

# Wresting The Scriptures

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## **INTRODUCTION: Wresters Unaware.**

The Scriptures say plainly that the wicked PERISH (Psalm 37:20; 2 Thess. 2:10). They UTTERLY perish (2 Peter 2:12). They perish FOR EVER (Numbers 24:28). Christ's sheep, however, are given ETERNAL LIFE and shall NEVER PERISH (John 10:28). A clear contrast is made between perish and everlasting life (John 3:16), and them that perish and them that don't (1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15,16). Of the 154 times that Scripture uses a form of the word perish, its plain and primary meaning is to die, be destroyed, cease to be, etc. IT NEVER MEANS A PROCESS WITHOUT AN UNDERSTOOD END. Not once! The Divine vocabulary is so consistently clear and clearly consistent that such plain language must be wrested for proponents of endless torment to maintain their theory.

To wrest Scripture is to squeeze it until a contrary definition is wrung out of it. It is to twist or torture language into a false sense. It is akin to rack- to "put to the rack" (as Strong defines it). Such wrestlers will not allow the Scriptures to be their own commentary, or for God's own Word to define God's own words, or for plain words to mean what they say. Instead, they read the absorbed assumptions of their traditional creed (such as the immortality of the soul) into the text with the result being that the primary and plain sense of a word like perish is twisted and tortured until it means something more, or something less, but always something else- in this case, something not only somewhat different, but altogether opposite.

Peter said those who were "unlearned and unstable" did wrest Paul's writings, "as they do also the other scriptures unto their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). In the case of endless torment, those who are supposed to be exceptionally learned and especially stable nevertheless wrest the scriptures until destruction doesn't mean destruction. They are in such a habit of wresting that they are not aware they are doing it. In the same breath that they quote the should not perish of John 3:16, they subconsciously equate perish with eternal torment without feeling any need to justify the equation. Similarly, they wrest end into endless, squeeze burn on out of burn up, twist consumption into something that's never consumed, and torture destruction into not destroying anything. And death is put to the rack until it does not express the end of life, but rather an endless life of misery.

## **Linguistic Looting.**

It was said of R. A. Torrey that his "education was obtained in the best schools and universities of higher learning," and that "he was recognized as a great scholar." His message God's Blockades on the Road to Hell begins with two familiar texts, 2 Peter 3:9 and John 3:16. In the introduction he emphasizes that "the Lord is not willing that any should perish," and that "whosoever believeth in him should not perish (*italics his*)." Without any elaboration, this great scholar equates perish with eternal torment in Hell, "a place of extreme and unceasing bodily suffering... and of unceasing remorse (*italics mine*)." [1]

So this learned man twice quotes perish as the fate of the lost only to wrest its primary meaning of ceasing into unceasing. And he does it without feeling compelled whatsoever to vindicate his instantaneous inversion. John R. Rice hardly exhales between "It is repent or perish... turn or burn," and asserts that "the gate... that leadeth to destruction" is the gate to Hell, a place where "souls will be tormented forever." [2] Thus words that express a definite and final end (perish, destruction) are mysteriously made to articulate an agony that is endless (burn, tormented forever).

Such wresting is commonplace, but such wrestlers are seldom arrested - apprehended, captured, taken in for questioning. That is what I will endeavor to do in this article - arrest the wrestlers - to catch them in the act, take them into custody, and investigate the motives for their linguistic looting. And these are no petty thieves. They are habitual, repeat offenders whose criminal behavior is a larceny of language and a violence to vocabulary. They are not the liberals or the modernists who deny the truth of the Bible by rejecting the inspiration of Scripture, but rather they are the conservatives and fundamentalists who nonetheless distort the truth of the Bible by injecting the immortality of the soul. And their problem is not a bad heart, but an awful hermeneutic (method of interpretation).

