

THE DARK SIDE OF ETERNITY

The New Testament Description of the Final Fate of the Wicked

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Master's Program
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ABSTRACT

Due to the heated climate of recent years revolving around the nature and duration of hell; and due to the veritable firestorm of controversy surrounding this subject, especially sparked by Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*, this thesis is offered as a clear exposition and explanation of the New Testament texts which describe the final fate of the wicked. Following some essential foundations for understanding the nature of the eternal, the various New Testament texts will be examined with careful attention to Jesus first, followed by the writings of Paul, John, Peter, and remaining New Testament writers. The information obtained from these texts will then be compared to the various views which are available to test and determine their validity. Then final observations and summation of the data will be offered.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the lost with the prayerful expectation that they would flee from the wrath to come.

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1 – Introduction

As unpleasant a subject as any, the fate of the wicked after this life is nevertheless a Bible subject. But it is F. LaGard Smith who puts it best when he writes in *AfterLife* that there are two things one can be assured of about hell: “First, that hell will be whatever hell turns out to be, whether or not our understanding of its reality is anywhere close to being correct; and second, that whatever it turns out to be will be appropriate punishment inflicted by a righteous and holy God.”¹ “What the infinitely wise and good God may see fit to do with his creatures; or what the exigencies of a government embracing the whole universe and continuing throughout eternal ages, may demand, it is not for such worms of the dust as we are, to determine.”² Whatever position one may take or whatever one understands of the final fate of the wicked, one should be of such a mind so as to acknowledge that God will be proven right and justice will be done in whatever form that takes. “Let God be true though every man a liar” (Romans 3.4).³

The orthodoxy of church history, by and large, concerning the fate of the wicked has been and continues to be eternal conscious torment.⁴ The orthodoxy of members of the churches of Christ has been and continues to be that the wicked suffer conscious punishment in hell for all eternity. This was clearly demonstrated in 2011 when Rob Bell published his book *Love Wins*. It was met with a veritable firestorm (pun intended) of criticism which was pandenominational in

¹ Smith 166.

² Hodge 3: 870.

³ All Scripture references will be from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Robert Peterson lists 11 figures from church history who all believed the wicked suffer eternal punishment and presents them as a consensus voice all speaking the same word about the punishment for the wicked: “Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Wesley, Francis Pieper, Louis Berkof, Lewis Sperry Chafer, and Millard Erickson” (Robertson 14).

scope. Edward Fudge sums up the issue: “Traditionalist writers agree that the wicked will remain alive for ever, in sensible punishment of some description, so that neither they nor it will ever pass away.”⁵

As terrible as hell will be, there is no shortage of interest in the subject. Last year (2013), Dan Brown published another best seller entitled *Inferno* in which the main character must decipher clues related to Dante’s famous epic of the same name. Surveys continue to show that many people still believe in hell. According to one poll,⁶ 53% of those asked say they believe in hell, though that figure is down nearly 20% in the last decade.⁷ Perhaps even more interesting is that of those polled who believe in hell, only 1.5% believed they were going there. So a majority of Americans believe in hell, and almost no one believes they are going there!

Is this the case? Is hell resigned for just a few who *want* to go or *believe* they are going there? What does the Bible say about who will end up in hell? Also, what is hell like? What are the various views on this subject? Is the traditional or orthodox view accurate? How does the New Testament describe the final fate of the wicked? How do the various views on hell square with what the Bible has to say about the subject?

⁵ Fudge 5.

⁶ “Majority of Americans Surveyed Believe Heaven and Hell Exist, the Devil and Angels Are Real and God Is Not Responsible for Recent U.S. Tragedies.” PRNewswire, 29 May 2013. Web. 8 February 2014.

⁷ “Americans Describe Their Views About Life After Death.” *Barna.org*. Barna Group, 21 October 2003. Web. 8 February 2014.

2 – Various Views on Hell

While not directly the purpose of this paper, it seems essential to put forward the various views regarding the final fate of the wicked. Many scholars have written about how best to understand the New Testament's (or in some cases the whole Bible's) description of the final fate of the wicked. As this paper unfolds, it will become evident whether these views are orthodox or heterodox and thus, whether the church should hold fast to them or reject them outright.

Annihilationism/Conditional Immortality. Annihilationists insist that the final fate of the wicked is not eternal conscious punishment. Some assert that after final judgment, the wicked are snuffed out of existence. Others say that following judgment, the wicked endure for a little while to endure misery in hell, but eventually go out of existence. The view involves the nature of immortality and who receives immortality in the end. Immortality is only bestowed upon the righteous and therefore the unrighteous will eventually cease to exist. Hence, a condition of immortality is to be among the saved.

Universalism. Most scholars trace the origins of the view that all will be saved to the early church writer Origen.⁸ Essentially, this view says that all creatures were created good (the devil included) and through a process of purification which can be attained either in this life or the next all creatures – men and angels – will be reunited with their Maker. Origen's heterodoxy was officially refuted and condemned at the Council of Constantinople (543 AD). Nevertheless,

⁸ Some, though, believe that Clement of Alexandria planted the roots for the belief which Origen would water and cause to blossom.

several since him have ventured into this territory and advocated for the final restoration of all creatures.⁹ Most notably are the Unitarians, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses.¹⁰

Purgatorial. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, purgatory “is a place or condition of temporal punishment for those who, departing this life in God's grace, are not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due their transgressions” (575). The Catholic view presents hell as a place which is intended to purge or purify the soul to prepare it for the eternal bliss and glory of heaven. Though not everyone is finally purified (some will remain in hell), many are eventually cleansed and can enter heaven. This is not simply a Catholic doctrine. In fact, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, C.S. Lewis, who was himself a layman of the Church of England, asked, “Our souls demand purgatory, don't they?”¹¹

Conditional Universalism. Rob Bell recently (2011) wrote a book in which he, in typical postmodern fashion, provides a rather unclear position of his belief on the afterlife.¹² In this book, he presents what I have labeled the “conditional universalist” position. As the title indicates, Bell believes God gets what God wants which is “all people to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2.4).¹³ In short, love wins. Immediately the universalism motif is evident. However, Bell is careful to point out that “we get what we want” because “God is that loving.”¹⁴ Bell is adamant, “If we want hell, if we want heaven, they are ours.”¹⁵ Bell essentially says everybody will be saved...if they want to be saved. If a person wants eternity

⁹ Another early church writer, Gregory Nyssa, held this view. F.D.E. Schleiermacher in the 19th century was the first prominent theologian to revive this belief.

¹⁰ Halbrook 128.

¹¹ As quoted in Smith 220 from *Letters to Malcom*.

¹² Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, HarperOne: New York, 2011.

¹³ Bell has an entire chapter on “Does God Get What God Wants?” in which he hints at universalist tendencies but never fully goes the whole way. See pages 95-116.

¹⁴ Bell 116-117.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 118.

away from God in despair, isolation, misery, and pain away from light, life, grace, and love, “God graciously grants us that *option*.”¹⁶ This is the conditional part of Bell’s universalism.¹⁷

Eternal Conscious Punishment. Throughout church history eternal conscious punishment has been the orthodox view of the final fate of the wicked. Official creeds and confessions of the faith have championed this belief. The final fate of the wicked is pain, misery, torment, and torture in fire and darkness forever and ever without end. There is debate over whether the language of the New Testament is literal or figurative. Some come down on the side of literal fire and darkness. Others see the language as figurative, and so the fire and darkness are merely figures which speak to the awful reality of what is in store. Both, though, agree that punishment is unending conscious torment.

¹⁶ Ibid 117. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ For a more expansive explanation of Bell’s position, see appendix #1.

3 – The Nature of Man

Major theologies are tied up in the nature of man. What one believes about the nature of man shapes their understanding about man's state in this life and the afterlife. So it is essential to lay out some basic tenets concerning the nature of man, especially in regard to original sin, man's body, and man's soul. Briefly, we shall consider the nature of man.

The dogma of original sin is relevant to the state of man's soul. At its most basic elements, the doctrine of original sin is that all men sinned in Adam and are guilty of that first sin. Since then, sin has been imputed to men through the parents. The whole nature of man is corrupted since Adam, from Adam. However, reason identifies the contradictions present in the original sin doctrine. Does it make sense that one person commit a crime and another person go to prison? Well, maybe if we both went to prison? No, but each man is responsible to God for his own sins. "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18.4, 20). "Each one shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deuteronomy 24.16). So Paul, with these Jewish texts as a backdrop, explains that God "will render to each one according to his works" (Romans 2.6).

Man is mortal. Contrary to orthodox belief, *physical* death did not come into the world through the sin of Adam. Orthodoxy concerning original sin points to Romans 5.12 where Paul says "just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, so death spread to all men because all sinned." However, this text is not talking about *physical* death coming through sin but *spiritual* death.¹⁸ Moreover, since "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of

¹⁸ For more on this, F. LaGard Smith capably argues this point in *AfterLife* 34-36.

God,” God’s plan from the beginning with mortal man was to clothe him in immortality once his time on earth was finished. Man, though, spoiled this by sin. Spiritual death came into the world through sin. Man’s soul, thus marred by sin and spiritual death, needed one who could provide the means of immortality and life with God. Christ does this (see 2 Timothy 1.10).

One’s belief in the origin of the soul of man is usually predicated upon the belief which one espouses concerning original sin. There is the preexistence theory which says one’s soul, before it inhabited the body, had a conscious existence and during that time sinned. The traducian theory says that, like original sin, one’s soul is a derivative of the souls of the parents. The fatal flaw for both of these theories is their false premise of original sin.

One other theory concerning the origin of the soul is that it was created by God. Even arguing philosophically, one can see this is true. God is the only great uncaused cause. He created everything, though He Himself is self-existent. God not only created man (Genesis 1.27), God created man’s soul. In other words, there was a time when man’s soul, like the man himself, did not exist. When exactly that creation took place (i.e. proposed from the extremes of all souls were created at the beginning of time to each soul created at birth) is not stated in Scripture. What matters is that in eternity God created each individual soul (cf. Psalm 139.16).

More importantly, Biblically this is the case. It is God who is the creator of the soul of man (cf. Zechariah 12.1), and also the giver of the soul of man (Ecclesiastes 12.7; Isaiah 42.5). Even as the soul “departs” at the time of one’s death (see Genesis 35.18), so at the time when life begins the soul “arrives,” sent by God according to His good pleasure. While theories abound about the soul’s state of existence during the interim before it inhabits a body whatever the

length of time, suffice it to say that as man's soul "sleeps" in the Hadean realm after death, before life it seems likely that the soul is unconscious.¹⁹

¹⁹ For a more detailed explanation of the origin of the soul, see Hodge 2: 65-76.

4 – Concerning Immortality

Man is mortal. He is human, and as a human he is subject to death. Therefore, to be *immortal* is to be superhuman and not subject to death. Indeed, several lexicons define the Greek word for “immortal” (*athanasia*) as “incapable of dying.”²⁰ It is one thing to speak of the flesh (*sarx*), but what of the soul (*psuche*) of man? Is the immaterial soul of man incapable of dying (i.e. immortal)?

The prevalent view throughout history has been that something of man is immortal. Peter Geach, in speaking of the soul, says, “There has been a common belief both in *survival* of bodily death and in *immortality*.”²¹ While the view has varied about the *how* and *what* immortality is, the fact remains that it has been a common belief something survives bodily death. Granted, some in antiquity have been unsure and even denied immortality and/or survival after death.²² However, this is best understood as comparable to our present-day situation where perhaps an atheist, agnostic, or skeptic doubts or denies immortality. This is not the prominent or dominant view; it represents the minority. So in history, the prevalent view has been in favor of immortality.

In a more contemporary sense, while there is debate about this issue, Edward Fudge in *The Fire that Consumes* states, “theologians frankly admit that the expression ‘immortal soul’ is

²⁰ *Wuest's Word Studies* but see also the *Dictionary of Bible Languages, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Louw-Nida, et al

²¹ Penelham 11, emphasis original.

²² Some examples are given by N.T. Wright in *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 32-34, which include quotes from Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Cambyses though Wright's comments are in regards to resurrection and not immortality. Other notable exceptions include the Stoics (who were pantheists), the Epicureans (who were materialists), and the Sadducees (who, in contrast to most Jews, were materialist).

not in the Bible but confidently state that Scripture assumes the immortality of every soul.”²³ In addition, Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown say: “Nowhere is the immortality of the soul, *distinct* from the body, taught” (on 1 Cor 15.53), and “It is mere heathen philosophy that attributes to the soul indestructibility in itself, which is to be attributed solely to God’s gift” (on 1 Tim 6.16). By “heathen philosophy” it seems they mean primarily Greek philosophy “which early Christian apologists took for granted.”²⁴

Is man’s soul immortal? Simply by utilizing our definitions that immortality is the incapacity for death and looking into Scripture it is clear that “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18.4, 20). Strictly speaking, the soul is not immortal for when sin enters the picture, death comes with it.

What do the Scriptures say? In 1 Timothy, Paul states that God is “immortal” (1.17) and that He “alone has immortality” (6.16). In 1 Corinthians, Paul asserts that God will bestow immortality upon men (specifically Christians) when “the perishable [body] puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality” (15.54). Pausing for just a moment, the argument is made by Constable that it is *only* Christians to whom God gives this immortal body:

[We] believe that the bodies of the just are *changed* at their resurrection, then putting on incorruption and immortality, and thus becoming "spiritual bodies;" while those of the wicked are raised *unchanged*, not putting on at resurrection either incorruption or immortality, but still natural bodies as they were sown, resuming with their old life their old mortality, as such subject to pain, and as such sure to yield to that of which all pain is the symptom and precursor, physical death and dissolution.²⁵

²³ Fudge 22.

²⁴ Ibid 6.

²⁵ Constable 111-112, emphasis original.

Since Paul wrote to Christians, not to lost unbelievers, he is describing in 1 Corinthians 15.35ff what is to happen for the dead in Christ: they will receive a changed body and immortality. Further, in this context, Paul is specifically talking about those who have “fallen asleep in Christ” in this context and their resurrection bodies (1 Corinthians 15.18). However, the fact that he does not mention the wicked dead as getting a different (spiritual) body does not mean it will not be so for them. God can give them “a body as he has chosen” fit for eternity away from His presence.

In addition, God will “give eternal life” to those who “seek for glory and honor and immortality [incorruption]” (Romans 2.7). Further, it is Christ who “brought life and immortality [incorruption] to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1.10). All this from Paul indicates that, contrary to Platonian philosophy, patristic teaching, and present orthodoxy, man’s soul, like his body, does not inherently possess immortality. “This immortality, it is seen, is part of the eternal life bestowed through Jesus on believers.”²⁶ “As He *hath immortality*, so will He give it to us who believe; to be out of Him is death.”²⁷ Immortality “is a gift of God, conferred on those who have entered into living communion with Him” (Warfield III). Immortality is granted and ultimately given to man by God who is immortal and possesses immortality essentially.

God created every soul that has ever or will ever exist (see above). Even as He has the power to create a soul, He no doubt has the power to destroy a soul (cf. Matthew 10.28). Hence, whether it is a Christian’s soul or a God-hating atheist’s soul, both are dependent upon God’s good pleasure for existence in the afterlife. However, the only way the soul can continue its existence is if God bestows upon it immortality, which, again, He alone possesses.

²⁶ Orr 3: 1461.

²⁷ Louw-Nida 1: 641; emphasis original.

Two important implications can be drawn from the immortality of the soul. First, people are composite beings with two natures: immortal (and spiritual) soul and mortal (and physical) body. Second, the immortal soul is the real person with the physical body as a temporary home. The eternal home of the immortal soul will be the imperishable body which God raises and reconnects man with miraculously at the final judgment.

5 – The Meaning of Eternal

If one were to go to a complete stranger on the street and ask them, “What does the word ‘eternal’ mean?” no doubt the response would be something akin to “forever,” or “without end,” or “timeless,” or even “infinity.” Indeed, when we turn to an English dictionary, the entry under “Eternal” is “having infinite duration” (Merriam-Webster). However, the New Testament was not written in English; the New Testament writers wrote in *koine* Greek. So when they used the word *aiōnios* to describe “destruction” or “fire” for those who do not obey the gospel and know not God (2 Thessalonians 1.9; Jude 7) and “life” for those who do (Romans 6.23; Galatians 6.8; et al), what did they mean?

Even as we could go to the streets and probably get a consensus about what “eternal” means from everyday people, so scholars seem to have a consensus about what *aiōnios* means. The Dictionary of Biblical Languages defines it as “**eternal**, an unlimited duration.”²⁸ Louw-Nida define it as “pertaining to an unlimited duration of time.”²⁹ Strong, in his concordance, explains that the import of the word is “without end, never to cease, everlasting.”³⁰ Clearly, the supra-temporality of “destruction” and “life” is evident. Eternal things belong to eternity, that timeless, endless state where the spiritual exists. Henry Constable in *The Duration and Nature of Future Punishment* sums the matter up nicely: “To us, as to the great majority of Christians of every age, it has always appeared that, as clearly as Scripture teaches that there will be

²⁸ DBLG 173, #2, emphasis original.

²⁹ 1: 641

³⁰ G166

punishment, with the very same clearness and distinctiveness it teaches that punishment to be absolutely eternal and without end” (10).

The question becomes what did the New Testament writers mean when they called something “eternal” (Gk. *Aionios*). Did Paul mean that “destruction” away from the presence of God and “life” with God are of “an unlimited duration,” never ceasing or ending, forever and ever? Or have we (and the scholastics) missed his meaning? When Jesus spoke of both “eternal fire” and “eternal life,” did he likewise mean these things are of “unlimited duration”? The answer to these questions is tied up in God Himself. God is described in Scripture as “the Everlasting God” (Genesis 21.33).³¹ In Romans 16.25, Paul uses the same Greek word (*aionios*) when talking about the eternal God (*tou aioniou theou*). As it pertains to the time element, God is without end, that is, eternal. Therefore, God, destruction for the wicked, and life for the righteous are all said to be “eternal” as it pertains to the time element. But does this exhaust the meaning of the word?

When speaking of the eternity of God, destruction, and life, in view is the supra-temporality of them not only as it pertains to time, but also as it pertains to quality as compared to this present world. There are divine and supernatural attributes that accompany them. For example, the favorite expression of Paul to describe the afterlife for his brethren is “eternal life” (*zoe aionios*). Louw-Nida explain:

If one translates ‘eternal life’ as simply ‘never dying,’ there may be serious misunderstandings, since persons may assume that ‘never dying’ refers only to physical existence rather than to ‘spiritual death.’ Accordingly, some translators have rendered ‘eternal life’ as ‘unending real life,’ so as to introduce a qualitative distinction.³²

³¹ In the Septuagint (LXX), the Hebrew word used has been translated into the Greek *aionios*.

³² 1: 641

One should expect this since God, destruction, and life belong to the spiritual realm which is different from our present state both temporally and qualitatively. Indeed, Buis affirms, “the very nature of this quality presupposes endlessness” (49). So not only does “eternal” point to the *quantity* of “life” but the *quality* of “life” and, consequently, “destruction.”

“‘Eternal life’ is that life which belongs to the age to come. Therefore it has no end. At the same time ‘eternal’ is a quality of life. It is not only that life in the age to come will be longer than life here; it will also be of a different quality. All of this has to be borne in mind when we consider the other expression ‘eternal destruction.’”³³

There are some who emphasize the time element over and above, almost to the neglect of, the quality aspect. On the other side, some emphasize the quality over and above, and perhaps to the neglect of, the quantity aspect. In fact, some would argue that “duration is a secondary idea”³⁴ and the moral quality of things eternal is of primary importance. However, there does not seem to be any reason why one would or should elevate quality over quantity or vice versa. Both ideas are inherent in the word “eternal.” First, when it comes to the word “eternal,” there is a *quantitative* aspect. This is the duration aspect. In other words, how long is it going to last? It really is timeless because of the second aspect: the *qualitative* aspect. This is the nature of the thing. In other words, what is it like? Taken together these concepts indicate that eternal things are of an altogether different nature than what we know in this universe. Some translators try to capture the meaning as “unending, real” life or whatever eternal thing is being described.

³³ Morris 206

³⁴ Vincent 4:61

6 – Jesus’ Description of Hell (1)

People talk about “hellfire and brimstone” preachers to refer to a preacher who seems to talk about hell an inordinate amount of the time in his sermons. Truly, though, Jesus was the original hellfire and brimstone preacher. Ron Halbrook accurately notes that, “No one taught as much on eternal punishment as Jesus Christ himself.”³⁵ For example, no one talked about hell more than Jesus. Of the twelve occurrences³⁶ of the word hell (Gk. *gehenna*), eleven of those are found on the lips of the Lord.³⁷ In addition, of the 104 of references in the New Testament to the final fate of the wicked, 44% of them are found on the mouth of the Master.

Our knowledge of hell flows to, through, and from Jesus. As the unique Son of God, He paints a compelling portrait of the awful reality of hell. There were ideas surrounding *gehenna* before Jesus came. However, it is Jesus who provides clarity to what was at the time a somewhat muddy or cloudy image. Jesus clears away the fog and haze so that a clear and crisp image shines forth issuing into a divine warning, first for disciples and then to all who would hear. But this begs the question: when Jesus spoke of a “fiery hell,” what did those who heard Him understand in that phrase?

³⁵ Ron Halbrook, "Eternal Punishment", *The Doctrine of Last Things*, ed. Melvin D. Curry, Florida College Annual Lectures (Temple Terrace, FL: Florida College Bookstore, 1986). 122.

³⁶ There are seven references in Matthew, three in Mark, and one in Luke. Despite the textual issues which are present in the Markan account, specifically verses 44 and 46, the references to *gehenna* and the citation of Isaiah are authentic. For this paper I have used the Nestle-Aland 27th Edition of the Greek New Testament and have included Mark 9.44, 46 in this count though they are absent in that Greek text.

³⁷ In Matthew: 5.22, 29, 30; 10.28; 18.9; 23.15, 33. In Mark: 9.43, 45, 47. In Luke: 12.5. The other occurrence of *gehenna* in the New Testament is James 3.6 which will be examined later in this paper.

A proper understanding of what Jesus meant begins with an examination of the Greek term *gehenna* itself. Where does the word come from, and what is its etymology? Hans Scharen traces the development of the full theology of divine retribution in the afterlife present in the New Testament from the Old Testament concept of Sheol (the place of disembodied souls), through the non-canonical literature of the intertestamental period where new traditions are established morphing Sheol into a place of punishment, to the New Testament era where the final touches are given to the doctrine of “postmortem retribution.”³⁸ Hence, *gehenna* is the culmination of the evolution of men’s thoughts about what happens and where one goes when he dies. Others, however, trace the word itself back to the Hebrew from whence it came. Duane Watson says, “The Gk is a transcription of the Aram *gêhinnām* whose Heb form is *gê-hinnōm*. The name means ‘Valley of Hinnom’ or its full form ‘Valley of the son of Hinnom.’”³⁹ In other words, the Greek term comes to us via first the Hebrew and then the Aramaic (which was the language Jesus spoke).

There is a rich history to this word which begins in the Old Testament. The Hebrew term literally means “the Valley of Hinnom.” Geographically, this was “a ravine running along the south side of Jerusalem and a place where the rubbish from the city was constantly being burned.”⁴⁰ This location makes an appearance very early in the Old Testament. In Joshua, it is a boundary separating the inheritance of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (15.8; 18.16). Later in Nehemiah and after Babylonian captivity, it serves as the northern border for Judah (11.30). So

³⁸Hans Scharen, "Gehenna in the Synoptics: Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149: 595 (1992): 325-327.

³⁹ Duane F. Watson, "Gehenna (Place)", *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992). 926.

⁴⁰ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996). 5.

initially this “deep, narrow glen to the south of Jerusalem,”⁴¹ currently known as Wadi er-Rababeh, was a boundary marker.

This valley, though, has a much darker history. It was here that the children of Israel abandoned Yahweh God for the Canaanite gods of fire and fertility, Molech and Baal, following the example of king Ahaz (2 Kings 16.3; cf. 2 Chronicles 28.3). Later, king Manasseh also led the people of Israel after the same idolatrous practices (2 Kings 21.6; cf. 2 Chronicles 33.6). Worship of these gods consisted of causing one’s son or daughter to “pass through the fire” and be burned (Jeremiah 7.31), that is, the parents sacrificed their own children to the god Molech, a practice which was condemned by God in the Law (see Leviticus 18.21; 20.2-5), punishable by death, and was abhorrent to God (Jeremiah 32.35). It was under the good king Josiah that this place was declared unclean and defiled (2 Kings 23.10). This is the dark history of the Valley of Hinnom.

God Himself uses this dark history in prophetic utterance as a judgment symbol. One could say that *gehenna* was the place where parents passed judgment – as it were – on their children as fit sacrifices to Molech. Therefore, God was going to pass judgment on Israel, His children who had become not His children. The Valley of Hinnom would be the Valley of Slaughter “because of the numerous Judeans killed and thrown into it by the Babylonians.”⁴² Jeremiah alludes to the Valley of Hinnom as a place of judgment (Jeremiah 7.31-32). In Isaiah, Topheth (another name for Hinnom) has been prepared as a place of fiery judgment for the Assyrians (30.33). So this valley was associated, through the prophetic word, with a place of eschatological fiery punishment in the Old Testament.

