

“Treasures in Hell?”

Exploring the Valley of Hinnom in the Biblical Concept of Gehenna and in the Scrolls of Ketef Hinnom

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Abstract: The title of this paper is intended to capture the two main topics discussed in this exposition with special reference to the Valley of Hinnom in its biblical allusion and as an archeological site. The first presentation is focused on the understanding linked with the place of the Valley of Hinnom especially in the mentions of the place in a number of Biblical occurrences where this valley is being referenced to with allusions to the concept and image of eternal damnation, as a destination for the wicked also known as hell both in the Old and the New Testament and most especially in Jesus’ various usage of the term “Gehenna” in his preaching and ministry. The second part of this exposition is the presentation that explores later archeological discovery from the excavations in the Valley of Hinnom known as the silver scrolls of Ketef Hinnom claimed to be one of the most important Biblical discoveries of antiquity, thus treasures.

Keywords: Gehenna, Hell, Hinnom, Ketef Hinnom, silver scrolls

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The Valley of Hinnom

The Valley of Hinnom, which is characterized as a steep valley, is among the three valleys and dry riverbeds (wadis) that surround the Old City of Jerusalem. It intersects in the southern area with the Kidron Valley that runs to the east of the Old City and separates the Mount of Olives from the city. It is a site which is often associated to the understanding of hell assumed to be a place of dumping and burning garbage during the time of Jesus. The Valley of Hinnom is found at the lower area of the Valley of Tyropoeon, a valley which runs down to the Pool of Siloam, dividing the lower part of the Old City into two hills, the Temple Mount to the east, and the rest of the city to the west.

A more fitting geographical claims about the Valley of Hinnom by different writers affirmed that this “valley was located south-southwest of Jerusalem, and it adjoined the Kidron valley which lay to the south-southeast of the city.”¹ It was a “deep and yawning gorge that never [contained] water,” and a valley that descended “over six hundred feet from its original source.”² In Jerusalem today, it is known as “Wadi er-Rababi.”³ Eusebius and Jerome located “Ge-hinnom” under the eastern wall of Jerusalem, near the Kidron Valley, while Moslem geographical writers Muqaddasi and Nasir-i-khusran, call the Kidron valley as Wady Jahamum. And the Jewish writer Kimchi also identifies the Valley of Jehoshaphat (i.e. the Kidron) with Hinnom.⁴

Ge Hinnom

Various images of Gehenna presented the place as always associated with the everlasting fire understood as the place of condemnation of the wicked (Rev 20:15; Mt 6:30; 25:41). Gehenna was also linked to a place of destruction and punishment as evidenced in the usage of the word with references and allusions to such a place in the preaching during the time of Jesus (e.g. Mt 5:22; Mk 9:43; Lk 12:5).

There were also claims of Gehenna being considered as a site for dumping garbage which Rob Well referred to as the “city of dump” during the time of Jesus⁵ where the “fire is not quenched” (Mk 9:46) which is situated outside of the city of

¹ Papaioannou, K., *The Geography of Hell in the Teaching of Jesus*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013, 4.

² Fudge, E., *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 3rd edition, OR: Cascade, 2011, 117.

³ Silva, M., “γέεννα,” in *New International Dictionary of NT Theology and Exegesis*, vol.1, MI: Zondervan, 2014, 548.

⁴ “Bible Map: Valley of Slaughter (Valley of Hinnom),” https://bibleatlas.org/valley_of_slaughter.htm. Accessed October 26, 2021.

⁵ Cf. Well, R., *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, NY: Harper One, 2011, 68.

