

Special Note from Rick

I hope you enjoy reading this sample from my new book

Hell? No! Why You Can Be Certain There's No Such Place As Hell.

I spent many years agonizing over the belief that God might actually subject billions of people to the worst sort of torture for all eternity, that is, until I decided *to find out for myself* if there was any legitimacy to the doctrine of everlasting punishment. I poured over the entire Bible, but in a way I hadn't done before—setting aside *everything* I had been *told* it means, to read every passage in its own context! I especially focused on the original texts of the gospels to find out what Jesus actually had to say, if anything, about endless retribution. And sure enough, it was then that I finally began to understand there is *no way* a fate such as Hell awaits anyone, not according to the Man from Galilee!

I can hardly describe the sense of liberty and joy I felt as I began to understand the original words of Jesus about the nature of God that makes the existence of Hell an impossibility!

Once you're done reading this chapter, I'm confident you'll want to know more by getting my entire book. You can wait until then, but if not, just go to my website www.thereisnohell.com and order your complete copy right now!

Did Jesus Believe in Hell?

Have you ever been the victim of an ugly rumor that a lot of people heard and just assumed it was true? I bet that hurt a lot, didn't it? However, if some refused to believe that rumor because they knew you well enough to find it completely incredible, I bet you really appreciated their friendship more than ever. As an example, let's say someone took something you said, twisted its meaning or added some nonsense to it, and then began passing it around to suit some personal agenda he had and, sadly, some people just believed it without question. And to make things worse, let's say that you thought these same people were your friends! But don't you know the only people who would believe that ugly distortion of what you really said are those who've never really listened to you, those who didn't really pay attention to how you've conducted yourself, and those who were anything but your friends! By contrast, the ones who stood up and refused to accept the distortion are those who did carefully listen to you, those who did paid attention to see how you actually conduct yourself, those who really are your true friends.

Well, if you can appreciate those who don't just believe what they hear, but get their facts straight first and hold back from making assumptions in the meantime, then you've already got a pretty good idea about what's going on with those who spread the awful rumor that Jesus believed in and actually taught that there's such a place as Hell...and can appreciate those of us who know there is *no way* he could have ever done so! Those who think Jesus believed in Hell have just never really gotten to know what he was like. They haven't really considered all the things he said about who he was. They've never taken the time to objectively examine what he stood for, what his attitudes were and how he reacted to situations. In other words, if they honestly think that Jesus intends to one day start burning people alive for all the rest of eternity...they don't really know him!

But this is not to say it's ever too late to get a fresh introduction to the real Jesus, to begin looking objectively at *who* Jesus really was and, perhaps more importantly, why that should matter when examining the doctrine of Hell.

Was Jesus The Word of God?

Before we delve into the details of what Jesus actually said and did, let's establish the importance of the historical Christian claim that Jesus was "The Word of God." What exactly does this mean? Well, let's break it down, starting with the use of the singular "Word" as opposed to the plural "words." Think about the modern expression, "the *word* is on the street," which doesn't mean people are passing a singular word around...but a *core message*. Using the singular form is a way of describing a unified expression, especially when preceded by the definite article "the." So "The *Word*" means "the unified, core message" or "singular expression."

Next are the words, "of God." This is crucial because we're *not* talking about a unified message that God was *sending* to us which could be about anything or any one (in which case the wording would have to be "*from* God"), but the "of" is letting us know this unified or core message is *about* God!

Now let's move to the means. Jesus was a flesh and blood person, not some voice coming out of a cloud. So The Word or The Expression is to be found in the earthly *person* of Jesus, not just what the person Jesus *said*, important as his words were, but in the *totality* of his life! To say a person is The Word of God is to say *everything about him embodied and expressed and revealed what God is like!*

Therefore, to say that this *person* Jesus was *The Word* of God means that Jesus' life message was more than "*a word*," not *another* message, not just some additional information we can tack on to all the other information previously provided by various Old Testament prophets, but equally as valid. No, but to say Jesus was *The Word* means *he* was the *full* expression of God! The term implies that, whatever God was trying to communicate before about who He was, what He was like and what He wanted from us...was *incomplete!* If Jesus was *The Word* of God, this means that the complete message that had, for whatever reason or reasons, not gotten through before, has finally all been laid out through the *life* of this one person! To put it another way, if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

Does God Have a Double Standard?

Believe it or not, though, many Pseudo-Evangelical ministers say that we cannot determine what God is like by the way Jesus acted! They would have us believe that the manner in which Jesus conducted himself has nothing to do with what God wants *us* to do! They would have us think, for instance, that if something really upset Jesus, such as when the disciples once suggested asking God to rain fire on an entire village of people, that it wouldn't necessarily have bothered God in the least to have answered their prayer!

Now, take a moment to let this soak in because I'm not fussing about semantics here. This point is huge! What is today passing for Evangelicalism though it, in fact, denies that Jesus was/is The Word, says that God could have (through Jesus) told *us* not to lie, but if He wants to, He can lie all he wants! Though Jesus taught *us* to return love for hate, God, supposedly, can return hate for hate if He so chooses! They would further assert that, just because Jesus healed everyone who came to him, that God not only doesn't want everyone to be relieved of their suffering, but that He will be the direct cause of eternally more suffering! In other words, they try to say that God has a double standard, one set of rules for us, and no rules for Him, that Jesus had come merely to inform us of what *we* are supposed to be like, not to show us what God is like!

And what's really strange is that these are the same ministers who insist Jesus *is* God. If so, then Jesus was not the Expression of God, but one who concealed what God was really like, apparently, just so we wouldn't see His dark side!

“Sovereignty”—Code for Amorality

So just how does the Pseudo-Evangelical leadership justify the idea that God would issue one set of rights and wrongs *for us*, but reserve for Himself the prerogative to do just the opposite? Well, a lot of them do it with the help of a theological concept that has this really fancy name—“sovereignty.” In a nutshell, to say that God is sovereign means that He can do whatever He wants because He not only has the *raw power* to do whatever He wishes, but there is *nothing within His nature* to keep Him from doing anything! The reasoning is that, since God is the One who makes all the rules of the universe, He is under no obligation to abide by any of them!

But all a “sovereign deity” really boils down to is a being who is completely *amoral*, one who rules arbitrarily, by decree, on the basis of “might makes right.” Of course, those who promote the sovereignty doctrine (who are almost, invariably, quite sure of *their* eternal security in Heaven) are quick to invoke the doctrine to explain why so many billions of souls will suffer eternal damnation, though, if they were not so incredibly short-sighted, they wouldn't feel so secure about their eternal hides. Here's why--if God's nature were as they define it, then staying on the good side of such a deity would forever be in question. A deity who is truly sovereign is also under no obligation to stay true to anything he may have promised to anyone! Think about it. Which is more difficult for a deity who has no moral limits to do--to torture most every one for all eternity or to fib about sparing anyone? If God could have damned anyone, just because he makes the rules and can just as easily change them on a dime, then any promise made to the so called “elect” can also, just as easily be revoked!

Fortunately, there is Someone that God does have to answer to after all—Himself! Thankfully, we learn from Jesus that God has an *internal* set of restraints that, odd as it may seem (but only because of the sadly mistaken popular notions most of us have absorbed from popular beliefs), *God is limited by his intrinsic character!* More about this point in the later chapter “Why Hell Retards Morality.”

Why We Can't Simultaneously Imitate and Disobey God

For the sake of argument, though, let's indulge the "Sovereign God Camp" for a bit, long enough to ponder what they are to make of the many admonitions to believers in the New Testament to imitate God. If God gets to do whatever He pleases, and He has no moral limits upon or within Himself to restrain what He might do, then couldn't they take (and sadly, throughout the history of Christianity, many have, in fact, taken) these admonitions to mean that they, too, can indulge in every evil under the sun? If God can kill, if God can torture, if God can return evil for good, then under the guise of imitating God, believers could readily dismiss every one of Jesus' teachings to save lives, relieve suffering and return good for evil!

Ironically, those who are very quick to accuse those who point out the relatively few interpolations in the extant copies of the scriptures of "taking scissors to the Bible," are often the very same people who cut out *many* passages, such as Ephesians 5:1, to justify the doctrine of Hell--"Be ye, therefore, imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ also loved us." If, indeed, God gets to do all sorts of things that are only wrong for *us* to do, then this passage makes no sense. If God intends to torture people, imitating Him in this respect could hardly be characterized as "walking in love"! Thankfully, this passage does, indeed, reveal the seamless connection between God's behavior and the loving walk of Jesus that we are to also imitate.

One more point; if we were to imitate a God who does things He tells us not to, then we would end up disobeying him! So if there is a Hell, then any passage declaring God wishes us to follow His example would be invalid, because we couldn't then imitate *and* obey Him, again, if God tells us to do what He says, not what He does. But admonitions to imitate God make perfect sense for a God who cannot do one thing and ask us to do another. It would follow, then, that the loving way Jesus behaved was, indeed, a precise mirror of how God behaves, not the antithesis of what He is really like.

Now, it's beyond the scope of this book to prove, one way or the other, if Jesus actually is God or The Word of God. There are a ton of other books that do a fine job with this historical Christian belief. The reason I bring it up, though, is because almost everyone who makes the claim that Jesus believed in and taught about Hell, also claims to believe that he was God and/or God's Word! They are just like the people mentioned at the beginning of this chapter who have believed the worst, ugliest rumor about someone, without giving a single thought as to whether there were any facts to back it up, all the while claiming to be his friend. How is it that they can accept the idea that God could be so brutal and, yet, claim to believe Jesus was the living expression of what God is really like? The answer is that, either they don't *really* know Jesus or, if they ever did, their view of him has since been severely distorted.

If we really get to know the Jesus in the gospels and, thus, get to know God, what type of being do we see? Do we see someone who was vindictive? Intolerant? Punitive? No, just the opposite! Time and again, Jesus is forgiving, patient and compassionate which, if he is God's Word, means that God is forgiving, patient and compassionate.

The Doctor of All Doctors Wants the Sick in His Presence

How many times do we hear those who say God is going to burn billions of people forever try to justify it by saying, “God is so holy that He cannot tolerate sin in his presence, so He must remove and punish sinners forever!” Sorry but, again, if Jesus was God’s Expression, then we know nothing could be further from the truth because, time and again we see Jesus going way out of his way to hang out with sinners, to get as close to them as he can!

And sure enough, the religious leaders of his day who determined that Jesus could not have been sent by God because his actions contradicted their view that the Divine was too holy to mix with sinners, gave him a lot of flack for doing so. For example, all the synoptic gospels contain the story about how he was ridiculed for eating with publicans and sinners (Mt. 9:11; Mk. 2:16; Lk. 5:30, 15:2), but his response was, “It’s the sick who need a doctor.” Though it’s not expressly stated, the type of doctor Jesus was not only allowed *anyone* in his office, no matter how sick, but he also made house calls with no discrimination! In other words, Jesus’ attitude toward sinful man shows that God is anything but incapable of being around sinners, that were it even possible for Him to be separated from any of us by sin (which is impossible, by the way, if God is also omnipresent, everywhere), He would then come to us, which, if you think about it, is exactly what He did in Jesus!

If anything, the *more* sinful a person is, the more the Doctor of all Doctors is inclined to grab his divine black bag and travel as far as necessary *to get even closer* to him! He doesn’t get upset or angry or offended to have them and all their sins “before him.” On the contrary, God’s Expression looked up the most sinful of people and had dinner with them? So the living, walking message of Jesus is that God reaches out to the sinner, and gets as close to them as he can...so he can help them! Of course, it’s not that he’s apathetic about the things we sinners *do*! He wants the sinning (which, by the way, means “hurting people”) to stop! So the more we are sick with the disease of sin (the inclination to hurt others and ourselves), God wants all the more to heal us of it!

Speaking of healing, Jesus spent most of his time doing just that—healing the physically ill. Why in the world, though, would he heal those suffering from physical disease and injury if his ultimate intention was to make most of us suffer in the worst way? Why do we read in the gospels that, even when Jesus was exhausted, he had so much compassion that he kept on healing. If there were a Hell, then Jesus went way out of his way to send the wrong message, and, therefore, could not have been The Word! To still be The Expression of a deity who intends to torment billions, he should never have healed anyone. He would have to have told the sick and injured how their suffering was just a very small taste of what was in store, just a little head start on what they really deserve! Clearly, on the contrary, the point of Jesus’ tireless compassion toward the suffering revealed God’s endless compassion and eternal desire to do the same.

