

## **QUESTION**

*“It is no longer possible to believe in Hell”. Discuss this statement.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Discussing this statement, one needs to understand what we mean by *belief*. By this we can understand the ground for the argument about hell. Belief is a commitment, either intellectual or emotional, or both, to something such as a proposition, position, procedure, or person. The interesting aspect of belief is its close connection with religion from where the idea of hell comes. In this role, belief is sometimes defined as synonymous with faith and sometimes as a weaker version of faith. From this definition, it has been argued that belief is immune from any need for a rational basis, that is to say, belief can be well founded without being founded on any process of rational inference as opposed to knowledge. Therefore, discussion about hell would always be subjective and cannot be divorced from one's belief, either one is a believer or atheist.

All those who deny the existence of God or the immortality of the soul of course deny the existence of hell. Thus among the Jews the Sadducees, among the Gnostics the Seleucians, and in our own time Materialists, Pantheists, etc., deny the existence of hell. But apart from these, if we abstract from the eternity of the pains of hell, the doctrine has never met any opposition worthy of mention. In this essay however, I would try to give the definition of hell, bringing out what the Bible and the Intertestamental writings explain to be its character. I would appeal to reason and I would describe what seems to be the universal conception of hell. In doing that, I would identify the belief of nations and what the world's major religions teach about hell. Finally, I would point out the misconceived areas of Christian doctrine of hell.

Hell (*from a Germanic root meaning 'to cover'*) is the traditional English translation of the Hebrew word Sheol in the Hebrew Bible, and of the Greek word Hades in the Apocrypha. In the NRSV these words are simply transliterated into English, and the translation 'hell' is reserved for 'Gehenna'. In later Jewish writings Gehenna came to mean the place of punishment for sinners (Assumption of Moses 10:10; 2 Esdras 7:36) It was depicted as a place of unquenchable fire – the general idea of fire to express the divine judgement is found in the Old Testament (Deut. 32:22; Daniel 7:10). Both Sheol and Hades refer to a general dwelling place of souls after death (Gen. 37:35; Acts 2:27). Since this sphere was mainly supposed to be found in the underworld (Num. 16:30; Matt. 11:23), it was also called “the pit” (Isaiah 38:18), “the bottomless place” (Lk. 8:31; Rm. 10:7), or “the lower parts” (of the world; Ps. 63:10).

There was a general conviction that existence continued in some way after its separation from earthly life, an event that implied separation from God, the source of all life. Even the light of mere reason can demonstrate the existence of hell. The Fathers, from the very earliest times, are unanimous in teaching that the wicked will be punished after death. And in proof of their doctrine they appeal both to Scripture and to reason.

The Bible explains the character of hell as the universal lot of humankind (Eccles. 9:10), as well as the place reserved for the wicked (Ps. 9:17). In His sanctity and justice as well as in His wisdom, God must avenge the violation of the moral order in such wise as to preserve, at least in general, some proportion between the gravity of sin and the severity of punishment. But it is evident from experience that God does not always do this on earth; therefore, He will inflict punishment after death. Moreover, if all men were fully convinced that the sinner need fear no kind of punishment after death, moral and social order would be seriously menaced. This, however, Divine wisdom cannot permit.

When ethical viewpoints are involved, however, Sheol is said to be a place of punishment. “The earth” (a term that can also mean “the underworld” swallowed up Korah and his companions, while their supporters were burned in fire (Num. 16:31-35). Psalmist and prophets threatened the godless with destruction in hell (Ps. 9:17; 31:17; 55:15; Isaiah 5:14; 28:15, 18; 66:24), and wisdom teachers warned the youth to avoid hell (Proverbs 7:27; 15:24). Originally, this probably meant that untimely death was the deserved fate of the wicked, but many of these texts could also be interpreted to mean punishment after death.

From a neutral viewpoint, Sheol was regarded in Israel as the dwelling place of all the dead, independent of their character. Jacob is reported to have said when he believed his son Joseph dead: “I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning” (Gen. 37:35). A similar pessimism is found in various types of literature (e.g. 2 Sam.12: 23; Isaiah14: 9-11; Ps. 6:5; 88:5; 115:17; Job 7:9-10).

Postexilic Judaism and the New Testament also presupposed this general place of the dead, but made it provisional because of the belief in a coming resurrection (Daniel 12:2; Acts 2:27; Romans 10:7; Rev. 20:13).

Intertestamental writings also developed the idea of different sections for righteous and sinful people in hell (I Enoch 22:1-14), and especially ascribed the punishment of blasphemers to a cursed and flaming George (27:1-4), later called Gehenna. In the New Testament, the story of Lazarus illustrates the different places reserved for the righteous and sinners in the realm of death (Luke 16:26).

Furthermore, hell was even seen as a power that endeavours to attack life on earth. This found expression in psalms dealing with salvation from mortal danger; for example: “The cords of Sheol entangled me” (2 Samuel 22:6; Psalm 18:5), or “The pangs of Sheol laid hold on me” (Psalm 116:3).

