
Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory

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Abstract: Imaginative Christian art often portrays “heaven” as a huge palace far above the earth, and hell as a fiery, dark catacomb replete with the screams of the damned. “Heaven” and “hell” as they are portrayed in Scripture are certainly “places”; heaven, as it relates to God, is metaphorically His dwelling place although it did not exist before the creation, and hell is debated as to whether it is the place of eternal torment or serves some other function. Purgatory, a Roman Catholic dogma, has no Biblical foundation, yet there is evidence within the early church fathers of belief in an intermediate stop between earthly life and being in the presence of Jesus. The position here will demonstrate purgatory is a false doctrine that effectively contradicts plain language about the post-mortem presence of those who believe. I will also defend the “traditional” view of hell after a review of other competing positions.

Heaven and the Dwelling of God. The Old Testament phrase, “God of heaven” (e.g., Genesis 24:7, 2 Chronicles 26:23, Nehemiah 2:4) speaks of that non-earthly place where God is said to dwell; using “place” as a spatial description is more of a generalization than trying necessarily to situate heaven somewhere in the cosmos. Solomon declared that not even the “heavens, the highest of heavens” can contain¹ the Most High (2 Chronicles 2:6). The Temple was less a “house” or a “place”

¹ “Contain” is from the Heb. *kûl*, “to contain as does a vessel.” Solomon’s comment expressed the truth that it was foolish to think a human-made structure would be adequate to “contain” Yahweh. See John N. Oswalt, “*kûl*”, in *TWOT*, I:432.

for God as it was a centralized location for Israel to worship Yahweh.²

Much of the OT imagery of heaven is perhaps rightly called “other-worldly”. For example, the prophetic vision of Ezekiel 1, is replete with what to many would be considered odd looking creatures.³ The vision is said to be in a windstorm, a cloud filled with lightning and “brilliant light” (Ezekiel 1:4). That this windstorm, its meteorology and its beings are from “heaven” is noted in Ezekiel 1:1. It is thought that the language of chapter 1 may well be the prophet’s way of “speaking...of something like the reflected image of the divine world”,⁴ which in modern thinking, would be considered heaven.

Heaven in the Old Testament. Genesis 1:1 simply says that “in the beginning”, whenever that was, God “created the heavens and the earth.” Immediately the emphasis is less on what was created and more on the Creator. The Hebrew word for “heaven”, *shāmayim*, signifies variously the “atmosphere surrounding the earth”, or “the space in which the clouds are floating”, or “the expanse” where the stars are located. It is a direct opposite of *she’ōwl* (Sheol) which is a place of degradation while *shāmayim* is one of exaltation, the dwelling place “of the Most High and of the angels of God”; *she’ōwl* is the abode of the dead.⁵ It does not make a distinction between the righteous or “good” dead and the unrighteous or “wicked” dead; it is the destination of the dead, regardless of spiritual standing. The majesty of the Creator is far more emphasized in the Genesis creation account; “God is mentioned 35 times while

² J. A. Thompson, *1, 2 Chronicles* (NAC 9) (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 209.

³ Despite the interesting descriptions of creatures, the overall tenor of the visions is that of “a palpable sense of awe” (Mark Dever, “A Vision of God”, *SBJT* 2.4 [Winter 1998], 17).

⁴ William H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19* (WBC 28) (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 14-15.

⁵ Robert Baker Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (3rd ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 290.

“heaven/firmament” only 21 times.⁶ Most often in Genesis, “heaven” or “heavens” refers to the skies; Genesis 7:11 and 7:19 use *shāmayim* to describe the origin of the rain and the covering of the mountains by water. Genesis 19:24 says the Lord, in His judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, “rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens”. It is probable the intent is the fiery judgment came out of the skies by divine fiat as the language in Genesis 19:24 is meant to evoke a remembrance of the Noahic flood and the deluge which came out of the skies.⁷

But the prophet Micaiah, when prophesying against Ahab, who is remembered as doing more evil “in the eyes of Yahweh than any of those before him” (1 Kings 16:31), was given a vision of Yahweh “sitting on His throne with all the multitudes of heaven⁸ standing around Him on His right and on His left” (1 Kings 22:19 par. 2 Chronicles 18:18). The prophet apparently served as the local mouthpiece for the decisions of the “heavenly council”.⁹ It is probable the vision of Yahweh in heaven on a throne, surrounded by a council of some kind, may well be more metaphorical than necessarily a reality. The Micaiah story is less about heaven as a place and more about “the universal effects of the sin nature on all humanity”; the book of the Kings relays the truth that no matter what a person’s socioeconomic position, there is no person who can claim to be without sin.¹⁰

Isaiah 66:1 records God declaring, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.” Taking this phrase as prophetic imagery, it is probable the intent is to convey to Israel His

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 6.

⁷ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26* (NAC 1B) (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2005), 241.

⁸ “The metaphorical court of heaven” (Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings* [WBC 12] [Waco, TX: Word, 1985], 268).

⁹ Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is A Warrior* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 56.

¹⁰ Richard S. Hess, “Kings”, *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker and London: SPCK, 2008), 122.

nearness, His majesty and His glory, that He is not “limited to any temple made by some king (1 Kings 8:27-30) or to any one group of people.” God’s concerns cover the whole of His created order, not just one individual or group who thinks God is “completely focused...on them and their concerns.”¹¹

“Heaven” as God’s actual dwelling place is probably best understood as a metaphor, a means by which it is communicated the nearness of God to His people. There is no real concept of even the most faithful of Israelites (with the exception of Elijah and Enoch) going to “heaven” when they die.

The afterlife. Within the OT, as far as the afterlife is concerned, there is more attention given to She’ol than on heaven. The dead, both the righteous and the wicked, are consigned to She’ol; heaven is the realm in which God exists, even transcends (cf. 1 Kings 8:27).¹² He fills space, parts of the creation, and He is omnipresent in that space. But omnipresence is not the same as transcendence or immensity.¹³

As as previously discussed, the dead are in a place where no praise is offered to the Lord (Psalm 6:5), where no one has any

¹¹ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40-66* (NAC 15B) (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2009), 728.

¹² Solomon’s prayer rightly understood the infinite majesty of God; He was not confined to heaven as if it were greater than Him. Instead, heaven was, in a sense, a spatial distancing of His majesty from the commonness of His people. See Isaiah 66:1. Solomon knows the Temple cannot contain Yahweh, so his prayer is for Yahweh’s “Name” to dwell there as “an hypostasis or extension Yahweh’s true being, but not the Deity in the fullness of His being” (DeVries, *1 Kings*, 125).

¹³ Donald Macleod, “The Greatness of God: A Meditation”, *SBET* 31.1 (Spring 2018), 6, emphasizes “space” is subservient to God’s greatness since “space” is part of His creative work: “Space is not co-eternal with God, nor should we imagine him fitting his creation into space as if it was there before the universe itself. He created space in the very act of creating the world and gave it whatever characteristics it pleased him. Here it is important to distinguish between God’s omnipresence and his immensity. Omnipresence is a relational term, defining God’s relation to the created universe, and reminding us that God is all-present to the world he has made. But the universe does not contain him nor set limits to his freedom as creator. He was when space was not, and his presence is not exhausted by his omnipresence.”

interaction with God (Psalm 88:10), for they wind up in a place of silence (Palm 115:17). God, conversely, speaks to His people from heaven (Exodus 20:22, Deuteronomy 4:36) but as Creator has sovereign presence in both heaven and the earth (Deuteronomy 4:39).¹⁴ It is from *shāmayim* that God will “thunder”¹⁵ to make His presence known. The prophet Elijah was taken to heaven in a divinely supplied chariot (2 Kings 2:11), bypassing death and presumably She’ol.¹⁶ Elijah is one of two individuals in the OT who did not experience the pain of death; the other is Enoch, an ante-diluvian patriarch, of whom is said that “he walked faithfully with God” (Genesis 5:23, 24). He is never said to have died, as were the other patriarchs. The text has “he was no more, for God took him away.”¹⁷ Based on Hebrew word use, in comparing Enoch’s departure with Elijah’s, Bruce Waltke has argued for the sense of “rapture”, of a divine taking away as a “mysterious disappearance.”¹⁸

Outside of Enoch and Elijah, the text of the OT does not speak of people, no matter how righteous they may have been, going to be in heaven with God. Since both the righteous and the

¹⁴ “In heaven above” is a “divine epithet” reserved for God alone. It also places emphasis on the universality of Yahweh, not just who He is but also “what He does and what He expects” (Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy* [NAC 4] [Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994], 133).

¹⁵ For a discussion on the poetic use of words as figures of speech in the Old Testament, see Charles R. Pfeiffer, “Figures of Speech in Human Language”, *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 2.4 (Fall 1959).

¹⁶ See the discussion in T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC 13) (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 21 on the symbolism in Elijah’s translation to heaven. Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (INT) (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1987), 160, sees the chariot and horses of fire as a theophany; he corrects the assumption Elijah rode the chariot into heaven, noting the text says the prophet was taken in a “whirlwind”. He says the idea of Elijah actually in the chariot comes from the apocryphal Sirach 48:9. But Mark A. O’Brien, “The Portrayal of Prophets in 2 Kings 2”, *ABR* 46 (1998), 10, argues the text seems to be unclear as to whether Elijah went to heaven in a chariot surrounded by a whirlwind, or only in the whirlwind.

¹⁷ W. E. Vine, “Notes on Hebrews, Chapter 11”, *TBS* 24.2 (April 1953), 85, notes: “In his translation he is a standing testimony to the fact that for the believer the domination and rights of death are destroyed. It is gain to the life of faith. Prophetically, Enoch foreshadows the Church.”

¹⁸ Bruce C. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredericks, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 115.

unrighteous dead will find themselves in She'ol, according to Jewish thinking, nothing further is even considered, such as whether there is a separate place in She'ol for those who were righteous when they died. There's no sense of some kind of eternal punishment associated with She'ol aside from death itself being "the divinely decreed punishment for human sin (Genesis 2:17, cf. Romans 6:23)."¹⁹

The Christian (NT) concept of heaven. As did *shāmayim* in the Old Testament, the Greek word for "heaven", *ouranos*, denoted both the realm of the birds and the clouds but also the place where God is said to dwell.²⁰ In Revelation, "heaven" is pictured as the place of the Lamb who was slain, but now reigns, and receives worship from the redeemed (Revelation 4:2f).²¹ While some evangelical scholars have argued that heaven is more a state of being rather than a place, Wayne Grudem says the Biblical promise of a resurrection body post-mortem (1 Corinthians 15:42-44), one like Jesus' glorified body, means believers post-mortem will be in a *place*.²² When Jesus spoke to His disciples about the future state, He said He was going to prepare a *place* for them (John 14:2). The Greek word for *place*, *topos*, has at its basic meaning "a designated area".²³ He said that when He came again, He would take the disciples to be with Him (John 14:3). Jesus resurrected is not a "state of mind" or a "state of being"; He arose with a tangible physical existence, having both flesh (*sari*) and bones (*osteon*) (Luke 24:39). Heaven is a place; that it cannot be seen with human eyes or discerned with human senses does not *de facto* make it something else, such as some nebulous state of being. It is still a place where God chooses to dwell,²⁴ where believers in Christ

¹⁹ Paul R. Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife: Biblical Perspectives on Ultimate Questions* (NSBT 44) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity and London, UK: Apollos, 2017), 131.

