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Author(s): Dennis L. Largey

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Dennis L. Largey

The Bible teaches that there is a devil and a hell, but the place of hell in the plan of salvation is taught best by the Book of Mormon. Hell is a state of suffering, both temporary and permanent. Continuous suffering, however, is reserved only for sons of perdition – those who are still unclean after the final judgment. The Book of Mormon clarifies that the “lake of fire and brimstone” is a metaphor for the suffering of the wicked. It also teaches that the Atonement ransoms humankind from physical death through the resurrection and from spiritual death, or hell, through repentance.

As a young boy, I attended a two-week Christian camp. When the lights were out and we were on the verge of sleep, our camp counselor took advantage of the moment and endeavored to imprint his teachings upon the minds of his captive audience. One memorable night, he instructed us about the “pains of hell.” He asked us to imagine being stabbed and having that initial intense pain of the insertion of the knife last for twenty years. At the end of the twenty years, the knife would be withdrawn and again stabbed into us, with the resulting excruciating pain lasting another twenty years; this process would then be repeated for all eternity. That night not one boy was interested in going to hell!

Christians have debated for centuries the nature of the “hell fire” of which Jesus spoke (Matt. 5:22), and the “lake which

burneth with fire and brimstone” of which the apostle John wrote (Rev. 21:8). Whether Christians have believed hell to be literal or figurative, the New Testament metaphor of an unquenchable “lake of fire” has conjured up for believers in the Bible harsh images of souls consigned to never-ending punishment as recompense for their evil deeds done while on earth.

What is the Book of Mormon’s contribution to our understanding of the New Testament’s teachings concerning hell, or that “lake of fire” John calls the “second death” (Rev. 20:14), or the “outer darkness” (Matt. 22:13) that awaits the wicked? Who will partake of it, and what is the nature of the eternal torment? This analysis will first briefly review what we know from the teachings of the Restoration about hell, second death, the lake of fire and brimstone, and outer darkness. Following this introduction will be a discussion of the usage of these terms—first in the New Testament, then in the Book of Mormon.

Introduction

Latter-day Saints understand hell to be a literal place and/or state—either the temporary hell in the spirit world where the unjust suffer in a state of torment until they are resurrected to a celestial glory (D&C 76:81–85, 98–112), or the permanent hell where the wicked (the sons of perdition) continue to suffer eternally after the resurrection (D&C 76:37, 45–48).¹ The “pains of hell” can also be experienced in mortality (Jacob 3:11). These pains are similar to the state of suffering experienced by the ungodly who after mortality are assigned to hell.

The terms “spiritual death” or “second death,” “lake of fire and brimstone,” and “outer darkness” are all synonymous with hell, and all are descriptive of both the temporary and the permanent hell. Hell is outer darkness; it is the lake of fire; and it is the second death. Those consigned to hell or outer darkness are partakers of the second death, and their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone. For most, outer darkness, the lake of fire, and the second death have an end, but for the sons of perdition these states continue eternally. Often in the scriptures it is difficult to discern which hell—temporary or permanent—is being spoken of, since many references to hell in the scriptures are used in a nonspecific manner to simply designate a place or state of suffering for the

wicked. It is, therefore, important to examine carefully the context of each reference.

Hell

The word *hell* is mentioned twenty-three times in the New Testament: fifteen times in the Gospels, twice in the book of Acts, once each in James and 2 Peter, and four times in the book of Revelation. As used in the New Testament, *hell* is an English word which is translated from two Greek words: *hádēs* (used ten times) and *géenna* (twelve times). In each New Testament passage that speaks of hell (the word *hádēs* is neutral – neither a place of punishment nor reward but the place of departed spirits) the context associates it with suffering and punishment.²

Jesus warned that those who mocked their brothers by saying “Thou fool” were in danger of “hell fire” (Matt. 5:22), as were those who failed to “cast” away their sins (JS-M 5:34; cf. Matt. 5:30). Jesus proclaimed to Peter that the “gates of hell” would not prevail against the rock upon which He would build the Church (Matt. 16:18). The city of Capernaum was upbraided for its lack of faith in view of the miracles Jesus performed there. Jesus declared that this exalted city would be “brought down to hell” (Matt. 11:23). He stated that converts made by the Pharisees became “twofold more the child of hell” than their teachers (Matt. 23:15). He called the Pharisees and scribes “vipers” and questioned, “How can ye escape the damnation of hell?” (Matt. 23:33). Jesus’ disciples were told not to fear those who could kill the body but to “fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the tormented rich man “in hell . . . lift[ed] up his eyes” and saw Abraham and Lazarus across an impassable gulf (Luke 16:23).