In Postexilic Judaism, the topic was further developed by the community of Qumran, which also let the “gates” of hell represent the aggressiveness of the underworld (1QH 3. 16:19). According to Matthew 16:18, these gates of hell will not be able to subdue the Church. It is Gehenna that inspires false teachers (Matthew 23:15) and inflames evil tongues (James 3:6), and powers of destruction ascend from hell to rage on earth (Rev. 9:3, 11; 11:7).

Reason easily understands that in the next life the just will be made happy as a reward of their virtue. But the punishment of evil is the natural counterpart of the reward of virtue. Hence, there will also be punishment for sin in the next life. If men knew that their sins would not be followed by sufferings, the mere threat of annihilation at the moment of death, and still less the prospect of a somewhat lower degree of beatitude, would not suffice to deter them from sin.

Furthermore, if there were no retribution beyond that which takes place before our eyes here on earth, we should have to consider God extremely indifferent to good and evil, and we could in no way account for His justice and holiness. – Nor can it be said: the wicked will be punished, but not by any positive infliction; for either death will be the end of their existence, or, forfeiting the rich reward of the good, they will enjoy some lesser degree of happiness. These are arbitrary and vain subterfuges, unsupported by any sound reason; positive punishment is the natural recompense of evil.

Accordingly, we find among all nations the belief that evildoers will be punished after death. The Egyptians spoke of a trial of each “soul” by 42 judges in the Du’at, or other world; the Iranians of an inquisition at which the divine beings Vohu Manah (“Good Mind”) and Sraosha (“Truth”) play a leading role. While Plato and subsequent Greek writers make mention of three judges – Minos, Aeacus, and Rhadamanthus – who assess the dead in Hades. The worthy were thought to be then assigned to some special blissful area in heaven, like the Egyptian “Field of Peace,” the Iranian “Mansion of Song,” the Greek Elysium, or the Valhalla of the Norsemen. Conversely, the unworthy were relegated to a region of torture, that is, to a “hell,” like the Tartarus of the Greeks.

Such belief is likewise attested among several peoples of the present day, for example, the Andaman Islanders and the Gabon and the Fon of Africa. Curiously enough, however, it is absent by and large, from the lore of American Indians. This punitive hell is a feature of most major religions. The various religions picture hell in different ways. But, in all, the idea of a hell implies that the universe is concerned with morality, and that men are punished for wrongdoing. Most peoples have thought of hell as a place. But some mystics have described it as a condition of man’s soul. Hells have been described as both hot and cold. Hindus, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians regard hell as a temporary dwelling where a person is cleansed of sin, punished, and re-educated. Moslems picture hell as lasting forever.

This universal conviction of mankind is an additional proof for the existence of hell. For it is impossible that, in regard to the fundamental questions of their being and their destiny, all men should fall into the same error, else the power of human reason would be essentially deficient, and the order of this world would be unduly rapt in mystery. This however, is repugnant both to nature and to the wisdom of the Creator.

In contemporary Christian theology there is a reducing tendency to describe hell (*like heaven*) as a state rather than a place, and not to identify it as the condition of misery endured by those who reject salvation through Christ. This situation is predominant among the evangelical believers who preach the modernist stance of a kinder Gospel and not reaffirming the other side of the Good News that is '*the lost will suffer eternal conscious punishment in the next life*'. They keep showing only one side of the coin and forgetting that for a coin to be acceptable and valid, it must have both head and tail. If we take the cross seriously we must also take judgement seriously and by this we confirm the existence of hell.

Even though, the conviction of God's omnipotence led to a belief in the resurrection of the dead. The expectations which were prepared for by prophetic sayings like the following: God "will swallow up death" (Isa. 25:7; cf. I Corin. 15:54); "Your dead will live, their corpses shall rise" (26:19); "He [the Servant] shall prolong his days" (53:10); "I will open your graves" (Ezek. 37:12). This is not to say that it is no longer possible to believe in hell.

Furthermore, in the New Testament, a new perspective is opened by the witness of the apostles that God had raised his Christ from death, confirmed by the information that some women had found the tomb empty (Matt. 28:6) and that several disciples had “seen” the risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:3-8). These experiences were understood to indicate that hell is real, moreover, hell and death had already been defeated by the Lord of life, as Peter was reported to have proclaimed at Pentecost (Acts 2:24, 27, 31). Some of the righteous were also reported to have risen together with him (Matthew 28:52).

The provisional and the definitive victory of Christ over death and related powers was a central point for Paul (Romans 6:9; 8:38-39; I Cor. 15:4), and he exclaimed with great joy: “O death, where is your victory?” (I Cor. 15:55; Hos.13: 14). Although he avoided expressions for hell, Paul certainly reserved some place for the dead until their resurrection, describing this as a peaceful sleep) (I Thess. 4:13) or a punishment in fire (I Cor. 3:5). This of course does not suggest that it is no longer possible to belief in hell.

In my own opinion, the few men who, despite the morally universal conviction of the human race, deny the existence of hell, are mostly atheists and Epicureans. But if the view of such men in the fundamental question of our being could be the true one, apostasy would be the way to light, truth, and wisdom.