²⁰ Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*, 175.

²¹ William D. Mounce, *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 329.

²² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity and Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1160.

²³ Mounce, *Dictionary*, 514.

²⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1160.

will have their “citizenship” (Philippians 3:20) in the eschaton. It strains at a smooth reading of NT cosmology to posit believers will have citizenship in a state of being. Christ will not come again from a state-of-being; He will come as He promised from His *place* with the Father.²⁵

Roger Olson wrote that Christianity “has always been a religion of hope”, where those who come into relationship with God through the salvation offered in Jesus Christ, who are genuinely repentant of their sin (rebellion) against God, are assured from the Scripture that physical death is not the end. Instead, because of being reconciled to God in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21) in salvation, there is the prospect of life eternal with God “in heaven.”²⁶ Over the centuries since the birth of the Church, human ideas about “heaven” have varied; some see verdant gardens, sparkling lakes, and even a plethora of animal life, what comes to be an imagined re-creation of all that the Garden of Eden was before the entrance of sin into the world. Others picture a majestic palace, a place truly beyond description but still portrayed in paintings and pictures. Then there is the more humorous depiction of all the saints sitting on a tuft of cloud, white robes and halos, each scrumming a harp. And somewhere came the idea that at the “door” to heaven stands St. Peter, checking to see if an arriving soul is eligible to enter into the heavenly realms.

As to the “St. Peter at the gate” idea, Scripture distinctly shows such a belief is complete fabrication. Those who die and find themselves in heaven never have to “sign in” with one of the apostles;²⁷ Paul plainly says that if a believer is “away from the body” he or she is “at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). Jesus spoke of two “gates” through which the dead will pass. One gate is wide and the road it is on leads to destruction, while the other gate is narrow and its road leads to life (Matthew 7:13-

²⁵ David W. Hay, *Christianity and Cosmology* (CJT) 5.4 (October 1959), 239.

²⁶ Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity and Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2002), 309.

²⁷ The question I have on this thought is, with whom did Peter sign in?

14). Each road leads to a specific destination.²⁸ Those who are on the road to destruction never cross anything having to do with heaven; those on the road to life never cross anything that looks like hell, and nothing is even hinted at in Scripture that they will have to encounter some kind of heavenly receptionist when they arrive.

As to the artistic conceptions of heaven, it is probable the background for such scenes comes from a reading of Revelation 21 and 22. But even with those readings, the human ability to conceive of the wonder and the majesty of the consummation heaven is limited by its own humanness. What Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 2:9, that no human eye has seen, no human ear has heard, and no human mind has been able to conceive what God has prepared for those who believe is not a veiled comment about the glories of heaven but about the magnificence of salvation which God prepared for those who love Him.²⁹ Paul's emphasis is believers should rejoice in their salvation and see "heaven" as secondary to their finding their name in "the book of life" (Philippians 4:3, Revelation 3:5), for those who are not found in the book of life are excluded from the presence of God in the heavenly realms (Revelation 20:15, 21:27). It is interesting to note that no descriptive material of "heaven" is found in the NT until John's visions which comprise Revelation. I would surmise the lack of descriptions of what "heaven" looks like in the majority of the NT have to do with the overreaching importance of salvation in Christ. A person does not become saved in order to gain heaven; a person becomes saved in order to be freed from the bondage of sin, to be made a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), and to "press on" to become more and more like Jesus (Philippians 3:7-14, 21).

Murray J. Harris has argued the NT clearly shows a lack of a "temporal distinction" between the time of actual death and "departure from the mortal body"; from 2 Corinthians 5:6, he

²⁸ Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew* (EGGNT) (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2017), 73.

²⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 107-108.

says “as soon as physical embodiment ceases, so too does absence from the Lord.”³⁰ He further points to 1 Thessalonians 4:16, saying the phrase *hoi nekroi en Christō* speaks of the “the dead who are in Christ”; nothing changes about their standing with Christ in salvation except for “the quality of their fellowship with Christ and the degree of their proximity with Christ.”³¹

Paul’s belief that in his resurrection state Christ possessed a glorious body (Philippians 3.21) would more naturally imply that active, personal communion ‘with the Lord’ (v. 8b) involved the believer’s possession of a spiritual body than that such fellowship should be experienced between a bodiless spirit and its embodied Lord. And it is at least open to doubt whether Paul ever countenanced the notion of a disembodied, sentient soul capable of sustaining personal relations.³²

Towards the end of his life, Paul spoke about his expectation once he departed this world. His immediate expectation was not on a heavenly destination *per se* but the rewards coming from the Lord, “the righteous judge” (2 Timothy 4:8). The “crown of righteousness is not about one’s “personal achievements” in life but rather “the expected recognition due to the righteous”, for those who so love the return of Christ they live in obedience and seek continually after righteousness.³³ 1 John 3:2 speaks of the eschaton, but with no mention of a specific heavenly destination. John’s focus is on the promise that when Jesus appears again, the emphasis will be on seeing Him.

³⁰ Murray J. Harris, “The New Testament View of Life After Death”, *Themelios* 11.2 (January 1986), 48

³¹ Harris, “New Testament View”, 48fn12.

³² Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 100.

³³ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr. *1, 2 Timothy, Titus* (NAC 34) (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 1992), 349.

The believer's form after death. In what form is the believer after death, when taken immediately to the presence of Jesus? One argument is the post-mortem body of the believer is similar to that of angels, an idea about which is claimed “finds clear support in all the Gospels of the New Testament.”³⁴ Offered in support is Luke 20:34-36 and Galatians 3:28. The conclusion the argues:

The message in the Gospels and in the writings of Paul with respect to believers being transformed into either angelic beings or beings analogous to angels implies that a believer will undergo a radical transformation, which is a prerequisite to becoming a full citizen of heaven.³⁵

I agree that the mortal physical body will undergo a radical transformation, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 15. But I would argue Grieg's thesis is founded on a poor understanding of the New Testament text. When Jesus said those in the heavenly realm are “like angels and are children of God” (Luke 20:34), He was not saying the righteous dead are somehow transformed into angels. The context has to do with marriage in the eschaton (Luke 20:27-33). Jesus' reply was not about the form of existence in heaven but that marriage is confined to this life. Just as the angels do not marry, neither will the righteous dead. As Harris has written, being with Jesus (and in context, at the time of the resurrection of the righteous dead) means a “transformation into a new mode of being” that is “comparable” to the state of being of the angels; that which was in the temporary world will be swept aside into a “preoccupation with God and with doing His will.”³⁶ It is about immortality, not form

³⁴ Alison Joanne Grieg, “Heaven in the History of Western Religions”, unpublished masters thesis (University of Wales, 2014; <https://repository.uwtsd.ac.uk/id/eprint/384>, accessed November 10, 2025), 37.

³⁵ Grieg, “Heaven”, 38.

³⁶ Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 128.

or mode of existence.³⁷

Galatians 3:28 is not about post-mortem existence; Paul's line of thought has to do with the sonship of the believer effected by grace outside the strictures of the Law of Moses. The fellowship which believers in Christ have in this present life is beyond "temporal statuses or classism" which may be found in any societal structure.³⁸ Paul emphasizes God's intention to redeem is not selective to the exclusion of others, such as redeeming rich people but not poor ones, or males but not females. The Gospel message is the same for all people at all times, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender.³⁹ Grieg completely misses the point in both the Luke 20 and Galatians 3 pericopes causing her thesis to fail. In neither place is the subject the appearance or form of humans in heaven. The closest we are given in the NT to the form or being of believers in heaven are Paul's discussion on the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15:25-55 and John's declaration in 1 John 3:2, that believers shall be "like Him" (Jesus) when He appears.

Purgatory. Roman Catholic dogma of purgatory is about "elect souls, destined ultimately to be saved." Article 12, Part Three, Section 1030 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.⁴⁰

The length of time spent there is conditional:

³⁷ Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 232.

³⁸ Kenneth R. Lewis, "A Social Status Change: An Examination of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24", *Semănătorul* 3.1 (October 2022), 78.

³⁹ Gerald Bray, "The Goodness of Our God in Our Redemption", *Evangel* 20.2 (Summer 2002), 51-52.

⁴⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P2N.HTM, accessed November 17, 2025).

A soul may win a reprieve or early release from punishment, not by virtue of its own good conduct but thanks to outside intervention in the form of suffrages. The duration of punishment therefore depends not only on God's mercy, symbolized by the zeal of the angels to snatch souls away from the demons, but also on personal merits amassed over a lifetime and on suffrages undertaken by the Church at the behest of friends and relatives of the deceased.⁴¹

The Catholic Catechism's exhortation to consider those in purgatory makes it appear that the practice of praying for the dead was a doctrinal position from the earliest days of the Church.

From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead:

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.⁴²

No Scriptural reference is given to substantiate the claim that "from the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead"; neither is there given any substantiation the Church has ever offered "prayers in suffrage for them" and so on. Further,

⁴¹ Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (tr. Arthur Goldhammer) (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 211.

⁴² Article 12, Section III, Paragraph 1032, *Catholic Catechism*.

the reference to Job's offering sacrifices for his sons is taken completely out of context, for Job's sons were not (yet) dead.

Purgatory is approved of in Catholic doctrine on the strength of *tradition*: "Tradition abounds in testimonies in favour of the doctrine."⁴³ The apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which is used in substantiation of purgatory, was found to be, according to the early theologian Tertullian, a fanciful tale written by an Asian presbyter who hoped to magnify Paul's fame, confessed of his involvement and was subsequently removed from serving as a presbyter.⁴⁴ Yet, it is interesting that Pope Gelasius (492-496), in *Letter 42*, a decretal, included "The Exploits of Thecla and the apostle Paul" (presumed to be the same book) as apocryphal and, along with other apocryphal works, "should not only be scorned, but also got rid of by every catholic and apostolic church in Rome, and we declare that, with their originators and the followers of the originators, they have been condemned forever under the indissoluble bond of anathema."⁴⁵

Purgatory as a Catholic doctrine has no support whatsoever from the canonical Scriptures. In an apocryphal work, 2 Maccabees 12:42-45, Judas Maccabeus, who led the Jewish military, gathered a large sum of money for a sin offering, with the thought of "making atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin."⁴⁶ However, two issues arise with

⁴³ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (ed. James Bastible, tr. Patrick Lynch) (Fort Collins, CO: Books for Roman Catholics, 1954), 322.

⁴⁴ A. Hilhorst, "Tertullian on the Acts of Paul", *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer) (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1996), 151-152.

⁴⁵ Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen, eds. *The Letters of Gelasius I (492-496)* (Turnhout, Belgium, Brepols, 2014), 161. Neil and Allen note that *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* belong "to the genre of the ancient novel" (165, fn76).

