

Jude 7 in the Navajo Bible

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T'áá ákót'éego Sádam áadóó Gomárah índa binaagóó kin hadaas'áá nít'é'ígi diné baa'ihgo na'ageh yee tsí'deeskai, áadóó ahaa nináldeehgo ałdádanoolníí nít'éé', éí hool'áágóó hodook'ááł bee até'él'íigo ti'hoo'níhgíí yee k'ééhodidoodlííł bee na'nitinii át'é. (Jude 7)¹

In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. (Jude 7)²

Introduction

In what way are we to understand the author's intent? If "eternal fire" means that once it starts it never stops, how can Sodom and Gomorrah be mentioned in this context? These towns are located on land that is now under the southern end of the Dead Sea. They were destroyed thousands of years ago and are not burning now. The fire that destroyed them was in some way similar to the eternal fire that destroys the wicked – hence the present comparison – and yet without question it has gone out. In fact it did not burn very long. These are the facts of the case. How are we to understand them?

The Story of Jonah

The word "eternal" means different things in different contexts. If we want to mean only one thing in each and every context where it occurs, some passages are going to remain puzzling for a very, very long time. Consider one example.

To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God. (Jonah 2:6)

This quotation is drawn from the story of Jonah. You will recall that Jonah was a prophet of God who went west when God told him to go east. He thought He was running away from God, but as he sailed westward toward Spain³ a violent storm arose and the sailors threw him

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

² English Bible quotations not otherwise marked are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version®*. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

³ Where Jonah went was "Tarshish." There were many places named "Tarshish," or some variant of that term. The apostle Paul came from "Tarsus." Some think that Paul's native city was named for a pagan deity, Tarku (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarsus_\(city\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarsus_(city))), but I disagree. The name is Semitic in origin (from the Canaanite root *ršš "to smelt") and means "smelter," i.e., a place where metal is manufactured. There were towns with this name all up and down the Mediterranean. In one place Isaiah says, " Wail, O ships of Tarshish! For Tyre is destroyed and left without house or harbor" (Isaiah 23:1). If Tarshish is in

overboard in order to make the storm go away. He was swallowed by "a great fish [*dāg gādōl*]" (Jonah 1:17) who kept him in its belly for, well, that's the question. How long did the fish keep Jonah in its belly?

But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1:17)

How can "forever" (Jonah 2:6) be the same as "three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17)? But in this context it is. The two verses were written by the same man and describe the same events. Jesus Himself confirms the story and uses it to describe what His own experience would be in the tomb.

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:40)

The Navajo Text

Where does the Navajo text fit in all of this? The words *éí hool'áágóó hodook'qát bee até'él'íigo ti'hoo'níhígíí yee k'ééhodidoodlít bee na'nitinii át'é* are not easy to translate into idiomatic English, but mean roughly, "this is an illustration of the destruction caused by the suffering and torment of [fire] that will burn forever." The words *hool'áágóó hodook'qát* by themselves mean "it will burn forever." How else would you translate Greek *puros aiōniou* ("fire of eternity," i.e., "eternal fire")? To be true to the text we must translate this way. But to be true to the meaning we must interpret in a way that is consistent with other passages as well. Scripture must be compared with Scripture. Only in this way does the Bible become self-authenticating.

"Eternal" in the Context of Fire

Returning now to our earlier illustration, if the experience of Jonah is any guide, Jude is using the word "eternal" in a way that might not mean what we think it should mean. If we feel uncomfortable with this, consider how words get their meaning. We're starting with a Hebrew story that was already old when Jesus was here on earth, referenced in Greek, translated into English (and Navajo in this case), and we want all the word meanings to be retrofitted to twenty-first century English usage? We can't interpret the Bible in such a way and get meaningful results. The Bible must be allowed to interpret itself. If a biblical term is used a certain way in the Bible, based on reasonable comparisons, that's what it means.

