

Matthew 5:21-22 in the Navajo Bible

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Ałk'idáá' diné kóábidi'ní nít'ée'go dasidoots'áá', Diné ts'ídá doo diyííhéeł da, áko t'áá háiida diné adziisxínígíí haa náhódóot'íííi bááh jílíí doo. Nidi shí ánihidishní, T'áá háiida ła' hak'is bich'í' háhóochíídígíí bee haa náhódóot'íííi bááh jílíí doo, áádóó t'áá háiida hak'is yááb'jii'íídígíí naat'áanii danilíinii yee aa nídaat'íinii bááh jílíí doo, ında t'áá háiida hak'is nilíinii, Diigis nílí, bizhdííniídígíí biiniinaa hool'áágóó kọ' bii' ti'hoo'nííh bááh jílíí doo. (Matt 5:21-22)¹

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. (Matthew 5:21-22)²

Introduction

Where the Navajo has *hool'áágóó kọ' bii' ti'hoo'nííh* ("eternal torment in fire"), NIV has "the fire of hell" and the Greek means literally "the Gehena of fire" (vs. 22). There's no question about the word "fire." That's in the text. But does "Gehena" really mean "eternal torment"?

Discussion

"Gehena" is a Hebrew word. What it means is "Valley of Hinnom." This was a place just down from Jerusalem (Jerusalem is built on a hill) which served as the city dump. All the trash was burned there.

In the Greek New Testament the word "Gehena" is used twelve times, always as a euphemism referring to the place of future punishment.³ It is not that the wicked will suffer in the Valley of Hinnom close by the literal site of Jerusalem, but the word "Gehena" is used as a symbol represent the place where they will eventually suffer. It is a good symbol. In Gehena there was always a fire smoldering. Clearly the idea of "torment" is present. What about "eternal"? Can we get that from Gehena as well? If we were to go to Jerusalem today, would we find the fires of Gehena that Jesus saw and talked about when He was here with us still smoldering?

If not, then how did people start to think of Gehena as a place where the fire never goes out? And is it true that they never went out? Think about this with me for a moment. A person

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

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³ See Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6.

takes a bag of trash to the dump and lights a fire to burn it. As s/he is leaving, someone else brings a bag of trash. That burns too, maybe using the same fire. Then someone else comes with another bag of trash. And so on. Each bit of trash burns up and is gone, but people keep bringing more. In this sense the fire continues.

Does this illustration provide a complete explanation of how God punishes those who reject Him? An explanation, yes, but a complete explanation? Are there some Bible verses that could help us fill in the details? It is not my purpose to be exhaustive in this brief note, but merely to sketch some background for the use of a common biblical term.

Conclusion

God does not leave unfinished business. He does His work completely. When He created our world, He created all of it. When He forgives us our sins, He forgives all of them – completely. When He punishes the wicked, He lets their punishment drag on endlessly and it's never ever done. Right? I don't believe it that way. In Malachi God tells us the wicked will be ashes under the soles of our feet (see Malachi 4:1-3).⁴

God does all His work completely. It's not that He's thorough in some things and not in others. When He gets through with Satan, Satan will be no more. His angels and all his followers will be more. And it's not just that he gets rid of Satan. He also makes an end of Satan's idea, i.e., the thought that there's anything to gain from disobeying God will be gone and never come again. More than this, not only with the wicked be burned up – entirely and completely. "That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat" (1 Peter 3:12).

Who's going to escape a fire like this? Not anyone God wants to puts there. And when the fire has done its work – as it surely will, thoroughly – God will recreate the entire earth and make it completely new again (see Revelation 21:1).

⁴ See <http://www.thebooklet.org/Documents/Papers/NavBibleMal0401-03.pdf>.