⁴⁶ This reference to Judas Maccabeus is called "sacred Scripture" in the Catholic Catechism (Article 12, Part Three, Section 1032). To the Protestant view of Scripture, the books of the Maccabees are apocryphal but are not elevated to the place of true Scripture. For a brief history of the exclusion of apocryphal works from the canon of Scripture, see Basil Hall, "Symposium: The Old Testament in the Church Today", *The London Quarterly & Holborn Review* (January 1965), 30-36.

using the Judas Maccabeus text to justify the practice of purgatory. The first is Judas making “atonement” for the dead. The New Testament is very certain that atonement for humans is made solely by Jesus Christ.⁴⁷ The second problem using the Maccabees text is Judas’ declaration those soldiers who “had died in the mortal sin of idolatry”, which according to Catholic dogma, is unforgivable, should still “have prayers and sacrifices offered for them with the possibility that they will be delivered from their suffering.”⁴⁸

By the Middle Ages, purgatory had become an entrenched aspect of Catholic theology, despite its lack of support from anywhere in the true Scriptures.

Medieval writers did not view purgatory as a novelty. For them, the images of purgation that they read about in visions, and the intercessions that mitigated its horrors, must always have existed, and they looked to scriptures and patristic opinion to support that view. They were probably little aware of how much of the theology of purgatory was an imaginative feat of intellectual engineering and how much their own belief in the idea of purgatory served to enlarge and solidify a notion that was only hinted at in the scriptures.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, Catholic dogmaticians have argued strenuously for the reality of purgatory, saying that the process of being cleaned of sins post-mortem “is explicitly taught in Scripture...found in the writings of the church fathers...(and) is part of the deposit of faith ‘which was once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 1:3).⁵⁰ A common understanding of purgatory

⁴⁷ See Charles Bradlaugh, *The Atonement* (London, UK: n.p., 1870); Thomas Houghton, “The Atonement”, *EvQ* 6.2 (April 1934), 137-146.

⁴⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 818.

⁴⁹ Isabel Moreira, *Heaven's Purgatory in Late Antiquity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.

⁵⁰ John Salza, *The Biblical Basis for Purgatory* (Charlotte, NC: St. Benedict Press, 2009), 12.

is as a “second chance to attain eternal life”, where it is possible for a “mitigation of penalties, commutation of sentences”; purgatory “requires the projection in the afterlife of a highly sophisticated legal and penal system.”⁵¹ As an intermediate state, purgatory allows for intercessory prayers from the living to “abridge” the amount of the suffering to be endured by the dead. This idea had influence on Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who thought it possible to offer prayers on behalf of the dead, spurred by the death of his mother.⁵²

Roman Catholic doctrine understands purgatory as a form of justification, where through a “long process of sanctification”, a person’s earthly sin “is purged out” so that “the human soul attains perfection and is rightly admitted to heaven.”⁵³ In the late Middle Ages purgatory had been developed into a graded system of penance based on the type of sin one had committed; the thought was held that not all sin is of the same culpability, so those who post-mortem were not guilty of heinous sin would not experience the depth of purgation required by those who had committed some especially noxious sin or who had lived a predominately sinful life.⁵⁴

One defender of purgatory, a 19th century author, Mary Anne Madden Sadlier, admitted that Scripture says nothing about purgatory specifically, but that through the (Catholic) Church,

⁵¹ Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 5

⁵² Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 11. But this is not to say Augustine necessarily held to the idea of “purgatory” as it was understood in the early days of the church. He did believe the afterlife had some kind of post-mortem “extended purification” nor did he believe that there was any efficacy in “human intercessory activities” for the dead. See Moreira, *Heaven's Purge*, 17.

⁵³ D. B. Knox, “Original Sin and Justification by Faith”, *Churchman* 67.4 (October-December 1953), 204.

⁵⁴ Gerald Bray, “Adam and Christ (Romans 5: 12-21)”, *Evangel* 18.1 (Spring 2000), 5. Bray also notes that Protestant expressions add times resort to “grading sin” in the same way as the Catholics, even though Scripture does not support the idea that some sin is in some way less odious to God than another sin.

purgatory may be established even if it is not identified by that word. Sadlier claims purgatory is “proved” by”

the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Councils of the Church, especially those of Florence and of Trent, the Fathers and Tradition, and by theological reasons.⁵⁵

Is her conclusion a reasonable one? Is there Biblical basis for purgatory?

One NT text used to affirm the Biblical basis of purgatory is 1 Corinthians 3:11-15. Moreira argues the pericope, in the minds of some, expresses that some Christians “passed through some form of purifying or probative fire before entering the kingdom of heaven.”⁵⁶ But this is a wrong conclusion based on the context of what Paul wrote; it reads the purgatory dogma into the text without considering the context in which the verses appear. Paul uses the metaphor of fire to demonstrate that in the day of judgment, whatever a person had which was not beneficial to the Kingdom of God, would be subject to losing that “thing” through the metaphorical fire of divine judgment.⁵⁷

What was the reasoning behind the development of “purgatory” in early Catholic thinking?

...in the absence of strong scriptural guidance, discussions of purgatory often arose in large part from the desire of Western Christians to explain other things: how Christians could be “saved by fire”; how the dead could be helped through prayer and works of others; how sin could be removed from the soul, and how the soul could be prepared to meet God; how divine justice would

⁵⁵ Mary Anne Madden Sadlier, *Purgatory: Doctrinal, Historical and Poetical* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 11.

⁵⁶ Moreira, *Heaven’s Purge*, 18.

⁵⁷ F. F. Bruce, *1 Corinthians* (NCBC) (London, UK: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1971), 44.

ultimately prevail; or why mortality and pain could be reconciled with the actions of a merciful God.⁵⁸

A significant gap exists between Roman Catholic and Protestant understanding of the authority of Scripture. On the Protestant side stands the Reformation ideal of *Sola Scriptura*, the establishing of the Word of God as the only authority for the Church,⁵⁹ and the Catholic view that *Sola Scriptura* may give rise to interpretation of the text in “anachronistic forms”; interpretation of Scripture “should not forbid a legitimate drawing out of the inferences of the written Word which allow and encourage practices and understandings which go beyond the letter”. Catholics apparently do not “sufficiently” and “rigorously” make a distinction between the canonical, apostolic message and “all subsequent developments in doctrine and practice.”⁶⁰ Thus, even though “purgatory” is never mentioned specifically in the canonical Scripture, Catholics feel justified in retaining the idea of an intermediate situation between life and heaven based on apocryphal and traditional evidence.

Purgatory gained ground in the early church despite the intent of Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, where the apostle gives only two options for human existence: either one is “home in the body”, which means “away from the Lord” (clearly a pre-mortem state) or “away from the body” and “at home with the Lord.” There is no indication either from Paul or from any other NT writer of any kind of an after death “redemptive process”.⁶¹

Despite the various “proofs” offered within Catholic theology for the existence (and the necessity) of purgatory, those attempts pale in the face of the complete lack of Scriptural authority for

⁵⁸ Moreira, *Heaven’s Purge*, 210.

⁵⁹ See A. Skevington Wood, *Luther’s Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (London, UK: Tyndale, 1960), for a discussion on *Sola Scriptura* and its effect on the Reformation.

⁶⁰ Andrew Kirk, “An Open Letter: Some Comments on a Response”, *Anvil* 6:1 (1989), 46.

⁶¹ Ronald Cassidy, “Paul’s Attitude to Death in II Corinthians 5:1-10”, *EvQ* 43.4 (October-December 1971), 216.

such a post-mortem state. Of course, it should be noted that here, “canonical” refers to the Protestant canon, which completely excludes the apocryphal works which have the approval of the Catholic Church.

Of all the problems with the dogma of purgatory, the most pernicious in terms of the plain reading of Scripture is the belief something else must be added to the finished work of Christ. As Grudem explains:

(Purgatory) teaches that we must add something to the redemptive work of Christ, and that His redemptive work for us was not enough to pay the penalty for all our sins.... Moreover, in a pastoral sense, the doctrine of purgatory robs believers of the great comfort that should be theirs in knowing those who have died have immediately gone into the presence of the Lord, and knowing that they also, when they die, will “depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Philippians 1:23).⁶²

Hell. In the New Testament, two words in the Greek are typically rendered as “hell”. One is *geenna* (Gehenna); the other is *hadēs* (hades or Hades). This differs from the OT concept of She’ol, where no differentiation is made whether the dead person is righteous or unrighteousness. Whereas in the NT *geenna* and *hadēs* have some differentiation between them, later theological development tended to combine the two terms into the singular idea of “hell”.⁶³

Geenna or Gehenna, is used most often for “hell” in the NT, appearing twelve times (Matthew - 7X, Mark - 3X, Luke - 1X, James - 1X). With the sole exception of James, the word is spoken exclusively by Jesus.⁶⁴ It is, in Matthew, generally

⁶² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 819.

⁶³ Mounce, *Dictionary*, 331.

⁶⁴ Kim Papaioannou, “Motifs of Death and Hell in the Teaching Of Jesus. Part 2: An Examination of Gehenna”, *MeJT* 33.1-2 (2017), 7.

associated with judgment in the eschaton as opposed to the immediate destination of the wicked dead. Owing to the background history in the development of the word, it is associated with fire; in the eschaton, it is the place where “Satan, his angels, minions, and hades (personifying death) will be burnt at the end (Revelation 20:11-15; Matthew 15:41).”⁶⁵

Dymitris Kyrtatas has argued Jesus, as He is recorded in the Gospels, “is never presented...as introducing new ideas about the afterlife — apart from His conviction that the kingdom of God was immanent.”⁶⁶

Frequently in the Gospels, Jesus appears to expect that, after their death, men and women either enter the kingdom of God (also known as the kingdom of heaven or, simply, paradise) or are cast into *geenna* (*gehenna* in Latin and other languages). As all Jews would know, the Greek rendering of the valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem (often, but erroneously, translated in English as hell), was the place where the Canaanites were said to have been sacrificing their children to their god Moloch (Molech in Hebrew). By the time of Jesus, the valley had become a garbage dump, where the dead bodies of criminals were also being disposed. To ensure that the fires burning the garbage and corpses would not be extinguished, sulphur was sometimes added, probably for sanitary purposes. With good reason Jesus equated *geenna* the place in which, according to Jewish prophecy, the corpses of who rebel against God are left

Papaioannu provides a succinct history of the development of “Gehenna” in Jewish thought. Since a discussion on the history of the word itself would be an involved one, for the sake of brevity, I would refer the interested reader to Papaioannu’s essay.

⁶⁵ G. E. Okeke, “The After-life in St. Matthew and an Aspect of Matthew Ethic”, *MeJT* 4.2 (1988), 36.

⁶⁶ Dimitris Kyrtatas, “The Origins of Christian Hell”, *Numen* 56.2/3 (2009), 283. (Emphasis original.)

unburied, exposed to the worm never dies and the fire that is never extinguished (Mark 9:48 depending on Isaiah 66:24; cf. Judith 16:17). Consequently, he warned his audience not to fear "those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul," but rather those "who can destroy (*apolesai*) both body and soul in *geenna*" (Matt 10:28). Thus, in the Gospels, *geenna* meant the death of both the body and the mortal soul, a death that made entrance to the kingdom of God impossible.⁶⁷

Kyrtatas later advocates for annihilationism, arguing specifically from the ancient *Oracula Sibyllina*.⁶⁸ He asserts the consuming fire in the *Oracula*, if meant to "function like Jesus' *geenna*", then the end result for the wicked dead is total annihilation of their being, "precluding any possibility of redemption."⁶⁹

Views on hell. Of the many works which address the overall issue of hell, perhaps none is more balanced than *Four Views on Hell*, edited by Stanley N. Gundry and Preston Sprinkle.⁷⁰ The second edition of the book, part of the Zondervan "Counterpoints" series, follows the same format as the others in that same series: one writer responds to the subject of the book and the other contributors, holding to differing views, provide a short response. In this particular book, the four positions on hell and the writers defending that view are:

- "Eternal Conscious Torment" - Denny Burk;
- "Terminal Punishment" - John G. Stackhouse, Jr.;

⁶⁷ Kyrtatas, "Origin of Hell", 283-284.