Jerusalem presumed to be a familiar place to those who listened to Jesus’ preachings. Hackett described this place as a site “where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned.”⁶ Easton’s Bible Dictionary defined Gehenna as a valley that became the common receptacle for all the refuse of the city where the dead bodies of animals and of criminals, and all kinds of filth, were cast and consumed by fire which was kept always burning.⁷

William Barclay suggested that the location “was a foul, unclean place where loathsome worms bred on the refuse, and which smoked and smoldered at all times like some vast incinerator.”⁸ And while some scholars claimed that the Biblical image of Gehenna is geographically concrete claiming that a garbage dumpsite with fire always burning really existed, there are others who associated and use of Jesus’ allusions to the place and the eternal fire as an analogy for the judgment of the wicked. David Kimhi, a medieval rabbi, commented on Psalm 27: “Gehenna is a repugnant place, into which filth and cadavers are thrown, and in which fires perpetually burn in order to consume the filth and bones, on which account, by analogy, the judgment of the wicked is called ‘Gehenna.’”⁹

In the NT, Gehenna is recorded twelve times, seven in Matthew (5:22, 29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33), three times in Mark (9:43,45,47), once in Luke (12:5), and once in James (3:6). In nine of the eleven warnings Jesus gives concerning Gehenna, he is speaking to his disciples; the other two times he directs his speech towards the Pharisees.¹⁰ And outside the evangelists, the mention of Gehenna occurred only in the Letter of James 3:6.

Earlier understanding of Gehenna is traceable to the Hebrew term גֵּיאֵ הַחִינּוֹם / ge-Hinnom/ referring to the Valley of Hinnom (also understood as the valley of the sons of Hinnom). The origin and meaning of the word Hinnom are unknown that only its usages suggested that it refers to a person’s proper name. The exact place of the valley of Hinnom as being referred to in the text is ambiguous due to the lack of Biblical data to support it. It must have ran along the boundary of Judah and Benjamin (Joshua 15:8; 18:16), at the entry of the Potsherd Gate (Jeremiah 19:2). Others claimed that it is located below the southern wall of ancient Jerusalem, from the foot of Mount Zion eastward past the Valley of Tyropeon to the Kidron Valley. However, the Tyropeon is within the city walls during the time of Manasseh and child sacrifice must have been done outside the city (2 Kgs 21:10-15).

⁶ Hackett, H. B., *Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible (Volume 1)*, MI: Baker Book House, 1971, 268.

⁷ Cf. Easton, G., “*Easton’s Bible Dictionary*,” 2007, 1259.

⁸ Barclay, W. I., *The Gospel of Mark*. The New Daily Study Bible. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 268-269.

⁹ Bailey, L. R., “Gehenna: The Topography of Hell,” *Biblical Archeologist*, 49:1986, 189.

¹⁰ Watson, D. F., “Gehenna,” *ABD* 2:927.

The term Ge-hinnom was used thirteen times in the Hebrew Bible: “as a purely geographical term” (Josh. 15:8; 18:16; Neh. 11:30); as to describe the events that happened in the valley and nearby sites (2 Kgs. 23:10; 2 Chr. 28:3; 33:6; Jer. 32:35); and according to its usage within the Jeremaic text as prophecies “about a war in the valley in which God will punish the apostates of Judah” (Jer. 7:31,32; 19:2,6).¹¹

There are other OT texts where there exist allusions to the language and imagery of judgment in a valley but without actually using the term *Ge-hinnom* (e.g. Jer. 31:40; Isa. 66:24).

Furthermore, Ge-hinnom was mentioned in 2 Chronicles 28 in relation to the narration of the actions of king Ahaz of Judah who “did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD as David his father had done” (v. 1). Ahaz offered sacrifice in the Valley of Ben-hinnom, and immolated his children by fire in accordance with the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD had dispossessed before the Israelites. (v. 3). These events are considered as of significance to the way the places are associated with its present understanding which gave the image to Gehenna as a place for one of Israel’s most terrible lapses into pagan customs in the history of Judah.

