"

But Aqhat the hero replied:
 "Do not deceive me, O Virgin,
 for to a hero your deceit is rubbish!
 Man, (at his) end, what will he receive?
 What will he receive, a man (as his destiny)?
 Silver? will be poured on his head,
 gold? on top of his skull,
 [and] the death of all I shall die,
 and I shall surely die."

¹⁰ See Wyatt 1996:112–13: narratives concerning Korah (vv. 1a, 2bc–11, 16–24, 27, 35), and Dathan and Abihu (vv. 1b–2a, 12–15, 25–26, 28–32a, 33–34), the eponyms of various priestly orders, appear to have been conflated. Though such atomistic treatment of a text is frequently unconvincing, it seems to work well in this instance.

that for the writer it also evoked the concept “Swallower.” (Belial later developed into a sobriquet of the devil.)¹¹

Whether this story reflects an earthquake, or is to be seen as entirely supernatural, we cannot be sure (the former would in any case have been conceptualized in terms of the latter); but the imagery reflects a primitive and potent fear of dying, and being smothered by burial in the earth. The image generating the metaphor of swallowing is that of a mouth that devours all things.¹² This also suggests utter annihilation. These people suffer no ordinary fate.

Behind these two stories lies a moral judgment, however strange to modern eyes. Aqhat had blasphemed by his insolent response to Anat, while (Korah,) Dathan, Abihu and their companions had challenged the priestly authority of Moses and Aaron. People who stepped outside

¹¹) As perhaps in the War Scroll from Qumran, 1QM 1.1 (conveniently, Martínez 1994:95), which refers to “the army of Belial” (paralleling “the sons of darkness,” implying the identification with either a place [Sheol] or a person [Satan]). In *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* Beliar (var. Belial) appears to be the name of the devil (Charlesworth 1983–85, 1:779, 782 n.2a), although the precise wording in some passages still allows a topographical interpretation. See also among other passages *T. Reuben* 6:3, *T. Levi* 19:1, *T. Judah* 25:3, *T. Issachar* 6:1, *T. Zebulun* 9:8, *T. Dan* 4:7, 5:10–11, *T. Naphtali* 3:1, *T. Asher* 1:9, 3:2, *Jubilees* 1:20, 15:33, 2 Corinthians 6:15, etc.

¹²) The metaphor already appears in the *Baal* cycle, where Mot, the divine personification of death, boasts to Baal (KTU 1.5 i 4–8 = [31–35]):

When I tear you in pieces:
I shall devour (you),
elbows, blood and forearms;
You will indeed go down into the throat of divine Mot,
into the maw of the Beloved of El, the hero.

This experience is set within a broader context in KTU 1.4 viii 10–24, where Baal’s messengers are to enter the underworld, but avoid coming into contact with Mot. Cf. also KTU 1.6 ii 17–18, where Mot says:

My appetite felt the want of human beings,
my appetite the multitudes of the earth.

The all-devouring nature of Mot’s mouth is explicit in this passage (KTU 1.5 ii 2–3):

[He extended a lip to the under]world,
a lip to the heavens,
[he extended] a tongue to the stars.

the conventional mores of their cultural environment could not be allowed to remain within it. Ancient societies were without exception totalitarian. A social judgment, of utter exclusion, was visited upon them. We can see here an inchoate grasping at the “use,” or social function, to which hell would later be put: that is, it provided a warning against dissent. And it is perhaps no accident that issues of conventional morality, of right or wrong, are not necessarily involved: it is primarily a question of the *compatibility* of such persons with society at large. It is not unlike the later attitude taken toward heretics.

This is one strand in the theme whose prehistory we are examining. Another important one is not ultimately dissimilar, because it has the same concern for loyalty and dissidence. This may be summarized under the rubric of “the myth of cosmic rebellion,” the title of Hugh Page’s monograph on the subject (Page 1996). A large amount of material, biblical and post-biblical, has been associated with this motif,¹³ and an Ugaritic antecedent has been discerned by some. Page however appears to have misconstrued the evidence. He understood the narrative in the *Baal cycle*, KTU 1.6 i 43–67,¹⁴ to describe the god Athtar’s ascent on to Baal’s throne, from which he then went down to the *under-*

¹³ Gen 6:1–4; Isa 14; Ps 82; 1 En. 6–16, 19, 39:1, 64, 69, 86:1–6; 2 En. 7, 56:12–15; and allusions elsewhere. The Psalm 82 reference should not appear here. It has an entirely different, historical, reference: Wyatt 1996:357–65.