## **Sine Sera- without wax.**

The apostle Paul, thankful for the opportunity and compelled by the responsibility of an open door to preach the gospel, declared that he handled the word of God sincerely, not corruptly. "Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life." He outlined a clear contrast between the obvious opposites of life and death. He continues, "And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ" (2 Cor. 2:14-17).

For the savour of his knowledge to be made manifest (clearly seen), the word of God, and the words of the Word (the very vessels of communication) must not be corrupted, but handled sincerely. And this is the difference between wresting the Scripture into meaning something it doesn't say, and resting in what it says. The Creator of language has used his creation to communicate, not to confuse. And He communicates quite well. He has used plain words, sincere words- Sine Sera, from the Latin potter's

guarantee that his vessels were without wax. And we must understand and handle such words sincerely, without wax. It is the "sincere milk of the word" that facilitates growth (1 Peter 2:2); the polluted poison of the corrupters hinders understanding. Paul sincerely understood and used perish as synonymous with death and as opposite of life. He did not corrupt these words, twist or torture them into a false sense. He did no violence to the Divine Vocabulary. No wax. No wresting. Sincerely handled, not corrupted.

### **The Plain & Primary Sense.**

But this is not the practice of the champions of endless torment, particularly with the words life and death. Scripture is replete with references to death as the penalty for sin: "The soul that sinneth, it shall DIE" (Ezekiel 18:20); "the wages of sin is DEATH" (Romans 6:23); "sin hath reigned unto DEATH" (Romans 5:21); "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and DEATH by sin; and so DEATH passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Romans 5:12); "sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth DEATH" (James 1:15); "he which converted the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from DEATH" (James 5:20); "if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall DIE in your sins" (John 8:24); "shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second DEATH" (Revelation 21:8).

But the wresters dare not let the plain word death stand uncontested. R. P. Amos writes, "The price or penalty for those sins is 'death;' i.e., eternal separation from God in conscious, fiery torment. 'The wages of sin is death (emphasis his).'" He could not let his readers understand death in its plain and primary sense. But in the next breath, Brother Amos presumably reverts back to that plain and primary sense of death: "However, Jesus Christ the Lord, by dying for our sins, has taken the penalty for us and paid our debt of sin in full to God... The victory lies in the Lord Jesus Christ and His death" (emphasis his).[3] Death is the only word R. P. Amos highlights in bold face. In the first instance he felt compelled to define it in a metaphorical sense of eternal separation from God in conscious, fiery torment. In the second instance, he did not. When he writes of Christ dying for our sin, would anyone readily understand that to mean eternal separation from God in conscious, fiery torment, or rather that "he laid down his life" (1 John 3:16; Cf. John 10:11; 15:13)?

### **LIFE & DEATH: Who shall never die?**

Sometimes the wresters simply deny what the plain wording of Scripture declares. When God said "Thou shalt surely die," the serpent said, "Thou shalt not surely die." When God says death, the wresters say not so. James Grant echoes the serpent, "The wicked shall never die." Jeremy Taylor concurs, "They shall burn eternally without dying." [4] Evangelist Hyman J. Appleman boldly asserts, "There is no death in Hell... There is no rest, no death, no ceasing of burning, blazing memory there." [5] Robert Murray McCheyne insists that "eternal hell... is the death sinners are to die, yet never die." Considering "the fate of Judas," McCheyne continues, "he wishes to die, but he will never be able to die. So it will be with all who shall go to Hell." [6]

**NEVER DIE?** That is the very language used in Scripture of believers, not the wicked: "whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?" (John 11:26). The wresters evidently believe it for the wicked, too. But God's Word repeatedly says the wicked shall perish. W. E. Dowell evidently disagrees with Scripture: "souls and bodies that cannot perish, but are capable of the greatest amount of suffering, will be plunged into hell, and suffer... for all the ceaseless ages of eternity!" [7] It is the Word versus the wresters: Shall perish OR cannot perish? Shall surely die OR shall not die? Bringeth forth death OR never be able to die?

