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THE GATES OF HELL

by

Robert A. Blewett*

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***Professor of Economics, St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York 13617**
phone: 315.229.5429 email: blewett@stlawu.edu

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And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18 AV).

Introduction

Matthew 16:18 is an exciting scripture that speaks of a victorious church. Different translations are consistent in preserving this notion. The NASB translates the second part of the verse as "...the gates of Hades will not overpower it" while the NIV uses "overcome" rather than "overpower."¹ However, there are distinct and varying interpretations concerning the nature of the victory implied.

A common view of the gates of hell is it implies a stronghold of Satan and his demons. The gates of hell are likened to the gates of a fortress. Such an interpretation is commonly used in sermons and teachings about the victory Christ gives us over our demonic enemies. Matthew 16:18 is often used as a proof text concerning the believer's power in spiritual warfare and deliverance ministry.²

Another view interprets the gates as representing a seat or place of demonic power and rule. In the ancient Middle East and Greek world, rulers or elders of a city would meet in or near the gates of a city to hear accusations and judge disputes. The gates of hell refer

¹ Strong (2729 Greek) interprets *katischw* or *katischw* as 1) to be strong to another's detriment, to prevail against; 2) to be superior in strength; 3) to overcome; 4) to prevail. Also see Vos (1955, 1315).

² I have personally heard such teachings a number of times. The following pages gathered from internet sources also refer to the gates of hell as a demonic stronghold which cannot ultimately defend itself against the church: <http://www.demonbuster.com/weapons.html>, <http://answers.org/bible/gatesofhell.html>, http://www.solidsounds.org/song_detail.php?rid=611, <http://www.wholeperson-counseling.org/warfare/devil's-armor.html>.

figuratively to a center of power where demonic beings make accusations against the brethren, spout blasphemous judgments against God, and conspire against the church.³

This paper presents a third view where the gates of hell refer figuratively to popular images of the underworld in ancient Greek and Middle Eastern cultures that also have precedents in OT scripture. I hold the implication of Matthew 16:18 is that the grave will not hold its dead or stand against Jesus conquering death and the grave.

This third view is a more accurate interpretation of scripture in contrast to the views of the gates of hell indicating a demonic stronghold or center of rule and power. I have no dispute with the doctrinal conclusions concerning the believer's authority over demonic forces, or the fact of demonic oppression and conspiracy in the current age. Those holding the other views have the correct doctrine but use the wrong text. Matthew 16:18 refers to something entirely different from demonic strongholds.

The next section considers the different origins and concepts of the term hell in scripture, followed by sections discussing gates to the underworld and keys to hell.⁴

Translations of Hell

There are many OT and NT references to hell in the AV Bible. However, hell was translated from three different words, *Sheol*, *Hades*, and *Gebenna*. Most modern versions translate the Hebrew word Sheol as the grave since it is the abode of all of the dead. Hades, the abode of the dead in Greek mythology, is a seemingly strange term to import into Scripture let alone find it 11 times in the NT. However, well before the NT, Sheol was

³ Brooks (1995) takes this viewpoint. I have also heard sermons and teachings using this perspective.

⁴ NASB is used for all scripture references unless noted otherwise.

translated as Hades for the Septuagint. Use of this Greek term continued much later in NT writings.⁵

The third term, Gehenna, appears 12 times in the NT and is translated as hell in the AV.⁶ According to Strong (1067 Greek), “This was originally the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned; a fit symbol of the wicked and their future destruction.”⁷ There is widespread agreement that Gehenna represents the final state of the unsaved after the resurrection of the dead.

“Gates of Hades” is a more accurate, and less likely to be misunderstood, translation of Matthew 16:18 than the AV’s “gates of hell.” Most modern translations, including NASB and NIV, use Hades. It refers to the abode of the dead and represents the intermediate state of humans after death and before the resurrection. The use of Sheol and the use of Hades should have the same scope and significance in both the OT and NT (Easton, 1897). In light of the expectation of the resurrection at the end of the age, Sheol or Hades should both be viewed as the temporary abode of the dead (Bauckham, 1997b).