⁴¹ Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887). Matthew 5:22.

⁴² Watson 927.

This motif of final fiery punishment for the wicked in *gehenna* was elaborated upon during the intertestamental period. According to Watson, “By at least the 1st century C.E. there emerged a metaphorical understanding of Gehenna as the place of judgment by fire for all wicked everywhere.”⁴³ One example of this is 2 Esdras 7.36: “The pit of torment shall appear, and opposite it shall be the place of rest; and the furnace of hell shall be disclosed, and opposite it the paradise of delight” (NRSV). Latin, Syriac, and Ethiopic manuscripts read “Gehenna” for “furnace of hell.” This furnace of hell is a place of “fire and torments” (v.38) where the wicked “wander about in torments” in seven ways of grieving and sadness (v.80). Another example is 2 Baruch which describes *gehenna* as an “abyss” of “fire” and “torment” (59.5-12). While the dates of these non-canonical, even pseudepigraphal, works is debated, these works serve to show that a metaphorical understanding of *gehenna* was emerging in the intertestamental period. However, this metaphorical understanding of *gehenna* was rooted squarely and firmly in the Old Testament passages. Thus, Jewish writers built upon the inspired foundation of a fiery place of torment for the wicked dead. Francis Chan says, “Jews living between the Testaments picked up on this metaphor and ran with it.”⁴⁴ Therefore, when Jesus comes on the scene in the 1st century speaking of *gehenna*, His audience already had a working of knowledge of what He was talking about.

There is one controversial aspect of *gehenna* which needs to be addressed. It is debated by scholars whether the Valley of Hinnom was the local garbage dump or not. Lloyd Bailey’s article on Gehenna from the *Biblical Archaeologist*⁴⁵ is usually cited to support the idea that “there is no evidence of hundreds and hundreds of years after Jesus that there ever was a garbage

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Francis Chan, *Erasing Hell* (David C Cook, Colorado Spring, CO: 2011), 61.

⁴⁵ Lloyd R. Bailey, “Gehenna: The Topography of Hell,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 49.3 (1986): 187-91.

dump in Hinnom Valley in the first century.”⁴⁶ In other words, there is no archaeological evidence for the “garbage dump” theory and the earliest literary evidence for it is Rabbi David Kimhi in commentary on Psalm 27.13 which was written in the 13th century AD.

There is, however, some evidence which suggests the garbage dump theory should not be dismissed too quickly. Many commentators are univocal that in fact after the desecration by Josiah and the Babylonian captivity, the Valley of Hinnom was transformed into the burning, stinking valley of refuse. For example, Vincent in his *Word Studies* says *gehenna* “became the common refuse-place of the city, into which the bodies of criminals, carcasses of animals, and all sorts of filth were cast.”⁴⁷ In addition, Carr agrees, “After [Josiah] pollutions of every kind, among them the bodies of criminals who had been executed, were thrown into the valley.”⁴⁸

Barnes’ description is typical:

[Gehenna] was made the place where to throw all the dead carcasses and filth of the city, and was not unfrequently (sic) the place of public executions. It became, therefore, extremely offensive; the sight was terrific; the air was polluted and pestilential; and to preserve it in any manner pure, it was necessary to keep fires continually burning there. The extreme loathsomeness of the place; the filth and putrefaction; the corruption of the atmosphere, and the lurid fires blazing by day and night, made it one of the most appalling and terrific objects with which a Jew was acquainted.⁴⁹

Elsewhere Coffman succinctly states, “Hell is God's cosmic disposal unit.”⁵⁰ As already seen, it was to be a place where slain Jews were thrown after the Babylonian invasion. Surely there was

⁴⁶Chan 59. Scharen also cites this article in footnote 17 in “Part 1” arguing much the same thing.

⁴⁷ Vincent on Matthew 5:22.

⁴⁸ A. Carr, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1881), 120.

⁴⁹ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Whole Bible*, Matthew 5.22

⁵⁰ Coffman on Matthew 25.41.

the ever-present reminder that *gehenna* was the accursed valley of the fire gods. Scripture's own description of the Valley of Hinnom is lurid enough to evoke a strong visceral reaction among the Jews. Fire, flames, undying worms ever consuming the bodies of the dead – these were all ideas familiar to the desecrated valley of slaughtered children. Doubtless in the minds of first century Jews, the Valley of Hinnom was a burning, stinking valley of refuse and decay.

It is this valley of burning, stinking refuse and decay which morphed over time and became the figure of God's eternal punishment upon apostate Jews and mankind in general. It was a figure used in Old Testament prophecy, literature written between the testaments, and prevalent among the first century Jews to whom Jesus spoke. If it was not, why would Jesus use it in such a fashion? In fact, Jesus takes an already familiar concept and does not soften it but strengthens it. He does not weaken it, but as will be noted, He intensifies it. He is cognizant of the preconceived ideas surrounding the Valley of Hinnom as well as *gehenna*. Jesus couples this with imagery of His day to intensify the prevailing concept of *gehenna*. In addition, Jesus is heir to the rich prophetic heritage of the Old Testament. Jesus will allude to or quote directly from the Old Testament prophets when He speaks of *gehenna*. He takes those images and figures from the prophets and recasts them in the Gospels to paint the portrait of hell. Equipped with this background material of *gehenna*, an examination of Jesus' use of this concept in the Gospels can commence.

Attempts have been made to categorize the *gehenna* passages or at least break them into groups. For example, Scharen says the eleven *gehenna* references can be broken down into three categories: warnings to disciples about personal stumbling blocks (Matthew 5:29-30; 18:8-9; Mark 9:43-48); warnings to disciples about personal destiny (Matthew 5:22; 10:28; Luke 12:4-

5); condemnation to the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23.15, 33).⁵¹ Perhaps these sayings can be divided into simply two groups: sayings addressed exclusively to disciples (Matthew 5.22, 29-30; 10.28; 18.8-9; Mark 9.43-48), and sayings addressed to a general audience (Matthew 23.15, 33; Luke 12.5). Nevertheless, it seems clear from an overview of these passages that *gehenna* is the final fate of the wicked whether that person claimed to be a disciple of Jesus or not.

One does not need to read very far into the New Testament to run across the first reference to *gehenna* by Jesus. Matthew 5-7 is the passage commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. Chapter 5 begins with a clear distinction that the crowds stay down in the valley, but disciples follow Jesus up the mountain for instruction (v. 1). That is to say that this is teaching aimed squarely at the hearts and minds of disciples. The sermon begins with the Beatitudes (v. 2-12), followed by an explanation that disciples are to be shiny, salty cities set on a hill (v. 13-16). Next, Jesus explains the need for superior righteousness, even greater than the scribes and Pharisees (v. 17-20). All of this is couched in the grand theme of the rule and reign of God in the life of the disciple which is explicated through six antitheses where the old Law is stipulated – “You have heard that it was said to those of the old” (the thesis) – followed by Jesus going further than the Law and touching even the heart of man – “But I say to you” (the antithesis). In this first case, at the heart of the Sixth Commandment is the disposition of the heart of man.

The actual exposition of the verse is tricky. Jesus says, “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire (*ten gehenna tou puros*)” (Matthew 5:22). Williams explains that there are three typical explanations for this

⁵¹ Scharen 330.

verse: First, “judgment” is the judgment of God, “council” is the Sanhedrin, and “the hell of fire” is just that – hell. Second, “judgment” is the local court, “the council” is the Sanhedrin, and “the hell of fire” is hell. Williams says, “It should be noticed that both the above interpretations are inconsistent. They make our Lord pass from literal to figurative language in the same sentence.”⁵² That is to say these interpretations make it seem that Jesus cannot keep a coherent thought for two seconds. This simply will not do and so Williams presents the third option: “judgment” is the local court, “the council” is the Sanhedrin, and *gehenna* is the Valley of Hinnom. Thus, pictured here are metaphorical degrees of divine judgment. Jamison, Fausett and Brown agree with this: “All three clearly refer to *divine retribution*, and that alone, for breaches of this commandment; though this is expressed by an *allusion* to Jewish tribunals.”⁵³ Man’s liability to divine Law, judgment, and retribution is symbolized here with the earthly processes of the law, judgment, and retribution by man. In addition, Lenski, citing Zahn, says Jesus is satirizing the Pharisees and scribes superficial understanding and distinctions of sin in order “to demolish the entire Jewish treatment of this commandment as a mere civil law.”⁵⁴ Jesus is saying that *gehenna* is the final fate for all sin from anger to murder.

One other note before pressing forward to the next reference of *gehenna*: Jesus calls it “the hell of fire” or “hell fire” (KJV, NKJV) or “fiery hell” (NASB). This clearly shows there was already present in the minds of Jesus’ first century audience an idea of fire associated with the Valley of Hinnom. This is why Jesus uses this kind of language. Vincent states the obvious: “As fire was the characteristic of the place, it was called *the Gehenna of fire*.”⁵⁵ It is this figure

⁵² Spence and Exell 15:1:160.

⁵³ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997). Mt 5:22. Emphasis original.

⁵⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961). 219.

⁵⁵ Vincent on Matthew 5:22. Emphasis original.

which is used to symbolize the final process of divine judgment. In short, “fiery hell” was used metaphorically of final punishment.

Jesus’ next mention of *gehenna* is just a few verses later. The second antithesis is centered on lust and adultery of the heart. Once again the familiar, “You have heard...but I say to you...” formula is used by Jesus to show His transcendence of the Law of Moses. Then He says:

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” (Matthew 5:29–30)

A.T. Robertson correctly points out, “These vivid pictures are not to be taken literally, but powerfully plead for self-mastery.”⁵⁶ This is exactly what Jesus is getting at. This is a call for radical sacrifice with the intent of avoiding sin and, by consequence, hell. In short, “It is better to be maimed physically than to experience absolute spiritual loss.”⁵⁷ Even this smacks with satire aimed at the scribes and Pharisees who would blame the eye for sin when the problem is the heart. So what Jesus is saying is that a heart full of lust will land one in the hell of fire. Since, as will be seen later, it is God who hurls the wicked into hell, the deduction in connection with this passage is that God throws the “whole body” into hell. This is the final fate for the disciple who refuses to get serious about personal sin and pursue a lifestyle willing to do whatever it takes to be rid of sin in the heart.

The next passage (along with Luke 12.5) has been used by proponents of annihilationism doctrines about the final fate of the wicked to support their heterodoxy. Jesus says in Matthew

⁵⁶ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933). Matthew 5:29.

⁵⁷ Scharan, Part 1, 338.

10.28, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Those proponents of annihilationism argue that the word “destroy” means to snuff out of existence. F. LeGard Smith commenting on this verse says, “‘Body and soul’ here denotes man’s *wholeness*, as if to say that in hell’s destruction *nothing whatsoever* will remain.”⁵⁸ This is typical of those advocating the annihilationism position.

However, the juxtaposition of “killing” – the termination of bodily life – with “destroying” – the ruination of the whole essential being – is evident. Jesus is not equating “killing” and “destroying,” but is contrasting them in order to warn His disciples about cowardice toward their evangelistic mission. Men can kill the body (*soma*) but not the soul; God can destroy both body and soul (*psuchen*) in *gehenna*. Therefore, the imperatives are “do not fear” men, but rather “fear” God.⁵⁹ God is the one Who can “destroy both body and soul in hell.” The One who destroys is “God himself, who in such a case does not play the passive role of One who loses something, but exercises the supremely active function of Judge...and more specifically of eternal destruction.”⁶⁰ Robertson is adamant that “‘destroy’ here is not annihilation, but eternal punishment in Gehenna (the real hell).”⁶¹ Thayer says the word means “to devote or give over to eternal misery.”⁶²

The audience of this warning should be noted. Matthew 10 begins with a list of the names of the apostolic college. It is the Twelve to whom Jesus addresses His instruction and sends out (v. 5). Part of their instruction is concerning the fear of God as opposed to the fear of men. In

⁵⁸ Smith 66. Emphasis original.

⁵⁹ It is noted that while there is a debate about who “him who can destroy both body and soul in hell is” – whether that is Satan or God. Lenski rightly observes that Satan is not to be feared but resisted (410). It is always God that believers are to fear, not some other.

⁶⁰ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-). 396.

⁶¹ A.T. Robertson on Mt 10:28.

⁶² Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti* (New York: Harper & Brothers., 1889). 64.

fact, it is by the fear of God that Jesus seeks to drive out the fear of man. To do this, He explains that *gehenna* awaits the cowardly disciple who is more fearful of man than he is of God.

Furthermore, it is not the fiery hell or eternal misery one should fear any more than one should fear man. God is the proper subject of holy terror and reverential awe.

The next *gehenna* reference is very similar to 5.29-30, but it is notably different. In still another discourse aimed at His disciples (18.1), Jesus once again cautions them:

“And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.” (Matthew 18:8–9)

Once again the theme of doing all that is necessary to avoid sin is presented although the figures to capture this idea are reversed. Some important connections are made here by Jesus concerning *gehenna*. First, it is juxtaposed with “life.” Thus, whereas “life” is the final destiny of those who do everything in their power to avoid contamination by sin, “hellfire” (HCSB) is the final fate of the disciple who refuses to pursue a course toward personal holiness. “Entrance into life,” says Scharen, “or God's kingdom is of such importance that anything obstructing this goal must be dealt with in the most radical manner.”⁶³ Second, *gehenna* is equated with “eternal fire.” The time component is manifest in this passage through this connection. In other words, the duration of *gehenna* is the same as the fire – eternal. There is a discussion elsewhere in this paper focused on “eternal” (Gk. *aionios*),⁶⁴ but suffice it to say here that “eternal” means without end. Further, the nature of the fire is also communicated in the word “eternal.” Something which is eternal is

⁶³ Scharen, pt.1, 337.

⁶⁴ Page 9-12

spiritual by nature. Therefore, the nature and duration of hellfire is eternal, that is, it is both spiritual and unending.

The final passages in Matthew concerning *gehenna* are the only passages from Jesus addressed to His disciples but spoken about those who are not His disciples. These final two sayings in which *gehenna* is mentioned are spoken about His opponents. In the first, Jesus says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.” (Matthew 23:15) It is to the copyists of the Law and the members of the strictest sect in Judaism⁶⁵ that Jesus says this. It is spoken in reference to their proselytizing efforts (Gk. *Proseluton*, which is a Gentile convert to Judaism). As Robertson explains, “There were two kinds of proselytes: of the gate (not actual Jews, but God-fearers and well-wishers of Judaism, like Cornelius), of righteousness who received circumcision and became actual Jews.”⁶⁶ It was not that the Pharisees were converting people simply to Judaism; they were going further and converting them to Pharisaism. Hence, Jesus’ remark is both a condemnation of the converts and the Pharisees themselves. The implication that Jesus makes is that the Pharisees are sons of *gehenna* while their converts are “twice as much” sons of hell. That is to say the proselytes are twice as bad and “became more bigoted and fanatic than the scribes and the Pharisees themselves.”⁶⁷ The phrase itself, “son of hell” (NASB), is a rabbinic Hebraism found in Talmud, according to Gill.⁶⁸ It denotes “an excessively wicked person, such as might claim hell for his

⁶⁵ This is how the apostle Paul categorized Pharisaism and so I defer to his experienced and expert opinion.

⁶⁶ A.T. Robertson on Matthew 23:15.

⁶⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961). 905.

⁶⁸ John Gill on Matthew 23.15.

mother, and the devil for his father.”⁶⁹ So these converts were destined for the fiery pit of *gehenna* even as their teachers – scribes and Pharisees – were destined for the same fate.

Jesus is not finished with the scribes and Pharisees. Just a few verses later, Jesus asks a very pointed question of His opponents: “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (Matthew 23:33) As seen in the previous reference, the scribes and Pharisees are indicted as being destined for hellfire. This question by Jesus likewise implicates that the scribes and Pharisees are on a trajectory which ends only in the pit of fire. In addition, as with the previous expression, the phrase “sentence of hell” (NASB) is likewise a Talmudic statement “common in rabbinic writings.”⁷⁰ This would have been language familiar to His opponents. Therefore, it is interesting to note that Jesus uses the language of the scribes and Pharisees against them. They are the ones destined to hell, unable to escape this fiery fate because they refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah and so be saved. Their verdict is in regarding Jesus, and their doom is sealed as a result.

Having examined all the Matthean passages where *gehenna* is mentioned attention is now turned to the three references in Mark which are lumped together into a single pericope. Perhaps no passage better captures the awful reality of hellfire as does the Markan account. The language is clear, vivid, and unmistakable. In Mark 9, Jesus “was teaching his disciples” (v. 31) about His Messianic mission which would culminate in His crucifixion and resurrection (v. 31-32), He engages His disciples in a discussion about true greatness (v. 33-37), and He responds to a comment from John about those “not following us” with teaching about those who are “for us” (v. 38-41). This dovetails into related and further instruction about causing other believers

⁶⁹ Adam Clarke on Matthew 23.15.

⁷⁰ Spence and Exell 15:2:402.

(especially “little ones”) to sin (v. 42). Then comes this saying of Jesus directed toward disciples and comes as part of a longer answer to a comment made by John:

“And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” (Mark 9:43–48)⁷¹

Immediately several observations can be made. First, this is a parallel passage to Matthew 5.29-30 as well as 18.8-9. So the meaning is the same: pursue personal holiness and sanctification by avoiding sin at all cost. Second, once again “life” (connected with the reign of God) is juxtaposed with “hell” and “unquenchable fire.” Reward stands opposite punishment. Disciples who pursue holiness will be rewarded with life; disciples who do not will be punished with hellfire. Third, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 66.24 to further deliver his point. Though not specifically mentioned by name in the Isaiah text, Jesus overstamps *gehenna* onto it with His own inherent divine authority. “This is that” which was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. *Gehenna* is where the undying worm resides, ever consuming but never fully destroying. *Gehenna* is where the unquenchable fire ever burns but never consumes.

Some argue about the nature of the worm and fire. Are they literal or figurative? Is hell a place where literal worms crawl in and crawl out? Is it a literal pit of fire? Or were these merely figures of what hell is like? Given the fact that Jesus quotes from highly figurative, prophetic

⁷¹ Although much can be said about the textual issues present in this passage, it is not the purpose or aim of this paper to deal with them. As mentioned in a previous note (#29), the references to *gehenna* and the Isaiah quotation are definitely authentic and these are the focus of this paper’s discussion.

literature, it seems evident that Jesus used figures available to Him and reticent to the minds of those who heard Him to communicate the awful reality of hell. Coffman cites Hobbs on this point as saying, “If hell is not real fire, as some insist, then it is worse than fire; for the reality is always greater than the symbol.” Robertson agrees, “No figures of Gehenna can equal the dread reality which is here described.”⁷² Words fail to communicate just how dreaded hell is. Jesus used the language and figures available to Him, but even this fails to fully explicate the final fate of the wicked since He is communicating an infinite truth through a finite medium. What is communicated is that ruination awaits. Internal and external ruination are pictured in the worms and fire respectively.

As mentioned above, this next passage (along with the Matthean parallel) has been used by proponents of annihilationism to support their heterodoxy. Jesus says in Luke 12.5, “But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” Though not as explicit as the Matthean parallel, annihilationists still cling to this passage as proof positive that the wicked will eventually be snuffed out of existence following a brief span in torment, that is, hell. There seems to be a mix up between soul-killing and body killing.

Jesus, though, is focused on driving the fear of men out of His disciples. That He is speaking to His disciples is evident from verse 1 which says “he began to say to His disciples first.” In verse 4 He urges His disciples (“My friends”) not to fear “those who kill the body,” i.e. men. That is all they can do; they cannot touch the soul of the disciple. Man stands in sharp contrast with Him who “has authority to cast into hell,” i.e. God. God is the only one who has this kind of authority, and He is the only proper subject of reverential awe and respect (i.e. fear).

⁷² A.T. Robertson on Mark 9:48.

He alone has authority over man's life (literally, "after the killing") and his eternal destiny (heaven or hell). Scharen sums up the matter very well when he writes, "Since both man and God are able to kill, the emphasis of the saying lies on God's ability to destroy in or cast into Gehenna."⁷³ Thus, God's authority to cast into *gehenna* make Him the only proper object of fear. When disciples exercise faithlessness and fear men more than they fear God, they are in danger of hellfire.

Based upon examination of the several *gehenna* passages several conclusions can be drawn. First, nearly all of the statements by Jesus pertaining to *gehenna* are spoken to and about disciples. Only Matthew 23.15 & 33 are aimed at those who do not follow, though they are spoken to disciples. Thus, *gehenna* is primarily intended as a warning and exhortation to followers of Jesus. His strongest admonishments and severest warnings are spoken with a primary audience being His closest followers. Every disciple must take soberly the several and severe warnings of Jesus. Second, *gehenna* is a spiritual reality of eternal and final punishment. *Gehenna* is repeatedly connected with ideas of eternal, unquenchable fire and undying worms. So this indicates the time element, namely, *gehenna* is unending. Third, *gehenna* is final conscious suffering of man as a whole being. Man's whole being, body and soul, go into *gehenna*. Fourth, Jesus takes for granted that people believed in final justice for wicked.⁷⁴ He builds on long established concepts already built into the culture's notions of the afterlife – notions rooted and established in the word of God (the Old Testament). These concepts, which remained and evolved in extra-biblical intertestamental writings, were used by Jesus and even intensified in most cases. Finally, *gehenna* is the final fate of the wicked dead. The conclusion is

⁷³ Scharen pt. 2 458.

⁷⁴ For more on this see Appendix #2.

clear: whether disciple or not, those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah stand condemned to hell.

7 – Jesus’ Description of Hell (2)

Jesus’ teaching on hell does not end with *gehenna*. One might say *gehenna* is merely the hem of the garment in terms of the final fate of the wicked. In addition to the *gehenna* doctrine, Jesus uses powerful and graphic concepts prevalent in His culture while He was here on earth to communicate the danger of disobedience. In fact, Jesus not only uses those ideas but intensifies them. Furthermore, the number of figures He uses to capture the terror of final fate of the wicked is astonishing.

Fire. Perhaps the most well-known figure Jesus uses when speaking of the final fate of the wicked is fire. Like *gehenna* one does not need to read very far into the New Testament to find Jesus talking about fire as eternal punishment. Fire is a figure of judgment in the prophecies of the Old Testament.⁷⁵ Perhaps the best known reference from Old Testament literature is Isaiah 30.33 concerning “a burning place” which has “long been prepared” for the Assyrian king specifically and the Assyrian people generally. Even in intertestamental literature there are various judgment pictures in which fire plays a key role.⁷⁶

So John the Baptist, standing upon the rich heritage of highly figurative prophetic language, uses the same figure for the judgment of God upon the people of Israel unless they repent: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matthew 3.10).⁷⁷ One commentator says,

⁷⁵ Psalm 21.8-10; Isaiah 5.24; 9.19; 10.16-19; 27.4, 11; 33.11-14; 66.15-16; Jeremiah 4.4; 5.14; 15.14; 17.4; 22.6-7; Ezekiel 15.7; 19.12-14; 21.31-32; Amos 1.4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2.2, 5; 5.6; Zephaniah 1.18; 3.8; Malachi 4.1

⁷⁶ 2 Esdras 13.10, 11, 38; 15.23; 16.4, 6, 9, 15; Judith 16.17; Wisdom of Solomon 16.16; Sirach 21.9

⁷⁷ Cf. Luke 3.9, 17.

“Because of John the Baptist’s use of this same phrasing in 3:10, many believe this was a common proverbial saying.”⁷⁸ In strikingly similar language, Jesus teaches this is the final fate for false prophets: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matthew 7:19). This figure of trees bearing bad fruit or bearing no fruit at all being “thrown into the fire” (Matthew 7:19) was no doubt familiar to Jesus’ audience. Not only had John used that figure, but it is a figure which shows up in the Old Testament. For example, Jeremiah says that Israel was once “a good olive tree, beautiful with good fruit,” but God was going to “set fire to it” (11.16). In addition, Isaiah says the people of Israel are like “thornbushes” that “will be set ablaze” (33.12, NIV). It is this figure of bad trees thrown into fire which John then Jesus use in their didactic ministry to convey the awful reality of the final fate of the wicked.

Jesus, though, also uses the idea of weeds being gathered out of the fields at harvest time to be cast into the fire as still another fiery judgment image. At the close of a parable which seems to have eschatological import, Jesus says, “Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’” (Matthew 13:30). The implication of this “burning” is that it will be done in fire (v.40). Also immediately evident is the contrast in destinies – burned or barn. In His own explanation of this parable, Jesus says that the weeds are “the sons of the evil one” (v.38) who are “causes of sin and all law-breakers” (v.41). These will be burned when they are “thrown into the fiery furnace” (v.42). Of this furnace Williams says, “*The furnace of fire* was no unknown expression for the punishment of the wicked.”⁷⁹ As already seen there was literature

⁷⁸ Robert James Utley, *The First Christian Primer: Matthew*, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2000). 66.

⁷⁹ Spence and Exell 15:2:12. Emphasis original.

written between the Old and New Testaments which spoke of a furnace of fire for punishment.