¹⁴ KTU 1.6 i 50–67, with ascent likewise followed by descent, read:

“Let the finest of pigments be ground,
let the people of Baal prepare unguents,
the people of the Son of Dagan crushed herbs.”

The Great Lady-who-tramples-Yam replied:

“Indeed, let us make Athtar the Brilliant king:
Athtar the Brilliant shall rule!”

Then Athtar the Brilliant went up into the uttermost parts of Saphon;
he sat on the throne of Valiant Baal.
But his feet did not reach the footstool;
his head did not come up to its top.

Then Athtar the Brilliant said:

“I shall not rule in the uttermost parts of Saphon!”

world to reign (Page 1996:91, 103).¹⁵ This descent from heaven to hell was thus, in Page's broader discussion, the paradigm for later developments.

The key to the problem here is the precise nuance recognized of *arṣ* in line 65. While it is sometimes ambiguous, and can mean either "earth" or "underworld," I think that here it is univocal, and has the former sense. Page translated it as "Underworld," that is, the latter sense, understanding an implicit rejection of Athtar's claims with regard to Baal's throne. On my understanding, however, he entirely misread the evidence, for the narrative is the paradigm for the rites of inauguration of the human institution of kingship in Ugarit. Further searches by Page in the Ugaritic corpus were equally fruitless. And while insisting several times on the existence of a "Canaanite prototype" of the later material, dealing with cosmic rebellion, he had to concede each time that he had not actually found it in any of the texts he discussed!¹⁶ And none of his other suggestions are convincing, either, so far as continuity is concerned, though some passages, such as Ezekiel 28 (two oracles) appear to envisage a deposition of an overweening king, which appears to be the prototype of later traditions of fallen angels and demoniacal rebellion. This may or may not have been "Canaanite" in origin. Though

Athtar the Brilliant came down,
 he came down from the throne of Valiant Baal,
 and ruled in the earth (*arṣ*), god of it all.

[they d]rew water from amphorae,
 [they drew] water from vases.

¹⁵ In the Bergen meeting, Mark Geller averred that Page was right on this, that Athtar did indeed go down to the underworld (to reign), comparing his downward trajectory to Ishtar's descent into the underworld. But everything in the narrative tells against this: there is no rebellion: nor is there any extant West Semitic version of Ishtar's descent. And why would he go? In favour of a kingship upon earth: Athtar was appointed by his mother (a lovely example of matrilineal royal succession!); he sat on the royal god's throne (Baal's); he was anointed; fertility rituals with water were performed in conclusion (cf. Ps 110:7). See discussion in Wyatt 2005:221–30.

¹⁶ Page 1996:139: "the fact that there is no Ugaritic evidence of a revolt by Athtar against El is a troublesome, though not devastating, datum. The mythological allusions in the poem are of Canaanite origin"; an assessment repeated with regard to a number of biblical texts at 147, 158, 163, 164, 187, 200 and 204. Where is the evidence for this unsubstantiated claim?

these passages bear *some* relationship to the Ugaritic material, they have already become parodies of royal ideology.

But there is one text from Ugarit that *is* best construed as the background to one of the most intriguing of biblical texts, the oracle of Isa 14. This is Ugaritic text KTU 1.161, which provides the liturgy for the burial of King Niqmaddu III–IV, the penultimate king of Ugarit before the city's destruction in about 1188 BCE.

Here are the two texts for comparison:

KTU 1.161¹⁷

Order of service for the sacrifice(s)
of the (divine) Shades:

“You are invoked, O Rapiuma of
the under[world],
you are summoned, O assembly
of Di[danu].

