***Hadēs***

The word translated “grave” in the REV is the Greek word *Hadēs* (#86 ᾅδης), which came over into English as the loanword Hades (pronounced 'hay-dees). *Hadēs* was the Greek word that was used in both the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) and the Greek New Testament to represent what the Hebrew word *Sheol* meant in the Hebrew language. *Sheol* referred to the state of being dead. *Sheol* was not the physical grave itself, but the state of being dead (the actual physical grave was referred to in Hebrew as the *qeber* (#06913 קֶבֶר). Some theologians refer to *Sheol* as “gravedom” (“the reign of the grave”; or “the reign of death”). *Sheol* (*Hadēs* in the Greek Bible) is not a place, it is a state of being—the state of being dead. In the Hebrew Old Testament, dead people are said to be in *Sheol* (cf. Gen. 37:35; 42:38; 1 Kings 2:6; Job 7:9; Ps. 6:5; 16:10; 31:17; 49:14; Prov. 7:27; Eccl. 9:10; etc.) where there is no thought, knowledge (Ecc. 9:10), or remembrance of God (Psa. 6:5).

Like English, Hebrew has a common noun for “death,” which is *maveth* (#04194 מָוֶת), and a commonly used verb for “die,” which is *muth* (#04191 מָוֹת). However, the Hebrew language also has the word “*Sheol*” which refers to “the state of being dead.” English has no such word, so what we have to say is a person “is dead,” or they are “lifeless.” In contrast, Hebrew has the advantage of being able to say that the person is “in Sheol.” This has the potential to stop a lot of confusion, because if when a person dies they are “in Sheol,” then they are not also “in heaven” or “in hell.” They are dead, in the state of being dead, and thus they are “in Sheol.”

In Greek mythology, *Hadēs* was both the name of the god of the underworld and also the name of the underworld itself. When the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek around 250 BC, the Septuagint translators translated the Hebrew word *Sheol* by the Greek word *Hadēs*. It was actually a bad choice to translate *Sheol* as *Hadēs*, because in *Sheol* people are dead, whereas the Greeks believed that in *Hadēs* the souls of dead people were alive. Greek mythology had many stories of people being alive in *Hadēs*. So when the Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt translated *Sheol* as *Hadēs*, by the stroke of a pen they turned dead people into living people, and this introduced great confusion about the state of the dead into Judaism and then into Christianity, and that confusion still exists today. Actually, that confusion continued and perhaps was exacerbated when the New Testament books of Matthew, Luke, Acts, Corinthians, and Revelation used the word *Hadēs*. Although the New Testament use of *Hadēs* was the same as its use in the Septuagint, it is understandable that most Greeks would have seen *Hadēs* in light of their traditional mythology, and believed that the god *Hadēs* (the Devil) lived in *Hadēs* and reigned over the people there. So today, millions of Christians believe that the souls of dead people are alive and suffering in “hell” (*Hadēs*) because of what came from Greek mythology into Christianity.

Why would the Greek-speaking Jews translate *Sheol* as *Hadēs*? It is possible that some of the Jews had become so Hellenized that they thought that the dead were alive in *Hadēs* and felt that *Hadēs* was a good translation of *Sheol*. It is also possible that they used *Hadēs* because they did not have a Greek word that had the same meaning as *Sheol*. The Greeks believed that the human soul was immortal, and so they did not have a vocabulary word that was the equivalent of *Sheol*, which meant “the state of being dead.” Yet, since *Hadēs* is the place where people go immediately upon death in the Greek language and culture, and *Sheol* is the place where people go immediately upon death in the Jewish language and culture, they might have seen the word *Hadēs* as the most fitting translation*.* Whatever the case, the Septuagint translators chose to use the Greek word *Hadēs* as a translation of *Sheol*. To maintain the proper theology of the Bible, it would have been better if they had simply transliterated *Sheol* into Greek and brought it into the Greek language as a loanword. Actually, that is what David Stern does in his *Complete Jewish Bible*. When *Hadēs* occurs in the Greek New Testament, Stern translates it *Sheol*.

