

THE BIBLE TEACHES ANNIHILATIONISM

By Joseph Dear

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PART 1: OPENING SECTIONS

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Introduction

So, this will probably be the most controversial theological piece I will ever write. If not, it will be close to it. But I hope it never gets more so.

So here's what I'm talking about: Hell.

Now, there are different ideas floated about regarding this issue. Some take the descriptions of everlasting fire and a lake of burning sulfur literally, where all of the unsaved are burned alive, tormented in excruciating, unspeakable, unimaginable pain, day and night, endlessly, for ever and ever. Others claim that those descriptions are more symbolic, that the lake of fire and the descriptions of fire and worms in *Gehenna* are only pictures, not literal descriptions of the real thing, and that the true fate of the damned is so horrible that the writers had to settle for conscious burning as a picture because they couldn't come up with anything more terrible to use as a symbol for it. And others will say that Hell's torments are not caused by fire or any actual tortures inflicted, but rather by the pain of being separated from God.

Whatever the case, for obvious reasons, nobody likes to talk about Hell. I remember the reactions that many people gave when I told them about that time I visited a church in my home town. As my story goes, in the middle of a sermon, the pastor, imitating a conversation with a hypothetical non-believer, eventually gets impatient with hearing (out of his own mouth), "But I'm a good person." Then, red-faced and all, pounding the altar with his fist, he yelled something to the effect of, "What I know, is that you're going to Hell for ever and ever and ever and ever!" Most whom I told this story to were pretty put off, yet as appalled as most people were, that's

pretty much what we believe. It's really just a matter of how much you think about it and how bluntly you say it.

B. Where Am I Going With This?

What if the damned aren't consciously tormented for ever and ever, but rather, one day, they are destroyed completely? I am firmly convinced that, contrary to popular belief, the Bible teaches annihilationism.

Some of you may have never even heard of such an idea before now. Some of you may have investigated it but are not convinced (which I hope will have changed after you've reached the end of this). On the whole, most Christians have probably never given it much serious consideration. After all, people who believe it only do so because they can't bring themselves to believe in eternal torment, right? It is just an unbiblical belief of cults, isn't it? A few people who have yet to be exposed to the Bible in any depth might buy into the shallow arguments of cultists or liberals, but no one who has read any significant portion of the New Testament could have any doubt that the Bible teaches the eternal conscious existence of all people, right? Or who is to say that I hadn't just heard some really exciting conspiracy theory that says that the early church turned away from the truth for some nefarious reason and ran with it because, well, why not?

And yet, as much as I disdain the idea of God torturing people for eternity, I held the traditional view during my most formative years as a believer and still raised my arms in worship higher than most, so it obviously wasn't a deal breaker. I haven't decided that the traditional doctrine of Hell is too horrible to be true, or that I'd rather it not be true, and so therefore annihilationism must be true.

Annihilationism may be held by some people and groups with terrible theology, but I can assure you that I am no Christadelphian or Jehovah's Witness. I'm not even a Seventh-Day Adventist. I am still a born-again, evangelical Christian. Really, I am. When push comes to shove, if I have to choose (as I usually do) between a church with otherwise good, biblical, evangelical theology that also believes in eternal torment in Hell, and one whose only upside is that it teaches annihilationism (as opposed to just tolerating it among its members), I will pick the former without question.

I haven't seen Romans 6.23 for the first time and thought "Death? Oh ok that changes things..." Even as a very young Christian in college, knowing the Bible has always kind of been my thing among those who know me. Of course, a lot of people who know the Bible as well as I or even better still hold to the traditional view, but nonetheless, I am by no means biblically illiterate. I've read the Bible cover to cover. I've read about "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment." I've read Revelation multiple times and I know about 14.9-11 and 20.10. It's not as though the traditional view is based on nothing, but that doesn't make it right.

And, I haven't read some cheap imitation of *The Da Vinci Code* that claims that there was some conspiracy in the 2nd century to change what the Bible says about Hell. I don't buy into that any more than I buy into *The Da Vinci Code* itself! Indeed, over time the error of eternal torment became the norm, but, well, as church history makes abundantly clear, these kinds of things happen sometimes.

This is what is true: I am just basing the idea on a thorough examination of scripture using normal rules of hermeneutics, interpretation, and language. This idea is not only biblically possible, but the biblical evidence for it is far stronger than it is for the traditional view that the unsaved in Hell will be tormented for ever and ever. Do I believe that you should all believe in

annihilation? Yes. Nevertheless, I do understand that I'm probably asking you to turn a huge part of everything you believe upside down. For many, this means going against cherished confessions, traditions, denominational statements of faith, and the teachings of many great men. Ultimately, I'm asking you to change your view of eternity itself. Nevertheless, what's true is what is true, and what's biblical is what is biblical. "Don't believe something just because you want to, and don't embrace an idea just because you've always believed it. Believe what is biblical. Test all assumptions against the precious words that God gave us in the Bible" (Chan and Sprinkle 15). That was written in a book defending the traditional view of Hell, but it sums up the position we should all be taking all the same.

C. To Those Who Know Me, and to the Body of Christ at Large

Those not familiar with this topic may be shocked at the kinds of outright slander and character assassination that come about when someone brings up annihilationism. Those who hold to my view are all liberals. We're all Jehovah's Witnesses in disguise. We don't take sin seriously (or worse, we believe this so we can feel better about sinning more). We don't care about what that the Bible says, at least not enough to believe something we don't like. Anyone who becomes a conditionalist eventually abandons the core truths of the Christian faith and becomes a liberal and then an unbeliever entirely. If we were real men, we'd keep a stiff upper lip and believe in eternal torment (I'm not sure what that would mean for godly women, but no matter).

It's all rather remarkable, and disheartening, because we are supposed to be different from the rest of the world. Admittedly, it could be worse; as far as I know no annihilationist seminary professor has been stabbed to death by his own students like medieval universalist

Johannes Scotus Erigena (Turner 89). Still, it is so important that, as the children of God and the light of the world, we be able to handle debates over these issues with kindness and grace, because we are not part of the world anymore. We're children of God, and like it or not we are supposed to love one another as we would love our own brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers, as I'd like to think I have done for all of you who know me. You won't see me attacking any traditionalist personally; I will aggressively attack and refute all forms of poor reasoning, fallacious arguments, and clear misunderstandings that contribute to the inaccurate view that the Bible teaches eternal torment. Admittedly, I can also be a little sarcastic. Nevertheless, I will not forget that we are one family bound together not biologically, but by blood. Those whom I know personally who have heard my beliefs have largely been very civil and Christ-like about it. Most of my closest Christian friends still believe in the traditional view of Hell (for now). I expect nothing less of you who read this now, because we are redeemed and remade by the blood of Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us.

I'm all for open debate. Disagree with something I say? I am perfectly willing to discuss it further. If I wasn't looking for open discussion, why would I have written this? However, if you disagree with annihilationism, and you're not willing to seriously investigate this and what I have to say, then what good are statements like "Jesus spoke about Hell more than Heaven," and "God is holy and just so eternal torment must be true"? Obviously, I won't agree with anyone who says that it's pretty well established that souls are immortal. That won't get us anywhere. I don't make this up; this is from the scriptures. They are the final authority, so continue to investigate for yourselves, and we can go from there.

If you've come this far and have decided that you don't want to get into this right now, then that's fine. You really should at some point, because of how serious and important this is,

but this isn't exactly light reading, so I understand. Just understand that it's hard for me to accept criticism of and objections to the doctrine, at least as I present it, if you don't even know what I am saying. Think about it; I have devoted thousands of hours to study and to the composition of this book, all in order to comprehensively, in one place, prove my case and address relevant objections to it. Odds are, I've probably addressed whatever objection you might have. I may or may not have done so successfully, but the point is, if you bring something up to me personally, I'm probably just going to direct you to a relevant section anyway...

There's a lot of material here; this goes way beyond a simple conversation. I've been working on this off and on for years, so I don't expect you all to burn through it in a day. Nevertheless, if you think about it, you'll all have to deal with these tough issues eventually. I guess it's been decided that, if you haven't already, you will start dealing with these tough issues now.

I'm sorry if I sound a little defensive; it's nothing against any of you. You know I love all of you. I'm not merely a reader of the word, after all. I just want to make myself very clear because these things can get ugly.

II. THIS IS LONG BECAUSE IT IS THOROUGH, NOT BECAUSE I'M WRONG

It shouldn't be this way, but I can imagine that some are going to look at how long this is, how long sections on single verses can get, how multi-layered my arguments can be, and assume that I must not know what I'm talking about. No way someone should have to spend 20 or 30 or even 40 pages on a single verse unless they were just full of it, right? I must be resorting to "verbal gymnastics," right? Surely, I could make my points more concisely if they were valid, right? Surely I could just take scripture at "face value" (see Section IV) if I were on God's side, couldn't I?

However, this is a very controversial position that I am advocating, and there will be a lot of arguments against everything I say. Is it not up to me to defend such a controversial claim? I don't spend over 40 pages explaining how Revelation 20.10 is consistent with annihilationism; I spend about 2 pages explaining that (in-depth). The rest is me backing up my arguments with scripture and defending my interpretation against any number of arguments that could be made against it. I can tell you in a few sentences why Matthew 25.41 doesn't mean eternal torment, or why 2 Peter 2.6 speaks of annihilation of the lost, but who would be convinced by that when many traditionalist arguments are made against such claims? If it is claimed (with little evidence) that Jews all believed in eternal torment and thus Jesus must have affirmed that view by not refuting it, is it "verbal gymnastics" to give multiple examples of annihilation found in writings from the time period? I am being thorough; that's not in any way a fault of mine.

III. WHAT I WILL AND WILL NOT BE ARGUING

- I will be arguing, from the Bible, that the Bible teaches annihilationism. I will be assuming that the reader believes that the Bible, if not inerrant, is at least fully authoritative and accurate when it speaks of the things of God. NOTE: I also assume, in writing this, that what the Bible says supersedes all creeds and church traditions.

- I will not be arguing, in any real way, that the Bible is accurate or that it supersedes church tradition. As I said above, I assume those claims to be true from the start.

- I will be arguing that, rather than being consciously existent in a place or state of torment endlessly, for ever and ever, the condemned will, after the resurrection and final judgment, be destroyed and/or made non-existent.

- I will not be arguing that the wicked pass into non-existence at death. All men will be resurrected and judged. Even if it is nothing more than the terror of standing before God and being declared guilty, all unsaved people will have to answer for their sins.

- I will be arguing that the Bible teaches annihilationism to be true no matter what the intermediate state is like. It doesn't matter whether the dead, between their death and the resurrection, live on as immaterial beings or cease to have any sort of conscious existence. Whether men are only flesh, or whether they are a body and an immaterial soul (or even a body, soul, and spirit), it will not matter for our purposes here.

- I will not be arguing for any one position about what happens between death and the resurrection over another. Consider the position put forth here to be undecided or neutral. That said, the fact that I do not come down on one position over another other here is not a weakness, but rather, a strength. The fact that annihilationism is true under any number of views about the intermediate state means that it is not dependent on any one view. Thus, simply disproving a

view about the intermediate state, or proving a different one, would not affect the truth of annihilationism. By not saying one way or another what the “soul” is, my theology may not fit into a nice orderly system from where a view of eternal punishment can be formed, but it doesn’t matter. Even if I can’t tell you for certain what the soul is, I can tell you that, whatever it is, the Lord said it will be destroyed in Hell along with the resurrected body (Matthew 10.28).

Regardless of what the composition of man ultimately is, the Bible tells us that that whole person who is not covered by Jesus’s blood will be done away with, and that is what matters.

- I will be arguing that the second death, the final fate of the damned, either is or results in permanent extinction, regardless of what occurs in the intermediate state.

- I will not be arguing that people necessarily pass into non-existence or unconsciousness at death prior to the resurrection. Again, the eternal state and the intermediate state are different. I want to emphasize this: arguments that the soul survives past death do *not* at all disprove annihilationism, even if they are true (which I don’t necessarily grant).

- I will be arguing that when nouns of action are qualified as “eternal,” it does not necessarily mean that the action itself continues eternally (because in some cases in scripture this is undeniable, as commentators on both sides of the debate argument will agree). Rather, it can speak to the action’s results lasting for eternity, and not the action itself.

- I will not be arguing very strongly for any alternative interpretations of the Greek and Hebrew words for "eternal" (e.g. that they are not referring to a length of time at all or they only mean a long time but not eternity). This is because there is no need for me to do so. Although there are situations where they *may* mean something other than for ever and ever, and if so, it would only help my case, at no point *must* this be the case for conditionalism to be true. I will show how even if every time the words are used, they are correctly rendered as "eternal" and

qualify something as to make it last for eternity, that still is not a significant challenge to the annihilationist doctrine.

- I will be arguing that “life” and “death” are complex ideas, and they sometimes do refer to literal, biological life and death (as opposed to always referring to knowing or being separated from God, respectively). More importantly, I will argue that, although life in the sense of “eternal life” does refer to more than just conscious existence, you will not have continued conscious existence if you do not have life.

- I will not be arguing that life always means existence and death non-existence. I agree that there is more to it. I simply don't make the fallacious assumption that since life can mean something more than just existence, death (in the spiritual sense) must include existence and cannot include non-existence.

- I will be arguing that annihilation is a form of eternal punishment because, once the punishment is inflicted, it is never reversed.

- I will not be arguing that the Bible does not teach that there is “eternal punishment” of the damned. I elaborate on this much more in Section XVI on Matthew 25.46, but this is important. After all, if annihilationism were a denial that the Bible teaches eternal punishment, then all you'd need to do is open up to that verse and that would be that. I credit Glenn Peoples for pointing out the importance of making this point clear at the beginning (“Why I Am an Annihilationist” 1). I agree that the lost will suffer eternal punishment, and I use that phrase throughout. The question is, what is their punishment and what does it mean for it to be eternal?

- I will be arguing against some emotional and philosophical arguments against conditional immortality (although many I simply ignore and dismiss on the grounds that scripture overrides human philosophy and emotion).

- I will not be arguing for annihilationism on emotional or philosophical grounds (except to the extent necessary to refute philosophical arguments against it). You will never hear me say that not even Hitler was as horrible as God is said to be. Now, I do believe that eternal torment is inconsistent with the character of God, but that is first and foremost because the Bible says that God will not torment anyone endlessly.

- I will be arguing that the damned cease to exist as sentient beings that can feel or think or have conscious punishment inflicted upon them. I argue that, for them, it will be as it were before God created them from dust and breathed the breath of life into them.

- I will not be arguing that it is necessary for God to completely annihilate every subatomic particle that makes up their bodies and every supernatural element that makes up a human soul. It doesn't matter if the damned end up like a completely totaled car that, even though it does not operate or even resemble a car, still "exists." It doesn't matter if they are like corpses which still "exist," or the ashes and remains of something burnt in fire. More on this will be discussed in Section V.

IV. THINGS TO SAY BEFORE WE DIVE IN (DEFINITIONS, FORMAT, ETC.)

A. Definitions

For the purpose of what I am writing about, annihilation and annihilationism refer to the belief that the wicked are eventually destroyed and deprived of conscious existence *after* their resurrection and judgment. It is not to be confused with the false belief that there is no resurrection or conscious suffering of the damned at all (some actually believe that they just die and that's that).

I will use the terms “annihilationism” and “conditionalism” (as well as “annihilationist” and “conditionalist”) interchangeably. Technically, the terms do refer to different doctrines, but the end result is the same either way, and most who hold to one hold to the other as well (as do I). For those not familiar with the terminology, annihilationism refers to the belief that God will annihilate the wicked (although it can also be misused as referring to the false belief I mentioned above). Conditional immortality is the view that all are inherently mortal unless God makes them otherwise. Technically, they don't have to go together. One could believe that immortality is inherent, not conditional, but that God will destroy those who are currently immortal and otherwise would have lived forever. Likewise, one could believe that immortality is conditional and therefore, God need not destroy them, since they will die off unless He sustains them. Of course, since jargon in any discipline can never be simple or consistent, you will probably find these terms used somewhat differently in some places (if you haven't already). But at least now you know what I mean! Ultimately, one way or another, the unsaved will one day cease to exist, and that is what matters for our purposes here.

The terms “the traditional doctrine,” “traditional view,” “traditionalism,” “eternal torment,” “eternal conscious punishment,” “eternal conscious torment,” “ECT,” and any really similar terms will all be used interchangeably to refer to the typical Christian belief that the unsaved in Hell are eternally tormented or otherwise subject to conscious existence in a state of suffering for ever and ever. A “traditionalist” is one who follows that doctrine.

B. Format

As shown in the table of contents, this book is divided into 11 parts. The first six are the book’s core content (followed by acknowledgments, citations, and a scripture index). Within the first six parts are sections in Roman numerals, and within some sections are lettered subsections.

There is rhyme and reason to the unusual order of my arguments. When dealing with the issue of Hell, I have found that no argument, and no passage of scripture, stands alone. I begin primarily with a rebuttal of the biblical arguments for the traditional doctrine because otherwise, if I show arguments in favor of annihilation, one might say, when any ambiguity exists at all, that since passages like Revelation 20.10 or Matthew 25.46 prove eternal torment, we should read the other texts differently. That happens all the time in books on Hell, and that is why I go in the reverse of the typical order used in most persuasive essays and books, attempting to really make the case for my position only after showing the falsity of the main competing view (universalism does come up as well, but not until Part 4, which is after my positive case). Part 2 is not a strictly negative case, however, as I will demonstrate that some passages and themes that are said to prove the traditional view actually favor my position. Thus, even before I make my main positive case, there already will be evidence for the annihilationist position from the traditionalist proof texts. This shouldn’t be that surprising; after all, the biblical arguments for the traditional

view come from the Bible, and the Bible does, after all, teach annihilationism. Ultimately, although thought processes can differ, I have ordered the content to hopefully make the clearest, most thoughtful case for annihilationism.

This is designed to be read in its entirety, section by section, in order. Nevertheless, because not every person has the same thought process, each section is numbered with Roman numerals and given a clear heading so that you know what topics, and often what main passages, are being discussed. Therefore, if you want to jump around, just see the table of contents.

1. Additional Notes

The term “Useful Semi-Tangent” will refer to a discussion that, although related to the argument being made, is not actually part of the argument. Some may be interested in what I have to say on a given topic and may want to read on, but others may want to just get down to business. Such sections are labeled so that the reader can choose whether or not to read it.

And as you might imagine given the scope of this work, I will reference Greek and Hebrew words at times. For the sake of ease, I will use the transliterations of the Strong’s Number of the word except when specifics of the particular form of the word is relevant or given by other authors. For example, *ἀγαπᾶν* and *ἀγαπᾶντι* would both be referred to as *agapaó* (corresponding to Strong’s Number 25).

Now, I do not deny that my Greek and Hebrew knowledge is limited, so I’m not in a position to make bold, unusual claims about the language or to really do anything except conservatively cite lexicons and scholars (who actually know what they are talking about) when relevant. Therefore, my appeals to the original languages will not go beyond what any number of traditionalist scholars would agree with. I know my limitations. Then again, proponents of my view who do have advanced theological degrees (like John Stott or Glenn Peoples) or advanced

knowledge of the biblical languages (like Edward Fudge) don't typically base their cases on obscure, technical aspects of the Greek or Hebrew. They don't need to. The original languages do come up, of course, but any layperson with adequate biblical knowledge can read the Bible in English and see why their arguments are compelling. The original languages mainly come up to assure the reader that the actual, inspired Bible agrees with the English (which it tends to do because our translators put a lot of work into this and tend to do a pretty good job overall). The reason most Christians so readily see eternal torment in the Bible isn't because of bad translations, but because from the hour we first believe, we are told that that eternal torment is what is in there. When you look at it anew, whether you read it in English or in its original languages (as many annihilationist scholars can and do), you suddenly begin to wonder how you didn't at least more seriously question the idea of eternal torment before. If eternal torment is the Bible's teaching, then why, for example, is mention of torment so rare yet mention of death and destruction so prevalent? That question, and many like it, will come up as you read on.

C. What Am I Hoping to Accomplish?

The primary reason I put this out is to show that my beliefs are biblical. If I go and tell you that I believe this crazy, seemingly unchristian idea, how can I not make a concerted effort to justify it? Of course, I like to talk about theology a lot because I find it interesting, but I didn't write this to be interesting. I don't care if anyone finds it interesting; that is not my goal. I assure you that this is deadly serious, and so am I.

That said, as you might imagine by the length, I am trying to be very thorough. I am not merely trying to make those who already agree with me feel good about themselves, nor am I only hoping to get a few young Christians who don't know much scripture to agree with me.

Like I said before, I tried to take on every serious scriptural and non-scriptural argument for the traditional doctrine and against mine that I could find (as well as some not-so-serious ones). Now, there will certainly be some argument someone makes somewhere that I do not address, but given that I have found nothing that successfully challenges my view in what are considered the best writings on the topic by the biggest names, I don't worry too much that I am unaware of some truly impressive silver bullet that would prove the traditional doctrine true. My goal is to persuade everyone, be they young and uninformed or well-researched biblical scholars. I hope to do more than just embolden my followers and ostracize those who disagree by means of fiery rhetoric. I don't think I will convince everyone, and I can accept that. Nevertheless, at the very least, the burden is on me to justify going against what the vast majority of Christians have believed throughout most of history (though not without exceptions that go back as far as the early church fathers). I think I have succeeded in doing that much.

D. Citations

All references are cited in the format of the Modern Language Association (MLA), as of 2011 (seventh edition). A few other modifications are made for ease of the reader, such as the inclusion of approximate time markers within parenthetical in-text citations of audio and video files. None alter the meaning of any given citation. In-text quotations may contain typographical or grammatical errors if they were present in the text that is quoted. Whenever possible, I include links to websites and free online books that I have used and cited. Even though this is no longer required by MLA standards, I figure it's good that the reader has as much access to relevant material as is possible.

NOTE: Except where otherwise noted, the content of the Bible in its original languages is taken from the Greek and Hebrew interlinear Bibles provided by interlinearbible.org. Except where otherwise noted, all scripture quotations come from the New American Standard Bible (NASB). Note that the NASB uses *italics* to mark words not existent in the original language.

E. My Hermeneutical Method – Part I

You might be wondering what my hermeneutical approach is. Well, it is both simple and extraordinarily complicated. My hermeneutical approach, my system as it were, is to try to understand what the Bible says and what it means by what it says.

In other words, there isn't just one hermeneutical system or "approach" I apply, because no man-made system is going to be perfect. I'm not interested in following a system. I am interested in what God is saying. I'm not saying that it is something subjective. Everything in the Bible, every event, every description, every idea has an objective meaning. My approach is to figure out, to the best of my abilities, what that objective truth is.

The whole reason we read books on interpretation and come up with formalized systems of hermeneutics is because we are trying to figure out what the objective truth is, not because the system of interpretation itself is of any significance. Now, there are plenty of good books on how to read and interpret scripture (I very much liked D.A. Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies*, for example). However, any system or book or whatever else is only as worthwhile as it is good at revealing the actual, objective truth found in the Bible.