Invoked is Ulkanu the Rapiu;
invoked is Tarumanu the Rapiu.
invoked is Sidanu-and-Radanu;
invoked is the eternal one²,
Tharu.

They have been invoked, the
ancient Rapiuma.

You are invoked, O Rapiuma of the
underworld,
you are summoned, assembly of
Didanu.

Invoked is Ammithamru the king
(and) invoked as well is
Niqmaddu the king.

O throne of Niqmaddu, may you be
mourned!

And lamented be his footstool.
Let the table of the king be
mourned in his presence.

But let their tears be swallowed,
and their dreadful lamentations.

¹⁷⁾ For translation and commentary see Wyatt 2002:430–41.

Go down, Shapshu,
 yea, go down, Great Luminary!
 May Shapshu shine upon him.

After your lords, from the throne,
 After your lords into the
 underworld go down:
 into the underworld go down
 and fall into the dust,
 down to Sidanu-and-Radanu,
 down to the eternal one, Tharu,
 down to the *anci-ent* Rapiuma,
 down to Ammithamru the king
 and also down to Niqmadu the king.”

One — and make an offering,
 two — and make an offering,
 three — and make an offering,
 four — and make an offering,
 five — and make an offering,
 six — and make an offering,
 seven — and make an offering.
 You shall present a bird.

“Peace!
 Peace on Ammurapi,
 and peace on his son(s);
 peace on his kinsmen,
 peace on his house;
 peace on Ugarit,
 peace on her gate(s)!”

In this liturgy, recent past kings (*mlkm*: *malikūma*) and legendary kings of yore (*rpum*: *rāpiūma*), both categories of minor gods, are invoked to come up from the underworld into the threshold of the tomb, where they are to greet the newly deceased monarch, and accompany him to his rest.

The text above provides an unprecedented, though still widely ignored, insight into the text of Isaiah 14. This oracle is a taunt addressed to a great king, variously identified as Assyrian, Babylonian or Persian. It envisages the king's entry into the underworld. Here are selected verses (9–15, 18–20a):

Sheol below stirred
 to greet you at your coming.
 The Rephaim were astir on your account, all the rulers of the earth;
 there arose from their thrones all the kings of the nations.
 All of them respond
 and say to you:
 “Have you too been slain like us?
 Are you to be compared to us?
 Your pomp has been brought down to Sheol,
 your circumstance has been put to death.
 Beneath you is a bed of maggots,
 and your blanket is worms.”
 How did you fall from the heavens, Morning Star, son of the dawn?
 And how were you thrown down to the earth, destroyer of nations?
 For you used to say in your heart,
 “I shall ascend to heaven:
 above the stars of El I shall exalt my throne,
 and I shall sit on the Mount of Assembly,
 in the recesses of Saphon!
 I shall climb up onto the backs of the clouds,
 I shall rival the Most High!”
 But now you are cast down into Sheol,
 into the depths of the pit!
 ...
 All the kings of the nations, every one of them, lie in honour, each in his tomb.
 But *you* have been thrown out of your grave, a loathsome branch¹⁸ ...
 ...
You will not be gathered with them in the burial-place.

The whole force of this bitter satire lies in its parody of royal funeral rites, suggesting that Judahite ritual practice conformed to the broad pattern of the Ugaritic material. When performed with due solemnity, the king is gathered to his royal ancestors, joining their divine company for future intercession on behalf of their former subjects. *This* king, however, will go unburied, with all the horrors that this implies: loss of prestige, loss of power, loss of identity, loss of all hope, annihilation.¹⁹

I think that this material and its *Vorlage* is the background against which the oracles in Ezekiel 28 are to be read. If there is some aspect of

¹⁸⁾ Often an arboreal metaphor for a king.