The word *Hadēs* occurs in the Greek New Testament ten different times (11 in the Byzantine text), and it always refers to the state of being dead or the state of non-existence except one time in Luke 16:23. Admittedly, it is quite unclear what *Hadēs* is exactly referring to in its uses in Revelation, because it is being personified and associated with Death (Rev. 1:18; 20:13-14), yet distinguished from Death (Rev. 6:8), which is also being personified. Still, Luke 16:23 is the only passage in the entire Bible in which *Hadēs* is clearly not referring to “the state of being dead.”

In that passage, Jesus uses *Hadēs* in the same way that his Pharisee audience was using it—to refer to a place of the living dead. The Pharisees were one of the Jewish groups that took on the Greek belief that some of the humans who had died were alive in *Hadēs*, which explains why Jesus framed his parable of the rich man and Lazarus the way he did (Luke 16:23). Josephus, speaking of the Pharisees says, “They say that all souls are incorruptible, but that the souls of good men only are removed into other bodies, but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment.” Josephus goes on to say this regarding the Sadducees in contrast to the Pharisees, “They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades.”[[1]](#footnote-13187) From these two quotes, it can be deduced that the Pharisees believed in the immortality of the soul, and punishments or rewards in *Hadēs*. This background brings clarity as to why Jesus would speak of people being alive in *Hadēs* in Luke 16:23; he is trying to cater to the Pharisees’ current beliefs so that he can focus on making a separate point.

When Jesus told that parable, he was not trying to debate with the Pharisees whether dead people were dead or alive, he was trying to make the point that they were being so hard-hearted that they would not believe the truth if someone came back from the dead and told it to them (Luke 16:31). Secondly, he was trying to make the point that there will be justice in the end, and punishment for each unbeliever’s sins, which is taught elsewhere in the Scriptures (2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 11:22, 24). So, Jesus used the illustration of torment and flames (Luke 16:23-24) to bring the point across.

One thing that is vital to note, is that it is not proper exegesis to take every part of a parable literally, the point of parables is to teach one or two main points, and the rest of the details of a parable are superfluous. For example, in the Parable of the Wise Manager in Luke 16:1-9, Jesus says one debtor owes “100 measures of oil” in the parable, but it would be a mistake in interpretation to think Jesus is speaking of a real person who owes 100 measures of oil, rather this is just a minor detail to build out the story. The Parable of the Wise Manager is about prudence (Luke 16:8), and the other more minor details do not have to correspond to something that is actually true in reality. In the same way, in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the minor secondary details (such as people being alive in *Hadēs*) do not have to correspond to something that is actually true in reality.

Many people mistakenly take the flames in the parable literally, and thus, see support for the idea that unbelievers will be in eternal conscious torment. This is again, a mistake in interpretation. Either unbeliever’s end will be death, or eternal torment, but it cannot be both. The clearer scriptures in the New Testament, that are not parables (Luke 16:19-31) or Apocalyptic visions (Rev. 14:10-11), are unanimous in teaching that the end for non-believers is death (Matt. 10:28; Rom. 5:12; 6:23; 2 Thess. 1:9; 2 Pet. 3:9; Heb. 10:26-27; Rev. 21:8), and that they are not given immortality which is a gift given through the good news (2 Tim. 1:10; Rom. 2:7; 8:11).

All of this to say, Jesus’ use of *Hadēs* in this parable should not override the consistent use of *Sheol* in the Old Testament and *Hadēs* in the New Testament as the “state of being dead,” which all people go to, righteous (Gen. 37:35; Psa. 16:10; Acts 2:31) and unrighteous (Psa. 31:17; Luke 10:15).

E. W. Bullinger writes so lucidly about *Sheol* and *Hadēs* that it is worth quoting him extensively.

“*Hadēs*. This is a heathen word and comes down to us surrounded with heathen traditions, which had their origin in Babel, and not in the Bible…. As *Hadēs* (a word of human origin) is used in the New Testament, is the equivalent for the Hebrew *Sheol* (a word of divine origin), its meaning can be gathered not from human imagination, but from its Divine usage in the Old Testament. If we know this, we know all that can be known. [At this point, Bullinger lists all 65 uses of *Sheol* in the Old Testament].