Ultimately, God didn't give us a nicely wrapped systematic way to interpret the Bible. The prophets and apostles had no formalized system that they followed without question, nor did their ancient, non-linear minded readers. They read it and applied whatever was relevant (history,

language, reason) to figuring out what it meant. Sometimes they got it right, because they rightly understood the objective truth. Sometimes they got it wrong, but when they did, it wasn't because they were "inconsistent" or didn't properly follow hermeneutical rules (which didn't exist yet). They got it wrong because what they thought it meant was not what it actually meant.

What I am saying may sound irresponsible, or like I'm not willing to make the effort to be consistent, but this is not the case. In reality, insisting on following a certain approach is what is irresponsible, because you know full well it isn't going to perfectly lead you to the correct understanding every time. Although we can't expect to succeed in understanding everything 100% of the time, that still needs to be our goal. And doing so is *more* difficult than following rules and systems without exception, not less so. So many things matter. Language matters. History matters because it helps us understand how language might have been understood by its intended reader (as it may be different from what we would expect it to mean today). Genre matters, and yet even then, genre is still just a man-made concept; after all, the writers don't say "this writing fits into genre X."

Here's something to consider: I once heard a physics professor say that social science students (like me) had it harder than him because he only had to study physics. When everyone understandably laughed, he explained that he was serious, because as mind-ravagingly complex as physics is, there is a system and structure to it. It's mathematical; if you follow the steps perfectly, you know you will get the right answer (or at least it is assumed that you will). People are not like that, because while there are general truths, they don't fit into a system. If you follow the steps as they tell you to, you still might not get the correct answer. So while social science classes may be easier than physics because there is no calculus involved, actually understanding people (i.e. social science) is ultimately harder because there is no calculus or linear algebra that

you can learn that will give you the answer. And it's the same thing here. I'm not lazy or inconsistent; I just know that what I am studying cannot be adequately studied when approached like physics. The Author of the Bible is the Holy Spirit, but its authors are humans who were writing to different humans in different eras. There are no formulas. To get it right you need to be flexible, and that is a lot harder than reading a books hermeneutics (which I have done, by the way).

F. My Hermeneutical Method – Part II: “Face Value”

Some may complain that I don't take certain verses at “face value,” as if it is intuitive and clear that every passage is to be taken at face value. But nobody takes every passage of scripture at face value. It's not possible to do that and have the Bible still say anything coherent. This isn't to say that the Bible contradicts itself; rather, you can no more take everything in the Bible at face value than you can take what any person says or does at face value. We have idioms. So does the Bible. We sometimes speak in hyperbole. So does the Bible. We have our sinless quirks. So does the Bible. Not everything any person says is literal or means what it first appears to mean; the same is true of the Bible.

Most importantly, not always being able to take scripture at “face value” is not a problem for conditionalists alone. Traditionalists have to explain, for example, how lost humans will always be conscious, sentient beings when the Bible says that God “destroys” body and soul in Hell (Matthew 10.28), that He reduces them to ashes (Malachi 4.1-3), and that what they ultimately face is “destruction.” It doesn't take 500 words, let alone 500 pages to explain why that at least sounds like annihilation. Furthermore, at face value, being warned of “death” sure doesn't sound like eternal conscious existence either, given what death appears to be at face

value (just think about what a dead body is like). Taking into account the many passages that speak of “life” for the saved, in contrast to the unsaved, it’s not hard to see annihilationism all over the Bible, if we are in fact to take all of those passages at face value. Taken at face value, a lot of passages would seem to place annihilationists in a very good position.

Along these lines, taking everything in the Bible at face value leads to all kinds of problems when other doctrines are involved. Regarding final punishment again, it is also true that, when taken at face value, the Bible not only seems to teach eternal torment in places and annihilationism in many others, but it also teaches that everyone will be saved (see Section XLVI). Furthermore, it goes beyond discussions of final judgment to all sorts of other topics. At face value, the Bible teaches that Jesus isn't God. What does Jesus say to the Father? “This is eternal life, that they may know You, *the only true God*, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (emphasis added) (John 17.3). There is only one true God, and Jesus is someone in addition to that one true God. At face value, the Bible teaches that God is a human (before and outside of the incarnation). After all, He has arms (Isaiah 40.10), hands (Isaiah 11.15), and a face (Exodus 33.20). God even has wings (Psalm 63.7)! At face value, Jesus was hung on a tree, not killed on a cross (Acts 5.30). At face value, the sun revolves around the earth (Ecclesiastes 1.5), an earth which is not a sphere but a flat quadrilateral (Revelation 7.1)! Therefore, nobody can take scripture at face value all of the time, which is okay; God gave us reason for a reason.

G. Why Does This All Matter?

This whole thing matters for many reasons. This whole debate matters both for practical reasons and reasons of godly principle.

The biggest reason is simply this: God is truth, God cannot lie, and so the truth matters. If God teaches that something is true, then anyone who claims to follow Him has to care about what He teaches to be true (and therefore, what is true). People get things wrong in good faith, and that will not be held against them, but who can, being led by the Holy Spirit, not at least care what the truth is?

There are practical reasons as well, although honestly, what they are will vary radically from person to person. For example, what Hell is like affects how we try to reach the unbeliever. Traditionalist authors sometimes argue that denying the traditional view will mean fewer people will be saved because Christians will care less about the fate of the unbeliever, and because the unbeliever will have less reason to be afraid of not turning to Jesus. Annihilationists counter that the traditional doctrine makes people unfairly believe God is a monster, thereby turning away people from the gospel. What the truth is affects how we reach the lost (although I am still naïve enough to think that no one who would reject the gospel under one understanding of Hell would genuinely accept it under any other understanding of it). How you walk with God is also dependent on this issue. I question the very existence of a person who truly believes in their heart that eternal torment is right but that annihilationism is not. However, if such a person exists, and annihilationism is true, then that person needs to be able to seek God to come to grips with the truth. The same would be said of one who believes in their heart that annihilationism is right but not eternal torment, if the traditional doctrine ends up being true. For some it may affect whether or not they can sleep at night. They need to know the truth to know if they will need to come to terms with a hard truth or just continue believing what already seemed right to them. One view will naturally be better for one's spiritual life, so one then needs to know if that view is true. If it

is true, then they can rest easy. If it is false, then they need to turn to the Lord and figure out how they can be spiritually healthy even accepting what they don't want to accept.

I know that the above ideas are pretty general overall, but in some cases that's just the way life is. The specifics of how these things will affect you are dependent on you and your situation. The fact that you are reading this means you probably have a reason for doing so, so why not read on?

V. IMPORTANT: WHAT DO I MEAN BY “ANNIHILATION”?

This could have definitely gone under Section III, but it comes up so often in these debates that it seemed worth giving this topic its own section. It is sometimes argued that in order for the unsaved to cease to exist as conscious, sentient beings, they must be utterly and completely annihilated in every way, even down to the atoms that formed them. While this may be what happens, that goes beyond what I am arguing. To be fair, given that the doctrine is often called “*annihilationism*,” it’s an understandable mistake to make if you are not familiar with the doctrine. However, the claim that the unsaved are done away with, made dead in every sense of the word, does not require the absolute cosmic uncreation of everything that made them up.

Think about this: from a worldly perspective (their spirit and future resurrection not in play), when a person dies, they might be utterly destroyed, such as in a massive explosion. However, this is not always the case. Often times, a dead body remains intact for a while after a person has died. Someone who has just died of a small-caliber gunshot wound to the head would hardly appear any different from a live person who is sleeping. Their body parts are all intact except for a small portion of the brain. Nevertheless, life has ceased. From our standpoint, the spirit has left, and the body is dead (James 2.26). The person is gone. That body no longer has any real significance (except that which their given culture applies to it). One who believes in no afterlife would say that they are gone completely and no longer exist. We would say that the spirit has returned to God and the person is awaiting the resurrection while in some sort of state (whether unconscious as in soul-sleep or in a conscious intermediate state). But from either standpoint, the body wasn’t really “annihilated” in the sense that some traditionalists argue the damned would have to be in order for annihilationism to be true. That said, it clearly is not a sentient person, is it? This comes up a lot, because while pictures of what is as close to utter

annihilation as could have been expressed 2,000 years ago are applied to the damned, language of utter cosmic annihilation usually isn't.

The common misunderstanding is well represented by Douglass Moo in the book *Hell under Fire*. In dealing with the language of destruction as it is applied to the damned, he makes this analogy: "In other words, these key terms appear to be used in general much like we use the word 'destroy' in the sentence, 'The tornado destroyed the house.' The component parts of that house did not cease to exist, but the entity 'house,' a structure that provides shelter for human beings, ceased to exist" (105). The argument he is making in this section is that when the Bible speaks of the damned being "destroyed," the words mean destruction not in regards to the person, but in terms of the thing they were meant to be, ceasing to exist. Since humans are meant to enjoy God's presence and worship him, the entity of a being that is meant to worship and enjoy God is destroyed, even though the actual human being is not.

With arguments like these, I would agree that the entity made up of the "component parts" is destroyed even if the parts are not. That's my whole point. The wood and tile is intact but the house is destroyed. Similarly, in the case of final punishment, the entity is the human, which needs more to exist as a human than just the component parts. A human being is not a component part of anything. Although the component parts are intact, the thing they make up is eliminated because it is greater than the sum of its parts. Like Moo says, the "house" ceases to exist. The parts, if not put together properly to serve a purpose, do not successfully make up the greater entity. Just as a house is greater than all that makes it up, so too is a body. And if a body, even in which everything is perfectly arranged, does not have its spirit and God's breath of life (which some argue are the same thing), it ceases to be a person. That body still ceases to be a person, even with all its parts.

Now, what if that same thing were to happen to a person's spirit (or whatever you call the immaterial part of the person)? A body, when not put together in the proper way, could cease to be a person (or part of a person), even though all the stuff that makes it up still exists. I say that the spirit could be rendered like that body. All the matter that makes up a damned person's body, and any spirit matter that makes up a spirit/soul (or both), could all still be there. Nevertheless, if the body and spirit/soul is not made alive and animated by God, the person is gone and has no conscious existence. Now, I don't think there will be a bunch of resurrected people turned to eternal corpses lying around for ever and ever. Nevertheless, even if there were, even if they weren't destroyed but merely made unable to have some sort of animation, some sort of "life" in the way the world (and a good deal of the Bible) uses the term, that is all the same here. It wouldn't matter that the molecules and particles of matter still exist. It wouldn't matter that whatever makes up a soul still exists. The life is gone. The person is gone. All that remains is matter, which is not the same thing as the entity that the matter once was part of (more on that in Section XLVII). You cannot torment nonliving matter, even if it was once part of a human.

Another clear misunderstanding of what annihilationists mean can be seen in Robert Morey's *Death and the Afterlife*. When dealing with the claim (addressed in Section XLVII) that Jesus was annihilated on the cross, Morey writes:

What can be said of the Adventists and neo-Adventists who also claim that Christ's death meant total annihilation? Fudge's claim that 'Jesus' death involved total destruction' is an example of this kind of thinking. How they can ignore the existence of Christ's body in the tomb while His soul was in Hades and pretend that Christ was 'totally destroyed' stretches the imagination." (102-103)

I don't really know what to say about that...Does Morey really think Edward Fudge is that stupid? Could it be that maybe Fudge didn't mean literal annihilation in every sense of the word? What if Fudge is just saying that Jesus, rather than existing as an animated but disembodied soul for three days, was dead in the classic sense; that is, unthinking, unfeeling, and not alive? More on that in Sections XLVII and XLVIII.

This error, that in order for the damned to no longer "exist" their bodies and souls just instantly disintegrate and disappear, pops up often in the discussion of eternal punishment. Morey also writes: "We must pause at this point and emphasize that nonexistence was not the punishment inflicted on the body and soul of Christ. If the annihilationists were right, the Christ should have disintegrated on the cross...However, Christ's body was not annihilated but intact in the tomb while His soul was conscious in Hades" (102). I do not claim that at death, a person ceases to exist in the same way that the damned will when judged. Jesus needn't have been unconscious when He was dead in order for annihilationism to be true. Like I said, what happens between death and resurrection is irrelevant (although if Jesus were dead in the way that atheists see death, then that would help annihilationism). However, even those who do claim that Jesus (at least in His humanity) was totally gone don't make absurd claims about the body being destroyed in an instant at death (although for everyone but the Lord, the dead body does decay until it is just matter strewn about the universe). And of course, even those who say that the dead cease to exist acknowledge that their personal identity is somehow maintained after death. Otherwise, how could there even be a resurrection?

At times, existence of a living entity is even confused with the mere existence of the matter that once composed it. C.S. Lewis taught something like this: "People often talk as if the 'annihilation' of a soul were intrinsically possible. In all our experience, however, the destruction

of one thing means the emergence of something else. Burn a log, and you have gases, heat, and ash” (127). The soul cannot be annihilated, so the reasoning goes, because to destroy something never really gets rid of it, but only changes it. There are remains. However, even if some sort of soul matter is left over from a soul being destroyed (like ash from a log), the soul matter is no more a soul than atoms that were once part of a corpse are a vivacious human body (nor is it any more a soul than are ashes and various forms of gas suitable to make a hardwood floor). Just think about it. Does the log still exist just because the matter that made it up still exists in various forms? If so, then you would have to say that the log has existed since the creation of matter itself, since the matter that still existed after the log was burned would have also existed long before God even created trees! More on this in Section XLVII.

These arguments against annihilationism that compare humans to inanimate objects (houses, wood, corpses) also fail for this reason: humans are not inanimate objects. It can be hard to tell at what point physical damage to an object renders it non-existent. Philosophers have debated that kind of thing for millennia. If you cut the legs off of a table, does the table still exist? How badly broken does a clay pot have to be in order to cease being a pot? But there is more to the existence of a human than physical form. You don’t need to destroy a body to cause a person to stop living. You don’t even need to badly damage it. Now, if you do destroy it like how a tornado destroys a house (Moo’s analogy) or like how fire turns a log to ashes, that just makes it all the more obvious that the person is gone. But ultimately, you just need to cause biological life to cease. Assuming that a soul is separate from a body, then if you cause animation of the soul to cease, as is the case for a dead body, the soul cannot feel or think or anything else. As Basil Atkinson correctly points out, “An inanimate object can exist without living, but a living being in which life is inherent, part of its essence, cannot cease to live without ceasing to exist” (83). If a

person does continue on as an immaterial being after death and before the resurrection (an idea that he argues against and about which I am neutral here), it is because, although the body dies at physical death, the soul/spirit does not die like the body does (which comes up in Section XI). Humans have to be in some way animated or alive, not just a collection of matter, in order to exist in any way that allows torment to be possible.

Consider what Dr. Anthony Hoekema (a traditionalist) says about Jehovah's Witnesses and their view of what happens to a person after physical death: "For them, too, there is no soul which survives when the body dies, since the soul cannot exist apart from the body. No aspect of man continues to exist consciously after death; hence, when man dies he totally ceases to exist" (*The Four Major Cults* 345). Now, he's well aware that Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that the body poofs into nothing the moment a person dies. Nevertheless, what they believe, that when a person dies all that remains is an unconscious, rotting, decomposing corpse, amounts to an end to existence. When a man's *conscious* existence ends, he ceases to exist, even if a corpse is there for some time after. Louis Berkhof reasons similarly, objecting to the doctrine of soul sleep, saying that the so-called sleep "really amounts to non-existence" (688). Now, it should be noted that Jehovah's Witnesses views of annihilation are wrong in some regards. Most notably, they deny the biblical truth that all people will be resurrected. Also, I would counter the claim made by Hoekema and Berkhof that having a soul die with the body in the first death amounts to true non-existence. Even if people are unconscious at death, it would not amount to the full non-existence that the lost will suffer in the second death (since they will have no future resurrection after the second death). God, after all, somehow maintains a person's identity after physical death (whether by way of their conscious immaterial soul, or something else), which is how the resurrected person is the same person who died. Still, while Hoekema and Berkhof

perhaps go a little bit too far to one side of the spectrum (by calling a temporary lack of consciousness in death non-existence), their overall point remains. If the person as a conscious entity (permanently) ceases to be, then the person ceases to exist, at least for our purposes here.

Therefore, do not be distracted by arguments about “annihilation,” and whether or not “destroy” really means “annihilate” and so forth. One way or another, the damned will be gone, quibbling over matter and corpses aside. Even if one insists that they “exist” and have not been “annihilated” because the matter and components that made them up might still exist, you can neither torment nor give joy to a corpse or a soul rendered just like it, so it doesn’t really matter.

VI. HADES, SHEOL, GEHENNA, AND TARTARUS – SOME BACKGROUND

A. This Is Mainly Just Background Information; For The Most Part, It Does Not Argue My Point

Although there are nuances in the views that scholars have regarding some of the terms that will be discussed, there is nothing all that controversial that I will be discussing in this section (although it is somewhat more controversial than I had originally thought). This is just some background information. The more controversial aspects are fortunately the least relevant to our discussion about annihilationism, so I will only touch upon them. That said, because the words *Hades*, *Sheol*, *Gehenna*, and *Tartarus* are at times translated as “Hell,” they will come up from time to time, so it is important that we are on the same page.

B. The Different Words That Are Translated as “Hell”

In the Bible, different words are translated as “Hell,” and they don't all mean the eternal post-judgment Hell this is mainly about. In the King James Version, there are four terms: *Hades*, *Sheol*, *Tartarus*, and *Gehenna*. Other translations differ (for example, the NASB simply transliterates *Sheol* and *Hades*). I am not saying that there are different Hells or making any bizarre claims about the end times. As far as we're concerned with Hell, a place of eternal punishment, there is just one. It's not like some of the damned go to one (like *Hades*) and some go to *Gehenna* and so forth. In the end, all of them go to the same place (the one called *Gehenna*). What I am saying is that the English word itself, “Hell,” does not always refer to *Gehenna*.

Many of you are well aware of this, and if you are very well versed in this, then you might be able to skip this section. I bring up some points about stuff you might be interested in, but probably not anything you will need to know for this discussion.

For everyone else, if you didn't know about this, or you thought there is just "Hell" and you go straight there forever when you die, then please read on. Again, this is nothing all that controversial; this is just what it is. Different Bible translations simply do translate different words that mean different things as "Hell."

Now about the four words that can be translated as "Hell":

1. *Sheol*: Hebrew word; refers to the intermediate location of the dead. As of the writing of the Old Testament, the righteous went there as well as the wicked (Psalm 89.48; Ecclesiastes 9.10). Some say that that changed with Christ's death and/or resurrection; more on that later.

2. *Hades*: Greek Word; means the same thing as *Sheol* (Vine 517). This is clear when you cross reference Psalm 16.10 with Acts 2.27. In Greek mythology, it has several different meanings, referring to the god of the underworld (Lindemans) and the underworld itself. Its nature and descriptions are varied. In scripture, it is interchangeable with the Hebrew *Sheol*, given its use in place of *Sheol* in New Testament quotations of Hebrew scripture.

3. *Tartarus*: In 2 Peter 2.4, an unusual verb, *tartaróō*, is used to describe the action of imprisoning rebellious angels until the judgment. It is based on the Greek noun *Tartarus*, which does not itself appear in the Bible. There is some mystery behind this idea of *Tartarus* and its use here. In Greek mythology, it is said to refer to a place of eternal torture of those who greatly displeased the gods (Woodcock 132), although it may not have always been this way in earlier mythology (M. Thompson). Whatever the Greeks meant, for the angels, in the Bible, it is describing a holding cell, not an eternal abode or state, although it may still indicate some sort of torment of demons in the meantime. It is unclear if all demons are in *Tartarus*, or if it is even a literal place or realm. If it is a distinct realm of the universe, there is no mention of humans ever going there.

4. *Gehenna*: This Greek word is what we think of as Hell. It literally refers to the valley of Hinnom or *Ge Hinnom* (Woodson 17), a place outside of Jerusalem (Galli 95), but it is used symbolically on a number of occasions (like Matthew 10.28; obviously God doesn't destroy souls in an earthly valley). It is generally believed that, in Jesus's time, it was a big garbage dump, one into which even disgraced corpses would be thrown. It has traditionally been believed that fires were continually burning in the valley of Hinnom (e.g. Hendriksen 196; Wenham 171; Woodson 18), although this has been challenged as of late (Chan and Sprinkle 59-60; Galli 95). It was used to refer to a place of some sort of future punishment in uninspired religious literature from before Jesus's time. It also was spoken of as a place of earthly judgment in the Old Testament (more on this in Section XXXII). History aside, that is the word that describes Hell as we know it, at least in the handful of passages that use it. The lake of fire from Revelation is almost certainly *Gehenna*. When Jesus warns that it is better to cut out your eye/hand/foot than go to "Hell," He's talking about *Gehenna*.

All I am saying is that if you see the word "Hell" in the Bible, it may not be referring to the place of eternal punishment; it may not be referring to Hell. There is no actual word "Hell" in the Bible: it's strictly an English word.

Now, again, this all varies with translation. King James Version translates all those 4 words as Hell (although *Sheol* isn't always translated as "Hell" but rather only about half the times it is used). The NIV does not translate *Sheol* as "Hell." It also footnotes *Hades* and *Tartarus* when it calls them "Hell," so if you don't see a footnote for the word "Hell," then the word is *Gehenna* and it is referring to the place of eternal punishment. The NASB transliterates *Sheol* and *Hades*, making it among the least confusing (although it does still translate *Tartaroó*

as “cast them into Hell”). Similar translations can be found in most mainstream Bible versions, such as the ESV, the RSV, the ASV, and the like.

One thing that I cannot emphasize enough is that nothing I have said requires any bizarre ideas, nor am I saying anything really controversial; there just simply are 4 words translated as “Hell” in the KJV. That’s the way it is. The traditional Christian idea of eternal torment in Hell for the damned and eternal joy for the saved works perfectly with what I say. You could also be a conditionalist, or even a universalist (believing that everyone gets saved, though perhaps after the unsaved are punished in Hell for a while first), and what I say doesn’t pose any problem for your position either. You could believe in second chances after death, or predestined salvation of a few now and the rest after death, and nothing I say matters to those ideas either. I am just sharing a bit of information about generally agreed upon meanings of words, information that is important to understand when studying Heaven and Hell.

People look at modern translations and see that the word Hell appears less and less and think that it’s a reflection of liberalism and people wanting to deny Hell. However, the real reason is just that modern translators are less inclined to confuse people. Jesus warns of the fires of *Gehenna* the same number of times no matter how many times “Hell” is used. Job talked of going to *Sheol* long before the word “Hell” was invented. What he says is the same whether we refer to it as “Hell” or *Sheol* or whatever else. This is only a matter of translation, not content.

C. How Do We Know These Places Are Distinct?

How do we know that these places are distinct? There are plenty of biblical reasons. This part will be slightly more controversial, but it is generally pretty clear. As I said before, the KJV sometimes translates *Sheol* as “Hell”. On many occasions, it is referred to as the fate of the

ungodly (e.g. Psalm 55.15 and Isaiah 14.11). However, if *Sheol* is talking of the fiery place of eternal punishment, this would mean the following is true:

- God is present in Hell (Psalm 139.8). So much for being separated from God...

- Furthermore, since *Sheol* is probably a proper place name (Kitto et al. 116), would it not logically refer to the same thing whether or not it is translated as “Hell”? This would mean, among other things: Job would have rather gone to Hell than live (Job 14.13). Apparently all men are damned, since they all go to *Sheol* (Psalm 89.48; Ecclesiastes 9.10). Job also seemed to think that there is rest there (Job 14.13). As an old man, Jacob took it for granted that he would go to *Sheol* (Genesis 37.35). Being that he was a patriarch, it is safe to assume he didn't assume he was condemned by God; rather, that is what old people all do; their lives end and they go down to *Sheol*. It is used interchangeably to refer to the abode of the dead, righteous and wicked.