God's Word never speaks of life to unbelievers, but wresters who tenaciously cling to the immortality of the soul assure unbelievers of what God only promises believers. Rick Jones alleges "You will live forever (italics his). The question is... where?" [8] Tatian: "The wicked live on for ever." James Grant: "The sinner shall live on through eternity." J. Angus: "The wicked shall live for ever." J. C. Furniss: "In hell they must live." [9] John L. Bray: "In Hell, men will live on after death." [10] F. W. Faber is explicit: "As truly as Europe lies across the ocean and as truly as thousands of men and women over there are living real lives and fulfilling various destinies, so truly is there a place called Hell- all alive this hour with the multitudinous (a multitude of) life of countless agonies and immeasurable graduations of despair. None, save the blessed in Heaven, have a more keen or conscious life than those millions of ruined souls..." [11] John Wesley is graphic: "They have no interval of inattention or stupidity; they are all eye, all ear, all sense. Every instant of their duration, it may be said of their whole frame that they are 'trembling alive all o'er/ and smart and agonize at every pore.'" [12]

### **LIFE & DEATH: Who shall live forever?**

Live forever? Live on through eternity? Live on after death? These are words descriptive of the gracious gift of eternal life to believers, but the wresters have claimed them for unbelievers! WHAT SAITH THE SCRIPTURE? Who shall live forever? "And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God HATH NOT LIFE" (1 John 5:11, 12). "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son SHALL NOT SEE LIFE; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). "If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever... Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have NO LIFE in you" (John 6:51-54). "And ye will not come to me THAT YE MIGHT HAVE LIFE" (John 5:40). It's the Word versus the wresters: hath not life OR all alive? shall not see life OR A keen, conscious life? no life OR alive all o'er? SHALL PERISH? OR SHALL LIVE FOREVER?

### A Notorious Scene of Their Crime.

To further make our case, we will now focus our attention on another notorious scene of their crime, Isaiah 33:14. It is a text that defenders of undying souls and unending anguish cite oft as proof of their horrible hypothesis. They are unabashed in lifting the verse out of its chapter, and isolating one of its phrases, everlasting burnings, out of its setting, thus allowing its disconnected wording to play right into the assumptions of their audience. If they would defend the integrity of their intentions, they would have to confess the carelessness of their research. If they didn't mean to mislead, neither did they bother to verify. Did they even read it, or just repeat it? Once the text is examined in context it becomes evident that to dangle the disconnected phrase as a proof-text of endless torment is either to knowingly deceive, or to unknowingly be deceived. Hopefully, it's a case of a lazy parrot, not a wily fox.

Before arresting some of the wresters of everlasting burnings, here is the context of the verse:

#### ISAIAH 33:10-16.

10 Now will I rise, saith the LORD; now will I be exalted; now will I lift up myself.

11 Ye shall conceive chaff, ye shall bring forth stubble: your breath, as fire, shall devour you.

12 And the people shall be as the burning of lime: as thorns cut up shall they be burned in the fire.

13 Hear, ye that are far off, what I have done; and ye that are near, acknowledge my might.

14 The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?

15 He that walks righteously, and speaks uprightly; he that despises the gain of oppressions, that shakes his hands from holding of bribes, that stops his ears from hearing of blood, and shuts his eyes from seeing evil;

16 He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks: bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure.

The magnanimous Dr. D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, identified on the back cover of his book *Why I Believe* as “one of the most listened to ministers in the world today,” and “author of forty books,” is our first suspect. In the chapter “Why I Believe in Hell,” he begins, “No subject in the world is so repugnant to the human mind as this one, yet no subject is of greater importance. Jesus wept when he contemplated the destruction of Jerusalem. God himself says, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked’ (Ezekiel 33:11). No Christian can find joy in the contemplation of the final abode of the impenitent (*italics mine*).” What a way to begin- paralleling destruction and death with the final abode of the impenitent, an abode Dr. Kennedy says is a place of “endless punishment” (which to him means eternal torment)! To correct “the delusion that hell has evaporated,” we are asked to consider the words of “the great Princeton theologian, A. A. Hodge” stressing the consensus of “the Jews... all the great church fathers, Reformers, and historical churches... all the great evangelical theologians and biblical scholars (*italics mine*).” The thrust of his urgings are to affirm that “the wicked are to suffer forever... the endlessness of the future sufferings... that the unbeliever will go into endless punishment.” **[13]**