¹⁹⁾ There is an implicit Ugarit expression of this fear of annihilation in the line of the duties of the righteous son in *Aqhat* (KTU 1.17 i 27–28, 45–46, ii 1–2, 17):

enthronement rites lying behind the self-aggrandizement of these foreign kings, there may of course be a tenuous, if indirect, connection with the Ugaritic material, but the passages cannot be directly dependent upon it, because they already parody it. And several centuries separate the two forms, which could provide endless possibilities for intermediate invention. But perhaps a more important influence in developing thought is one curious snatch of myth embedded in Genesis 6:1–4, in what now appears to provide the reason for the flood in the biblical narrative. This reads as follows:

Now when men began to increase in number on earth, daughters were born to them. And the gods (lit. “sons of God”) saw how beautiful women (or: “Adam’s daughters”) were, and they took such as they chose as wives. Then Yahweh said, “my breath shall not remain in man forever, since he is also flesh. Let his lifespan be 120 years.” Now the Fallen Ones (*nʿpilīm*) were on earth in those days, and it was after this that the gods consorted with women, who bore them children. These were the heroes of yore, the men of renown.

The precise manner in which this invention took place is impossible to describe with confidence, because it is inherently difficult to date biblical texts, and old ideas might well be embedded in younger texts. And on the way, various external influences by adjacent cultures may well have contributed nudges here and there.

The royal figure we encounter in Isaiah 14, given the title *hēlāl ben šaḥar*, “Morning Star, son of the dawn,” *Lucifer* in the Vulgate, became by association with another figure, the heavenly accuser in the divine court, *haśśāṭān* (who appears for the first time in Job), the Devil (διάβολος: in origin the same legal function) of late Judaism and early Christianity. A figure who might have remained simply a legal functionary in later judgment scenes was gradually caught up in the “fall” mythology, becoming himself a rebel and deposed.

into the underworld sending forth his dying breath,
into the dust protecting his progress....

This passage deals not with rescuing the dead *from* the underworld, but with keeping them *down* there (Husser 1995). Burial was essential for the long-term good of the dead as well as the living; see Brichito 1973.

The critical period ca. 165 BCE to 200 CE spawned a considerable number of “fall” narratives, inspired by materials such as these. We should spend a moment considering the reasons for the explosion in speculation that now took place.

While scholars have broadly sought in vain to find clear evidence of any influence, it should be remembered that post-exilic Judaism developed during two centuries of Persian imperial control of *Jehud*. It is scarcely possible that the Jews remained entirely unaware of the Zoroastrian interest in eschatology, a concept hitherto alien to Jewish thought.²⁰ The polarization of the hereafter into heaven and hell, with appropriate rewards for the good and the wicked, could then develop its own momentum and particular conceptualizations in the troubled Maccabean period and the continuing civil and religious strife that still characterized Judaism in the early Christian era. It was following the Maccabean crisis (second century BCE), when Antiochus IV Epiphanes began the active persecution of the Jews for refusing to recant, that a narrative such as *4 Maccabees* 8–18 (final version first century CE) could be composed, narrating the martyrdom of a widow’s sons, each of whom, as he expired, gave a ringing endorsement of new and revolutionary beliefs concerning the hereafter.

The youngest, having watched his brothers tortured to death by fire, said to the king (12:12):

In return for this (impiety), justice will hold you in store for a fiercer and an everlasting fire and for torments which will never let you go for all time. (Trans. Anderson, in Charlesworth 1983–85, 2:557)

But this is a later passage, contemporaneous with early Christian language about the hereafter, of which some of the most graphic comes in the gospels (below).

²⁰ Cf. Zaehner 1961:57–58. He was right to point out that we know next to nothing about general developments in Zoroastrian thought in the Achaemenid period, so that the debt remains unquantifiable; but he considered that in eschatological matters there is a case to answer. Fire, as in the Lake of Fire, was strictly part of a judgmental process rather than a destination for the damned, whose abode was rather icy coldness (*ibid.* 307–8). Hell was in any case temporal in Zoroastrian thought, since the final Rehabilitation (*Frashkart*) redeemed all souls.

1 *Enoch* 6–16, a pre-Maccabean composition (Isaac, in Charlesworth 1983–85, 1:7), is modelled on Genesis 6:1–4, but the gods of Genesis have become angels, and this is a version of their fall. They fathered children on women, and the giants begotten of this miscegenation became carnivorous (men were herbivorous before the flood) and even drank blood (7:5), the unforgivable sin! They taught men the elements of culture, evidently also a great sin (7:1b; Azazel did it in 8:1 and other angels in 8:3, and later in ch. 64). The flood was announced (10:2), and Azazel was bound and cast out into darkness (10:4–6), where Enoch told him he was beyond redemption (13:1–3).