Hades’ Realm

If you hang around Pseudo-Evangelical preachers long enough and the topic of Hell comes up, you’ve probably heard this assertion: “Jesus preached twice as much about Hell as he did about

Heaven,” as if to say, “Since Jesus must have *really* believed in Hell, it must be real, so you’d better turn or burn.” But did the actual, historical Jesus of Nazareth really preach about Hell? Assuming the overwhelming majority of what is recorded in the existing copies of the gospels accurately represents Jesus’ teachings, we can be very certain that he did *not*.

Let’s begin by dispensing with the claim that Jesus preached more about Hell than Heaven, which turns out to be completely false, even if we include both of the different words translated into the word “Hell” in the King James Bible (the transliterated, Aramaic word, *Gehenna*, along with the Greek word *Hades*). Even with this accommodation, Jesus would have only mentioned Hell a grand total of 14 times, and that’s only in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The gospel of John does not contain the term at all! By contrast, Jesus is quoted in the gospels as using the term “Heaven” 135 times, almost 10 times as much! (For those who think I’m making this up, just get out any exhaustive concordance, look up the words and add them up for yourself.) If Jesus actually warned of Hell, surely, he would have talked about it at least as much as Heaven, not 10 times less.

No, the reason the modern versions of the gospels have Jesus talking about Heaven 10 times more than Hell, is simply because he *never* preached about Hell in the first place! And in addition to the sheer volume of textual evidence, we can also be sure Jesus never believed in Hell because of the way the doctrine would have directly conflicted with everything else he is recorded to have taught.

But let’s first consider the two words which are translated as Hell in most English bible translations, beginning with the more familiar one--*Hades*. Most people might recognize this word since *it comes directly from Greek mythology*. Of the 15 times Jesus had supposedly spoken about Hell in the existing copies of the gospels, in four of these places, the Greek word was *Hades*—Matthew 11:23; 16:18 and Luke 10:15; 16:23! *Hades* was thought by the pagan Greeks to be the eternal abode of *all* the souls of all the dead but, in common usage, the term often referred to the part of the Greek underworld where those who were being punished for having offended the gods in some way were eternally imprisoned. In other words, to say that Jesus actually spoke of Hades as a real place would mean that he believed in a pagan myth, a pagan god, and an afterlife conceived in pagan superstition.

In all likelihood, *Hades* made its way into later copies of the original gospels, thanks to one or two scribes who had come from the large influx of pagan Greek converts to Christianity who imported their pagan beliefs with them. Unlike the Jews of Palestine or the Diaspora or Gentile proselytes to Judaism who dominated the first decades of Christianity, the pagan Greek converts were much more likely to make little to no distinction between their long held beliefs about the afterlife and what their new found faith had to say.

For the sake of argument, though, let’s just take a moment to really think through what it would mean for Jesus to have actually used the word *Hades* to describe some place in the next world where the unbelieving are tortured. As noted above, *Hades* is the name of the Greek pagan god who ruled over the underworld. Whenever we read *Hades* in any Greek text where the term is clearly referring to a *place*, we really should understand the word as an abbreviation for *Hades’ Realm* or the *Kingdom of Hades* (just as we do when a person’s name is closely associated with a

place, e.g., “Joe’s” as short for “Joe’s Restaurant”). Therefore, if those who insist that the four places where the existing copies of the gospels use this word are faithful renditions of the original autographs, what would this mean? Well, for one thing, it would mean that the Holy Spirit must not have inspired the Ten Commandments, especially the one that said, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” How could the same Holy Spirit turn right around and name a place God supposedly created after a *pagan deity* and, thus, place another god before Himself for all eternity in direct contradiction to one of his own commandments?

Moreover, was not the Omniscient Spirit the least bit worried that people might just get the pagan Realm of Hades confused with a place that was actually created by the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob? And why wait all through the centuries of the Old Testament to finally tell us about this place and, then, just by coincidence, give it the same name the pagan Greeks were calling their underworld after Zeus’ and Poseidon’s brother? Wouldn’t it have made a lot more sense to come up with something different, a lot sooner, and let the pagan Greeks keep their underworld name, and leave a pagan god’s name out of it?

OK, I’m teasing a bit here because, really, it’s blatantly obvious to any impartial observer that, of course, Hades only came to be a part of Christianity due to pagan Greek influence once gentiles came to dominate what began as a Jewish sect! There were very few Jews who would have felt in any way comfortable tying their views of the afterlife to what the pagan Greeks believed. No! What happened is that the belief in Hades came *directly* from the Greeks, pure and simple, and it never caught on with the early followers of Jesus who were all Jewish or Jewish proselytes. It was only *after* the Church became a Gentile Greek movement that the belief in *Hades* was added to the Christian tradition and then later on superimposed on Jesus’ lips.

The Gehenna Dump

Now, when it comes to the word *Gehenna*, which makes up the remaining 11 places where Jesus was supposed to have preached about “Hell”—Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33; Luke 12:5 and Mark 9:43,45,47”—the story is *very* different! Indeed, *Gehenna* is a Jewish word, Aramaic (a descendent language of Hebrew) to be exact. Literally, *Gehenna* means the “Hinnom Valley,” which was just outside of Jerusalem and, at the time of Jesus, was the location of the city dump!

Now, why should Jesus have ever found it necessary to talk about the city dump, and how in the world did Christians, centuries later, come to think he was talking about Hell? Well, it’s a twisted tale, so we’re going to take it one curve at a time, starting with a little Waste Disposal of the First Century 101. It’s important to understand that, 2000 years ago, there were no limitations as to what got put in a dump; not just household trash, but things like dead bodies, those of animals and even humans! While most Jews, even the poor, did everything they could to avoid it, sometimes the very indigent poor who died with no family or friends would end up having their bodies tossed into the Gehenna Dump. However, most of the human corpses that ended up in the Gehenna Dump belonged to those who had committed, or were thought to have committed, a capital crime against Rome!

Now, when the Romans first invaded and took over Palestine, it didn't occur to them that it was all that bad to cremate the dead. Greek culture which had, for centuries, heavily influenced Roman ideas about the afterlife, treated the human body as a temporary housing for what was really important and eternal, the human soul. Sure, they had their own funeral rites, and would probably have thought it debasing to toss a human body on a pile of trash where it would eventually be burned, but it wouldn't have aroused any particular disgust in that Roman and Greek funerals were concluded with the bodies of the deceased burned on pyres. All that said, the Roman government believed very strongly in using the most horrifying methods of torture and execution, including when they could, psychological elements of horror, to keep order over their subjugate territories. Once the Romans became aware of just how harrowing the mere thought of cremation was to Jews, though, they began to go out of their way to make crucifixions of Jews all the more horrifying by the disposing of their bodies in the Gehenna Dump. As bad as the physical suffering of the slow and painful death on the cross was, the *anticipation* of the humiliating mistreatment of one's corpse made it all the worse! Given the ancient notions the Jews still carried with them about Sheol and how a proper burial was the key to resting in peace in the next world, the idea of "going to Gehenna" was certainly a dreaded one, but not because of any sort of conscious, eternal torture by fire or any other means. (By the way, this is also why the gospels make a point of Jesus' body getting exceptional treatment by being buried in a tomb. Had it been common to do so, there would have been no reason to mention it.)

No, it was only many years later, when Greek converts to Christianity were trying to reconcile their imported belief in Hades with the words of Jesus that they began to *read into* his practical teachings about how to avoid a dreaded manner of death in the Gehenna Dump the notion of punishment in the afterlife. And it didn't help that, because they came from a very different culture and spoke a very different language and, therefore, didn't understand the many idioms of Aramaic, it was just a matter of time before a common expression about the burning of the trash and bodies in *Gehenna* was distorted into a belief that, in the next world, God punished people with fire.

So just what was the fire of the Gehenna Dump? Well, the only practical way of keeping diseases from spreading from ancient dumping grounds and, not to mention, to reduce the awful stench of all the rot, was to burn the trash *on a regular basis* (which is actually what people who live way out in the country, even in modern, industrialized nations, still have to do where there is no trash pick up). With giant mounds of trash regularly set on fire, there was always some smoldering within, a "never ending" fire. Consequently, anything dumped in Gehenna was going to, eventually, be reduced to ashes.

The revolting practice of dumping human bodies in Gehenna eventually generated an expression that had come into common use among the Jews referring to the final disposition of the corpses of the executed in or near Jerusalem. In the King James bible, it was re-translated from the Greek as, "everlasting fire" or "the fire that is never quenched." But this rendering doesn't give us anything approaching a good sense of the original Aramaic expression! A somewhat better way to convey the sense of this expression would be as follows: "Oh that murderer got the *non stop* Gehenna fire." It was somewhat like the expression that was common, just a few decades ago, referring to the criminally convicted who had received the death penalty by electric shock--"they gave him *the chair!*" Just as people in the year 4,000 might, in their ignorance, wonder if

criminals executed by the electric chair were given a Lazy Boy, not understanding the idiomatic reference, so do more than a few Christians to this day fail to understand (though they are often assisted in their misunderstanding by those who know exactly what the idiom meant) that the “unquenchable fire” of Gehenna was not a torture for souls in a next world, but a reference to the fate of Jews who had not only been condemned to suffer a horrific death, but whose bodies were subsequently desecrated in the worst way imaginable.

Now, just in case this explanation seems like a stretch (as, no doubt, those who want to perpetuate ignorance about its real meaning will claim), consider how modern American English, like ancient Aramaic or any language for that matter, employs many execution idioms that are gross exaggerations. Think of how often teenage girls say, “If I find out she’s flirting with my boyfriend, I’m so gonna kill her.” Or at the workplace, “...and my boss just threw me under the bus!” In the same vein, then, Jesus had, on a few occasions, referred to a horrific reality that hung over the Jews of Judea, the possibility of being put to death by the Romans in the most painful and humiliating way, using a common idiomatic expression that all his contemporary listeners would have easily understood in order to make some of his teachings stick.

A second point of confusion is the ignorance regarding another idiomatic expression about Gehenna translated in the King James Version as, “where the worm never dies.” As with the constant burning of the trash and the bodies of animals and, sadly, humans as well, the Gehenna Dump was notable for its immense infestation of maggots (“worms,” in the King James bible), so many, in fact, that they were commonly described as “beyond extinction.” But, unfortunately, this was poorly rendered as “undying.”

Once again, it’s important to understand that the language of Jesus had just as many idioms, metaphors and hyperboles as we have in modern English. But, sadly, people who have no scruples about taking advantage of the average, lay person’s ignorance of other languages don’t mind twisting what was a very well understood expression in Jesus’ day to suit their underlying agenda and distort his original message. What’s so odd, though, is how they’ve been able to get away with equating what translates into English as “where their worm never dies,” into “they will suffer eternal torture,” evoking some weird vision of eternally living, fire-breathing worms that are somehow necessary to ensure those cast into Hell won’t find any nook or cranny where the flames can’t reach them! Well, please allow me to go into gross detail to explain how so very wrong this interpretation is and why, if when you first heard it you thought it sounded very screwy, it was for good reason.

If you’ve ever been cornered into a conversation by someone who would just “never” stop talking (you know, the kind who will move, seamlessly, from one topic to another, “never” giving you a chance to politely excuse yourself to get away), and then later complained to a friend about how that rude individual “just went on and on *forever*,” then you should be able to understand how, in the language of Jesus’ day, the Jews of Palestine described the Gehenna Dump with an expression better worded as “where the maggots just never go away!” When Jesus was giving practical advice about how to stay out of trouble with the government, especially the foreign Roman rulers, he employed this expression, as a way of conveying just how repulsive an end of life it would be to end up in the Gehenna Dump, and have your body crawling with, what we might today express as “bazillions” of maggots.¹

In Matthew 5:21-22, for example, Jesus teaches that getting angry with someone for no reason could end up landing you before a local judge who might fine you, that insulting someone could land you before a district judge who might throw you in jail, and how calling someone a fool could result in a deadly fight and being charged with murder before an imperial Roman judge who might have you executed and your body, subsequently thrown into the “Gehenna fire.” The context is all about legal judgments and their successively more serious, but quite earthly, punishments. It would make no sense at all if Jesus actually made a huge segue from his practical admonishments on how to stay out of legal trouble, to go off and claim that God would punish someone with eternal fiery torture just for calling someone a fool,” but this is the kind of distortion one hears all the time!