Some scholars will inevitably insist that it means something totally different when speaking of the righteous than the wicked, because darn it they surely cannot go to the same place (e.g. Shedd 19-41). But both righteous and wicked die, do they not? It is not necessary at all to say that they literally mean totally different things in the case of the wicked (where it means place of future punishment) and the saved (simply the generic abode of the dead). Both righteous and wicked, for example, go to what we metaphorically call “the grave,” don't they? And the grave, (i.e. being dead) is something both want to avoid (like *Sheol*), but is something that we also have to all ultimately accept (like *Sheol*). The arguments by Shedd and others are not silly or anything, but they unnecessarily complicate the issue (and coming from me, that's saying something). Christians would certainly agree that the righteous and wicked go to what we metaphorically call “the grave,” right? Our metaphorical use of “the grave” means the same thing regardless of who is in view, and yet most of those same Christians would likewise say that when

the wicked die, their experience between death and the resurrection is far different from that of the righteous when they go to the generic and vague “grave” or “place of the dead.” We don’t need to make a dogmatic (and arbitrary) difference in definition to be consistent with the traditional view (or any view of final judgment, for that matter). This is why many traditionalists, though arguing elsewhere that the intermediate state (i.e. *Sheol*) is different in its experience for the wicked and righteous, nonetheless see *Sheol* as one vague entity, not two distinct ideas. Robert Peterson does not make a hard and fast conclusion, but concedes that according to the “predominant evangelical view...*Sheol* speaks of life after death in vague terms” (*Hell on Trial* 29). When examining Shedd’s idea of fully distinct definitions when used for the righteous versus its use for the wicked, John Gerstner states, “The majority of contemporary Bible scholars are opposed” (100). Taking *Sheol* at face value, as the generic destiny of everyone (just like death), is not itself wrapped up in any view; after all, traditionalists, conditionalists, and universalists all agree that both righteous and wicked die and go to “the grave,” even though the experience of the righteous may differ from that of the wicked while there.

In short, given the use of *Sheol* in the Old Testament as a place for righteous and wicked, it appears to simply refer to the immediate place of the departed dead, the general intermediate state as it were, kind of like how we often refer to the state of death figuratively as the “grave.”

There is also the issue of *Hades*. King James almost always translates *Hades* as “Hell.” According to King James, “Hell” is thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20.14). Would that make any sense? Hell is thrown into Hell? If we furthermore make the logical conclusion that *Hades* means the fiery place of eternal punishment in its other uses (because it is a proper noun and a specific place or state), then it seems that King David was eternally damned because it is implied that he went there (Acts 2.27-31). Wasn’t he a man after God’s own heart? Importantly,

as I mentioned before, the scripture uses the Greek *Hades* in place of *Sheol*, which makes it hard to see it as meaning something different. For this reason, Leslie Woodson, in defending the traditional doctrine, simply states that *Hades* “refers to the place of the departed dead, the underworld, and actually means that which is unseen” (17).

Furthermore, regarding Revelation, if you read 20.11-15, the dead are taken out of *Hades* (or in the KJV, taken out of “Hell”). Then, after being emptied, *Hades* is cast into the lake of fire, as are the damned. I think that this sufficient evidence that *Hades*, the abode of the dead, is not eternal and is not “Hell.” How could the place of eternal punishment let the dead out to be sent elsewhere? If that were the case, it wouldn’t be eternal (because it would end)! The lake of fire is Hell as we know it. Nobody is in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels today. Nobody is in what we would call Hell now (so tell that to anyone who went there on the operating table).

Now, *Hades* (*Sheol*) may very well be a bad place/state for the damned. A literal take on Luke 16.19-31, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, would indicate that when the wicked depart to the place of the dead, *Hades*, they are burned with fire and are in agony (though not excruciatingly so, since the rich man could still talk). Now of course, this would lend support to the idea that there are different parts of *Hades* for good and bad. It’s not a biblical claim, but it’s not unbiblical either. It’s an idea meant to fill in blanks and reconcile the Old Testament with the New. The Old says that everyone goes there before the resurrection. However, New Testament passages like Luke 16.19-31 and Luke 23.43 might suggest that there is pleasure and torment in the intermediate state (although that interpretation is not a given). This idea had previously been popularized in the intertestamental period (Bromiley 591). There is no contradiction; as far as I

know nothing in the Old Testament says that the idea of different parts of *Hades/Sheol* isn't true. The idea would just fill in the blanks.

USEFUL SEMI-TANGENT

Some believe, based on passages like 2 Corinthians 5.1-10 and Philippians 1.23, that disembodied souls of the saved go straight to Heaven, and claim that Jesus went to *Hades* after He died to pull the saved souls out. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, holds to this belief (Berkhof 687). There's nothing in the Bible that really says that it happened, though I do not necessarily say it could not have. For our purposes here, just note that the idea of an intermediate state in Heaven seems to be the generally accepted position. Alternatively, some believe that the souls in *Hades* are unconscious until the resurrection. I won't go into that, because it's complicated and not really important to what we are discussing. I only mention it because, in discussions of the afterlife, it does help to know the different positions of people.

Thus comes the question of where people go when they die. As far as where we go immediately after death, I'm not sure. But it doesn't matter for our purposes here, as the debate over annihilationism concerns the final state, and nothing in between. Annihilationism is compatible with any number of views about what happens right when you die. And whether you go to an interim Paradise, or ascend to Heaven, or even are unconscious until the resurrection, it would surely be within the twinkling of an eye from when we go to sleep that we would meet the Lord, just as in a twinkling of an eye, the resurrection occurs and we will bear Christ's glorified image (1 Corinthians 15.49-51). Whatever the case, we do have the hope of being with the Lord, immortal and imperishable, for ever and ever. We will see God's face and He will call us His children, and there will be no crying or death or mourning or pain (see Revelation 21 and 22).

END SEMI-TANGENT AND SUBSECTION

D. Why This Is Important?

For the purposes of determining the truth of annihilationism, this information is important, though not because it really lends much of a helping hand to the idea of annihilationism (except perhaps regarding Luke 16.19-31). It is really more for the sake of coherency; with so many different translations having so many different philosophies about when to use the word “Hell,” knowing what is being meant in a given passage requires one to know which “Hell” is being discussed in the first place.

SUPER USEFUL SEMI-TANGENT

This information is more than just abstract theology. It has enormous practical value, because knowing this is very important to defending the truth of the gospel. One thing that serious detractors of Christianity have used as ammo is the apparent difference between the afterlife in the Old Testament and the New. The Jewish “Hell” is all quiet and so-so, but our “Hell” is fiery and horrible. It’s like, “Oh you Christians say you believe the Bible, but the Hebrew scriptures say something totally different from the later Greek scriptures.” However, this isn’t an issue when you point out that the Old Testament doesn’t often talk about the eternal abode; it just says that the dead go to a place. The word *Sheol* means something different from what we call “Hell.” The contradiction is not biblical; it’s translational. When King James was translated, it was common to refer to the underground as “Hell,” so of course the grave (literal or metaphorical) would be called “Hell.” This makes sense, given that the word itself is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *helan*, which means to conceal (Humphrey 10). This does raise the question of why *Gehenna* was called Hell too, but whatever the case, the New Testament and Old Testament typically talk about two different things. The New Testament authors could talk about eternity more because more about it was revealed to them. Many theologians call this

“progressive revelation.” Many also abuse that idea. Nevertheless, it certainly is true that more has been revealed over time.

So what if many Old Testament authors knew little past going to *Sheol*? Their words are still true. Daniel knew there would be a resurrection and eternal life for the saved (Daniel 12.2), but he may not have known much about the fate of either groups of people beyond what he said. That doesn't adversely affect us, because nothing he says is untrue. The Greek and Hebrew scriptures do not contradict one another because they do ultimately speak of the same thing. Suddenly, when you realize that the place the Old Testament talks about *is* in the New Testament (that is, *Hades*), and that people do go there, you silence these arguments against the gospel.

According to the scriptures as a whole, everyone does go to *Sheol/Hades* (or at least they did when those scriptures were written), and then they go to *Gehenna* or the kingdom forever. There is no contradiction anymore. They say, “The Old Testament says that people go to this place,” and the truth is that people do go there (or did at the time it was written). Your ultimate fate is something that happens later. If you say that the lost just die and go straight to Hell, like many Christians unfortunately do, then that contradicts the Old Testament. But if you follow what the New Testament actually says, that there is an intermediate state of some sort (*Sheol/Hades*) that is followed by the final judgment, then all scriptures are shown to be completely true accurate, and our Lord and God is vindicated.

END SUPER USEFUL SEMI-TANGENT AND SECTION

VII. BEWARE OF PRE-CONCEIVED NOTIONS

A. For The Sake of Christ, Sometimes We Have to Change Our Very Paradigms

If there is one thing that I have learned in becoming a believer, in this study, and in all kinds of things that came in between, it is that sometimes you have to ditch your old pre-conceived ideas when it becomes clear that they are wrong. Much as we like to think that Jesus makes all our ways perfect, the fact that there are said to be somewhere between 9,000 and 38,000 Christian denominations pretty well indicates that most people (myself included I'm sure) are wrong about something somewhere (although these tend to be small things that have no eternal significance). Rethinking seemingly core ideas like those regarding eternal punishment can be extremely difficult, especially when you have grown up with them. I will talk more about this later on, but I am asking you to flip a huge part of how you view the world upside-down for the sake of truth, which is for the sake of God.

B. You Have to Work to Consider New Ideas

You have to work to genuinely consider new ideas. It is not natural to do so. It is natural to latch on to our old ways of thinking. Remaining objective takes effort. And it's not easy. Traditionalist Robert Peterson even begins his response to conditionalist Edward Fudge in *Two Views of Hell* by recounting the reactions of his students to *The Fire That Consumes*. As they seriously considered Fudge's arguments in it, they reported "headaches and churning stomachs" until, when they decided that Fudge was wrong, "fear gave way to confidence" ("A Traditionalist Response" 83). They actually "feared" that God didn't artificially keep people alive to torture them in fire for ever and ever...That's how powerful preconceived notions can be.

C. You Are Bound to Encounter Bad Arguments

In any debate, you're bound to hear arguments that are clearly bound in bad reasoning and various fallacies. When discussing eternal punishment, this is perhaps even more the case (though hopefully not here, of course). Circular arguments, arguments based on assumptions, and at times even a seeming unwillingness to seriously consider another point of view happen often. Three of the most prominent types of bad arguments are as follows:

1. Cognitive Dissonance

One very clear example of cognitive dissonance pops up in *Knowing the Truth about Heaven & Hell* by Harry Blamires. Now, much as with the works of his teacher and mentor, C.S. Lewis, Blamires' book is largely philosophical (though certainly not without a good bit of scripture here and there). That isn't a criticism in itself. I'm all for philosophy; just understand it is not meant to be largely exegetical. Nevertheless, even philosophically, this falls far short because Blamires accepts two logically incompatible ideas rather than reconsidering one or the other.

Now, when addressing the language of destruction as it applies to the damned, Blamires' take on it goes like this: First, noticing how the language of destruction is applied to the damned often (specifically, in this case, 2 Thessalonians 1.9), Blamires sees a contradiction. If the damned are condemned to eternal torment, how can this be reconciled with the language of destruction? Blamires also notes that the damned are said to be separated from the Lord's presence. With that in mind, he continues: "All that is good in the world is derivative from God's creative work. All that is evil in the world represents a depletion or distortion of that creative work, a movement towards discreation destruction [sic]. Philosophically speaking, the ultimate end to which depletion or deprivation moves, is nothingness or annihilation" (65).

At this point, conditionalists would give a standing ovation, but this is short-lived. Annihilationists agree that evil separates one from God (in one way or another), and this ultimately leads to annihilation, just as he argues. However, he then adds the following: “It is not therefore surprising to find the vocabulary of death, destruction, and perishing mixed up with the vocabulary of torment, anguish, ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ in the New Testament forecasts of the fate of the damned” (65). In other words, Blamires is saying that because it philosophically follows that destruction is always a result of evil, Paul uses destruction language even though Blamires thinks that Paul believes in eternal torment. But eternal torment and annihilation are not logically compatible. Just think about what is being said; the New Testament writers knew that the fate of the damned was eternal torment. Nevertheless, since the logical consequences of godlessness would be destruction, not eternal torment, they speak of torment as if it were destruction. But, destruction is destruction...

Blamires himself sees the problem here, but his response is quite unsatisfactory:

We human beings cannot combine the notion of endless torment with the notion of death or destruction. What is endless must go on and on indefinitely. On the other hand, total destruction must involve an abolition of consciousness which is final. It could be argued that at the point where the human mind runs up against a brick wall in its exploration of the hereafter it must accept the mystery. (65)

Must accept the mystery? You can't just say that it's a mystery whenever something in the Bible doesn't work with what you "know" is true. Now, there are mysteries to Christianity. There are lots of things that just aren't said. God does all kinds of things that just don't make sense. There are aspects that bend the very fabric of reality as we know it (which is actually a great apologetic point, since Christianity is just supposed to be some ancient set of myths made by simpleminded

people who didn't know better). The triune nature of God would be an obvious example. There is only one true God (John 17.3), yet we know there is more to it than that. How can Jesus have been God (Philippians 2.5), yet be a separate being from God (Verse 6) who was raised up by God (Verse 11)? However, eternal punishment doesn't have the equivalent of Philippians 2.5-11 (which concisely states, in one place, that Jesus is God yet God is someone separate at the same time). Regarding God, we are told flat out in that passage the Father and Son, that God and Christ, Jesus and the LORD, whom Jesus Himself called "my God" on several occasions (John 20.17; Revelation 3.2; 12) form some sort of biune relationship (the Holy Spirit isn't mentioned, but once one is said to be two, one can pretty easily become three). However, at no point do we read anything like this: "The lost will be made immortal and will be kept alive for ever and ever to be tormented in fire and will be utterly annihilated and made as if they had never been." We aren't told of any mystery here. This aside from the fact that, if you think hard enough and have enough life experience, you can start to make God's triune nature make logical sense (even though the idea, while true, is still extremely bizarre and seemingly ridiculous to outsiders). But if we are confronted with logical opposites, existence and non-existence, why on earth would we ever try to assume that somehow they can co-exist concurrently? One has to be true. God may not tell us everything, but He has told us that A doesn't equal something that isn't equal to A.

Blamires's ultimate explanation fails. He goes on: "The seemingly irreconcilable destinies of endless torment and total destruction can be reconciled only insofar as the apostle Paul reconciled them in his reference to destruction as deprivation of God's presence." He ultimately concludes: "It clearly involves a total deprivation of happiness and peace" (66). However, if the logical conclusion of separation from the Lord, as Blamires said, is annihilation, depletion, and discreation, then it doesn't solve the problem to just ignore that and say, basically,

that the utter destruction really means destruction of happiness. No explanation is ever given for how what is claimed to lead to annihilation is suddenly said to lead to a miserable existence. In the argument laid out, destruction is assumed to mean literal destruction. Rather than reconsider the traditional doctrine, in this instance, a traditionalist is so devoted to the idea that he would declare the illogical nature of it as “a mystery.” If that is the attitude we are to take, why are we bothering to do any exegesis? After all, the truth is what he believes, and if something in the Bible disagrees, “it’s a mystery” as to how both are true.

Now, most traditionalist arguments are far better than this one and at least make sense. This is *not* all that typical of how traditionalists argue against the language of destruction as you will see. They actually have real arguments, usually based on language, which if true leave us with no logical discrepancies. I don’t think they are ultimately successful, but that’s not the point. They aren’t illogical. I just want to emphasize that.

2. Reading into a Passage What Is Clearly Not There

One example of reading what is not in a passage into a passage occurs when some look at John 3:36. The passage reads, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” The argument is that since it says God’s wrath currently abides on the unbeliever, it proves eternal torment, because God’s wrath never leaves, since it remains. The person must always be conscious and around for God’s wrath to abide, so the lost always exist. Anthony Hoekema argues this (*The Bible* 268-269). Aside from the fact that one could argue that God’s wrath abiding on the person does not necessarily entail their continued conscious existence in the first place, any more than things like contempt will (see Section XX), this argument fails for one even simpler reason. When does someone saying “this is the case now” ever mean, on its own, “this will always be the case”?

Never. It just simply doesn't say that God's wrath will always abide on the lost. It just says that it does now (i.e. did at that moment). Do you know what I would say at this moment? I would say, "I sit in my chair. I'm in a chair as I write this." That does not mean that I always will be. And if the verse is speaking of a future event in present tense (which does happen in the Bible), it doesn't mention duration or eternality. I could say, as I sit, "I *will* sit in my chair." That is, in fact, *more* than this passage says about the lost, but I still am not saying that I will sit in my chair for eternity.

What Hoekema reads into the passage simply isn't in the passage. I'm not necessarily saying that the passage says God's wrath won't always abide, but it isn't clearly saying that it will. It may be that God's wrath abides on him forever, or maybe "the wrath of God abides on Him...and will until some point where it doesn't." All that this passage says is that those who don't believe currently have God's wrath upon them. This doesn't even disprove universalism, for a universalist would also argue that God's wrath abides on a person, and will abide on a person until the day God's wrath is somehow resolved and the lost are given eternal life (whenever that is supposed to happen). Be on guard for people reading into passages what isn't there in the slightest.

3. Overlooking Key Differences

Is there a difference between perishing and having perished? This question comes up in the occasional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1.18. The passage reads: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who *are perishing*, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (emphasis added). The claim is, since the people are consciously existent who are "perishing," then to perish must include consciousness. When the Bible says that the unsaved will perish, this gives evidence that when someone has perished, they remain conscious. But, if one is perishing,

doesn't that mean that they have *not* yet perished? By definition, if they had already perished, they wouldn't still be *perishing*. This is common sense. One has either perished or one has not. To be *perishing* means that you have not perished, so how can we determine what it means to perish based on those who have *not* perished?

Consider dying and death. I'm not saying that to perish and to die are exactly the same thing (although they have a lot of similarities). But language-wise, for our purposes here, they are more or less the same. If someone is dying, have they died? Is there not a pretty big difference between a person who is dying and one who is dead? If someone were dying, and their family were at their bedside, would you console the family by saying, "Don't worry, as you can see, even though he's dying, he's still with us; he's conscious and able to talk and communicate and interact with us; therefore, even when he dies, that won't change"? Of course not. Even if the soul/spirit is conscious after death, and death is the separation of body and spirit/soul, to be dying is still not being dead, because as you are dying, the spirit is not partially there and partially not. It's one or the other, with the body or without it, dead or alive (see also Section XI, which deals with the relationship between separation and death).

It's the same thing with *perishing* and to perish. They're conscious now *because* they are *perishing*, which means that they haven't perished. They are in the process of going to their doom; they aren't suffering it yet. And anyway, neither side would say that what the lost experience now, while they are *perishing*, is what they will experience when they have perished in the future. An annihilationist would of course agree that the lost are *perishing*, but that doesn't tell us any more about what it means to perish than looking at a dying person tells us what it means to die.

Take these instances as a warning to all, for in debates about something that has been taught as part of the eternal gospel for well over a millennium, you will find people who consider the eternal existence of all men as fundamentally true as their hand in front of them. You will also find plenty of arguments that are more reasonable but are still ultimately beholden to tradition or philosophy or emotion. Be on the lookout because every once in a while, you will find logic being set aside and all sorts of assumptions being made, and like cyclists in the bike lane, they can be easy to miss if you aren't checking for them.

D. Biggest Issue: The Soul Is Not Immortal on Its Own

Sometimes we ask people where they think they will spend eternity after they die. I really want to drive the point home that that question is not necessarily biblical (and ultimately, I say that it is not). The idea that everyone will spend eternity somewhere is so ingrained in our minds that it may be really hard to think out of the paradigm, to think not in terms of *where* people will live eternally, but *if* they will live eternally in the first place. I am asking you to make a huge shift in your very mindset, because this “truth” which we have probably all just taken for granted from the moment we first believed in Jesus is the very issue that is in question.

PART 2: AGAINST THE MAIN ARGUMENTS FOR ETERNAL TORMENT

VIII. THE BIBLE DOES NOT TEACH THAT MEN ARE INHERENTLY IMMORTAL

A. Only God Has Immortality by Nature

What does the Bible actually teach about immortality? I don't think it is a stretch to say that for most believers, when we first believe, it's a matter of "where you go" after your mortal body dies. That is to say, we take it for granted that all men will always exist in some form. We see this base assumption in lots of Christian literature, like *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis (127). People ceasing to exist is what atheists believe, not us. Christians, after all, believe that good people go to the good place, and bad people to the bad place. "Everybody spends forever somewhere," right?

There are really two questions involved here, which are each addressed in this section and the next. They are pretty similar. First of all, is the soul immortal by nature? Secondly, if humans are not inherently immortal, will the unsaved, who are currently mortal, be made immortal in the future?

Regarding the first question, if the soul is immortal, then nobody can cease to exist. If punishment is "eternal", and it is "used in reference to that which is either in its own nature imperishable, or of which the unending existence is revealed, as the human soul is," then eternal conscious punishment is confirmed, so reasons reformed theologian Charles Hodge (876). But where in the Bible does it actually say that the soul is immortal in the first place?

Nowhere.

The claim that the soul is immortal is nowhere to be found in scripture. Any number of approaches, which will be discussed throughout this section, are used to try to prove that the

Bible does in fact teach the immortality of the soul. These arguments, as you shall see, are not successful, nor are they based on anything that the Bible actually says on this specific issue.

For example, one approach is to say that the immortality and eternal existence of all human souls is assumed in the Bible, and so it wasn't necessary for the writers to actually say that it is so. According to reformed writer Loraine Boettner, "In general the Bible treats the subject of the immortality of the soul in much the same way that it treats the existence of God - such belief is assumed as an undeniable postulate" (78). Likewise, Eryl Davies writes the following: "This [the immortality of the soul] is everywhere assumed in the Bible, although it is not explicitly stated" (56). How very convenient...

Others will rely entirely on prooftexts for eternal torment to show that, by necessary inference, the soul is immortal. This argument fails in two ways. First of all, it requires that you prove eternal torment in order to prove the immortality of the soul. To then use the immortality of the soul as proof of eternal torment would be to engage in circular reasoning. Secondly, even if ECT is true, this doesn't mean that the soul is naturally or inherently immortal. Who is to say that God does not make mortal men immortal, either as a reward or in order to punish them? Some traditionalists argue just that. The Belgic Confession, a statement of faith of the Christian Reformed Church, states in Article 37, "The evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and shall be made immortal—but only to be tormented in the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (The Christian Reformed Church). They recognize that immortality is not inherent but will occur in the future so that God can torment the damned in fire. Along these lines, Erwin Lutzer justifies the possibility of literal physical torment in Hell because "the bodies of those present there will have been recreated and made indestructible" (116). So eternal torment is not necessarily wrapped up in the doctrine of the immortal soul, nor

does eternal torment mean the soul is immortal, but only that men will be immortal in eternity (whether they are naturally that way or are made that way later doesn't matter).