On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter spoke of the promise David had received that his soul would not be left in hell (Acts 2:27). In Peter’s second general epistle to the Church, he taught concerning the angels who had sinned, saying that God “cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness” (2 Pet. 2:4). The apostle James taught that “the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity . . . and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell” (James 3:6). John the Revelator heard Christ proclaim that he possessed the “keys of hell and of death” (Rev. 1:18).

He also saw a pale horse with a rider whose name was "Death, and Hell followed with him" (Rev. 6:8). Finally, John saw that death and hell delivered up the dead to be judged according to their works, and "death and hell were cast into [a] lake of fire" (Rev. 20:13-14).

The New Testament testifies that there is an actual place identified as hell into which people can be cast, as in the case of the wicked, and from which they can lift up their eyes, as in the case of the rich man, and from which they can be delivered, as in the case of King David. Consistently, hell is associated with fire.

Brigham Young University Professor Larry E. Dahl reported:

The word *hell* appears sixty-two times in the text of the Book of Mormon. Thirty-three times it stands alone, without modifiers or explanation of what it means, as in "And thus we see the end of him who perverteth the ways of the Lord; and thus we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell" (Alma 30:60). Twenty-nine times the word *hell* is used with descriptive modifiers, for example, "depths of hell" (1 Ne. 12:16), "hell which hath no end" (1 Ne. 14:3-4), "awful hell" (1 Ne. 15:29, 35; Alma 19:29; 54:7), "sleep of hell" (2 Ne. 1:13), "gates of hell" (2 Ne. 4:32; 3 Ne. 11:39-40; 18:13), "pains of hell" (Jacob 3:11-12; Alma 14:6; 26:13; 36:13), "chains of hell" (Alma 5:7, 9-10; 12:11; 13:30; 26:14), "child of hell" (Alma 11:23; 54:11), "powers of hell" (Alma 48:17), "everlasting hell" (Hel. 6:28), "hell fire" (3 Ne. 12:22; Morm. 8:17), and "endless hell" (Moro. 8:13).³

The phrases "depths of hell," "awful hell," "sleep of hell," "pains of hell," "chains of hell," "everlasting hell," and "endless hell" are all unique to the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon provides another testament of the reality of a designated place called hell, where the wicked are consigned. Additionally it provides helpful commentary on New Testament passages concerning hell. For example, John saw the judgment in vision and wrote that "death and hell delivered up the dead . . . and they were judged every man according to their works" (Rev. 20:13). John's announcement of "death and hell" releasing their dead for judgment is augmented by the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob, who taught the same doctrine but provided significantly more detail. Jacob identified "death and hell" as temporal and spiritual death. Because of the resurrection, the body and spirit of the wicked are restored—the body from the

grave and the spirit from hell to be judged. The wicked, or in this particular context, the sons of perdition who are “filthy still” after judgment and resurrection, are assigned to “everlasting” punishment (see 2 Ne. 9:10–12, 15–16).

In harmony with this doctrinal truth that death and hell will deliver up the spirits and bodies of their captives, King David received the promise that his soul would not be left in hell (see Ps. 16:8–11) – meaning to be left with those who would partake of that permanent hell reserved only for those who, as Jacob stated, are “filthy still.”

The Book of Mormon teaches that only through the Atonement of Christ can one escape the “damnation of hell.” Jacob testified that without the “infinite atonement” all mankind would be forever subject to the “awful monster, death and hell,” and thus would become like the devil and his angels (2 Ne. 9:7–10, 19, 26). The Book of Mormon also teaches that by coming unto Christ, one can escape the “pains of hell” experienced in this life. For example, Alma the Younger was delivered from the intensity of his hellish pain when he cried to the Lord for mercy. “Yea,” Alma wrote, “I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell” (Alma 36:13). In this state of torment Alma remembered his father’s teachings about Jesus Christ and his redemptive mission. He cried: “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.” This desperate cry for forgiveness through Christ brought deliverance from the “pains of hell” Alma had experienced because of his sins (Alma 36:16–20).

In Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus contrasted the afterlife state of the lowly Lazarus with that of the self-absorbed rich man. Death brought a reversal of their conditions wherein the rich man in hell became a beggar, longing for a drop of water from the finger of Lazarus, who was now in heaven, or “Abraham’s bosom.” In the parable Abraham explained the impossibility of receiving his request, because “between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence” (Luke 16:19–26).

Nephi’s commentary to his brothers concerning his father’s dream of the tree of life adds interesting insight into the possible

meaning of the "great gulf" Jesus referred to: "And I said unto them that it was an awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life, and also from the saints of God. And I said unto them that it was a representation of that awful hell, which the angel said unto me was prepared for the wicked. And I said unto them that our father also saw that the justice of God did also divide the wicked from the righteous; and the brightness thereof was like unto the brightness of a flaming fire, which ascendeth up unto God forever and ever, and hath no end" (1 Ne. 15:28–30). Nephi's words can thus be applied to Jesus' parable: the reason the rich man could not cross the great gulf to Abraham's bosom, or the reason the wicked could not join the Saints of God at the tree of life, is because the justice of God does not permit it. Each person must reap the harvest of the seeds sown in this life. The righteousness of some (Abraham or Lazarus) cannot erase the consequences of another's sins (the rich man). The sinner must deal with the self-created gulf on his own, with the help of the Savior and his Atonement.

Additional doctrinal truth concerning the "great gulf" can be found in the Doctrine and Covenants (see D&C 138:18–37). Through his Atonement, Resurrection, and ministry in the spirit world, Christ provided a bridge by which repentant souls could cross the gulf from hell to spiritual freedom.

The Second Death

The New Testament contains four references to the second death, all located in the Revelation of John. To the Church in Smyrna the Apostle John wrote: "He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death" (Rev. 2:11). Concerning the first resurrection John observed: "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years" (Rev. 20:6). John did not define the second death other than to make it synonymous with the lake of fire and brimstone that awaits the wicked. He wrote: "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death" (Rev. 21:8; cf. Rev. 20:14). While John

could be referring to the sons of perdition in this passage, the specific sins he identified are characteristic of those who will suffer in hell but, after experiencing “their part” in the lake of fire, will be released from their torment and be resurrected to a celestial glory (see D&C 76:103–12).

The term second death refers to spiritual death or separation from God. The Book of Mormon contains six references to the second death: one reference by Jacob (Jacob 3:11), three by Alma (Alma 12:16, 32; 13:30), and two by Samuel the Lamanite (Hel. 14:18–19). John’s references to the second death testify of its existence but do not offer any explanatory information that instructs those readers who do not already understand the doctrine. In contrast, Book of Mormon references to the second death are embedded in sermons that teach it in context with other essential elements of the plan of salvation.

For example, Samuel the Lamanite taught:

For behold, he surely must die that salvation may come; yea, it behooveth him and becometh expedient that he dieth, to bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, that thereby men may be brought into the presence of the Lord. Yea, behold, this death bringeth to pass the resurrection, and redeemeth all mankind from the first death—that spiritual death; for all mankind, by the fall of Adam being cut off from the presence of the Lord, are considered as dead, both as to things temporal and to things spiritual. But behold, the resurrection of Christ redeemeth mankind, yea, even all mankind, and bringeth them back into the presence of the Lord. Yea, and it bringeth to pass the condition of repentance, that whosoever repenteth the same is not hewn down and cast into the fire; but whosoever repenteth not is hewn down and cast into the fire; and there cometh upon them again a spiritual death, yea, a second death, for they are cut off again as to things pertaining to righteousness. Therefore repent ye, repent ye, lest by knowing these things and not doing them ye shall suffer yourselves to come under condemnation, and ye are brought down unto this second death (Hel. 14:15–19).