On a careful examination of the above list, a few facts stand out very clearly. …”The grave”…stands out…as the best and commonest rendering. As to the rendering “hell,” it does not represent *Sheol*, because both by dictionary definition and colloquial usage, “hell” means the place of future punishment. *Sheol* has no such meaning, but denotes the present state of death. “The grave” is therefore a far more suitable translation….

The student will find that “THE grave,” taken literally as well as figuratively, will meet all the requirements of the Hebrew *Sheol*; not that *Sheol* means so much specifically “A” grave as “THE” grave.

If we enquire of it in the above list of the occurrences of the word *Sheol*, it will teach:

* That as to direction, it is down.
* That as to place, it is in the earth.
* That as to nature it is put for the state of death. Not the act of dying…but the state or duration of death. *Sheol* therefore means the state of death; or the state of the dead; which the grave is tangible evidence. It may be sometimes personified and represented as speaking, as other inanimate things are. It may be represented by a coined word, Grave-dom, as meaning the dominion or power of the grave.
* As to relation, it stands in contrast with the state of the living…. It is never once connected with the living except by contrast.
* As to association, it is used in connection with mourning; sorrow; fright and terror; weeping; silence; no knowledge; punishment.
* And finally, as to duration, the dominion of *Sheol* or the grave will continue until, and only end with, resurrection, which is the only exit from it.

[In the New Testament] *Hadēs* is invariably connected with death; but never with life; always with dead people; but never with the living. All in *Hadēs* will “not live again” until they are raised from the dead (Rev. 20:5). That the English word “hell” by no means represents the Greek *Hadēs*; as we have seen that it does not give a correct idea of its Hebrew equivalent, *Sheol*. That *Hadēs* can mean only and exactly what *Sheol* means, vis., the place where “corruption” is seen and from which resurrection is the only exit.”[[2]](#footnote-32534)

Bullinger was correct that when a person dies, they go to *Sheol*, the state of being dead, and they stay dead until God raises them up in the Rapture or one of the resurrections. The Bible compares death and *Sheol* with a prison that has gates from which there is no escape except by resurrection, so it uses the phrases, “the gates of *Sheol*” (Job 17:16; Isa. 38:10) and “the gates of death” (Job 38:17; Ps. 9:13; 107:18). Jesus Christ referred to the gates of *Hadēs* in Matthew 16:18, and many English versions translate the Greek words as “the gates of hell,” but “the gates of the grave” would be more correct. Once a person has died and gone through the “gates of *Sheol*,” only God and his Son Jesus can open them and bring the person back to life, but Jesus will open those gates and resurrect people to life. Jesus said that “the gates of the grave (*Hadēs*)” would not prevail against his church (Matt. 16:18), and indeed, those gates will not prevail because he will raise dead believers to everlasting life.

In the end, *Hadēs* refers to the “state of being dead,” and *Gehenna*, which is another term that often gets translated “hell” in the New Testament, refers to the place of punishment for the wicked in which they will experience a period of punishment for their sins (Matt. 11:22; Luke 12:47-48; 2 Cor. 5:10) and then ultimately, be destroyed (Mark 9:43; Matt. 10:28). Having a correct understanding of these terms helps us see how unbiblical doctrines such as the immortal soul and eternal conscious torment made their way into Christendom, which happened primarily by Greek influence and poor translations. Having a proper understanding of *Hadēs* and *Gehenna* also helps us see that God truly is a just and merciful God who does not desire to torture people eternally for temporal sins (2 Pet. 3:9), but rather, who desires sin to be eradicated (Gen. 2:17; 6:7; Rom. 6:23) so that the world can dwell in peace and harmony again (Acts 3:21).

[For more information on *Gehenna*, see Appendix 4: Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.]

1. Flavius Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, trans. by William Whiston, A.M., 1895, 2.162. [↑](#footnote-ref-13187)
2. Bullinger, Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament, 367-369. [↑](#footnote-ref-32534)