

## Universalism – Did Jesus Believe in Hell?

by Norman Walford 10th January 2014

I had a serious shock a couple of months ago when a Christian friend of many years' standing whom I have always held in high regard started dropping hints that he was moving in the direction of Christian Universalism—the doctrine that says that all men without exception will eventually be reconciled to God, that the penalty for sin is not everlasting.

I confronted him with the question ***So do you think that Jesus Christ himself believed in Universalism?*** and after some prevarication he replied that there might indeed be some hints and suggestions in that direction. In response I've taken a few hours out to go through Mark, which I generally regard as the archetypal gospel narrative to see what 'hints and suggestions' might come out. Any trawl through a segment of the Bible undertaken with a specific question revolving in your mind will always yield fascinating and often surprising results, and for me this was no exception. This is what I found.

In the first box here I've listed the passages from Mark's gospel—all familiar ones—that struck me on a straight read-through as being relevant to the question in point, which can really be equally phrased as ***Did Jesus Christ believe in Hell?***

The first thing that struck me looking at these passages is just how little mention there is of Hell (*Gehenna* in the Greek original). In Mark it's only found in one passage [9.43-47]—three mentions [43, 45 and 47] which all say essentially the same thing. Comparing Matthew and Luke, we find that Luke who is a gentle soul has left this rather inflammatory passage out altogether. His only mention of Hell elsewhere is of God having the **authority** to throw people into Hell [Luke 12.5]. It doesn't say he actually uses it, just that he can. Matthew seems much happier with Hell than the others. He includes both these mentions, plus a few more [5.22, 23.15, and 23.33].

*3.29. Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin*

*8.35+. Whoever would save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?*

*9.43+. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire... (and likewise for feet and eyes) ... where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.*

*10.27. For all things are possible with God.*

*12.40. They will be punished more severely, (or They will receive the greater condemnation).*

*13.13. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*

*14.35. (Jesus) fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."*

*15.34. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

*16.16. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*

And that's it (for the gospels). Quite surprising really—at least it was to me. I had expected a bit more. And as for the rest of the New Testament—there's even less. Paul never uses the word. Acts never uses the word. James uses it once in an unrelated context. Essentially nothing. This is in marked contrast to the Koran, by the way, which goes on and on about Hell, eternal fire, eternal punishment and so on. 77 mentions of Hell in the Koran altogether. But in the New Testament not. It seems the New Testament writers prefer to talk about the positive side of life, not the negative.



So where does this take us? Jesus says very little about Hell but what he does say is quite strong. It is however worth remembering that the scariest bits of it—the worm that doesn't die and the fire that is not quenched—are Jesus quoting directly from Isaiah 66. In Isaiah it seems to be a battlefield metaphor—the aftermath of a great battle in which the corpses are either being piled up to be burnt or else being left to rot (worms, maggots and so on). The fire in Isaiah is the fire of disposal rather than the fire of torture. Still nasty but not as bad as it could be.

The second theme that comes out of Mark is the theme of punishment or condemnation [12.40 and 16.16]. This is judicial

punishment, as for a crime committed, as we might speak of being 'condemned to death'. It is contrasted with being saved—either you are

punished/condemned, or you are saved. Punishment can be either temporary like prison, or permanent as in a death sentence—no question of making you a better person there. In 12.40 Jesus suggests that some may be punished more severely than others—difficult to know quite what to make of that. Does it just mean that some are more culpable than others?

The third theme in Mark [3.29] is the eternal sin that is never forgiven. This is disturbing. If it's never forgiven, presumably there is never reconciliation. This also brings in the question of what

exactly is meant by **eternal**. Nowadays it usually means something that goes on and on, through time, indefinitely with no end. However it can also mean something more like 'outside time'. The Greek word actually translates more literally as 'in the age to come', less time-focused than we usually think of it. Having said that, the statement '*shall not be forgiven in the age to come*' still seems to have a certain finality about it.

I think my Universalist friend is drawing some comfort from the repeated phrase **with God all things are possible** (10.27, 12.35). This he takes to mean that if God wants to he is capable of reforming and sparing everyone; and if he is a kind, loving God he would wish to do that, and since he can he will. I don't really buy this argument. This is the 'If I were God I'd do things differently' argument that comes up in all kinds of contexts in Christian discussions. I'm not God, I don't know much of what God is like, but I know that he's not much like me. Every day I am confronted by the reality that things that are trivial to me are hugely important to him, and vice versa. I can never safely predict his reactions to anything, still less assume that they will mirror my own.

Jesus explores this argument in 14.35—*God, you can do all things; so you can spare me this ordeal and do it another way if you so choose; so do it!* Then he quickly recognizes the dead-end he's heading into and backs off. No human brain, even that of the incarnate God, is in a position to pass rational judgment on God's choices. Jesus backs off, and we have to do the same.

So where does all this take me?

A note on GEHENNA and HADES

*The King James Version did us the inestimable disservice of translating two unrelated Greek words, Gehenna and Hades, by the single English word of Hell. Recent translations have generally tried to put this right, but the confusion is deeply rooted in the psyche of the Christian church and may take a couple more centuries to root out.*

*Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom outside of Jerusalem, was the city rubbish dump in Jesus' day (and probably a site of human sacrifice in earlier times) and becomes by analogy the Hell of the New Testament.*

*Hades is adopted from the Hades of Greek mythology. Originally it was the name of the god who ruled over that shadowy underworld, but later it became the name of the underworld itself. It seems to correspond to the Old Testament Sheol, the place of the dead. After that it gets complicated. Interestingly it is Hades, not Gehenna, that is cast into the lake of fire in Revelations 20, Hades where Dives goes in the parable of Dives and Lazarus, and it is the gates of Hades which will not prevail against the Christian Church.*

1. Probably to a conception of Hell a lot less clear-cut than I might have imagined, stretched somewhere between the Jerusalem municipal rubbish dump and a shadowy underworld borrowed from Greek mythology.
2. There's a lot less about Hell than I thought there would be, but it's still there and—if Jesus is to be believed—its somewhere we do well to avoid going to at all costs.
3. There's talk of punishment and of destruction but not of torture—certainly no indication of a God in any way taking pleasure anyone's pain, which I find comforting.
4. As to whether Hell has a finite end or goes on forever—I suspect it's the wrong question to ask, presupposing as it does a continuation of the current space-time continuum into the age to come, which is far from certain.
5. I haven't found anything to actively support my friend's doctrine of Universalism which I suspect owes more than a little to a combination of wishful thinking and a kind heart.
6. But in the meantime I feel a lot better about the whole thing than I did before.
7. For a long time now I've gone to extreme lengths to avoid using the word *Hell* where humanly possible, particularly in conversations with non-Christian people. I much prefer to talk about *separation from God* or *exclusion from the Kingdom* which I think portray the reality in a more helpful way. My brief study leaves me feeling fully vindicated in this, and in fact I think I will try and avoid the word even more from now on.