⁶⁸ For a discussion on the *Oracula Sibyllina*, see Miguel Vargas, "A Therapeutic Medium?: Crisis and History in *Oracula Sibyllina* 4". *Religions* 12.11 (915) (2021) at <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110915>.

⁶⁹ Kyrtatas, "Origin of Hell", 289-291. (Emphasis original.)

⁷⁰ Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.

- “A Universalist View” - Robin A. Parry;
- “Hell and Purgatory” - Jerry L. Walls.

As can be seen from the divergent positions on hell, no consensus exists within evangelicalism about the nature or the necessity of hell. The discussion here will not be able to delve into any depth but will hopefully serve as an adequate overview.

Conscious eternal torment. Harry Buis several years ago equated the doctrine of eternal punishment to an acceptance of the infallibility of the Scriptures. He says since the Scriptures teach the doctrine conservative believers are obligated to accept it, but further, that “theological system without hell is morally dangerous.”⁷¹ Robert A. Peterson’s 1995 monograph, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*,⁷² advocates for the reality of a place of conscious, eternal punishment post-mortem for those who die without salvation in Jesus Christ. Yahweh remains the ultimate judge, continuing Ezekiel’s understanding that God is in fact the “divine judge who sentences the wicked and the sinner to death (Ezekiel 18:30, 33:20); he executes the sentence (Ezekiel 11:10), he wields the sword in his own hand (Ezekiel 21:8-10, 32:10), he cuts people off (Ezekiel 14:8), he destroys (Ezekiel 14:9, 25:7), he causes to perish (Ezekiel 6:3, 25:7, 25:16), in his fury he consumes (Ezekiel 20:13), he causes people to fall (Ezekiel 6:4), he sends them down to Sheol/the Pit (Ezekiel 6:20).”⁷³

There is apparently a move away among theologians from the traditional teaching of hell as a place of eternal, unremitting punishment for the finally impious. The reason for this shift, according to Jerry L. Walls, is “the doctrine is widely held to be indefensible”, which, if it is, presents difficulties in “traditional

⁷¹ Harry Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957), 127.

⁷² Philipsburg, PA: P & R Publishing, 1995.

⁷³ Daniel I. Block, “Beyond the Grave; Ezekiel’s Vision of Death and the Afterlife”, *BBR* 2 (1992), 119.

theism” to understand theodicy, “the problem of evil.”⁷⁴ Walls’ examination of the various Biblical and philosophical arguments about the nature of hell led him to conclude the traditional view of hell, as a place of conscious eternal torment for the unrighteousness dead, has a much stronger Biblical and philosophical foundation than one promoting universalism (see below).⁷⁵ Traditionally, hell involves painful torment, but the punishment there goes beyond just physical punishment; it will extend to the knowledge of the damned they have lost what they could have had — the “joy of eternal fellowship with God”. Drawing from the church father Augustine of Hippo, Walls asserts the condemned will maintain their memories of the eternally good life they chose to forfeit.⁷⁶

Buis argues the various ways the punishments of hell are depicted in the NT are not necessarily literal, physical depictions but must be taken as symbols of the extent of the misery experienced by those whose eternity is in hell.

Here then is an important point in the present day conservative position; Hell is a reality, but the concepts such as fire mentioned in the Scriptures must be taken symbolically, as symbols of a very real and very serious spiritual fact. The liberal must recognize that he fails to understand our position when he thinks we take these symbols literally. On the other hand, the ultra conservative literalist must be made to understand that we have in no way abandoned the belief in eternal punishment when we advocate such a symbolical interpretation.⁷⁷

Williamson seems to agree with Buis on the symbols of hell; where at times the Synoptics will vary in the wording they use

⁷⁴ Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, IN and London, UK: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 3.

⁷⁵ Walls, *Hell*, 158.

⁷⁶ Walls, *Hell*, 143.

⁷⁷ Buis, *Eternal Punishment*, 131.

to describe the conditions in hell, they all “leave a dominant image...of an eschatological place that (at least implicitly) involves some degree of conscious eternal punishment.”⁷⁸

Robert Peterson’s defense of the traditional view of hell as a place of conscious eternal torment rests on the interpretation of certain vivid phrases, particularly in the NT, as speaking of a condition of hell. He finds five “pictures depicting (hell) as a place of endless misery”:

1. Darkness and separation;
2. Fire;
3. Crying and grinding (or, “gnashing”) of teeth;
4. Punishment;
5. Death and destruction.⁷⁹

Among the texts Peterson employs is Matthew 8:12, where those who are denied entrance into the Kingdom (and here contextually, unbelieving Jews) will experience “terrible suffering”, a continual “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”⁸⁰ The aspect of fire, where it is unquenchable (Mark 9:43) in Gehenna, implies those who end up in the place of the damned are not immediately annihilated; their experience of weeping and teeth-gnashing indicates a state of continuing consciousness.⁸¹ Mark 9:47-48, which speaks of being “thrown into hell”⁸² where the worm does not die, and the fire in that place never stops. Okeke points out the despite the inherent contradictions (how can a worm live in continuing decay when fire would consume that decay, and how can darkness exist when it is a known property of fire to give light), “We must allow that the grimmest pictures

⁷⁸ Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*, 151.

⁷⁹ Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 189.

⁸⁰ Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 189.

⁸¹ Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*, 149-150.

⁸² So ESV and NIV; KJV has “hell fire”, but the Greek does not have any word for “fire”. “Hell” here is represented by *geenna*.

of the punishment of the wicked and evildoers are painted, without a consideration of their inherent contradictions.”⁸³

Whereas the Synoptics use *geenna*, Hades, darkness, weeping and teeth-gnashing, torment and everlasting fire, John’s Gospel uses different language⁸⁴ which arrives at the same basic conclusions. The language of John 15:6, where those who fail to remain “in” Christ but through their own choices⁸⁵ fall away from Him are cut off the “vine” (Christ) and are burned.⁸⁶ Jesus also refers to the fate of the wicked as “perishing” (e.g., John 3:16, 10:28, from *apollumi*, “to destroy”).

Among the church fathers, Augustine, bishop of Hippo, held that God was indeed capable of empowering eternal conscious punishment, since to him, the doctrine was an “assured reality, seeing that both the prophets and Christ Himself had testified to it.”⁸⁷ For Augustine, the doctrine of eternal punishment was a catalyst towards true piety in the church.⁸⁸ He further understood the “miseries of this life” were sufficient cause to take Scripture seriously, especially in regard to the idea of

⁸³ Okeke, “The Afterlife in St. Matthew”, 39.

⁸⁴ Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*, 151.

⁸⁵ Soteriologically, I hold to a distinctively Arminian view of salvation, where it is possible for a person once saved to fall away as an apostate. Of course, this will cause no amount of umbrage in Calvinist/Reformed circles, where the colloquial mantra is “once saved, always saved.” It is beyond this essay to examine such issues in any detail. For an excellent presentation of the Arminian position, see Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, and Free Will* (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2002); F. Leroy Forlines, *Classical Arminianism* (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2011).

⁸⁶ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1879), II:253, writes, “The general doctrine is this, that their relation to Christ involves those in heavier guilt and punishment who cease from His fellowship, and who thereby sink back into a condition which is far worse than that of those with whom He never entered into any such relation. The truth of this declaration of the Redeemer was demonstrated not only in the Jews, but also in many early flourishing Christian communities and peoples, which were consumed by the fire of the wrath of God because they failed to abide in the Vine.”

⁸⁷ Graham Keith, “Patristic Views on Hell - Part 2”, *EvQ* 71:4 (1999), 291. Augustine’s comments on hell are in his *De civ. Dei* 21:9.

⁸⁸ Keith, “Patristic Views - 2”, 299.

conscious eternal torment for the wicked dead.⁸⁹ Burk, in his essay on eternal conscious torment, maintains the Biblical teaching on hell motivates to two ends. First, “the Biblical doctrine of hell tells us who to fear.” He argues the terror of hell is not the devil but rather “the presence of God’s wrath and indignation forever”, basing this on Matthew 10:28. As Hebrews 10:31 affirms, it is a “terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God”, for being in hell means “being left in the presence of God’s wrath forever.”⁹⁰

The second reason Burk presents is “the biblical doctrine of hell compels believers to see the urgency for evangelism.”⁹¹ Thad Harless’ 2015 essay emphasized from an apologetic position the need for believers in Christ to include the doctrine of hell in their evangelistic (i.e., “personal witnessing”) efforts. Harless argued against both annihilationism and conditionals, claiming the only truly Biblical view was the traditional one, and with that, the hope that the traditional doctrine would be “appropriately restored in the lecterns and pulpits of professors and pastors alike”, and in so doing, “will rekindle the flames of evangelistic zeal and hell will indeed be under fire, not from liberal theologians, but from heaven’s army on earth, Christ’s church.”⁹²

Kenneth Himma’s 2003 essay on issues regarding the proportionality of the punishment in hell related to the extent of the offense of the damned raises several important questions in any discussion of the afterlife of the dead. Himma identifies the “conservative view” as comprised of four theses:

1. Anti-universalism thesis: some persons are consigned to hell;
2. Inescapability thesis: no one in hell is ever able to escape

⁸⁹ Keith, “Patristic Views - 2”, 302.

⁹⁰ Denny Burk, “Eternal Conscious Torment”, *Four Views on Hell*, 42-43.

⁹¹ Burk, “Eternal Conscious Torment”, 43.

⁹² J. Thad Harless, “A Biblical-Theological and Historical Critique of the Doctrine of Hell as an Impetus in Evangelism”, *JISCA* 8:1 (2015), 234-235.

hell;⁹³

3. Penalty thesis: consignment to hell is justified as divine judgment for sin.
4. Exclusivist thesis: All and only persons lacking a genuine Christian faith are consigned to hell.⁹⁴

He notes a “natural objection” to the conservative view is based on the “uncontroversial moral intuition that punishment should not be excessive in relation to the magnitude of the wrongdoing.”⁹⁵ This is the *proportionality argument*. Since the amount of sin any one person can commit is finite, restricted by their earthly lifespan, it is reasonable to assume that sin has a “finite disvalue.” All of the possible wrongdoing any one person can do will always be necessarily finite; it then seems it is unjust, the argument goes, to punish for all eternity someone who only sinned, say, for seventy years.⁹⁶ Marilyn McCord Adams, while embracing a view much similar to that of John Hick, argues that God would be considered unjust if “he treats some persons worse than they deserve,”⁹⁷ an argument which assumes imperfect humans can know more about justice than the perfect and omniscient God. That said, Adams defends the idea of proportionality in punishment by citing from Exodus 21:24 and Leviticus 24:20, the “law of the tooth” (*lex talonis*). She then asserts that “God would have the right to visit total and everlasting unhappiness on a sinner, if and only of that

⁹³ The idea of escapism is discussed by Andrei Buckareff and Allen Plug, “Escaping Hell: Divine Motivation and the Problem of Hell” *RS* 41.1 (March 2005), 39-54. They advance two theses for the escapist view: (1) Hell exists and may be populated for eternity and (2) Those in hell may have, at any time, the ability to accept God’s grace, leave hell, and enter to heaven (46). For a critique of Buckareff and Plug, see Kyle Swan, “Hell and Divine Reasons for Action”, *RS* 45.1 (March 2009), 51-61.