This is typical of apocalyptic literature: it is very confused, repetitive and contradictory.

1 *Enoch* 86–88 (165–1 BCE; Isaac, in Charlesworth 1983–85, 1:7) is the prologue to a typical apocalyptic panorama, running through to the present time, the Maccabean revolt, in ch. 90. It describes how the angels descended as bulls, and mated with cows, who bore various species, which the bulls then proceeded to devour. Then four heavenly beings (one, a person, is God) appeared, and one of them seized the first star (angels > bulls > stars) and cast him into an abyss (“narrow and deep, empty and dark,” 88:1). The animals on earth were then armed, and attacked each other, while one of the four figures bound other stars and “cast them into the pits of the earth” (88:2–3).

2 *Enoch* 7 describes a vision in which, now in the second heaven (of seven), the sage sees guarded prisoners hanging (suspended), “waiting for the measureless judgment.”

A range of descriptions of the underworld is found in the apocalyptic literature.

We now move on to the theme of child sacrifice, which while seeming to be tangential to our theme, contributed an important motif, as we shall see. Allusions to rites of child sacrifice are surprisingly common in the Old Testament. In spite of the fact that there are clear pointers to its historical association with the cult of Yahweh, such as the ritual prescriptions of Exodus 13:2, 11–15, 34:19–20; Leviticus 18:21, 20:2–5; Numbers 3:11–13, 13–18 and 18:15, it is evident from most references that the rite was regarded with horror by the biblical writers. In fact there is a distinct bias towards presenting it as something inherently alien to Israelite religion, practised by Israel’s enemies, and just occasionally,

and deplorably, adopted locally. Thus in the somewhat tedious account of the dreadful crimes of King Manasseh, the strange expression “he shed innocent blood” is used a number of times (2 Kings 21:16 etc.), in a strikingly vague way compared with the precision of other charges of cultic crimes laid against him. F. Stavrakopoulou (2004) convincingly argued that this referred to child sacrifice.

Examples of the “foreign” — non-Israelite — practice of such cults can be found. Carthage is of course infamous for its ritual centre the Tophet, associated with thousands of deposits of children’s ashes, and in spite of efforts to deny the presence of child-sacrifice, the evidence is strongly in support of it.²¹ In the Levant, King Mesha of Moab, at war with Israel in the ninth century, sacrificed his son on the city wall during a siege, presumably to the national deity Chemosh, which apparently forced the Israelite army to withdraw (2 Kings 3:27):²²

He offered him up as a holocaust on the (city) wall.

But in a similar time of crisis, King Ahaz of Judah appears to have done the same, though the terminology is different:

He passed his son through fire according to the abominable practices of foreign peoples. (2 Kings 16:3)

The expression “to pass someone through fire” is used of the ritual actions by the kings of Israel (2 Kings 17:17) and of individual kings, here and in 2 Kings 21:6 of Manasseh of Judah himself. In spite of the writer’s attempt here to represent it as foreign, it evidently went on right outside the walls of Jerusalem, for Josiah, during his iconoclastic reforms ca. 620 BCE,

desecrated the Tophet, which is in the Valley of the son (or sons) of Hinnom (*gê ben/bʿnê hinnôm*), to prevent people from passing their sons or daughters through fire *lammolek*. (2 Kings 23:10)

²¹) See the current website with arguments on both sides by M. H. Fantar and L. Stager with J. A. Greene: <http://phoenicia.org/childsacrifice.html>.

²²) See discussion and references in Dearman 1989:229–31.

The expression “passing (sons) though the fire” also occurs in Jeremiah 15:14, 32:35, Ezekiel 16:21, 20:26 and 20:31. In Ezekiel 23:37 the formula is,

They have passed the children they bore for me over to them (sc. other deities) as food.