One thing those on both sides of the debate often fail to take into account is that there are actually two Greek words that are often translated “immortality,” and though similar, they do not necessarily mean quite the same thing (although they can). The first word is *athanasia*, which literally means “deathlessness” (Vine 579). It simply means “immortality” in the plainest sense (Strong, “A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament” 8). The other word, more commonly used, is *aphtharsia*. Their meanings are similar, but they can potentially have subtle differences (more on this will be discussed in Section XXXIV). Neither word is ever used to describe the lost in any sense, whether here or in the future. According to one commentary:

Immortality (861) (aphtharsia [word study] from a = not + phthartós = corruptible from the verb phtheíro = to corrupt, shrivel, wither, spoil by any process, ruin, deprave, defile, destroy) is literally that which cannot decay or be corrupted (deteriorated or lowered in quality, implying loss of soundness, purity & integrity) and is that which experiences unending existence. Aphtharsia is a state of not being subject to decay or death – immortality, incorruptibility (state of being free from physical decay), perpetuity. It speaks of an unending existence, of that which is not capable of corruption. (Bracketed statement theirs) (“Romans 2:7-8 Commentary”)

In that sense, *aphtharsia* is not all that distinct from *athanasia*. Nevertheless, its focus on decay and deterioration does lend it to implying more than necessarily just existence. For that reason, it is not as conclusive as *athanasia* in terms of just meaning simply “endless existence.”

Here's why this matters; regarding God, it is written, "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, *who alone is immortal* and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen" (emphasis added) (NIV, 1 Timothy 6.15b-16). What word is used for God's "immortality"? It is not merely incorruptibility, *aphtarsia*, but immortality, being *athanasia*. God alone is immortal like our supposedly immortal souls. Now, obviously He gives immortality to all who follow in the footsteps of His Son, who now also lives for ever and ever (Revelation 1.18). However, nowhere does the Bible say that man has an immortal soul.

Now, one could say, "this doesn't necessarily say God didn't create man with an immortal soul." I cannot say that this cannot be true. After all, Jesus was immortal at the time Paul wrote to Timothy, yet He was once mortal before. Therefore, a man was immortal when Paul said that only God had immortality. It appears that Paul may have been saying "He alone has immortality in the sense that it is inherent in Him." After all, Christ had immortality as well. So God alone being immortal wouldn't mean others couldn't have had it, just that He had it on His own and everyone else got it from Him. Of course, Jesus is, in His nature, God, which confuses this whole thing. One could argue that Jesus would be excepted, just as He would be excepted from the claim that nobody can see God, and that since He was in His very nature God and chose to be mortal (Philippians 2.5; 9), He is included in Paul's statement, meaning that God alone has immortality in any sense.

Whatever the case, to say that it is not impossible for God to have created man immortal is not at all the same as saying man has an immortal soul. We cannot say that because a thing is possible for God, therefore God has done it.

B. Genesis 2.7

Nowhere is man said to have been created immortal. Some mistakenly point to Genesis 2.7. The King James Version reads “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living *soul*” (emphasis added). Some say that it means that God created Adam with an immortal soul. Harry Buis writes:

The first of such references is found in the very description of the creation of man, in the fact that he was created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26), and that God himself “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7), so that man became a “living soul.” Although this cannot be considered absolute proof of the natural immortality of man, it certainly points in that direction. Of the first passage, the critical scholar Oesterley says, “It means that the breath breathed in by a Creator who was immortal conferred thereby on man the faculty of becoming immortal.” He also says, “In all the three accounts referred to, the immortality of man will be accounted for because of the mode of his creation, a part of his partook of the divine, and therefore immortal nature.” (8)

However, Genesis 2.7 does not say what Buis and Oesterley assume. Genesis 1.26 will be addressed in Subsection D. As for this passage, there are a few problems with their assessment. First of all, without going into too much detail, the word “soul” and “spirit” come from many different Hebrew words with different meanings. In this case, the word translated as “soul” is *nephesh*. It literally just means a “breathing creature,” though it is used figuratively as well (Strong, “A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible” 80). Most modern translations (NASB, NIV, ESV, RSV, even YLT) say Adam became something besides a “soul” (such as “being” in the NASB). It doesn’t mean soul in the way we think. In fact, the word often

describes animals as well as humans. It describes the creatures that filled the waters in Genesis 1.20. It describes the animals that Adam named in Genesis 2.19. Later, in Chapter 9, God refers to the living creatures and animals of the earth using the word in Verses 10 and 12 and 15. Is anybody going to claim that beasts and fish and insects have immortal souls? They *are* souls, breathing and living creatures, just like men.

Even the English makes it apparent that it isn't saying that God created a man with a soul. It doesn't say that God gave Adam a soul, but that Adam *became* a living "soul." A "soul," is what Adam was, not what he had. It clearly is referring to the whole person, even just in the translation. That's probably why most modern translations chose to translate it differently than KJV. Adam obviously did not become a "soul" in the sense of an immaterial part of person that departs at death, and I highly doubt that that is what the KJV translators ever would have meant. Adam became a living creature, same as every other living creature.

Also, the "breath of life" isn't really unique to mankind. Although only men are explicitly said to have breathed in them the *neshamah chay*, other animals have the *ruach chay*, often translated as "breath of life" (Genesis 6.17; 7.15). It is suggested that all creatures have the "breath of the spirit of life" (Hebrew *neshamah ruach chay*) within their nostrils (Genesis 7.22). Despite the fact that the exact wording is not used, it certainly is implied that the immortal God breathed life into the all animals, same as men. My knowledge of Hebrew is limited, but if Bible translators across the board see the same "breath of life," and lexical sources are correct that the meanings of *ruach* and *neshamah* are nearly identical (The Lockman Foundation 1565, 1595; Strong, "A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible" 81, 107), then this isn't an issue. Where else did their breath of life come from but God? They certainly "partook in the divine" as well, yet they are not immortal. Unless we are to argue that *neshamah chay* is such a

special phrase that it has a radically different meaning from *ruach chay*, despite the similar uses of *ruach* and *neshamah*, it would seem that the fact that God breathed in Adam the “breath of life” doesn’t tell us anything more than that God gave him biological life the same as every other creature. Now, obviously man is different from other animals; I’m just saying that it appears that Genesis 2.7 doesn’t speak of this fact, but rather only expresses the fact that man too had life.

C. What of the Continued Existence of the Soul in the Intermediate State?

Some look at passages that indicate that people have conscious existence after death as proof that the soul is immortal. However, conditionalism certainly allows for the continued existence in the intermediate state. I am not preaching soul-sleep. All I am concerned with is what happens after judgment, after the resurrection, when eternal judgment is made. Does the continued existence of the spirit after death mean that a soul is immortal? Or, does it mean that God simply keeps it in existence before the resurrection when the final sentence is delivered? Who naturally has immortality according to scripture, men or God? Isn’t God, the creator, the one who sustains men’s existence? Does it follow that, since we are alive today, we will always be? Of course not. God keeps us alive today but we will die eventually. Just as death ends our physical lives, which God sustains so long as they continue (Psalm 3.5; Matthew 10.29-31), so the resurrection puts an end to whatever occurs within the intermediate period.

The continued existence of the soul in the intermediate state has no logical bearing on what happens after the resurrection. Indeed, it certainly fits the idea of an immortal soul, but it doesn’t make it so. It also goes the other way; if soul sleep were true, or if the more extreme idea that people literally cease to exist at death were true, that wouldn’t in any way disprove eternal torment. After all, at the resurrection, their ceasing to exist would itself cease. From there, they

could logically be made immortal and condemned to eternal torment. The intermediate state has no logical bearing on a person's eternal fate after the resurrection.

Not only does continued existence between death and the resurrection not in any way demand eternal existence after the resurrection, but the idea that God would continue the conscious existence of the damned during the intermediate state before annihilating them after the resurrection isn't new with me or other modern annihilationists. The sentiment is spelled out best by Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the most oft-quoted early church fathers. Not as well-known, however, is the fact that Irenaeus' views were clearly and unambiguously conditionalist. His conditionalist claims actually come as he argues that indeed, the soul does live beyond the body, after death. How is this so? In a nutshell, God keeps it alive so long as He wills, which for the damned, he ultimately concludes, is not for ever and ever (411-412; bk. 2, ch. 34). This is explained much more in-depth in Section X.

Whatever the intermediate state is like, God alone has immortality. No one is immortal unless God makes them so. The question is, will He do so for all men after the resurrection?

This of course presupposes that the idea of soul sleep is wrong and that there is conscious existence after death and before the judgment. I do not make any assumptions about the intermediate state here. That goes well beyond the scope of this study, and coming to one conclusion or the other is not necessary to determining eternal fate, for anything that would occur before the resurrection, even if it were actual non-existence, would be temporary.

D. Scripturo-philosophical Arguments from Genesis 1.27

I use the term "scripturo-philosophical argument" to refer to arguments that, although rooted in something scripture says, are themselves an assumption or extrabiblical extrapolation

based on scripture. Basically, they are arguments that say that scripture says something, and because that is true, something else must be true. The arguments make claims not found in scripture about what scripture does say. They can be right or wrong, but they are not actually biblical. A hypothetical example would be “Jesus is perfectly righteous, so He would never read a book by Ernest Hemingway.” Jesus indeed had no sin (2 Corinthians 5.21; Hebrews 4.15). However, the argument requires an outside assumption. In this case, it is that it would be a sin to read a book by Ernest Hemingway. After all, the aforementioned deed is not said to be immoral in the Bible. We must therefore assume that the action is immoral in order to make the claim that Jesus would not do it because He is righteous (and therefore, would not do what is unrighteous).

This type of argument regarding immortality is made based on Genesis 1.27: “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” Because man was created in God’s image, and God is immortal, man too must be immortal. I should note that Genesis 1.26 is also brought up, as seen above, for the exact same reasons of as Verse 27. Since the human body clearly dies, it must be man’s soul that never dies. This is a scripturo-philosophical argument. The scripture does tell us that man is made in God’s image. It does not say, however, that being made in God’s image means that man is immortal. The assumption is made that part of being in God’s image is being immortal. Can we make this assumption? Is immortality part of God’s image?

It is true that God is immortal, and so that could be an aspect of God that men hold by virtue of being made in His image; however, a lot of things are true about God that are not true about man. As Francis Nichol points out: “Why should only one of God’s attributes, that of immortality, be singled out for comparison? God is all-powerful. Does it therefore follow that man, made in the image of God, is also all-powerful? God is all-wise. Is man therefore possessed

of boundless wisdom, because made [sic] in God's image?" (91). Grammar aside, he makes a good point. In like manner, men cannot be at all places at once, and although we have a sense of morality, men do not have God's perfect righteousness (at least not since the fall). There is no reason to just assume that whatever is true of God must be true of His image bearers (since many of His attributes we do not share).

There may even be a relationship between immortality and our being made in God's image, yet this would not prove that man is in fact immortal. Considering God's eternity and the significance of being made in His image, A.W. Tozer asks, "Is it not reasonable to believe that one mark may be man's insatiable craving for immortality?" (41). It could easily be the case that being in God's image gives us a sense that we were designed for immortality without actually making us immortal. We were meant to be immortal; eternity is written on our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3.11). And yet, only in Christ can this actually be fulfilled. Consider this: according to many theologians (and me), being made in God's image gives us our sense of justice and morality. And yet, we know that without Christ, we are lost in sin and inclined towards evil. Being made in God's image allows us to have an idea of righteousness, since God is perfectly righteous, but because of sin, we are not actually righteous like our God whose image we bear. Why could it not be that being made in God's image allows us to have an idea of immortality, since God is immortal, but because of sin, outside of His mercy and grace in Jesus Christ we are not actually immortal like the God whose image we bear?

One might argue, unsuccessfully, that because humans do not have God's other attributes, we must therefore be immortal or else our being made in God's image would be meaningless. However, there are some aspects of humans that are unique to us, qualities that probably can be attributed to being in God's image. Wayne Grudem makes note of many attributes that are

unique to men among creatures, including reason, moral accountability, creativity and the ability to relate to God (445-449). Boettner, who does believe that immortality is part of being in God's image, also points to things like our intelligence and our dominion over lower creatures (94). Although many aspects of God's nature are not shared by man, many are. Therefore, it cannot be argued that man does not share other characteristics with God and so therefore immortality must be what defines us as being in God's image. Some aspects of God are true of us, and some are not. We can't just assume that since we are made in God's image that a given trait of God is part of who we are as humans.

A similar argument is this: because man is made in God's image, he is so important and dignified that God could not stand that any man ever become extinct. According to Robert Morey, "In light of the dignity and worth of a man as the unique image-bearer of God, we cannot, therefore, accept the idea of conditional immortalists that man's death can be reduced to the death of brute beasts" (37-38). Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland reasons similarly, arguing that God sustains the unsaved because He values His image-bearers (192). Although he does not explicitly mention man being made in God's image, the Bible Answer Man, Hank Hanegraaff, writes the following: "Common sense dictates that a God of love and justice does not arbitrarily rub out the crowning jewels of his creation" (82). This line of reasoning is certainly not unheard of.

Again, however, this argument is largely philosophical. Indeed, man is in God's image, but the rest is an assumption made by those who use this kind of argumentation against annihilation. After all, the Bible never says, "All men are too important for one to ever be completely destroyed." And the Bible, not any human thinker, is what matters.

In fact, the significance of man cuts both ways. Often times, annihilationists are accused of not taking sin seriously, for if they did they would agree that it deserves never-ending pain and horror (or, for less fire-and-brimstone traditionalists like Moreland, everlasting sadness). As John Piper puts it, for example, “Annihilationism reduces sin from high treason to a misdemeanor” (“The Echo”). However, if man is so important and his destruction such a travesty, then who is to say that only such a punishment as said man dying like a beast, even though he was made in the image of God Himself, suffices for sin? Maybe the traditionalist doesn’t take sin seriously enough, if he believes that all men retain the dignity and value to always exist despite their unforgiven sin. Maybe it is only annihilationism that truly treats sin against God as “high treason.” Moreland even insists that it would be immoral for God destroy the lost because of their intrinsic value (183). However, who is to say that God, the sole reason men have their very existence, let alone their value, cannot judge that the stain of sin is so grievous that it warrants their destruction, despite their value (value which solely comes from God to begin with)?

Whatever the case, any such speculation is outside of what the Bible says. Neither the annihilationist nor the traditionalist is qualified to say these things with any certainty. What matters is what the scripture says. The scripture says that man is made in God’s image, and that is all. Other scripture speaks to final punishment; from there, and not from some speculation about man’s nature, will we find the answers.

IX. THE BIBLE DOES NOT TEACH THAT THE DAMNED WILL BE IMMORTAL

A. Regarding the Condemned Being Made Immortal

Although the doctrine of the immortal soul has had an enormous impact on Christianity and still does, it is neither necessary to the doctrine of eternal torment, nor is claimed as a basis for the doctrine of eternal torment by all traditionalists. Some claim that they will instead be made immortal in the future. But do any passages of scripture directly declare this to be the case? On what basis can it be said that the damned will have immortal bodies and be subject to eternal existence?

B. Doesn't 1 Corinthians 15 Teach That All Will Be Made Immortal?

Dealing with this passage is crucial because it is pretty much the only passage that I know of that is ever claimed to actually say the wicked will be made immortal (independent of prooftexts of eternal torment). As *The Interactive Bible* simply puts it, the argument is irrefutable unless one “affirms that none of 1 Cor 15 has anything to say about the resurrection of the wicked, the central resurrection chapter of the Bible.” Their claim is that one cannot make this argument because “v22 proves this applies to ALL MEN! ‘For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive’” (“Eternal Torment”). The reasoning is that this passage speaks of the resurrection of all men who have ever lived and ever will, and therefore, they are included when it is said that, “For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15.53). If the lost are given immortal bodies, then it would follow that they would be in conscious existence for ever and ever.

C. Context of 1 Corinthians 15

I would argue that in fact, Paul is not talking about all men but only the saved, at least in the relevant verses. Despite their inference based on Verse 22, the talk of the resurrected body in this passage is surely speaking of the saved only.

For starters, although Verse 22 does say *all* men, that does not necessarily mean literally all human beings who have ever and will ever live. It's no secret that when a reference is made to "all," context is the determining factor in knowing how it is used. It also comes up in Section XLVI. We refer to "all" or to "everybody" all the time when referring only to some people. We see this in scripture. For example, all men were to hate the disciples because of Jesus (Matthew 10.22). At most, they'd be hated by all men within a context, being those who hear the message and resist it. Perhaps it was even just hyperbole, saying that many men would hate them (like how we'd use it today). Importantly, "all" are those "in Christ," since, "*in Christ* all will be made alive" (emphasis added) (1 Corinthians 15.22b). Are literally all men in Christ? No. Although all men will be resurrected, that's not the focus here.

If we continue reading, Verse 23 goes on to say, "But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; then they that are Christ's, at his coming." After this, it completely shifts to another point. The way Verse 23 is phrased seems to imply that the reader would understand that Paul was talking just about the saved, those "in Christ." After mentioning all men, he then gives the following sequence: Christ, then later his followers. Only the saved (and the Lord) are mentioned. No mention is made at all of the damned, yet you'd certainly think if Paul were giving a description of the order of the total resurrection of all the dead, as they say he is, then he'd put the damned in there somewhere if they were relevant.

These should be the first things that an objective reader would notice that should make them question the idea that this passage refers to literally all humans. It is by no means, however, the last (or the strongest) point.

It is significant that Verse 53 isn't the only verse in this passage to speak of immortality. In Verse 42, it says something very similar: "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption" (ASV). Indeed, that is totally consistent with Verse 53. However, Verse 43 adds some very significant information about the resurrected body: "It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power." If when Paul says "the resurrection of the dead," he means all the dead (damned and saved alike), wouldn't that then mean that the damned are raised in honor? Wouldn't that mean the damned are raised in power? Are the damned raised in honor? Do I even have to say it...? Think Daniel 12.2.

D. Corruption (Decay) in the New Testament

The emphasis on incorruption in Paul's description of the resurrection body is significant because the New Testament elsewhere says that the damned actually inherit corruption. According to Galatians 6.8: "For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." It is also written: "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption" (ASV, 1 Corinthians 15.42). Yet in this verse, when it says "sown in corruption," the same Greek word is used for corruption, *phthora*, as is used in Galatians 6.8. Given that the alternative to "corruption" is "eternal life," contextually it's safe to say that Paul is talking about judgment and not just the decay of our mortal bodies (which we all suffer anyway). The damned are said to reap corruption, yet these people described in Verse 42 escape from corruption, using

the same word in both cases. How can the damned be raised in incorruption (and out of corruption) if it says that what they reap *is* corruption?

This is further confirmed in 1 Corinthians 3.17, which reads: “If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.” The word used for destroy in both uses is *phtheiró*. Just as “to grow” is the verb akin to “growth,” so is the verb *phtheiró* is akin to *phthora* (Vine 235). God will bring about corruption to those who bring about corruption to his church (same Greek word used both times). God will corrupt and bring decay to the damned. How do you corrupt the incorruptible? How do you bring *phthora* to something that is immune to *phthora*? You can’t. How then can it be said that these immortal bodies described in 1 Corinthians 15 belong to the damned when these bodies are incorruptible and the damned face corruption? Unless we are to say that God will have vengeance on them by corrupting them morally (which God does not do, according to James 1.13-14), He will bring them what the saved are said in 1 Corinthians 15 to be immune from. I assert that these bodies cannot therefore belong to the damned, lest scripture explicitly contradict itself.

The fact that this is written in 1 Corinthians is also rather significant. In the very same epistle where Paul talks about the immortality and incorruption of our new bodies, he says that God will bring the opposite, corruption, to the damned.

An aside, the fact that the same Greek word is used of how God will destroy those who destroy his temple and for how they destroy it can go both ways. If their intent is merely to hurt the temple (which is the body at Corinth, or possibly the whole church), then that can score a point for traditionalists (though saying that they will be ruined and stripped of their worth doesn’t in anyway disprove annihilation). If, however, their intent is to bring it down completely,

this verse works better for the annihilationist. It could also be a play on words, as how it applies to a church could certainly be different from how it applies to a person in eternity. Ultimately, this is not the important thing here; I just don't want anyone to think I missed it.

Furthermore, Romans 2.7 refers to the righteous seeking *aphtarsia*. If all men will have this form of immortality (or imperishability), why seek it? Much more on that in Section XXXIV. Yet these bodies in 1 Corinthians 15 are said to be clothed with it! It is written: "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (ASV, 1 Corinthians 15.53). The word for "incorruption" in this verse is *aphtarsia*. If this quality of being is only for the righteous, and these bodies inherit it, what then can be said about these bodies? They belong to the saved, and not all men.

E. Conclusion

Given what has been shown regarding the very text in question, as well as in Paul's other writings, the immortality and incorruptibility spoken of in 1 Corinthians 15 only apply to the saved. This in and of itself does not technically disprove the idea that the damned receive immortality. Although I don't find the idea particularly reasonable, it's not impossible that the damned receive immortality separately from the saved (who are described in 1 Corinthians 15), and then remain in a state of perpetual decay that never culminates into actual destruction. This, however, is doubtful, given what will be discussed in Section XL regarding the words involved.

There is little else that I have ever seen used to justify the claim that the damned have immortal bodies. The most common argument is based solely off the fact that the damned are resurrected. According to an article on *gotquestions.org*, "It seems that the unsaved are resurrected with a body prepared for eternity just as the saved are (Revelation 20:13; Acts 24:15).

These bodies are prepared for an eternal fate” (“Is Annihilationism Biblical?”). But all that these verses show is that there a resurrection (and they arguably aren’t even the best ones to do that). They make no mention of what anyone’s bodies are like at all. It is the author of the article, not the Holy Spirit, that says that the bodies of the unsaved are “prepared for eternity.” Why then would we just *assume* that they have new, immortal bodies instead of bodies like we have today, bodies that would be destroyed upon being cast into a lake of fire? I guess the bodies are raised immortal because, well, eternal torment is true, so of course they are immortal...

Unless traditionalist theologians with every reason to prove the immortality of the damned are missing something, the Bible never affirmatively says that the damned will be made immortal. The claim that the damned will be made immortal is then completely dependent on eternal torment being true. Therefore, we definitely cannot use the claim that the damned will be made immortal as proof that they are always in conscious existence and therefore are condemned to being tormented in Hell for ever and ever.

Now, there is one more similar argument, one from the abolition of death, that is made by *The Interactive Bible*. I’ve almost never heard it anywhere else, but I certainly am not going to ignore it. However, part of it requires an exegesis of Revelation 20.10, so it will be addressed in Section XIV.

X. THE EARLY CHURCH

A. Eternal Torment Was Not *the* Universal View of the Early Church

There is a reason why the view that Hell is a place of eternal torment is commonly called “traditionalism.” It has traditionally been the majority view throughout most of church history, so much so that it is assumed to be the “orthodox” position. For example, according to Jon E. Braun, author of one of the several books titled *Whatever Happened to Hell?:* “Origen [a universalist], who died in A.D 254, and who was later condemned by two ecumenical councils, was the only significant ancient who actually challenged this doctrine [eternal torment]” (34).