⁹⁴ Kenneth Einar Himma, “Eternally Incurable: The Continuing-Sin Response to the Proportionality Problem of Hell”, *RS* 39.1 (March 2003), 63-64.

⁹⁵ Himma, “Eternally Incurable”, 64.

⁹⁶ Himma, “Eternally Incurable”, 64.

⁹⁷ Marilyn McCord Adams, “Hell and the Justice of God”, *RS* 11.4 (1975), 1975.

sinner had done the same to God.”⁹⁸ Since no human has the ability to create an unending state of unhappiness for God, the idea of an “eye for an eye” in defending a classical view of hell is without rational basis. The punishment must fit the crime, as Thomas Talbott has argued;⁹⁹ on that reasoning, then, conscious eternal torment for the wicked dead is completely out of proportion to the finite amount of sin committed in the span of a finite life.

Hinna thinks there is a “prima facie worry about proportionality”; if the degree of suffering in hell is high, and infinitely so, then proportional concerns are raised, but if the degree of suffering in hell is at such a low degree that hell is “relatively comfortable”, then the proportionality argument is weakened and may not apply.¹⁰⁰

As erudite as Hinna, Adams, Talbott and others may be on the proportionality argument, the divine standard of justice is not drawn from human ideologies about what constitutes “justice” or whether God is “fair” or “unfair.” Instead, God’s standards of justice are within Himself; He is final arbiter of what is just and what is not. The apostle Paul takes strong issue with any human thought of questioning God’s choices and actions (Romans 9:20-21). Wayne Grudem points to the case of Job in the OT, who questioned whether God had in fact “been righteous in his dealings with him.” God’s reply was unequivocal: “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?” (Job 40:2).¹⁰¹ The idea that every person was to be given what was (actually) due him is more of a secular Greek idea than one borne out by the OT revelation of God.¹⁰² But the issue extends to the very Being of God in His dealings with an undeserving and rebellious human race. A loss of hell as the eternal fate of

⁹⁸ Adams, “Hell and the Justice of God”, 435.

⁹⁹ Thomas Talbott, “Punishment, Forgiveness and Divine Justice”, *RS* 29.2 (1993), 155.

¹⁰⁰ Hinna, “Eternally Incurable”, 65.

¹⁰¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 204.

¹⁰² K. K. Oresti and Manfred T. Brauch, “Righteousness, Righteousness of God”, *DPL*, 828.

the wicked dead, owing to human ideas of justice, is mirrored by a loss of salvation for eternal life, being viewed more as “a matter of personal fulfillment in this life.”¹⁰³ Walls has rightly argued that some people, through their own genuine human freedom, “have closed off every apparent avenue by which good may enter.” In other words, wherever grace was offered, those individuals “preferred” evil, so much so that, as sin reigned in increasing levels within, the distance to repentance became so extremely distant that it was “all but foreclosed”; such persons became “thoroughly immune to the grace of God.”¹⁰⁴ Henri Blocher, drawing from William Shedd, writes that “sinners, such being the power of their freedom, will persevere in their hatred of God, for ever and ever.”¹⁰⁵ A freely chosen unyielding rejection of God and His offers of grace will, in His justice, require an unyielding punishment. It is ultimately a foolish gambit that seeks to do an “end-around” the justice of God by appealing either to His goodness, His love, or to some form of human-centered reasoning to mitigate the idea of a conscious, eternal torment.

Universalism. “Universalism” is “the view that ultimately all human persons will enjoy salvation”¹⁰⁶ and has its supporters in Parry, John Hick, J. A. T. Robinson and Jürgen Moltmann.¹⁰⁷ For Robinson,, “only universal salvation is consistent with God’s nature of omnipotent love; final judgment would be a frustration of His purpose.”¹⁰⁸ Hick’s view of universalism tended to flow from his theological difficulties with

¹⁰³ Walls, *Hell, The Logic of Damnation*, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Walls, *Logic of Damnation*, 123-124.

¹⁰⁵ Henri Blocher, “Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil, in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed.) (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster and Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 296.

¹⁰⁶ Trevor Hart, “Universalism: Two Distinct Types”, *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ On Moltmann, see Nigel G. Wright, “Universalism in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann”, *EvQ* 84.1 (2012), 33-49.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Bauckham, “Universalism: An Historical Survey”, *Themelios* 4:2 (January 1978), 53.

the problem of evil (theodicy). For Hick, it is necessary for God to save all persons.

(For Hick) the suffering and evil of this world can only be justified if God is going to bring to a good end every individual personal life He has created. If there is either eternal punishment or annihilation for some, then either God is not perfectly good — since He does not desire the salvation of all His creatures — or He is not omnipotent — since His purse has finally failed in the case of some.¹⁰⁹

Hick also embraced pluralism, the idea that those who are saved are not “restricted to one particular religion.” Hick the universalist also had to follow with pluralism, so that no one, without exception, is excluded from eternal salvation.¹¹⁰

An early form of universalist thinking came through the 2nd century church theologian Origen.¹¹¹ He tended to promote a view of sin which allowed him to diminish God’s role as the final judge, “seeing it an open possibility that even the most hardened of sinners among men, perhaps even among demons, might be restored.”¹¹² Origen’s views have largely faded; what is known as “universalism” today comes from 19th century England as part of a religious revolt against the God of the Bible; it was less about “an espousal of universal salvation than a growing unease about its alternative, hell.”¹¹³

It is Hick’s contribution to the position on universalism that has been his tool “for refashioning of the Christian (and every other)

¹⁰⁹ Bauckham, “Universalism”, 55.

¹¹⁰ Chris Sinkinson, *John Hick: An Introduction to His Theology* (Leicester, UK: Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship, 1995), 27.

¹¹¹ For a study on the development of universalism, beyond Origen, see Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, “Origen, Bardaisan and the Origin of Universal Salvation”, *HTR* 102:2 (April 2009), 135-168.

¹¹² Graham Keith, “Patristic Views on Hell - Part 1”, *EvQ* 71:3 (1999), 226.

¹¹³ Nigel M. De S. Cameron, “Universalism and the Logic of Revelation”, *ERT* 11.4 (October 1987), 26.

religion.” For Hick, universalism has become the linchpin, the very crux, for the interpretation of “all religious truth.”¹¹⁴

Jan Bonda argued the Scriptures know nothing of an eternal, conscious punishment; instead, he writes, what is found in the Scriptures is a very clear indication that neither Jesus nor Paul nor any of the Biblical writers had any thought of a hell where the punishment extends eternally. Drawing from Isaiah 25:6-8, he insists all people, without exception, will be gathered on Mt. Zion; there, God will destroy death, He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and will pronounce a complete victory over death. If there is a death which continues, Bonda reasons, then death is not truly swallowed up in the victory of which the Bible speaks.

If God wipes away the tears from all eyes — of all people — then suffering and sorrow cannot be the final end of them. Referring to the judgment, Jesus speaks of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:42, 50). But this prophecy of Isaiah makes it very clear that Jesus never intended this to go on forever and ever.¹¹⁵

At the very core of universalism are two very Biblical truths: God’s love is good, and God’s love is sovereign. It is an easy leap from those truths to the universalist position: that God, who is love, will save people, and because His love is sovereign/omnipotent, he will save all people.¹¹⁶ Parry argues the Bible never says death is the salvific point of no return, but also never says no one is able/capable of repenting post-mortem.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Cameron, “Universalism”, 28.

¹¹⁵ Jan Bonda, *The One Purpose of God: An Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (tr. Reinder Bruinsma) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 123.

¹¹⁶ Joseph Dabney Bettis, “A Critique of the Doctrine of Universal Salvation”, *RS* 6.4 (December 1970), 330.

¹¹⁷ Robin G. Parry, “Universalism”, *Four Views on Hell*, 116.

Perhaps the biggest issue universalism faces is not as much the application of God's sovereign love but rather than of His fully unmerited grace.¹¹⁸ God provided salvation solely as an act of unmerited — unearned, undeserved - grace. If He chooses to save in and through grace (cf. Ephesians 2:8), it could follow that His grace could make it possible for all, without exception, to also be saved. However, grace unto salvation is not a right or even something somehow deserved. It is purely a gift from God (Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:8). That God saves at all highlights His freely given grace.¹¹⁹ Against Parry's argument about what the Bible says about the timing of salvation is the response that Scripture gives a *condition* for receiving salvation, a condition that begin with single-minded faith in Christ and continues with a confession of Christ as Savior and Lord (Romans 10:9-10). Peter, in his defense of salvation, declared: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). God saves by His grace, He saves those to come to Christ, and He saves no one who chooses not to come to Christ for salvation. Christian exclusivism troubles those espousing universalism because it narrows the road to salvation and deliberately excludes those who try some alternate means — another religion, personal effort — to become saved and thus escape the fires of hell.

Richard Bauckham draws from Emil Brunner's work in asserting there is a necessary tension between the Scriptures which speak of the "division of men at the Last Judgment" and the Scriptures which "speak of God's single unqualified will for the salvation of all men."¹²⁰ It seems that Paul understands salvation for all people as a necessary element of divine soteriology; in 1 Timothy 2:4, the apostle says God "desires" (ESV) "wants" (NIV). The Greek verb *thelō* (desires, wants) can

¹¹⁸ For a discussion on the Scriptural nature of grace, see Gerald L. Bray, "Grace", *NDT*, 376-378; also see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 729-730.

¹¹⁹ Paul Helm, "Are There Be Few That Are Saved", *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, 258.

¹²⁰ Bauckham, "Universalism", 53.

be expressed as “will” but also of a desire¹²¹ without willing the desired end. The same basic idea is in 2 Peter 3:9, with the verb root *boulomai*, “the desire or the intent of a person to do something.”¹²² That God has no desire to see anyone perish in hell is made clear in such texts as Ezekiel 18:30-32, where the divine call is to “Repent and live.” If it is possible that unrepentant souls post-mortem can somehow be redeemed on the grounds of God’s love, then Jesus, in John 14:6, was either misrecorded, mistaken, or outright lied. But access to God’s love must be included in Christ as the means to “come” to God.¹²³ Justification, the sovereign act of God effected through the finished work of Christ, declares sinners to be made “just in His sight”, removing the penalty for sin.¹²⁴ Condemnation because of sin is removed only for those who are saved by faith in Christ (Romans 8:1). Justification comes through faith (Romans 5:1, Galatians 2:16). Those who die without faith in Christ go beyond the gracious offer of salvation; they remain forever hardened in their sin.

By spiritual death is meant that hardening of the sinful will which leaves no prospect of conversion to good. Such a condition is conceivable only if we presuppose that the consciousness of guilt, which as a rule accompanies sin, and under certain circumstances makes conversion possible, is crushed out. Nevertheless this process contains no guarantee that with a heightened degree of sin altogether the consciousness of guilt will entirely disappear. It is at work, without doubt, in the unhappiness and despair of lost men, and that it

¹²¹ Mounce, *Dictionary*, 788.