Thus, the second death is taught in conjunction with the “first death,” which came as a consequence of the Fall of Adam and Eve, and also with the Atonement of Jesus Christ, which redeems all of humankind from the first death through resurrection and the second death through repentance. The second death is a second separation from God, not because of Adam’s transgression (the

first death) but because of one's own failure to repent of personal sin. Samuel also confirms the relationship John spoke of between the second death and the wicked being cast into fire, but he adds this explanatory clause: "For they are cut off again as to things pertaining to righteousness."

Alma the Younger contributed even more insight on the second death when he gave the wicked people of Ammonihah a detailed description of the fate of those who harden their hearts against the word of God:

Then if our hearts have been hardened, yea, if we have hardened our hearts against the word, insomuch that it has not been found in us, then will our state be awful, for then we shall be condemned. . . . And now behold, I say unto you then cometh a death, even a second death, which is a spiritual death; then is a time that whosoever dieth in his sins, as to a temporal death, shall also die a spiritual death; yea, he shall die as to things pertaining unto righteousness. Then is the time when their torments shall be as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever; and then is the time that they shall be chained down to an everlasting destruction, according to the power and captivity of Satan, he having subjected them according to his will. Then, I say unto you, they shall be as though there had been no redemption made; for they cannot be redeemed according to God's justice; and they cannot die, seeing there is no more corruption (Alma 12:13, 16-18).

Here, like John and Samuel, Alma equated the second death with the lake of fire and brimstone. In addition, Alma defined the second death as dying "as to things pertaining unto righteousness." These individuals are "chained down to an everlasting destruction" and are subject to the will of Satan. Later in the same discourse Alma blended the doctrines of the Fall, agency, and the second death together as an admonition to keep the commandments of God (see Alma 12:31-37). Again, the doctrine of the second death is woven together with other essential parts of the plan of salvation, offering the reader the "big picture" concerning God's judgments.

Lake of Fire and Brimstone

In the Bible, the phrases "lake of fire" and "lake of fire and brimstone," describing the fate of the wicked, are unique to the

book of Revelation. There are three references that connect the judgment with a “lake of fire and brimstone,” and two references to a “lake of fire.” However, the use of the word “fire” in connection with judgment and the torment of the wicked is widespread throughout the Gospels. For example: “everlasting fire” (Matt. 18:8), “hell fire” (Matt. 5:22), “burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12), “the tares are gathered and burned in the fire” (Matt. 13:40), “cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:42), “the fire that never shall be quenched” (Mark 9:45), “where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48), and “cast into the fire” (Luke 3:9).

The apostle John saw the final judgment and wrote of the destiny of the wicked: “And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire [i.e., overcome or defeated by Christ’s Atonement]. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:13–15).

John identified specific sins that would lead to the lake of fire and brimstone: “But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death” (Rev. 21:8; see also 19:20).

Some Christians have believed the lake of fire John spoke of to be a literal lake. St. Augustine wrote: “Hell, which also is called a lake of fire and brimstone, will be material fire, and will torment the bodies of the damned, whether men or devils—the solid bodies of the one, aerial bodies of the others; or if only men have bodies as well as souls, yet the evil spirits, though without bodies, shall be so connected with the bodily fires as to receive pain without imparting life. One fire certainly shall be the lot of both.”⁴

In the Book of Mormon the phrase “lake of fire and brimstone” is used as a metaphor for the suffering that awaits the wicked. There are ten references to the “lake of fire and brimstone” in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon also makes reference to “everlasting fire” (2 Ne. 9:16), “unquenchable fire” (Mosiah 2:38), and “hell fire” (3 Ne. 12:22).

The Book of Mormon presents several significant insights concerning the “lake of fire and brimstone” of which John spoke. Jacob taught that the lake of fire is not a literal fire but a figurative representation of torment: “And assuredly, as the Lord liveth, for the Lord God hath spoken it, and it is his eternal word, which cannot pass away, that they who are righteous shall be righteous still, and they who are filthy shall be filthy still; wherefore, they who are filthy are the devil and his angels; and they shall go away into everlasting fire, prepared for them; and their torment *is as* a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever and has no end” (2 Ne. 9:16; emphasis added).

