

Gospel According to Matthew

Bible Study: Session IV

Last Week's Questions

I have a two part question related to Session II. Why was Gehenna rendered hell? What does the Episcopal Church teach about hell?

We always need to be careful when we look at ancient texts speaking of ancient geographic locations—there can be a lot of ‘wobble room’ in trying to find these place. So, down the rabbit-hole we go.

That said, Gehenna literally means Valley of Hinnom in Hebrew. It is mentioned in Joshua (“*Then the boundary goes up by the valley of the son of Hinnom at the southern shoulder of the Jeb'usite (that is, Jerusalem); and the boundary goes up to the top of the mountain that lies over against the valley of Hinnom, on the west, at the northern end of the valley of Reph'aim; [Joshua 15:8]*”). This describes the Wadi-er-Rabâbi which runs along the south side of Jerusalem.

It is also, in the Hebrew scriptures, associated with the Valley of Slaughter—“*Therefore, behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter. [Jeremiah 19:6]*”. Topheth (Tophet) was where child sacrifice was made to the Canaanite god, Moloch (Molech). However, Topheth was much closer to the Dead Sea, than just south of Jerusalem. The ritual involved the sacrifice passing through fire, thus the imagery of flames.

Then in later Jewish thought, Gehenna was increasingly looked upon as a divinely appointed place of punishment for apostates and other great sinners (e.g. Enoch and 2 Esdras—books of Biblical Antiquities).

In the Christians scriptures, when rendered in English, the Greek word, Gehenna (γεηννα), is frequently translated as “hell”. This English translation is to possibly represent both the Hebrew Sheol (the pit, or place of the departed, or underworld) with the Greek Gehenna.

As to where the Episcopal Church stands on “hell”, would you be satisfied with: it’s not a good place or state of being?

Okay. Although that is a true perspective, I’ll try to answer a little more seriously. The Episcopal Church is not an overly ‘canonical’ church, and even then, the canons are mostly concerned with the over-sight of clergy and parishes and parish vestries. Mostly, what defines an Episcopalian is how we worship.

How we worship is founded upon the Book of Common Prayer—hereafter BCP. In the BCP, “hell” is mention approximately 7 times (Apostles’ Creed, The Exsultet within the Great Vigil of Easter, Traditional Burial Office (Psalms 139 & 116), Psalter (Psalm 18), Historical Documents (Creed of St. Athanasius—*Quicumque Vult*— on page 865, the Articles of Religion—Article III on page 868), and in the Catechism.

With the exception of the Catechism, most mentions of "hell" are in passing. The closest thing that the Episcopal Church 'teaches' about "hell" is found in the 'Outline of Faith' (Catechism). In a question—answer form (BCP, Pg. 862) the following is found:

Q. *What do we mean by heaven and **hell**?*

A. *By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God; by **hell**, we mean eternal death in our rejection of God.*

This theological perspective is not very definitive, but our approach to doing theology—speaking about God—Episcopalians traditionally try to avoid the pitfalls of being too specific, as we can never completely know the mind of God.

Perhaps it is best to simply say that heaven and hell aren't physical locations, but rather our eternal relationship with God.

Introduction

In this section—Matthew 10:5-11:30—I will attempt to speak about mostly eschatological matters: an on-going mission to Israel, impending sufferings, and revisit John the baptizer.

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Mission to Israel Read Matthew 10:5-15

Although near the end of Matthew's gospel account Jesus urges the *eleven*—Judas has let to be replaced—to make disciples of "*all the Gentiles*," (Great Commission, Matthew 28: 18-20). However, at this point in Matthew's record, Jesus is emphasizing that their—the *Twelve's*—mission is to approach the "*lost sheep of the house of Israel*." Their message is to be the same as that of Jesus (Mt. 4:17) and of John, the baptizer (Mt. 3:2): "*the kingdom of heaven has drawn near*". In other words, to proclaim that the End-Time isn't fulfilled yet, but has been inaugurated.

In order to demonstrate that the kingdom is near, they are to do as he has been doing: *heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and cast out demons*—this also will establish a continuity with Jesus' actions.

Factoid: Wickedness of Sodom & Gomorrah
Although many people believe that the wickedness is homosexuality, some scholars believe that 'inhospitality' was the real offense.