Now, I’ve only been able to delve into this issue a little bit, but to the extent that I have, I have been pleasantly surprised how undaunting of a threat the position of the early church is to my position. The burden on me is only to say that conditionalist beliefs did exist in the early church to some meaningful extent, which is contrary to what many will assert. I’m not trying to say it was a common position. All that I am trying to establish is that it is not a new belief that originated in the 1800’s with the Millerite movement (William Miller is the guy who spawned Adventists and indirectly led to Jehovah’s Witnesses later). Conditionalism was by no means *the* view of the early church, and most will concede that by the third century, traditionalism became dominant (with a hearty dash of universalism as well). However, annihilationism is not some crazy new doctrine.

Some traditionalist sources do point to some early church belief in annihilationism, which certainly cannot hurt my case (as they have no reason to want to see this belief being expressed by the early church). Many point to Arnobius of Sicca, a father from the third and fourth centuries. In Volume 13 of *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, put out by the Catholic University

of America, they cite a number of fathers who held to the view and denied the immortality of the soul (469). I don't cite them all because I'm not so sure about some of them, but those that did are acknowledged nonetheless. Traditionalist Leslie Woodson acknowledges that "there have always been individuals and small groups who held to the doctrine of annihilation of the wicked and repudiated eternal punishment [i.e. eternal torment]" and "the idea emerged as early as the second century of the Christian era" (50). It really appeared even before then, in the Bible, but, I'll take it. It is true that we should be suspicious of any new doctrine, but while annihilationism was not a hugely popular one, it is by no means new.

NOTE: a common theme in the earliest writings is the use of biblical language (e.g. "perishing," "destruction," "eternal punishment"). Therefore, there is some ambiguity, as what one will make of these statements is dependent on what you all already believe the Bible says. If you're an annihilationist, perishing means...well, what we normally think of when we think of perishing, and if you are a traditionalist, then the earliest church fathers spoke of being lost in Hell forever with such terms.

Ultimately, scripture matters most because it is inspired by God himself, while the likes of Irenaeus and Ignatius were not. The point I hope to make here is simply this: the common argument that *everyone* believed in eternal torment throughout church history until recently is untrue, and therefore, we should not be so suspicious of annihilationism because we think it is "unorthodox."

B. Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius of Antioch was one of the earliest church fathers, living well before Christian annihilationism is supposed to have come into being. He lived from the mid-first century until

110AD or so (dates vary by source). In Chapter 17 of his *Epistle to the Ephesians* (shorter version), he writes:

For this end did the Lord suffer the ointment to be poured upon His head, that He might breathe immortality into His church. Be not ye anointed with the bad odour of the doctrine of the prince of this world; let him not lead you away captive from the life which is set before you. And why are we not all prudent, since we have received the knowledge of God, which is Jesus Christ? Why do we foolishly perish, not recognising the gift which the Lord has of a truth sent to us? (56)

This gift, the alternative of perishing, is immortality. Would that not indicate that those who perish are those who miss out on immortality? Could it be a figurative, strictly qualitative use of *apharsia* (discussed more in Section XXXIV)? You won't think so after you read on.

He also writes, later in the epistle:

Especially [will I do this] if the Lord make known to me that ye come together man by man in common through grace, individually, in one faith, and in Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David according to the flesh, being both the Son of man and the Son of God, so that ye obey the bishop and the presbytery with an undivided mind, breaking one and the same bread, which is the medicine of immortality and the antidote to prevent us from dying, but [which causes] that we should live for ever in Jesus Christ. (Bracketed statements theirs) (57-58; ch. 20)

Importantly, the “medicine of immortality” comes from the Greek *phármakon athanasías* (Hryniewicz 126). The Greek *athanasías* is a form of *athanasia*, the most literal form of immortality, immortality that is natural only to God, as discussed in Section VIII and later in Section XXXIV. In the same breath, we are told it “prevents us from dying.” Now, unless

Ignatius was beyond clueless and believed that the saved never die the first death, he is either talking about spiritual death when he refers to “dying”, or he is saying that the saved live forever physically after the resurrection because of the “medicine of immortality.” Either way works for the annihilationist. If Ignatius’ references to never dying refer to one having eternal existence (likened to physical life), then this eternal existence has a source, the Eucharist, and is not universal (because if it were universal, there’d be no point in mentioning the Eucharist since outsiders would have the same immortality). And if he means dying “spiritually,” then this spiritual life, this never dying, would specifically come from what makes you immortal. Spiritual life and literal immortality would come from the same source. Therefore, you either have both, or neither. This runs contrary to the traditionalist view that the lost are “dead” yet are literally immortal.

Most conclusive is this gem from Ignatius’ *Epistle to the Magnesians*, in regards to the Lord Jesus Christ: “Let us not, therefore, be insensible to His kindness. For were He to reward us according to our works, we should cease to be” (63; ch. 10). What then? According to Ignatius, the fruit of a person’s actions is ceasing to be. It isn’t merely “death.” Various translations read to this effect. However, if Ignatius says that the fruit of a person’s actions is ceasing to be (does anyone else see the direct parallel to Romans 6.23?), how can we possibly think he believed in eternal torment? Did he then believe that the damned get worse than they deserve by being tortured eternally instead of being destroyed? Or alternatively, if somehow eternal torment is actually a better fate than annihilation, does that mean that Ignatius is saying that God would not give the damned full punishment for what they deserve? I think the point is pretty clear.

I have tried to find quotes by Ignatius that are even suggested to be referring to eternal torment. I have only come across one, being from *Epistle to the Ephesians* 16:2: “Such a one

shall go in his foulness to the unquenchable fire” (qtd. in Crockett 65). Other translations I have found say ‘everlasting/eternal’ instead of “unquenchable,” but that’s not really important. It is significant, nonetheless, that this comes up immediately preceding Chapter 17 which I quoted above. After declaring the fate of eternal/unquenchable fire for the lost, Ignatius declares immortality for the church. Thus, the fate of those who do not receive immortality is eternal fire, or as he said in *Epistle to the Magnesians*, ceasing to be. This would seem to indicate that he used the phrase “eternal fire” to refer to a fire that did not burn for ever and ever. Upon analyzing the biblical use of such language in Sections XVI and XVII, it will be clear why, especially in light of clear annihilationist statements made elsewhere, Ignatius’ use of this language does not indicate a belief in the traditional doctrine.

Both Edward Fudge and John Roller assert that Ignatius does not speak of an immortal soul ever (Roller 24; *The Fire* 320). Given what he affirmatively says, I am inclined to trust their claim. If the “immortal soul” of the unbeliever is never granted immortality, and he ceases to be, what besides conditionalism and annihilationism can be in view here?

C. Arnobius of Sicca

Going to Arnobius will break any sort of chronological theme that may have existed, as he is a much later church father than the others in this section. He lived from 250-327 AD (Roller 9). That said, he is good to take note of here. While many may be surprised at the teachings of Ignatius of Antioch, as well as others to come, Arnobius is essentially the main annihilationist figure of the early church. Most traditionalist works I have come across that deal with the early church are well aware of Arnobius’ views. They are clear and obvious, like this passage from his only surviving work, *Against the Heathen*:

For they are cast in, and being annihilated, pass away vainly in everlasting destruction. For theirs is an intermediate state, as has been learned from Christ's teaching; and they are such that they may on the one hand perish if they have not known God, and on the other be delivered from death if they have given heed to His threats and proffered favours. And to make manifest what is unknown, this is man's real death, this which leaves nothing behind. For that which is seen by the eyes is only a separation of soul from body, not the last end— annihilation.

(439-440; bk. 2, ch. 14)

Having come across no challenge but only agreement with this interpretation of his very clear and unambiguous words, it can be said safely that Arnobius was an annihilationist.

D. Barnabas

It is not entirely clear who this Barnabas actually is. The epistle that bears his name is dated around 135 AD (Roller 33), which means it definitely wasn't by the apostle. Nevertheless, this Barnabas did write an epistle, and it appears that Roller is right that he is generally grouped in with the apostolic fathers (33). His epistle is less clear than the works of Ignatius. Overall, he sounds more like a conditionalist than a traditionalist, although one passage I will look over does sound a bit more traditionalistic than the rest.

Barnabas 6: The relevant parts sound more conditionalist. As John H. Roller says:

In Barnabas 6:3, he quotes Isaiah 28:16 as saying, "he who hopes in him shall live forever." Actually, Isaiah 28:16 reads, "he that believeth shall not make haste."

The Apostle Paul similarly rephrases this verse when he quotes it, in Romans 10:11, as saying, "Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed." In any case,

Barnabas' point (by implication) is that those who do not "hope in him" will not "live forever." (33)

Although in context "Barnabas" isn't specifically speaking of eschatology, what he says is what he says. He, either mistakenly or as a matter of interpretation, claims that Isaiah says that those who trust in God "will live forever." Why say that if everyone will live forever?

Barnabas 15: The relevant parts also sound more conditionalist, speaking of a time when Jesus will return and "shall destroy the time of the wicked man" (146). It is this time that the reader is told, "Behold, therefore: certainly then one properly resting sanctifies it, when we ourselves, having received the promise, wickedness no longer existing, and all things having been made new by the Lord, shall be able to work righteousness" (147). Contextually, Barnabas is discussing the "Sabbath," that is, the day of the Lord at the end of the world, a day in which wickedness will no longer exist. How can wickedness no longer exist if the wicked still do?

Barnabas 20 – Sounds a bit more traditionalistic than the ones before, but it is ultimately ambiguous. The passage reads: "But the way of darkness is crooked, and full of cursing; for it is the way of eternal death with punishment, in which way are the things that destroy the soul" (149). Indeed, the fact that eternal death is "with punishment" does make it sound more consistent with traditionalism than the others. However, it is not definitive or explicit. First of all, what does he mean by "destroy the soul"? Maybe Barnabas is making a claim that is consistent with Fudge's ultimate conclusion, that there is eternal death, being extinction, and that in addition to that fate, the damned may also face a separate punishment that is finite. The way it is written, at least as far as the English translation goes, it can go either way.

If their eternal death is eternal conscious separation from God, then the punishment included would therefore be conscious and would reasonably be eternal as well (since the

existence is eternal). In mathematical terms, it wouldn't be "eternal death + punishment" but rather "eternal (death + punishment)." It would be part of the eternal death, like saying "eternal death [separation, not literal death] that includes a separate eternal punishment."

However, if eternal death is taken to mean extinction, then the fact that we are told that it is "with punishment" would indicate there is something additional, something separate from the eternal death, which finite torment would fit into perfectly. Is he saying "eternal death [conscious separation] and punishment together," or is he saying "eternal death (extinction) plus an additional punishment before they are annihilated of which duration is not specified (but that could not be eternal)"? It could go either way. Given the rather clear statements made earlier in the same epistle, I find it far more likely that it means the former and that this epistle supports the idea of conditional immortality. After all, he never mentions eternal torment, eternal existence, immortality of the soul etc., but he does say that evil will stop existing. Along those lines, it should also be noted that, in the following chapter, Barnabas contrasts the righteous, who "shall be glorified in the kingdom of God," with the wicked, who "shall be destroyed with his works" (149). Now, not only are the wicked "destroyed," they are said to be destroyed along with their works, things which cannot be tormented, being intangibles that offend God, and would most reasonably be seen as being done away with.

E. Clement of Rome.

Clement of Rome's *Epistle to the Corinthians*, commonly known as 1 Clement and dated anywhere between the late 60's A.D. (Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 177-178) to around 95 A.D. (Roller 12), has many conditionalist-friendly elements. It quotes Psalm 34.16, declaring that, for the wicked, God will "cut off the remembrance of them from the earth" (11; ch. 22). In Chapter

14, Clement refers to Proverbs 2.21-22, writing, “The kind-hearted shall inhabit the land, and the guiltless shall be left upon it, but transgressors shall be destroyed from off the face of it” (8).

Clement is using this verse as a warning to a Christian church, not Israelites in the promised land.

His interpretation seems to go far beyond just being sent away from an area of land. Clement

also writes in Chapter 35, “How blessed and wonderful, beloved, are the gifts of God!” which

include “life in immortality.” This is contrasted with the fate of sinners, where Clement, citing

Psalms 50, gives the following warning: “Consider now these things, ye that forget God, lest He

tear you in pieces, like a lion, and there be none to deliver” (14). So then, there is life in

immortality, or being torn in pieces like by a lion. Does that sound like the choice between

eternal happiness and eternal existence in pain, or like the choice between life and being torn

apart like the prey of a lion...?

The Second Epistle of Clement, commonly referred to as *2 Clement* is more ambiguous.

Having been written after the death of Clement, it is claimed to be a written record of a sermon

once given by him. *2 Clement* 6:7 is sometimes cited as proof of Clement’s belief in eternal

torment (e.g. Crockett 65). However, all that passage says is this: “For if we do the will of Christ,

we shall find rest; otherwise, nothing shall rescue us from *eternal punishment*, if we neglect his

commandments,” (emphasis added) (518). If “eternal punishment” necessarily means eternal

torment, then there’s no reason for you to bother reading any of this because the Bible itself uses

that term (addressed in Section XVI).

A more traditionalist-friendly passage is found in Chapter 17:

It is of the great day of judgment He speaks, when they shall see those among us

who were guilty of ungodliness and erred in their estimate of the commands of

Jesus Christ. The righteous, having succeeded both in enduring the trials and

hating the indulgences of the soul, whenever they witness how those who have swerved and denied Jesus by words or deeds are punished with grievous torments in fire unquenchable, will give glory to their God and say, “There will be hope for him who has served God with his whole heart.” (522)

At first glance, this seems to fit well with the traditionalist view. After all, the damned are tortured in unquenchable fire. However, just think about what is said and what is not said. Nowhere is the torment said to be everlasting. The fire itself isn’t said to be everlasting, but only “unquenchable.” As will be discussed regarding Mark 9.43-48 in Section XXI, a fire being unquenchable does not mean it is everlasting, just that it can’t be extinguished. All that is said is that they will suffer in fire. Fudge says, “Taken at face value, it more easily fits the conditional view, particularly since there is no further explanation to the contrary” (*The Fire* 318-319). Technically, he’s right. After all, fire hurts. It’s unquenchable, but that doesn’t mean that it burns for eternity. This whole curse upon the wicked never mentions eternity anywhere.

Given *2 Clement*, I am not saying that we can say that Clement of Rome was necessarily a conditionalist. What I am saying is that his views were not clearly the traditionalist view, and that they do overall sound more conditionalist in light of *1 Clement* (which he himself actually wrote).

F. Epistle to Diognetus – Unknown Author “Mathetes”

The *Epistle to Diognetus* is an epistle to a now unknown person named Diognetus. The author is also unknown, but is commonly referred to as “Mathetes.” John Roller places its date of composition at around 130 A.D. (8).

For what it is worth, Chapter 10 sounds rather conditionalistic:

Then thou shalt see, while on earth, that God in the heavens rules over [the universe];...then shalt thou condemn the deceit and error of the world when thou shalt know what it is to live truly in heaven, when thou shalt despise that which is here esteemed to be death, when thou shalt fear what is truly death, which is reserved for those who shall be condemned to the eternal fire, which shall afflict those even to the end that are committed to it...(Bracketed statements theirs) (29)

The issue of temporality comes up again, but this time, there is one major statement that goes against the traditionalist position. The damned are delivered to the fire “even to the end.” What end? Would not eternal torment require *endlessness*? Now, it is possible that the end is something that never comes, but why say that? The fire burns to an end. It burns until it achieves something, at which point, when it burns to an end, then it ends. Eternity has no end.

Also, the real death is said to be “reserved for those who shalt be condemned to the eternal fire...” Well, that almost sounds as though the “real death” isn’t the fire at all. Perhaps the “real death” is the end that the fire burns to. Now, I’m not such a literalist that I don’t recognize that just because Mathetes phrases it this way he might not still be referring to the same thing, as the doctrine of eternal torment would necessitate. However, how it’s phrased definitely allows for my interpretation. The “eternal fire” burns to an end, and is apparently only something that is suffered by those who suffer eternal death, as opposed to being that death itself. This letter is not perfectly clear, but it leans more towards supporting conditional immortality.

G. Irenaeus of Lyons

Far from being an obscure or recent referent, Irenaeus of Lyons is one of the most oft-quoted church fathers, one who “probably had more influence than any other Christian leader

in the first three centuries” (Hitchcock 26). And yet, despite also living over a century before Arnobius of Sicca (at a time when Christian annihilationism wasn’t supposed to have existed yet), he expresses clear and explicit conditionalist views in *Against Heresies*, Book 2, Chapter 34, Paragraph 3:

It is the Father of all who imparts continuance forever and ever on those who are saved. For life does not arise from us, nor from our own nature; but it is bestowed according to the grace of God. And therefore he who shall preserve the life bestowed upon him, and give thanks to Him who imparted it, shall receive also length of days for ever and ever. But he who shall reject it, and prove himself ungrateful to his Maker, inasmuch as he has been created, and has not recognized Him who bestowed [the gift upon him], deprives himself of [the privilege of] continuance forever and ever. And, for this reason, the Lord declared to those who showed themselves ungrateful towards Him: ‘If ye have not been faithful in that which is little, who will give you that which is great?’ indicating that those who, in this brief temporal life, have shown themselves ungrateful to Him who bestowed it, shall justly not receive from Him length of days for ever and ever.

(Bracketed statements theirs) (411-412)

It is not just that God is the one who bestows life on us. Most traditionalists (at least today) would agree that God *could* deprive the lost of conscious existence if He so chose. But here, we are told that the wicked “*shall* justly not receive from Him length of days for ever and ever.” It’s not that God *can* do it, but that He *will* do it!

Importantly, this takes place in a discourse about the immortality of the soul in which Irenaeus actually argues for continued existence of the soul after physical death. It can almost be

a little deceiving that way. As he does in other places (e.g. 532-533; bk. 5, ch. 7), he is saying that the soul does not die like the body does. One might think just from reading the first part of the chapter that he believed all souls lived endlessly. However, he then elaborates. The whole point he is trying to make is that the soul can be a created thing yet can also continue to exist forever. This is in response to Greek critics who presumed that the soul must either have always existed, or that it must eventually cease to exist. His argument is simply that if God is the creator, then God can, if He chooses, cause it to exist forever. In the process, he argues that the soul continues existing after death, using this as evidence that it continues existing despite being a creation. However, in the process, with that in mind, he then says the above, that it is by God's grace that you continue existing, and that God *will not* perpetuate the damned for eternity. God can will that the soul continues to exist forever. However, he explicitly says above that God will not have all souls last forever.

The clarity of Irenaeus' statement hasn't missed the traditionalist sources cited earlier in this section. Leslie Woodson counts Irenaeus as one of the fathers who held to conditional immortality (50). Consider also this gem from the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume 13: "From time to time there has recurred the idea of conditional immortality. That is, survival after death is conditional on conformity with God's law and wishes. Against the Gnostics, Irenaeus said that the soul is not immortal by nature, but it can become immortal if it lives according to God's law" (469). Irenaeus speaks for himself.

Other claims that Irenaeus was a traditionalist flow from the same well of unsuccessful arguments used to describe the beliefs of other early church leaders who were conditionalists or at least held ambiguous beliefs. References to "eternal fire," "eternal punishment," etc. which are addressed later on, all come up when Irenaeus' view of Hell is looked at.

However, given that Irenaeus so clearly preaches conditionalism, the fact that he uses biblical terminology that is typically seen as proof of eternal torment only helps the annihilationist case. In Book 4, Chapter 28, Paragraph 2, he writes about the lost and how their punishment is “not merely temporal, but rendered also eternal.” He justifies his claim about eternal punishment by then quoting Matthew 25.41, including the reference to “everlasting fire.” He also writes, in the same chapter, that among the damned, some would be punished more severely than others (501). Irenaeus also makes references to “eternal fire” in Book 1, Chapter 7 (367). This means that unless he was a traditionalist when writing Book 1, then became a conditionalist when writing Book 2, and then changed his mind again while writing Book 4, he was a conditionalist who believed that the damned were completely destroyed in “eternal fire,” suffering a punishment that was “rendered also eternal,” and that, in the process, these unsaved people suffered varying degrees of suffering based on their sins. While modern writers insist that eternal punishment in eternal fire requires eternal torment, this was not the case with Irenaeus of Lyons.

Now, I of course am not arguing that since Irenaeus said it, it must be true. That certainly is not what I believe! What I am saying is that, whether annihilationism is right or wrong, it’s hard to justify the claim that this belief has always been one held only in the fringes of Christianity until recently, given its support by even Irenaeus of Lyons (and other fathers mentioned in this section).

H. *The Apocalypse of Peter* and Other So-called New Testament Apocrypha

Uninspired literature that came about in the first few centuries after Christ is sometimes looked to as a reflection of what early Christians believed about Hell. Now, uninspired literature

can have a lot of use to us. It has great historical value. Many uninspired writings are, despite not being God-breathed, full of wisdom and truth. The writings of the early church fathers are uninspired theological writing. What I am writing is an uninspired theological writing, so obviously I don't dismiss all such writings!

However, not all such literature is created equal. A distinction here should be made between books that are pseudepigraphal, which is a nice way of saying “forged,” and those that are not. My concern here is with those that are pseudepigraphal, those that claim to have been written by apostles but were not. There are quite a few of these writings. If it bears the name of an apostle, and it is not in the New Testament, it is because it was deemed to be a false writing, as pseudepigrapha, by the collective church at large at some point in history. Only a few will I look at here, but keep in mind that much of what I have to say applies to all of them.

The Apocalypse of Peter is probably the most well-known of such writings. In it, the apostle Peter is shown by the Lord the many sufferings of the damned in Hell. In a fashion similar to Dante's *Inferno*, there are many levels of Hell with different forms of torment applied to different sinners in accordance with the kinds of sins they had committed in this life. Is this work a guide to understanding how Christians saw eternal punishment in the second century? I say, not really.

First of all, not all copies of this work are the same. The Ethiopian text, for example, actually teaches universalism. At the end, the Lord says to an understandably distraught Peter, “My Father will give unto them [the damned] all the life, the glory, and the kingdom that passeth not away, . . . It is because of them that have believed in me that I am come. It is also because of them that have believed in me, that, at their word, I shall have pity on men.” If *this* is seen as a

reflection of how the earliest Christians viewed Hell, it would obviously suggest that eternal torment was not the only major view!

More importantly, was this even written by a Christian? Why do I even ask this? After all, it talks about Jesus and the apostles and Heaven and Hell. Who else would have written it? Well, in *The Apocalypse of Peter*, the narrator, named Clement, claims that Peter taught him about this vision he saw. This book was even considered by some in the early church to be scripture. Clement of Alexandria accepted the book (Davis). The Canon Muratorianus (also called the Muratorian Fragment), one of the oldest known lists of New Testament books, reads, “We receive also the Apocalypse of John and *that of Peter*, though some amongst us will not have thus latter be read in church” (“Fragments of Causis” 603-604). It was a controversial book, though one with notable acceptance for a time. But if the story told were a true story, and Peter really did receive this divine revelation, why isn’t it in the Bible? Needless to say, it never made it in because it wasn’t (and isn’t) believed to be authentic. And if the content of this writing is false, then the author is a liar (either that, or it was a discarded manuscript of a bad Christian fiction novel that was discovered and mistaken for the real thing). Either Peter actually had this vision and told the author, or he didn’t. Unless somehow it was unintentional, there’s no middle ground here. It isn’t just a statement of belief (like many uninspired writings are) where they can be wrong here and there and it is okay because people can, in good faith, be wrong about things. What kind of Christian would fabricate a divine vision and pass it off as truth? Consider how harshly God dealt with such things in the past. Under the Mosaic Law, those who claimed to prophesy on behalf of God and who were doing so falsely were to be put to death (Deuteronomy 18.20). In the book of Revelation, the Lord repeatedly warns against adding to or taking away from anything in the book, under penalty of plague and even damnation (e.g. 22.18-19). How

much more harshly would the Lord deal with someone who doesn't just add to a prophetic writing, but totally fabricates one? If the events of the book really happened, then it is from God. If someone made it up, it is of the devil, who is the father of lies (John 8.44).