The same earthly context goes for Matthew 18:9, “if thy eye offends thee, gouge it out. Better to *enter life* [emphasis mine] with one eye than to end up in Gehenna.” Pause for a moment to consider the second part of this expression. It does *not* say “enter Heaven,” but “enter life.” If Jesus had been talking about Heaven, he would have said “enter *death*.” But he was talking about some place where there were *living* people, thus the term “life.” Yes, indeed, he was referring to some place where one could really live it up, but certainly not a place where anyone had to die first to get there, especially since his point is all about avoiding death so you can get to this place.

So what place is it? Well, Mark 9:47 provide a little more clarity as to what Jesus meant: “And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into *the kingdom of God* [emphasis mine] with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell [Gehenna] fire. Clearly, “entering life” and “entering the Kingdom of God” were not referring to the eternal afterlife, but to the earthly Messianic Kingdom! This was actually just another way of saying, “if you have to choose between going blind or getting the death penalty and not getting a proper burial, it’s the lesser of evils to be blinded, and still be alive when the Messiah comes to set up his earthly kingdom.” How can we be sure? The context, itself tells us! Unless it’s possible to find yourself in Heaven missing an eye, these passages are no more talking about Hell than they are Heaven! (By the way, don’t fall for the explanation that this passage is merely referring to having only one eye at death. The text plainly speaks about “entering life” with the clear implication that whatever life that is one has entered, he would have only one eye while he is there, not just at the outset).

Knowing what *Gehenna* really means, then, tells us the King James Bible translators (and sadly, most English bible translations ever since) were quite wrong to equate going to *Gehenna* with going to Hell. In the 12 instances where Jesus is said to use the term *Gehenna*, the context gives no indication whatsoever that he was referring to being tortured by fire, in an afterlife, for eternity. Going to Gehenna was a very bad way to die, but it was about a manner of death, nothing more.

Another one of the reasons why there is so much confusion about the term *Gehenna* has to do with yet an expression which made perfect sense in Hebrew and Aramaic, the language Jesus actually spoke in, but which gets twisted into something else entirely in Greek and English—“losing one’s soul.” The typical Hell, Fire and Brimstone sermon interprets this expression to mean “the invisible part of one’s being ending up in Hell.” The assumption is that we are not just made up of a physical body with our self-awareness coming from our brains, but that our sense

of who we are comes from an invisible “spirit” or “soul” that is contained in our physical body or brain. Death means the body and brain dies, but one’s “real self” or “soul” continues in some other realm. This idea dates back to ancient Greece. Philosophers, perhaps most notably, Plato, argued very strongly for the belief that the physical human body was not “real” because it was temporary, but our soul is what was eternal and lasting.

But we must understand that this notion of an independently existing soul trapped in an earthly body in the material world was foreign to the ancient Hebrews! The Hebrew word for soul, NEPHESH, had a very different meaning. It was a much broader term that included one’s character, the totality of one’s value as a person, one’s legacy, one’s meaning to one’s self, family, tribe, world and God. Sometimes, we use the word “soul” in English in this same sense, perhaps mostly in poetic ways. For example, “After he caved into his primitive desires, he sensed he was losing his soul, no longer living up to his full, intellectual potential.”

This is the kind of loss Jesus was referring to in Matthew 10:28, “Don’t fear those who can only kill the body, but who can *destroy* [emphasis mine] both body and soul in Gehenna. The original Greek word here is APOLESAI, from the root word APOLLUMI, which means, “to utterly destroy, annihilate, kill, abolish, perish, put to death.” Since Hell implies an eternal existence, Jesus had to be speaking of some other place, and when we understand that Gehenna represented the utter destruction of who one was, it makes perfect sense to use the word APOLESAI. It cannot possibly be a reference to retaining existence in the spiritual realm of Hell or Hades because he was clearly talking about a place where both, I think I’ll repeat that, *both the body and the soul are destroyed*, i.e., made to no longer exist! Since no physical bodies go to *Hades*, but only the souls of the damned, and the souls there continue to exist for eternity, *Gehenna* cannot be the same thing as *Hades*!

The same thought is conveyed in Matthew 16:26 and Mark 8:36-37 where Jesus says, “it’s not worth it to gain the whole world only to lose one’s soul.” He’s not talking about going to Hell or Hades in the future, but losing one’s dignity and self-worth, the denigration of one’s memory and the ruin of one’s legacy in the same time frame, i.e., during life. “Losing” a soul is just another way of saying it no longer exists! Otherwise, he would have to have said, “...it’s not worth it to gain the whole world only to have one’s soul preserved and sent to a place of punishment in the next world.”

One more example of Jesus referring to *Gehenna* as an earthly place is found in Matthew 5:29-30 where he says:

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole *body* [emphasis mine] should be cast into hell [Gehenna]. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish and not that thy whole *body* [emphasis mine] should be cast into hell [Gehenna].

If what Jesus was saying here meant that a person’s non-corporal self was going to go to Hell, then why does he talk about “thy whole *body*”? The physical human body doesn’t go to Hell, not

Illustration Five

The Gehenna Dump

The Most Desecrating Place to Dispose of Corpses

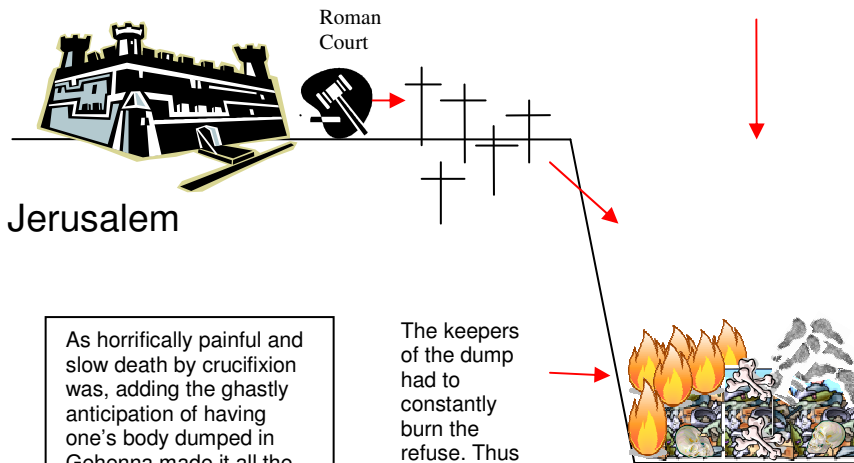
(At the Time of Jesus)

When Jesus warned against having one's *entire body* end up in Gehenna, e.g., in Mt. 5:21-22, he was actually talking about running so afoul of Roman Law, that one might not only be executed, but have one's body desecrated.

The Roman practice of disposing of the corpses of those they executed by crucifixion by putting them in the Gehenna Dump represented the worst manner of death for Jews.

The Gehenna Dump was located in the Valley of Hinnom, just outside of Jerusalem.

Decades later, after Christianity had spread beyond Palestine and Greek converts began to fill up the early church, they didn't understand what Gehenna was referring to. Geographically it was foreign, and culturally, they wouldn't have seen any problem with immolating the dead. Sadly, some confused it with a punishment in the underworld of Hades.



Jerusalem

As horrifically painful and slow death by crucifixion was, adding the ghastly anticipation of having one's body dumped in Gehenna made it all the worse for the Jews of Jesus' day. Though the belief in the need for a proper burial to rest in Upper Sheol had given way to resurrection hopes, fear of improper or no burial had become deeply lodged in the Jewish psyche by this time, and continues to this day.

The keepers of the dump had to constantly burn the refuse. Thus the Aramaic expression, "the fire never goes out in Gehenna" for the lasting shame of its bodily desecrations.

The corpses of the executed were violated by being consumed by both the fire and the unclean maggots.

In spite of the immolation, the infestation of maggots ("worms") was impossible to eradicate. Thus the Aramaic expression, "the worms never die in Gehenna" for the lasting ruin of one's legacy after having one's body dumped there.

In 1611, the "King James" Authorized Version (KJV) of the English Bible is published, in which the Greek word Gehenna is incorrectly translated as "Hell," and subsequently translated in the same way by many English translations ever since. Of the 15 places where the KJV places the word "Hell" on Jesus' lips, Gehenna accounts for 12 of them.

according to ancient Greek mythology and not according to later, Greek influenced, Christianity. Clearly, Jesus is not referring to Hades or any other place that existed outside our physical world. No, he was speaking about the Gehenna Dump, the actual, real, physical valley outside of Jerusalem. Therefore, it was quite wrong of the King James Bible translators to have made out his usage of the word Gehenna to mean Hell, which reduces the number of references to Hell, based on the term *Hades* to three passages only.

Did Jesus Believe in a Pagan Deity of the Underworld?

Even if one insists that Hell must be real because of the 3 passages in which Jesus is quoted as using the word *Hades*, the argument in favor of Hell actually becomes even weaker. Let's start with Matthew 16:18. In the previous verses, Jesus gives his disciple Simon a new name, Peter, which is famously known to mean "rock" or "stone." And then he makes a very interesting claim: "...and upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hell [*Hades*] shall not *prevail* [emphasis mine] against it." Now, I put the word "prevail" in italics because I'd like you, the reader, to think for a moment about what it is that gates to a particular area do—keep people in or out or both! But if we read the next verse, it becomes clear that we're talking about gates designed to keep people locked *in*: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven..." In other words, even if this passage were an accurate quote of Jesus talking about Hell, then the most one could say is that it exists, but no one in it, not any more!

I know this is a tough one, because, believe it or not, believers are almost always told that the meaning of this verse is that the Church is somehow always going to survive the attacks of the Devil. It's a bizarre interpretation! For starters, the "gates of Hell" are taken to mean "the Devil and his demons" and, perhaps mostly because of the King James use of the somewhat now antiquated word "prevail," the imagery is flip-flopped to make the gates of Hell into some sort of *offensive* weapon to attack the Church with! Confusing to say the least.

So let's sort this out. First, the original Greek word translated as "prevail" is more properly represented by the word "hold." With this translation, the statement becomes much more clear: "...and the gates of Hell will not *hold* against it [i.e., the attack of the Church upon Hades]!" So, instead of the standard interpretation which makes the Church out to be some sort of a weak garrison that is just barely managing to stave off invasion, trying to hold onto their faith against a powerful assault by the Devil and, presumably, all his demons from Hell, the real idea behind this verse is that it is the *Church* that will be the powerful force, on the offensive, going on the attack, as an ancient army often did back in those days, assailing the gates of a city and knocking them down!

Now that we have the correct image, let's move on to what the message is behind it. If, as Jesus is quoted here, the gates of Hell are not going to hold, and the Church is going to knock them down, then what is the subsequent result? Clearly, the entire point is that everyone who is trapped inside of Hell, would be able to escape! We're not talking about temporarily cracking open the gates to let some out, but that they are permanently destroyed. And if this were not clear enough, the very next statement has Peter receiving the "keys" to heaven. Therefore, everyone who was trapped in Hell gets out and then, with Peter's help, they all get to go to Heaven.

For the purpose of this discussion, it's not relevant to concern ourselves with some of the other interpretations which have been made of this passage (such as whether or not this means Peter was the first Pope, and whether or not the pope had the ability to discriminate as to when those who are languishing in Purgatory could go to Heaven). In all likelihood, this entire passage was inserted into a copy of the book of Matthew (with some admittedly Roman Catholic overtones), but if anyone wants to insist that it was not, they can certainly do so, but only at the peril of making the idea that Jesus believed in a permanent Hell even more unlikely!