In 2 Chronicles 33:2-3, another king of Judah was mentioned, Manasseh, who “did what was evil in the LORD’s sight, following the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD dispossessed before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had torn down. He set up altars to the Baals, and also made asherahs. He bowed down to the whole host of heaven and served them.” Manasseh desecrated God’s temple: “He sacrificed children by fire in the Valley of Ben-hinnom. He practiced soothsaying and divination, and reintroduced the consulting of ghosts and spirits” (2 Chron. 33:6). The sacrifices done is believed to have been offered to Molech, who is considered as the detestable god of the Ammonites and was associated with child sacrifices (cf. 1 Kgs 11:7). It is in this place that children were sacrificed by fire to Molech (2 Kgs 23:10), and a place where, probably, Ahaz had sacrificed his son (2 Kgs 16:3). The relationship of the place with the image of slaughter and bloody desolation was concretely adopted in the book of the prophet Jeremiah 19:1-15. In the book of the prophet Jeremiah, God referred to this place as the “valley of slaughter” (7:31) and also as a place of ruin and disaster (19:2-6).

In Isaiah 66:24, we see the Ge-hinnom text as it was most alluded to in the teachings of Jesus. In Isaiah 66:1-24 is described an eschatological battle scene outside

¹¹ Cf. Papaioannou, K., *The Geography of Hell in the Teaching of Jesus*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013, 4.

of Jerusalem.¹² The prophet Isaiah referred to the place as Topheth, the location where the bodies of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers who have died and been killed during the war in their siege in the days of King Hezekiah, were piled and were set on fire (Isa. 30:31-33; 37:36): “His firepit made both deep and wide, with fire and firewood in abundance, and the breath of the Lord, like a stream of sulfur, setting it afire” (Isa. 30:33).

Archeologically speaking, there is not yet any site discovered in the present location of the Valley of Hinnom that can lead to the mass grave of children as referred to in the aforementioned OT passages. And while there is no geographical evidence to support the claim that Gehenna was historically a place of flaming heap of garbage, there is an explicitly clear reference in Jesus’ usage with analogical allusion to the Jeremiaic Valley of Slaughter where God severely judged the nation of Judah.¹³

Ketef Hinnom

Although there are no concrete discoveries that can attest to the claims of the OT discussed above, later archeological attempt has led to the discovery of some burial caves which are considered to be with important contributions to Biblical science but apart from the theme of Gehenna. And this is going to be a presentation of this discovery in relation to the understanding of the Valley of Hinnom in its archeological aspect.

“Ketef Hinnom” refers to the archeological site where the archeologist Gabriel Barkay excavated burial systems in 1979-80 located at the southwest part of Jerusalem’s Old City where the valleys of Raphaim and Hinnom meet. Ketef Hinnom literally means “Shoulder of Hinnom” referring to the cliff on the “Jebusite Shoulder” that overlooks on the “Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna)” and lies directly across from the Old City just opposite Mt. Zion.

In 1979 there was discovered in one of the burial chambers in the excavated site, two tiny silver scrolls in the form of earrings on which are inscribed portions of the Priestly Blessing from the Book of Numbers. These “amulets” contained what claimed to be the oldest surviving texts from the Hebrew Bible, dating from the First Temple period around the late 7th to the early 6th century BCE before the Babylonian Exile. These are now preserved at the Israel Museum.¹⁴

¹² Block, D.I., “The Old Testament on Hell,” in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, Morgan, C.W. – Peterson, R.A. (eds.), MI: Zondervan, 2004, 60-61.

¹³ Cf. Burk, D., “*Eternal Conscious Torment*,” in *Four Views on Hell*, 2nd edition, Sprinkle, P. (ed.), MI: Zondervan, 2016, 22-23.

¹⁴ Cf. Cabello P., “*Arqueología bíblica: los textos bíblicos a la luz de los hallazgos arqueológicos*,” Córdoba: Almuzara, 2019, 400-402.