This passage also confirms the suspicion that it relates to the sacrificial offering of children, as holocausts, and not merely some innocuous purification rite.

There has been much debate concerning the form *lammolek* occurring in Leviticus 18:21, 20:2–5 (four times), 1 Kings 11:7, 2 Kings 23:10 and Jeremiah 32:35 (eight times in all), always in the context of a burnt offering. In an influential paper, O. Eissfeldt (1935)²³ argued that the old view — already implicitly espoused by MT with its vocalization — that it denoted a god (sc. “Molech,” “Moloch,” Malik etc.) was untenable. Instead, it denoted a type of votive offering (*molk*), involving the sacrifice of children. More recently, G. Heider (1985) and J. Day (1989) attempted to refute Eissfeldt’s view. F. Stavrakopoulou later championed it, but went further, and argued that despite efforts by biblical writers to deflect suspicions, it was Yahweh himself who demanded and received such offerings.²⁴ She also isolated three distinct forms: the

²³) See also the important dissertation of P. Mosca (1975).

²⁴) See for instance Jeremiah 7:31–32:

“For the Judahites have done evil in my sight” (declares the) oracle of Yahweh. “They have set up their abominations in the temple dedicated to me (‘called by my name’), so polluting it. And they have constructed *tophet* cultic structures (*bāmôt hattōpet*) in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom (*gē ben-hinnōm*), to burn their sons and daughters in the fire, which I never demanded and never considered in my heart...”

and also Jeremiah 19:3–5, 11–13:

“They [the inhabitants of Jerusalem] have forsaken me and made this shrine foreign to me, and have made offerings in it to other deities whom they have not known, they, their ancestors and the kings of Judah; and they have filled this shrine with innocent blood. And they have built cultic structures (*bāmôt*) to the Baal, which I never demanded and never authorized and never considered in my heart...”

sacrifice of the firstborn, the *molk* sacrifice (fulfilment of vows), and offerings to “the Shadday gods,” the form *šaddayim* (of whom El Shaddai is the type) being distorted into masoretic *šēdīm*, “demons.”

An important recurrent key term in these passages is *tōpet*, “tophet,” the term also used in the Punic context. It has so far defied satisfactory etymological clarification.²⁵ Heider (1985:349) appealed to Isaiah 30:33,²⁶ which at least gave a description of it, even if it left certain details unexplained. This has a bearing on our broader discussion:

For a Tophet²⁷ has long been made ready; he too is destined for a *molk* offering, wide and deep is his fire-pit, with much fire and firewood; Yahweh's breath burns in it like a river of sulphur.

This description supports Robertson Smith's view that *tōpet* is cognate with Arabic *ʿotfiya* and Syriac *tfāya*, “stones on which a pot is set, and then any stand or tripod set upon a fire,”²⁸ even though this explanation is now generally rejected. The idea can be traced back to J. D. Michaelis in 1786. P. Haupt (1918), in taking up the idea, opined that the name of the so-called Dung-Gate (Vg *Portam Stercoris*) leaving the city just west of the temple mount (see below) — *šāʿar hāʾašpôt* — actually meant “Tophet Gate.” But even if the etymological link of *ʾašpôt* with *tōpet* be rejected, it would still have the sense of “Garbage Gate,” or “Ash Gate,” as the means by which rubbish was taken out from the city. He also pointed out (1918:233) that the gate also had other names: *šāʿar ḥaršīt*, the “Pottery Gate,” Greek Πύλη Κεραμική, since it also went out into the Tyropoean Valley, in turn known as the Potters' Field: Matthew 27:7, and the Field of Blood — bought with the thirty pieces

Thus says Yahweh of hosts, “So shall I smash this people and this city [Jerusalem], as the potter smashes a pot which is beyond repair. And they will be buried (reading *yiqqābrū* for MT *yiqbrū*) in Tophet until there is no more room for burying... This is what I shall do to this shrine,” oracle of Yahweh, “and to its inhabitants: I shall make this city like Tophet, and the houses of Jerusalem and the palaces of the kings of Judah will become polluted like the shrine of the Tophet...”