This furnace is without doubt hell.

Just before Jesus goes to the cross, He discusses the final fate of the faithless by explaining that even a disciple, if found to be fruitless, would experience this fate. “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:2). He goes on a few verses later to say, “If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned” (v. 6). Two ideas are present here: separation and scorching. First, the concept of separation is seen in the phrases “he takes away” and “he is thrown away.” Implicit in these phrases is that these branches are removed for destruction. As Lenski explains, “The fruitless disciple is severed from Jesus. The Father rejects him.”⁸⁰ The faithless are destroyed “away from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 1.9). Second, the destruction these fruitless disciples endure is burning with fire. Now there has been difficulty with explaining the tenses of the verbs used in verse 6. “Thrown away” and “withers” are in the aorist tense. But “are gathered,” “thrown,” and “burned” are in the present tense. It is Lenski who offers some clarification. He writes,

“These aorists have nothing to do with the past; nor do they make the actions so certain, as if they were already done and beyond recall... Here we find them combined with three timeless present tenses, all five expressing actions that invariably follow upon a supposed future case, a man’s failure to remain in Jesus.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961). 1029.

⁸¹ Ibid 1037-38.

Those disciples who fail to remain in Christ have only the expectation of a future of fire. The use of figurative language is obvious: faithless disciples are likened unto fruitless branches cut from the vine (Jesus) and cast into fire which is away from God. These figures indicate a far worse reality of punishment for the wicked disciple.

Darkness. Another figure employed by the Lord to communicate the awful reality of hell was darkness. Only Matthew records that this image is found on the lips of Jesus. While there is some connection between this idea and the Old Testament, the idea is never employed in the way in which Jesus used it. Even in the Old Testament, its use is exclusively in reference to Sheol (see Psalm 88.3, 6), or as a judgment figure (see Isaiah 8.22; Joel 2.2; Amos 5.18, 20). So when Jesus enters the fray and speaks of hell being darkness there may have been a dim idea of this concept, but overall it appears to be a new concept. This is especially true when one considers that the noun “darkness” is always coupled with the adjective “outer” when used by Jesus to describe the final fate of the wicked. However, one should not be surprised that outer darkness characterizes the final fate of the wicked. If God is light (1 John 1.5), then where He is not present is utter outer darkness.

There are three instances where Jesus speaks of “outer darkness” in Matthew’s gospel. First, after the servant of a centurion comes to Jesus and expresses such faith as is not found in Israel (8.8-10), Jesus gives a brief parable about the composition of the citizenry of the kingdom of heaven. Those rejected from the kingdom “will be thrown (cast out, KJV) into the outer darkness” (8.12). Commentators point out the force of the language which literally translated reads “the darkness, the outermost.”⁸² The adjective is included for emphasis, acting superlatively.⁸³ The contrast is striking: on the one hand are those citizens of the kingdom who

⁸² See Vincent, Robertson, Lenski, Clarke, et al.

⁸³ See Lenski, *The Interpretation of the St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 331.

feast in light and life of the table with Abraham (v.11); on the other hand are those cast “far away from the glory and brightness of the banquet into the gloom and blackness of the outer world, which represents the misery of lost souls.”⁸⁴ Barnes is adamant that “this is an image of future punishment” with Coffman in agreement that “the ‘outer darkness’ is a reference to hell.”⁸⁵ The origin of the idea is debated by the commentators. Some say what is in view is the construct of the Roman prison cell which was void of light.⁸⁶ Others say the parable is much more straightforward, referring to the ancient near east custom of feasts at night.⁸⁷

The second reference to outer darkness is once more at the conclusion of a parable, this one about a wedding feast where a guest does not have the proper wedding garments. “Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’” (22.13). Lenski speaks for the commentators when he says of the guest, “He is cast into hell. Whatever name may be given to this outer darkness, its description as here repeated is more than sufficient to identify it and to make us recoil from its horrors.”⁸⁸ Though Lenski allows the language of Jesus to speak for itself, others have helped color the portrait. For example, Williams says, “Observe the description of ‘hell’ – absence of spiritual light; separation from the company of the saved; lamentation; impotent rage.”⁸⁹ Barnes reminds the reader of the severe spiritual reality presented by Jesus here: “Go to a damp, dark, solitary, and squalid dungeon; see a miserable and enraged victim; add to his sufferings the idea of eternity, and then remember that this, after all, is but an image, a faint

⁸⁴ Spence and Exell 15:2:359.

⁸⁵ See both of these commentators on this verse.

⁸⁶ Barnes puts this idea forward.

⁸⁷ Gill cites this. Clarke, though not as strongly as Gill, suggests this also.

⁸⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961). 858.

⁸⁹ Spence and Exell 15:1:325.

image, of hell!”⁹⁰ In other words, the true hell of hell is quite literally unimaginable for the human mind. The best we can understand are figures of the awful spiritual reality.

The final reference to outer darkness by Jesus is at the close of the well-known parable of the talents. Outer darkness is the final fate of the servant who buried his master’s money rather than exercising good stewardship. The master’s words are, “Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place where will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (25.30). The same concepts are present of the finality of the punishment, and the eternal misery associated with it. These are captured by Williams, quoting Quesnel: “There are no longer feet to run to God’s mercy or to flee from his justice; no longer hands to good or make amends for evil; no longer saving light, whereby to know God or one’s own duties. Nothing but darkness, pain, grief, tears, rage, fury, and despair”⁹¹ for those dismissed from either table with Abraham, the king’s wedding feast, or the master’s presence.

A Contradiction? This is the point at which opponents of Christianity and the Bible will speak up and voice an objection. They will claim that Jesus uses contradictory terms and phrases to describe hell. How can there be both fire, which gives off light, and darkness? How can the two exist simultaneously in the same place? Opponents of the faith would say they cannot. The indictment is that Jesus, God in the flesh, could not keep a coherent thought for more than two verses, using conflict ideas in an attempt to describe the final fate of the wicked. Before tackling the alleged contraction outright, it must be noted that Jesus is He “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2.3). He was the smartest man to ever live. Therefore, any apparent contradiction man may find in Scripture must be a misunderstanding on his part not a mistake on Jesus’ part.

⁹⁰ Barnes on Matthew 8.12.

⁹¹ Spence and Exell 15:2:359.

Now to the supposed contradiction itself – there are a couple of ways of explaining what appears at first blush to be conflicting ideas. One way of viewing these descriptions from Jesus is as literal things. In other words, hell is literally a place of darkness and there is literal fire burning forever and ever. Those who take these figures as literal ask, “Could not God create a fire which burns but gives off no light?” Consider the account of Moses who saw a bush that was burning but was not consumed (Exodus 3.2). If God can make a fire which burns but does not consume a bush, He could surely create a fire which burns but gives off no light in hell. Most scholars, though, do not take the words of Jesus when He speaks of hell as literal but as metaphors. So another way of understanding this fire-darkness issue is to understand that when Jesus speaks of “the fiery pit” and “outer darkness,” He is using figurative language to capture the idea of the awful reality of hell. Hell is like burning; hell is like darkness. With the fire imagery, destruction and torment are emphasized. With the darkness imagery, eternal lostness is communicated. So these figures become a fitting and proper representation of the final sufferings endured by the wicked. Whether one adopts a literal or figurative view of the elements involved in the final fate of the wicked, it is clear that this supposed contradiction can be explained.

Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth. Another figure used by Jesus to speak about the final fate of the wicked is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This is a common expression used by Jesus to denote the pain and suffering awaiting the wicked in hell.⁹² The intense agony in the place where the wicked are sent is typically contrasted with the place of peace they might have enjoyed. For instance, the wicked could have been taken into the “barn” (Matthew 13.30), which is representative of the bliss the righteous enjoy “in the kingdom of their Father” (13.42). As seen in His explanation of the parable of the weeds, accompanying the image of the “fiery

⁹² See also Matthew 8.12; 22.13; 24.51; 25.30; Luke 13.28. Interestingly, it is peculiar to Matthew’s gospel with one exception in Luke.

furnace” is the further detail that “in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13.42). The same language is used verbatim at the end of the parable of the net (13.50), as well as the parable of the wicked servant who did not wisely invest his talent (25.30). He uses this image in still another parable to speak of the fate of an unprepared wedding guest whom the king binds and casts out of the wedding into “outer darkness” where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (22.13). Also, in another brief parable, Jesus employed the exact same phrase to describe the fate of a servant unprepared to meet his master who is cut to pieces and sent to the place of the hypocrites (24.51). The final place where Jesus uses this figure is when He teaches about entering the narrow gate; those who do not are told by the master to depart, that he never knew them, and they are “cast out” into the place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Luke 13.28).

Immediately evident from these passages is that this punishment is yet future and certain. That is, the sure fate of the wicked after the judgment is that they are cast into a place of torment to experience weeping and gnashing of teeth. In addition, when Jesus used this kind of language to speak of the final fate of the wicked, evident in the language itself is the notion of intense mental anguish and suffering. Whether the place is described as “outer darkness,” the “fiery furnace,” or the hypocrite’s place, these phrases describe just one place where there is “the remembrance of lost opportunities, wasted graces, bartered privileges.”⁹³ These “will fill the mind of the punished with terrible remorse, and make existence a very hell.”⁹⁴ Gill suggests that in this phrase the wicked are “declaring the remorse of conscience, the tortures of mind, the sense of inexpressible pain, and punishment, the wicked shall feel; also their furious rage and

⁹³ Spence and Exell 15:2:481.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

black despair.”⁹⁵ Others agree “the ‘wailing’ [signifies] the anguish this causes; while the ‘gnashing of teeth’ is a graphic way of expressing the despair in which its remedilessness (sic) issues.”⁹⁶

Where did this idea of unending intense anguish and suffering come from? The members comprising Jesus’ audience were no strangers to this kind of language. In fact, one can find reference to this kind of suffering in the literature between the Old and New Testaments. For example, Judith 16.17 reads, “Woe to the nations that rise up against my kindred! the (sic) Lord Almighty will take vengeance of them in the day of judgment, in putting fire and worms in their flesh; and they shall feel them, and weep for ever.”⁹⁷ There was somewhat of an idea of eternal weeping in a place of misery which had developed in the intertestamental period. In fact, Lenski says of this phrase “it must have been stereotyped already in Jesus’ time”⁹⁸ since Jesus used it so frequently. It is Jesus, though, who takes this imagery, which is no doubt familiar to the minds of those who heard it, and augments and amplifies it. Not merely eternal weeping, but also eternal grinding of the teeth in pain and suffering.

Torture. With so many figures which undoubtedly have torture as a by-product, it is no wonder that Jesus outright describes the final fate of the wicked as “torture.” In three passages, Jesus refers to torment as the final fate of the wicked. First, at the conclusion of a parable on forgiveness (Matthew 18.23-35), Jesus says that the master hands over the unforgiving servant “to the prison guards to torture him” (v.34, NET). These were not simply “jailers” (ESV), but the word He uses denotes “a person serving as a guard in a prison, whose function was to torture

⁹⁵ Gill on Matthew 13.42.

⁹⁶ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown on Matthew 13:42.

⁹⁷ *The Apocrypha: King James Version* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995). Judith 16:17.

⁹⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961). 752.

prisoners as a phase of judicial examination.”⁹⁹ Of this word, Vincent cites the Roman historian Livy (2.23) who “pictures an old centurion complaining that he was taken by his creditor, not into servitude, but to a workhouse and torture, and showing his back scarred with fresh wounds.”¹⁰⁰ In the parable of Jesus, this was the servant’s ultimate fate without hope of escape for the debt he owed was so great that he could never repay it.¹⁰¹

In another well-known parable (Luke 16.23-28), Jesus talks about a rich man in hades who is in “torment” (v.23, 28) and “anguish” (v.24, 25). While it is noted that this is a description of Hades (v.23), the unseen realm of disembodied spirits of both the righteous and unrighteous, the torment and anguish experienced there is indicative of the final fate of the soul. That is, while waiting for final consolation the righteous are consoled while the wicked awaiting final torment are tormented. An illustration from our earthly court system might help: when a guilty verdict is rendered, the convicted individual must await final sentencing. In a similar way, in Hades, the guilty, as well as the innocent, are awaiting final sentencing at the final judgment. Based upon their experience in Hades, they know what their verdict will be.

Degrees of Punishment? One other passage where some kind of torment is directly mentioned is also a passage which seems to hint at degrees of punishment or torment for the wicked. Luke 12.42-48 contains a parable about servants, both obedient and disobedient. The obedient servant is rewarded for his obedience; the wicked servant, though, is punished for his disobedience. The master will take the disobedient servant and “cut him in pieces” (v.46), put him with the wicked, and hand him over for a beating. First, the word used by the Lord concerning cutting an individual into pieces was used in antiquity when people were literally

⁹⁹ Louw-Nida 486.

¹⁰⁰ Vincent on Matthew 18:34.

¹⁰¹ See Lenski *According to Matthew* (723) who makes this point citing Chrysostom. “Until” indicates “never.”

sawed in two and killed. Second, the servant is numbered with the unfaithful (or unbelieving). Of these, Lenski says, “To be cut in two (executed, put to death) and to have one’s portion assigned among the unbelievers are evidently to land in hell.”¹⁰² Finally, the fate of those in hell is described as a “beating.”

This word (Gk. root *dero*) is used throughout the gospels to speak of a physical whipping, including when Jesus is beaten (Luke 22.63). So that is its primary definition – to strike the flesh with a whip of some kind. But in the parable the severity of the beating is based upon the servant’s knowledge; if the servant knew the master’s will and did not obey it receives a “severe beating” (v.47), but the servant who was ignorant of the master’s will receives a “light beating” (v.48). Some see here degrees of punishment in the future final fate of the wicked.¹⁰³ Other passages with eschatological significance seem to further build this case.¹⁰⁴ In point of fact, Spence explicitly states, “In this solemn passage it is notable that degrees or grades in punishment as well as degrees or grades in glory are distinctly spoken of.”¹⁰⁵

However, not everyone is convinced of this. In fact, the point of the parable is about using the gracious gifts of God wisely (i.e. good stewardship). Since we do not know when our Master will return, servants (read: Christians) must be ever wise in using the gifts, talents, and knowledge of His will. This is Coffman’s conclusion:

Many speculations on “degrees of punishment in hell” are founded here; but none of them afford any enlightenment on a subject that lies beyond the abilities of human

¹⁰² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* 710.

¹⁰³ E.g. Jamieson, Faussett, & Brown on this passage. Also, H. Leo Boles (as quoted by Coffman on this passage). John Gill on this passage. Both Lenski and Matthew Henry seem to allude to this as well though neither specifically state such.

¹⁰⁴ In Luke alone, 10.12, 14 about it being more bearable in the judgment for Sodom or Tyre than for towns which reject the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom. Cf. Matthew 10.15; 11.24; Romans 2.5-6.

¹⁰⁵ Spence and Exell 16:1:338.

exploration. With these words, Jesus concluded the warning against unpreparedness and moved to another division in his discourse.¹⁰⁶

Readiness and constant wise stewardship are at the heart of this parable, and attempts to build an eschatology of degrees of punishment surrounding the final fate of the wicked is speculative at best. Nevertheless, those who fail to constantly use the Master's blessings wisely and are caught unprepared will face severe penalty for their laziness.

Beneath these shocking and intense physical figures lies a far worse spiritual reality. Jesus used figures familiar to His audience. Torture such as cutting people in two and severe beatings using rods or leather straps with pieces of bone or metal attached to the ends (the preferred instrument in Roman scourging) were readily identifiable. To a 21st century American mind, if Jesus were to communicate a similar parable today, a figure which might be fitting would be waterboarding. Keeping in mind that Jesus' primary audience for the parable in Luke were disciples (12.1, 22, 41), and that other passages give us the time element concerning the duration of the torture (eternal), it might sound something like this: those disciples who were hypocrites will be eternally waterboarded without any relief but those who acted disobediently in ignorance will be eternally waterboarded less severely. As with all other figures used by the Master, it means that hell is a place of torture so awful that earthly figures fail to capture the nature of it fully and truly. This side of eternity only provides dim pictures.

Eternal Damnation. Gaining heaven and missing hell is dependent upon one's reception or rejection of the gospel. Jesus taught as much in Mark 16.16: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." Those individuals who hear the gospel, believe the good news that Jesus came as Savior and Forgiver, and are

¹⁰⁶ Coffman on Luke 12.47.

immersed in water to be united with Christ comprise the saved and are assured of a home in heaven so long as they remain in faithfulness. However, if one either never hears or hearing refuses to believe the good news, these are “damned” (KJV) to eternal misery. The word Jesus uses here (Greek root *katakirno*) was a judicial term which denoted that an individual was definitely guilty and subject to punishment.¹⁰⁷ A guilty verdict had been rendered; punishment came next. Thayer is brief when he comments on the usage of the word used here in Mark saying it means “simply, of God condemning one to eternal misery.”¹⁰⁸ Vincent cites a Dr. Morrison who points out that the word used here by the Lord “determines, by itself, nothing at all concerning the nature, degree, or extent of the penalty to be endured.”¹⁰⁹ One must look elsewhere for what this punishment is, what it is like, and its duration. But that there is a punishment and the guilty (those who are not saved) face it is clear from this verse.

Rescuing the Perishing. One way Jesus talks about the final fate of the wicked is with the word “perishing.” For example, Jesus warns the crowds twice that “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13.3, 5). While there are some who see in these twin warnings the destruction of Jerusalem,¹¹⁰ the normative meaning is that “the matter that Jesus warns his hearers against is not some form of cruel death but the danger of perishing in death.”¹¹¹ All those people who refuse to repent of sin and subsequently come to Jesus for life (cf. John 10.28), regardless of the manner of their death, will perish away from Jesus forever.

Perhaps the best known instance of this figure is in what is sometimes called “The Golden Text of the Bible”: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever

¹⁰⁷ Louw-Nida 555.

¹⁰⁸ Thayer 332.

¹⁰⁹ Vincent on Mark 16:16.

¹¹⁰ E.g. H.D.M. Spence in the *Pulpit Commentary*'s 2nd volume on Luke and Coffman on this passage.

¹¹¹ Lenski, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 724.

believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).¹¹² Immediately obvious from this passage is the juxtaposition of “eternal life” with “perish.” Obedient faith in Jesus delivers one from perishing into eternal life.

It must be noted that the word used by Jesus when He speaks of those who “perish” is the same word used in Matthew 10.28 of those who, both body and soul, experience destruction in hell. This word is used frequently by New Testament writers to speak of the final fate of the wicked.¹¹³ The word itself has to do with destruction, loss, and ruination. In the passages immediately cited, what is lost to the one perishing is clearly eternal life. As Coffman says, perishing “is a reference to the overthrow of the wicked in hell, and is a hint of the judgment when God will settle accounts with evil.”¹¹⁴ Thus, perishing has to do with the eternal misery of having lost life with God. This is a state of utter ruination of the soul.

Death. One last expression used by Jesus to communicate the final fate of the wicked is death. In John 8.29, Jesus explains that the unbelieving will “die in [their] sins.” Conversely, just a few verses later in 8.51, Jesus says that those who keep His word will “never see death.” Jesus contrasts the two fates of all people in 10.10, explaining He has come to bring abundant life but the evil one seeks to “steal, kill, and destroy.” After the death of His friend Lazarus, Jesus tells his sister that those who put their faith in Him “shall never die” (11.26). Jesus is not speaking of the appointment every man has to keep with death spoken of in Hebrews: “It is appointed man once to die, and after that comes judgment” (9.27). When Jesus speaks of death He is speaking of the “second death” which comes after the judgment for the unrighteous and unbelieving (cf.

¹¹² While outside the scope of this paper, there is debate about whether John 3.16ff are Jesus’ words or John’s. Reynolds points out that *gar* indicates this is a continuation of Jesus’ teaching (1:122). However, Morris argues that these phrases are typically Johannine and v.16ff are John’s “reflection” (202). Thus, for this paper, comments have been generalized in terms of speaker though this text has been included in the section of this paper dealing with Jesus’ sayings.

¹¹³ Romans 2.12; 1 Corinthians 1.18; 2 Corinthians 2.15; 4.3; 2 Thessalonians 2.10; James 4.12; 2 Peter 3.9.

¹¹⁴ Coffman on John 3.16.

Revelation 2.11). Overcomers will not be touched by the second death; this is the final fate of those already perishing due to unbelief.

Final Judgment – A Parable. So when Jesus puts it all together, what does the final fate of the wicked look like? One of the last parables Jesus taught had eschatological overtones (Matthew 25.31-46). In this parable, He uses several of the figures previously examined to describe the fate of the “cursed” (v. 41). For example, the wicked go to “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Jesus states that the final fate of the wicked is 1) eternal, 2) fiery (i.e. *gehenna*), and 3) shared with the most wicked beings ever – the devil and his angels. This place of “eternal punishment” (v. 46) is juxtaposed with the destiny of the “blessed” which is a place “prepared...from the foundation of the world” (v. 34). In a similar vein, God, in His wisdom, prepared for the eternal misery of the wicked beings (the devil and his angels) from the founding of His creation. Sadly, this will likewise be the fate of those who refuse to hear and heed the gospel call.

Proponents of the annihilationist or conditional immortality views trip over the words of Jesus here, and therefore they must 1) redefine the language or 2) reinterpret what Jesus is saying (i.e. Yes, Jesus said that, but that isn't what He meant). Hence, eternal is redefined as meaning something other than “without end.” Or punishment is redefined to carry either a purgatorial significance or a sense of total destruction out of existence. Or both – there is no time element involved in “eternal” (or at least the idea is subordinate), and “destruction *is itself punishment*.”¹¹⁵ When this happens, one usually ends up where F. LeGard Smith ends up: “Hence, there is no cause to insist that Jesus’ reference to ‘eternal punishment’ (Matthew 25.46) must mean ongoing torment for eternity.”¹¹⁶ However, when the Lord teaches about the final fate

¹¹⁵ Smith 185. Emphasis original.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

of everyone in this parable, He “assumes the authorized view of [eternity], and draws his awful lesson from that view.”¹¹⁷ For a first century Jew, the concept of eternity was doubtless connected with “forever and ever” or “unending” even as the worms of *gehenna* were “undying” and the fires there were “unquenchable.”

Other reasons stand out as to why “eternal punishment” means unending torment. First, the fate of the wicked is the same as Satan’s fate. Said another way, Satan’s fate just so happens to be the fate of the wicked. However, rarely does one read an annihilationist argument which factors in this fact. Yet this is the natural conclusion if hell is not unending torment. Satan himself will cease to exist even as the unsaved will be snuffed out of existence. Second, the reduction of “eternal punishment” to eventual extinction of those beings in hell fails to grasp the serious nature of sin. Rob Bell does this in his book *Love Wins*. He argues that it is inconsistent with the love of God for people to “suffer infinitely for [their] finite sins” committed while on earth for a few short years.¹¹⁸ Bell’s hamartology is too base, too earthy. Sin is a heinous spiritual offense against an *eternal* God.¹¹⁹ Therefore, sin is punished infinitely and eternally. Moreover, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross is one time “for all time” (past, present, and future, Hebrews 9.26; 10.12). It is not that Christ suffers repeatedly for sin, but that His sacrifice is sufficient to deal with the eternal nature of sin inasmuch as He is God in the flesh bearing the penalty for sin. Either we flee to Him Who was punished for our sin or we face the punishment our sin deserves – unending torment.

Perhaps the most devastating reason the annihilationist position fails is the juxtaposition of “eternal punishment” with “eternal life” in verse 46. The wicked “will go away into eternal

¹¹⁷ Spence and Exell 15:2:485.

¹¹⁸ Bell 102.

¹¹⁹ See Genesis 21.33; Deuteronomy 33.27; Romans 16.26 for eternal God.

punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The same Greek word (*aionion*) is used to describe both “punishment” and “life.” Therefore, whatever one may say about the duration of one must be true for the other. In other words, if the punishment is said to last for only a short time, then the life too must last only for a time. Conversely, if the bliss of heaven to go on unendingly, then the torment of hell will likewise go unendingly. So Lenski says, “Those who would reduce the fire of hell to a shorter or a longer period of time must then similarly reduce the joys of heaven.”¹²⁰ Clarke is in agreement: “But some are of opinion that this punishment shall have an end: this is as likely as that the glory of the righteous shall have an end.”¹²¹ His reasoning is much the same as what has been stated, but he further solidifies the argument against annihilationism by affirming “that which ceases to be, ceases to suffer.”¹²² Robertson succinctly states, “There is not the slightest indication in the words of Jesus here that the punishment is not coeval with the life.”¹²³ It is evident that Jesus intended for man to know that the duration of life with God enjoyed by the righteous is equivalent with the punishment away from God endured by the unrighteous.

Then there is the concept of “punishment” itself. As has been argued throughout this section of the paper, hell has elements of torture, pain, suffering, and misery associated with it. Nevertheless, supporters of universalism argue that the word used by Jesus indicates that hell is more purgatorial where “pruning” takes place. Once purification is completed, the now clean individual is permitted into heaven. Militating against this view is the fact that whatever “punishment” is, it is eternal and therefore never ending. Further problematic is that the primary definition of “punishment” is not pruning.