Although Christians do sometimes sin and lie, this goes a lot deeper. Now, of course, we can rest assured that, although we are not to keep sinning, we will be forgiven if it happens (1 John 2.1-2). However, to have such a blatant disregard for the word of God as to make up a divine revelation should make us seriously reconsider the idea that this is a "Christian" writing. All too often, people don't think twice about so-called Christian writings which contain legends and falsehoods and forgeries. After all, Christianity is a religion. All religions have legendary elements. All religions have oral traditions and stories that are accepted as truth even though they never happened. Over time the teachings evolve alongside culture because people change, and the stories they come up with will too, right? However, I shall not use in a Christian theological treatise the words that properly describe these "religious" practices. They are lies. If you knowingly say something that is untrue and call it the truth, it is a lie. There is no gray area. There's no room for "legends" in Christianity. Legends and myths are lies. If you make up a story and say that it's just a story, then there's no problem with that. That's called fiction. Fiction is great. TV and literature and movies are fiction. I sometimes write fiction. No problem. But if you knowingly take something false and call it truth, it is a lie.

Now, just so nobody finds me ignorant, I do concede that on very rare occasions, lying can be the right thing to do. This was the case for the Hebrew midwives who lied to Pharaoh to protect the Hebrew babies and were blessed by God for it (see Exodus 1). But liars, those for whom lying is normal, are listed among those condemned to the lake of fire (Revelation 21.8).

Christianity is not just another “religion” where people get to write stories and fabricate gods and histories and revelations in order to explain the world. People of every other faith get to do that. We don’t. They create their gods and make them say whatever they want. We worship the only true God who created us, and obey His word and His Word. Their father is the devil, the father of lies. Our Father is the Lord God Almighty, who does not lie (Titus 1.2). It is possible that someone who actually was a Christian, albeit a very misguided one, made up the story. However, I will hardly accept this as a given. I can understand a believer falling to just about any other sin (murder, adultery, even idolatry), but desecrating the word of God? What child of God would dare prophesy falsely?

In these writings, many claim things that make them either scripture or the product of demons. This was the case for *The Apocalypse of Peter*. The same can be said for *The Vision of Paul*, which does speak of eternal torment, though with one day of reprieve every week on the Lord’s Day (163; ch. 44). Upon looking over other such works from the first 4 centuries of the church’s existence, Robert Morey concludes, “Enough has been given to demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that the position of the early church was not that of Universalism or annihilationism [but rather, eternal torment]” (162). If the early church really did express its views by creating false writings in the names of apostles and claiming false words from the mouth of the Lord as a matter of common and accepted practice, then maybe the Muslims are right about us...

You might be wondering why someone who didn’t believe in Jesus would make up a story about Him. Honestly, I don’t know why. But then again, why would anybody write any false religious document? Why did men, even in the earliest ages, choose instead to worship idols and not their creator (Romans 1.21-23)? Why have people around the world been lying and

making up false religions ever since then? Why did people come to deny that Jesus came in the flesh, despite the absolute necessity of believing that He came in the flesh (1 John 4.2-3)? I could even point to Islam. Regardless of how the Qur'an came to be, somebody somewhere lied and claimed that God said the gospel was false and that Jesus was just a prophet. I can't say why people do it, but they've been doing it from the beginning. Ultimately, it all comes from the devil, the father of lies.

Now, let's just say for a moment that maybe the writer was a believer. After all, even I am not so presumptuous to say I can judge the salvation of a professing believer. But even if this person were saved in spite of himself, should we really take the beliefs of people so clearly misguided as being representative of what was normal? By the very nature of writing what they are writing, they are committing grave sins against God. Think about it: Today we have people who publically praise God for the death of soldiers. Today, we have Christian pastors and writers who write books on why slavery in America was good and why interracial marriage is bad because their heavy-drinking preacher told them from childhood that that's what a few passages mean (context and actually thinking about what you believe be damned). Today, under the banner of our faith we have clergymen who protect child rapists because they believe that they all have the authority of Peter and the apostles because of the collars they wear. Would we say that they are a good source of information on what Christians today believe? Well, would the early church say that a bunch of liars and false prophets are a good source of information on what the church believed in its infancy and childhood?

Now indeed, there are alternative possibilities. Maybe this was a common view and a believer had a hallucination based on their beliefs. Maybe the devil placed a false vision in a believer's head (if that is even possible), and it still mimicked what they already believed. But

the idea that at least some of these writings are simply made up, as opposed to all kinds of bizarre supernatural occurrences taking place, is by far the most likely explanation. That just goes without saying.

If indeed unbelievers have come and written lies about God (which they have done from the beginning of the world), what they say has little bearing on what the early church believed (even though a good number may have been written late enough to where the early church did largely believe in eternal torment). And even if some of the people who wrote these false works were saved (because I am not willing to claim that I know for certain that they aren't), they are hardly people we should look as model theologians or representatives of Christianity.

I. Conclusion

It is wrong to assume that eternal torment has been universal in church, especially in the early church, and this takes a lot of the wind out of the traditional doctrine's sails. Conditionalism existed in the early church. Ambiguity existed in the early church, more so than anything else among the earliest writers. As mentioned before, one common element among the earliest writers was the use of biblical terminology without explanation. The lost would be "destroyed." They "perish." They suffer "death" and "destruction." If anything, at face value this would indicate that they were annihilationists, not traditionalists. Furthermore, if there were not Christians who believed in annihilationism early on, church fathers that held to traditionalism would not have had to write against annihilationism (e.g. Tertullian 570; ch. 35). Even universalism sprang up early on in the west, held by early church fathers like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and quite possibly Clement of Alexandria. Furthermore, universalism "seems to have been not uncommon in the East during the fourth and fifth centuries" (Bauckham 48). As

Graham Keith notes, “Indeed, a century or so after Constantine we have a surprising amount of evidence indicating widespread denial of eternal punishment within the church” (219). That doesn’t sound like a historically unanimous church.

Furthermore, although conditionalism lost its influence for quite some time, this isn’t to say that it never popped up again within the church between the ante-Nicene fathers and the Adventists of the 1800’s. Even traditionalists take note of fringe groups like the Socinians of the reformation age and philosophers like John Locke, for example (Salmond 476). Although Anabaptists are a bit of a mixed bag in all matters of theology, we can infer from Article XVII of the Lutheran Augsburg Confession of 1530 that a denial of the traditional view was prevalent among at least some of them. The confession declares: “They [the Lutheran churches] condemn the Anabaptists, who think that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils” More orthodox churchmen of the reformation era are also noted, such as “Hammond and Warburton” (Warfield 185). I imagine these references are to Henry Hammond and William Warburton, the Anglican bishops from the 17th and 18th centuries (respectively). The latter not only denied the inherent immortality of man but also called traditionalists “unmerciful doctors” (621). Eternal torment may have been the majority view throughout much of history, but it was not even close to the only view of the early church, or of the body of Christ since, so don’t even give a moment’s thought to it whenever you hear it claimed that eternal torment must be right because the church has always believed it.

XI. THE TRUE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEPARATION AND DEATH

A. Introductory Notes

Death vs. life is a fairly common motif in the Bible, and it is quite relevant for our purposes here because “death” is the fate of the unsaved. The book of Revelation repeatedly warns of the fate of the unsaved, known there as the “second death” (2.11; 20.14; 21.8). James bookends his epistle with warnings that “death” is the fruit of sin (James 1.15; 5.20), the latter passage speaking of a person’s very soul being in danger of death (this is not apparent in the NIV, but it is in the more literal translations). It has been suggested that physical death, rather than spiritual death, is in view in Romans 6.23, but whatever is meant in that particular verse, its wording can be applied to summarize the contrast between the saved and unsaved made in scripture: “For the wages of sin is *death*; but the free gift of God is eternal *life* in Christ Jesus our Lord” (emphasis added). Other passages, such as Matthew 10.39 and John 3.16 don’t mention “death” by name, but nonetheless contrast life with the fate of the lost (and death, of course, is the opposite of, and alternative to, life).

Now, figuring out where to best place this section was a bit tricky, as it is really as much an affirmative argument for annihilationism as it is a rebuttal of traditionalist arguments. In the course of this section, I will be making the case that while “death” in the Bible may not be quite as simple and literal as some make it out to be, the fact that the lost are repeatedly warned of impending “death” in contrast to “life” greatly helps annihilationism. However, more of the section will be devoted to rebutting claims made by many traditionalists that the warnings of “death” actual give evidence for eternal conscious existence of the wicked after judgment, and that is why it is here in Part 2.

The fact the unsaved are condemned to “death,” on its face, would seem rather helpful to the annihilationist case. License plates tell us that everyone *lives* forever and that you can follow the up arrow or the down arrow. When speaking of Hell, Christian scholars and preachers say “the soul in torment shall *never die*, or lose any of its powers and faculties” (emphasis added) (Gill). Instead, “every human being ever born *lives forever*” (MacArthur, “The Answer”), and the unsaved are given warnings like the following: “Thou art a fallen creature, having only capacities to live here in sin, to *live forever* in torment” (Spurgeon, “The Holy Spirit”). It would seem that traditionalism entails that everyone lives forever (which seems rather intuitive). And yet, the Bible says that the wicked do not live, but rather, they die!

Of course, although this is the case, we can’t just leave it at that. If we could, this section would be so much shorter! In the Bible, “death” need not mean the same thing in every instance. With the exception of some at the end of time, everyone dies physical death, whether they are saved or unsaved. Already, when the Bible speaks of death, we know there are at least two different things that it could be referring to. It could be referring to the death that everyone dies that is reversed when they are resurrected (which we will call “physical death”), or it could be referring to the fate of the unsaved after judgment (which will be called “spiritual death,” although that term will have more specific uses on a few occasions, which will be clear when those situations arise). Just what is death, then, and what does it mean for the unsaved to suffer a second death at judgment?

It is over the specifics and nitty-gritty details of what the word “death” means that a lot of the disagreement arises. A common traditionalist argument is that “death” doesn’t mean an end to conscious existence (i.e. not used how the traditionalists above, and most others, use it in every day discussion). Rather, death literally means “separation.” It is treated as a technical term;

“As we have already noted, death in the Bible means separation” (Wilmington 89), and that is that. Physical death is the separation of the body and soul/spirit (or the separation of the body from both soul and spirit, as some believe soul and spirit are distinct). Spiritual death is the separation of the whole person from God. Some use the term “eternal death” to describe the final fate of the lost (e.g. Boettner 18), but you get the idea. On the other hand, some traditionalists treat the term “death” less mechanically, seeing it as simply having different meanings in different contexts (like most words do). In annihilationist circles, some take it more mechanically than others as well. Since some annihilationists are physicalists and therefore do not believe in a separate, conscious soul, they see death as tantamount to practical non-existence. The only difference between the first and second deaths is that God reverses it the first time, so it is not eternal like the second death is. Others look at it in a more nuanced way (especially those who believe in an immaterial soul). None, however, see it as referring to the eternal conscious existence of those who suffer it.

It is my belief that, for the most part, these positions are not as different or incompatible as it seems, and that the aspects of death that the Bible does clearly explain spell out all we need to know, regardless of some minute details.

One final note: This whole section assumes dualism and the survival of the immaterial soul past physical death. If physicalists are right, if there is no immaterial soul and the death of the body means the end of conscious existence of a person, then the passages that warn of a second death would be quite clear in pronouncing the truth of annihilationism. We all know what a dead body is like, so if that is essentially the whole person, and that happens on an eternal scale, then what that means for the lost is pretty clear. If physicalism is true, and the “spirit” which returns to God in Ecclesiastes 12.7 is just the breath of life (since spirit and breath are the same

Hebrew word), then a dead person is “dead as a doornail,” giving us no reason to see the second death as anything different. However, virtually all traditionalists reject that initial premise in the first place. They (like some annihilationists) believe that humans have a living, immaterial, component. Some see one part (interchangeably called the soul or spirit), and others see two parts (soul and spirit). Either way, the death of the body does not mean an end to conscious existence, as the soul/spirit lives on. However, even under this traditional view, I will explain why what we see at physical death still death foreshadows annihilation, not continued existence.

B. Death Occurs at a Separation – Just as the Body Dies When Separated From the Spirit

Given what death and life ostensibly look like in this life, it should be no surprise that annihilationists across the board make reference to the fact that the wicked will suffer “death.” Taken at face value, “death” hardly sounds consistent with eternal torment. As previously mentioned, it is argued, in defense of the traditional doctrine, that death is not a form non-existence, that it is not really “death” as we might have envisioned it as children, but that it really just means separation. The first death is the separation of the body from the soul/spirit. The second death is also separation, only this time, it is the whole person being separated from God. Thus, when sinners are warned of “death,” it means separation from God.

This may surprise some, but I don’t disagree that death is separation. Really, I agree with the above premises. Death does mean a separation. When you die the first time, the spirit becomes separated from the body, (controversies over the definition of “spirit” aside). After all, according to James 2.26 (which is also part of a useful reminder of what our lives as Christians should look like): “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead.” When the Bible speaks of the “second death” (Revelation 2.11; 20.14; 21.8), it probably is

referring to the body and spirit (or body, spirit, and soul), the whole person, being eternally separated from God. I don't disagree with those points, but I do disagree with the implications that supposedly follow from this being the case.

The question is this: Is biblical death the separation itself, or is it the result of the separation? Put another way, are both elements that are separated from one another "dead," or does the separation of two things that occurs at what we call death cause the death of just one? If death refers to the separation itself, then would that not mean that when a person dies physical death, their spirit is dead too (assuming dualism)? After all, both are separated from something. Furthermore, if the second death is separation from God, would that then mean that God is dead? After all, He is separated from the damned person...

As soon as we leave behind the hasty Christian cliché that death means a separation and see what the Bible says, like in James 2.26, it becomes clear that death is what is *caused* by separation. When separation occurs, death occurs. Both parties are separated, which causes one of the separated parties to die. A body without a spirit is dead, but a spirit is not dead without a body. God is not dead...ever, yet most would agree that you are spiritually dead if you are cut off from God. Death is the *result* of the separation. Only one of the separated entities dies.

This turns the idea of death fitting with eternal existence on its head. Why? Well, if the separation of the body and spirit causes the body to die, then to have an idea of what death is like, we need only to look at a dead body. The conscious soul/spirit, after all, is not dead in the first place. And what is a dead body like? A dead body is cold, has no feeling, no thoughts, no perception, and eventually decays and decomposes. It cannot be tormented. If that is what a dead body is like, what then of a person whose spirit/soul is dead as well? Why would we just assume that a dead spirit is somehow animated and conscious when a dead body is not?

This discussion has, for centuries, been muddled by human language. After all, when a person suffers physical death, we don't say that his body died. No, we would say that the person died. With this in mind, one mistakenly thinks that at physical death the whole person dies, and since the person does not cease to exist but is conscious as a soul/spirit, one emphasizes the fact that it is a separation. But really, the body is what dies. That's specifically what James 2.26 says. Assuming dualism, the whole person does not die. Assuming dualism, when a saved person suffers physical death, their spirit is obviously not dead in any sense of the word. And yet, they are still dead, because their body is dead, and the corpse of a believer is as dead as anything else on this side of eternity. At physical death, a separation occurs, and thus death means separation. However, it is ultimately like this: At physical death, a separation occurs, and this causes the body to die. It doesn't matter that the spirit, according to traditional dualism, is conscious after physical death; the spirit is not dead in the first place! That which is dead is the corpse, and we all know what a corpse is like.

This is further demonstrated by Christ's warning to his disciples in Matthew 10.28: "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." In context, Jesus is referring to men who might react violently to the disciples' message. What is it that men do? They kill the body, but they cannot kill the soul. Now, we could say that Jesus only says that physical death inflicted by men cannot kill the soul, and that other forms of physical death could, but is anybody going to? Rather, as traditionalists Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman Jr. accurately point out, "Killing the body does not result in the death of the soul" (51). Jesus's disciples would understandably fear for their safety; there isn't some metaphorical aspect here. All that men can kill is the body, not the whole person (which God can "destroy"). Physical death kills the body, not the soul.

So what then need be said about “life”? Not all that much, given what we know about its opposite. We know it stands in contrast to “death.” You have “life” or you have “death.” Like death, we know what it means at face value. Although the Bible gives it a richer meaning than mere conscious existence, those who claim that its meaning is separate and apart from that of conscious existence need to do more than just say that this is the case. Some appeal to John 17.3 as proof that the “life” we have in Christ, “eternal life,” is referring simply to quality of life. The passage reads as follows: “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” But to say that this is referring to a subset of those who exist, that it is referring only to those with a certain quality of existence in contrast to others who exist without it, would be begging the question. This assumes off the bat that those who do not know God and Christ are in fact still consciously existent in eternity. This assumes that you can exist for eternity without having eternal life, that you can exist in eternity despite not knowing God. An annihilationist need not shy away from this passage; you either know God and Christ and have life in every sense of the word, or you don’t know Jesus and you have life in no sense of the word. It is the opposite of death, after all, and according to the annihilationist interpretation (and the Bible), those who suffer the second death, those who are cut off from God’s blessings and mercy, suffer death in every sense of the word while those of us who love God will enter into eternity with death gone forever.

To reiterate, at physical death, it is the body that dies, not the whole person. So then, to see what death is like, we should look at what is dead, being the body. If a corpse is the example we have of something that is dead, and if in the second death the soul dies as well as the body, then we should expect the whole person to be rendered like a corpse. It should therefore be no surprise that the Greek philosopher Plato, in his work *Phaedo*, used the Greek word for death,

θανάτος (*thanatos*), when referring to what does *not* happen to the soul (White 361). In other words, the philosopher most famous for his belief in the immortal soul explicitly contradicts the New Testament in its original language! The whole person, body and soul, is turned into something like a corpse, confirming annihilationism.

C. No Distinction between the Death of Animals and the Death of Men

Simply put, there is no actual distinction, in Greek or in Hebrew, between the death and dying of animals, and that of men. It is just as the English reads. When fish die in Revelation 8.9, it is the same word, *apothnέskό*, used to say that Jesus died in Romans 5.8. Likewise, when God tells Adam and Eve that they will die in Genesis 2.17, it is the same Hebrew word, *muth*, that applies to the fish that die in the Nile in Exodus 7.18. If one is to say that death literally means, by definition, the separation of body and immaterial spirit/soul, then what of animals? They “die” too. Unless they have immaterial souls that live on past death, then we can’t say death literally means a separation between body and soul/spirit since animals die also die.

I am not by any means saying that death must ultimately result in the same thing for men and animals simply because the word is the same. In fact, in assuming dualism for our purposes here, I am arguing just the opposite. Men, unlike animals, have what we call “souls.” Both men and animals die, meaning that their bodies die. For animals, that means the end of everything (unless God somehow resurrects them or something in the new heavens and earth). For men, their souls do not die at physical death, so they exist in a different form. However, the point here is that the process itself, death, is something that can be applied to animals. Because animals presumably do not have a separation of body and immaterial soul like men do, death is the thing that happens to their bodies that turns them to corpses, If this is the state of the body at the first

death, wouldn't it at least be a reasonable possibility that the state of the whole person at the second death is similar?

Even if animals actually do have immaterial souls that go on past death as human souls do, it would not destroy the argument that death is what a dead body, and not a still-existent soul, suffers. After all, their bodies still would die as a result of that separation, which is the case for humans as well (assuming that humans have an immaterial and vivacious spirit/soul). Also, their hypothetical souls would remain alive, same as for the human. What would be dead would just be the body even then. And ultimately, Subsection C is only a supporting piece of evidence for the claims of Subsection B anyway.

D. Other Instances of Death as Separation

There are instances where death is mentioned that aren't referring to eternal punishment or physical death. Paul makes references to dying to sin (Romans 6.2) and to the Law (7.4). A page on *The Interactive Bible* even points to the fact that, according to 1 Corinthians 7.39, a husband and wife are separated by death ("Death"). What are we to make of these death references?

The first thing to take note of here is that in all of these cases, just as with the body and the spirit, only one of the separated parties is "dead." When Paul speaks of us dying to the Law, the Law is not dead, but we are dead to it. Same with sin. In the case of marriage, on one hand, it's not really even applicable. Being separated is not called a form of death. Bodily death occurs, and this nullifies a covenant. It's a totally separate matter. Paul never says that the husband and wife are both dead because of separation. Death causes a separate separation, but it is not the

separation itself. And even then, only one party is dead (the physically dead spouse). The one who is physically and consciously alive is not the dead one.

What of the fact that Paul, being dead to sin and to the law, is still consciously existent even though “dead”? Firstly, I am going to go out on a limb here and say that maybe, just maybe, Paul and other biblical authors might occasionally be less than 100% literal. Paul could be saying that he died to sin and the Law strictly by having separated himself from them, using death and its derivatives as technical terms for separation, the way that they have come to be known in modern Christianese (despite never being defined as such in the Bible). However, he could also be saying it much more simply; as far as sin’s ability to utilize him, he was as good as dead. It is not unreasonable to imagine that he might be using death, a picture and idea familiar to every human in every culture (especially the 1st century Roman empire), as a metaphor. He was a sinner, an agent of sin, a servant to sin (John 8.34; Romans 6.17). So long as he lived, he served evil. Now, however, through Christ, it is as if sin’s slave is dead (similar idea with the Law, since Christ freed Him from the Law as well). What good is a dead slave?

After all, there are instances where talk of death is clearly figurative, not meant to be speaking of literal separation at all. Take Galatians 2.20 for example: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” Paul wasn’t literally crucified, and he obviously was alive physically when he wrote that. Paul also isn’t saying that he no longer lives spiritually; the opposite was true! He has gained, not lost, spiritual life, and he lives in the flesh, but the life he lives in the flesh is one in faith in Jesus. He lives because Jesus gave him the right to be called a child of God (John 1.12-13). He lives because Jesus’s spirit in our hearts cries out *Abba*, which means “Father” (Galatians 4.6). Just as Jesus

gave Himself completely in death for man, so too are His followers to give themselves completely to Him, both in being willing to suffer death, and more importantly, giving themselves to Him in life so completely that it is as if they died and He lived. Think about it; Paul wasn't really crucified with Christ, and he in every way certainly did live. He was there quite clearly being figurative. After all, one's only hope for eternal life is in Jesus, and if he has faith, he should give himself so completely that it would be as if Jesus were walking the earth. It is a matter of how death appears on earth. On earth, if someone dies, they are gone, even if they aren't really gone completely. The point made is that, without the Law bringing death, his sin is not held against him, and he is made anew. We were slaves to sin, but after Christ saved us, it was as if we, sin's slaves, died (thus he was dead to sin). Sin lost its servants, and in place of each of us, it is as if a part of Christ now walks the earth.