²⁵ Summary in Heider 1985:346–50; Day 1989:24–28; Stavrakopoulou 2004:152–53; *HALOT* iv 1781.

²⁶ On Isaiah 30:27–33 see Stavrakopoulou 2004:201–5.

²⁷ MT *topteh*, RSV “burning place”; perhaps “his Tophet”?

²⁸ Robertson Smith 1927:377 n.2; cited Heider 1985:348.

of silver after Judas hanged himself: Matthew 27:8; or where he died by spontaneous disembowelling: Acts 1:19 — Aramaic *'akel dāmā'*, “Field of Blood.” The point of these allusions was that pottery spoil-heaps were located there, that is, rubbish tips, and it was also a convenient place for executions, assuming that the Judas connection is a Christian aetiology.

Another key term, the location to which the city gate led, is *gê ben* or *b'ne hinnōm*, “the valley of the son (or: sons) of Hinnom.” The origin of this toponym, and the identity of the person, are entirely lost. However, its location is well known. It is a valley (Wadi el Rahabi, Jahan-nam) leaving the Kidron valley at the south end of the old “City of David” and Silwan, which lies south of the temple platform in Jerusalem, and skirting the present Mount Zion, going west up to just north of the railway station.²⁹ It was reached directly by leaving the city by the so-called Dung Gate, discussed above, just west of today's Wailing Wall.

A pre-Christian³⁰ witness to the cosmology which became attached to the Valley is found in *1 Enoch* 26–27. Uriel, guiding Enoch round Jerusalem, explains in answer to his enquiry,

This accursed valley is for those accursed forever; here shall come together all (those) accursed ones, those who speak with their mouth unbecoming words against the Lord and utter hard words concerning his glory. Here shall they be gathered together, and here shall be their judgment in the last days...³¹

It appears here that the valley was to be the location of this judgment (Bauckham 1990:359 and n.13), and not (yet) simply a symbol of some transcendent location. This suggests a continuity of thought from the time of the active cults located there.³²

²⁹) It can be seen very clearly online on Google Earth.

³⁰) Discussing the date of *1 Enoch*, Isaac, in Charlesworth 1983–85, 1:7, omitted reference to these chapters. Bauckham (1990:358) gave a date of third or early second century BCE.

³¹) Translation Isaac in Charlesworth 1983–85, 1:27. Note the futuristic aspect: judgment will be at the eschaton. This contrasts with the implication of some “tours of hell,” in which the seer evidently sees punishments already being inflicted (Bauckham 1990:357).

³²) Note the independent location of hell in *2 Enoch* 40:12 (J). But this is probably a much later text: F. I. Andersen in Charlesworth 1983–85, 1:94–95.

The New Testament renders *Gê... Hinnôm* by Γέεννα, “*Gehenna*,” a term which has become a name for hell. Both Old and New Testaments use other terminology, such as Hades, Sheol, the Pit, the Grave, and so on. By the time of early Christianity they seem to have more or less coalesced in meaning, though they will have had slightly different shades of meaning. While *Gehenna* occurs 10 times in the gospels (Matthew 5:22, 29, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5 and also in James 3:6), *Hades* occurs 11 times (Matthew 11:23, 16:18; Luke 10:15, 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; 1 Corinthians 15:55; Revelation 1:18, 6:8, 20:13, 14). This suggests a conception, probably still fairly fluid, which shares elements of contemporary Greek and Roman cosmology, themselves heirs to the Mediterranean *koine*, together with Jewish elements, which themselves seem to have absorbed earlier Egyptian or even Zoroastrian ideas (such as the Lake of Fire). The latter is certainly a good candidate, though it is hard to quantify the debt. At all events, there is no certain corroboration of Iranian influence, even if it was perhaps catalytic, and the old Judahite cultic associations give an independent source for the fiery image.

