

Revelation 20:14 in the Navajo Bible

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Nít'ée' aniné áádóó hool'áágóó ti'hoo'níh éí kọ' be'ek'id góne' aheest'ííd. Díí kọ' be'ek'id biyi'di naakidi ná'ní'né át'é. (Revelation 20:14)¹

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. (Revelation 20:14)²

Introduction

There are ways to get this verse wrong. At issue is the meaning of the word "Hades." We can't turn to the Greek for help with the meaning of the word because this *is* the Greek word (*hadēs*). People didn't know how to translate it so they just brought the Greek word over into English. In many places it simply means the grave. But not always.

What Does "Hades" Mean?

In Matthew 11:23 and Luke 10:15 the city of Capernaum is brought down to Hades. In the case of a city, because cities don't die like people, it can't be equated with death and would be expected to have more to do with destruction. In Matthew 16:18 ("and the gates of Hades will not overcome it") "Hades" is neither death nor destruction. Jesus is talking here about a church. In this context the word has more to do with evil and its power over people's lives. In Luke 16:23, from the story of the rich man and Lazarus, "Hades" is a place of torment. And yet, in the midst of all his troubles, Job longs to be in a place described as Hebrew *š'ól*, Greek *hadēs*. No one longs to be in a place of torment. He is talking about the grave. For him the grave would bring welcome relief from what he was then going through.³

Torment is not the same as destruction. If you destroy someone, and they aren't a living person anymore, they no longer feel pain and the idea of torment would lose its meaning. In the case of torment, people do feel pain. In the case of destruction they don't – at least when the process of destroying them has gone to completion. On the other hand, evil has nothing to do with feeling pain. Sometimes evil feels quite good. That's why people are drawn to it. From this it should be clear that the word Hades is used in a variety of different ways.

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

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³ Other passages where the word *hadēs* means "grave" are Proverbs 1:12; 30:16; Habakkuk 2:5; Isaiah 5:14; 14:9. Elsewhere it is translated "death," as in Proverbs 1:12; 27:20; Song of Solomon 8:6; Job 26:6. Sometimes it stands in poetic parallel with "destruction" (Proverbs 15:11; 27:20; Job 26:6), sometimes with "death" (Song of Solomon 8:6; Habakkuk 2:5).

What Does "Hades" Mean in Revelation?

Destruction, evil, torment, and death or the grave are four very different things, but all are described in the New Testament with the word "Hades." What does this word mean in Revelation? Four times in the book of Revelation "Hades" appears together with the word "death" (1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14), so in Revelation – including Revelation 20:14 – it would make sense to say that "Hades" is the place where dead people go. Anyone who has ever buried a loved one will understand what I'm saying. The grave is the place where dead people go. Hell is a place where living people go. That's why John calls it the "second death," i.e., because hell fire brings about or causes the second death. You can't cause someone to die if they're already dead. Hell is a place where living people go – at least that's what the following passage says.

But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. (Revelation 19:20)

If we reject salvation and are lost, do we really think we will be treated differently from those who are destroyed with us? If the beast and the false prophet are "thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur," do you think you won't be – if you reject what God offers? Alive is different from dead. People roundly misunderstand these things. I hope you agree that to miss the difference between being alive and being dead would be a very big misunderstanding.

Discussion

If we take the Navajo translation just as it reads, eternal torment (*hool'áággóó ti'hoo'nííh*) is thrown into the lake of fire. What does this mean? Are wicked people removed from eternal torment and placed in the lake of fire? But in this model isn't the lake of fire itself a place of eternal torment? So they would be going from one place of eternal torment to another. How many are there? This is not the only problem the model has. It's much simpler to accept a biblical view of death, in which "the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten" (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. His context for saying that "the dead know nothing" was of common experience – the present life. His context for saying that "they have no further reward" was also concerned with the affairs of this life. He was not saying the dead will not face a future judgment, or that there is no heaven or hell. He is saying, when you die, you're dead. You don't know about anything that happens after that. From other passages we learn that after this period of unconscious sleep in death, the wicked are raised to life to face punishment for their bad deeds and the righteous are raised to life to receive their reward in heaven. There is no conflict between the two claims (1) that dead people are truly and fairly dead and (2) that when Jesus comes He will raise people to life – "some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). Both claims are true, but they refer to different things. We must keep them separate, "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, KJV).

Conclusion

On the one hand we have death, on the other hand a place for dead people (Hades), i.e., the grave. Correctly understood, Revelation 20:14 shows that the lake of fire brings an end to death and dying. It is our world's last and final expression of death and dying. When people are thrown alive into the lake of fire and die there, no one else will ever die after that. That's the end.

But if this is the end, what does the word "eternal" mean? The word "eternal" is used in some passages, but not this one. That's my point! Navajo *hool'áágóó ti'hoo'nííh* ("eternal torment") is not an appropriate translation. How do you throw something into itself? God is not doing that here. He is not throwing one form of eternal torment into another form of eternal torment. He is throwing the grave and every memory of death into the lake of fire to be consumed and gone forever.