Now, let's look at the second passage, the famous story of the Rich Man and Lazarus found in Luke 16:19-31. I've already pointed out that for Jesus, a devout Jew, to have used the word *Hades* to describe a place God was supposed to have made and sustains, is impossible. There is no way that he would have in any way affirmed the existence of a pagan god and the underworld he was believed to rule over. So, on this basis alone, we can readily dismiss this entire story as either an interpolation or a gross distortion of whatever Luke may have originally written. But there are other huge problems with it. For one thing, there is no explanation given for why Lazarus goes to Abraham's Bosom, and why the rich man goes to *Hades*, other than for the fact that, according to Abraham, Lazarus had suffered a life of poverty and the rich man had lived a life of comfort. How many times do we hear those who use this passage, which they insist we much take literally and not some sort of parable in order to justify the doctrine of Hell, go on to take the rest of it just as literally? How about never! If they did, then they would have to believe that being rich is enough to send one to Hell, and being poor, enough to send one to Heaven! But as we hear all the time, especially in recent decades, the Pseudo-Evangelicals have no problem whatsoever with gathering as many earthly riches as they can and are quick to condemn the poor as cursed by God and undeserving of any help.

The other give away is the description of both places as being an upper and lower part of an underground cave, separated by a chasm. Clearly, this was nothing more than a revamped version of Sheol in which the upper portion was renamed Abraham's Bosom and the lower part, what used to be called the Pit of Sheol, into *Hades*. One need not have a doctoral degree to see that the older belief in Sheol was reworked thanks to the influence of pagan Greek religion. This process, whereby different beliefs of different origins are merged together, is actually very well documented and is known as *syncretism*. It occurs when people are told they must accept a new set of beliefs though they're not prepared to be rid of their old ones. In such cases, the human tendency is to attempt a reconciliation of the different or opposing principles, practices and or stories. While the Jews were resistant to Greek religious and philosophical influence, Greek converts to Christianity naturally tended to connect their new found beliefs to what they already believed, lacking the historical, cultural and social background to understand the very different views the Jews had about the afterlife. In all likelihood, the real origin of this tale came from a Greek convert to Judaism, a proselyte, who, upon learning about Sheol, superimposed his imported belief in Hades onto the Pit.

The only other place where Jesus is said to have employed the word Hades is in a complaint he made against the city of Capernaum in Luke 10:15 and Mark 11:23, "Will you be lifted up to the skies, no, but brought down to Hades." Clearly, Jesus was speaking metaphorically in this instance. He was no more speaking of an entire city going to Hell, than the literal possibility of

a city floating up to Heaven. Once again, the original word Jesus probably used was Gehenna, but some scribe along the way decided to replace the word with Hades. While we don't hear the exact reason why Jesus was disappointed with the *leaders* of Capernaum (not with *everyone* who lived there, by the way), he was merely pointing out that they were headed for an unseemly end, not in Hell, but a shameful end to their rule, that their social and political "high" was going to be short lived, and that they may very well end up being executed by the Romans and their bodies tossed like so much trash into the Gehenna Dump or if not, to suffer some similar, precipitous downfall.

Variable Temperatures in Hell?

Another point that needs to be mentioned briefly is the tendency to reinterpret Jesus' references to degrees of rewards or disappointments in the coming earthly kingdom as somehow referencing Hell. Mt. 11:20-24 and Lk. 12:47-48 tell us that some will be rewarded more than others and some will be chastened more than others, which makes complete sense when we understand Jesus was talking about the new imperial Messianic administration in which the faithful are elevated and the unfaithful are reduced in societal status. But these passages make no sense if we're talking about being burned alive! The difference between the pain of being burned at temperatures of 400 degrees or 400 million is rather moot!

What About the Apostle Paul?

Though the main thrust of this chapter is to point out that Jesus did not believe in Hell, it's helpful to note that the Apostle Paul, the same person whose letters make up more of the New Testament than anyone else, *never once* mentioned *Gehenna*, nor *Hades*! If, as we're told, Gehenna is the same thing as Hell, one would think that Paul would have talked about it at least once, but he didn't! Now, he was probably quite aware of the Gehenna Dump and the Aramaic hyperboles related to it! But Paul was a Jew of the Diaspora, raised in Tarsus, a Greek town. His writings were to Greek converts to Christianity, so it would have made no sense to bother explaining what would have seemed an eccentric, Jewish taboo.

To repeat, Paul never mentions *Hades* either, and this should tell us a lot! Since Paul's ministry was focused almost entirely on winning over Gentiles, Gentiles who were either themselves Greek or who had been immersed in Greek culture their entire lives, then surely it would have been extremely important to inform these lost souls of their impending doom immediately after death unless they converted! They most certainly would have understood exactly what place he meant, had he done so, for Hades' Realm was very familiar to them. All he would have had to explain is that the real God was not Zeus, but Yahweh, and that they didn't need to fear angering any other deity other than the One he preached about. Of course, it might have been quite a challenge to explain why the God of Jews would send people to a place named after the familiar pagan god of the underworld, only to then be informed that no such deity ever existed!

But if for any reason this were the case, as we are told by the Pseudo-Evangelical leaders and their ministers, then he would have had to make the case *somehow*. But he did no such thing, and the reason is obvious--because Paul the Apostle no more believed in *Hades* than in any other pagan myth. And there was no need to explain that there was some similar place that originally had an Aramaic name, *Gehenna*, because neither did he believe it was some place of torture in the afterworld.

Soul Sleep

As a matter of fact, Paul did not believe in a separation of the body and the soul at death. He believed in soul sleep, as did most Jews in his day, especially since he had been a Pharisee. Since this concept was very different from what his converts were accustomed to thinking, he had to go to a great deal of trouble to explain to what happened after death and how it would be very different from what they had been told. Instead of an immediate separation of the soul to some spiritual realm, he taught that the dead would be physically resurrected on the day that Jesus returns to initiate a world-wide, earthly kingdom, reigning from Jerusalem. The believers would be rewarded with very esteemed appointments in the coming kingdom's administration, and the unbelieving would serve them, most as lowly serfs, though it's clear from what he states in his letter to the Colossians 1:20 and II Corinthians 5:18 that everyone would eventually be reconciled to God. In any case, he did not think that, in the meantime and, much less, for all eternity, the unbelieving would be tortured in Hade's Realm.

While it's not a "deal breaker doctrine," nor necessary to the support of this thesis, it is notable that Jesus also believed in soul sleep. When he was approached to come and heal the dying daughter of Jairus, only to arrive after she had died, Jesus was very adamant that she was not truly "dead but only sleeping" (Mt 9:24, Mk. 5:39, Lk. 8:52). Some try to argue that Jesus believed in the existence of Abraham's Bosom and Hades by quoting his comment (in Mark 12:27 and Luke 20:30), "He *is* the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob, therefore He is not the God of the dead, but of the living." However, even a brief look at the context of this statement reveals he was speaking to a group of Sadducees in favor of the belief in the *resurrection*. His point was not that Abraham, Issac and Jacob were *conscious* in some spirit realm, but that they were not dead in the utterly permanent sense of "never going to be consciously alive again." Jesus, Paul and most Jews, therefore, understood the dead to be in a temporary state of unconsciousness, very similar to (if not the same thing minus breathing) natural sleep.

Getting People to Dismiss the Big "Puzzle" Picture of the Gospels

Before going further, I'd like to explain in more detail how so many have succeeded in turning Jesus' actual teachings inside out, all the while giving the false impression that they are being faithful to every single word God provided to us in the Scriptures.

Here's how it works. New converts are told, repeatedly, that every word in the Bible is directly inspired by God. The Bible is often referred to as "*The word of God.*" To reinforce this idea, preachers are taught (literally, they're instructed in Bible college, in courses specifically designed to tell them how to preach) to authoritatively claim the Bible is infallible, void of any contradictions. Of course, they rarely bother to make any distinction between the books we have today that we call "the Bible" and the original manuscripts which, unfortunately, were lost long ago due to the ravages of history. Many don't even bother to read the Bible for themselves and, even the few who do, never bother to inquire as whether there might be some errors in our modern renditions of those original autographs. The vast majority simply listen to what their preachers or favorite televangelists tell them it says and they, in turn, only quote from selected parts of the Bible, those verses that, especially when taken out of context, suit their ulterior agendas.

This deceptive seduction is very similar to the way in which a high pressure car salesman will first demand that a potential customer sign a vaguely worded "commitment" paper that offers few details on the car deal. Then, the salesman disappears for a while, supposedly trying to convince his boss to sell the car for such and such a price, only to return with the news that the best he can do is a much higher price! Of course, what he's really doing is emotionally manipulating the buyer. He's hoping the customer will still feel obligated to uphold his end of the phony bargain, even though he has no intention of doing the same at his end, the old Bait and Switch! The buyer is overcome by the sense that he has made a commitment and may not even realize he was cornered into buying a car for a price he really couldn't afford.

Similarly, potential converts are told they must accept every word of the modern Bible as inspired by God, long *before* they've had any chance to read it for themselves. They're not informed about the historical position of Protestant Christianity (as well as that of the largest and most broadly represented gathering of Evangelicals in modern times to give a definitive statement on the inspiration of the scriptures, known as the Chicago Conference on Biblical Inerrancy) regarding the divine inspiration of biblical texts which clearly *applies only to the original autographs*, not to any of the many, many copies which followed over the centuries that followed.ⁱⁱ The Pseudo-Evangelical leadership gives the false impression that there have been no changes along the way, though there most certainly have been. Fortunately, these changes are few in number and, were it not for their steadfast propagandizing, they would ordinarily be quite apparent, even to a novice Bible reader. The reason why is because they glaringly stand out from the context of all the rest, just as one can accurately distinguish between the intended picture of a jigsaw puzzle even though pieces from another puzzle were mixed in and forced into certain places.

I should add, at this point, that none of this is to say that the modern bibles we have are completely or mostly inaccurate. Nor should anyone think that, just because the Greek manuscripts we have contain some tampering, that it's impossible to be sure what the original "jigsaw puzzle picture" looked like. Actually, what's happened is that Pseudo Evangelicals have managed to get their followers to dismiss what they would otherwise clearly see with their own eyes when looking at the big picture the gospels present. However, they've managed to redirect their focus onto a handful of those "puzzle pieces" that should never have been there in the first

place! In effect, they say, “you have to re-imagine the big picture on the basis of what this or that little piece shows.”

Now, let me take a moment to explain just how crafty a lie this is and how it employs a very well known propaganda technique—the “Either/Or” fallacy. First, a believer is told, over and over again, that the gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were inspired by God. But make no mistake about it, the Pseudo-Evangelical hierarchy is well aware of the fact that those original writings are long gone due to the ravages of time! All we have left are copies of copies of copies, and there some discrepancies between them. But even though they *know* that some very contradictory things were added to the gospel texts along the way, they make it seem as if the ordinary believer has no other choice than to believe that every word *of the modern Bible* is the infallible Word of God or to reject the whole thing as a lie! Since their unspoken agenda hinges on getting people to believe that Jesus believed in Hell, they intentionally steer their converts to think the handful of adulterations of the original gospels found in the later copies are just as inspired as (if not more than) the original autographs! By so doing, their flocks are cornered into accepting even the most bizarre of passages, though they are so contradictory to all the rest! Then, while paying lip service to the view that every word is inspired, they get around it by *reinterpreting* what Jesus actually said to make it conform to the few words that have been falsely placed on his lips.

Here’s a great example. In John 12:32, Jesus makes an unequivocal statement as to how many people will be saved, “if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw *all* people unto me.” He doesn’t say when or how, but he does make it clear how many—*all*! Of course, leave it to those who insist this passage can’t mean what it plainly says to find a way to make it say something else. One of the most popular false reinterpretations of this verse is to take the word “draw” and say, “Oh, you see. This just means that Jesus will ‘try’ to save everyone; his Holy Spirit will ‘try’ to attract everyone to saving faith, but not all will respond!” Well, sorry guys! There’s no way to justify this particular spin on the word “draw” as if Jesus were some kind of advertiser hoping to get his commercials out to millions in the hope that only a small percentage will actually “buy” his product! No, that’s not it at all! When he says, he *will* draw all men to him, the language denotes a *prophecy* saying that, in due time, at some point in the future, the very last one of all men *will come* to Jesus.”