The fiery nature of the place becomes clear in passages such as the following:

He (Jesus) will baptize you {with the Holy Spirit and}³³ with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will sweep his threshing floor, and collect his wheat in the granary, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:11–12; cf. Luke 3:16–17)

...and they (the angels) will throw them into the furnace of fire: there, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth... (Matthew 13:42 [= 49–50]; see also Matthew 18:8–9 [= Mark 9:43–45], and 25:41)

(anyone who worships the Beast) will be tortured in fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. (Revelation 14:10)

(the Beast and the false prophet) were both thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with sulphur. (Revelation 19:20:)

³³) Probably an expansion of the original. Originally John's water would be matched by Jesus' fire. It was to be vivifying for the grain, but destructive for the chaff. On the selective nature of fire cf. Daniel 3:22–27.

In these, such is the developed form of the imagery that an Iranian substrate is perhaps arguable. However, this language is interestingly absent from the Pauline corpus.

We should not assume that the image of a fiery pit or lake of fire was the only one entertained. *The Apocalypse of Peter*, for example, a text from the second or third century CE, used this figure, but combined it with vivid accounts of other lakes, of pitch and mud, and images of people with their eyes put out, or gnawing their lips or tongues and so forth, reflecting the whole gamut of the practice of torture.

We may conclude this survey of shifting beliefs (and the shifting probably never stopped) with a brief consideration of the reasons for change. After all, religions are the most conservative features of culture: we do not expect them to change for change's sake.

In his study on gnosticism, *The Gnostic Religion*, Hans Jonas drew attention to the way in which the growth of large regional empires in the Near East (from Assyria and Babylon down to Rome and Persia) stifled local initiatives and sterilized local cultures. But the policy, whether deliberate or merely consequential, had one interesting outcome. Even as each empire fell, and as each local culture was crushed, a general process ensued:

On the one hand, it favored the disengagement of cultural contents from their native soil, their abstraction into the transmissible form of teachings, and their consequently becoming available as elements in a cosmopolitan interchange of ideas...

...the Babylonian exile forced the Jews to develop that aspect of their religion whose validity transcended the particular Palestinian conditions and to oppose the creed thus extracted in its purity to the other religious principles of the world into which they had been cast. This meant a confrontation of ideas with ideas...

Political uprooting thus led to a liberation of spiritual substance.³⁴

Ancient Israelite religion had been a typical state-maintenance system, an ideology for monarchical power in an independent city-state. With a succession of rapacious great powers in control from the early sixth century, at times actively persecuting religious dissidents, a whole maelstrom of ideas coalesced in an increasing obsession with theodicy — if

³⁴) Jonas 1963, excerpts from 11–17. See also the assessment in Wyatt 2001:329–32.

God was not guilty, what was he going to do about it? — and eschatology, a progressive despair in any this-worldly vindication of local rights — if there was no redemption or just desserts in this life, there must surely be such in the hereafter. Such an intellectual development must have been going on concurrently with developing views of human rights and responsibilities in jurisprudence. In some respects, the fantastic explorations of Apocalyptic may also be regarded as serious if inchoate enquiries into the nature and implications of moral theology, seeking appropriate figures for the punishments due for the various classes of sin. They were comparable³⁵ to Virgil's *Aeneid* book 6, which asked similar questions. Viewed from another angle, such enquiries, which in Apocalyptic were balanced by visions of heaven, allow us to see a continuation of the most ancient patterns of religiosity, represented by shamanism, with its journeys to the limits of the universe, its seeking for knowledge, and its profound if unconscious desire to transcend the limitations of human earthly experience.³⁶

Thus in the period between *ca* 200 BCE and 200 CE, which saw the rise of Christianity and the development of post-temple Judaism, all the currents of thought we have described gradually converged in the development of what can loosely be called a 'doctrine of hell'. Speculations on its nature continued for centuries.

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³⁵ Himmelfarb (1983) and Bauckham (1990) both argued that Jewish Apocalyptic was not dependent on earlier Orphic or Pythagorean speculation (*contra* Dieterich 1913). But there does appear to have been a commonwealth of ideas (Greek, Babylonian, Iranian, Jewish, Roman, and Egyptian thought, expressed in the *Book of the Dead*) in vogue, none of them developing in complete isolation from the others.

³⁶ Note the use made of shamanic psychology in Davila 2001, an enquiry into the Hekhalot literature.

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