¹²⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* 996.

¹²¹ Clarke on Matthew 25:46.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ A.T. Robertson on Mt 25:46.

8 – The Pauline Description

As we turn to Paul's writings, it is somewhat surprising that Paul never once mentions "hellfire" or "the fire that is not quenched" in his correspondence with various churches, both of which were present in the teaching of Christ. That does not mean he never mentions the final fate of the wicked. In fact, only Jesus talks about the final fate of the wicked more than Paul in the New Testament. Unlike Jesus, though, he doesn't use the fire motif. Instead, what we read about is "destruction" (1 Thessalonians 5.3; Philippians 3.19), "eternal destruction" (2 Thessalonians 1.9), "death" (Romans 6.21, 23; 8.13), "corruption" (Galatians 6.8), and "those who are perishing" (2 Corinthians 2.15; 2 Thessalonians 2.10). In addition, only one of these references on the fate of the wicked has the adjective "eternal."

Considering that the reason for Paul's writing to churches was for correction, it is interesting that he avoids the "unquenchable fires" as a means of scaring his brothers and sisters to good works. Today the doctrine of hell is used almost as "or else" theology – "straighten up and fly right...or else!" Paul doesn't do that. In fact, the punishment for the wicked is just that – for the wicked. It is not for Christians. Christians have eternal life, both presently and in prospect, even as those outside of Christ are perishing and will perish.

In this section of the paper, we will examine the Pauline description of the punishment for the wicked as found in his writings contained in the New Testament. It should be noted that while there are descriptions of this in the book of Hebrews, and some consider this writing to be

Pauline, the epistle to the Hebrews will be excluded in this section paper.¹²⁴ However, it will be examined later as part of the General Epistles.¹²⁵ Hence, the discussion in this section will include those writings in the canon of the New Testament which bear the apostle Paul's name.

Destruction. Paul talks about the fate of the wicked as they suffer the "vengeance" of God in 2 Thessalonians 1.9: "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction..." One commentary said this is "the most express statement in St. Paul's Epistles of the eternity of future punishment."¹²⁶ "They" are those "who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (v. 8). The "punishment" which they "suffer" is "eternal destruction." As previously mentioned, both ideas of quantity and quality are present in the word "eternal." In other words, the length of the destruction is endless and the nature of the destruction is spiritual.

It is the word "destruction" which we turn our attention to now. What does "destruction" mean? The Greek word itself is nearly universally defined as "destruction."¹²⁷ As a secondary definition, the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages* has "destruction" (G3897) accompanied by "to cause the ruin of something." Louw-Nida read similarly in their secondary definition: "to cause the complete destruction and ruin of someone or something" (1: 231). Thayer in his lexicon commenting specifically on this verse says this is "the loss of a life of blessedness after death" and "future misery" (443).

Most commentators say this is *not* the annihilation of the wicked.¹²⁸ Instead, the word "destruction" "is used in the same sense in which we use the word when we say that a thing was

¹²⁴ While the epistle to the Hebrews does not bear the name of Paul, this is not the only reason I have left it out of the discussion. Many first century people have been put forward by various scholars and commentators, including Paul, Apollos, Barnabas, Priscilla and/or Aquila, and Luke. So I have limited this section to those letters which specifically begin with Paul's name.

¹²⁵ Pages 72-79

¹²⁶ Walvoord and Zuck 2: 716.

¹²⁷ Nearly every English translation reads "eternal destruction" in 2 Thessalonians 1.9.

¹²⁸ John Gill, Albert Barnes, Adam Clarke, Burton Coffman, Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry, David Lipscomb, Leon Morris, A.T. Robertson, et al on 2 Thessalonians 1.9.

destroyed. Thus health is destroyed when it fails; property is destroyed when it is burned...life is destroyed when one dies” (Barnes). Hodge goes even further:

To destroy is to ruin...A ship at sea, dismantled, rudderless, with its sides battered in, is ruined, but not annihilated. It is a ship still. A man destroys himself when he ruins his health, squanders his property, debases his character, and renders himself unfit to act his part in life. A soul is utterly and forever destroyed when it is reprobated, alienated from God, rendered a fit companion only for the devil and his angels.¹²⁹

Put it all together and it seems best to understand this word as pertaining to the corruption that would come upon a corpse at death. It is destroyed as it decays, deteriorates, and decomposes. Coupled with the word “eternal,” we begin to grasp the picture of the fate of the wicked from Paul to the Thessalonians. It is a state of unending, spiritual decay, deterioration, and decomposition. It is truly “a state of utter ruin.”¹³⁰

Some have cited this passage to point to the final extinction or annihilation of the wicked. If the word (Gk. *Olethros*) “points to an unchangeable, irremediable, and endless condition,” that is it teaches “extinction,” then it is conceded that “the passage teaches the annihilation of the wicked.” However, the adjective “eternal” (Gk. *Aionios*) “is superfluous, since extinction is final, and excludes the idea of duration.”¹³¹ The adjective “eternal” associated with “destruction” “neutralizes the idea of annihilation, which implies a point of time in which the wicked cease to exist.”¹³² Instead, it “is the destruction of all gladness, hope, all that makes life worth living; it is the exclusion from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.”¹³³ This “punishment

¹²⁹ 3: 874

¹³⁰ DBLG 3897, #1

¹³¹ Vincent 4: 61

¹³² Spence and Exell 21: 6

¹³³ Ibid. 21: 12

of the wicked will be neither temporary nor will it be annihilation, but it will continue throughout eternity and those being punished will be conscious. It is eternal death as opposed to eternal life.”¹³⁴ About this death, David Lipscomb points out:

Death does not mean annihilation, but the separation of the spirit, the vital principle, from the body. Spiritual death means the separation of the soul and body from God, the vitalizing principle of spiritual life. Eternal death is the final and everlasting separation of soul and body from the presence and glory of God. Thus separated, it is not annihilated. It is subject to perpetual and eternal suffering.¹³⁵

There seems to be somewhat of an impasse here or so it would seem. On the one hand, as earlier established, man’s soul does not inherently possess immortality. On the other hand, God has in store unending punishment for the wicked, namely, “eternal destruction.”

In his correspondence with the church in Philippi, Paul exhorts his brethren to imitation of an apostolic walk which ultimately is a walk patterned after the model of Christ (Philippians 3.17; cf. 1 Corinthians 11.1). But in addition to this exhortation is a warning about those who “walk as enemies of the cross of Christ” (3.18). Concerning these enemies, Paul says “their end is destruction” (3.19). Earlier in the epistle Paul has spoken concerning the opponents of the Philippians. It is their opposition which is “a clear sign to them of their destruction” (1.28). In both places, Paul uses the same Greek word (Gk. *Apoleia*) which is different than the word he used in 2 Thessalonians 1.9. It should be noted that this is the same word Jesus used in Matthew 10.28 in speaking of the One “who can destroy both soul and body in hell” and in Matthew 7.13 concerning the way “that leads to destruction.”

¹³⁴ Walvoord and Zuck 2: 716

¹³⁵ 5: 91

Lexicons have similar statements about the meaning of this Greek word and usually it is defined as “destruction.”¹³⁶ Thayer, though, does shed a bit more light on this word as used in these verses in Philippians saying this is “the destruction which consists in the loss of eternal life, eternal misery, perdition, the lot of those excluded from the kingdom of God” (71). Arndt and Gingrich say this is “the *destruction* that one experiences, *annihilation* both complete and in process.”¹³⁷ The concept of this destruction being eternal, though, must be read into the text and the word itself. In fact, there is no time element, simply the nature of the end in store for the enemies and opponents. However, since this “destruction” is juxtaposed with “salvation” (1.28) and heavenly citizenship (3.20), it seems fair to conclude that this is also an eternal destruction.

Accursed. Another means by which Paul describes the final fate of the wicked is that they are under the curse of God. To the Galatians he writes, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed” (1:8–9). He repeats himself, no doubt for emphasis. Anyone presenting as the true gospel a false gospel, regardless of who they may be, is “accursed.” The word used here for “accursed” is found six (6) times in the New Testament with all but one of them from Paul. It is a word which denotes “the strongest curse that can be uttered.”¹³⁸ The use of this word in the LXX is typically in reference to things “devoted to destruction,” be they persons, places, or things.¹³⁹ As such there was no hope of redemption. So for Paul, the heretic who spreads his heretical gospel has forfeited his hope of redemption. They were then shut out from the presence of Christ and fellowship with God.

¹³⁶ So read Strong, Louw-Nida, and Thayer.

¹³⁷ 103, emphasis original.

¹³⁸ Coffman on Galatians 1.8.

¹³⁹ See Leviticus 27.28; Numbers 21.3; Deuteronomy 13.16, 18; et al.

This fate is not only for the heretic. Notice who else is included under the curse of God and thereby excluded from Christ: “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come!” (1 Corinthians 16:22) If a person refuses to love Jesus, they likewise fall under the curse of God and are worthy of only destruction. Barnes explains, “ No matter what any man’s endowments might be; no matter what might be his wealth, his standing, or his talent; no matter if he were regarded as a ruler in the church, or at the head of a party; yet if he had not true love to the Lord Jesus, he could not be saved.”¹⁴⁰ The one who does not love God or Christ is under the curse of God and will be worthy of destruction at the end unless he repent.

Death. Though we have already seen several scholars talk about “eternal death,” much like the phrase “immortal soul,” these words never appear in Scripture together. Nevertheless, where the fate of the wicked is described as death, it is often juxtaposed with the phrase “eternal life.” Therefore, the implication in the word “death,” when used in the context of the fate of the wicked, is the concept of this being an eternal fate.

This discussion touches on something already addressed and that is the immortality of the soul. Just as man’s body is subject to physical death, so man’s soul is subject to spiritual death. Paul captures this succinctly in 1 Timothy 5.6 in speaking of the self-indulgent widow who is “dead even while she lives.” Though alive physically, one may be dead spiritually. So there is a sense in which one is “perishing” in the present (see 2 Corinthians 2.15; 2 Thessalonians 2.10) and is (at present) dead.

What is this death? “The word [life], when used of the soul of man, means not only conscious being, but a normal state of being in the likeness, fellowship, and enjoyment of God. And in like manner the word death, when spoken of the soul, means alienation or separation

¹⁴⁰ Barnes on 1 Corinthians 16.22

from God; and when that separation is final it is eternal death.”¹⁴¹ As we have seen, God created the soul and bestows that soul to man. However, when sin comes alive, death enters the picture (see Romans 7.9-11). Only in Christ is it “made alive” and saved for immortality to be given by God. Otherwise, without Christ, it remains dead and will be destroyed in hell (Matthew 10.28), or to use Paul’s language, its end is destruction.

One more note from Paul: He tells the Romans, “Their condemnation is just” (3.8). In context Paul is speaking about those who were advocating doing “evil that good may come.” However, the principle can be expanded to include all the wicked: their final fate is just. This is because their punishment comes from a just God. Will not the God of heaven do right? So this should silence those who say that somehow God is not fair in punishing the wicked as He sees fit. The punishment in store is right.

¹⁴¹ Hodge 3: 874

9 – The Johannine Description

He is the apostle who writes about the love of God, even penning the words “God is love” (1 John 4.8). Indeed, he is the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (John 13.23; 19.26; 20.2; 21.7). Yet John, with his brother James, was called by the Lord “Boanerges” which means “sons of thunder” (Mark 3.17). From this half of what seems to have been a dynamic duo, some of our most graphic and disturbing descriptions of the final fate of wicked come. In this section, we will examine the several passages in which the apostle John explains the final fate of the wicked.

It is with some trepidation that one turns to the Revelation. So much fantastic and sensational eschatology has been built from the content of this book. Nevertheless, one thing seems certain: there are elements of this book which deal with the final fate of the wicked. The difficulty is discerning which figures are and are not associated with final punishment. Two figures, though, do stand out as definitely being figures of the awful fate awaiting the unrepentant. Those are the lake of fire and the second death. This section will address both.

Fire and Torment. The first figure for examination is that of a fiery lake. In the middle of the Revelation is this description:

And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no

rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”” (Revelation 14:9–11)

Several things are evident. First, the lake of fire is for “anyone who worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand” (v.9). Though not the scope of this paper, this phrase does need to be addressed. Lenski succinctly notes that it is an exposition of the words of Jesus – “He who does not believe shall be damned” (Mark 16.16). “This is the negative side of the eternal gospel,” he writes.¹⁴² Indeed, this phrase seems to describe those who are disobedient to the will of God. So one’s allegiance determines one’s afterlife. The decisions made in this life determines one’s destiny in the next life. Those who align themselves with the beast and receive his mark are destined for punishment (Revelation 14.11). Contrast with those who bear the Lamb’s name and the Father’s name on their foreheads (14.1).

Second, the punishment they receive is the “full strength...of [God’s] anger” (v.10). “Full strength” here is associated with the “wine of God’s wrath” and means “undiluted” or “unmixed.”¹⁴³ There is almost a sense in which the wrath God has poured out in time on nations has been subdued, but now, with the final unveiling of divine revelation, a picture is presented of God’s wrath in full strength. Even if this is talking about wrath to be poured out upon a nation in time,¹⁴⁴ that would serve as a type of the final day of God wrath. However, the language and finality of this fiery torment captured in the phrase “forever and ever” (v.11) points to this being more than historical, even eschatological in its implications for the ungodly.

Third, the punishment to be endured by the wicked is “torment” with fire and sulfur day and night without the prospect of rest for eternity. Among the commentators, there is near

¹⁴² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935). 435.

¹⁴³ So the KJV reads “without mixture” and the NRSV “unmixed.”

¹⁴⁴ E.g. Jerusalem or the Romans.

universal acceptance of this as eschatological, i.e. describing the final fate of the wicked in hell.¹⁴⁵ The word “torment” (Gk *basanismos*) is unique to John.¹⁴⁶ In fact, it is seldom used in the Septuagint.¹⁴⁷ There it is exclusively in reference to the physical suffering endured by the pious at the hands of the ungodly. However, over time the word changed in meaning from a trial or testing through affliction by the righteous to torment in general.¹⁴⁸ Certainly, in view here is not a purgatorial or temporal affliction, but a permanent state of torture reserved specifically for the wicked who worship the beast and bear his mark. It also carries with it severe pain, suffering, and agony.

Fourth, the duration of the torment of the wicked is described using three (3) descriptive phrases. “Forever and ever” (Gk *eis aionas aionon*), “day and night” (Gk *hemeras kai nuktos*), and “they will have no rest.” Only in 9.5 is the torment limited for five (5) months. There the torment is bound by time and the locus is earth. Here the torment is not time-bound nor earth-bound. The language indicates this being eternal. Combined with what has been noted, this text undoubtedly teaches that the final fate of the faithless is the full force of God’s fury involving excruciating torture and torment by fire for unlimited and unending duration. This takes on another dimension when one considers that this is all highly figurative, apocalyptic language which seeks to codify in finite language using finite figures a far worse and terrible reality of suffering which has no end.

The lake of fire and torment imagery is utilized later in the Revelation again. This time we get a glimpse of who this fate is for as well as an additional description of it:

¹⁴⁵ So read Alford, Barnes, Clarke, Coffman, Gill, Lenski, Spence & Exell, et al.

¹⁴⁶ John uses this word a total of six (6) times in the Revelation: 9.5 (2); 18.7, 10, 15, and here.

¹⁴⁷ See 4 Maccabees 9.6; 11.2

¹⁴⁸ TDNT 562.

“And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.” (Revelation 19:20–21, ESV)

A few things stand out from this passage. First, we note those for whom the wrath of God awaits: the beast and false prophet. Both of these individuals, regardless of how one interprets the book of Revelation, are clearly agents of Satan and antagonists against the people of God throughout the vision. Later, Satan himself will be cast into this place as well: “and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10, ESV). This harkens back to the words of Jesus who declared that “the eternal fire” is “prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25.41). The original intent of this lake of fire was for the devil and his angels to languish there for eternity. It was not prepared for people. Humans were not supposed to go there. Yet many people will endure eternity there in intense suffering which is explained later in Revelation (21.8).

Second, let it be noted that the place of fire and torment, common figures throughout the New Testament with Jesus utilizing it heavily, is called “the lake of fire.” Lenski suggests, “The term ‘lake’ is taken from the Dead Sea.”¹⁴⁹ However, in back of this imagery is possibly volcanic activity with its burning hot, liquid magma. There are about eighteen different volcanoes in the Asia Minor area. In fact, there is a volcano just outside of Philadelphia to the north. Philadelphia

¹⁴⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* 598.

is of course one of the seven (7) churches to which this letter is addressed (3.7-13). No doubt the imagery of volcanic activity was reticent for the readers. Furthermore, Patmos itself was an island of volcanic rock. Adjacent to Patmos was “the volcanic cone in the harbor (sic) of Thera” which “was believed to be such an aperture of hell.”¹⁵⁰ Thera “was in a state of more or less severe eruption during the first century.”¹⁵¹ Surely John was familiar with the volcanic phenomena for which that area was known.¹⁵² In addition, just years before the composition of the Revelation, Mount Vesuvius in Italy had erupted and destroyed several cities including Pompeii and Herculaneum.¹⁵³ No doubt the entire ancient world would have been familiar with this disaster.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps some of those in the seven (7) churches in Asia to whom this book is addressed were displaced Christians from that region. If nothing else, there was already precedent for a volcanic association in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which were destroyed with “sulfur and fire” (Genesis 19.24). So the volcanic motif certainly has Biblical, cultural, and geographical precedent for John to utilize that imagery to capture in language the terrible reality of hell.

Coupled with the lake of fire concept is the figure of sulfur or “brimstone” (KJV, ASV). Volcanoes stink like sulfur (rotten eggs). So this further lends itself to the idea that John borrows a physical concept familiar to his audience to communicate the awful reality of hell he sees in the vision. Barnes says the sulfur denotes intense heat. Gill says the sulfur acts to accentuate the

¹⁵⁰ James Moffat, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine", *The Expositor's Greek Testament, Volume V: Commentary* (New York: George H. Doran Company). 406.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* 404-05.

¹⁵² Moffat notes the volcanic phenomena of the Aegean archipelago “are in the background of this description, and of others throughout the book; features such as the disturbance of islands and the mainland, showers of stones, earthquakes, the sun obscured by a black mist of ashes, and the moon reddened by volcanic dust, were the natural consequences of eruption in some submarine volcano.”

¹⁵³ If one takes either a middle or late date for the writing of Revelation then Vesuvius had already erupted. If one takes an early date (pre-70 AD), the eruption of Vesuvius had yet to take place.

¹⁵⁴ This is evident in that the noted historians Josephus and Suetonius both mention the event. Further, Pliny the Younger was an eyewitness and records the event in Letter 6.

punishment because of the nauseating stench. Thus, John uses the volcanic imagery again to describe how terrible the final fate of the wicked is. So the accompanying idea of sulfur with the lake of fire augments the awful nature of hell.

Third, note that those thrown into the lake of fire are cast there “alive.” This is a present participle indicating they are “living” (see Young’s Literal Translation) while they endure their fiery torment. So this is “a living death; not mere annihilation.”¹⁵⁵ “The rest” of 19.21 are “slain” or “killed” and their fate stands juxtaposed with the beast and false prophet who are cast alive into their eternal fate. Like a self-indulgent widow who is “dead even while she lives” (1 Timothy 5.6), those cast into the lake fire (the second death as will be seen later) are living though they are dead. As Robertson aptly notes, “This is the final abode of Satan, the beast, the false prophet, and wicked men.”¹⁵⁶ A living, burning death for eternity.

Second Death. John’s description of the final fate of the wicked in Revelation all kind of runs together, no doubt due in part to the ample usage of the highly figurative apocalyptic language. All the figures kind of bleed into one another. It seems though that the overarching theme for John when it comes to the final fate of the wicked is that of “second death.” This phrase appears repeated in John’s Revelation to describe the final fate of the faithless. It is also a phrase which is unique to John; he is the only New Testament writer who uses it.

Technically, this probably belongs in the section covering Jesus’ sayings. However, for the sake of continuity and also to show that John’s epistemology is Jesus, it is included here. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” (Revelation 2:11, ESV). There is no threat of experiencing the “second death” for Christians who are “faithful unto death” for they receive the victor’s crown

¹⁵⁵ Jamieson, Fausset, Brown on Revelation 19:20.

¹⁵⁶ A.T. Robertson on Revelation 19:20.

(Gk *stephanos*), not of leaves but of life (2.10). So conquering means escaping the second death by faithfulness through martyrdom. The language is emphatic: “he will not, in no way be hurt by the second death.” That the faithful Christian escapes the second death is indisputable. However, it is not explicitly stated here what the second death is.

Later in the Revelation, John uses this image of “second death” to capture the final fate of the wicked. “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years” (Revelation 20:6, ESV). Once more, the declaration that the second death has no effect upon faithful martyrs (whose destiny is the first resurrection) establishes that fact, but does not explain what the second death is. However, just a few verses later, it is finally made clear what the second death is. “Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:14). The text is explicit and John is unmistakable: the lake of fire is the second death; the second death is explained as the lake of fire. Once again the image of fire is used, indicating that John’s epistemology was Jesus who frequently utilized the figure. Concerning the second death Robertson is emphatic that “It is not annihilation.”¹⁵⁷ Barnes agrees, “There is no evidence that John meant to affirm that the second death would imply an extinction of ‘existence.’”¹⁵⁸ After you die physically you are thrown into the lake of fire to be tormented for all eternity.

This passage also helps to make a distinction between the Hadean realm – the unseen realm of the dead wherein the righteous and unrighteous go upon death – and hell. First, death (i.e. the first death) is cast into hell (i.e. the lake of fire) since after the resurrection there is no more physical dying. There is only the spiritual second death, the lake of fire. Second, Hades is

¹⁵⁷ A.T. Robertson on Revelation 2:11.

¹⁵⁸ Barnes on Revelation 20.14.

cast into hell because following the resurrection of the dead there is no longer a need for it. The disembodied souls have been reunited with the resurrection body prepared for eternity either in God or away from God. Some commentators try to make Hades and hell the same.¹⁵⁹ However, there is a demarcation that is clear based upon this passage.

That the “lake of fire” is a figure is evident “because no literal fire could burn up the grave, personified.”¹⁶⁰ No literal physical fire can touch spiritual things such as death (the separation of body with spirit, cf. James 2.24) or Hades. What exactly is being described in the figure “lake of fire” is something with which theologians wrestle. Coffman cites Caird, seemingly in agreement, that this describes “separation forever from God and all good.”¹⁶¹ Adam Clarke agrees and expands, “The first death consisted in the separation of the soul from the body for a season; the second death in the separation of body and soul from God for ever (sic).”¹⁶² He goes on and says, “The first death is that from which there may be a resurrection; the second death is that from which there can be no recovery. By the first the body is destroyed during time; by the second, body and soul are destroyed through eternity.”¹⁶³ John Gill sees not only separation, but also the eternal ruination of the wicked when he writes that the second death is “the destruction of the soul and body in hell, which will consist in an eternal separation of both from God, and in a continual sense of his wrath and displeasure.”¹⁶⁴ So clearly the idea of separation is prevalent in the idea of the second death. But also the concept of continual, eternal destruction is present.

¹⁵⁹ For example, see Lenski on Revelation 20.14 wherein he conflates hades, Gehenna, the abyss, and the lake of fire.

¹⁶⁰ Coffman on Revelation 20.14.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Clarke on Revelation 20.14.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Gill on Revelation 20.14.

Why John uses the phrase “second death” is evident from the rest of the Bible. Though the phrase “first death” is not mentioned explicitly, it is implied by the “second death.” Further, “death” is thrown into the “second death” or lake of fire in Revelation 20:14. So although he does not use the phrase, clearly John makes a distinction between the first death and second death. The Scriptures are clear that all men have a date with physical death. The Psalmist asks, “What man can live and never see death?” (89:43) This is a rhetorical question with the answer being “None.” “We must all die,” declares David (2 Samuel 14:14). The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews affirms this in the New Testament: “It is appointed man to die once” (9:27). This is the “first death” implied by the “second death.” As Coffman notes, “Christ did not mention here [Revelation 2:11] ‘the first death’; but it is the death of the body to which all must submit.”¹⁶⁵ Robertson adds that “The spiritual death of 2:11; 20:14; 21:8 [is] in contrast to the first or physical death.”¹⁶⁶ So John’s use of the phrase “second death” intends to draw attention to the fate of the wicked following their departure from this life and the judgment.

Throughout this paper, an examination of the final fate of the wicked has been made. John gives us a substantial, though not exhaustive, description of who it is that must endure the second death or lake of fire. “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8, ESV). This passage actually details who the wicked are in no uncertain terms. Eight (8) different groups of individuals are listed as having their eternal abode in the anguish of hell. The “cowardly” (Gk. *Deilois*) are those who are generally timid or fearful, and in the context of Revelation they give way to the trials and pressures of persecution. The “faithless” (Gk. *Apistois*) are those who refuse

¹⁶⁵ Coffman on Revelation 2:11.