While I appreciate the sober demeanor of Dr. Kennedy's discussion of such appalling thoughts, I was disappointed that he relied so heavily on the quotes of great men to confirm his belief, such as Joseph Stiles' hollow extract that supposedly proves “that the laws of our nature demand that there be a hell,” and of course an endless one. And then he quotes Hodge again, and later follows with four consecutive quotes by the eloquently expressive William Munsey. Now for someone who is obviously well read, it is astounding that Dr. Kennedy did not read his Bible more carefully.

When he finally gets around to quoting God's words on hell, he alleges without any attempt at evidence, “The Scriptures state that if the effects of our sins are everlasting, then the punishment for our sins will also be everlasting.” Since the Scriptures supposedly state such a thing, it should have been easy enough for Dr. Kennedy to quote it, or at the very least give the reference. But there is nothing but the naked assertion. I guess we are to take Dr. Kennedy's word for it.

He continues, “We are told that sinners dwell in 'everlasting burnings' (Isaiah 33:14).” **[14]** It is here that we present our warrant for this wrester's arrest. He falsely identified a question as an assertion, wrongly assuming the answer to the question, and put the phrase everlasting burnings to the rack to wrest devouring into tormenting. In Isaiah 33:14, we are not told, we are asked! We are not “told that sinners dwell in 'everlasting burnings,’” but the question is asked, “Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?” The next verse continues: “He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly...” If this is not the direct answer to the preceding question (sure sounds like it is- Cf. Psalm 15:1, 2), the answer is nonetheless not that sinners will dwell with everlasting burnings! It is rhetorical at worst- who could possibly dwell with devouring fire and everlasting burnings? Certainly not sinners who are likened to chaff, stubble, lime, and thorns!

The context confirms our point: “Ye shall conceive chaff, ye shall bring forth stubble: your breath, as fire, shall devour you.” Chaff and stubble could not dwell (continue to abide) with devouring fire and everlasting burnings! FIRE DEVOURS CHAFF AND STUBBLE! It is further reinforced: “And the people shall be as the burnings of lime: as thorns cut up shall they be burned in the fire.” Lime and thorns could not dwell with devouring fire and everlasting burnings. FIRE CONSUMES LIME AND THORNS! These plain words, taken sincerely and not corrupted, picture complete destruction, not continual torment. They have to be wrested to express endless agony.

### **Word Rustlers of the Old Wrest**

This wresting by Dr. Kennedy provides a typical example of how Isaiah 33:14 is employed as a proof-text for endless torment. And I should emphasize typical- it is not exceptional. Without going into the detail we did with “one of the most listened to ministers in the world today,” we will nevertheless round up a gang of his cavorting cohorts- word rustlers of the Old Wrest.

The colorful Southern Baptist of “Payday Someday” fame, R. G. Lee, hoary headed like Robert E., rides in the lead. He let everlasting burnings stand alone and play to the assumptions of his hearers as he summarized his message *Is Hell a Myth?* He says, “Hell is a lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). A devouring fire (Isa. 33:14). A bottomless pit (Rev. 20:1). Everlasting burnings (Isa. 33:14).”**[15]** He continues with a long list of such descriptions. Lee’s listeners, at least those who would not bother to look up the references (which would be most if not all), would naturally assume that Isaiah 33:14 was verily depicting their understanding of hell. They would not suspect that another branding iron had distorted the original identifying mark. No, Dr. Lee, hell is not a myth, but that Isaiah 33:14 describes endless torment is.