In order to deal with the minority of converts who do manage to read the Bible and begin to notice a few passages are in complete contradiction with all the rest, they are told things like, “Oh, that’s only because you’re so young in the Lord, and have as yet to learn how to interpret the Bible,” which is just another way of saying, “pay no attention to those occasional pieces that don’t fit into the big picture, but let us tell you what the picture is.” They redirect their converts to the same passages over and over again, the ones that fit whatever pet doctrines they hold to and either play down the importance or change the meaning entirely of all the rest! When neither of those strategies work, they’ll dismiss Jesus’ teachings by claiming, “Oh, that was for a different dispensation (another time period when, supposedly, God’s rules were different from what they are today). And when all else fails, they turn to their argument of last resort, “Oh, yes, there are many mysteries, but God will explain them all once we’re in Heaven.” In other words, “Stop asking so many questions, and just believe what we tell you!”

Making a Brazen Serpent Out of the Bible

I want to underscore just how important it is to understand what converts to Pseudo-Evangelicalism are typically told about the Bible, as compared to what historical Protestantism and even their own scholars will admit to. It's a distortion that is subtle, but the impact is *huge*! What they hear over and over and over again is, "the Bible is God's Word!" And they say it with a lot of gusto, sounding as authoritative and sure as can be! Once someone believes that this book, often labeled "Holy Bible," often bound in leather with a gold trim on the sides of the pages, all of which is designed to convey "authority," it's really, really hard to discern that the truth has been twisted, ever so slightly, in order to manipulate the unwary believer into actually rejecting *most* of what's contained in that very same Bible!

Allow me to illustrate what's going on here with a story from the Bible, often known as the Worship of the Brazen Serpent. Way back in the Old Testament days (Numbers 21:4-9), when the children of Israel were wandering around in the desert with Moses trying to lead them to the Promised Land, the Israelites were attacked by a plague of poisonous snakes. So, as usual, Moses prayed to God for help and, in response, God told Moses to make a brass statue of a snake (or "brazen serpent" as it is called in the old King James Bible), place it on top of a poll, and give instructions to the Israelites that, if they are bitten by one of the snakes, all they have to do is look at the brazen serpent, and they would be healed. As a result, we're told, a lot of people were saved from death, and the plague finally abated.

Now, fast forward to several hundred years later, to the time of the Kings. Moses has been dead for centuries, and the main focal point of the worship of God was in the temple in Jerusalem, built by King Solomon. For some time now, the people had been told that they should not worship idols, unlike almost every other group of people who had tangible objects all over the place that kept them connected to their gods and goddesses...or so they earnestly believed. However, the Israelites had a lot of trouble adjusting to their very different way of practicing religion, especially since they had only one temple to Yahweh in all the kingdom! To be clear, it's not that the Israelites were forbidden only to have idols of *other* deities; no, they were not supposed to have any graven images of Yahweh either! To get any kind of earthly connection to God meant going on a long trip to the one and only temple and, even then, you had to stand outside because only the priests could get anywhere near the "Holy of Holies" on the inside. In other words, it was pretty difficult for the average person to have any sort of *tangible connection* to the Divine!

If this seems odd, bear in mind that, back in ancient times, most people were illiterate which, in turn, limited their ability to do a lot of abstract thinking. Today, we think nothing about praying to God silently, in our heads, but only because most of us have received a decade or more of education and trained our minds to picture things ideas and concepts. But without such training, the average Israelite probably felt very deprived of having anything "holy" that they needed to see or hear or smell or touch or taste, which made Yahweh seem very distant and hard to relate to!

Now, back to the Brazen Serpent. As it turned out, the Israelites hung on to it. We're not sure where it was kept for hundreds of years, but one day, whoever it was that was put in charge of

storing the Brazen Serpent (maybe an off duty temple priest or Levite, short on cash), blew the dust off of it and set it up in a shrine so people could come and check it out. Given the enormous holy object vacuum most of the Israelites felt, it's not too hard to understand why in no time at all they began to worship the Brazen Serpent! Not only did it fill a deep desire, but it was, technically anyway, a legal idol, an exception to the law against graven images! Nice loop hole!

Plus, this was no ordinary idol. It was an object that had actually served as the instrument by which the people of Israel had been saved from dying in the wilderness. We're told the people came and burned incense before the image (and no doubt, the caretaker made sure to have some on hand for a premium price!). One can almost hear the caretaker telling everyone, "The Brazen Serpent is the One True Image of Yahweh, the only one He put his stamp of approval on! Surely, if you've got any requests, making an incense offering before this 'Holy Brazen Serpent' will get Yahweh's direct attention!" After all, this was more or less what all the priests and priestesses of all the other gods and goddesses did. So, if one was trying to be faithful to Yahweh, but felt like there was something missing, something all the Gentiles got to do, then worshipping the Brazen Serpent was a very attractive option!

Eventually, though, a king came to the throne named Hezekiah, who was tied very closely to the priests of Yahweh in Jerusalem. One of the first things he did upon taking the throne (most likely because the priests were a little jealous of the competition and put a lot of pressure on him to do something about it), was to have the Brazen Serpent shrine destroyed (II Kings 18:4)!

What's the moral of the story? Well, human nature hasn't changed all that much since the Old Testament days, so we have all got to be careful that we don't fall into the same kind of trap, making a "Brazen Serpent" out of something that may seem to be as holy as can be, something as representative of God as you can get, so near to being his divinely inspired message to us as is possible in this world, but to be wrong on every count! Sadly, this is exactly what's happened with the Bible, especially among many, if not most, Evangelicals.

Instead of looking to Jesus, to the *person* whom, historically anyway, Christianity understands to be the Word of God in the flesh and instead of looking to the original writings of the gospels to understand as best as we can what Jesus originally taught through his preaching and through his actions, the Pseudo-Evangelical leadership has made an idol out of a book which is an assembly of the translations of the oldest copies of copies of copies of those original writings! Sure, the book we call the Bible is the *means* by which the written Word of God is received, just as the Brazen Serpent was the *means* by which God saved the snake-bitten Israelites. However, it is incorrect to say the *Bible is* the Word of God, just as it would be incorrect to say the Brazen Serpent was God! Just like the ignorant faithful of old were misled by the shrine-keeper of that metal snake, so today are modern believers uninformed that the *Bible is only the Word of God to the extent that it accurately renders what the original texts said!*

This explains why they go so far as to endow the modern Bible with sacred status, calling it "holy" or "sacred" or "inerrant." Also, they make sure that every convert will instantly become *persona non grata* if they should so much as *think*, much less vocalize, any doubt whatsoever that there could be any errors in any of the verses that are in the modern Bible. They have

cleverly seduced and led the unwary believer away from the actual Word of God to, yes, something similar, sure, something closely associated with Jesus, but not actually Jesus.

And they have reason for doing so! On some level at the top of the Pseudo-Evangelical leadership, they know their political and economic dominance depends on keeping their flocks weighed down with fear, fear of a deity who is cold, cruel and vindictive. They are acutely aware of the fact that the few verses that contain the belief in Hell were added to the gospel texts, and just how much it contradicts everything else Jesus taught! By insisting that the *Bible* is God's Word instead of honestly explaining that the Bible only *contains* the Word of God, they bully their converts into swallowing the doctrine of Hell, even when they are very reluctant to do so, even when they sense, deep down, that there is something extremely wrong with the idea that the God who is, in every other gospel text revealed to be so kind, loving, caring and forgiving, is somehow just the opposite!

Can We Believe Anything in the Bible?

All that said, let me assure that we don't need to go to the other extreme either! It is actually quite remarkable that we have enough existing texts from enough different parts of the Old World that dispassionate textual and literary scholars are confident we have a very good representation of what the original autographs said. This confidence arises from the methods experts in evaluating all historical documents have developed over the past 150 years to determine which of many texts and variations is *most likely* to be a fair representation of what was originally written. Ordinarily, they apply a strict regimen of *weighing* every passage according to specific criteria. Formally, they are known as the disciplines of textual and literary criticism. It's what historians have to do all the time when they're examining various accounts of, an ancient battle, for example. But in many, if not most instances, one doesn't have to have a doctoral degree to see where a text has been tampered with.

Perhaps one of the best examples of an ancient piece of literature that, over time, was clearly adulterated in later copies is the tale of Beowulf. In case you're unfamiliar with it, Beowulf is one of the oldest writings we know of that was written in English (about a thousand years ago). It's a heroic tale of a nobleman of the Geats, a people who lived in modern Sweden. We may never have heard about Beowulf, though, had it not been for Christian monks who took the time to record this ancient legend, so we can be very glad they did. However, they didn't exactly carry out this endeavor just because they wanted to preserve English literature! The tale is interspersed with comments that promote Christian ideas about God. This was actually a very common way the Church used to gain converts from paganism, which was still the predominate belief system at the time the tales of Beowulf originated.

So, just how can we tell the difference between what was in the original tale and what was dropped into copies of it later on? The *context*! Here are a couple examples from Beowulf to try for yourself:

It is sorrow for me in my mind to tell any man what malice and sudden
onslaughts Grendel has wrought on Heorot with his hostile thoughts.

Thin is my troop in hall, my war-band. Fate has swept thee away to the dread Grendel. God may easily part the bold enemy from his deeds. –VII

I have not heard such exploits told of thee, dread deeds, terror of swords; never yet did Breca or either of you two in the play of battle perform so bold a deed with gleaming blades—I do not boast of the struggle-- though thou camest to be the murderer of thy brother, thy near kinsman. For that thou must needs suffer damnation in hell, though thy wit is strong.
-X

Have any trouble? Well, if so, here are the same verses with the adulterations in italics:

It is sorrow for me in my mind to tell any man what malice and sudden onslaughts Grendel has wrought on Heorot with his hostile thoughts. Thin is my troop in hall, my war-band. Fate has swept thee away to the dread Grendel. *God may easily part the bold enemy from his deeds.* –VII

I have not heard such exploits told of thee, dread deeds, terror of swords; never yet did Breca or either of you two in the play of battle perform so bold a deed with gleaming blades—I do not boast of the struggle-- though thou camest to be the murderer of thy brother, thy near kinsman. *For that thou must needs suffer damnation in hell,* though thy wit is strong.
-Xⁱⁱⁱ

Hopefully, if you didn't catch them the first time, you're now smacking your forehead wondering how you could have missed what is now so obvious. What really gives these interpolations away is how the text reads without them. If you take them out, the story actually reads much more smoothly, and for good reason—that's how it was first written. To be sure, there are some texts in some copies of some ancient writings that are not easily discerned but, usually, this is only a problem when only one or a few copies of the original still exist. Thankfully, this is not at all the case with the gospels; there are a considerable number of copies, some parts dating back to the mid second century. Therefore, we have plenty of information to accurately piece Jesus' original message together into a clear picture. However, the Pseudo-Evangelical leadership prefers to pick and choose which texts to include in the picture of Jesus' core message on the basis of what suits their agenda and, thus, completely distort the picture, regardless of what all the other texts say!

When Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation in 1517 C.E., it was politically understandable that he took a strong stand on the "infallibility" of (what was then) the Bible. They had to find a counterweight to match the Roman Church's claim of the Pope's infallibility. But what we see today moves way beyond the need to compete with claims to divine authority to a much more sinister expediency—to protect and advance the agenda of the extreme wealthy and powerful. In a new twist on the saying, "keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer," a formula has been developed that has worked remarkably well. By superficially embracing "all" of the words attributed to Jesus, believers are virtually hypnotized into ignoring many, if not most, of his sayings that would otherwise cause one to challenge the claims of the wealthy and

powerful. At the same time, the average pew occupant is left with a proud sense of “standing true” to the belief that “every word” of the Bible is inspired by God (the Plenary Verbal view of inspiration as theologians call it)! This deception would be admirable for its simplicity were the effects not so damaging.

We could compare the simplistic argument calling for unquestioning acceptance of all existing texts to the witness statements of an automobile accident. Let’s say there are 4 different people who claim they saw a car smash into the front window of a convenience store. The first witness reports the car hit it straight on, going very fast. The second says the car was spinning “doughnuts” before it hit the storefront. The third person reports the car was flipping end-over-end, and finally, the fourth witness claims the car simply fell out of the sky! All these stories are recorded by a police officer and submitted as an “official report.”