A second point to consider is this: the second death is called the second death, which means only one death precedes it. I am going to go out on a limb again, and assume that the first death in view is physical death, as it is the only form of death that everyone who suffers the second death would have previously suffered. That form of death, as far as all forms of "death" are concerned, is the one that would reasonably be in view when John refers to the second death as a form of "death." If John has the idea of physical death in mind when he speaks of the other kind of death (spiritual death), a second death that comes after the first is reversed, then might that not reflect on what the second death is supposed to be like? And what is a dead body like...?

E. Adam and Eve

It is not uncommon to hear it said that since Adam and Eve did not drop dead after they ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God's warning of "death" entailed them being

separated from God. Importantly, it is argued that this shows that “to die” means not only to be cut off from God’s presence, but to be cut off from His presence and still be physically alive and conscious. This must be what “death” means, it is reasoned, since they were cast out of the garden, away from God, but they did not die physically until way later.

It is my position, however, that this is not what God meant when He warned Adam and Eve that every other tree was fair game, “but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” (Genesis 2.17). I will also explain why, even if God was speaking of this conscious “spiritual death” and being cut off from His presence, it ultimately is not that helpful to traditionalism as it would seem.

First of all, we have a very similar instance elsewhere in the Bible. 1 Kings 2.36-37 reads as follows: “Now the king [Solomon] sent and called for Shimei and said to him, ‘Build for yourself a house in Jerusalem and live there, and do not go out from there to any place. For *on the day* you go out and cross over the brook Kidron, you will know for certain that *you shall surely die*; your blood shall be on your own head’” (emphasis added). Does that sound familiar? And even less ambiguous is what was said when Shimei disobeyed Solomon and then returned: “So the king sent and called for Shimei and said to him, “Did I not make you swear by the LORD and solemnly warn you, saying, ‘*You will know for certain that on the day you depart and go anywhere, you shall surely die*’? And you said to me, ‘The word which I have heard is good’” (emphasis added) (Verse.42). Is that not exactly the same warning that God gave Adam in regards to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

The question then becomes whether or not Shimei actually died the same day that he crossed the river. Although the Bible does not say how much time passed, it is likely that he did not literally die that day. He left because his servants had fled to Gath (1 Kings 2.39-40). In

order for him to have died that day, then within that one day, he would have had to travel about 34 miles each way (Gil), spend time looking for his servants, retrieve his servants who had escaped and entered the custody of the local prince, make it back before dark (when city gates typically would close), be summoned to the King's palace, and then arrive to that palace. Because we are explicitly told that Solomon did not find out about it until after he returned (Verse 41), we have all the more reason to think he was not killed the same day he first left Jerusalem. And yet at the end, Solomon unabashedly reminded him that he had said to Shimei that if Shimei were to leave Jerusalem, he would die *that day*. If, however, Solomon simply was saying that on that day, death would be earned, then it is no problem.

Even if Solomon did successfully kill Shimei on the same day that he first left, it is still unlikely that Solomon meant that Shimei would necessarily be killed on the same day that he left. Simply put, even Solomon wouldn't be that cocky. And he obviously wasn't trying that hard to make sure Shimei died the same day that he left. Remember, Solomon only heard that Shimei had left after Shimei had returned. What if Shimei had gone 100 miles instead of 34? Solomon obviously didn't have one of his servants parked outside Shimei's house on an unmarked donkey who would follow Shimei and shoot him dead with a bow and arrow were he to have crossed the Brook Kidron. It seems that as far as Solomon was concerned, literally dying the same day just wasn't that important. The important thing was that on that day, Shimei would have earned his demise.

I think the only possible way to say that this is different is if we assume that the way Solomon initially made the threat, shown above, was intentional and all he meant was that Shimei would know on that day that he would eventually die as a result of his action. The fact that Solomon, upon Shimei's return, explicitly says that Shimei would die the same day, was by

mistake, and not because, as far as Solomon was concerned, the two statements were equivalent in meaning. Three years had passed, so Solomon thought he had said something different from what he actually did. This is indeed possible, especially if everything happened as fast as it could and Shimei really was killed the same day (which would provide a reason for Solomon to mix things up). Although this is possible, it's not exactly a strong possibility as much as it is a reason to not have to say that the phrase in question is at least sometimes used when the person who says it doesn't mean the condemned person would actually die the same day. Whatever the case, I think this should get you thinking.

This warning that Adam and Eve would die could also be something similar to a common rhetorical device called prolepsis, defined by Leroy Froom as “an anticipation of that which is future as if it were already present” (72). Traditionalist Kenneth Gentry points to this phenomenon as well: “A common literary device is *prolepsis*. Prolepsis is the anachronistic representing of something as existing *before* its proper or historical time...The scripture is filled with examples of prolepsis...” (*God Gave Wine* 42). This will become especially significant in Subsection F. In this case, although the warning of death is not directly prolepsis (in that God doesn't say they are dead, but rather, that they would die), it is still very informative in explaining what God meant. And this isn't an obscure theological term; it's simply a type of rhetorical device that is still common today (“Prolepsis”). Whenever those on death row call out “dead man walking” as a clearly living human walks to the gallows, that is prolepsis. Froom points to Genesis 20.3, Exodus 12.33 and Numbers 17.12 as examples of proleptic mentions of death (72). Genesis 20.3 is especially pertinent, as it is found in the same book as the account of Adam and Eve. Admittedly, in all these situations, one could read spiritual death into it, but to do so would be forced, and I have never come across a commentary that does so. Really, virtually

any passage that mentions a warning of death *could* be read to entail spiritual and not physical death, but that doesn't mean that is what is in view. In Numbers 17.12, for example, after the earth swallowed Korah and his followers and a plague struck down many of their countrymen, it is not hard to guess what kind of death was in view.

Prolepsis is not unique to the Old Testament. Have we been glorified yet? Last I checked, we still are prone to sin, suffering, and our ultimate mortality. We don't bear Christ's glorified image yet, but the Bible says that God has glorified us, in the past tense, as part of his grand saving plan (Romans 8.30). This hasn't literally occurred yet, but because it will happen, because God has decreed it and nothing can stop Him, the Bible speaks of it as being done already. Especially pertinent is Romans 8.10: "If Christ is in you, though *the body is dead* because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness" (emphasis added). Was Paul writing to a bunch of corpses? Was he writing to a bunch of disembodied spirits? Or, was Paul saying that their bodies were mortal and were day by day dying? Here again, Paul was speaking of something that was to happen in the future, something that was already set in motion, as if it already happened. Although death occurs at a moment, day by day we are getting closer and closer to death. Although they were not dead yet, Paul referred to them as being already dead. Is it unreasonable to think that God might speak this way to Adam and Eve?

If anything, this kind of language would make especially good sense in the case of Adam and Eve. We are mortal from the moment we are born. There is no point where we entered into this mortal state of ours. Under normal circumstances, it's hard to pinpoint a time where we become proleptically "dead" prior to our actual death because at any point, we are destined to die; the only thing that separates one point of our lives from another is how close to death we are. But Adam and Eve, at the very least, had the opportunity to live forever. We know this, if for no

other reason, because the Bible tells us how they lost the opportunity in Genesis 3.22: “Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever—.’” Even while we live, we are dying and we inevitably will die. But Adam and Eve knew no death. They were meant to live for ever and ever (I mean “meant to” in the most immediate human sense; I’m not saying that God wasn’t fully aware of what would actually happen). If the commencement and progress towards an end can be represented as the actual end having occurred (like our bodies being “dead” while we are alive), then why couldn’t Adam and Eve’s entrance into mortality be referred to as them dying that day?

In response to this, one might argue that their deaths were not imminent enough to warrant the use of prolepsis. After all, their deaths occurred after not minutes or days but years (centuries in fact, assuming a literal reading of the life-spans listed in Genesis). However, if they were meant to live forever, how can death after any amount of finite time be considered anything but imminent? If God would call the clearly living Abimelech a “dead” man in Genesis 20.3 because his death was to happen a few decades ahead of schedule, is it crazy to think that God might rhetorically refer to Adam and Eve entering into mortality and becoming doomed to die when they never were ever going to die as dying that day? Their deaths came an eternity ahead of schedule! Adam and Eve became dead in the proleptic sense. They became alive but doomed to die. On that day, they became as “dead” as our bodies are now (Romans 8.10).

Furthermore, the focus of Genesis 3 is on their physical mortality. God did not say, “And now, lest sinful men stay in my presence, they must leave.” The direct result of Adam and Eve sinning was that they were not allowed access to the tree of life, and thus they died physically. Consider also the curses pronounced on Adam and Eve. God had previously warned them that

they would die if they sinned. After they sinned, and God pronounced the curses on them, He did not say anything about them being cut off from His presence (“spiritual” death), but He did say that they would return to the dust (Verse 19), which elsewhere in the Bible is what is said to occur when one dies physically (e.g. Ecclesiastes 12.7). God didn’t mention their “spiritual death” of being cut off from Him to them, even though that is supposedly what He was referring to in His warnings to them before. However, He did mention their physical death among their curses, even though He supposedly was not warning them about physical death in Genesis 2.17. Would it not be a little odd for God to bring up a form of death that he had not previously mentioned, at the same time making no mention of the death that He had specifically warned them would result from their actions?

One additional point to consider is this: it’s hard to say that Adam and Eve really “died,” in this technical, theological sense, as they were not disfellowshipped completely. When Eve had Abel, she declared, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man” (*NIV*, Genesis 4.1b). Cain and Abel were as “dead” as their parents. After all, we know that death reigned from Adam onward (Romans 5.14). Nevertheless, they still made offerings to God, some of which He accepted. God even talks to Cain after Cain murdered Abel. Who among us can literally hear God’s voice today? Not many. Even today, we as believers are separated from God in the same way that Adam and Eve were. We can’t yet see God. We aren’t in His paradise prepared for us, worshipping and seeing His face and having Him just walk around like it was no big deal. Most of us today don’t directly hear God’s word as even Cain did, yet we are “alive” (Romans 6.11; Ephesians 2.5). In eternity, we will see His face and be put in full fellowship like it was at the beginning, probably even better than it was for Adam and Eve before the fall. For now, however, we are on probation. Nevertheless, we in Christ are not considered “dead,” but “alive.” Why then

would they be considered “dead” as they lived on earth, still giving praise to God? I suppose one could say that they “died” because for them, being in our position was a step backwards, whereas for us, it is a step forward. Thus, to “die” in this context means not being separated from God, but rather, to become more separated from God than before, and being made “alive” means being closer to God than before, allowing people in the same position to be considered “dead” or “alive” depending on where they started. But if that is the case, then we are no longer using any meaning of “dead/die” and “alive/live” any more literally than I am by suggesting that to “die” that day meant to become mortal, are we?

Lastly, even if their being kicked out of God’s intimate presence was really what God meant by His warning about dying, that doesn’t really matter. Their “death,” being separation from God, directly caused their physical death as well. They were alive when they were cast out, and their physical death didn’t occur immediately, but they died physically directly because they were cast out. By being kicked out, they lost access to the tree of life, which would have kept them alive forever. This tree of life is even shown in Revelation 22.2 as awaiting us in God’s kingdom (more on this in Section XXXIV). Therefore, it is not the case that to “die” for them meant being cut off from God’s presence and being physically alive but miserable. For them, being cut off from God, if that even is what it meant to “die,” meant that they would become mortal, and then would die physically. Their separation from God (so-called spiritual death) and physical death went hand in hand; they were not exclusive of, or ultimately separate from, one another. What will happen to the ungodly when they suffer “death” may very well be like what happened to Adam and Eve. They will be cast out of God’s presence, and therefore will lose what sustains them. Unlike Adam and Eve, who still had some contact with God, their separation will be complete and eternal, as will their mortality be. God will not raise them again as He will

Adam and Eve. Like Adam and Eve, they will be separated from God, and will thus lose their access to immortality, only then, it will be on an eternal scale (since the second death kills body and soul, not just the body).

F. What about the Fact That the Living Unsaved Are Called “Dead” Even Now? - Part I

That we are “alive” yet currently in a similar position to the “dead” Adam and Eve is important to consider when looking at how the Bible speaks of the lost who had not yet died physically. One might observe that the Bible says that people who were walking around were “dead” (e.g. Matthew 8.22; Ephesians 2.1; Colossians 2.13), yet they still existed. It is said that these passages refer solely to being “spiritually” dead, which essentially means separated from God (though obviously not completely). Since those who are spiritually dead are still very much alive physically, it is inferred that this will be the case in eternity. But is that what Jesus and Paul and others meant by “dead” in such passages? Even if we accept the above thesis about the meaning of “dead,” I will show why there is still a major problem with inferring that the lost will then live forever while “dead.” Furthermore, there is at least one alternative view that is reasonable, more fitting to the context, and that doesn’t make “dead” refer to a state that describes one who is consciously existent.

Even if the unsaved are literally dead now because death has some technical, theological meaning that has nothing to do with vivaciousness and consciousness and just means that they are separated from God, this if anything would help prove the annihilationist doctrine, not the traditional one. This is because, as has been established, the unsaved will suffer death in the future, a “second death” as it were. But, according to this theory, they are already dead! To quote Chris Date (who largely gave me this idea), if those who are separated from God and already

“spiritually dead” become separated from God, then, “in what sense is the second death a ‘second’ death?” (“Traditionalism”). In order for them to suffer death, they must be alive in some way which will not be the case after God inflicts final punishment upon them. How are they alive now? They are physically alive. Their bodies (and souls, assuming dualism) are vivacious and conscious. More importantly, after the resurrection, before the second death is inflicted, they will be in this same position. They will be as “spiritually” dead and as physically alive as they are now. If at that point, they were to be made like corpses in body and soul, then that would be a death that they could die despite being already “spiritually” dead. It could be a second death, the first death being whenever they became “spiritually dead” in this life.

However, they cannot die in the way that they are already dead. I suppose one could say that their bodies might die a second time but their souls would remain conscious, but this opens up no end of problems, not the least of which being the fact that Jesus speaks of a common fate for the body *and* soul in Hell (Matthew 10.28), in contrast to what happens at what we call “physical death.” And yet, since they are already “dead” in the other sense, what “*second* death” could they die except for something like “physical death” of the soul/spirit (for lack of a better term)? Therefore, this whole theory actually backfires on the traditional case, because instead of giving biblical evidence that a person can be “dead” spiritually but conscious, this actually eliminates the possibility that they will die this conscious “spiritual death” when they suffer the second death, since they are already “dead” in that sense.

Aside from this second death catch-22, we have good reason to reject the idea that these passages are even saying that “dead” means “consciously separated from God” in the first place. The first alternative theory is the position I myself hold. I cite the latter mainly because I want those who hold it to realize that it eliminates the need for this whole “spiritual death” idea.

The first possibility is that the references to people being currently “dead” could be prolepsis. This use of present tense to speak of future events, brought up in Subsection E, is not that unusual. Theologians point to this in other situations where Hell is not involved. Dispensationalist writer Stanley D. Toussiant points to the “futuristic present meaning” when discussing the following declaration by the Lord Jesus: “For behold, the kingdom of God *is* in your midst” (emphasis added) (Luke 17.21b). He writes, “The present tense of *is*...[in Jesus’s statement] is no problem; it is futuristic in significance, a common enough phenomenon” (236). Along these lines, Daniel Wallace in *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* says of the futuristic present, “The present tense may describe a future event” (534). There are a lot of nuances and there is a lot of technical information involved, of course, so this by no means proves that this is how Paul meant it in these passages. What it does do, however, is establish that I’m not just using verbal gymnastics to avoid something that is problematic for my view. Greek scholars and traditionalist theologians recognize the possibility of the legitimate use of the Greek language in this way, so I’m not just grasping at straws here to defend my position.

Most importantly, the Bible itself uses prolepsis and talks of future things as present realities. In addition to the examples listed above in Subsection E that dealt with death, a few verses after Paul spoke of the unsaved being “dead” in Ephesians 2.1, he says that the Ephesians (and we by extension) were made alive in Christ (Verse 5). And then what does he say in Verse 6? Not only were we made alive, but God made us alive “and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus.” Last I checked, neither we now nor the Ephesians whom Paul wrote to (at the time of his writing) were actually seated in a heavenly place. Paul was speaking proleptically of the glorious inheritance that awaits us, the inheritance for which God has given us His Holy Spirit as pledge of what will come (Ephesians 1.13-14).

Traditionalist Kenneth Gentry even cites several examples of prolepsis in the Bible in regards to a totally different topic:

“For instance, in Judges 9:13, ‘wine’ (Heb. *tirosh*, a liquid drink processed from grapes) is spoken of as ‘on the vine,’ just as figs exist on the tree (Judges 9:10-12). But of course, grapes appear as a solid fruit on the vine - though *tirosh* is the ultimate drink produced from the grapes. In Isaiah 65:8, we find ‘new wine’ (Heb. *tirosh*) ‘in the cluster.’ Jeremiah 40:10 speaks of ‘gathering in wine’ (Heb. *tirosh*) as if the liquid drink itself were in the field on the vine.” (*God Gave Wine* 42-43)

Gentry continues on, pointing out that “the Old Testament has a word for grapes, as literal fruit on the vine: *enab*,” meaning that the Old Testament authors above were clearly referring to the beverage that the grapes would become (wine). Thus, prolepsis.

The Bible is full of prolepsis, so the idea that the passages in question are proleptic is quite reasonable. The argument that I am critiquing, however, will be shown to be anything but reasonable.

There is a second alternative view as well, and it is surprisingly common among traditionalist theologians (when Hell and annihilationism are not being discussed). Also, it is not necessarily incompatible with the prolepsis view, as it could be the case that Paul and Jesus had more than one meaning in mind when they referred to the lost as being “dead.” For this reason, it is also not totally incompatible with the view that I am writing against (since multiple meanings of “dead” could have been in mind). Nevertheless, the reasons I give to oppose the interpretation I have been critiquing throughout this subsection are the same even if this second alternative theory is correct. Also, although this view is not incompatible with the view I’m critiquing, it does solve the conundrum that the death=separation view is assumed to be the only solution for.

This second view is that “dead” is a metaphor for utter inability of unredeemed people to respond to God without His intervention. Consider R.C. Sproul’s take on this: “Dead men will not open their mouths to receive anything. Their jaws are locked in death. Rigor mortis has set in. They must be raised from the dead. They must be new creations, crafted by Christ and reborn by his spirit.” Man is so helpless that Sproul rejects the analogy of a drowning man thrown a life preserver. Instead, the man is dead, at the bottom of the sea, and God must retrieve him and give him life (*Chosen by God* 115, 116). Similarly, according to John MacArthur, those who are “dead” in sin not only are godless, but also, “They are not able to respond at all to him” (“Exchanging Living Death”). According to Mark Dever, in commenting on how “we are, says Ephesians 2, dead in our sins and transgressions,” this death refers to depravity, “a death that deserves death” (35). In other words, this “death” is not the fate of the wicked, since it is what brings on the fate of the wicked. The point of this description of sinners as “dead” is to make the point that a person’s ability to save himself is likened to that of a corpse.

If this is what the Bible means, it would not be of much use in defending the traditionalist doctrine to show that being “dead” is something that they do while consciously existing. Indeed, the “dead” are consciously existent at the time, but they are not actually dead. Being “dead” would itself be a metaphor, a metaphor for their inability to respond to God. They are *like* dead people in that they cannot in any way save themselves. I hope I don’t have to explain to anyone what a metaphor is or that the Bible uses them. But if it is a metaphor for being helpless and useless, then it is not as though “dead” is some sort of technical, theological term which applies to them. Dead would mean “like a corpse,” and Paul and others would be using that as a metaphor for helplessness. If that is the case, it wouldn’t help the traditional doctrine, as the

“dead” aren’t really dead in the first place. It would simply be a metaphor that appeals to a meaning of “dead” with which annihilationists would readily concur.

G. What about the Fact That the Living Unsaved Are Called “Dead” Even Now? - Part II

This subsection simply gives additional reasons upon reasons not to adopt the traditionalist interpretation discussed above, as well as explanations of how any foreseeable responses would be problematic to say the least (I say “foreseeable” because the literature that I have come across doesn’t have much to say against my refutations).

Anyway, of the utmost importance in this discussion is the fact that, whatever the Bible meant by referring to the unsaved as “dead,” the condition of any person is not the same as their eternal condition. Taking this into account is important both in determining whether or not those who are “dead” in sin and so forth are actually currently “dead” or not, as well as in determining whether or not they currently being “dead” even helps the traditionalist case in the first place (beyond the glaring problem that Chris Date pointed out earlier).

Just as the wicked are not yet “dead” in the normal sense of the word, nor are our bodies dead despite Romans 8.10, so they are not in their eternal condition now either. We all agree that what they will endure in eternity is far different from what they suffer now. Consider this: before we knew God, we were “dead” just as the Ephesians were “dead” before they came to Christ (Ephesians 2.1). Today, because I know the truth, the idea of being godless as I once was is too terrible to imagine. However, I for one wasn’t that unhappy as an unbeliever. After all, I didn’t consciously know what I was missing. Neither do they. Furthermore, the damned are still shown God’s kindness and blessings today (Matthew 5.45; Luke 6.35-36). So, sometimes, life is good. They aren’t currently cut off from Him as they will be. It is not today like it will be at judgment.

Along these lines, this is also evident when we consider us being “alive.” Although one might argue that we already have some taste of eternal life today, literally what we experience today is still exceptionally different from what will be. One day, we will know God as He already knows us (1 Corinthians 13.12). However, as the same passage makes clear, we are not there yet. We have never actually seen God or actually known Him in a truly close and personal manner. Although we have His Spirit to lead and comfort us, that is not our hope and reward. Rather, as mentioned above, the Holy Spirit being with us is simply God’s way of promising that we will be adopted as sons and be able to finally know Him, our Father and God (Ephesians 1.13-14). We are “alive” and have “eternal life” today because we are guaranteed to know God when the time comes. Literally, eternal life is something we receive not at conversion, but in the next age (Mark 10.30; Luke 18.30). Does the Bible contradict itself when it says that we have it now? No. Our fate is sealed. It is present in its certainty. We have it the same way that Jesus has abolished death (2 Timothy 1.10); death is not actually gone, but, because of what Christ did for us, its end is as sure as the present. Thus, we are still mortal as of today, but part of our redemption will be the redemption of our mortal bodies (Romans 8.23, 1 Corinthians 15). We won’t truly be alive until we are resurrected in the new heavens and earth, free of sin and in untainted fellowship with God for ever and ever. Whether it is the damned being “dead” or us being “alive,” in neither case does it demonstrate anything close to what is to come.

If according to all views, the current condition of the unsaved is not what it will be in the future, then how can we say that since something is true of them now (i.e. them being conscious), it must therefore be true in eternity? We cannot (and this is true even aside from the argument from the “second” death made in Subsection F).

With all this in mind, if we affirm that the Bible is saying “they are currently ‘dead,’” unless death and life are truly relative to one’s prior position (as briefly discussed in Subsection E), then it must be the case that there are, in fact, degrees of death. If Adam and Eve “died” but then still walked the earth, and the Ephesians really were “dead” prior to their becoming “alive” in Christ, then they would have to have been less dead than the damned will be after judgment. Can you be more “dead” than someone else? Obviously, if “dead” really does literally mean separated from God, then you certainly can be more dead than another. However, if we are going to go that route, then who can say that it is the annihilationist who twists basic language to preserve their theology?