Note the Book of Mormon’s addition of the words *is as*. Clearly fire is used as a metaphor for suffering – not a literal fire but a state of misery. King Benjamin and Alma also use the word *as* to preface their reference to a lake of fire and brimstone (see Mosiah 3:27; Alma 12:17). King Benjamin defined the cause of this great torment: “Therefore if that man repenteth not, and remaineth and dieth an enemy to God, the demands of divine justice do awaken his immortal soul to a lively sense of his own guilt, which doth cause him to shrink from the presence of the Lord, and doth fill his breast with guilt, and pain, and anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever. And now I say unto you, that mercy hath no claim on that man; therefore his final doom is to endure a never-ending torment” (Mosiah 2:38–39).

King Benjamin also taught that the fiery suffering was a state of misery one encounters when viewing one’s sinfulness: “They shall be judged, every man according to his works, whether they be good, or whether they be evil. And if they be evil they are consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord into a state of misery and endless torment, from whence they can no more return; therefore they have drunk damnation to their own souls. Therefore, they have drunk out of the cup of the wrath of God, which justice could no more deny unto them than it could deny that Adam should fall because of his partaking of the forbidden fruit; therefore, mercy could have claim on them no more forever. And *their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone*, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever” (Mosiah 3:24–27; emphasis added).

Outer Darkness

There are three references to “outer darkness” in the New Testament, all contained in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus “marvelled” at the faith of a centurion he met in Capernaum and proclaimed that many would “come from the east and west, and [would] sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom [i.e., covenant breakers] shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:11-12). Jesus also referred to outer darkness in two parables he gave during the last week of his life. In the parable of the wedding of the king’s son, the king discovered that a guest was not properly attired in the required wedding garment, i.e., righteousness. After inspecting the intruder, the king instructed his servants, “Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 22:13). In the parable of the talents, the returning lord instructed that the wicked and slothful servant who hid his talent in the earth be cast “into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25:30). In each of the New Testament references to outer darkness, Christ declared the punishment that awaits faithless and wicked people.

The Book of Mormon contains one reference to outer darkness. It occurs in a doctrinal discussion Alma conducted with his son Corianton. The prophet Alma described the disposition of those in outer darkness: “And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of the wicked, yea, who are evil – for behold, they have no part nor portion of the Spirit of the Lord; for behold, they chose evil works rather than good; therefore the spirit of the devil did enter into them, and take possession of their house – and these shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth, and this because of their own iniquity, being led captive by the will of the devil” (Alma 40:13; cf. 34:34-35; note Alma’s repetitive use of the word “state” in Alma 40:11-12; see also D&C 101:90-91; 133:70-73).

In this context, outer darkness is the spirit prison, or that part of the spirit world that the wicked inhabit prior to their resurrection.

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon text confirms the truth of New Testament teachings on hell, second death, lake of fire and brimstone, and outer darkness. It also adds insight that, when blended with other essential doctrines, offers a more complete understanding of the plan of salvation. The Book of Mormon discusses with great clarity the ultimate punishment reserved exclusively for the sons of perdition, or those who are “filthy still” (2 Ne. 9:16) after the final judgment. The Book of Mormon does not teach the doctrinal truth that hell will end for the majority of those who suffer in the spirit prison prior to being resurrected and entering the telestial kingdom; however, this truth is clearly taught in the Doctrine and Covenants (see D&C 76:36–38, 106).

The Book of Mormon provides another testament concerning the existence of hell, and explains how one can escape the “chains of hell” in this life, and an everlasting hell in the next life, through application of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. It even warns its readers to beware of the devil’s temptation to disbelieve the doctrine of a personal devil and that there is an actual place and/or state called hell. In revealing Satan’s tactics, Nephi wrote: “And behold, others he flattereth away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none — and thus he whispereth in their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains, from whence there is no deliverance. Yea, they are grasped with death, and hell; and death, and hell, and the devil, and all that have been seized therewith must stand before the throne of God, and be judged according to their works, from whence they must go into the place prepared for them, even a lake of fire and brimstone, which is endless torment” (2 Ne. 28:22–23).

Dennis L. Largey is associate professor of ancient scripture, Brigham Young University.

Notes

1. See also Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 758.

2. For a discussion of the New Testament words that translate *hell*, see *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), s.v. "hell."
3. Larry E. Dahl, "The Concept of Hell," in *Doctrines of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 42–43.
4. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950), 781.