Now, imagine the insurance adjuster reviewing these statements simply cobbling them all together, as if under some order requiring that he not doubt what any of the alleged witnesses reported, nor whether the person they reported to did any investigation to verify their reports! “Well, since we have an official police report, and no police officer would ever lie, the car must have first began spinning in circles, then turning end-over-end, then bounced up into the sky, and finally landed just in front of the store to run straight into it!” Regardless of how soon it was after the accident, it would be very naïve to think that the objective truth of what really happened could be ascertained by simply slapping together all the testimonies into one.

Instead, the smart way to make any sense of these different statements is to look for clues *within* them to find out which are reliable and which are not. There are quite a number of questions that ought to be asked in order to properly *weigh* the value of what each person says. Their proximity to the site of the accident is one. If a witness was far away, they’re not as likely to have seen what happened very accurately. What were they were doing at the time? Were they distracted? And what about personal prejudices? Let’s say one witness was a racist who, upon learning the driver was African-American, was much more inclined to think he was intoxicated and had not been in control of the vehicle. Another might have a skewed perception of the event because the store owner is a personal friend. I could go on, but hopefully, you get the point--to get an accurate, objective understanding of any event, given the weaknesses of human prejudice and perception, one has to carefully examine each witness to get at the real truth of what occurred!

Well, these are the same sorts of challenges we face when trying to make sense of the various copies of the sources for what know as the Bible. Thankfully, most of the “reports” (most of the gospel verses, that is) are in agreement with each other, and most of the remaining variations stand out very clearly. But Evangelicals are told they must believe *all* the existing texts *are to be taken at their face value, even though it means reinterpreting the majority of what the reliable witnesses are in agreement on in order to force them to be consistent with a few, very unreliable ones!*

For any who doubt this is the case, just try asking about the details. It’s amazing at all the various explanations Pseudo Evangelical preachers will resort to in order to force the contradictory verses to override all the rest. Some will just ignore or downplay the significance of the majority

texts. Others will reinterpret them in such a way that they come to mean something entirely different.

So instead of giving far too much weight to unreliable evidence and, then, remaking the big picture to suit them, they should imitate what any good jury would do. Going back to the accident analogy, were a lawsuit filed and a jury had to decide whether or not the driver deserved to go to jail for being unduly negligent, if not maliciously intending to cause the wreck, all the testimonies should be examined carefully and cross examined to get a clear picture of what really happened. Once we approach the *New Testament* (hopefully, it's plainer than ever why this term is used) in this objective way, it doesn't become difficult at all to determine what the real message of Jesus was. The evidence is actually beyond any reasonable doubt!

Undermining the Core Message of Jesus

The vast majority of the sayings and actions of Jesus promote the theme of caring about others. This should come as no surprise to anyone who is actually familiar with the gospels. Jesus is repeatedly saying things like, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Nevertheless, there's a lot of scoffing at the idea that the many passages telling how Jesus promoted a loving God should carry greater weight than the handful which contradict them. Sadly, the average lay person's lack of knowledge about how textual and literary criticism works leaves him vulnerable to rhetorical questions like, "How can you tell the difference?" when, actually, it's not that hard.

While the sheer numbers are convincing, there is plenty of other sorts of evidence we can also look to. Here's just one of the many techniques used to help screen out texts that were not part of the original: *internal challenge*. The gospel accounts include a number of passages in which Jesus was challenged by the religious experts of his day, and one of his teachings most put to the test was that of God's universal empathy and His call to us to imitate Him. Later copyists of the gospels who added in their own views were too focused on their personal agendas to fabricate, along with them, stories of Jesus' contemporaries calling him into question on the very points they were hoping to put beyond question!

Universal empathy was, indeed, a revolutionary concept. It was not easily understood and, much less, broadly received, especially by the established Jewish sects of Jesus' day. Then as now, this teaching didn't support those in positions of power who could far better get away with their cruelties as long as they could keep people believing God was like them, one who loved only those who did his bidding and cruelly punished everyone else.

Jesus' revelation, consequently, seemed like way too sweeping a concept, and the gospels record many encounters between Jesus and Jews who tried to get him to soften up on it—"How many times should I forgive?" "Who is my neighbor?" "Do I have to share my wealth with those in need?" But each and every time people made excuses, Jesus let them know, in no uncertain terms, how they were not getting it. His "stump speech" was, "God cares about *everyone* who is suffering, wants to relieve their pain and *so should you!*" But if, many years later, some scribe was hoping to ride on the back of Jesus' authority by falsely alleging he took a certain view would not very likely surround the claim with stories of religious authorities challenging the

view. This is why in the many places in the gospel texts where Jesus is having to defend his teaching on God's universal love is strong evidence of its originality. By contrast, there is no such questioning attending the handful of passages where Hell was placed on Jesus' lips.

So then, it only makes sense that, in Heaven, the place where the caring and empathetic message of Jesus would presumably be realized to its fullest extent, the last thing we'd expect to see is *Jesus himself* keeping the flames of Hell on full blast in order to cause and sustain as much suffering as possible!^{iv}

And it wasn't just what Jesus said, but how he acted that tells us more about his view of God than anything else! Let's consider the following gospel passages, taking note of what percentage of the suffering Jesus helped:

And his [Jesus'] fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him *all* [emphasis mine] sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them (Matthew 4:24 KJV).

But when Jesus knew it, he withdrew himself from thence: and great multitudes followed him, and he healed them *all* [emphasis mine] (Matthew 12:15 KJV).

Now when the sun was setting, *all* [emphasis mine] they that had any sick with divers diseases brought them unto him; and he laid his hands on every one of them, and healed them (Luke 4:40 KJV).

And the whole multitude sought to touch him: for there went virtue out of him, and healed them *all* [emphasis mine] (Luke 6:19 KJV).

Let me bring your attention to a couple things here. The more obvious should be the fact that Jesus healed *everyone*. There is no indication whatsoever that he limited his compassion for their suffering to any particular ailments, nor did it matter whether the persons were faithful Jews or not, "sinners" or not, rich or poor, thankful or unthankful, whether they believed anything else he said or not. If they were hurting, Jesus healed them.

Now, what might not be so clear, though it's definitely implied by these actions of Jesus—is that he didn't want people to suffer! Therefore, if one wants to argue that this exact same Jesus was, simultaneously, intent upon eventually inflicting the worst sort of suffering on many, if not most, of these very same people, which is precisely what the doctrine of Hell implies, then there would have to have been something seriously wrong with Jesus. Maybe, one could argue that he only intends to bring suffering to the unrepentant, but then why did he bother to help and heal every, single, last one of these throngs of people, regardless of whether they were repentant or not! Perhaps, it would make sense if he only healed those who accepted his teachings or those who believed he was the Messiah. But no such limits are mentioned! If, Jesus is "the same, yesterday, today and forever," then we would have to conclude that if he could not allow for even one person to go on suffering, no matter what the cause, when he was here upon the earth, then he could never stand idly by on the Day of Judgment and do nothing while billions of people—

some of them, the same ones he healed in the above passages—are tossed into a lake of fire to suffer even more!

Speaking of fire, we should also think for a moment about the very decent likelihood that a good number of those who were coming to him for healing had suffered from burns! Imagine how often people who, at this time, relied heavily on open fires for the preparation of their food and warmth in the winter, when there were no fire departments, when there were no smoke detectors, when there were no classes in fire prevention, and children and animals were running loose all the time, everywhere...how often someone was accidentally burned!

So, let's say very conservatively, that of all those who came to Jesus for healing, about 5% were burn victims, and Jesus healed every single one of them! But why should he have done that if, in fact, he was going to turn right around and inflict the pain of getting burned on many of these very same people? It's completely absurd to think so! And, yet, those who would have us believe in Hell are really telling us this is exactly what happened! That Jesus, being one with God, knew all along that all this healing he was doing was some sort of cruel trick, kind of like when a torturer allows his victims to recover from their wounds for a bit, just so the suffering will be all the worse when he really begins to let them have it!

No, what is plainly inferred from Jesus' *unconditional* and *unlimited* response to all those who were suffering is that God has the same characteristic, that God looks upon all of human suffering with compassion and wishes only to stop all of it, for all time, for every single one.

Is God Exempt From the Golden Rule?

How about the one teaching of Jesus that almost everyone has heard of—The Golden Rule! Luke 6:31 (and a very similar rendition in Matthew 7:12) quotes Jesus as saying, “as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.” Once more, this teaching makes perfect sense if Jesus was trying to help us understand that God is the Ultimate Empathizer! The Golden Rule sums up the whole concept of feeling what others feel, and acting in accordance with that connection.

Now, let's lay this most well known of Jesus' teachings alongside one of the most often used justifications for the existence of Hell—“that God has to punish sin.” Guess what? Both of these ideas cannot possibly have come from the same Jesus! Since sin is just another word for hurting others, and since we tend to do a lot (perhaps *most*) of our hurting of others after they have hurt us, then clearly, the Golden Rule is most important to keep in mind when someone hurts or sins against us, especially when that someone is “not one of us.” The Golden Rule makes no qualifications; there are no disclaimers about *who* should be treated the way we'd like others to treat us. By contrast, getting revenge or abiding by the Anti-Golden Rule, “do unto others as they do unto you,” is precisely what the so-called idea of “God's justice” is based on, with the exception that God supposedly goes on to hurt people *infinitely worse* than they could ever have hurt anyone else or Him...as if that were possible.

So ask yourself, “Why would Jesus tell us to follow abide by this Ultimate Empathy rule unless, of course, it’s because God is the Ultimate Empathizer?” To claim anything else is to say that He orders us to do something that He either can’t or is unwilling to do Himself! If there were a Hell, God would then be violating his own rule, far more than everyone else put together.

No! Clearly, this very famous teaching of Jesus let us in on something very important to know about God’s nature, that He is, indeed, the Ultimate Empathizer, that He could no more bear causing any one of us pain, than any normal mother could stand to see her child suffer. In fact, the teaching helps us understand Jesus’ view of God as one who never, ever gives up on us. To put it another way, He is incapable of ceasing to feel what we feel, and because He is ultimately good to Himself, He must do all He can to rescue each and ever one of us, not from Hell, but from ourselves.

Do Two Wrongs Make a Right, After All?

Although it’s not specifically stated in any of the gospels, the common moral assertion *two wrongs don’t make a right* represents a very key element of Jesus’ core message. Going back to his famous teaching to turn the other cheek, the message is clearly implied, “If someone slaps your face, and if slapping someone’s face is wrong, then if you slap his face back, you are simply doing yet another wrong, with the mistaken notion that paying him back in kind somehow makes everything OK when, in fact, you have now merely committed the wrong as well!”

Yet, if God puts people in Hell, then the concept of Two Wrongs Not Making a Right would have to be changed! At the end of the day, Jesus’ words would have to be dismissed, because God would not only return a “slap” for every “slap” any human had given others, but God would deal out an infinite number of counter slaps! In this regard, then, the wise old saying would have to be changed to something on the order of “Two wrongs don’t make a right, but an infinite number of wrongs do!”

Seeking the Last, Lost Sheep *Until* He Finds It

It’s actually quite ludicrous to believe that the attitude of the earthly Jesus toward lost souls was accurately portrayed, for example, in the gospel parable about the Good Shepherd, he is to take a diametrically opposing stance once back in Heaven!

Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.’ And he spake this parable unto them, saying, ‘What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, *until he find it?* [emphasis mine] And *when* [not “if”] he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in Heaven over one sinner that

repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.’ Luke 15:1-7

The Gospel of John has a similar parable:

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. John 10: 11-13

Clearly, the point of these parables is to let us know that God is not satisfied with even one lost soul, a deity who is not at all content even if there is just one “missing sheep.” The character of God, according to this parable, compels Him to keep seeking out the lost *for as long as it takes*, “until” He finds the very last one. If there were a Hell, and the vast majority of humanity were going to end up there as Pseudo-Evangelical doctrine insists, the parable would have to be dramatically altered—The Shepherd would be content with *only one* saved sheep! Not only might He *allow* the other ninety-nine to be lost, as the hireling would, but He, Himself, would be actively involved in seeing them devoured! The hireling merely fled away when the wolf came because he had no real care for the sheep and was only passively responsible for the loss of some of the sheep. But if Hell were real, then God would actually be more comparable to the “wolf,” for He would be directly administering the torture suffered by the lost in Hell. It is unfathomable, therefore, that the Jesus who did all he could during his earthly ministry to *alleviate suffering*, and the Jesus who, when he wasn’t helping the suffering directly, was teaching anyone who would listen that they should also help to relieve the pain of the suffering, could in any way be the same Jesus who, in the next world, does all he can *to make* billions of people suffer!