¹²² Mounce, *Dictionary*, 788.

¹²³ Frank D. Macchia, “The Doctrine of the Trinity: The Revolution of Christian Thought”, *AJPS* 27.2 (August 2024), 241.

¹²⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 724. “Justification” is a legal word for declaring the penalty for sin removed. It is a forensic term.

is entirely awaiting in the hardened, is improbable.¹²⁵

M. E. Boring's analysis of Paul's letters concluded there is a tension, that Paul taught both limited salvation as well as universal salvation; he affirmed human responsibility to respond to the offer of salvation in Christ and he also affirmed the "universal victory of God's grace".¹²⁶ He illustrates this tension by comparing 1 Corinthians 1:18 ("For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God") with Romans 5:18 ("Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people").¹²⁷ He offers Romans 5:12-21 as an example of Paul affirming universal salvation, particularly pointing to Romans 5:18, claiming that if sin and death do, for most of the human race, prevail, then "the saving deed of Christ would be 'much less' than the condemning deed of Adam."¹²⁸ Beverly Roberts Gaventa's exposition of Roman 5:12-21 compares verse 12 with verse 21, concluding:

And in both cases "all" means all, because God's power to redeem humanity exceeds even the combined powers of Sin and Death. If grace does not reign over all without exception, then grace is less powerful than Sin and Death.¹²⁹

In my view, I have no issue with either Boring or Gaventa claiming the universal provision of grace, that not one human being anywhere is excluded from the offer of grace. Grace is universally supplied because of the universal presence of sin in

¹²⁵ Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: the Positive Development of the Doctrine* (tr. Alexander Macaulay and H. R. Mackintosh) (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1900), 52.

¹²⁶ M. Eugene Boring, "The Language of Universal Salvation in Paul", *JBL* 105.2 (June 1986), 292.

¹²⁷ Boring, "Language", 269.

¹²⁸ Boring, "Language", 285-286. (Emphasis original.)

¹²⁹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Romans: A Commentary (NTL)* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2024), 151.

the world (Romans 1:18-3:20).¹³⁰ Where I take exception is affirming this universal provision of grace which will ultimately result in salvation for all people without exception. The grace of salvation is *sufficient* for all people; if every one of the billions who have ever lived were to avail themselves of God's offer of grace, that grace would never be exhausted. But the grace of salvation is *efficient* only for those who believe. As Paul declared in Ephesians 2:8-9,¹³¹ it is *by grace* one is saved, *through faith* (*dia pisteōs*), eliminating any human sense of accomplishing any part of the salvific offer or action. In keeping with Arminian understanding of soteriology, becoming saved ("elected") is conditional based on one's repentance and faith, that "the burden has been placed directly on man himself to accept or reject God's provision for taking away man's sin and bestowing grace on a person through Jesus Christ."¹³² Scripture is very plain that salvation comes only in and through Jesus, by the sovereign determination of the Father, and must be received through faith in Jesus as Savior. As Jan Lambrecht has written:

For Paul, salvation is by definition universal; it is meant for the whole of humankind. Yet salvation occurs through Christ, and through Christ alone. For Paul, Christ is the unique Savior and only the believers, i.e., those who have become Christians, constitute the universal, worldwide "church of God" (1 Corinthians 10:32).¹³³

Bettis argues the universalist claim "that God's love is better if it reaches all men" is humanism, assuming humans have some ability to exist on their own, outside any divine contribution, and are thus in position to receive God's love. Traditionally, however, Christianity has rightly asserted humans have no

¹³⁰ J. William Johnston, "Which 'All' Sinned? Romans 3:23-24 Reconsidered", *NovT* 53.2 (2011), 163.

¹³¹ I assume Pauline authorship of Ephesians.

¹³² Charles T. Clouser, "The Will of God in Mission According to the Use of the Word Predestined", *AJPS* 13.2 (2010), 171.

¹³³ Jan Lambrecht, "Universalism in 1 Corinthians 8:1 - 11:1?", *Gregorianum* 77:2 (1996), 339.

existence outside of God's sovereign love: "Men are not pre-existing objects for God to love. They are the *results* of his creative, sustaining and redeeming love."¹³⁴ An over-emphasis on divine love obscures the Biblical concepts of the justice of God. God is love, true, but He is also just. He will punish sin (Isaiah 13:11, 26:21, Lamentations 3:39). For those who respond to Christ by faith and are saved, the punishment for sin was accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who are not saved and die that way remain in the condemnation of their sin. For them, there is no "second chance" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Annihilationism. Annihilationism, also known as "conditional immortality" or "terminal punishment", is the view that those who die without salvation in Jesus Christ, and who by their own actions have chosen to distance themselves from God's "sustaining life" will disappear "from the cosmos".¹³⁵ One explanation of "annihilationism" is termed "conditionalist eventual extinctionism", where the wicked dead, when raised up to face judgment "they are finally extinguished, the punishment being proportionate to their sin."¹³⁶ Another "version" of annihilations is *immortalize eventual extinctionism*, the position that all people are treated immortal, but when the unrighteous dead are raised for judgment, they are annihilated subsequent to a period of time of suffering.¹³⁷

Alan Linfield's 1994 essay identifies the issues at hand in the traditionalist v. conditionalist view. The whole issue has at its core at theological and an exegetical problem, which depend on each other. The first issue is that of the immortality of the soul, and the second is the exegesis and subsequent interpretation of the Scriptural texts which, in one way or another, address the "ultimate fate of the wicked." As to the first issue, whereas

¹³⁴ Bettis, "A Critique", 336-337. (Emphasis original.)

¹³⁵ John G. Stackhouse, "Terminal Punishment", *Four Views on Hell*, 61.

¹³⁶ Kendall S. Harmon, "The Case Against Conditionalism: A Response to Edward William Fudge", *Universalism*, 197. The Seventh-Day Adventists hold to this view.

¹³⁷ Harmon, "Against Conditionalism", 197.

traditionalists are the soul is immortal when created, which it is fashioned as the *imago Dei*, and since it is immortal and in the image of God, it is not possible to succumb to an eternal death. The exegetical, second, issue, avers that if the soul is in fact immortal, then “eternal punishment” must be understood as “unending punishment.” But, if as the conditionalists affirm, that the immortality of the soul depends on “the acceptance of God’s forgiveness”, such Biblical symbols as “burning”, “second death” and “destruction” cannot but point to a divine judgment o the wicked dead resulting in “their final extinction or annihilation.”¹³⁸

Jacob Blain, well over a century ago, wrote a small book which advocated for annihilation for those who die outside salvation in Christ. He surveyed over twenty terms from the Bible, and with them, 200 Scriptures, particularly focusing on such as “destroy” and “perish”, to demonstrate his thesis that the Bible has always taught post-mortem annihilation for the finally impenitent.

Look over the fifty-three texts I have quoted, where the Holy Spirit has said the final doom of the sinner is death, and to die, and ask yourself if he only meant that he should be miserable eternally !! Do the same with the other nineteen terms. If perish means eternal woe in the Bible, then 1 Corinthians 15: 18, must mean that "they who sleep in Jesus," are in eternal woe. If destroy is sometimes applied to calamities on earth, it still means the ending of a thing, as of prosperity, liberty, country, character, &c, so to say it does not mean the ending of the thing to which it refers, is false. So when God says the man — the wicked shall be destroyed and perish, it is evasion, or "

¹³⁸ Alan M. Linfield, “Sheep and Goats: Current Evangelical Thought on the Nature of Hell and the Scope of Salvation”, *VoxE* 24 (1994), 65.

adding to his words," to say the wicked themselves are not meant.¹³⁹

A classic and important work on the subject of annihilation of the impenitent dead is that of Edward W. Fudge entitled *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*.¹⁴⁰ Fudge, although a layman endnote an academic by any rule, is yet a careful scholar, weighing both Old Testament and New Testament material, as well as that of the patristic writers. His analysis of whether Scripture supports a conscious eternal torment brought him to the conclusion the Bible supports an opposite reality, which he expresses early in his work.

Jesus warns of everlasting *punishment* in the age to come, and he also explains the nature of that punishment, as do Paul and John among others. It is the second *death*, the wages of sin. It is everlasting *destruction*, at the hands of god who is able to destroy both soul and body. To undergo this punishment is to *perish*—eternally and entirely, fully and forever—and to *forfeit eternal life*, the gift of God that throughout the New Testament always stands as the blessed alternative to death, destruction and perishing.

These details, and scores of others from both Testaments, provide a clearer view of the biblical hell than does the majority tradition of unending conscious torment.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Jacob Blain, *Death Not Life, or The Theological Hell and Endless Misery Disproved and the Doctrine of Destruction Established by A Collection and Explanation of All Passages on Future Punishment, also Metaphysical Arguments for the Immortality of the Wicked Exploded* (New York, NY: Office of the Bible Examiner, 1853), 22.

¹⁴⁰ 3rd ed., Cambridge, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2012.

¹⁴¹ Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 4 (italics in original).

Fudge, who identifies was a “conditionalist”, not an “annihilationist”, believes in “penal suffering culminating in total extinction.”¹⁴²

The idea of the immortality of the soul, which is part of the reasoning for a conscious eternal torment in hell, is not as much drawn from Biblical sources but rather from Platonist thought.¹⁴³ Plato believed the soul is “separable from the body”, which gave rise to two interpretations: one is that every human has two souls, one separable, one inseparable, and the other that there is but one separable soul that preserves such as memories, and memories can be “preserved in that soul even after it has become separated from the body.” It is the one-soul position which was adopted by many of the ancient church fathers.¹⁴⁴ Fudge notes many of the church fathers chose to modify their understanding of “immortality of the soul” in order to bring some separation between Platonism and their theology. For the fathers, the soul was not “inherently mortal”; it had a beginning that was the action of God, but whether it survived post-mortem “depends entirely on God’s will.”¹⁴⁵ Thus for certain of the fathers, immortality was conditional, not in any way guaranteed.

Murray Harris has argued that immortality belongs to those who have been regenerated in Christ, since “immortality includes sharing the life of God”, a destiny which could only include those “who have escaped the moral decay that is in the world because of lustful passions (2 Peter 1:4)”. He believes it is “inconceivable” for those who because of their dying in their sin, who are eternally excluded from God’s presence (2 Thessalonians 1:9), should “simultaneously enjoy the blessings

¹⁴² Harmon, “Against Conditionalism, 199.

¹⁴³ D. H. K. Hilborn, “Annihilationism”, *NDT*, 35; Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 19.

¹⁴⁴ Harry A. Wolfson, “Immortality and Resurrection in the Ancient Church Fathers” in *Immortality and Resurrection* (ed. Krister Stendahl) (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965), 79-80.

¹⁴⁵ Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 21. Among the fathers who held this position were Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tatian, Theophilus, Arnobius and Lactantius.

of his (i.e., God's) immediate presence and life. "Investiture with imperishability and immortality...is therefore denied to those who are 'separated from Christ' (Ephesians 2:12)." ¹⁴⁶ Stackhouse asserts 2 Thessalonians 1:9, where Paul says who do not know God (verse 8) will experience a punishment of "everlasting destruction" (*olethros*) ¹⁴⁷ (NIV), "eternal destruction" (ESV), completely shut out or being made away from the presence of God, which "cannot sensibly mean an endless process of being destroyed." The "obvious" point the apostle makes is that this destruction, occurring at some point after the Last Judgment, "has the grim ramification of being utter and irremediable: 'destroyed' as in 'gone forever'".¹⁴⁸

If the soul is truly immortal post-mortem, as Fudge has argued, then the souls of the finally impenitent will either suffer eternally in a conscious and very much experiential torment, or universalism will triumph as God restores the impenitent and frees them from hell.¹⁴⁹ Fudge quotes apologist Edward Carnell to show that God, in fact, is not obligated to give to any human any form of immortality.