¹⁶⁶ A.T. Robertson on Revelation 20:6.

to believe and put that faith into action by, especially in Revelation, repentance (see 9.20-21). The “detestable” (or abominable, ASV, KJV) is translated from a word often used in the LXX to denote the idea of becoming a stench to God as a result of grievous sins which God hates (E.g. Exodus 5.21). “Murderers” are those who coldly and calculatedly take the life of another person. The “sexually immoral” (or fornicators, ASV, RSV; Gk. *Pornois*) is a person “who indulges in unlawful sexual intercourse”¹⁶⁷ which catches every sexual sin outside of the covenant of marriage as designed by God. “Sorcerers” (Gk *parmakois*) are those who practice magic and the dark arts, typically in association with the use of drugs and idolatry. “Idolaters” (Gk. *eidololatrais*) are those who engage in worship or religious reverence to any being (i.e. demons) or anything (i.e. objects of gold, silver, wood, etc.) other than the God of heaven (cf. Revelation 9.20). All “liars” (Gk. root *pseudēs*) captures everyone who seeks to deceive through falsehood and refuse to love truth, choosing rather to align themselves with the “father of lies,” the devil (John 8.44). The New Testament contains other lists of those who are doomed for the second death if they refuse to repent.¹⁶⁸ In fact, in the next chapter John gives a near identical list (22.15). Here, though, is a sobering description of those who face the lake of fire.

¹⁶⁷ Thayer 532.

¹⁶⁸ E.g. Romans 1.24-32, esp. vs. 28-32; 1 Corinthians 6.9-10; Galatians 5.19-21; Ephesians 5.3-5; et al.

10 – The Petrine Description

There is scant little in First Peter about the final fate of the wicked. Most of Peter's discussion centers on the Christian's behavior now and the future glorification of the faithful when Jesus comes back. Even when discussing the "fiery trials" that these Christians in Asia Minor are enduring, there is not the Pauline thought pattern in which the final fate of the wicked is pronounced. It is merely a call to be faithful in spite of those trials. Second Peter is where the apostle is more graphic and really presents several ideas concerning the final fate of the wicked. Some are borrowed from other writers, and some are unique to Peter.

Darkness. One figure that Peter uses, borrowed straight from Jesus, is that of darkness. Now most of the time when darkness is mentioned, it revolves around *tartarus*. However, there are a couple places where darkness is mentioned independent of the gloomy prison of the wicked. One case is found in his first epistle: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). Those who do not believe and reject the cornerstone, that is Christ (v.7); those who disobey (v.8); those who stumble over the Stone, that is, Christ; those full of malice, envy, deceit, hypocrisy, slander (v.1) – these are not God's people (v.10) and continue in spiritual darkness. These to whom Peter writes have been called out of these things (by the gospel, see 2 Thessalonians 2.15) by their faith and obedience to Christ.

Should one refuse to repent and turn to God, he will remain in darkness. Such were the false teachers in Asia Minor. So in his second epistle to these Christians, Peter explains concerning these false teachers, “These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved” (2 Peter 2:17). Even in the dawn of man’s concept of punishment there was an association between the suffering of the wicked and darkness. Job and his compatriots made this connection which is evident in the words of Zophar, “Utter darkness is laid up for [the wicked man’s] treasures” (Job 20.26). So Peter, well acquainted with the Old Testament, seems to allude to this passage. Also prevalent could be the imagery surrounding *tartarus*, the dark gloomy prison of the wicked dead (see below).

While these could be the roots of this figure, the meaning helps make clear the final fate of the wicked. The word “gloom” is unique to Peter and Jude in relation to the “utter darkness” reserved for the wicked. Barnes notes “the phrase ‘mist of darkness’ is designed to denote ‘intense’ darkness, or the thickest darkness.”¹⁶⁹ It is a word “associated with feelings of despair and foreboding” and combined with “darkness” “may be combined to form a phrase such as ‘fearful darkness’ or ‘darkness that causes fear’ or ‘fear because of darkness.’”¹⁷⁰ This is the blackest darkness imaginable for it is the total absence of light inasmuch as God, who is light (1 John 1.5), is not there. Naturally, then, this kind of darkness would incite fear and foreboding. Commentators agree that this is a reference to the future punishment of the wicked. Peter says this punishment “has been reserved” for the wicked. This is a perfect tense verb in the passive voice indicating that God has prepared this fate for the wicked, and it stands ready to receive them.

¹⁶⁹ Barnes on 2 Peter 2.17.

¹⁷⁰ Louw-Nida 175.

Destructive Condemnation. Chapter 2 of Second Peter focuses upon false teachers in the church (2.1-2) who stand juxtaposed with the prophets of God who were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (1.21). The final fate of these false teachers is graphically portrayed using several different concepts throughout the chapter. Almost immediately their eschatological fate is revealed when Peter writes, “Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.” (2:3). Condemnation (or judgment, KJV, NKJV, NASB) and destruction (or damnation, KJV) awaits these heretics who are trying to turn a profit from their erroneous doctrines. First, they are pronounced guilty, and are therefore worthy of punishment. Then, the actual punishment is meted out in the form of eternal ruin and waste as they are away from the presence of God. Peter rightly places destruction after the judgment of these false teachers.

Tartarus. Peter goes further in describing the destruction facing the false teachers. In speaking of the fate of fallen, Peter seems to suggest the place wherein final punishment is executed. Concerning these angels who sinned, Peter says God “cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment” (2:4). The word for “hell” here is *tartaros*, an aorist participle which includes the act of casting these angels to this place as well as giving the time when this occurred – sometime in the past. So these angels are already bound in this place of “gloomy darkness.” It seems that this place, though “prepared for the devil and his angels” (see Matthew 25.41), is likewise the place for these false teachers. Thus, after final judgment, the destruction of the wicked will be in Tartarus. God will hurl these heretics to hell.

The concept of *tartarus* actually predates Peter. The roots of *tartarus* reach back to the 8th century BC when Homer speaks of “Titan gods who dwell beneath the earth about great

Tartarus” (3: 335),¹⁷¹ and Hesiod, a contemporary of Homer, says that Zeus “hurled [the Titans] beneath the wide-pathed earth, and bound them in bitter chains.”¹⁷² Elsewhere Homer says, “For I will take and cast you into dusky Tartarus and awful hopeless darkness, and neither your mother nor your father shall free you or bring you up again to the light, but you will wander under the earth and be the leader amongst little folk” (4: 255).¹⁷³ Later, comic playwright Aristophanes writes, “These [pupils of Socrates] are groping about in darkness under Tartarus”¹⁷⁴ (*Clouds* 180). Writing in the first century B.C. the Roman poet Virgil in *Aeneid* speaks of “doleful Tartarus” (4:348), “the guilty gloom of Tartarus” (5:950-951), the “glooms of Tartarus” (6:182), and calls Tartarus the “dreadful doors of Pluto”¹⁷⁵ (8:893-894), Pluto being the Roman god of the underworld. The ideas associated with *tartarus* are taken for granted by him. Further examples of ancient writers could be added but these quoted suffice to paint the Greek idea of *Tartarus*.

From these quotations a composite picture begins to take shape. *Tartarus* is an underground world of darkness and gloom. It seems to have been a place for Titans or gods where they were bound in chains. While it was a prison for the gods, it was still a part of this physical universe in the heart of the earth. In fact, Lodge points out that “*Tartarus* was originally, according to Homer, the prison of the Titans.”¹⁷⁶ Over time though, *tartarus* was expanded to include all the wicked dead. Lodge continues, “Plato alone makes it the prison of *all* wrong-doers.”¹⁷⁷ Lewis explains, “In classical Greek mythology murky Tartarus was said to be

¹⁷¹ *Homeric Hymns (English)*, ed. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Medford, MA: Perseus Digital Library, 1914).

¹⁷² Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica With an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. Theogony*. (Medford, MA: Cambridge, MA.,Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1914).

¹⁷³ *Homeric Hymns (English)*, ed. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Medford, MA: Perseus Digital Library, 1914).

¹⁷⁴ Aristophanes, *Clouds The Comedies of Aristophanes*, ed. William James Hickie (Medford, MA: Bohn, 1853?).

¹⁷⁵ P. Vergilius (Virgil) Maro, *Aeneid*, ed. Theodore C. Williams (Medford, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910).

¹⁷⁶ Gonzalez Lodge, *Commentary on Plato Gorgias* (Medford, MA: Ginn & Company, 1891). 259.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

as far below Hades as earth is below the heavens, so much so that an anvil could fall for nine days and nights until it reached it. Tartarus is described as a prison with gates.”¹⁷⁸ Barnes agrees that *tartarus* “in Greek mythology was the lower part, or abyss of Hades.”¹⁷⁹ So Thayer says *tartarus* is “a subterranean region, doleful and dark, regarded by the ancient Greeks as the abode of the wicked dead, where they suffer punishment for their evil deeds.”¹⁸⁰ Thus, *tartarus* was the unseen prison of darkness, gloomy and murky, reserved for the gods and wicked dead men.

Though the idea predates Peter, he hijacks it to make a point about the false teachers. Writing to probably the same audience of his first epistle, and thus a primarily Gentile audience (see 1 Peter 1.1), Peter grabs a concept familiar to them from their own mythology. As Coffman notes, “It was natural for Peter, writing to Greeks, to use their word with reference to the state of condemnation of the angels, but without endorsement of any of the pagan traditions about the fallen Titans.”¹⁸¹ So he revisions *tartarus* not as the center of the of the world – an idea the Greeks had about it – but rather a spiritual realm since it houses spiritual beings. Further, it is not Jupiter or Zeus who casts into *tartarus*, but *ho theos*, the one true and only God. Pictured, then, is the impregnable and inescapable fortress of the faithless who are banished by God to the unseen realm of utter darkness and bound by the murky, gloomy chains of darkness.

Fire. Peter goes on in verse 5 to still another example of the judgment of God: Noah and the flood. However, it is verse 6 which seems to contain another eschatological allusion when Peter says of God, “if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly” (2 Peter 2:6).

¹⁷⁸ Theodore J. Lewis, "Dead, Abode of the", *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992). 105.

¹⁷⁹ Barnes on 2 Peter 2.4.

¹⁸⁰ Thayer 615.

¹⁸¹ Coffman on 2 Peter 2.4.

It is unfortunate that the translators of the English Standard Version rendered the text as they did, translating the Greek word *katastrophe* as “to extinction.” The first part of the text should read as follows: “He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes” (NASB95). The word *katastrophe* (from which we get our English word “catastrophe”) does not mean to cease to exist through total annihilation, but to bring to a state of utter and total ruination and destruction. That state of utter ruin and desolation came when the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were reduced to ash having fallen under the condemnation of God. This is the event which serves as an example of the final fate of the wicked.

The event to which Peter points his readers is recorded in Genesis 19.24 when YHWH rained down fire and brimstone on the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their great wickedness. By this, they were reduced to ashes, destroyed by the fire from heaven. Scripture says, “The men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD.” (Genesis 13:13, NKJV). God demonstrated his disapproval of sin when He smothered to destruction these cities. For their great wickedness and sin, God brought fiery judgment such as the world had not known. Peter says that what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah stands as an example one time for all time (perfect participle). Lenski says “a perfect participle brings out the thought as to what this judgment signifies for all future time” elaborating that the “perfect participle means that, once being set as an example, the judgment remains so.”¹⁸² So the catastrophic end of the wicked has stood firm based upon the example of Sodom as the ultimate plan of the grand Architect.

Later in the epistle, Peter once again revisits the idea of fire as part of the punishment for the wicked. In a verse rich with eschatological import Peter writes, “But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and

¹⁸² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966). 313.

destruction of the ungodly” (2 Peter 3:7). Mentioning the “day of judgment” immediately pushes this forward into the future to when Christ returns. The language is stark and clear: the physical world is going out of business (cf. v. 10, 12), and it will be burned up into nothing. But the spiritual realm remains. In the spiritual realm is where the “destruction of the ungodly” will take place. Though in 2.6 the fire mentioned there is for the torment of the wicked, here the fiery language is used to describe the complete annihilation of the universe. Nevertheless, the example of fiery punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah points to the fiery “destruction” in the spiritual realm. The word Peter uses (Gk *apoleias*) is a word used by Jesus in the gospels (see especially Matthew 10:28). It indicates eternal misery and ruination. From this an awful picture of the final fate of the wicked emerges.

The final realization of this example will be when the ungodly enter into the fire of hell. The “fiery hell” imagery was a favorite figure used by the Lord. No wonder Peter, arguing from an historical event, uses that same figure to describe “what is going to happen to the ungodly.” At the end, the wicked go away from God into eternal fire far exceeding the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah which prefigures it. Here the utter ruination and continual destruction of the soul will endure unendingly. The wicked face such a fate that neither this physical universe nor the spiritual realm has ever known.

Peter uses one more example to make his point that when it comes to the judgment and punishment of the wicked “their destruction is not asleep” (2 Peter 2:3, NET). The fourth of four examples is Lot in Sodom whose righteous soul was tormented during his stay in that city. Though that city was destroyed, Lot was rescued. That leads Peter to write that “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment” (2 Peter 2:9). While Peter’s primary purpose is to placate these persecuted

Christians, this verse does offer still another allusion to the eschatological fate in store for the wicked. God keeps disobedient angels in *tartarus*, He kept Noah from the punishment poured out on the ancient world, He punished Sodom and Gomorrah, and He kept Lot from the same fate. Now in verse 9, God keeps (or reserves, see KJV) the wicked under the sentence of punishment until the judgment day. Thus, God preserves the faithful, and He has suffering reserved for the unrighteous.

There is some debate over whether the “punishment” is now presently going on or yet future. For the former view, an appeal is made to the present tense participle and verb Peter uses here. So some see Peter saying that the unrighteous are being punished (present participle).¹⁸³ For the latter view, an appeal is made to the words of the demons Jesus cast during His ministry who ask if He would torment them “before the time” (Matthew 8.29). There is a yet future time appointed when judgment is issued and punishment meted out. Some split the difference and conflate the two views to some degree. For example, “Sin is already its own penalty; hell will be its full development.”¹⁸⁴ However, it seems best to see here the present preservation of the disobedient for their future final fate on the day of judgment.

Destruction. Peter is not finished describing the final fate of the wicked. He goes further in this text in chapter 2 to explain that these false teachers blaspheme angelic beings (v.10). Not even angelic beings themselves do this (v.11). “But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction” (2 Peter 2:12). Immediately one notices that Peter mentions destruction three (3) times. This seems to correspond to the triple mention of

¹⁸³ Caffin holds this view. Lenski does also for the disobedient angels. Jamison, Fausset, and Brown point out the present participle but hold to the future interpretation.

¹⁸⁴ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown on 2 Peter 2:9.

“blasphemy” in verses 10-12. The word he uses (both the noun and verb forms) is also rendered “perish” (KJV, NIV, NKJV) or “corruption” (KJV, NKJV), though most translations render it “destroy” or “destruction.” The variety of translation seems to be at the root of interpreting this verse. One interpretation would have this phrase meaning they will be utterly destroyed. In fact, Robertson sees a rhetorical Hebraism here.¹⁸⁵ However, the personal pronoun (Gk. *auton*) militates against this view. Another view sees the false teachers being destroyed at the same time as the “irrational animals.” A similar view says these false teachers will be destroyed in the same manner as these “irrational animals.” Still another view holds that these false teachers will be destroyed with the fallen angels previously mentioned (v. 4, 11). Finally, what seems to be the best interpretation, there is a view which sees Peter saying something along the lines of the false teachers experiencing eternal ruination (“perish”) due to their moral corruption. This seems reasonable since Peter explains that it is their blasphemy, certainly one facet of their moral corruption, which leads to their destruction.

As Peter closes his epistle, he provides a richly eschatological section (3.1-13) which includes material concerning the final fate of the wicked. Caffin says, “This is the clearest prophecy in Holy Scripture of the final conflagration of the universe.”¹⁸⁶ Peter is here discussing “the last days” (v.3), “his coming” (v.4), “the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (v.7), “the day of the Lord” (v.10), and “the day of God” when even “the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn” (v.12). All of these phrases are rooted in Old Testament prophecy. Peter, like Jesus, is heir to a rich prophetic heritage, and he samples from it generously to describe the end of all things (cf. 1 Peter 4.7).

¹⁸⁵ A.T. Robertson on 2 Peter 2:12.

¹⁸⁶ Spence and Exell 22:1:67.

The overall emphasis throughout this section seems to be on the destruction of the world by fire so hot elements are dissolved. This seems to be similar language found in the prophets of when God comes in judgment. Here the judgment is final judgment wherein all mankind is to stand before the Almighty and give account (hence, Peter calls it “the day of judgment” in verse 7). One verse which communicates the final fate of the wicked in this section is verse 7: “But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.” So “destruction” is in store for the “ungodly.” Once more Peter rightly has destruction following “judgment.” After the judgment comes destruction for the ungodly. Elsewhere in this epistle, Peter says “destruction” awaits “false prophets” and “false teachers” who proclaim “destructive heresies” (2.1). “There destruction is not asleep,” he declares (2.3). These same “ignorant and unstable” ones distort the Scriptures “to their own destruction” (3.16). Peter speaks of the final fate of the wicked as “destruction,” which is also a favorite word of Paul.¹⁸⁷

The word itself (Gk. *Apoleias*) is rare in secular Greek.¹⁸⁸ It speaks to a state of utter ruin. It is the eternal loss of life and consequently misery eternal.¹⁸⁹ It is of the same word group Jesus used when addressing the final fate of the wicked in hell in Matthew 10.28: “fear Him who can destroy (Gk. Root *apollumi*) both body and soul in hell.” For the wicked, this is not complete annihilation of being. This is the loss of eternal life unto eternal misery and death. This is the fate in store for the ungodly scoffers.

Perish. Contained in this section concerning the final obliteration of the present universe is another reference to the final fate of the wicked: “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as

¹⁸⁷ See Romans 9.22; Philippians 1.28; 3.19; 2 Thessalonians 2.3; 1 Timothy 6.19.

¹⁸⁸ TDNT 67.

¹⁸⁹ See Thayer 71.

some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3.9). The idea of the wicked perishing (Gk *apolesthai*) is closely related to that of “destruction” since both come from the same word group. Again, this connotes the idea of eternal misery at the loss of eternal life with God. So then we see that God does not want any to miss eternal life with Him. This do not mean all will be saved, merely that God does not want any lost. God loves the crown jewel of His creation with an everlasting love (cf. Jeremiah 31.3). Nevertheless, those ungodly and wicked souls which refuse to “reach repentance” and respond to the call of the gospel (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2.15) will perish. Many will perish, but that is not His will. God has said, “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone...so turn, and live” (Ezekiel 18.32). It is up to man to respond to the goodness of God (hence, the active voice) and obey the command to repent (See Acts 2.38; 17.30).

Before moving on, an important distinction must be made. The universe will be obliterated, annihilated since its purpose in the grand scheme of human redemption will have served its purpose. But the resurrected spiritual body of the ungodly or wicked will, according to Peter, “perish” in eternal “darkness” and “destruction” in “Tartarus.” Those who fail to realize their purpose before God – namely, repentance (3.9) and holiness (3.11) – or who declare doctrines or teaching which is contrary to the truth (2.1, 3), or who indulge in sensuality (2.10, 12), or who scoff at the word of God (3.3) will face the terrible fate Peter has described in his epistles.

11 – General Epistles

Though they do not get as much attention as doctrinal treatises like Romans or Ephesians, nor do they warrant near the interest as the epistles of Peter, those letters which are often called “general epistles” are nevertheless inspired of God and contain material relevant to this thesis. Included in this section of the paper are passages from these epistles, specifically, Hebrews, Jude, and James. Just a quick overview reveals that there are ideas and concepts which are carried on by these writers from Jesus.

Hell in Hebrews. According to the writer of Hebrews, “eternal judgment” is a foundational and elementary doctrine (6.1-2).¹⁹⁰ Unlike the epistles of Paul, the letter to the Hebrews does use the threat of future eternal punishment to attempt to correct his readers’ behavior and cause them to repent. So while for many folks in the church the epistle to the Hebrews is somewhat enigmatic, their usage of eschatological punishment for corrective purposes is virtually identical to it. This “turn or burn” motif is a bit more developed than most Christians’ view today. It is theological in nature as well as rooted in Old Testament language.

The overarching theme of this epistle is the apostasy of Christians from Christianity back to Judaism. He warns his readers about the need to hold closely to the message they heard “lest we drift away from it” (2.1). He pleads with his holy brethren to “take care...lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (3.12). He presents the very real possibility of falling away from the faith (6.4-6). He cautions his readers

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Ecclesiastes 12.14.

“do not throw away your confidence” (10.35), the implication being that some had done this. The writer presents the Christ and Christianity as all-around “better” than the Jewish religious system with better “things that belong to salvation” (6.9), a “better hope” (7.19), “better promises” (8.6), “better sacrifices” (9.23), with “better possessions” (10.34), all of which points to a “better country” (11.16) because the New Covenant is an entirely “better covenant” (7.22). His argument, then, is “Why go back to the shadow when you have the substance in Christ? Why go back to the copies when you have the original?”

This is the filter through which one must read the threats of future “eternal judgment” and “punishment” found in the epistle to the Hebrews. They are aimed primarily and squarely at those who “have tasted the heavenly gift...the goodness of the word of God” but “have fallen away” back into Judaism. This kind of apostasy is sin of such a gross degree that the writer will use some of the most powerful images and the strongest language to describe not merely the punishment, but also God Himself. In fact, it seems that the writer of Hebrews’ eschatology is founded upon an Old Testament allusion near the end of the epistle: “our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12.29; cf. Deuteronomy 4.24; 5.25; 9.3).

Following an introduction in which the writer upholds the deity of Christ (chapter 1) and just before reminding his readers of the humanity of Christ (chapter 2), couched between these two major sections is an admonition to “pay closer attention to what we have heard” so as to ensure they do not “drift away” from the gospel (2.1). He then inserts a word of warning should they fail to heed the apostolic word: “For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard” (Hebrews 2:2–3). Here we have a lesser to greater argument, the lesser

being the punishment of sin under the Law (“the message declared by angels”) and the greater being the punishment of sin under the New Covenant (“salvation...declared at first by the Lord”). The punishment for “every transgression and disobedience” is called “a just retribution.” When God gives punishment for sin, it is right and deserved. “The law punished every sin. And that punishment was fair.”¹⁹¹ “Every commandment has the appropriate penalty prescribed for its infringement, and for those who deliberately and of set policy defied or disregarded the law of God there was no reprieve.”¹⁹² In some cases the death penalty was the prescribed penalty for sin. The Hebrew Christians who first received gospel could not have denied these long established principles. Nor could they answer the writer’s rhetorical question. The natural conclusion is that there is no escaping the “just retribution” of God if Christians neglect the message of the Lord and His apostolic college. So His final penalty for those who reject “such a great salvation” will likewise be just and is always just. His justice is perfect. The violations of God’s Law were punished with a due penalty; much more will Christ and God punish those Christians who fall away from the faith.

Fire. True to the precedent set by other New Testament writers, the writer of Hebrews utilizes a familiar figure as he continues his warnings aimed at the apostates. In chapter 6 he writes, “For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned” (verses 7–8). This is an illustration. The idea of fruitfulness versus fruitlessness is one found elsewhere in the New Testament (see John 15.2, 6). In this instance, the fruitless field (i.e. disciple) is in danger of the curse of God and burning. It may be that this could be an allusion to an Old Testament text

¹⁹¹ MacArthur 46.

¹⁹² Bruce 66-67.

wherein God describes Israel as a fruitless vineyard (Isaiah 5.1-7). So in the same way he rejected Israel and brought judgment on her (Isaiah 5.5-6), God will reject the “worthless” disciple who by turning from Him proves barren. These barren disciples are nigh unto being cursed of God and are drawing ever closer toward total abandonment by God and the danger of eternal ruin. Hence, their “end is to be burned” like a field which does not produce crops. This seems to be an allusion to a common practice by farmers in antiquity and which a predominately agrarian culture would have understood immediately.¹⁹³ Some see here the scorched earth of Sodom and Gomorrah,¹⁹⁴ though that seems forced. Though this could be referring to the destruction of Jerusalem,¹⁹⁵ this burning is “an analogy pointing to the final overthrow of the wicked.”¹⁹⁶ The fruitless disciple will be set ablaze by the eternal fire of God.

Fire is once again coupled with judgment in 10.27: “but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.” The subjects of this furious fiery judgment are those Christians (“we” in verse 26 indicates the author includes himself) who “go on sinning deliberately,” which appears to be a way of speaking of apostasy. If one ventures off into apostasy, he forfeits the only “sacrifice for sin,” Jesus the Son of God. If one turns away from Him, then the only fate left is the certainty of God’s judgment. By marching off into apostasy, they become the “adversaries” or enemies of God. As the writer explains a few verses later (verse 31), “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” This is because of the “fury of fire” that consumes the enemies of God. The phrase “fury of fire” personifies fire. This seems logical because in the writer’s theology “God is a consuming fire” (12.29). The fire is

¹⁹³ See John Gill who quotes Pliny concerning this practice.