Let’s take another teaching of Jesus that tells us how to confront those who do bad things to us to see what it reveals about the nature of God. “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also,” which is found in Matthew 5:38-39, and then expanded upon in Luke 6:29f, “and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also.” Now, just in case you didn’t know, Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament book of Exodus, Chapter 21 which has God telling Moses to tell the people of Israel that if someone pokes out your eye, then you’re to poke out his. But Jesus says this was not what God really wanted, that he didn’t want or need “justice” (i.e., equal or “just” amounts of *revenge*) but, instead, to respond to evil with good.

Quite the opposite of what the Jews of his day had heard all their lives, this teaching was revolutionary! It carried with it a view of God’s nature that rebuked the “eye for an eye” concept, the view that God is all about getting back at those who do bad things, that He is compelled by His “just” (or let’s face it, the real word is “vengeful”) nature to hurt people in return for the hurts they committed. Instead, Jesus’ bold assertion clearly states that God is anything *but* vengeful and, therefore, he asks that we return good for evil *because that’s what He does!*^v

And probably because Jesus anticipated that there would come a day when more than a few people who claim to be his followers would try to twist his message against punishment to any degree by claiming that God the Father is somehow exempt, he goes on in verses 43-48:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; *That ye may be the children of your Father* [emphasis mine] which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? *Be ye therefore* [emphasis mine] perfect, even *as your Father which is in heaven* [emphasis mine] is perfect.

Jesus went on to tell us what the reason was behind his teaching against getting back at people: “so you can be children of your Father in Heaven,” by imitating His “perfect,” i.e., unconditional love for all. This expression is similar to our modern “he’s a chip off the old block,” “see how the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” or “like father, like son.” In other words, Jesus was not merely telling us one of God’s rules that *we* have to follow, regardless of how God behaves, but he was calling us *to act like God does*, Who not only refrains from hurting those who hurt, but does just the opposite.

So, if God “turns the other cheek,” this is just another way of saying He is not one to punish or get revenge, but to return love for evil, making it impossible for Him to hurt anyone for whatever sins they may have committed, much less, hurt them far above and beyond the measure of what the old “eye for an eye” standard implied, plainly making it impossible to punish anyone in Hell!

Let’s look at another gospel story in which Jesus denies the idea that God inflicts pain on people for their sins.

And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him...When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing. John 9:1-4, 6-7

This passage provides a very great insight into the degree to which the Jews of Jesus’ day had bought into the idea that God causes bad things to happen to people as retribution for either the sins they had committed or even for the sins of their parents which they had not been directly punished for! When they read the Law of Moses, they took it as the final and full revelation of what God wanted and, accordingly, it seemed to them like God was a vengeful, wrathful being. So, could it be that Jesus believed Moses was wrong? Well, some would say so, but a far better explanation is that Jesus was simply trying to communicate the message that God had wanted to

get through all along...but with only limited success. To put it another way, all that stuff in the Old Testament about God having some huge need to pour out his wrath on people had to do, not with God, but with the Israelites' inability to get Him (See Illustration Six)!

The Hardness of Heart Principle of Interpreting the Old Testament

Have you ever told someone something (maybe a person with whom you had an unhealthy relationship), and they took it all the wrong way, largely because they interpreted what you said through their internal, mental filters due to all the "baggage" they were carrying around? In response, perhaps you determined the only way you could get through to that person was to get down to his or her level. Maybe, you had to start off with only a part of what you really wanted to say because you discerned they could only handle so much at a time. Maybe, over time, you were finally able to get your point across. But what if a third party overheard what you had begun with who didn't understand your plight. That person might not have any idea that you were in the middle of a "progressive revelation." It would be easy to take your initial comments and conclude that your message ended right there. Likewise, Jesus taught that God had a very similar problem when He was first trying to communicate to humanity and, sure enough, there were a lot of people in his day who didn't understand that God didn't start off with everything He really wanted to say...because humanity was just not ready for it.

According to Jesus, God decided to give Israelites little bits and pieces of what He really wanted, just to get them going in the right direction, to make some sort of forward progress, however short the distance might be. This is why Jesus took many of the divine proclamations in the Old Testament and viewed them as "hardness of heart" commands, things God told them that, didn't immediately put a stop to some very bad things they were doing, but for the purpose of keeping them from doing really, really, really worse things.

This is why Jesus said, "you've heard it said, 'an eye for an eye', but I say, return good for evil!" In the Old Testament, God was just trying to stop the Israelites from taking dozens of eyes for just one eye, completely blinding not only the person who gouged out someone else's eye, but his entire family's eyes as well! He put a cap, in other words, on so many of the evils going on back then, as an interim solution.

Jesus explained the design behind Moses' law was to put some limits on the practice of "putting women away," limits that were only necessary because of the hardness of men's hearts. God could see that men were just not ready to stop dumping female sex slaves in such a way that no other man would take them (remember, this was back in the days when there was no such thing as women living on their own) and, thus, leave them on the street to either starve (if they was old or sickly) or to have to become prostitutes. Moses' law put a deterrent on this sort of "divorce" by saying "You better think twice before you abandon a woman. Once you get rid of her, you can't have her back and, if you do, you have to put it in writing so she can prove that's she's free to be with another." No doubt, God was quite unhappy with the institution of sexual slavery, but the people of that time were no where near ready to make that big of a change. It would have been fruitless to have Moses issue a command saying, "Thou shalt not purchase women as sex slaves!"

For that matter, God wasn't happy about any sort of slavery! He knew the ancient Israelites were most certainly not ready for an Emancipation Proclamation (though they, themselves, had once been enslaved!). But once again, a careful read of the Old Testament shows how He started them in the right direction. He began with a law that said, "You have to stop all work at least one day a week" to, literally, give the slaves a break! Interestingly, not even Jesus tried to break it to the people of his day about how God wanted all to be free. It was all he could do to dial them back from having turned God's attempt at moderating their mistreatment of slaves to translating the Sabbath laws into additional hardships for people to bear. This is why he taught, "The Sabbath was made for man, not the other way around."

OK, hold on to your hats, because this next one is going to be a little hard to take if you've been steeped in Man-made doctrine--God didn't really want any blood sacrifices either, not of animals, and certainly not of humans! Shedding blood to appease gods or spirits, or even demons, had been around a long time, and was almost universally accepted as if a known fact (I explain more about this in the later sub-chapter Wasted Blood?) However, God had never asked anyone to kill any animal or person for Him. On the contrary, He said just the opposite in the famous commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Eventually, He expanded on this point through the prophet Hosea, when he said, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." But in the meantime, the Israelites were no where near ready to set aside this cruel and superstitious notion.

So God started *by taking them from where they were* by, first, prohibiting human sacrifice. He made it clear that they were not to "pass their children through the fires of Moloch." (Hint: how weird would it be for a deity to forbid burning children to death if, as Pseudo-Evangelicals claim, he was intending on burning billions of people of every age for eternity, including many of these same children!) And while He really didn't want or need the blood of animals, He knew that it was going to be all they could handle to not sacrifice people, so He began by giving strict orders on how to sacrifice them so, at least, their deaths would be quick and *virtually painless* by forbidding the strangling of animals and other slow and painful means! Of course, anyone who might have been tuning in to what God was really getting at should have figured out that He was not merely handing out a bunch of meaningless rules, but that there were good reasons behind them.

Hopefully, if you never noticed it before, you're beginning to see what Jesus saw God doing in the Old Testament and tried to convey—that behind all these Hardness of Heart commands, there was the underlying message that God doesn't like, much less, needs or requires bloodshed of any sort!

Now then, with a little better idea of how Jesus understood what was going on back in the Old Testament days, let's reconsider what was going on with the blind man in the Gospel of John, Chapter 9. If it had been true that the man was blinded by God as His way of getting back at him for some sin, and that He did so because His just nature compelled Him, then it would have been wrong of Jesus to undo the act of God. But he explained that sin had nothing to do with this man's suffering, and that God had not inflicted it upon him for any reason. On the contrary, *God would be glorified by the healing of it!* If we look at all the many, many healings Jesus performed, according to the gospels, each and every one stands as a testimony to his view of God as one who abhors human suffering, and who desires to bring healing instead, even though every person Jesus healed was a sinner, and a good number of them gave no indication that they were

Illustration Six

Jesus' View of Progressive Revelation Up to Unlimited Forgiveness and Recidivism Back Down to Unlimited Revenge

Jesus' revealed the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament) as God's progressive word, not the full and final revelation of God. He regards many commands given by Moses as stop gap measures, given only due to "the hardness of people's hearts," designed to reduce suffering as much as possible caused by revenge and blame, given the lack of readiness to embrace unlimited forgiveness.

Jesus bans ALL revenge and blame. Instead, he teaches to return forgiveness for sins, love for hate and good for evil...with no limits.

Unlimited Forgiveness

Later prophets deny any guilt for the sins of parents passes on to children. The proverb "the parents eat the sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge" is no longer valid. The prophet Hosea says God rejects sacrifice altogether, and only desires mercy.

Greek converts to the early church import the belief in Hades' Realm and of arbitrary, unending punishment. Their numbers swell until Christianity becomes a Gentile religion.

Limited Blame

Mosaic Law limits how much pain can be inflicted as punishment to "just" or equal measures, an "eye for an eye." The guilt of parents can only pass to 4 generations. Limits are placed upon methods of animal sacrifices--no strangled meats. The idea that God is not pleased/placated by suffering is introduced.

The Catholic Church, under the influence of St. Augustine, overrides Jesus' message, and has God eternally offended by Adam's sin and guilt, impugning all his descendents and meriting eternal suffering of the worst sort.

Limited Revenge Limited Forgiveness

Gods and kings rule by fear of limitless revenge. Punishments far exceed offenses. Guilt for sins is passed on to all descendents.

All people inherit Adam's guilt and are Hell bound. This belief serves as foundation for many an earthly cruelty, gives justification to actively inflict suffering on the supposed damned.

Unlimited Revenge Unlimited Blame No Forgiveness

repentant. (By the way, we don't see that Jesus made a big deal about this, perhaps because he understood that it's rather difficult to stop and figure out what kind of sins one needs to repent of when one is in great pain.)

Was Jesus' Empathy For Human Suffering...A Temporary Phase?

Perhaps, the gospel passage which tells us most clearly how Jesus would react to the idea of eternal, fiery torture as a punishment for sin is found in Luke's gospel where, on one occasion, he was rejected by an entire village of Samaritans, and his disciples wanted to, quite literally, give them Hell!:

And when the disciples heard that the Samaritans would not let Jesus pass through their village, they asked, "Lord, shall we call upon the heavens *to rain down fire on them* [emphasis mine]?" And then Jesus rebuked them, saying, "Ye know not what spirit you are of. The son of man didn't come to destroy, but to save men." And then they went around the village to another city. Luke 9:51-56

It could hardly be more obvious that, if while he was on earth, Jesus was *completely incensed* when his disciples wanted *to burn people with fire*, regardless of the fact that *they had knowingly rejected him*, that surely the heavenly Jesus would be even *more* incensed at the very thought of *endlessly doing far worse* to people, again, regardless of whether they had rejected him in any way.

If there were any truth at all to the notion that the same Jesus rejected by the Samaritan villagers in the above passage is the Jesus who would preside over the casting of billions into an eternal fire on the Day of Judgment, his reaction would have been completely different: "Ye have the right spirit, guys. But not to worry! The son of man is going to burn these people soon enough, and when I do, it's not just going to be for a few minutes, but forever!" By all rights Jesus should have taken a look at the nearby sundial and said, "Oh, come on disciples! It's a little early in the day to be roasting people! Can't you just hold off a bit? Trust me, it'll be no time at all before you'll get to see just how vengeful I can really be!" Doesn't exactly sound like Jesus, does it?