The context here involves fire. Is there any way to understand the word "forever" in this biblical context that allows Jude's statement about Sodom and Gomorrah to make sense? I've said we can't impose modern meanings on ancient words, but there might be modern parallels to ancient situations that would bring those ancient meanings into focus. Consider the twin

the east, why should the inhabitants of the town wail because Tyre is destroyed in the west? In another place he says, "Cross over to Tarshish; wail, you people of the island" (Isaiah 23:6). The ships that Solomon built, which sailed probably to India (1 Kings 9:26), are not the ones we are talking about here. They sailed from Ezion-Geber, which looks to the east. Tyre looks to the west. Jonah sailed to a Tarshish – whichever one – which was as far away from Ninevah as he could possibly go.

towers of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. When terrorists flew airplanes into these towers there was a fire. Could anyone put the fire out? Is it still burning?

In Jude 7 the word "eternal" appears to mean "inextinguishable." Just like the fire which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, no one will be able to put out the fire that destroys the wicked. It will burn and burn and everything in it will be burned up. And it is not only the case that the wicked will be burned up – root and branch, totally – but the elements on which all of this happens will be melted in the heat.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. (2 Peter 3:11)

Our entire biosphere will be cleansed by this fire until every trace of sin and sinners is completely gone. Then the fire will stop burning. We know this because the fire is described in Revelation 20. It comes down from God out of heaven, consumes the wicked and melts the air they breathe and the ground on which they stand.

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. (Revelation 20:10)

There's that term again – "for ever and ever" (Greek *eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*) – and again it occurs in the context of fire. So it never goes out. Right? The problem with saying so is that these events happen here, on the surface of Planet Earth but in the Revelation 21, the very next chapter, John talks about God recreating the earth and moving the capital of His government there. That's where the saints of God will spend eternity, i.e., the part of eternity that follows the 1000 years of Revelation 20. Let's pause and pick up some of these pieces before going on.

They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. (Revelation 20:9)

Revelation 20:9 is the passage that says the wicked are marching "across the breadth of the earth" when fire comes down and devours them. So events do not occur under the ground somewhere in a firey place that's burning now and will burn on and on for all eternity. They occur on the surface of the earth, where we live now.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:1)

God recreates the old earth and makes it a "new earth." The "new heaven" in this context would not be a new universe, but a new atmospheric heaven – the mantel of oxygen and other elements that we breathe every day. This is where the redeemed of all ages will live in the future. If the fire of God comes down to destroy the wicked here, and if the redeemed will spend eternity here, is there a conflict? Does Scripture contradict itself? No. Not if we map these events correctly onto time. The one happens, then the other.

Discussion

At any busy intersection in any town in America you can see this same principle at work. First cars take a turn, then pedestrians take a turn, crossing the same intersection but going a different way. It is the same intersection, but there is no problem so long as the events occur at different times. In the present case, first the fire cleanses the earth (see Revelation 20), then God recreates the earth (Revelation 21).

We've got to make our theology from the facts given us in Scripture. The focus must remain on our biblical starting point. Our task is not to formula theories, but to accept Scripture. It would be a mistake to reverse the process and get these priorities backwards.

In the present case, the fire comes down (see Revelation 20:9), not up. The wicked are destroyed in the flames (same verse), which means they have not already been destroyed at the time they enter the flames. The fires of hell are the means by which the wicked enter the second death (see Revelation 20:14). They are alive when the fire falls on them; they are dead afterward.

Just here is a point that would be easy to miss, but must not be missed. Notice Paul's words, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). If the wicked are alive when the fire falls, is that their punishment? If they are dead after the fire has done its work, is that their punishment? The wages of sin is living forever in flames. True or false? That's not the way Paul says it. What he says again is, "For the wages of sin is death." From this I draw that the death of the wicked is their punishment, not the way in which this death is brought about. The process by which the second death occurs will be painful. Make no mistake. But the pain which accompanies it is not the wages of sin in the sense of Romans 6:23. The death which follows this pain is the punishment. From this death there is no return. It is a death that truly has no end.

Conclusion

"Eternal" fire, in the above Bible passages and many others, is fire that no one can put out. This does not mean it never stops burning. Only that no one can put it out. It will do its work with spectacular completeness. And when it has, "Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty" (Malachi 4:3). We cannot trample down the wicked – their ashes cannot be under our feet – unless our feet are where the wicked are, or were. These things happen in one place, but at two times. First the wicked burn, and finish burning, then they are ashes under our feet. We walk where they have burned. Thus, hell is here and the new earth is here. First the one, then the other. We can't simply choose which of the Scriptures to believe. They are all true.