Then, in order to make sure they understand that nothing is to impede their mission, they are instructed to not over burden themselves with baggage: the clothing they are wearing is sufficient to meet their needs. Upon entering a town, they are to find a worthy house by sending peace upon that house and seeing if it is returned.

When a Jew returned to Jewish territory, it was a practice to shake the dust off their sandals as a sign of rejecting the foreign

nation's paganism. Jesus instructs the *Twelve* to do the same with Jewish towns and cities that refuse their message. For those places that reject their message, Jesus emphasizes his warning—*Amen* accentuates his following words—that in the End-Time (day of judgment) they will be seen as emblematic of the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Future Sufferings Read Matthew 10:16-25

Lest the *Twelve* think that their mission is going to be received with open arms by everyone, Jesus

Factoid: The Sanhedrin usually refers to the general council in Jerusalem of the Sadducees and Pharisees, however, sanhedrins (plural) usually refers to local councils throughout Israel.

makes it clear that in nearness of the End-Time, it isn't going to be a walk in the park. They may be going to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel,' but they themselves will be 'sheep among wolves'—which is an illusion to the End-Times where lamb and wolf shall lie together (Isaiah 11:6). This put his warnings in the context of the End-Time.

The description of the End-Time and Apocalypse for

Factoid: For Judaism, there were several potential 'messiahs'. However, if the 'messiah' died before the Messianic Age occurred, then obviously they weren't the messiah. This is primarily the issue Judaism has with Jesus as still being the messiah—he died on the cross.

Judaism was the Messianic Age. Traditionally, the Messianic Age would be introduced by a messiah who would be God's vanguard. Matthew wants his readers to make this connection with Jesus, therefore he records Jesus' brief discourse concerning events of the Messianic Age: his followers will face persecution—even at the hands of their own family.

Factoid: For Matthew, the in-breaking of the Messianic Age began at Jesus' birth, therefore, he is the true messiah. His death & resurrection is within the Messianic Age.

Couched in this warning, however, is encouragement offered to the *Twelve*. They will not be on their own, but the Spirit of God will be with and within them.

Again, 'Amen' prefacing Jesus' words accentuates that the time is not far off, but that the in-breaking began with his appearance. He is also hinting at the Passion: if he is to be condemned, why should they not expect anything less.

This also sets the context for the next section.

Other Instructions Read Matthew 10:26-42

The third part of the mission discourse is a collection of disparate sayings. They are connected only loosely with each other and with the themes of mission and suffering in the first two parts.

Factoid: Matthew is telling his community: Jesus did the deeds of the Christ, therefore he is the Christ—the Anointed One—the Messiah.

It starts simply by telling the *Twelve*, not to worry, that God will be with them. God is in control and that another human can take only their body (kill), their soul is in God's hands. The bit about sparrows and hairs is to emphasize that God knows what's going on.

They are to go about boldly proclaiming what Jesus has taught them, shouting from the house-tops what was only whispered to them by him.

So far, so good, but now comes the verses with which many people struggle: Jesus has come to bring division.

This discourse is based upon the Prophet Micah, speaking about the corruption of the world: *"for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house. But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. [Micah 7:6-7]"*

Factoid: A group of swallows is a 'gulp'. Also, it would take many—or at least two— European swallows to carry a one pound coconut. [More info here.](#)

Although Matthew uses the word "sword" whereas Luke says "division," for Matthew a sword was a symbol of rending or division. Jesus is not calling for warfare, but rather saying that a decision is required for or against the gospel—for or against Jesus—and there will naturally be division among people as a consequence of that decision.

However, Jesus reassures the *Twelve*—all though "little ones" may also mean the community to which Matthew is writing—remaining faithful to the decision to follow Jesus will be acknowledged by God. Once again, 'Amen' prefacing the final statement, emphasizes these words of Jesus.

John & Jesus Read Matthew 11:1-19

Although Matthew doesn't recount what happened with the *Twelve's* mission (cf. Mark 6:30), they will reappear in chapter 12. With no story related as to what happened during their mission to the lost sheep, it tends to leave the message that the mission has an abiding value—it didn't end when they returned.