Let's now apply this Jesus reaction to those in our time who similarly "know not what spirit they are of," especially those who subscribe to the Cosmic Torturer View, those who are, indeed, *hoping* for far worse than what Jesus' disciples had called for—not just an agonizing death by fire from the sky lasting for a few, horrific minutes, but an *indefinite* fiery torture! So if Jesus felt his disciples were succumbing to the wrong spirit (presumably Satan) just for *suggesting* that fire be rained upon a small village of people *for a few moments*, imagine what spirit he would say believers are in league with today for not only suggesting, but *looking forward to* the fiery torture of billions of people *for eternity*? Certainly not the *Holy Spirit*!

However, most anyone who has been exposed to the sayings of Jesus has some sense that he was not the kind of person to hurt others. The majority of the stories of Jesus have him spending most of his time and effort healing those who were suffering from maladies or injuries. Even many of

those who preach the most damning of Hell, fire and brimstone sermons, can't bring themselves to portray Jesus as the one in control of the "fire switch" that keeps the flames of Hell at full blast. They try to separate Jesus out, as if to say he is powerless to do anything, and tearfully sad for all who end up being plunged into Hell, implying that it's some Old Testament version of God the Father or Satan who does the actual burning.

But this makes no sense! After all, these same preachers acknowledge Jesus is God. That being the case, then certainly, Jesus could, if he wanted to, put an immediate stop to the tortures of Hell and, more certainly, that is exactly what he would do, assuming that we're talking about the same person who walked the shores of Galilee. There's a huge disconnect in their thinking that has them portraying Jesus as all compassionate during his earthly ministry and maybe even on the final judgment day. But after that, we're led to believe Jesus will somehow get over whatever disappointment he may have had about the billions convulsing in the flames of Hell and put them out of his sight and out of his mind, which would be rather hard to do if, in fact, he is one with the All Knowing God.

The real problem, of course, is that no one in their right mind who had only been exposed to the original sayings of Jesus would ever in a billion years conclude that he would or could ever, hurt anyone. Were they to read the few Hell verses that were added much later on (free of the notion that they *have to accept every copied* word from the original biblical writings as inspired by God), they would resoundingly reject them as the ludicrous adulterations that they are!

The Message of Jesus Has Survived

Let's also make note of the fact that it wasn't just Jesus who rejected the doctrine of Hell. Not a single one of his disciples, none of their contemporary leaders (most notably, the Apostle Paul), nor any of their disciples ever expressed a belief in Hell. It was only after those who personally knew those who personally knew Jesus (in other words, people twice removed from him), did Church leaders begin to affirm a belief in Hades.

Let's take Timothy, for example, who was a disciple of the Apostle Paul. In I Timothy 2:1-6 we find a statement that plainly explains God is going to save *all* people--"I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for *all men* [emphasis mine]...for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; *who will have all men to be saved*, and to *come to the knowledge* of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave Himself a ransom for *all*, to be testified in due time." It's very plain that the concern here is not that God's will might somehow be thwarted and some men unsaved, but that not all men will, in this lifetime, "come to the knowledge" about what God has done to save them! "Salvation" here, in the context, has to do with no longer being lost in ignorance, living a life of unaware of what a great thing God has done for them, *not* going to Hell!

Here's another passage, this time, in Paul's letter to the Philippians 2:9-11 (and for those who've only heard the distorted interpretation of this passage, please, set aside what you were told to think it means, and let's re-read it without the commentary): "Wherefore God also hath highly

exalted him [Jesus], and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus *every* [emphasis mine] knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that *every* [emphasis mine] tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” When taken in its own context, this passage is explaining that the day is coming when *everyone* will believe in Jesus and will be serving him of their own free will!

But for those of you who have never before heard how this passage is spun like a top by Pseudo-Evangelical preachers, get ready for a whopper! Long before most converts ever have a chance to read the letter to the Philippians on their own, they’re told over and over that the people described in this passage are being *forced* to bow down and *forced* to say, “Jesus is Lord,” usually just prior to being tossed into Hell’s flames. It’s a ghastly denial of the original meaning, and here’s why--the context and the Greek language used support no such interpretation! “Confessing Jesus as Lord” is the same language that’s used in every other biblical passage where people are “getting saved.” And just in case there’s the slightest doubt in anyone’s mind, take a look at I Corinthians 12:3 which says “...no man can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ but by the Holy Spirit”! In other words, sure, it might take a while, perhaps only in the next life, but sooner or later, everyone will come to know God, everyone will have the Holy Spirit come into their hearts and, then, everyone will acknowledge him as their Lord and Savior!

Mind you, the guys who superimpose this notion of people being forced to acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and bowing down to him, as if at gun-point or at the edge of a sword, are the same guys who constantly try to justify the idea of God torturing people in Hell because “*everyone has a choice*, and those who end up in Hell chose not to believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior”! In other words, they want to have it both ways! When confronted with the obvious injustice and cruelty of God burning people, they try to shift the blame onto the tortured by claiming they “chose” to be so horrifically treated. But when they are confronted with a passage that plainly says everyone will eventually choose Jesus and give him reverence, then they say, “Oh, they’re being compelled to do that just before they’re tossed into the Lake of Fire.” So, what they’re really asking us to believe is that the Holy Spirit will be forced into the hearts of everyone on the Day of Judgment who didn’t believe before, and then, apparently, take the Spirit with them to Hell! Nonsense, of course.

The Women Who Got Jesus’ Message

One more point I’d like to make about the preservation of Jesus’ full and final revelation. When we first begin reading the Old Testament, God is often depicted as cruel, impatient, vindictive and even jealous. But even in the Law of Moses, one can detect that at least some limits were being put on the inhumanities that were commonplace at that time, clues that God was not that bad after all. Then, here and there, the prophets began to let us in on more about God’s real nature, rejecting long held ideas, such as the guilt for a given sin passing to “the fourth generation,” as exemplified by the old Hebrew saying, “The fathers ate the sour grapes, but their children’s teeth were set on edge.”

Then Jesus appeared and took the message of what God was really like to a whole new level but, unfortunately, it represented too radical a departure for most Jews. Then, once Greeks began to

enthusiastically embrace early Christianity, it wasn't long Jesus' message was being distorted. They began to mix in their superstitions, characterizing Jesus' mission as some sort of ultimate blood sacrifice to appease God's wrath, though Jesus never once alluded to such a purpose. After the Church became primarily a Greco-Gentile movement, the belief in Hades was adopted and blurred in. It's really a wonder that Jesus' message was preserved at all, given the tendency of Man to not get what he said in the first place and, then, even when he did at first, to redact it afterwards.

But I have a theory about how the message was preserved, and the key has to do with human gender. Think for a moment who it was that stuck to Jesus through thick and thin. When the disciples saw Jesus arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and when they realized that he was not going to put up any sort of fight, but actually stopped them from hurting anyone, when no army of angels showed up, when the power of God did not come crashing down to smite the Roman garrison and their Jewish collaborators, when, in other words, it finally became clear that, if Jesus was the Messiah, he was nothing at all like the Messiah they had hoped for...they took off, with only one exception, the one disciple who got Jesus (John), and had a clue about his real mission.

But he wasn't alone! There were also some women. We learn later that Mary, his mother was there, but also Mary Magdalene and others whom we only know as "the women" or the "daughters of Jerusalem." Isn't it so very interesting that, at the most critical moment of Jesus' life, at the point where he demonstrated in the most profound way how God reacts toward us sinful, cruel and unfair humans with nothing but the greatest love and forgiveness, it was the *women* who hung in there! Why do you suppose that?

Well, I am convinced it's because they understood Jesus' message! While the disciples were constantly scratching their heads, wondering, "How many times should we forgive?" and "So, now are you going to slaughter all the Romans?" and "Which one of us will get the highest appointment in your kingdom after you take over the world?" it was the women who were picking up on what Jesus was really saying about God!

And this should probably come as no surprise! Women are, by far, a lot more perceptive than us guys! They notice details that us dudes walk right over time and again. Some say their ability to catch on to a lot of details goes all the way back to our hunting and gathering days, when men had to be more singularly focused to hunt down animals, but women had to be constantly aware of their surroundings in order to find plant foods and stay out of danger.

Also, and closely related to the first, is another advantage that the daughters of Jerusalem had over the male disciples in getting Jesus' core message—the ability to give life and nurture children. You may have noticed that, up until this point, I've gone along with the typical convention of referring to God as a "He," as a male, but only because I didn't want my words to become an undue distraction. The reality is that God is not restricted by human gender. God is our Parent, having all the attributes of both man and woman, male and female, father and *mother*!

So, one might say that the Old Testament vision of God was a distorted one, largely because the people of that time saw God only from Man's point of view and, therefore, imagined Him as, well, a "Him" only! But Jesus was able to show a side of God that had been severely neglected, his parental, caring, loving, and nurturing side, his Female Side. As the women followed Jesus, listened to him, watched him, and heard what he was trying to say about what God was really like, *they were catching on because they already knew what that type of person was like!* As mothers who had carried life inside of them, who had given birth, who had fed helpless infants from their own breasts, even though they did nothing but cry and demand and make a mess in whatever they used for diapers back then, they had nothing but love for their children and unending patience! They could immediately relate to what Jesus was saying about God's unconditional love for all, because they naturally understand what it means to love a child with no limits and no matter what they do or fail to do.

Therefore, if we could somehow go back to the days of the early Jesus Movement, I would not be at all surprised if, whenever men began to take liberties with what Jesus said, and when they tried to redact his words, twist them around and superimpose their old beliefs over his, it was the women who said, "No, that's not what he said, and that's not what he meant!" Had it not been for their influence in the years that followed Jesus' death, we may very well have never learned of anything he actually said and did.

ⁱ Star Wars fans might recall how the character Luke was almost executed by order of Jabba the Hut by being cast into the mouth of Sarlacc, a semi-sentient, plant-like, omnivorous creature which, according to C3-PO, "In its belly you will find a new definition of pain and suffering as you are slowly digested over a...thousand years." I've yet to hear anyone who thought the point here was that Luke might actually remain consciously alive to suffer for a 1000 years, but it was just the tortuous *thought* and *anticipation* that his body would be subjected to such vile treatment that added to the horror of this manner of execution.

ⁱⁱ Article X states as follows, "We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original."

ⁱⁱⁱ *Beowulf*, translated by R.K. Gordon, Dover, New York, pp. 9-11.

²⁴ We're not talking about hard science here, but the *art* of weighing what is contained in the earliest and most reliable documents we have available which assert what Jesus was to have said and taught. You are not likely to get an accurate picture of Jesus' teachings if you just *presume* everything in those texts is accurate. So, what to do, since we have no reliable contemporary recordings of what Jesus said, but only some collections of stories and sayings that first circulated by word of mouth? Well, first we have to do all we can to assess which of all the extant texts are the most accurate. This discipline is known as textual criticism. Much can be weeded out as unreliable by weighing the disagreeing texts one against the other along with other external clues. However, not all interpolations can be detected in this manner in that they could have made their way into older copies which are so few, we don't have enough to compare one to another. It is at this point where we have to examine the *context* itself to look for clues that would tell us which of these stories and sayings came from Jesus, and *weigh* them according to these internal clues.

As one example of how we might weigh some stories/sayings as more likely to be original to Jesus than others, we can ask which ones went along with the conventional thoughts of the day, and which ones ran contrary to them? When you find varying streams of ideas in different stories and different sayings, and some conform to the status quo, while others stand out in opposition to the typical religious assumptions of the day, it makes sense to add a little

more weight to the oppositional sayings. Whatever Jesus might have said that everyone else was saying would not have likely been worth recording and circulating. No news there, in other words.

Here's another one. Which sayings make the original leaders of Christianity, the 12 disciples, seem clueless? Any saying which held up and continued to be circulated in spite of knocking these guys about, is more likely to have been original. Any which glorify the disciples and put them on pedestals is probably an exaggeration.

^v In all fairness, we should note that the Law of Moses, like the Code of Hammurabi which preceded it, was actually a relative improvement for it's time. Prior to these codes, it was not uncommon to exact vengeful punishments that were far in excess of what the original offence was. But Jesus took this concept to a whole new level by rejecting the idea of revenge or "justice" altogether.