Finally, there are no OT or NT verses referring to the *hosts of hell* or to Satan as the *lord of hell*. The gates of hell must mean something other than a demonic stronghold.

⁵ The AV translates the 65 instances of Sheol in the OT as hell 31 times, 31 times as the grave, and three times as pit, while translating Hades in the NT as hell 10 times and one time as the grave. Early Hebrew and Greek thought did not have the underworld as a place of torment for the wicked. It is also uncertain as to the extent of consciousness for the dead residing in the underworld. In later Hellenistic thought, Hades became a place of torment (West, 2000, 538). As similar notion of a place of punishment arose in Jewish writings during the intertestamental and NT period when Palestine came under Greek influence. See Bauckham (1997a; 1997b) for a more detailed explanation of the development of thoughts concerning the underworld in apocryphal and other writings of this period. However, details concerning the nature of consciousness and punishment during the intermediate state are beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶ Gehenna is combined with fire for three of 12 times used in the NT and is translated in the AV as “hell fire.”

⁷ The Valley of Hinnom also has OT references as a place of idol worship, particularly involving child sacrifice as worship of Molech (2 Ki. 23:10; 2 Ch. 28:3; 33:6; Je. 7:31; 32:35). Jeremiah prophesied it would be called the Valley of Slaughter (Je. 7:29-34; 19:1-15) because of the large numbers of Judeans killed and left there by the Babylonians (Watson, 1984).

Gates to the Underworld

Sheol in the OT and Hades in Greek mythology are both the common fate of all who die. In early Greek thought, Hades was located in the belly of the earth and entered through gates kept closed by locks (West, 2000, 537). The Babylonian underworld also had gates (Bauckham, 1997b). Sumerian mythology has the underworld “...guarded by seven walls, each with a gate and a gatekeeper whose role is to allow only the dead to enter and to prevent anyone from leaving” (Bauckham, 1997a). The common thread of these myths is that once someone entered the gates there would be no leaving. The image is not of a fortress denying entry but of a prison forever preventing its inhabitants from escaping.⁸

OT scripture also makes mention of gates to Sheol. For example, King Hezekiah cried out to the Lord, “In the middle of my life I am to enter the gates of Sheol; I am to be deprived of the rest of my years” (Is. 38:10). The Lord asked Job in Job 38:17, “Have the gates of death been revealed to you, Or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?” Other OT passages speak of drawing near to the gates or doors of death only to be rescued by the Lord (Ps. 107:18-20; 9:13).

Keys to Hell

The gates of hell (Hades) refers to the power to hold people in death (Mansfield, n.d.; Bauckham, 1997a), never allowing those to escape who have once entered (Vos, 1955, 1315). Fortunately, Jesus has greater power that will prevail over the hold death has on people. Before his death, Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 16:18 that he has the power to open the gates of hell (Hades) and free those held captive by death. Later, the risen Christ

⁸ Since ancient Greek and Middle Eastern worldviews held that escape from death was impossible, the resurrection of Jesus was awe-inspiring. Paul’s preaching of Christ’s resurrection alienated many in his audience of intellectuals at Areopagus (Mars Hill) because it was just too unbelievable (Ac. 17:32).

declares, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades”(Re.1:17-18). He was again declaring that he had the power to free from death those who had died because he held the keys that open the gates of hell (Hades). After the general resurrection, death and Hades are ultimately destroyed in the lake of fire (Re. 20:14). Matthew 16:18 is about the resurrection and Christ conquering death.

In Conclusion

The gates of hell (Hades) refers to the power to hold people in death. The gates do not protect a stronghold where Satan and his demons reside. The gates are not a place of demonic rule or power. While the church has power over the enemy and will be victorious, Matthew 16:18 refers to something completely different. Matthew 16:18 refers to Christ’s victory over the grave, his power to resurrect those bound by death.

*Lift up your heads, O gates,
 And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
 That the King of glory may come in!
 Who is the King of glory?
 The LORD strong and mighty,
 The LORD mighty in battle.
 Lift up your heads, O gates,
 And lift them up, O ancient doors,
 That the King of glory may come in!
 Who is this King of glory?
 The LORD of hosts,
 He is the King of glory. Selah. (Ps 24:7-10)*

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