At Ketef Hinnom is a Jewish necropolis with seven burial caves used during the late Iron Age and Persian period. One of the caves had five rock-cut chambers surrounding a central room. The wealth of the owners of that tomb was high. Excavations of those caves, carried out by Gabriel Barkay, turned up one of the largest collections of ancient jewelry ever found in Jerusalem: pieces of gold, silver and precious stones worn by the wealthiest residents. Of particular note were a pair of well-preserved gold earrings in the form of stylized animal heads, a gold earring adorned with carnelian inlay, necklace beads of agate, carnelian, crystal and porcelain, silver rings, pendants, etc. In the chamber of one of the tombs were found two of the most important treasures for Israel: two rolls of silver, as an amulet.¹⁵

According to the descriptions of Gabriel Barkay, the discoveries found in the site were two amulets which are in the form of small scrolls with a hole in the center through which a necklace or string could be threaded. These two amulets were made of very thin elements which is comprised of ninety percent silver and of one percent copper. These were rolled up objects which contained some writings. There was a need for these amulets to be unrolled first so that what was hidden and concealed could be shown.¹⁶

The amulets were unrolled by the aid of conservation experts. This was done by the process wherein into the amulets were applied a special type of acrylic glue to the coils which allowed the silver foil to gradually uncoil to reveal the writings that they contained. After having uncoiled to reveal their contents, the amulets were then covered with a special protective film called the Mylar polyester film and the amulets were then placed between two thin layers of glass to protect them and to reveal their contained writings. Both were damaged severely; they were corroded and there are cracked on their outer edges. The larger plate (Ketef Hinnom I) had eighteen lines of writing, with a possibility of having nineteen originally, each line contained five to seven letters. And the smaller one (Ketef Hinnom II) probably had eighteen lines of writing, of which the main parts of twelve were preserved.¹⁷

These archeological evidences found in the fourth of the several burial caves, contained small variations of parts of the three blessings that appear in the famous priestly benediction of Numbers 6:24-26.¹⁸ This passage contained by the silver scrolls are considered as one of the central passages of the Sacred Scripture also known as the 'Priestly' or 'Aaronic' Benediction. The inscribed Priestly Benediction are as in these English words translated from the original Hebrew:

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cf. Ibid.

¹⁷ Cf. Cabello P., "Arqueología bíblica: los textos bíblicos a la luz de los hallazgos arqueológicos," Córdoba: Almuzara, 2019, 400-402.

¹⁸ Barkay, G., "The Riches of Ketef Hinnom," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 35.4: 2009, 28-33.

May Yahweh bless you and keep you;
May Yahweh cause his face to
Shine upon you and grant you peace¹⁹

Ketef Hinnom I, which is the larger plate, contained texts which when examined the translation of lines 3-6 are directly related to the texts found in Exodus 20:5-6 and Deuteronomy 5:10; 7:9 which stated that God keeps His covenant and shows mercy toward those who love Him and keep His commandments.

Ketef Hinnom 2, on the other hand, is a scroll that contained the words directly related to Numbers 6:24-26 that says, “The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

These inscriptions found in the unrolled silver coils revealed one of the earliest extrabiblical references to Yahweh and the oldest known text of the Bible by four hundred years. Ketef Hinnom I and II were dated by combining paleography, stratigraphy, and ceramics. And all three elements point to the 7th century B.C., which is the era before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and the time of the prophet Jeremiah and King Josiah.²⁰ Furthermore, the discovery of the silver scroll in the excavations of Ketef Hinnom affirmed the antiquity of the passage of the Priestly Benediction.

The two amulets are evidence of the antiquity of traditions preserved in the Bible; it also provides indirect evidence, as do the Dead Sea Scrolls and other manuscripts from the Second Temple period, of the accuracy of scribes who for centuries copied sacred texts.²¹

The discovery and the examinations done on the two silver scrolls excavated and known as the Ketef Hinnom is a shedding light in some contentions related to the antiquity of the OT. In a 2004 study, high-definition photographs were examined by four scholars of four different institutions, concluded that the new techniques enabled them to “reaffirm with confidence that the late pre-exilic period is the proper chronological context for the artifacts”—a conclusion now accepted by the mainstream, that the Torah *was* in use (at very least in part) during the First Temple period.²² This is actually an affirmation which added weight to the traditionally believed early dating of the biblical text that we have right now.