Instead of teaching that man is of such infinitely incontestable value, that God, to be worthy of his name, must preserve him immortally, the Christian follows Paul's judgment that there is none righteous, no not one (Romans 3:10). man, then, deserves death, not life.¹⁵⁰

Clark Pinnock, whose views on the nature of God and of the afterlife changed later in life, was unflinching in his defense of annihilationism. In his article, "The Destruction of the Finally

¹⁴⁶ Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 198.

¹⁴⁷ Compare 2 Thessalonians 1:9 with 1 Corinthians 5:5, 1 Thessalonians 5:3, 1 Timothy 6:9.

¹⁴⁸ Stackhouse, "Terminal Punishment", 68.

¹⁴⁹ Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 25.

¹⁵⁰ Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 29.

Impenitent”,¹⁵¹ Pinnock first levels strong criticism of the “traditional” view of hell as a place of conscious, eternal torment: “Not only is it God’s pleasure so to torture the wicked everlastingly, but it will be the happiness of the saints to see and know this is being faithfully done.” He considered “the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity, a bad doctrine of the tradition that needs to be changed.” Referring to the nature of God as love, he argues: “Torturing people without end is not what our God does.”

Pinnock’s case for annihilation of the finally impenitent rests partly on his interpretation of certain OT passages. For example, he refers to Psalm 37 and the various descriptions of the wicked:

- Verse 2 - they will fade like grass and wither;
- Verses 9, 10 - they will be cut off and be no more;
- Verse 20 - they will perish and vanish like smoke;
- Verse 38 - they will be altogether destroyed.

He also refers to Malachi 4:1, where the wicked:

- The day of judgment will come “burning like an oven.”
- All arrogant and evildoers will be stubble.
- The day comes that will burn them up.
- They will leave neither root nor branch.

Pinnock then concludes: “The message is plain: the finally impenitent wicked will perish and be no more.”

¹⁵¹ This article originally appeared in the *Criswell Theological Review* 4.2 (1990), 243-259. The copy available to me came from <http://claypeck.com/articles/the-destruction-of-the-finally-impenitent-clark-h-pinnock/#sthash.zDTPmC6Z.dpuf>, accessed September 2, 2021. The copy does not have page numbers.

Another proponent of annihilationist/conditionalist eschatology was Philip Edgcumbe Hughes. Referring to Augustine's interpretation of Matthew 25:41, Hughes notes the conclusion Augustine drew — that there will be punishment eternal as well as life eternal. Hughes then argues:

The logic of this interpretation is sound enough so long as it is punishment that is spoken of as being endless. But, as we have seen, the ultimate contrast (as was also the original) is between everlasting life and everlasting death, and this clearly shows that it is not simply synonyms but also antonyms with which we have to reckon. There is no more radical antithesis than that between life and death, for life is the absence of death and death is the absence of life. Confronted with this antithesis, the position of Augustine cannot avoid involvement in the use of contradictory concepts, for the notion of death that is everlastingly endured requires the postulation that the damned be kept endlessly alive to endure it.¹⁵²

Hughes claims it is confusing to speak of “everlasting death” which is not death but being kept alive in suffering with the power of actually dying.¹⁵³ He is critical of Augustine's reinterpretation of eschatological death, which has been ingrafted into conservative evangelical theology, requires a radical redefinition of Biblical terms. Since “life” and “death” by definition, are opposed to one another, “the qualifying adjective *eternal* or *everlasting* needs to be understood in a manner appropriate to each respectively.”¹⁵⁴ He defines “everlasting life” as an existence without an ending point; “everlasting death”, then, “is destruction without end, that is, destruction without

¹⁵² Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, “Conditional Immortality”, *Evangel* 10.2 (Summer 1992), 10.

¹⁵³ Hughes, “Conditional Immortality”, 10.

¹⁵⁴ Hughes, “Conditional Immortality”, 11. (Emphasis original.)

recall, the destruction of obliteration.”¹⁵⁵ Stackhouse comes to the same basic conclusion when he writes:

Even when one of the words for destroy or destruction can be rendered as “ruin” (*apollunai, apoleia* ¹⁵⁶) it usually means - and always means, when it is linked with “fire” - the disintegration and disappearance of the thing in question.¹⁵⁷

Hughes asserts that “without the abolition of death the triumph of life and immortality cannot be complete.”¹⁵⁸ Marius Nel notes that hell is “the natural result of an individual’s decision to reject God and the good”; the logical *terminus ad quem* is that being separated from God, who is life, implies “the destruction of life.”¹⁵⁹

Within mainstream evangelicalism, however, the reaction to annihilationism as a better option than conscious, eternal torment has been strong. J. I. Packer, a staunch defender of the traditional view of hell and the afterlife, objects to characterizations of the traditional view of hell as missing the truth of what the Bible teaches. Packer argues:

- The Christian understanding of hell is “not a freestanding concept of pain for pain’s sake.
- Eternal punishment in hell is a grouping of significant miseries:
 - “Exclusion from God’s fellowship”, with punishment and with destruction;

¹⁵⁵ Hughes, “Conditional Immortality”, 11.

¹⁵⁶ E. g., Matthew 7:13, Romans 9:22 Timothy 6:9, 2 Peter 2:1, 2:3, 3:16; in contrast to salvation, Philippians 1:28.

¹⁵⁷ Stackhouse, “Conditional Immortality”, 69.

¹⁵⁸ Hughes, “Conditional Immortality”, 12.

¹⁵⁹ Marius Nel, “Rethinking hell from a classical Pentecostal perspective: Some ethical considerations”, *STJ* 7.1 (2021), 5.

- Punishment is upon “those whose negativity towards God’s humbling mercies” has already caused them to banish both the Father and the Son from their lives;
- People in hell receive what they have already freely chosen: “to be forever without God and without any of the good He gives.”¹⁶⁰

Simon Chan is critical of annihilationism for its failure to take in full consideration the idea of genuine human freedom; it “means the unmaking of free, created agents...the taking away of the freedom which defines the moral structure of the relationship between God and man.”¹⁶¹ Gerald Bray has argued annihilationism creates philosophical issues. If the end of the finally impenitent is annihilation at the Last Judgment, why does God delay their punishment, allowing them to experience an immediate afterlife of suffering apart from the presence of God? Further, from a Calvinist view, “if the non-elect have no hope of salvation and God does not want them to suffer unduly, why were they created in the first place? Their existence must serve some purpose, and one that is admitted (is) the view that their eternal punishment glorifies the justice of God seems perfectly logical.”¹⁶²

Chan further argues the annihilationist claim to understand Scripture in a more literal sense violates the intent of the use of metaphor in those passages which speak of hell. Have the finally impenitent become objects of God’s wrath as a divine act or do they experience that wrath (and all the accompanying negatives) because their “persistent self-will”?¹⁶³ On the idea of metaphor and analogy, Packer writes,

¹⁶⁰ J. I. Packer, “Evangelical Annihilationism in Review”, *RefRev* 6.2 (Spring 1997), 42.

¹⁶¹ Simon Chan, “The Logic of Hell: A Response to Annihilationism”, *ERT* 18.1 (January 1994), 17, 22.

¹⁶² Gerald Bray, “Hell: Eternal Punishment or Total Annihilation?” *Evangel* 10.2 (Summer 1992), 23.

¹⁶³ Chan, “The Logic of Hell”, 25.

For evangelicals, the analogy of Scripture, that is, the axiom of its inner coherence and consistency and power to elucidate its own teaching from within itself, is a controlling principle in all interpretation, and though there are texts which, taken in isolation, might carry annihilationist implications, there are others that cannot naturally be fitted into any form of this scheme. But no proposed theory of the Bible's meaning that does not cover all the Bible's relevant statements can be true.¹⁶⁴

Chan asserts annihilationists have not seriously taken stock of God's sovereignty. The claim is made that a traditional view of hell places a "blight" on God's (eschatologically renewed) creation.¹⁶⁵ Apparently the continued presence of a hell with conscious eternal punishment would mar the "perfection" of the eschatological kingdom. A place of eternal, conscious punishment creates an "unbiblical dualism" of "unending evil",¹⁶⁶ over against the eschatological pictures of a renewed creation (cf. Revelation 21:22-27, 22:1-5, cf. Isaiah 11:6, 65:25). If the wicked dead are infinitely annihilated, with them goes the evil (rebellion/disobedience, unbelief, rejection of grace) which characterized their earthly life.

But J. I. Packer points out that being made extinct poses exegetical problems with 2 Thessalonians 1:9. He argues that Paul's phrasing "punished with everlasting ("eternal", *aionios*) destruction" must be taken in balance with the following phrasing, "shut out from the presence of the Lord." It is only by existing that a person can be excluded.¹⁶⁷ If the presence of a place of conscious, eternal punishment is in a dualistic tension with a place of conscious, eternal bliss, then it is a deliberate dualism within creation, a decision by the Creator to display

¹⁶⁴ Packer, "Evangelical Annihilationism", 44.

¹⁶⁵ Chan, "The Logic of Hell", 22.

¹⁶⁶ Andy Saville, "Arguing with Annihilationism: An Assessment of the Doctrinal Arguments for Annihilationism", *SBET* 24.1 (Spring 2006), 78.

¹⁶⁷ Packer, "Evangelical Annihilationism in Review", 45.

both His unending grace and His justice. It is also, as Walls has written, a response to God's equipping humans with genuine free will. If God provides a measure of grace to all persons, a provision to awaken them to the offer of salvation in Christ, but some in their genuine free will choose to delay responding with the thought they will always have time to repent of their sin, "it may well be that they are forming, by that very attitude, a settled disposition to prefer their will to God's."¹⁶⁸ It becomes an issue of deliberate, chosen rebellion to the revealed will of God. The holiness and the righteousness of God is such that He must punish those who freely choose rebellion against Him.¹⁶⁹

Annihilationists/conditionalists respond that the goodness of God (which would necessarily include His holiness and His righteousness) would not consign a person to eternal torment; a "terminal punishment is more consonant with the goodness of God."¹⁷⁰ The question is whether the image of "fire" in connection with hell and finally, as the controlling description of the eschatological lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15), refers to a literal inferno or to, as Burk argues, "an image of God's holy wrath against sin."¹⁷¹ The extent of that wrath must be measured in light of God's offer of grace and the free will choice of some to shut off every means of possibly receiving the grace God chooses to offer.¹⁷² Scripture points out Jesus experienced the wrath of God for sin vicariously for those who would be saved.¹⁷³ Jesus was "made sin" by taking upon Himself the sin of the world (2 Corinthians 5:21), enabling righteousness in

¹⁶⁸ Walls, *Hell, the Logic of Damnation*, 94.

¹⁶⁹ Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 207.

¹⁷⁰ Stackhouse, "Conditional Immortality, 76.

