

## **Topheth: beating drums in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom**

### 1. Study Jeremiah 7:31-32. Where is Topheth and the Valley of the son of Hinnom?

Once called the Valley of the son of Hinnom, possibly naming the original owner, the Valley of Hinnom is a deep ravine west and south of Jerusalem, and today it is known as Wadi Jehennam or Wadi er Rubeb. Believed to be located in the southeast region of the valley of Hinnom, Topheth occupied a “high place” and was the site of worship of the Ammonite god Molech.

### 2. To understand the significance of these verses, it is important to understand the historical context of this geographical area. What do you learn about the kings of Judah that are associated with the Topheth and the Valley of Hinnom?

Initiated by his love of “foreign” women as wives and concubines, King Solomon established shrines for the worship of pagan gods about “high places” or hilltops (1 Kings 11:1-7). Two pagan gods were particularly detestable, Chemosh the pagan god of the Moabites and Molech the pagan god of the Ammonites, because their worship called for the sacrifice of infants.

Topheth, meaning “place of fire,” was a site of worship for Molech; however, it’s primitive root word “toph” meant “playing or beating a percussion instrument such as a timbrel, tambourine, or drum”. Scholars believe that it was possible that percussion instruments were used to drown out the sounds of infants as they were burned alive.

Molech had the head of a bull with two horns and the body of a man. The idol’s stomach was hollow and was the furnace for the fire used during the sacrifice. When hot enough, the infant was placed into the arms of the idol.

It is not known when the Israelites started sacrificing their children; however, God clearly prohibited such forms of worship and indicated that sacrificing innocent children was murder (“blood on their hands”). And infanticide began with idolatry.

The Bible states that King Ahaz of Judah, the 12<sup>th</sup> king from King Solomon, sacrificed his own sons to Molech in his attempt to seek military aid from the pagan god (2 Kings 16:1-3).

King Manasseh of Judah, the 14<sup>th</sup> king from King Solomon, was also an evil king. Like King Ahaz, King Manasseh sacrificed his own sons by burning them to death in the worship of Molech (2 Kings 21:1-6, 2 Chronicles 33:1-6).

King Josiah of Judah, the 16<sup>th</sup> king from King Solomon, was a godly king and in his reforms, abolished all idol worship, pagan priests, destroyed pagan shrines and specifically destroyed Topheth (2 Kings 23:1-14, 2 Chronicles 34:3-7). By spreading human bones about, King Josiah defiled the former high places of idol worship and rendered them ceremonially unclean. It is not known if King Josiah was entirely successful as Jeremiah makes repeated calls against Topheth (Jer 19:1-6; 32:35); however, in time, the Valley of Hinnom became a garbage dump for the city of Jerusalem receiving waste, refuse, and unclean objects such as the bodies of dead animals and executed criminals. Fires within the dump were promoted to reduce the garbage that collected.

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### 3. What implications of this Old Testament reference have on the New Testament?

By Jesus' time, the Valley of Hinnom was a full fledged garbage dump with its wretched rotting aromas, howls of scavenging wild animals, and smoldering and perpetual fires. In Hebrew, the Valley of Hinnom was "Ge Hinnom" which transliterated into Greek became "Gehenna." Because of its history of infant sacrifice and idol worship, the area was associated with desecration, abominable fires, death, and waste.

Excluding James 3:6, Jesus alone is the only one using "gehenna" in the New Testament. As a figure of speech to convey the symbolic fate of unrepentant sinners, Gehenna's image of abomination, death, stench, fire, and waste was well understood by the citizens of Jerusalem. In this manner, the judgment of an invisible God can be understood in a tangible and frightening manner.

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