¹⁹⁴ For instance, Lenski mentions Sodom and Gomorrah, though in fairness he does not make a direct connection.

¹⁹⁵ Barnes alludes to this though he seems to lean toward this being eschatological. Clarke is of the opinion that this is proof positive of the letter’s composition being pre-70AD since he sees here the impending destruction of Jerusalem.

¹⁹⁶ Coffman on Hebrews 6.7.

living for it comes from the living God. “He who descended on Mount Sinai in fire and spoke to his people from the midst of that fire still consumes in the white heat of his purity everything that is unworthy of himself.”¹⁹⁷ As before, some advocate that in view is the coming fiery end of Jerusalem and the Jewish religious system. However, it seems best to take this as eschatological since just two verses previous the writer has mentioned “the Day drawing near” (verse 25). On that Day, God, the consuming fire, will devour the disobedient ones with fire. “Consume” is a present infinitive indicating that this is a continual devouring of the wicked and works counter to the annihilationist who would use this as a proof-text of the wicked being snuffed out of existence. In addition, this fire does not purge, as is taught by Catholics with their doctrine of purgatory, but devours continually without end. Once again, the Biblical text is consistent in presenting continual fiery suffering as the final fate of the wicked.

Punishment. Another figure used by the writer of Hebrews is that of “punishment.” The writer will use a word which is unique to his epistle and originally meant vengeance.¹⁹⁸ In 10.29, the word used has “the implication of causing people to suffer what they deserve.”¹⁹⁹ Having detailed the penalty for disobedience under the law of Moses (v.28), he writes, “How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?” Here is another lesser to greater argument frequent in this epistle: “The reference is to the sin of idolatry and its punishment as a capital offense. The parallel of the Jews forsaking the true God and Christians forsaking the living Christ is significant.”²⁰⁰ It should be noticed that the writer indicates worse punishment is deserved for worse sin. Truly the worst

¹⁹⁷ Bruce 365.

¹⁹⁸ See Robertson on this text. Thayer has “vengeance” as a definition for this term (624).

¹⁹⁹ Louw-Nida 489.

²⁰⁰ Lightfoot 194.

sin of all is hearing the gospel of God's grace and rejecting it. The worst sin is rejecting the Son and insulting the Spirit of God. MacArthur sees here a rejection of the entire Godhead. He writes, "By trampling under foot (sic) the Son of God, he rejects God the Father. By regarding the blood of the covenant as unclean, he rejects the Son. By insulting the gentle, gracious leading of the Spirit, he rejects the Spirit. No wonder he deserves much severer punishment."²⁰¹ Jesus talked about "greater sin" (John 19.11). "The greater the sin the greater the judgment. Since apostasy is the worst sin, it will have the worst judgment."²⁰² The judgment and subsequent punishment reaches beyond the physical realm and touches the spiritual. This is what should be understood concerning "worse punishment." That has been the purpose of using the lesser-to-greater arguments: "To disobey the gospel incurs judgment more certain and terrible even than that incurred by disobedience to the law."²⁰³ The emphasis is not necessarily degrees of punishment regarding the final fate of the wicked, but a contrast from the penalty under the Old Covenant (physical punishment) and that of the New Covenant (spiritual punishment).

Destruction. Others in the New Testament refer to the final fate of the wicked as destruction (i.e. Jesus, Paul). The writer of Hebrews unites in describing their fate as destruction. However, like the rest of his references, this warning is aimed squarely at Christians. "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls" (Hebrews 10:39). "We" here is undoubtedly Christians. Those who live by faith and die in faith "are saved" (See NIV). Those Christians who shrink back and are faithless are "destroyed." Like the other various references in the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews usage of this terms is the same as theirs. Contrary to what annihilationists attempt to derive from this text, the

²⁰¹ MacArthur 280.

²⁰² MacArthur 277.

²⁰³ Bruce 363.

regular usage of this word refers to “utter and eternal perishing.”²⁰⁴ This is “the destruction which consists of eternal misery in hell.”²⁰⁵ Two paths are set before these Christians, but the writer is confident that they will choose the better.

Having warned his readers repeatedly throughout this epistle, the writer offers one final exhortation: “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven” (Hebrews 12:25). What is it he wants his readers to escape? Surely it is the God who is consuming fire (v.29).

Judgment in Jude. Jude is one of the two half-brothers of Jesus who pen New Testament epistles. The primary thrust of his epistle is to exhort his brethren to “contend for the faith” against some ungodly men who have crept into their fellowship (verses 3-4). Jude presents three examples of rebellious people and beings that fell under the judgment of God: the unbelievers during the Exodus, fallen angels, and Sodom and Gomorrah. In each example, these people are rebellious to the Lord and fell under the judgment and condemnation of God. These examples are then used by Jude to point to judgment and condemnation of those false teachers among the Christians to whom he wrote. They further serve as illustrations of the future, final punishment of the wicked.

The first of these examples deals with an event that is from Jewish history. “Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe” (Jude 5). To prove that punishment for the wicked is eminent and sure, he uses the nation of Israel when they are taken out of the land of

²⁰⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1938). 371.

²⁰⁵ James Strong, *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2001).

Egypt. The application Jude is eluding to is that no matter how secretly these men may act, they will be rooted out by God and given the condemnation they rightfully deserve. Although these men may engage in the acts of worship and religion, they are not willing to accept into their lives and hearts the righteous principles set before them. The idea, therefore, is that if half a million Israelites did not escape the judgment of God, these false teachers will in the same way not escape the judgment prophesied for them. He says these false teachers, who certainly could have been delivered by Jesus, will be “destroyed” by the Lord. “Destroyed” is the same word Jesus used (Matthew 10.28) and Paul used (Romans 9.23) to speak of the fate of the wicked. As elsewhere in the New Testament, the word denotes ruination. So as the disobedient Jews’ corpses rotted in the wilderness, so the disobedient teachers will rot eternally in the “wilderness” of hell. Ultimately, eternal ruination is the final fate of all who are disobedient.

Jude goes on to describe the fate of those false teachers in the church and, by extension, all those who are disobedient to the Lord. The second example is of fallen angels: “And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—” (Jude 6). There are some who believe this is a reference is to the angels who came to earth, as recorded in Genesis, and had relations with the daughters of men. This is taken from the “psuedepigraphical” Book of Enoch, a book that Jude quotes from in verse 14. However, it seems more likely that this could be a reference to Isaiah 14, which describes the fall of Satan and others who decided that heaven was not for them and rebelled against God. These angels lost there “positions of authority” or “principality.” The “principality” spoken of here is a term meaning office or position and it is this that the angels have abandoned. The reason for these angels abandoning their positions is not stated.

Jude uses this reference to show these brothers and sisters he is writing to that there were angels that were openly rebellious to God and they suffered eternally for that. Jude uses the perfect tense to explain that they have been put into and are “kept” by the “eternal chains.” They have their punishment and will receive further punishment later at the final judgment on “the great day.” In the same way, these false teachers have impending doom. It is the final judgment “when both angels and men shall receive their eternal doom.”²⁰⁶ The great day of judgment is coming to bring them down into the gloomy darkness of hell (*tartarus*?) where fallen angels are currently. Jude also uses this reference to show the readers that not even angels are above being punished for rebelliousness and disobedience. In the same way these angels have fallen, so also these false teachers have fallen, and they will suffer the judgment and condemnation of God. This is the sober reality for all those who either refuse to accept “their proper dwelling,” or who, having come into “their proper dwelling,” reject their calling from God.

Jude goes still further to present the final fate of these false teachers, indeed, all those who reject God’s offer of eternal life (see verse 21). The third instance or example that Jude cites as he continues to build his argument for his readers is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities: “just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7). “Sexual immorality” is actually a word used only here and denotes “a lust that gluts itself, satisfies itself completely.”²⁰⁷ Jude goes further and states these cities went after “unnatural desires” or “strange flesh” (ASV, KJV, NKJV, NASB; Gk *sarkos herteras*). Different flesh other than the flesh God had made for them to enjoy which is woman. The men of Sodom deviated from the norm, lusted after the flesh of men, perverting

²⁰⁶ Clarke on Jude 6.

²⁰⁷ Thayer 199.

that which God had made, and suffered their due penalty for it. It is this gross offense which Jude mentions and for which God brought fiery judgment. Jude uses this example to show that the false teachers in the midst of these people have the same eternal fate as the men of Sodom.

This verse has been used by annihilationists and conditionalists to argue that the punishment of hell is not eternal in the sense of unending, and that “eternal” must mean something else like spiritual or from God. The argument is that the “eternal fire” of Sodom and Gomorrah’s punishment has been extinguished and those cities have long been destroyed. In other words, the word “eternal” (Gk *aioniou*) must point to the result and not the process. The cities were totally burned up and were never rebuilt. They ceased to exist.²⁰⁸ However, factors found in the text work against this view. First, the “chains” keeping the disobedient angels in the darkness of hell are said to be “eternal.” Their bondage is unending in the same sense that the punishment for Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities is by “eternal fire.” The “life” offered by the mercy of Christ is likewise “eternal” (verse 21). If one would limit the duration of the punishment of eternal fire, then one must also limit the bondage of the disobedient angels as well as the bliss of obedient Christians. Second, the present tense is used to describe the punishment of these wicked cities. This is evident even in the English – they are “undergoing” punishment. If Jude wanted to capture the result of the eternal fire in time, he would have used the aorist tense or perhaps the imperfect. But Jude captures the process of their punishment by using the present tense; they are currently undergoing or enduring what they rightly deserve for their iniquities, transgressions, and sins. In fact, there is almost a sense in which the fires of hell broke forth into time and space to burn those cities to ashes and drag their inhabitants to their destiny. Even as Jude pens this letter they are enduring their just penalty. Third, the destruction

²⁰⁸ This argument is briefly presented by Earl Edward in *The Spiritual Sword* 36.2.12.

of these cities is said to be an “example” of lesser to greater. The lesser is the physical destruction of those cities; the greater is the spiritual punishment. Clarke says that the destruction which came upon these cities “signifies an eternally destructive fire; it has no end in the punishment of the wicked Sodomites, etc.; it has no end in the destruction of the cities.”²⁰⁹

Coffman alludes to the epistemology of Jude when he writes: “Such a punishment suggested to Jude the ‘eternal fire’ mentioned by Jesus as the punishment of the wicked, of which the physical destruction of the cities was but a preliminary type of the ultimate overthrow of the wicked in hell.”²¹⁰ Barnes agrees that the destruction which befell Sodom and Gomorrah serves as “a type of that eternal punishment which will be inflicted in the next [world].”²¹¹ The fiery end of these cities signifies or serves as a type of the fiery fate of the wicked in that city. Indeed, it is typical of the final fate of all the wicked.

In the span of three verses, Jude provides us with three illustrations of divine retribution which are typifying the final fate of the wicked. Whether it is ruination like that of the rotting corpses of Israel of old, or what seems to be a reference to *tartarus* reserved for disobedient angels, or eternal fire typified in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Jude paints a graphic portrait of what awaits the wicked after judgment. Though it may not be his intent, Jude presents the afterlife for the wicked as a burning, rotting prison. As with all the figures seen in the New Testament, these human and, no doubt, familiar figures to the original audiences are but a pale shade of the gruesome reality of unending spiritual ruination away from God. It should also be noted that Jude’s epistemology is his older half-brother, Jesus. He employs figures which are found in the preaching ministry of Jesus such as darkness and eternal fire. Of course behind the

²⁰⁹ Clarke on Jude 7.

²¹⁰ Coffman on Jude 7.

²¹¹ Barnes on Jude 7.

scenes and inspiring both men is the Holy Spirit. Surely His presence in the message of both men explains the identical figures as well.

One more text from Jude has implications for the final fate of the wicked. Once more Jude seeks to describe for his readers what these false teachers in their midst are like. He says they are “wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 13). The people of antiquity called the planets wandering stars because of their movement. However, the reference here could be to comets and meteors as well. But planets is more likely. The idea here is that an unpredictable star would not help the seafaring people of the time. It would not be possible to navigate using a movable star. Therefore, these false teachers are useless and untrustworthy. Their doom, thus, is eternal blackness or darkness. It has already been noted that “gloomy darkness” in “eternal chains” is one way in which Jude describes the final fate of the wicked (cf. verse 6). Here Jude is playing off of that and mixing in an astronomical analogy. As previously seen in Jude, the final fate for the faithless is utter, eternal, gloomy darkness. One should expect this, for if one is sent away from the Lord and shut out from the presence of God who is light, in His absence there is only darkness.

Judgment in James. James is the other half-brother of Jesus who pens a New Testament epistle. He is relatively silent on the final fate of the wicked in his epistle. There are, though, a couple of passages which warrant noting. For instance, James is the only other New Testament writer to mention *gehenna*. Every other occurrence of this word is found on the lips of the Lord. He not only seems to borrow that imagery from his older half-brother, but he also utilizes the common figure of fire near the end of his epistle.

In the larger context of the third chapter, James is addressing teachers (v.1) which leads into a discussion of Christian speech in general (“anyone,” v.2). He uses several figures to illustrate the destructive nature of the tongue, including a forest fire (v.5). From this figure, James says, “And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell” (James 3:6). “The tongue is a fire” because it is “set on fire by hell” (Gk *gehenna*). As a fire, the tongue sets ablaze the “entire course of life” (lit. wheel of birth). This phrase is meant to picture life as a wheel which begins rolling at birth and ceases to roll at death. Using that familiar imagery, James communicates the idea that the tongue sets ablaze not only one life, but ignites everything it encounters and rolls over. No wonder James calls the tongue “a world of unrighteousness.” This could be understood in a couple of ways. First, we sometimes say that someone is in “a world of trouble” or in for “a world of hurt,” meaning there is much trouble or hurt coming their way. Second, Jesus talked about the “unrighteous wealth” of His day (Luke 16.11). Perhaps James, borrowing a page from his older half-brother, speaks of the unrighteous world in a similar manner. Thus, the tongue has been set in our bodies, and though small it has the ability to stain our whole body.

The use of *gehenna* is interesting. For one, it seems safe to assume that the rich background of *gehenna* is taken for granted by James, and that, if nothing else, the view that this was a place of fire was a prevalent one that his readers would have understood. Taking a view that James wrote his epistle to a primarily Jewish audience, they would have been familiar not only with Jewish tradition and usage of that word, but also, as Christians, they would have been familiar with the Lord’s usage of the word. For another, though *gehenna* is a place of final punishment, James indicates that in time that spiritual domain can have some kind of influence.

Barnes explains, “The very spirit of that world of fire and wickedness - a spirit of falsehood, and slander, and blasphemy, and pollution - seems to inspire the tongue.”²¹² Others more explicitly lay the blame at the feet of Satan, the father of lies (John 8.44), who himself is a resident of that place of eternal fire.

The other passage where James seems to mention the final fate of the wicked is in the fifth chapter. In the greater context of this section, James is indicting the rich (v.1) who are mistreating their servants (v.4), all the while living a self-indulgent life (v.5). To the self-indulgent rich James says, “Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days” (James 5:3). James lays this final strike against the rich when he says that they “have laid up treasure in the last days.” Scholars debate what exactly it is that the rich are treasuring up (Greek word from which we get our English word “thesaurus”). The ESV seems to indicate that riches (“gold and silver”) are still in mind. John Gill seems to confirm this. In the Vulgate text, what is being “treasured up” is wrath. Other scholars point to the preceding object, which is fire. Hence the rich are storing up fire “in the last days.” This fire is mentioned in connection with the “last days” (v.3) and “the Lord’s Coming” (v.7). So while the rich store up finances on earth, they are storing fire in eternity due to their callousness and insensitivity to their poor servants. When Jesus comes in judgment, pictured in the text as “standing at the door” (v.9), the wicked rich will be recompensed with fire.

It is worth noting that the oft used figure of fire is used by all three writers examined in this section. One should not be too surprised to see this overlap in the use of figures since one and the same Spirit was the superintendent of their writing. Furthermore, like with all the other

²¹² Barnes on James 3.6.

Biblical writers, those presented in this section cast a vision of the final fate of the wicked in figures and language which is but a shadow of the true reality. As awful as these descriptions are to the finite understanding, the substance of hell is far worse than can be expressed adequately in human language.

12 – The Wrath of God

The fate of the wicked is further described in the New Testament as the wrath (Gk. *Orge*) of God. Because God is a righteous God, He must punish sin. The punishment He will mete out is variously called “the wrath of God,” “the wrath to come,” and “His wrath.” Several New Testament speakers and writers use these kinds of phrases to speak of the coming eschatological wrath of God. These instances have been separated from other various usages of *orge* such as when used in connection with people²¹³ or of God’s judgment upon nations and peoples in time.²¹⁴ Thus, only those instances when “wrath” speaks of God’s final fury upon the wicked will be examined.

The notion of divine fury certainly has Old Testament roots. However, the overwhelming majority of these instances usually focus on God’s wrath in judgment upon nations in time.²¹⁵ It is often associated with the idea of “the cup of God’s wrath,” imagery intended to denote that every nation of peoples have their own cup which they are filling with iniquity. When that cup is full, God comes in judgment upon that nation in wrath.²¹⁶ Thus, one also reads where the wrath of God is “poured out” upon peoples.²¹⁷ Rarely, though, is God’s wrath in the Old Testament connected with final judgment and the end of time. However, one scholar has noted, “All historical wrath points forward to eschatological; all historical periods of wrath are types of the

²¹³ E.g. Luke 4.28; Ephesians 4.31; Colossians 3.8.

²¹⁴ E.g. Revelation 14.10, 19; 15.1, 7; 16.19; 19.15.

²¹⁵ E.g. 1 Samuel 28.18 (Amalekites); 2 Kings 3.27 (Israel); Isaiah 9.19 (Israel); 13.9 (Babylon); 63.3 (Edom); et al.

²¹⁶ E.g. Isaiah 51.17; 63.6; Jeremiah 25.15. The concept of the cup of wrath seems to be rooted or at least related to Genesis 15.16 where God explains that “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

²¹⁷ E.g. 2 Chronicles 12.7; Jeremiah 42.18; 44.6; Ezekiel 14.19; 20.8, 13, 21, 33, 34; Nahum 1.6; et al.

day of wrath.”²¹⁸ So every time God has come in judgment in history on a nation or nations, it served as a figure of His final coming upon all mankind at the end of time. Nevertheless, perhaps Isaiah 66.15ff, where God’s anger and fury are on display, is one such instance of divine wrath at the end of time. Consider that Jesus quotes from that text when He taught about *gehenna* (Mark 9.44, 46, 48).

While the Old Testament Biblical writers frequently attribute wrath to God (an anthropomorphism which continues to boggle the minds of philosophers), they never seek to explain or present an apologetic for divine fury. It just is an awful reality.²¹⁹ They had no problem with God expressing His displeasure over sin. Their primary concern was how to avoid coming under God’s wrath. This same paradigm holds true in the New Testament. There is no treatise or apologetic on God’s wrath – theologically, the reality of God’s wrath is taken for granted. Their emphasis is on escaping the wrath to come.

When one broaches the New Testament, a distinction is made between the historical and eschatological wrath of God. While one still gets flavors of God’s wrath in real time upon nations (see Revelation), several passages speak of divine wrath yet to be experienced at the end of time. In addition, nearly all eschatological references to God’s wrath utilize the word *orge*. Only in Romans 2.8 is *thumos* used to describe God’s wrath eschatologically.²²⁰ The distinction between these terms is subtle but important. Thayer explains that *thumos* has do with a quick boiling over of the emotions whereas *orge* has to do with settled indignation which has risen gradually.²²¹ Trench confirms that *orge* is “more of an abiding and settled habit of mind”

²¹⁸ TDNT 415.

²¹⁹ Intertestamental apocryphal writers, pseudepigraphical works, and rabbinical writers have no problem with and frequently write of the wrath of God as well.

²²⁰ *Thumos* is typically used of God’s fury against nations in time. For examples see footnote 206.

²²¹ Thayer 293.

whereas *thumos* is likened to “fire in straw, quickly blazing up, and is quickly extinguished.”²²²

The dominant idea concerning the wrath of God centers on *orge*. As the holy and righteous God, His settled, even permanent, disposition toward all sin and evil is divine displeasure. So the wrath of God is the response of deity to man’s injustice and impiety which is exercised both historically, toward individuals and nations, and eschatologically, wherein it is finally and fully expressed following the judgment of mankind.

It is John the Baptist who is the first, chronologically speaking, New Testament character to speak of the wrath of the God. In Matthew’s gospel, he speaks to the Pharisees and Sadducees; in Luke’s gospel, he speaks to the crowds in general. The message to both is identical: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.”²²³ There are two ways of understanding this passage. A few see here a reference to the coming of God’s judgment upon Israel in AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem.²²⁴ However, in context it seems John is speak of eschatological wrath. First, the word used is *orge*. As noted, *thumos* is typically the word used of God’s judgment on nations in time. God’s *orge* is in store for the wicked at the end of time. Second, the parties addressed are coming out to the river to be baptized by John’s baptism which was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1.4). God’s *orge* is His settled disposition against sin which is not forgiven. Since they were coming out to John to be immersed and have their sins forgiven it seems they were fleeing God’s final wrath against sin in the afterlife.

Interestingly, Jesus never speaks of the “wrath of God.” The phrase itself is never found on Jesus’ lips. For that matter the word itself is never recorded to have been uttered by Jesus. It is

²²² Trench131-132.

²²³ Matthew 3.7; Luke 3.7.

²²⁴ Clarke and Gill. Barnes makes a note of the dual interpretation in his comments.

somewhat ironic that the one who graphically captures the wrath of God in images which are gripping and terrifying never uses the word *orge* when talking about God's wrath. Speculation might abound as to why this is, but that would be unprofitable since we will never know this side of eternity why Jesus does not use the phrase "the wrath of God." Still, in the seeming dark night which is the absence of the phrase "wrath of God" from the lips of Jesus, He lights up that night sky with bright and brilliant fireworks in describing the coming wrath. He takes for granted the coming wrath and that His audience is aware of it.²²⁵ He doesn't need to use the phrase.

Nevertheless, there are other instances of its use in the New Testament.

In Romans 2.5-11, Paul gives a lengthy discussion about the judgment of God and the "wrath" to come.

"But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up *wrath* for yourself on the day of *wrath* when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be *wrath* and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality." (Romans 2:5–11, emphasis mine)

Adam Clarke says, "By *wrath* we are to understand *punishment*."²²⁶ So in this passage, Paul is addressing the punishment to come upon those who "are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness" (verse 8).

²²⁵ For more on this see appendix #2.

²²⁶ Clark on Romans 2.5, emphasis mine.

Several characteristics of the wrath of God are seen from this passage. First, one can store it up. This is a fantastic idea which Albert Barnes comments on by saying, “The man who commits sin is only *increasing* this [wrath] by every act of transgression”²²⁷. Matthew Poole, identifying the language used by Paul, says, “By heaping up sins, thou heapest up judgments of God upon thyself: just as men add to their treasure of wealth, so dost thou add to thy treasure of punishment.”²²⁸ It is a frightening scene Paul paints for those outside of the righteousness of Christ. As one would heap up treasure for himself, so the sinner is heaping up wrath for the coming day of God’s righteous judgment. His account continues to accrue more and more sin-debt and the penalty for that sin-debt climbs higher and higher.

This imagery seems to build on Jesus’ description of what is in store for the wicked servant “who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will” (Luke 12.47-48). Jesus presents a picture of punishment in which some are beaten with many stripes and some are beaten with few. The severity of the beating or punishment is based on knowledge of the will of the master. Paul presents a similar scene of judgment: wrath is stored up for the coming day of God’s wrath, and punishment is meted out to each person “according to his works” (Romans 2.6).

There is also coming a “day of wrath.” This is an idea which has Old Testament roots, typically associated when God came in judgment upon a nation.²²⁹ Paul, though, uses the phrase in reference to an end time event. On this day, the righteous judgment of God will be on full display and each person, whether Christian or non-Christian, will stand before God in final judgment. In addition, we see for whom it is coming (verse 8). They are those who are “self-

²²⁷ Barnes on Romans 2.5, emphasis mine.

²²⁸ Poole 3:484.

²²⁹ E.g. Ezekiel 7.19; Zephaniah 1.15, 18. Both of these speak of a “day of wrath” for Israel and Judah.

seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness.” This is a description of those who are “the authors of their own destruction.” God’s wrath is in store for them and by their wicked works they write their own condemnation.

Paul uses several different words to describe the coming punishment for those to whom God’s wrath is coming: wrath, fury, tribulation, and distress (verse 8b-9a). Each of these carries its own subtle nuance of meaning and they combine into a terrible picture of what is coming. Richard Rogers says, “Judgment will bring indignation (God’s), wrath (God’s), tribulation (ours), and anguish (ours).”²³⁰ Lipscomb brings out a similar idea, saying that these words sum up “misery of all descriptions, without possibility of escape.”²³¹

The wrath is juxtaposed against the “eternal life” which is bestowed upon those who “by patience in well-doing seek glory and honor and immortality [incorruption]” (verse 7). While it is not explicitly stated as such, the implication can be drawn from this text that the one who must face the eternal God (Romans 16.26) must face His eternal wrath. Just as the life of the patient Christian will be eternal, so too will the wrath and fury which the self-seeker faces be eternal. William Reid in *Everlasting Punishment and Modern Speculation* seems to identify this key component concerning the wrath of God. He writes: “Not merely does [Scripture] speak of punishment, but of a punishment that is never exhausted – of a wrath that shall never be appeased...there is no Christian doctrine respecting which a greater unanimity prevails.”²³²

Since so great and fearful a fate awaits all who remain under the wrath of God, man is in need of deliverance from God’s wrath. It is man’s sin which places him under the wrath of God, and it is sin against which God’s wrath breaks out. What can deliver us from God’s wrath? Who

²³⁰ Rogers 38, parentheses original.