¹⁹ Coogan, M. D., “10 Great Finds,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21.3: 1995, 36–47.

²⁰ Cf. Cabello P., 400-402.

²¹ Coogan, M. D., 36–47.

²² Ketef Hinnom Scrolls, A look at the oldest biblical texts ever discovered, Armstrong Institute, 2018: <https://armstronginstitute.org/45-ketef-hinnom-scrolls> Accessed: January 16, 2023.

Conclusion

The two concepts attached and related to the Valley of Hinnom presented in this exposition are affirmations of the role that this place has played not only in its Biblical references and allusions but as well as in the archeological artifacts discovered in it as an excavation site for Biblical scientific studies.

The burial sites unearthed in the shoulder of the Valley of Hinnom so far are evidences and testimonies that once this place was used to be more than just what it is right now and how it is understood in the allusions believed to be associated with it. This presentation affirms that the site existed as a cradle for the development of some historical truths. In the valley of Hinnom rather than just a place with allusions of terror, horror and punishments, and rather than just being referenced to as a site of unpleasant events and disagreeable associations, there are treasures that can be discovered and encountered in its buried artifacts which can give witness not only to its Biblical significance but more so in its actual role in the life of those who may have inhabited or may have been buried in this place.

Although not all the references associated with the Valley of Hinnom – as can be found in the present location of the place – can be proven by physical and historical proofs for this time, such as that there is not yet found the site that can be attested to as the site of the graves for the mass killing of those children offered as sacrifices being mentioned in the OT nor has the place remained the dumpsite that the site was claimed to be what it was during the time of Jesus Christ and the NT, but the importance and value of the valley is still being attested to by the efforts that led to the discovery of artifacts that can give witness to its actual value in the history of mankind as a whole.

Based on the discussion presented, there are but endless possibilities that can both draw us closer or that can pull us farther from the assumptions and references that we are searching for. In Biblical archeology, it takes time, treasure and tireless efforts to trace, retrace and associate discoveries and excavated artifacts to their Biblical and historical contexts. We can only depend on intelligent and scientific guesses and interpretations based on what has been discovered, up to the present time, at the least, to provide connections and linkages.

There are possibilities that the Valley of Slaughter being referred to in the OT is located in a different site or in the very site where it is claimed to be but that through time, the evidences have become indistinguishable or non-existent. The burning dumpsite that Jesus has referred to in his teaching could also possibly be a theological reference which are familiar to the people of his time or it can also be

an existent place which can possibly be the Gehenna we call it today as found in the actual location of the Valley of Hinnom or it is also possible that it can be located somewhere else. And the different burial caves which were excavated could be proofs of the events that took place in Topheth or it can also just be a common graveyard site where the dead were buried with their properties and belongings with them or it can also be possible that it pertained to a discovery of a wealthy buried community in the shoulder of the Valley of Hinnom as alluded to by the treasures discovered. The possibilities are endless. They can be related to what is claimed or they can also be new discoveries. But we can only interpret what has been found, discovered, and unearthed so far through a process as interpreted by those who are capable of doing so by the utilization of the technologies pertaining to its interpretation, deciphering and understanding relating to its original context expressed in the present understanding.

But as for the two concepts attached to the Valley of Hinnom, what is being spelled out is the significant roles that it has played and that it continues to play in giving light to the Word of God. The concept and theology of Gehenna and of the silver scrolls of the Ketef Hinnom are both of value that have given the Valley of Hinnom its unparalleled and unique value both in its Biblical references and in its contribution to the witness of antiquity in the field of Biblical archeology. Both the Gehenna as the Valley of Slaughter and the Ketef Hinnom's silver scrolls share in the concept of “immortalizing” the Word of God both in its content and its actual references. **PS**

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