### **Doctor Desperado.**

John Walvoord, the genteel Dad Cartwright of the Dallas Theological Ponderosa, should have known better, yet quotes verse 14 without comment, which is its own comment. Beforehand he writes, “The Bible is clear that judgment follows the death of the wicked; see Job 21:30-34, where the idea that the wicked escape punishment and are spared from the day of calamity and God’s eternal wrath is declared to be ‘falsehood.’ Obviously, the wrath of God is more than mere physical death.” **[16]** Yes, the Bible is clear that judgment follows the death of the wicked, and obviously, the wrath of God is more than mere physical death. But more does not equal endless!

The very passage Dr. Walvoord cites tells us “the wicked is reserved to the day of destruction,” and “shall be brought forth to the day of wrath.” But most of his readers probably won’t look the reference up and discover his tidy twisteroo. At his rack, the day of destruction becomes the day of calamity, and “the day of wrath” becomes “God’s eternal wrath.” So sincere words that are both clear and obvious in expressing a limited day of destruction are cleverly corrupted by this wresting desperado into confessing an infinite eternal wrath and punishment (eternal and punishment being words that Dr. Walvoord supplies that are nowhere to be found in the text in Job). Day equals eternal? Only after it’s terribly tortured on the rack of a wrestler!

The Old Testament prophet Malachi and the New Testament apostle Peter speak plainly of “the great and dreadful day of the LORD,” and both articulate a complete destruction by fire: “behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall BURN THEM UP” (Malachi 3:16-4:6); “the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men... the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be BURNED UP” (2 Peter 3:1-12). Truly, the day of wrath is the day of DESTRUCTION! To twist it into eternal torment, Dr. Walvoord, is falsehood.

### **Everlasting Burnings Wresting Gang.**

J. M. Humphrey, in the chapter “No Annihilation in Hell” of his sober book *The Lost Soul’s First Day in Eternity*, connects Isaiah 33:14 with the torments of the rich man in Luke 16: “The rich man in hell lifted up his eyes, being in torments. The wicked shall dwell with everlasting burnings.”**[17]** Again, the phrase is lifted to stand alone, without context or comment. Again, the question is changed into a statement. The unsuspecting would obviously suppose that the everlasting burnings must be speaking of the place where the wicked rich man dwells. And the wily fox or lazy parrot would have them so suppose.

Under the heading, “Sheol signifies the place of future retribution,” W. G. T. Shedd, quotes Isaiah 33:14 without context or comment as part of “that large class of texts in the Old Testament which represent God as a judge, and assert a future judgment, and a future resurrection for this purpose.”**[18]** I would agree with these futures, but as we learned from the context of the oft isolated text, the everlasting burnings speaks of a future judgment of devouring fire in which sinners will not be able to dwell, but will be like chaff, stubble, lime, and thorns devoured by fire.

So these are some of the Everlasting Burnings Wresting Gang. Oh, but there were and are many others. Dear John Wesley would use the term everlasting burnings (without the reference) like a cliché in speaking of hell and future punishment (for verification, do a word search on his sermons on *The Essential Christian Library CD-Rom*). Beloved Matthew Henry’s commentary ties the verse to the endless torment of an immortal soul: “His wrath will burn those everlastingly who make themselves fuel for it. It is a fire that shall never be quenched, nor ever go out of itself; it is the wrath of an ever-living God preying on the conscience of a never-dying soul.” Articulate Brother Henry fails to explain how devouring fire will burn those everlastingly, or how fuel described as chaff, stubble, lime, and thorns should be understood to relate to a never-dying soul!

Henry Constable, champion extraordinaire for conditional immortality, lamented in his day (the late 1800’s) that the isolated portion of verse 14 “is very often brought forward in proof of the eternity of future misery,” but which to his sincere handling of the Word “affords very valuable proof that the eternity which it affirms of future punishment does not refer to any eternity of life in misery; but to the eternal extinction of life...”**[19]** In our own day, Carl G. Johnson includes Isaiah 33:14 (alone, of course) in a listing of verses under the heading “What the Old Testament Says About Hell and the Eternal Punishment of the Wicked.”**[20]** And Brother Carl has plenty of contemporary company.

