

- The Greek term “Gehenna” is frequently forced to mean eternal separation from God by a modern Western perspective that an ancient Eastern mindset would avoid. In many English translations it appears twelve times in the New Testament and each time it is poorly rendered as “hell.” (Mt. 5:22, 29, 30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15, 33, Mk. 9:43, 45, 47, Lk. 12:5, Jms. 3:6). The Jewish biblical writings and the LXX – Septuagint each address “Gehenna” as the valley/son of “Hinnom” (1 Sam. 2:8, 2 Kgs. 23:10, 2 Chron. 28:3, 33:6, Neh. 2:13, 3:13-14, 12:31, Psm. 113:7, Jer. 7:31-33, 19:2, 6-9, 32:35, Lam. 4:5). This location in Israel outside of Jerusalem was historically known as a place for idol worship and child sacrifice. It was subsequently utilized as a burning garbage dump or manure pile. The site earned a less than stellar reputation. An out-of-control crime-ridden country can be known as a “3rd world dumpster fire.” A dangerous part of town rhetorically may be called “the wrong side of the tracks.” Bad decisions can cause one to find themselves in an unfortunate condition “living in a van down by the river.” Thus, it’s not unreasonable to understand the term “Gehenna”, as used by Christ and James, to be an apparent figurative expression communicating critical evaluations and shameful consequences, not separation or eternal destiny. “Gehenna” is the symbolic but real possibility of severe and intense negative assessments, the rotten nature of moral imperfection, and/or the reality of catastrophe, tragedy, and loss (of honor/reward) in the Christian life. There is indeed a lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). Equating “Gehenna” and its shameful reputation with an eternal place of endless punishment (Jude 7, 13) seems to rob the reality of temporal consequences intended for readers of the biblical text to comprehend. Less is more, and Gehenna is Gehenna – not Portland, the lake of fire, or hell.