Now Jesus is approached by followers of John, the baptizer, who is setting in the fortress prison of Herod Antipas. They are wondering if Jesus is the Messiah—Matthew highlights this by referring to 'the Christ' (anointed one) rather than simply Jesus. In response Jesus answers, just not directly. He tells them to tell John what they've seen and heard, indicating that, yes, he is the one while redefining Messiah as something other than a warrior.

However, when he turns his attention to John's nature, he explains to John's disciples who John really was: a prophet—the forerunner of the Messiah, Elijah. Matthew's readers will clearly understand that with Jesus, the Messianic Age—End-Time—has begun. This clarification of John's purpose is prefaced with 'Amen', basically saying, 'listen up'. He then tells them that if they have ears—pay attention.

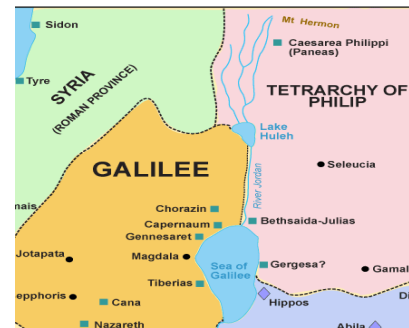
In the last three verses of this segment, I read that Matthew is indicating through Jesus' words, that the scribes and Pharisees will never be happy: John was a nut, Jesus was a hedonist. However, this does not mean all Jews, as Matthew is writing to Jews. This is about the scribes and Pharisees.

Remember: Matthew is not anti-Jewish, simply anti-Jewish hierarchy (scribes & Pharisees).

Threats Against Unrepentant Cities Read Matthew 11:20-24

In as much as Jesus' miracles should have inspired repentance, Jesus addresses three cities — Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum—claiming that these predominantly Jewish cities will face greater peril in the End-Time than those of Israel's enemies—Tyre, Sidon, and even Sodom.

Chorazin and Capernaum are in the territory of Galilee, while Bethsaida (later known as Bethsaida-Julias) is just West of the Jordan River and technically in the Territory of the Tetrarchy of Philip—however, it would have had a predominantly Jewish population, possibly even the hometown of Peter, Andrew and Philip. Tyre and Sidon are in the Roman Province, now known as Syria. Sodom is not on the accompanying map as it is believed to be south of the Dead Sea.



The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Joel all mention—for the most part—the destruction of Tyre and Sidon in the End-Time. Jesus' words concerning Capernaum imitate the taunt against the king of Babylon found in Isaiah: “You will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon ... Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come, it rouses the shades to greet you ... [Isaiah 414:4, 9]”. Matthew's readers would have understood this reference very well.

Revelation & Its Recipients Read Matthew 11:25-30

In this section Jesus is affirming his relationship to God. Matthew records Jesus as declaring that the *Father* and *Son* are basically one. Although this gets cumbersome to explain: in Koiné Greek, the phrasing of “*the Father*” knows “*the Son*” and “*the Son*” knows “*the Father*”, emphasizes a direct connection that is not fully demonstrated in an English translation.

The section is also begun with a traditional phrase from the *Qumran Thanksgiving Psalms*—writings of the *Essenes*—a stylistic form to introduce what God has done—is doing. In this case, it is to hide a revelation from the wise and understanding—a.k.a. the scribes and Pharisees—that which is revealed to infants—the disciples who hear and perceive Jesus' significance.

Precisely what is being hidden is: the significance of Jesus' deeds and the presence of God's kingdom in his ministry.

Jesus then invites people to come to him, a familiar phrase inviting people to wisdom. This invitation is very similar to that found in the Book of Sirach: *“Draw near to me, you who are untaught and lodge in my school. Why do you say you are lacking in these things, and why are your souls very thirsty?... Put your neck under the yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by. [Sirach 51:23-24, 26]”*

In this, wisdom is the person of ‘*the Son*’ and his teaching; wisdom is to be found at the “school” of Jesus.

The imagery that Jesus uses concerning the “yoke” would be familiar to Matthew’s readers. A yoke was to provide discipline and direction for work—in this case, the ministry and mission of Jesus. However, Jesus quickly establishes that his yoke will be light compared to that of the scribes and Pharisees. This, of course, is to distinguish him from the scribes and the Pharisees who were more interested in rules and regulations rather than substance.

Summary

It is imperative to keep in mind the ‘eschatological’ climate in which Matthew recalls these words of Jesus concerning his mission to Israel.

End Session IV