



## Lay Preachers' Conference

### Re-thinking Christian faith in the light of ancient semantics

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**Intertextuality** is the practice of using one text when writing another. [Matthew references the Torah, Paul references popular Greek culture.] It always happens, whether consciously or not.

When employing the Hebrew scriptures for Christian theology or teaching, we must remember that, while the Christian scriptures were written in Greek, the Hebrew scriptures were written in Hebrew (with a small minority in Aramaic). There are therefore translation issues:

\*\* Ideas do not always carry over exactly from one culture to another, so the translation may carry different overtones and associations from the original; [and it happens between different cultures using the same language: witness English and Australian “house” or American and Australian “momentarily”.]

\*\* Sometimes translators add their own ideas when making a translation [and sometimes this is unavoidable – does one translate word-for-word, or does one translate the metaphor, eg Ps 73:2?].

\*\* Some ideas are lost in translation: eg, the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith implies by the believer's faith – this is incorrect. But in Romans 3:22 and Galatians 2:16, the Greek is the faith of Jesus, or more properly the *faithfulness* of Jesus. Similarly for the word “glory”: the common Christian idea, of greatness, power, might, etc, is from Greek culture. The original Hebrew is *kavod*, literally the liver: the biggest and heaviest organ in any mammal's body, therefore the most important.

### Table discussion

What do we think the words sin, redemption and hell are about?

The paper is about 8 key Christian concepts and words:

***life/death, sin/cross, heaven/hell, redemption/resurrection.***

### Life and death

Refer Gen 2:9 - ... in the middle of the garden stood the tree that gives life and the tree that gives knowledge of what is good and what is evil [ie, knowledge of everything]. And the later threat – the day you eat of the tree of knowledge ... you will die [but actually they don't – they are expelled from the garden].

***In Hebrew: life and being alive*** are tied up with community – union and unity. **Life is unity.**

***Death:*** relates to Mot, the god of death and brother of the god of “Ocean”, the source of chaos and danger. (Hence Rev 21 – there is no sea, that is, no threat, no danger.) Death is capture by Mot and expulsion from life. **Death is separation.**

*The tree of life creates union.*

*The tree of death creates separation.*

*And hell is sometimes described as separation  
from God.*

### Sin and cross

#### Sin

***In Hebrew,*** there are two words describing sin:

***pasa:*** to do with broken relationships, and by far the more common. God describes Adam's sin as breaking the relationship between Adam and God.

***hata:*** to do with an arrow missing the mark because it strayed from the correct path. The associated Greek word is ***harmatia:*** doing wrong things.

The Septuagint, produced in about 200 BCE (and the sole text used by Paul and Jesus) uses ***hata*** exclusively. The loss of the other metaphor has clearly shaped the Christian understanding of sin ever since.

When Paul wrote, “the wages of sin is death”, the Hebrew would have been, “the wage of a broken relationship is separation from God. But the gift of God is life, ie, union with God. [Jesus “without sin” = relationship with God not broken.]

### **Cross**

What did Jewish people think of crucifixion?

1 Jewish culture used the word *tree* for *cross* (there being presumably no other word in Hebrew) and declared that a person hung from a tree was cursed. No ambiguity there!

2 Refer John 19: Golgotha, the place of the skull.

There is a small(ish) cliff at the northern gate of old Jerusalem (now a bus station): holes in the cliff face give an appearance something like a skull. There is a garden near the top of the cliff. For Jewish people this is a reference back to the Garden of Eden and the tree of death.

In *John* Jesus is executed on Golgotha and buried in a nearby garden. John is saying that the one executed on the tree of death comes back to the garden to make it once again a place of life.

## **Heaven and hell**

### **Hell**

The Hebrew is **gehinnom** – the Valley of Hinnom – just outside Jerusalem. This was transliterated into Greek as *ge-enna*, sometimes written as *gehenna*.

In the Caananite days before Hebrew occupation, the god Moloch – depicted as a human body with an ox head – demanded baby and child sacrifice. Often enough, babies were born for the sole purpose of offering to Moloch; there were so many sacrifices that bodies were often left unburied, simply to decay.

King Solomon worshipped Moloch for a time (1 Kings 11:7-11) and built a statue in the valley.

Josiah banned the worship and practice (2 Kg 23:10).

The name **gehinnom** for Hell as the separation caused by broken covenant (see above) arose because it was in that place that Solomon broke the covenant.

### **Heaven**

Refer to Genesis 1:1 and the metaphor therein.

God created “the heavens and the earth”, that is, everything that exists; it has no deeper theological meaning than that.

In 2 Cor 12:2, Paul refers to a person taken to “the third heaven”. He is here referring to the 3-layered cosmology of his day: the 1<sup>st</sup> is the sky, the 2<sup>nd</sup> is the sun, moon and stars, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> is where God dwells. That is, “the third heaven” is the presence of God.

Once again:

Heaven = life = in the presence of God

Hell = death = separation from God.

## **Redemption and resurrection**

### **Redemption**

This fundamental doctrine for conservative Christians draws its meaning from the Roman practice of *slavery*. Just as a slave could be *redeemed* (if someone paid the purchase price) and set free, so Paul said that we could be set free from sin (which he saw as a power exercising slave-owner-like power over us).

This notion of redemption is entirely a Greek/Roman one that has no parallel in Hebrew culture. In that Hebrew culture, indeed, the word *redemption* does not exist.

But there is the notion of a **redeemer**. He is the **go’el**, the one who comes to the aid of somebody in deep distress, and provides a way out, “gives the person their life back”. For a widowed woman, this usually meant marriage, and children from this new marriage would be held to be children of the deceased man. Redeemer is about marriage.

*Ruth* wanted Boaz to be her go’el, and he was indeed willing [but there was in fact a closer relative who held that privilege and responsibility and had to be consulted first].

*Job* had a redeemer – everybody did – but his (in)famous line [my additional note] “I know that my redeemer lives” stands as one of the worst misuses of biblical quotation in modern times: it has

nothing at all to do with resurrection – the full notion is “I know my redeemer is out there somewhere, but where the hell is he?”

We note also that Isaiah 54:5 uses the word go'el twice, the first usually translated as husband, the second as redeemer.

### **Resurrection**

John 20:11-14 records how Mary Magdalene looked into the tomb and saw two men with the empty shelf between them – a reference to the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies that had Ark of the Covenant in the middle of the altar; except that here the space is empty: God is missing.

Mary turned and saw Jesus behind her, outside: God had gone from the place of death into the world. **Life**, as the **presence of God**, is found in the world of physical existence.

The Old Testament Song of Songs has parallels with 1<sup>st</sup>-century Greek romantic poetry.

Specifically Song 1:12 shares these elements with the Greek counterpart: dark, the futile search, a sudden discovery, holding by the woman. This, then is another marriage image – in *John* this time. Jesus comes as a bridegroom, as a human, proposing to humanity. It is just one of many marriage metaphors in *The Gospel of John*.

My note – we should also remember Paul's declaration: there is therefore no condemnation now for those who are in union with Christ Jesus ... (Romans 8:1).