EVERLASTING BURNINGS and PERISH and DESTRUCTION and DEATH and LIFE are by no means the limit of their wresting. It is astonishing what all the worm of Mark chapter 9 can be twisted into (like soul, conscience, consciousness, or memory). But of course when it says “the worm dieth not,” the word dieth (at least in this one instance) is understood in its plain and primary sense. Here the wresters nearly twist themselves into a knot. If the worm is the soul, and death means “eternal separation from God in conscious fiery torment” (see R. P. Amos’ definition above), then the soul of man will never be eternally separated from God in conscious fiery torment. Thus the wresters inadvertently turn their own proof-text into a pretext for universalism!

### **CONCLUSION: Guilty as Charged!**

And by these same wresters, punishment is squeezed into being equivalent to torment, not destruction (“who shall be PUNISHED WITH EVERLASTING DESTRUCTION“- 2 Thess. 1:9); smoke into being the testament of continual torture, not the evidence of complete consumption; and a fire so powerful that it cannot be quenched into something so weak that it cannot consume the most combustible items imaginable, such as chaff, stubble, dried branches, and cut thorns. And on the wrestler’s rack, eternal life is not the gift of the immortal God, but rather the possession of an immortal soul; it is not received from Christ through a new birth, but from Adam through our first birth; and it is not promised solely to the righteous through regeneration and received at the resurrection, but to all mankind, including the wicked, through generation, and realized at death.

At least some of these wresters have now been arrested. They have been charged with twisting the words, corrupting the Word, and deceiving the masses. They have been caught in the very act of violence to vocabulary and larceny of language. The mangled forms of their tortured victims have been examined. The evidence against them has been probed. And they have been found Guilty as charged!

Their followers are hereby sentenced to life... in study of the Scriptures to see whether these things are so. THEY MUST CAREFULLY READ SUCH PLAIN WORDS, SINCERELY HANDLE SUCH CLEAR WORDS, AND HUMBLLY BELIEVE SUCH TRUE WORDS. May God abundantly bless the honest heart who will love truth more than tradition, and seek to please God more than men.

**All the words** of my mouth are in righteousness; there is **nothing** forward or perverse in them. They are all **plain** to him that understands, and **right** to them that find knowledge. Proverbs 8:8, 9

### **FOOTNOTES:**

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3. Amos, R. P., The Church- A Discipleship Manual for the Body of Christ, Henrietta, NY: R. P. Amos, p. 7.
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5. Appleman, Hyman J., “Hell- What Is It?”, Great Preaching on Hell, pp. 142, 143.
6. McCheyne, Robert Murray, “Eternal Punishment”, Great Preaching on Hell, pp. 54, 55.
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10. Bray, John L., Do We Live After Death?, South Jacksonville, FL: Evangelist John L. Bray, 1951, p. 25.
11. Cited by Lee, Robert Greene, “Is Hell A Myth?”, Great Preaching on Hell, p. 94.
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13. Kennedy, D. James, Why I Believe, Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1980, pp. 73, 74.
14. Ibid, p. 78.
15. Op. Cite, Lee, “Is Hell A Myth?”, p. 102.
16. Walvoord, John F., “The Literal View,” Four Views on Hell, William Crockett, editor, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992, p. 17.
17. Humphrey, J. M., The Lost Soul’s First Day in Eternity, St. John, IN: reprinted by Larry Harrison, no date, p. 69.
18. Shedd, W. G. T., The Doctrine of Endless Punishment, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998 (First published 1885), pp. 22, 26, 27.
19. Op. Cite, Constable, pp. 195, 196.
20. Op. Cite, Johnson, pp. 19, 21.