²³¹ Lipscomb 1:52.

²³² Reid 3.

can deliver us from the wrath to come? God's "Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Jesus is the Deliverer from God's wrath. Note that He who spoke the most of God's wrath, while never explicitly using that phrase, is He who delivers us from the wrath He vividly speaks of in the gospels.

Without doubt Jesus delivers from the coming wrath of God. But how? Paul gives the answer when he writes, "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Romans 5:9). Herein lies the answer to how Jesus delivers us from the wrath of God. Our sins merit the wrath of God. Christ dies to save us from that wrath. His blood justifies us; this is *what* delivers us from God's wrath. That is, it brings us into right relationship with God. No longer are we weak, ungodly sinners who are enemies of God (verses 6, 8, 10) under the wrath of God. Nothing but the precious blood of the Deliverer Himself shed on the cross can take away and appease the wrath of God. So we are saved by His blood. Further, when Jesus suffers and dies on the tree, He receives unto Himself the punishment and wrath due us. He endures the penalty of the guilty verdict; we are released from the penalty for our sins. The innocent One experiences the full brunt of wrath; we, the guilty, do not.

There is one more difficult text concerning the wrath of God: "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory" (Romans 9:22-23). Note that God's wrath toward the "wrath-vessels" is juxtaposed with the glory in store for "mercy-vessels." What is on display here, as in all of Romans, is the righteous character of God. God desires to manifest His grace and power, even as He did in the days of Pharaoh and Moses (verse 17). He desires all men to

repent and be saved (1 Timothy 2.4; 2 Peter 3.9). But as Lenski says, “Foolish men may think that his threats of judgment are not serious; God is willing to run that risk. Displaying his grace is supreme to him.”²³³ By their folly, men prepare themselves as vessels fit for God’s wrath or God’s mercy.

The difficulty of this text is in whether or not Paul is presenting God as deterministic or not. Much is made about how they are “prepared beforehand” for either wrath or glory. Some argue that this reaches back to a sovereign decree by God concerning the eternal destiny of every individual before time began. God has then predestined every person to either wrath or glory before they even enter this world. This is Calvinism in shorthand. However, Clarke says,

But even in this case there is not a word of their final damnation; much less that either they or any others were, by a sovereign decree, reprobated from all eternity; and that their very sins, the proximate cause of their punishment, were the necessary effect of that decree which had from all eternity doomed them to endless torments. As such a doctrine could never come from God, so it never can be found in the words of his apostle.²³⁴

In fact, the preparation does not reach backward to a divine decree in eternity past, but reaches back into the lives of the vessels themselves. In this life we are preparing for wrath or mercy in the afterlife. In addition, Barnes notes concerning “prepared” (Or “fitted” KJV), “It is a simple declaration that they were in fact suited for it, without making an affirmation about the manner in which they became so.”²³⁵ No agency is mentioned of how they came to be “prepared” for God’s wrath. Lenski says it is not God but Satan who fits the “wrath-vessels” for destruction.²³⁶ Barnes

²³³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936). 622.

²³⁴ Clarke on Romans 9.22.

²³⁵ Barnes on Romans 9.22-23.

²³⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* 624.

says this verse “affirms only that God is willing to show his hatred of incorrigible and long-continued wickedness when it actually exists.”²³⁷ Again, holy God’s settled disposition toward sin, wickedness, and iniquity is wrath.

Here seems a good place to point to Paul’s triumphant statement elsewhere: “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:9). As with the preceding verse, many want “destined” (or “appointed,” ASV, KJV) to reach back into eternity past. However, the wrath to come is juxtaposed with the appointment unto obtaining salvation through Jesus. This takes place when one obeys the gospel and becomes a saved individual, fleeing from the wrath to come. God has decreed salvation by and through the Lord Jesus Christ from eternity (hence, the use of the aorist tense). This has been and continues the grand purpose of God’s will in human history (cf. Ephesians 1.5ff). Those destined for the eternal wrath of God “were thus appointed, not from eternity, nor from any indefinite or remote time, but from that time in which they utterly rejected the offers of salvation made to them by Jesus Christ and his apostles.”²³⁸ Continued refusal to accept the offer of God’s grace and gain possession of salvation leaves one under the wrath of God, and destined for the full and final realization of that wrath. Failure to flee from the fury of God leaves only the decree of His wrath.

It is the apostle John who succinctly sums up the situation: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” (John 3:36) The faithful flee the Father’s fury, coming to the Son for eternal life through obedience to His gospel. Failure to “obey the Son” causes one to miss eternal life. All that awaits the negligent sinner is the wrath of God. In fact, the present tense participles and verb indicate that the wrath of God is a present reality for the disobedient. As Coffman puts it, “God’s

²³⁷ Barnes on Romans 9.22-23.

²³⁸ Clarke on 1 Thessalonians 5.9.

face is set against fallen and unregenerated men.”²³⁹ Barnes exclaims, “Such is the miserable condition of the sinner!”²⁴⁰ Since this is the present reality of the wicked, it is no wonder Paul declared “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven” (Romans 1.18). Even as the faithfully obedient one has as his present possession eternal life, so the faithless disobedient one has for his present possession the eternal wrath of God abiding upon him. So John Gill writes, “[God’s wrath] comes upon the children of disobedience, and remains there; it hangs over their heads, and lights upon them, and they will be filled with a dreadful sense of it to all eternity.”²⁴¹ Their whole world is colored red with the wrath of God.

But the present possession of God’s wrath is but a pale shadow seen dimly in a mirror of the awful reality of the full and final realization of the wrath of God at the end of time following the judgment. So Coffman explains that God “has appointed a day in which the unredeemable portion of humanity will be judged and punished, and when evil will be cast out of God’s universe.”²⁴² Lenski agrees that, “A holy and righteous God must come to a final issue with all those who reject him and his saving grace in the Son.”²⁴³ The offer of eternal life stands, and one may obtain it by faith and obedience, thereby fleeing from the wrath of God. However, so long as faithlessness and disobedience remain, God’s wrath remains and looks forward to the supreme expression of divine fury.

This discussion of God’s wrath culminates in the last book of the Bible – Revelation. This book is written to detail the coming judgment of God upon the nation of Rome (figuratively called “Babylon the great” – see 17.5 and chapter 18) when He would “make her drain the cup of

²³⁹ Coffman on John 3.36.

²⁴⁰ Barnes on John 3.36.

²⁴¹ Gill on John 3.36.

²⁴² Coffman on John 3.36.

²⁴³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* 295-96.

the wine of his fury” (16.19). Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the wrath of God in history points forward to the wrath of God in the end. This aspect may be captured in 6.15-17 which reads that “everyone,” from the highest (kings, generals, etc.) and the lowest (slaves and free) stations in life, is “calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” (Revelation 6:16–17) In a surprising twist, those who have turned their faces from God in disobedience now cry out for God to turn His face from them! Another powerful contrast in this text is that the wrath is said to come from the Lamb. A lamb is a gentle creature except when it comes to the eschaton. Then this one is both Lion (5.5) and Lamb. When the Father and the Son come in judgment, that day is said to be “the great day of their wrath.” There will be no more mercy. There will be no more grace. The patience of God has been exhausted. All that remains for the faithless and disobedient, the wicked, is wrath. In answer to their question, no one can stand when God unleashes His ultimate fury.

As mentioned, none of the Biblical writers or extra-Biblical writers have a problem with the wrath of God. That is not say that there have never been those in history who have had a problem or sought to explain away the wrath of God. Even today, some look at the wrath of God and think it does not square with His nature. However, to strip God of His wrath is to divest Him of all other feelings including love. 4th century church writer Lactatius was one who ran into those who argued against the wrath of God, namely the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. He has set forward some of the most cogent and potent arguments for the necessity of the wrath of God.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁴ Roberts 7: 259-280.

Lactantius sets forth his arguments in his treatise on “The Anger of God” right from the beginning. “Either anger must be attributed to God,” he writes, “and kindness taken from Him; or both alike must be taken from Him; or anger must be taken away, and kindness attributed to Him; or neither must be taken away” (Ch. 2). Like some today, the various philosophers of Lactantius’ day were of the opinion that anger was inconsistent with the character and nature of God. However, Lactantius succinctly points out the error of the philosopher. By taking away the anger of God, they by necessity robbed God of His kindness. “Therefore,” writes Lactantius, “lest he should concede to Him a vice, he deprived Him also of virtue” (Ch. 4). But this kind of reasoning only digs the hole deeper for the philosopher. Lactantius goes on to point out:

If there is neither anger nor kindness in Him, it is manifest that there is neither fear, nor joy, nor grief, nor pity...But if there is no affection in God, because whatever is subject to affections is weak, it follows that there is in Him neither the care of anything, nor providence” (Ch. 4).

So God’s wrath is a necessary quality of deity. If one removes this attribute, the rest of the nature of God is compromised.

The Stoics argued that anger is unbecoming of a man of wisdom and authority. It is even more unbecoming of God to manifest anger, they said. So Lactantius identifies their folly arguing “if God is not angry with the impious and the unrighteous, it is clear that He does not love the pious and the righteous” (Ch. 5). But in fact, God does love, yea, He is love. “Because God is moved by kindness,” says Lactantius, summing up the matter, “therefore, He is also liable to anger” (Ch. 5). This is vital to the nature of God, “the sum and turning-point on which the whole of piety and religion depend; and no honour (sic) can be due to God if He affords nothing

to His worshippers; and no fear, if He is not angry with him who does not worship Him” (Ch. 6). In other words, God is not God without anger.

So the necessity of God’s wrath is laid forth. To strip God of His wrath is to divest Him of all His emotion, love and kindness included. But God does love and He does express wrath. God’s wrath is His settled desposition against the wicked and disobedient. As Lenski says, “God’s wrath is the inevitable reaction of his righteousness and holiness against all sin and guilt.”²⁴⁵ This wrath is both a present possession and a yet future prospect to be fully and finally realized by the unbelieving and unrepentant. Therefore, the future final fate of the faithless is the full force of God’s fury.

²⁴⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* 295.

13 – Various Views and the New Testament

Having examined the evidence and exegeted the several texts found the New Testament, it seems appropriate to weigh the various views of hell against the New Testament description of the final fate of wicked to determine if any of them align with the Bible. This section will weigh the views one at time and in no particular order.

Purgatorial. Purgatory (from the Latin *purgare*, meaning to make clean or purify, to purge) is a doctrine taught by the Catholic Church. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, purgatory “is a place or condition of temporal punishment for those who, departing this life in God’s grace, are not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due their transgressions” (575). In other words, if a Catholic person dies who has venial (lesser) sins which have not been forgiven at the point of death, that person goes to purgatory to have those sins “purged” by “the sufferages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar.”

Purgatory is not hell, but a separate place of torment. In order for that person to be released from purgatory and go to heaven, a still living family member must either ask a priest for a special mass for that person’s sins or else pay a nominal fee. As Yohann Tetzel used to say, “As the coin into the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!”

Justification for this doctrine is found in 2 Maccabees 12.39-45 (an uninspired account about uninspired men making sacrifices for their dead fellow comrades), Matthew 12.32 (through a faulty exegesis of sins forgiven “in this age and in the age to come”), and 1

Corinthians 3.15 (wherein again through faulty exegesis and distortion of the simile “as through fire”).

Now that’s what the Catholic Church teaches about purgatory. The question is: does this view agree with the biblical description of the final fate of the wicked? What does the Bible say about purgatory? In short, nothing. As has been shown in this paper, purgatory is not a biblical doctrine nor a Scriptural concept. There are only two destinations for man when this life is over and following the judgment: heaven or hell. There is no third option.

Jesus tells a parable about a rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31) which presents two vastly different fates – comfort or suffering – with a wide chasm between the two. There is no third option.

In another parable where Jesus speaks of the end of time (Matthew 25.31-46), again there are only two destinations – sheep got into the kingdom, goats go into eternal fire. There is no third option.

The Bible also says, “And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,” (Hebrews 9:27, ESV). After death follows judgment. There is no mention of an interim period for further cleansing. There is no third option.

In fact, this doctrine of purgatory makes a mockery of the grace of God. It spits in the face of the Savior as He hangs on the cross. If there is this interim third place where further purification takes place, then the grace of God is insufficient to save. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross is incomplete and insufficient since more suffering and purification is necessary.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ In his book *Afterlife*, F. LeGard Smith entitles his chapter on purgatory “Slapping Grace in the Face.”

This doctrine contradicts the very words of Jesus when He's dying on the cross and says, "It is finished" (John 19:30). According to Jesus, the full work of redemption was accomplished on the cross. According to the Catholic Church, it was not.

Universalism. Universalism is that special view of the afterlife wherein everyone goes to heaven. Since God is a loving Father, He would never allow people to suffer eternally for sin in hell. Rather, everyone will be conformed to the image of Christ and perfection (i.e. theosis). This happens because Jesus died for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). So He is the Savior of the world (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14). Whether a person obeys the gospel or not, at some point, in this life or in the Millennium or in some future state, God will save all people. In fact, some universalists believe that the devil and the demons will also be saved.²⁴⁷

This view, though relying on scant biblical data, is wholly unbiblical. Jesus says on multiple occasions things like, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14) or "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:14). On another occasion Jesus was asked, "'Lord, will those who are saved be few?'" And he said to them, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able'" (Luke 13:23–24). These texts make it painfully clear that not all will be saved. Many will reject the gospel and refuse to receive Christ and so be saved.

Further working against the idea of universalism are the texts which describe those outside of Christ going away into hell. Hell is a spiritual reality wherein the wicked are punished for eternity. It is a fixed fate following death and judgment. This point has been firmly established throughout the New Testament. Universalism essentially erases hell from the pages of the Bible. To do that requires removal of over 100 verses from the New Testament alone, 44%

²⁴⁷ Matt Slick, "Universalism" <http://carm.org/universalism-is> Accessed 11 April 14.

of which belong to Jesus. This simply will not do. God is just and sin will be punished eternally in hell.

Conditional Universalism. While quite possibly the view getting the most attention due to the recent release of his book, the conditional universalism of Rob Bell is fully bankrupt and does not square with the biblical description of the final fate of the wicked.²⁴⁸ This view says all will be *if* they want to be saved. If they don't, then they won't. That is the conditional aspect of this brand of universalism. Most of the arguments for this view are highly subjective (which seems to be the case for many of these positions): "How could God, who is love, punish people for eternity for their finite sins?" Besides betraying a flawed understand of the grotesque nature of sin, this sentimentality runs roughshod over the New Testament.

Like the preceding views, this view seeks to change the fixed fate posthumously. In some future state (what the Bible calls "hell") those who never heard of Jesus or heard of Him but rejected Him have the option to repent and enter heaven. This works against what the New Testament presents concerning the final fate of the wicked. Jesus says concerning the resurrection of the dead at the last day, "those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29). The writer of Hebrews says, it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (9.27). These texts make it clear there is no second chance. Once a person has been judged and the sentence passed down from the throne of God, there is no changing that eternal destiny. Both the punishment and the life are said to be "eternal." These are fixed destinies and absent is the idea of a change in either.

Annihilationism. Of the heterodox views, by far annihilationism is the most popular belief concerning the final fate of the wicked. It stands in opposition to the doctrine of unending

²⁴⁸ For a thorough expose of Bell's book see appendix #1.

punishment. For example, Leigh Hunt says, “If an angel were to tell me to believe in eternal punishment, I would not do it; for it would better become me to believe the angel a delusion than God monstrous.”²⁴⁹ This is just one of many dissenting voices. Clark Pinnock’s comments are somewhat typical of the objection raised:

How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself.²⁵⁰

It should be observed that the reasoning used is usually subjective, the argument usually consisting of just how terrible an orthodox view of hell is; that it simply cannot be so if God is love. There is an attitude which says, “I can’t believe in a god who would banish people for all eternity to fiery torment.” Charles Hodge sums up the opposing voices: “It is said to be inconsistent with [God’s] benevolence that He should allow any of his (sic) creatures to be forever miserable.”²⁵¹ In short, it’s just not fair!

It should be noted that the same subjective argumentation could be used from those who hold the orthodox view. In other words, “I can’t believe in a god who would *not* punish sin to its fullest extent.” This seems to be what Lipscomb is getting at when he says in speaking of the annihilation doctrine, “Whence does it come? It comes from a disposition to mitigate rebellion against God and to find lighter punishment than God has prescribed.”²⁵² This seems to be the other end of the spectrum when it comes to sin. It’s just not fair to annihilate the wicked; God

²⁴⁹ qtd. in Reid 6.

²⁵⁰ qtd. in Gomes.

²⁵¹ 3: 879

²⁵² 5: 91

must make them pay. So either way, the God of the opposition is “monstrous,” for either He punishes sins too severely or not severely enough.

In addition, the orthodox crowd says that to deny the orthodox doctrine of hell is to deny the Bible. What if, though, the orthodox belief is wrong and a misinterpretation of the Bible? Is it really the Bible one denies? Or is it the erroneous beliefs the orthodox crowd reference the Bible for which is denied? The annihilationist likewise references the Bible for his/her beliefs. So who is right?

In all honesty, annihilation of the wicked is a much more “pleasant” doctrine for those who cannot conceive of God punishing not only the wicked but all outside of Christ eternally than unending punishment. Not only more pleasant, it would no doubt be more popular since one need not worry about consequences for their actions – simply eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. It is cleaner. It is nicer. To a generation of narcissistic self-lovers, it seems like the more appropriate punishment – what better way for God to manifest His wrath on the “self-seeker” than to annihilate the self?

But simply because a doctrine is nice, neat, clean, popular, pleasant, or appropriate does not make it right. A normative reading of the writings of the New Testament make it clear that the punishment for ignorance of God and disobedience to God’s truth in Christ is everlasting, unending punishment. This is the full and final demonstration of the wrath and anger of God against all ungodliness and wickedness.

Annihilationism is ultimately done in by the language used to describe the final fate of the wicked. Jesus says their fate is “eternal punishment;” Paul calls it “eternal destruction;” John in the Revelation says “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever.”²⁵³ These texts, as

²⁵³ Matthew 25.46; 2 Thessalonians 1.9; Revelation 14.11.

well as others, militate against the annihilationist position. Furthermore, the annihilationist must depend upon a partial definition of the word “eternal.” They focus exclusively upon the qualitative aspect of the word and ignore the quantitative aspect, both of which are present in the word. This also makes this position untenable. So in the end it is the language of the Bible itself which condemns this view of the final fate of the wicked.

Eternal Conscious Punishment. If the preceding views can be said to be heterodox (when laid next to the New Testament, they are clearly in opposition to a biblical eschatology), then eternal conscious punishment is the orthodox view. Those who die having never heard the gospel or having heard but never obeyed the gospel will be judged by God and sentenced to eternal punishment in hell wherein they will experience torment consciously. Historically this has been the view held by the majority of Christians. However, how this eternal conscious punishment is administered has been the subject of some discussion. Some parse the punishment as literal while others view the language of the texts of the Bible as figures of an indescribable reality.

The root of this disagreement is hermeneutical. How each party interprets the Scriptures, both specifically and generally, leads to their notion of eternal conscious punishment. If one interprets the Bible literally then the fires of hell are literal flames in a real place. This has led some to even speculate that hell is in the center of the earth. For instance, Reg Kelly argues that hell is in the center of earth citing the Catholic Encyclopedia, early church writers, and a grocery store checkout lane tabloid story in which Russians trying to dig through the earth’s crust accidentally drilled into hell and heard the cries of the damned 12 miles down.²⁵⁴ This kind of sensationalized sermonizing, which depends on the authority of yellow journalism, does not help the cause of Christ.

²⁵⁴ Reg Kelly, *Hell of Hell*. Sermon audio, 18 Jan 2004, Web. 8 March 2013.

There have been reputable scholars and theologians through the years who have held to the literal view of hell. Charles Spurgeon said, “There is a real fire in hell, as truly as you have a real body – a fire exactly like that which we have on earth in everything except this – that it will not consume, though it will torture you.”²⁵⁵ What is noteworthy in this quote is that while it clearly has literalistic overtones, Spurgeon was compelled to indicate that the fire of hell did have a unique quality to it. The fire of hell is ever torturing but never consuming. Perhaps no one so graphically described the literal hell than Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan preacher from New England, when he described the unrepentant sinner’s fate: “The anger of God burns against them; their damnation is not sleeping. The pit is prepared; the fire is burning; and the furnace is now hot and ready to welcome them. The flames are now raging and glowing.”²⁵⁶ The examples could be multiplied, but these suffice to show the literal hell position. This view interprets the language used to describe the final fate of the wicked literally, and so hell has literal flames, heat, darkness, chains, worms, etc.

The other side of the eternal conscious punishment coin takes the language of the New Testament and interprets it figuratively. This seems to be the way it was intended to be understood. “Fire,” “darkness,” “burning,” “gehenna,” et al are physical figures which are employed to communicate an even worse spiritual reality. Human language is unable to adequately codify the awful fate awaiting those outside of Christ. So figures are used in an attempt to explain what hell is like. Metaphors are used to paint the portrait of hell. So hell is not a literal burning, stinking valley of garbage or a dark, gloomy prison; rather, hell is like these familiar images, and in fact is far worse. The punishment is not pacified nor the ruination

²⁵⁵ Spurgeon 104.

²⁵⁶ Edwards 40.

removed; they are intensified with the knowledge that as terrible as these figures are, hell is even worse!

While the figurative interpretation seems more consistent with what one finds in the New Testament concerning the final fate of the wicked, both sides of this view are in agreement that hell is unending conscious torment for the wicked. So these are really two sides of a single coin, two camps separated by their hermeneutic.

14 – Observations

The Scriptures teach us that the punishment of the wicked is everlasting, in the same sense in which the blessedness of the saints is everlasting. Moreover, this punishment is eternal even as our God is eternal. When the eternality of a state or being is mentioned, it speaks both to *quantity* and *quality* of that state or being. That is both the time element and the nature element are touched upon in the word “eternal.” Whether it is “destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1.9) or “punishment” (Matthew 25.46) or “fire” (Jude 7), all of these are both of unending duration and spiritual in nature.

Jesus and the New Testament avail themselves of the language and figures available to them in the first century to talk about hell. So they use words like “destroy,” “perish,” “death,” “fire,” and “darkness” to communicate about the final fate of the wicked. These are words which have rich histories that developed into colorful ideas. These ideas are borrowed and sometimes “baptized,” as it were, to paint the portrait of the final fate of the wicked. The figures used are those readily available and appropriate for their audiences. So Jesus speaks of *gehenna* when speaking to a primarily Jewish audience. Peter speaks of *tartarus* when writing to his primarily Gentile audience in Asia Minor. Even John seems to get in an idea which those in Asia Minor would easily identified, perhaps even referencing a contemporary event (the eruption of Vesuvius) with the volcanic language to communicate an even worse spiritual reality. Hell is *like* these figures.

Notice that Jesus and the apostles were not afraid to borrow well established ideas and concepts to communicate about hell. As a brief exercise, it might be helpful to ask – what figure (if any) would Jesus or the apostles use today to speak of the final fate of the wicked? To the Jewish audience Jesus said hell is like a burning, stinking valley of garbage (i.e. *gehenna*). To a Gentile audience Peter said hell is like a dark, doleful prison (i.e. *tartarus*). What contemporary America fixture might be used to communicate the awful reality of hell to the American mind?

In 1993 Sheriff Joe Arpaio set up what has become known as Tent City adjacent to a Maricopa County Jail in Phoenix, Arizona. This jail can currently hold 2,126 inmates.²⁵⁷ Having lived in Arizona for a few years, this writer can affirm that a Phoenix summer is very unpleasant, with temperatures reaching well over 100 degrees. It is in these conditions that inmates live and sleep out in the desert. It is hot. It is smelly. They have work which is to be done. Perhaps this is a fit contemporary figure which the New Testament writers would have used to speak of the unspeakable fate of the wicked. Hell is like a burning, stinking prison in the desert where the work does not cease and the sun does not set!

Whether they would have used that figure or not really is beside the point. What the Tent City illustration does is give us an idea of how Jesus or Peter or John took an already existing idea and commissioned it to communicate the terrible reality of hell. Yet in spite of the graphic language and colorful images these descriptions provide, they *still* pale in comparison to the true nature and awful reality of hell. They only touch the hem of the garment, to borrow a familiar statement.