¹⁷¹ Burk, "Eternal Conscious Torment Response", in *Four Views on Hell*, 85.

¹⁷² Walls, *Hell, the Logic of Damnation*, 123.

¹⁷³ Rustin Umstattd, "The Holy Spirit in Relation to God's Love and Wrath", *MJT* 7.1 (2008), 33. Umstattd points out that because God is holy, there is a standard by which people are judged; it is in the violation of that standard the precipitates God's wrath: "when his creation turns its back on him and attempts to find its good in some place other than him, his wrath is aroused against the offense. Sin is not the breaking of an impersonal law passed by a distant legislator, but is instead the rejection of God himself, and this rejection is none other than the rejection of all that is good and right" (31).

those who believe. For those who freely choose to reject the finished work of Jesus Christ in salvation, the wrath of God against sin is not *effectively* borne for them. They remain in sin and in that sin, become objects of God's wrath.

Annihilationists see no conflict with the wrath of God against sin and their position. As Fudge wrote:

To say the sin is never forgiven does not require unending conscious torment for committing it. The sinner who is destroyed both soul and body in hell, and so experiences the second death, is never forgiven, even though he dies, perishes, and is destroyed—or, in other words, he ceases to exist. The wages of sin is the second death. This unforgiven sinner experiences the full penalty for his sin. He dies, perishes, and is destroyed—but he is never forgiven.¹⁷⁴

In other words, God's wrath against sin is not compromised; the unrepentant fail to appropriate the gift of God of eternal life in Christ, they remain objects of divine wrath, and, as Fudge reasons, their experience of the "second death" is their extinction, perishing eternally without ever receiving forgiveness.

Fudge's conclusions have been criticized as being mostly special pleading. He claims the traditional view allows for "the thought (that) will always linger (will be) they (i.e., the unrepentant dead) might eventually find their way to salvation." If the wicked dead are not annihilated, then it is possible they may well find a way to be restored to God.¹⁷⁵ The problem here is a lack of Biblical justification for such a position. Consider first Revelation 14:10-11. In the context of the chapter, these dead are those who chose to worship the beast: "the consequence of drinking Babylon's cup is the inescapable

¹⁷⁴ Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 166.

¹⁷⁵ Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 285.

necessity of drinking the Lord's cup."¹⁷⁶ These damned souls are "tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb." The Greek for "tormented" is *basanisthēsetai*, a singular future passive¹⁷⁷ verb. There is no time qualification; upon judgment, these wicked dead will be tormented without rest or respite. If these were annihilated, made extinct, then they would cease to be actively in torment without rest or respite. One commentator reflecting on Revelation 14:10-11 does admit to it being a picture of divine brutality, wondering how the God of love and of mercy "could indulge in such an orgy of destruction and barbarity" but also admit it is God who judges, not humans.¹⁷⁸ But as Henry B. Swete wrote many years ago, "The partial punishments inflicted under the Trumpets have now given place to a judgement which is final and a sentence without time-limits."¹⁷⁹ Ralph Bowles objects to such conclusions, arguing the contextual setting of Revelation 14:10-11, drawing from Isaiah 34, argues for the annihilationist/conditionalist position; the rising smoke comes after the statement about "no rest day or night", which describes the unremitting, unrelenting nature of God's judgment. As to the traditional view of conscious, eternal torment, Bowles notes:

We look in vain in the description of the final judgement to find a picture of eternal, conscious torment. There is torment certainly, and great distress in the awesome judgement of God, but it ends in the decisive dissolution and obliteration of the enemies of God. The Conditionalist interpretation of Revelation 14:11 fits the immediate context much better than the eternal

¹⁷⁶ NLEKGT, 639.

¹⁷⁷ The passive voice indicates the subject receives the action of the verb (BGG, 153).

¹⁷⁸ Christopher Rowland, *Revelation* (London, UK: Epworth, 1993), 122

¹⁷⁹ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1907), 186.

torment reading.¹⁸⁰

Burk, defending the traditional view, sees the fire-image as “an expression of Gods holy and painful judgment on sin.” He points out the phrasing “for ever and ever” (*eis aiōnas aiōnōn*), according to BDAG¹⁸¹ “is formulaic and synonymous with ‘eternal’”.¹⁸² The same wording is in Revelation 4:10 , 10:6 and 15:7, in referring to God’s eternity; in 11:15 in speaking of the duration of God’s reign. It is perhaps an exegetical leap to allow for God as being *eis aiōnas aiōnōn* and understanding it no other way than He is timeless but to take the identical wording in Revelation 14:11 and infer the “torment” is not an eternal state of suffering but the eternity of the penalty, which is extinction.

Albert Barnes’ exposition of Revelation 14:11, on the nature of the smoke of the torment, affirms:

It implies that their torments continued, and were the cause of the ascending smoke; that is, there were tormented *while* it ascended, and as this is declared to be ‘for ever and ever’, it implies that the suffering of the wicked will be eternal; and this is such language as *would* not and *could* not have been used in a revelation from God, unless the punishment of the wicked is eternal.¹⁸³

It should come as no surprise that on this issue, like other theological topics, there is no consensus among commentators. There are those who favor the conscious eternal torment

¹⁸⁰ Ralph G. Bowles, “Does Revelation 14:11 Teach Eternal Conscious Torment? Examining a Proof-Text on Hell”, *EvQ* 73:1 (2001), 29.

¹⁸¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (trans. William F. Arndt and Frederick W. Danker; rev. and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Bauer’s fifth edition) (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1979).

¹⁸² Burk, “Eternal Conscious Torment”, *Four Views on Hell*, 40fn63.

¹⁸³ Albert Barnes, *Notes Explanatory and Practical on the Book of Revelation* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1852), 383 (Emphasis original).

view,¹⁸⁴ and those who believe the text speaks of final extinction.¹⁸⁵ Michaels doubts the text is meant to be a classical description of hell, tying it instead to the later total destruction of eschatological Babylon (Revelation 19:1, 19:3). He thinks “both scenes are momentary previews of ‘hell’ and hell’s finality in the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20; cf. Revelation 20:10, 20:14, 21:18) not the reality itself.”¹⁸⁶ From another approach, Wall is less inclined to see some objective form of divine punishment, instead preferring a symbolic representation of the wicked dead as completely apart from “God’s eternal shalom” which is to the ones who are “redeemed from the earth.” The vision of the torment of the wicked dead is more of a description of certainty concerning God’s judgment of the wicked.¹⁸⁷

The crux of the debate as to whether the wicked dead suffer conscious eternal torment or are simply annihilated, going completely out of existence, depends on how the term *aiōnōn* is understood and applied. The root *aiōn* is used in the LXX for the Hebrew *’ōlām*, “a long time or duration”, including “for ever, all time.”¹⁸⁸ Packer, commenting on 2 Thessalonians 1:9, asserts “punished with everlasting (eternal, *aionios*) destruction”, coupled with “shut out from the presence of the Lord, a phrase by its intent of exclusion “rules out the idea that ‘destruction’ meant extinction.”¹⁸⁹ But Hughes, arguing for conditional immortality, believes the exclusion of the wicked dead from the presence of the Lord will constitute suffering of “unbearable agony” immediately before such are “plunged into

¹⁸⁴ E.g., Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (NIVAC) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 374; Friedrich Dürstler, *Handbook to the Revelation of John* (tr. Henry E. Jacobs) (New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1887), 398; Alfred Plummer, *Revelation* (PC) (London, UK and New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909), 349; Swete, *Revelation*, 166.

¹⁸⁵ E. g., William Milligan, *The Book of Revelation* (EB) (London: UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1903), 250; Robert H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (ICC) (New York, NY: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1920), II:17.

¹⁸⁶ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation* (IVPNTC 20) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 175.

¹⁸⁷ Robert W. Wall, *Revelation* (NIBC) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 186.

¹⁸⁸ J. Guyot, “Time”, *NIDNTT*, III:827.

¹⁸⁹ Packer, “Evangelical Annihilationism in Review”, 45.

the abyss of irreversible destruction (“abyss of obliteration”) with the final fate of “destruction (in) the second death.”¹⁹⁰

God is described as *aionios* in Romans 16:26 and 1 Timothy 1:17 (*aiōn*), and the life He gives to the redeemed is similarly *aioniōs*; that God has no end is indisputable in the Scripture; He has life in Himself (His *aseity*) without any contribution from anything else. He is eternally divine, eternally living, eternally existing.¹⁹¹ If God as eternal, with no beginning or end, is rightly described as *aionios*, “eternal”, then it could be argued that the duration of the wicked dead in hell is also *aionios* without recourse.

What is necessary, and what those with conditional immortality/annihilationist leanings must contend, is the speciousness of any theology where the human element is placed prior to God’s justice. Bray argued the issue with attempts within evangelicalism to “mitigate the punishment of Hell” has been a paradigm shift from “divine justice to human suffering.” Annihilationists consider first the pain experienced by the wicked; they are right in their claim “no Christian (and certainly not God)” would find any pleasure in that suffering. God’s punishment of the wicked dead is not for the amusement or entertainment of the saints; His penalty on the impenitent dead is “in order to satisfy the demands of His own justice.”¹⁹²

Conclusion. Hell, then, as Paul Helm has written, is about pain, but more so it is a “full recognition of God’s justice”, along with a full vindication of His character, and a full glorification of His Being, “even by those who in this life have defied him and suffer for it.”¹⁹³ They suffer because they rejected the unmerited means of grace - Jesus Christ - being content to rely on the

¹⁹⁰ Hughes, “Conditional Immortality”, 12.

¹⁹¹ Carl F. H. Henry, “The Living God of the Bible”, *SBJT* 1.1 (Spring 1997), 18.

¹⁹² Bray, “Hell: Eternal Punishment or Total Annihilation?”, 24.

¹⁹³ Paul Helm, *The Last Things* (Edinburgh, UK and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 116-117.

fruitlessness of their own works and accomplishments to be made acceptable to God.

ABBREVIATIONS

A. D.	<i>anno domini</i> (“year of our Lord”)
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
AJPS	<i>Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies</i>
anon.	Anonymous
BBGG	Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
CJT	<i>Canadian Journal of Theology</i>
DPL	Dictionary of Paul and His Letters
EB	Expositor’s Bible
e.g.	<i>exemplo gratia</i> , “for example”
EGGNT	Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament
ESV	English Standard Version
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
fn	footnote
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
INT	Interpretation Commentary
IVPNTC	InterVarsity Press New Testament Commentary
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JISCA	<i>Journal of the International Society of Christian Apologetics</i>
KJV	King James Version
MJT	<i>Midwestern Journal of Theology</i>
MeJT	<i>Melanesian Journal of Theology</i>
NAC	New American Commentary
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NDT	New Dictionary of Theology
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NLEKGNT	The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament
NICNT	New International Commentary New Testament
NIDNTT	New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology
NLEKGNT	New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
n.p.	no publisher

Scott E. Osenbaugh

NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NLT	New Testament Library
PC	Pulpit Commentary
<i>RefRev</i>	<i>Reformation and Revival</i>
RS	<i>Religious Studies</i>
SBET	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
SBJT	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
STJ	<i>Stellenbosch Theological Journal</i>
tr., trans.	translated by, translator
TWOT	Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament
<i>VoxE</i>	<i>Vox Evangelica</i>

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