In the New Testament, every description of the final fate of the wicked is a figure. That is, the language used is symbolic and non-literal. Images and concepts are employed to describe

²⁵⁷ “Tent City Jail.” Accessed 28 March 2014.

what awaits the wicked. An image is used in an attempt to communicate to finite man in finite ideas an awful infinite reality. Separation from God cannot be codified fully in words. It can be described to one degree or another using figures and symbols, but even those are weak illustrations of a powerful reality.

The weakness of describing the final fate of the wicked is that we must rely upon human language and physical figures to communicate spiritual ideas and realities. So fire is used to communicate that hell is *like* burning. Darkness is used to explain that hell is *like* isolation. The physical concepts are employed to speak to the spiritual reality, and yet they fail to fully explain just how awful, terrible, very bad hell is.

An illustration may help: how awful is sin spiritually speaking? The sacrifice offered points to how terrible sin is. Animals were slaughtered in the Old Testament, and it was a very bloody affair. There was no doubt blood everywhere! The physical sacrifice in the physical realm with all its awful mess was indicative of just how awful the nature of sin is. That sacrifice even reached to the eternal plain to make atonement for the sinner. Then consider “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin” (Hebrews 10.4). Atonement was made and real in the Old Testament only because those sacrifices looked forward to a “better sacrifice” in the God-man Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only solution to the sin problem. When one considers that His death on the cross, the most violent and vicious mode of execution ever devised by the mind of man, is infinitely greater than the millions of bulls, goats, lambs, and doves of the Old Testament combined, we are coming to see how terrible sin really is spiritually. The bodily sacrifice in this physical realm of the Son of God on the cross is a clear indicator of the terrible spiritual nature of sin. Sin is utterly sinful. Sin is unspeakably sinful.

In similar fashion, the physical figures and earthly ideas borrowed by the New Testament writers serve to communicate infinitely greater spiritual concepts and an eternally worse spiritual reality. So while hell is like burning, it is infinitely worse than burning. While hell is like darkness and isolation, it is eternally more awful than isolation. Hell is utterly awful. Hell is unspeakably terrible. So while the figures help, no figure can adequately or fully explain what God has in store for the wicked.

Another observation is that the language of the New Testament concerning the final fate of the wicked is all prophetic. It is predictive of the future final state of the wicked. This explains the highly figurative language. It also serves as a profound and grim reality. When God speaks a prophecy, it is always fulfilled. Every prophecy of Messiah was fulfilled in Christ. The prophecies of Christ concerning His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem in 70 AD were all fulfilled. In like manner, these prophecies concerning the final fate of the wicked will be fulfilled. God will exact retribution upon the wicked and punish them for their rejection of His offer of life.

In the same vein, the language surrounding the final fate of the wicked is apocalyptic in nature. That means it is revelatory in function. The curtain of this physical realm was pulled back and prophets were given a glimpse of what God has in store for the disobedient. No doubt they recoiled in horror. Nevertheless, what was covered and hidden was revealed to man. As is the case with this kind of literature, not all of reality is in the vision and not all of the vision is reality. Hence, the language communicates human concepts which are but a dim shadow of what is coming. But when one synthesizes the New Testament data, a horrific harmony is discovered.

15 – Summation

What might we conclude about the fate of the wicked as described by Jesus, Paul, John, and the other writers of the New Testament? First, immortality belongs to God alone and man is solely dependent upon God for immortality. Second, the wrath of God is real and is being stored up for the wicked at final judgment. Third, eternal destruction has both a quantitative and qualitative nature. Fourth, the apostles agree with Jesus concerning the fate of the wicked, using the same kind of language to describe their end. Fifth, those who are presently outside of Christ are both presently perishing and presently dead.

If this is true, that the final fate of the wicked and lost is unending spiritual punishment, Christians ought to be the first people on their knees in prayer, begging God not to send us there, thanking Him for salvation, and begging God to grant repentance to those who face this eternal punishment. Moreover, if this is true and this is the final fate of the lost, Christians ought to be on their knees begging the lost not to go there.

First, Christians need to get serious about sin. In the Bible we read that God hates sin: “Your throne, O God, is forever...you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness” (Psalm 45.9). In addition, this same text is cited by the writer of Hebrews to explain that Jesus hates sin: “But of the Son He says, ‘Your throne, O God is forever and ever...you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness’” (Hebrews 1.9). As lovers of the Lord, Christians are exhorted in Scripture to hate sin: “O you who love the Lord, hate evil” (Psalm 97.10). Sin is clearly no small matter or something which God winks at. How dare us view sin as a small,

trivial thing. God hates it. Jesus hates it. The reason the Father and the Son hate sin, evil, and wickedness is because they love mankind, and they know the soul-crushing consequences of sin in time and for eternity. Our holy, perfect God punishes sin eternally in a place far worse than language can adequately describe. Christians must stop acting like sin is no big deal. Sin is a big deal! So Christians need to get serious about sin in our own lives first and foremost.

Then Christians need to get serious about sin in the world. There is much evil in the world today. Be it the more than 3,000 babies slaughtered daily by means of abortion, the ever increasing immorality in generality, the rising acceptance of homosexual and other deviant sexual behavior, we are well aware of the overt sinfulness of our world. Then there is the insidious moral decay of the internal character where lines of right and wrong are blurred. Cheating, stealing, lying, and other morally wrong actions are marginalized as acceptable in certain circumstances. But as J.C. Ryle has rightly pointed out, “He that hates sin truly, hates all sin.”²⁵⁸ The world, though, is in love with sin. “People loved darkness rather than the light” (John 3.19). Men love their sins. But the Christian must hate sin wherever he may find it and expose “the unfruitful works of darkness” with the light of God’s truth (Ephesians 5.11).

This means Christians need to get serious about the lost. Lost people, those outside of Christ who do not know God and do not obey the gospel, die and go to hell for eternity (2 Thessalonians 1.9). This is the grim reality. Hell is the final fate of the wicked. It is real. It is permanent. People really go there. How do we feel about that? Consider that some of our neighbors, friends, loved ones, co-workers will die and be eternally lost in hell. Have we done anything to prevent their fate? Paul said, “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart” for “my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh,” that is, lost Israel (Romans 9.2-3).

²⁵⁸ Ryle 7.

Do we have unceasing anguish for lost people? When is the last time we wept for the lost? When was the last we were heartbroken over the fact that unless they obey the gospel their fate is sealed for eternity in hell? When is the last time we prayed for those outside of Christ? Paul said, “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for [lost Israel] is that they may be saved” (Romans 10.1). Paul had unceasing anguish and made urgent prayer for the lost. May we imitate this great apostle’s example for the sake of the lost today.

“If we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, all we have to do is to ascertain what it teaches on this subject, and humbly submit.”²⁵⁹ The thrust of this paper has been to consider the data from the New Testament concerning the final fate of the wicked and weigh that evidence against some of the prevalent views. In the end, the clear, Biblical truth is that God will execute justice perfectly. “Let God be true though every man a liar,” says Paul. Indeed, God will be proven right, and He will issue His righteous judgment appropriately on that Day. Given how much He has said concerning the awful fate of the wicked, it seems evident that He does not want the crown jewel of His creation to face that fate. So it is fair to say we have been warned.

²⁵⁹ Hodge 3: 870.

Appendix 1

A Critical Review of Rob Bell's *Love Wins*

In 2011, Rob Bell's book *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* hit bookstores and sparked a veritable firestorm (pun intended) of both criticism and support. Fallout came from every corner as Bell hit the road on a book tour. Other books were written to counter the points brought up by Bell.²⁶⁰ Albert Mohler wrote several articles for the Christian Post to answer Bell's position. In truth, this paper originated from what I was reading about that book. Only when I read the book did I realize how needed this paper was. Allow me to expand on what I see in Bell's book.

Rob Bell is quintessentially postmodern, and this is on display from page one of his book. He asks specious question after specious question in the open pages which reflect his postmodern worldview that just so happens to have a Christian influence. It is as if he has taken every assault from skeptics, atheists, agnostics, and doubters, baptizes them and says, "They are OK and good." Furthermore, his exposition of the Biblical text is elementary and simplistic, composed of highly subjective straw man arguments.

Granted, *Love Wins* is not just about hell. As is suggested in the subtitle, it is also a book about heaven. In postmodern fashion, Bell asserts there are "other ways" (note the plural) to think of heaven (26). He then attempts to explain the term *aion* (Greek for "age"), but he is

²⁶⁰ For example, *God Wins: Heaven, Hell, and Why the Good News is Better than Love Wins* by Mark Galli and Randy Alcorn; *Christ Alone: An Evangelical Response to Rob Bell's "Love Wins"* by Michael Wittmer; *Erasing Hell* by Francis Chan.

misleading in his explanation because his colloquial usage of the English word “age” with “forever” does not reflect accurately “their” (the New Testament writers) understanding. He essentially conflates their usage with our understanding. For example, he talks about someone being “gone for ages” or “gone forever” – colloquial statements in English – and says that’s what the 1st century writers meant (31-32). This kind of conflation of terms and language is grossly misleading and disingenuous. But that is just the beginning.

Bell’s inability to exegete the biblical text is on full display when he takes a literal interpretation for highly figurative prophetic language. This lead to his “renewed earth” belief (34-37). Then he takes the simile language of Paul and interprets it literally (49). He reads modern meaning into the language of antiquity (57-58). One is left to wonder if he takes Jesus’ sayings on hell as figurative. That is, until you read what he says about *gehenna* (68); you begin to realize Bell constantly conflates metaphors with the literal. He actually allegorizes the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (75)! Basic hermeneutics says a parable is not an allegory.

Chapter three of the book is the actual chapter on hell. Or at least it is his rendition of a Bible study of sorts on the texts about hell. He grossly downplays the number of references to hell and follows it up with “that’s it” (69). Further, he fails to mention the dozens of other allusions to the final fate of the wicked elsewhere in the New Testament. He then executes an exegetical hack job by butchering the text of Scripture concerning Sodom and Gomorrah, which are figures couched in prophetic language to stand for Israel and Judah (83-84). They are not intended to be the literal cities, which is apparently how Bell takes them to mean.

As mentioned, Bell downplays the number of Biblical references found in the pages of Scripture concerning hell. However, when it is obviously a point he is passionate about and really wants to support his theology, Bell has no problem quoting lots of Scripture. Case in point,

as he is laying down the foundations of his *conditional universalist* perspective, he quotes several passages in rapid succession to prove God restores because God loves. He even says “that’s a lot of Bible verses” (87). The problem is Bell is performing eisegesis, forcing meaning into the passages that simply is not there.

In what turns out to be a most grievous error and still another proof to show Rob Bell does not know whereof he speaks, right in the middle of a discussion about “eternal punishment” he writes, “But ‘forever’ is not really a category the Biblical writers used” (92). No doubt one can see where Bell is heading. He wants to redefine “eternal.” Furthermore, words are equivocal not univocal. That is, context (and other factors) dictate translation and meaning of words. They do not get translated the exact same in every single context. Just because a majority of passages dictate (by context) that a word means something does not mean that in any given passage it has that same meaning. Again, this is yet another basic rule of hermeneutics Bell has apparently thrown out in his quest to redefine hell.

Context, though, is apparently not something that Bell is concerned about. He is constantly ripping verses from their given context, playing fast and loose with the text, to argue his points rather than allowing the Biblical text to make God’s points. For example, Bell discusses Psalm 22 (100). He treats Psalm 22.27-31 eschatologically (i.e. referring to the end of time) rather than ecclesiologically (i.e. referring to the church), which is the intended aim of that prophecy.

Rob Bell also has a low, base, and earthy hamartiology. He talks about “finite sins...committed in the few years...spent on earth” (102). This view of sin is too low and is frankly unbiblical. Sin is a serious, spiritual offense against “the eternal God” (Romans 16.26).

Therefore, sin must be and is punished infinitely, eternally. In fact, only the eternal sacrifice of Jesus erases our eternal sins and brings us “eternal salvation” (cf. Hebrews 5.9; 10.11,14).

Near the middle of the book, Bell runs the gamut on the various views concerning the final fate of the wicked and, in typical postmodern fashion, seems to agree or at least give tacit approval to them. He talks about the erasing of the divine image which seems to be his way of speaking of annihilationism (105). He talks about a “second chance,” seemingly alluding to purgatory (106). He talks about a “universal hugfest” and really camps on universalism (105-107). To back up this variety, he turns not to God’s word but to man’s word, citing the early church fathers (107-108). The climax of this section is still more subjective, postmodern questions: “Could God say to someone truly humbled, broken, and desperate for reconciliation, ‘Sorry, too late?’” To the chagrin of Bell, there is an answer to this question. Jesus envisioned this very thing in the parable of the virgins (Matthew 25.1-13). But for Rob Bell, “It is, after all, a wide stream we’re swimming in” (110). Has he not read that the wide stream leads to destruction (Matthew 7.13)?

No doubt he has read what Jesus said, but for Bell and his audience this view is too narrow, too modern. He chides orthodox Christianity. “Somewhere along the way [many people] were taught that the only option when it comes to Christian faith is to clearly declare that a few, committed Christians will ‘go to heaven’ when they die and everyone else will not, the matter is settled at death, and that’s it” (110). So Bell reenvisions heaven, hell, and the afterlife. But many people do the same thing with Jesus as the only way to God. So when many people (a majority, perhaps) do not like that tenant of faith, that Biblical doctrine, should we just reenvision that doctrine and teach many ways to God in order to placate the guilt stricken consciences of the masses? In fact, later in the book Bell butchers John 14.6 (154-155). Bell says, “Telling a story

about a God who inflicts unrelenting punishment on people because they didn't do or say or believe the correct things in a brief window of time called life isn't a very good story" (110). With all due respect, Mr. Bell, like it or not, that *is* part of the story. But this is yet again just another typical, quintessential postmodern practice: if you don't like the story, highlight and delete the parts you don't like and retell a different story.

The closest Bell gets to an orthodox view of eternal punishment is when he writes that it is safe to assume people will choose eternity away from God (114). But even that is in the middle of a larger discussion about how hell is now, here on earth for many people. This seems to be part of Bell's belief about hell. "We create hell" in the here and now (173).

In the interviews since the publication of this book, Bell has been adamant that he is not a universalist. Having read his book, I am inclined to buy that to a degree. This is because Rob Bell is not solely or purely a universalist. Bell's position is summed up in the phrase *conditional universalism*. According to Bell, all will eventually be saved (universalism) *on the condition* that they want to be saved. If they do not want to be saved, they will not be saved. God is so loving he gives us the choice both now and forever to either be with Him or away from Him. He succinctly sums up his position with these words: "If we want hell, if we want heaven, they are ours" (118). "That's how love works" according to Rob Bell.

One thing Bell gets right is the purpose of Jesus' teaching hell: "Jesus does not use hell to try and compel 'heathens' and 'pagans' to believe in God, so they wouldn't burn when they die. He talked about hell to very religious people to warn them about the consequences of straying from their God-given calling and identity to show the world God's love" (82). Yes, the majority of the texts in the New Testament about the final fate of the wicked are aimed squarely at the disciple, the Christian. Yet, the apostle Paul says, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone...with

all wisdom” (Colossians 1.28). So it seems there is an element to preaching Jesus to people which includes a warning about His return. He’s coming back; everyone needs to be ready.

Bell’s distorted theology in all its grotesque glory is manifested clearly in the final chapter of this book. He spends most of his ink bemoaning the metanarrative Christians have held for millennia: eternal conscious punishment. He questions whether a God who could do that can be good. This, though, is confusion of what and who are “good” and who defines what good really is. If God has ordained that the final fate of the wicked is eternity in a spiritual reality so awful that words fail to truly communicate it fully and our finite minds fail to fully grasp it, then it is good, right, just, and best. Bell says “if your God will punish people for all of eternity for sins committed in a few short years, no amount of clever marketing or compelling language or good music or great coffee will be able to disguise that one true, glaring, untenable, unacceptable, awful reality” (175).

But in the grand scheme of things, who has disguised God in order to make Him more user-friendly and palatable? Who’s hiding the real nature of God? Who is it who has written a book questioning and redefining and reenvisioning what heaven, hell, and the afterlife are like? Who is it who has championed a god who is impotent at punishing sins? Who is it that has tampered with the efficacy of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus? This, with all the preceding militating factors, makes Rob Bell’s position “untenable, unacceptable, awful” as an eschatology.

One more note in closing: this theology strips away one important factor for evangelism. Unlike Calvinism, which goes too far in destining souls from eternity to heaven or hell without the possibility of changing that destination thereby making evangelism unnecessary, Bell’s theology of the afterlife makes evangelism unnecessary since all who want to be saved will be

saved even postmortem. Why preach the gospel now if the unbeliever can just bang on heaven's door in the afterlife and beg and plead to enter, and if they want it bad enough they will be granted entrance? Evangelism is pointless if "love wins."

Appendix 2

The Justice We Cannot Not Know

In his book *What We Can't Not Know*, J. Budziszewski argues that something we cannot not know is that there is common moral sense. This common moral sense is what the philosophers call “natural” law. In other words, there are not just some things which are universally right and wrong across time and space, but they are universally known to all. These are the things “written on the heart” which, try as he might to suppress the knowledge, man knows inherently.²⁶¹ This natural law he ties directly back to the Ten Commandments.²⁶² In the Ten Commandments is stated “the most important part of the universal moral code in ideal form.”²⁶³

Like the laws put in place by men, the moral law carries with it penalties for breaking it. For example, if someone were to steal something, he may have to face jail time. But at a deeper level is the guilty conscience associated with breaking natural law. While the jail time may satisfy some sense of justice in society, “a clear vision of the moral law reveals a debt that exceeds anything we can pay.”²⁶⁴ Where does one go to assuage the guilt and guilty feelings? Only the great moral Lawgiver could provide the means by which the guilt of the penalty could be removed. Should one argue there is no such Lawgiver only condemns himself to the self-

²⁶¹ Cf. Romans 1.18; 2.15.

²⁶² Budziszewski 29-47.

²⁶³ Ibid 29.

²⁶⁴ Ibid 70.

evident conclusion that forgiveness is necessary but impossible.²⁶⁵ What if the guilt is never addressed, i.e. forgiven? That there is something to be forgiven is undeniable since one has violated the natural law.

At this point some might argue against the existence of a natural moral law written on the heart. However, the existence of evil is undeniable. There are certain things in this world which are inherently evil (i.e. rape, child abuse, theft, etc.). If evil exists, good must likewise exist. If good and evil exist, there must be a moral law by which one can differentiate between good and evil. This is the natural law which transcends time and space and which we cannot not know, the common moral sense. Since there is this transcendent moral law, there must be a transcendent moral Lawgiver, without which there is transcendent moral law by which one can distinguish good from evil, in which case life devolves into chaos. With this simple apologetic, it can be seen that there is a God to whom we must give account for the violations we have committed against His Law. The existence of God similarly points us to the need for forgiveness for those violations lest we fall under the penalty for our infractions.

Vince Gilligan is the creator and writer of the hit AMC TV show *Breaking Bad*. Though it has run its final season, the critically acclaimed show is now in syndication. Before the final season aired, Gilligan sat down with the New York Times for an interview to discuss his show. As the times reports, Gilligan is “a man with both a wicked sense of humor and a highly refined sense of right and wrong.”²⁶⁶ He says one of the overarching lessons in the television show is that actions have consequences. He goes on to explain,

If religion is a reaction of man, and nothing more, it seems to me that it represents a human desire for wrongdoers to be punished...I feel some sort of need for biblical

²⁶⁵ Ibid 71-72.

²⁶⁶ David Segal, “The Dark Art of ‘Breaking Bad,’” *The New York Times*. Web. Accessed 10.29.13.

atonement, or justice, or something...I like to believe there is some comeuppance, that karma kicks in at some point, even if it takes years or decades to happen...My girlfriend says this great thing that's become my philosophy as well. 'I want to believe there's a heaven. But I can't not believe there's a hell.'²⁶⁷

While I do not agree with everything he said, Gilligan expresses what I believe all people sense. We desire that wrongdoers be punished for their wrongdoing. Whether it takes years or decades, we want something done about the infraction. If it does not happen in this world then surely it will happen in the afterlife. So there cannot not be a hell.

There is a built-in need for justice in the mind of mankind. For instance, take any human law code, be it Hammurabi or the American judicial system. Under human law codes, there has always been punishment for offenses. "The human legislator attaches certain penalties to the categories of acts he does not want done."²⁶⁸ Typically the punishments were meted out according to the nature of the offense. For example, certain offenses under the Law of Moses which were deemed "abominations" by God were punishable by death. Other offenses required a sacrifice, be it a bull or lamb or some other animal prescribed in the Law. Or take an example closer to home: if I drive recklessly through the city, I will probably be forced to pay a fine and possibly face jail time depending on how reckless I was behind the wheel. Punishment follows breaking the law. In fact, a law code without punishment for offenses is impotent, powerless to enforce moral behavior and stabilize civilization. Removing the penalty for lawlessness takes the bite right out of the law.

When God is removed everything becomes permissible. It is once again *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan who points out the obvious implications of a worldview without God:

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Budziszewski 102.

I'm pretty much agnostic at this point in my life. But I find atheism just as hard to get my head around as I find fundamental Christianity. Because if there is no such thing as cosmic justice, what is the point of being good? That's the one thing that no one has ever explained to me. Why shouldn't I go rob a bank, especially if I'm smart enough to get away with it? What's stopping me?²⁶⁹

Philosophers have argued this same point for millennia. An ethical code is impossible without God. "Without a divine judge – not to mention moral legislature and executor – there can be no final accounting of our conduct in our lives."²⁷⁰ Therein lies the issue. If there is no God, there is no law "written on our hearts." If there is no natural law (specifically the sixth commandment), then theft is permissible. One may be smart enough to evade punishment from the American judicial system, but we cannot escape the penalty connected with violating natural law.

Some argue that belief in the afterlife is not necessary to help people or engage in philanthropy. For example, Bart Ehrman feels we need to help people though he does not believe in an afterlife.²⁷¹ Furthermore, we do not need a reason to help people; we are just human and we understand what it means to be human. In other words, one does not need God in order to be moral. Frankly, though, Ehrman presents a view which is moral in spite of its agnosticism or full-blown atheism. Consider that the faithful are merely one generation away from apostasy (See Joshua 2). How much more the faithless! And when a generation grows up which does not know Ehrman or his "moral-despite-faithlessness" arguments, they will be all the more inclined to live for their own selfish ego. Man's inclination and proclivity is not toward goodness but

²⁶⁹ Segal

²⁷⁰ Spiegel 32.

²⁷¹ Butt-Ehrman Debate: Suffering and the existence of God. In this debate Ehrman makes this point.

toward wickedness. “Evil people go from bad to worse,” says Paul (2 Timothy 3.13). So much worse that every thought of their heart is toward evil.

Why bother? So what? What is man without God? Nothing but the product of millions of years of meaningless, purposeless accidents and coincidences. So not only is life meaningless, but our actions are likewise meaningless. What is stopping us from driving the morality off the cliff? Ehrman and other agnostics and atheists would say, “Because we’re human.” Even in that statement is an admission to the knowledge written on the heart. The question for Ehrman is who wrote it there? One significant deterrent to completely loosing ourselves from all moral moorings is the knowledge that there is God who has written on our hearts common moral sense and the natural knowledge that justice follows breaking natural law. “And without a system of rewards and punishments whereby we experience the lasting effects of our behavior [i.e. final justice], there can be no adequate motivation to live a truly virtuous life, complete with all of the self-control this requires.”²⁷² If there is no final justice, let us eat, drink, and be merry.

Perhaps the most definite demonstration that justice follows the guilty knowledge of having violated natural law is the need for forgiveness. There is a debt which exceeds what we can pay. “The difficulty is that without a special revelation from the Author of the law, it is impossible to know whether the possibility of forgiveness is real.”²⁷³ We know intuitively that we are guilty of wrong and in need of forgiveness. Without forgiveness, the removal of the guilt and penalty of our wrongdoings, we know we face some kind of punishment. Knowledge of what that punishment is exactly is dependent upon special revelation by the Lawgiver. Enter the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament. The justice of God is assumed along with the

²⁷² Spiegel 32.

²⁷³ Budziszewski 26.

punishment for violating our common moral sense (i.e. sin). What comes into sharp focus in the New Testament is the nature of that punishment.

One more note: if death is all there is, what does that do to our sense of justice? We have a law code, it is known, but infractions would be left unresolved if man just ceases to exist at death or after some indefinite period of time. Wrongs are never made right. Our sense of justice would be frustrated. A vacuum would exist with a desire which can never be satisfied. And nature abhors a vacuum. Therefore, man has a sense that justice must be done and done perfectly, if not in this life then in the life to come. “We are born to justice.”²⁷⁴

Now just as knowledge of the law written on the heart can be suppressed in unrighteousness (Romans 1.18), so too can the knowledge of impending punishment. It can be suppressed, but never erased. It remains though walled off or hushed by the guilty conscience. But without a judgment day, justice for every man is a myth. The fidelity of the faithful will not be rewarded and the infidelity of the ungodly will not be punished. So there must be such a thing as final justice. This is why the New Testament writers take for granted the fact that people know that wrongdoing will ultimately be punished.

²⁷⁴ Lactantius, “The Wrath of God” ch. 14.

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