More significant, though along the same lines, is this: If this is the case, then we as believers should be said to be both alive and dead. If “dead” means separated from God, and there can be degrees of death (since the lost are not yet completely separated from God but are already “dead”), then to be “alive” means to be close to God (or something like that). The Bible even says that we are already “alive” (Ephesians 2.5). And yet, have I not made it clear that we as believers are still partially separated from God? Therefore, we are also “dead” (though less so than the unbeliever). So, spiritually, we are both dead and alive, because we know God to an extent (making us “alive”), yet are still in ways separated from His presence (making us “dead”). It would have to be that “dead” and “alive” are not only special technical terms, but also, unlike the words in every other use, they are not incompatible opposites. It would have to be the case that you can be both dead and alive, in the same way, at the same time. Doesn’t that sound absurd? And what about the unbeliever? They still have some contact with God through His blessings, so they would be partially alive (though much less so than us)! Now, to nobody’s surprise, we as believers are never described as both dead and alive in a spiritual sense. When

contrasts do exist, the meaning is either clearly physical death *as opposed to* spiritual life (e.g. Romans 8.10), or contrasting our current state with our guaranteed future. We are alive, and they are dead. Only in the future will we completely know God, and only in the future will they be completely cut off. Only in the future will there literally be such a distinction. Thus, it is very likely that the references to people simply being dead or alive speaks either of their future position, or as a metaphor for their inability to respond to God (both of which make perfect sense given what dead things and living things are like in nature).

In response to the above, I suppose it is possible that we could say there is a threshold where once you are over 50% in either direction, you are considered “dead” or “alive” because you are more one than another, or something like that. But again, if we are going to make arguments like that, then who’s the one twisting language beyond what most could consider reasonable? Of course, even if it were successful, there is still is the fact that the lost wouldn’t die a second death, but would just be dead like they already were. Let’s just say that there are reasons why I have never seen anyone make this 50% argument. It’s purely hypothetical; frankly, the argument that death includes consciousness because the lost are already “dead” just never seems to get developed far enough for all these issues I have raised to be considered in the first place.

I know that given the length of these last few subsections it may seem that I am rambling, but frankly, there are just so many problems with the arguments I’m critiquing here that this is inevitable!

One final argument for the interpretation I oppose is this: one might say that since the unsaved are already “dead” now, they are in some senses separated from God, and thus it gives them a taste of full separation from God. After all, we who are saved and “alive” have some taste

of eternal life because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the case of the unsaved, because they are consciously existent, and because their current state is meant to give them a taste of being completely dead in a spiritual sense, then we should expect them to be consciously existent when they are fully dead.

Aside from the fact that this doesn't solve the problems that Date pointed out (as they are just suffering more of the same), the following question must also be asked: what part of the damned's life experience would be a taste of their eternal torment? Is it the fact that they suffer misery and sadness and physical pain? No, because we suffer that too. Is it the hopelessness about the condition of humanity? No. In fact, I would say if anything, we would have that more than them. After all, our Bible teaches that humanity is generally inclined to evil (Genesis 8.21; Ecclesiastes 9.3; Romans 3.23), and that many people are doomed (Matthew 7.13-14). As for their own outlook on life, many have false religious beliefs, and therefore live with the false hope that they have something better awaiting them. The archetypal unbelieving religious studies student is right when he cynically says that nobody thinks they are going to "Hell" (by which they just would mean the place where bad people go according to a person's religious beliefs). After all, if a person believed that their gods did not approve of them, and that it mattered, then they would make a change. Many aren't emotionally troubled by their godlessness, at least not on a conscious level. For those who are atheists or who just simply deny any sort of afterlife, some do not feel hopeless. They are happy today, and death is just something that comes. For those who are afflicted by hopelessness, it is because, in their mind, after this world of pain and misery, they will be dead and know and feel nothing more for eternity. That hardly fits the idea of eternal existence in a state of pain. Their hopelessness lies in the belief that life is only bad, only miserable, and then it ends. That is very much like what I believe the damned will see at

judgment. They will see only sorrow and misery until it all just ends in nothingness. How then does the life of the unbeliever foreshadow their eternal torment?

I should make clear that I am not saying that the current life of the unbeliever foreshadows annihilation either. There are so many factors and so many complexities and ambiguities to life and exactly what foreshadows what that one cannot say that since life is one way, eternity must be a certain way. All that I am saying is that the lives that all men live in the flesh are different from what is to come. Therefore, although the unsaved people that currently walk the earth are all called “dead,” this does not mean that their eternal death should likewise be seen as including conscious existence.

H. Conclusion

With all that in mind, let me recap. The lost will suffer death. It is not just physical death, but they suffer the “second death” (Revelation 2.11; 20.14; 21.8). The Bible teaches that death is what happens to the body at physical death. The soul/spirit being conscious after death is irrelevant, as it is not dead in the first place. The body is what dies when the spirit leaves (James 2.26). Physical death (as implied by the reference to death by murder) can kill only the body and not the soul (Matthew 10.28). God, however, can and will kill the soul of the unsaved sinner (James 5.20).

Objections raised do not adequately refute what I have said, as it is what the Bible teaches. Metaphorical uses of death in relation to sin and the Law do not change what death actually is. Given that John, in Revelation, acknowledged only two deaths, one of which the saved do not face (the “second death” - Revelation 2.11), this is all the more evident. The fact that the unsaved are now called “dead” doesn’t prove that being “dead” is actually their literal

current position in the first place, and if it is, then the idea that this then means that the lost will likewise be physically alive in eternity is wrought with problems.

So, far from being evidence for the traditionalist view, the Bible's descriptions and warnings of death are just as a person opening the Bible for the first time would have thought; they warn of the final end of a person's conscious existence. Its opposite, life, though a term with more depth and meaning than just existence, nonetheless is necessary for existence. If we didn't have all the theological baggage about Hell, we no doubt would see the warnings of death and the numerous promises of life in contrast to the alternative fate (not always called "death" specifically) and think that the fate of the wicked would seem to be annihilation (not in the strawman sense of cosmic obliteration, but in the sense of a permanent end of conscious existence). And it's presented so clearly to us! I have only pointed to a small number of passages. Just scan your Bibles for the word "life," and many times, if "death" isn't specifically mentioned, we still see "life" put in contrast to a fate that really means the same thing (destruction, decay, perishing - this will be discussed more in Section XL).

Now, I overlooked all of these things early on in my new life in Christ, so I can hardly be harsh with others for doing the same. What I can say, is that this is just one of many examples of tradition and our preconceived ideas keeping us from seeing something that really be should be quite clear. Just look at one of our main evangelistic texts; it is written: "For the wages of sin is *death*, but the free gift of God is eternal *life* in Christ Jesus our Lord" (emphasis added) (Romans 6.23). Even our favorite, John 3.16, makes the same point, one which is just too often not even thought about (emphasis added): "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not *perish* [see Section XL], but have eternal *life*." There is life, or there is perishing. That seems pretty clear, doesn't it?

That said, I certainly don't blame traditionalists for not just taking it to mean annihilation but instead for looking in the Bible and seeing how death is used in various contexts. That's not verbal gymnastics; that's responsible theological study. As I said before, we can't just assume that everything is meant to be taken at face value. However, once we do take a serious look at what the Bible specifically says, in detail, we see that death really does mean more or less what it would appear to indicate when taken at face value. A body dies, we know what that is like, and that's what happens to the whole person, body, soul, and spirit, in Hell.

Thank God that He had mercy on us and gave us a way to escape the second death. We do have hope, in and only in the grace of God, grace that has waited for us since before the creation of the world, "but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1.10)

XII. FIRE AND BRIMSTONE IN SCRIPTURE

A. How Is Fire and Brimstone Used in Scripture?

Why does this matter? Well, two of the key verses used to argue for eternal torment are Revelation 14.9-11 and 20.10. Those passages will both be addressed in-depth in the following sections. Both of those speak of beings being tormented with fire and brimstone. It is from these two verses that we get the term “fire and brimstone” to refer to a Christian who is, shall we say, very vocal about divine wrath. Now, there is a lot more to the annihilationist response to both of those verses. In fact, this isn’t even the most important aspect of either verse. If all I had was the use of fire and brimstone in the rest of scripture, I wouldn’t have much of an argument. Nevertheless, given the fact that Revelation is a book full of symbolism, imagery, and allusion to the Old Testament, and that this will come into play in the discussion of those verses, it is important to see what fire and brimstone were used for in the Old Testament, as its use in Revelation is surely drawing upon the Old Testament figure.

NOTE: If you weren’t already aware, brimstone is just another name for sulfur. Older translations (KJV, ASV) tend to use the term “brimstone” while most modern translations tend to say “sulfur.” There is no difference between the two, so I will use the terms interchangeably throughout.

Outside of the two verses from Revelation, this figure of fire and sulfur is used almost exclusively to speak of destruction (with a few passages that are ambiguous but probably also speak of destruction). Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed with burning sulfur from the heavens (Genesis 19.24-27). In Deuteronomy 29.22-23, God warns the Israelites that if they do not obey Him, He will destroy their land as He did in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. Burning

sulfur was to destroy Edom in Isaiah 34.9-10. It is part of the prophecy against Gog in Ezekiel 38.22 where, though probably symbolic, it clearly speaks of destruction and death. Even elsewhere in Revelation, John sees a vision of horses that breathe fire and sulfur and help to kill one-third of mankind this way (9.17-18). Whether literal or symbolic, destruction is the main use of fire and brimstone in the Bible.

The other references to burning sulfur, such as Psalm 11.6 and Job 18.15, do not necessarily exclude eternal torment from being read into the meaning (because they don't explicitly mention annihilation), but they hardly indicate it, especially when the use of burning sulfur in the rest of the Old Testament is taken into account alongside them. In Isaiah 30.33, the prophet speaks of the fate of the Assyrians, and how the king will be consumed with fire, fire that is kindled by the breath of God, which is likened to burning brimstone. He is likely speaking of the king's physical death. Nevertheless, God may be speaking of Hell, as the fire is kindled in Topeth, which in Jeremiah 7.31 is identified as part of the Valley of Hinnom, known in Greek as *Gehenna* (see Sections VI and XXXII). In none of these passages is torment evident.

As far as even fire alone is concerned, it is mentioned much more often than burning sulfur, but never is it used to torment anyone except in Revelation. The only time it is prescribed that a person be burned without being killed was in God's commandment that those who intentionally injure someone else be punished with the same infliction "burning for burning" (Exodus 21.25a). It must be noted that in that situation, the person was never to be tormented for an extended period of time, but rather was to simply suffer an injury that directly matched what they inflicted. Likewise, this punishment of being burned would have been seen as far less severe than execution. It was a specific punishment for a specific offense that would have been finite. Depending on the circumstances, it might not have even been severe (it could have been a minor

burn). Indeed, very short and limited torment by fire was a possible punishment, but because it was finite and less severe than death (possibly even less severe than a heavy fine), it doesn't give a good picture of torment in fire being God's eternal punishment for the damned. It's about as good of a model for eternal torment as the fact that disobedient children would often be disciplined physically. After all, if a child is disciplined with a rod, is that child not tormented?

Typically, when the lost are spoken of as being burned with fire, they are usually compared to things that are destroyed by fire. They are compared directly to dry grass that is burned up (Matthew 13.40). They are compared to dead trees, which get burned up (Luke 3.9). They are compared to Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Peter 2.6), which were completely wiped out and never rebuilt. More of this will come up in Part 3.

Fire also is shown as being destructive in 1 Corinthians 3.10-15. When the deeds are tested, they are shown metaphorically as being subject to fire. All works go through the fire, and those who do adequate work receive a reward. They are shown as using strong building materials that withstand fire. The rest use straw and the like. The fire destroys their accomplishments, and no reward is given. However, they are not then tormented by that fire. The fire judges them unworthy of any reward, but they are not touched by it. They are saved, despite suffering loss. It is used as a metaphor for destruction, as well as for testing purity, things which one would normally associate with fire.

B. Extrabiblical Literature – A Concession

I am not unaware that fire is used as a means of torture in some extrabiblical writings. William Crockett, defender of the eternal but metaphorical view of Hell makes this claim and backs it up with a number of sources (such as in 2 Enoch 10:2) (59). Robert Morey in *Death and*

the Afterlife and even Edward Fudge in *The Fire That Consumes* point out the same fact in several places. Fire was used to describe *Gehenna* and the eternal torment of the damned in some rabbinical writings prior to Jesus.

Therefore, even though the imagery of a place of fire and eternal torment for the lost does not come from Old Testament scripture, it's not as though there would have been no precedent for using fire as a symbol for torment. This then forces us to ask, which source of imagery would Jesus more likely use? Would He apply extrabiblical imagery, or might He apply pictures from scripture? In general, we can definitely say Revelation uses Old Testament imagery ubiquitously. Incense represents prayers (5.8). The beast is drawn directly from the beasts of Daniel 7. The four living creatures come from Ezekiel 1. God's wrath is a winepress (Revelation 14.19), which corresponds to Lamentations 1.15 and Joel 3.12. In Revelation 14.10, a reference is made to the drinking of a cup of wine unmixed, an Old Testament symbol for God's wrath, (Isaiah 51.17-22; Jeremiah 25.15-28; Lamentations 4.21; Ezekiel 23.31-33). You get the idea.

Importantly, although fire is used as an agent of torment in some extrabiblical writings, most of these rabbinical references to fire do not mention sulfur. However, when we are shown the final fate of the damned in the book of Revelation, it is not just fire, but fire and brimstone (Revelation 14.10; 19.20; 20.10; 21.8). Jesus would simply mention fire when referring to *Gehenna*, but when *Gehenna* is shown to us in Revelation, it is shown as a lake of fire *and* sulfur. Maybe some have missed this, but the fact that it is fire and brimstone, not just fire, is quite important. Fire in scripture could represent lots of things in the Bible (although never a punishment of torture), but burning sulfur was almost always representative of absolute destruction or death at the hands of God, and probably nothing else.

Were there rabbinic writings involving fire and brimstone tormenting and never destroying? There are very few, although admittedly, 1 Enoch 67:6 does come to mind. It speaks of Noah smelling sulfur as he looks upon a valley where disobedient angels were sent, a valley whose streams turn to fire soon after. They at least seem to be condemned to unending torment there. Other than that, there doesn't appear to be much. There could be more. I am not aware of any, but let's assume that there are a few. Even then, it is hardly a common motif; most references to eternal torment in fire don't mention sulfur. *Fire* was somewhat common in intertestamental literature that spoke of eternal torment, but this was not the case with fire *and* sulfur. Fire *and* sulfur were, however, used throughout the Old Testament as the means by which God would destroy those He judges; not just fire, but uniquely, burning sulfur. The fact that John specifically sees a lake of burning sulfur, therefore, is telling. Hell isn't just fire spoken of as fire, but as fire and brimstone.

Do I really think Jesus would have wanted His listeners to hear His words in a vacuum, that He would expect them to see only the scripture in them and not what they may have been taught by rabbis? Well, if there's any teacher who would, it would be Him...Let us not forget that Jesus wasn't just a teacher. His disciples were special in ways far beyond just having gotten to learn from Him for three years. Jesus is the Son of God. He was there before the foundation of the world when all this was planned, and He was there when the Creator breathed the scriptures into existence. If anybody is going to speak and expect His listeners to hear not what they had been taught by others but rather what His Father taught in the scriptures, it would be Jesus. Not to mention, some of those writings have the same issues as *The Apocalypse of Peter*; they contain lies and forgeries. Besides, what is the Sermon on the Mount if not Jesus rejecting rabbinical teaching after rabbinical teaching in favor of scripture rightly interpreted? Don't be

convinced that Jesus was just parroting other teachers. It's not unreasonable to say that He might have been doing that, but it is by no means a foregone conclusion.

With that said, because there was some degree of precedent for fire in extrabiblical writings being used to describe eternal torment in the centuries between Malachi and Jesus, it would be intellectually dishonest of me not to acknowledge this fact. What did Jesus mean? I can't say for certain, but I think on its own it is more likely that the Lord, the Son of God, would be referring to the clear and obvious scriptural uses of these images. Keep in mind the *scriptural* background when we discuss these two fire and brimstone passages, arguably the most important passages regarding eternal torment...coming right now.

XIII. REVELATION 20.10

A. This Is *the* Eternal Torment Verse

So, we have finally reached it: Revelation 20.10, the only verse in the Bible that speaks explicitly, without ambiguity, of eternal torment in some context. Any of you who are at all familiar with the debate on eternal punishment, or really any of you who have even seen a webpage about Hell, should be familiar with this verse. It is written: “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (*NIV*).

For obvious reasons, this verse is huge for the doctrine of eternal torment. It is by far the most powerful verse regarding eternal torment (though perhaps it is less commonly used than a few others). It is the most convincing verse. From this verse, the meaning of a myriad of other passages is construed to mean eternal torment. If the lake of fire is a place of eternal torment in Verse 10, then it should mean the same thing in Verse 15 when men are thrown in. If the devil is tormented eternally, then the “eternal fire” of Matthew 25.41 that is prepared specifically for him and his angels is one that torments for ever and ever (and therefore the men sent there are condemned to eternal torment too). Ambiguous terms like “eternal punishment” (Matthew 25.46) mean “eternal torment” because we know from this verse that eternal torment is true. Since eternal torment is true, nobody is ever literally destroyed (because if they were, then they couldn’t be tormented for ever and ever). Therefore, the “eternal destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1.9) of the damned must mean eternal, conscious ruin (instead of, ya know, destruction). The same goes for the plethora of straightforward, non-allegorical passages that say that the damned will be “destroyed” and are doomed to “destruction” (more on that in Section XL). It is

impossible that God's new, eternal creation is free of evil and sin because this verse shows that, at the very least, the devil, beast, and false prophet are still existent and unregenerate. Therefore, it is reasoned that any passage that appears to teach the eradication of evil cannot really mean that. I think the idea here is clear.

Now, some might object when I say that this passage is the only passage that mentions eternal torment. Many will say, "the Bible is full of passages that speak of eternal torment!" Well, can anyone find any other passage besides this that actually says such a thing? Some passages like Matthew 25.46 or 2 Thessalonians 1.9 mention eternity, and a few like Luke 16.19-31 mention torment, but they either do not mention both, or they do not explicitly put the two together. Revelation 14.9-11 does come close, but I will explain in Section XV why that verse doesn't even say such a thing on its own. This is the only verse that actually says "tormented" and "for ever and ever."

Some might also object when I say that through this passage many others are viewed and defined. First of all, read any number of traditionalist works like Robert Peterson's *Hell on Trial* or *Hell under Fire* by nine different scholars, and you will see exactly what I mean. Secondly, this isn't literally the only reason other ECT prooftexts are seen to speak of eternal torment, and I will address other lines of reasoning in the sections on those respective passages. Needless to say, I don't think they stand up to scrutiny either (or else I'd be a traditionalist). Obviously, though, there is more to the traditionalist case. If there wasn't, I wouldn't devote a majority of this work to refuting it. Nevertheless, as far as the doctrine of eternal torment goes, this is *the* verse.

The annihilationist has the responsibility of answering this monumental question: How on earth can this verse exist and yet not prove eternal torment? I will do that. Furthermore, not only will I explain how this verse can be read in a way that does not teach eternal torment, I will

explain why such an interpretation is quite possibly the most straightforward and reasonable one, based specifically on the passage itself, and not only because I believe that the rest of the Bible teaches annihilationism (although other passages will come into play, of course).

B. My Interpretation in a Nutshell

Here is an overview of what I will be seeking to prove in this section:

The book of Revelation is a highly symbolic book, drawing largely from the Old Testament. Many symbols and pictures within the visions that John sees and describes represent something else in real life. Although it sounds bizarre at first, I am not denying that “tormented day and night for ever and ever” means anything but tormented day and night, for ever and ever. I concede that the three figures seen in Verse 10, within the vision that John sees, are to be tormented for eternity. However, this entire vision of them being cast into a lake of fire to be forever tormented is itself symbolic, representing the real life destruction (not torment) of the things that they represent.

The first main reason for this interpretation is that death, which in real life isn't even a tangible entity, is cast into the same lake of fire in Verse 14. The Bible elsewhere tells us that death will be done away with and destroyed. This means that when we see a tangible manifestation of death being thrown into a demonstrably non-literal lake of fire, we know that this represents the destruction of death in real life. Death is the only entity thrown in whose real life fate we know (although we have a good indication that what is represented by the beast will be destroyed, not eternally tormented, in light of the angel's divine explanation given to John in Revelation 17.8-11 - for more on this, see Section XL, Subsection I). Therefore, unless told differently, we should infer that the lake of fire in the vision represents the real life destruction of

the other things cast into it, as it does for death. When the symbolic beast and false prophet are cast into it, though within the vision they are condemned to torment, the things that they represent are destroyed in real life. From there, when the devil, men, and *Hades* are seen being cast in, the same principle would apply (even if the devil and men are just visible placeholders for the actual devil and all actual unsaved people).

The second main reason is that the beast likely represents not an individual person, but rather a kingdom or similar corporate entity. Such an entity cannot be tormented like a person. Therefore, the fate of the thing that the beast represents must be something that can be applied to an impersonal entity. This cannot be torment, but annihilation fits. After all, anything in existence could theoretically be done away with, whether it is a personal entity (like a person), an abstract entity (like death), an impersonal corporate entity (like a nation or corporation), or anything else. Because the devil, beast, and the false prophet all suffer the same exact fate in the vision (eternal torment in the lake of fire), the things that they represent surely suffer the same fate in real life (even if they include personal entities like the actual devil). If they can't be tormented, but can be annihilated, is that not the most reasonable interpretation? What other fate would they all suffer, being called naughty? Admittedly, this argument is more speculative than the first, but even if it fails, the argument from death stands alone.

This explanation may be bizarre, but it is not unnecessarily complicated, nor does it engage in any so-called verbal gymnastics. I will explain why this somewhat complex and figurative interpretation makes sense and is biblically defensible. Beyond that, it will become clear by the end of this section why any traditionalist interpretation that successfully addresses all of the elements of the vision (like death and *Hades* being thrown into the fire, which is usually ignored) will be no more clear or straightforward than what I am arguing. My

interpretation is neither simple nor literal, but that doesn't make it wrong. Those that are simple and literal do sound better at first, but they fail in other ways in which mine succeeds. Although my interpretation is by no means the only plausible explanation, it certainly is among the most reasonable. I say that it is actually the most reasonable, though even if in isolation it isn't, it makes enough sense to justify the claim that, despite what this verse may look like at first, the Bible teaches annihilationism.

C. The Idea That Eternal Torment Can Represent Destruction Is Not Absurd

It is perfectly understandable that, at first glance, it may sound very absurd and a bit strained to say that eternal torment, which is seen in Revelation 20.10, can be symbolic for the fate of destruction in real life. However, it must also be asked of traditionalists how utter destruction and annihilation can represent eternal torment, if eternal torment cannot symbolize destruction.

What do I mean? Well, as will be addressed later on in Part 3, a number of passages, in didactic teaching passages rather than figurative and symbolic narratives, describe the fate of the unsaved with talk of utter destruction. In some cases, it isn't even symbolized, but rather is just said to be the case. Sodom and Gomorrah serve as an example of the fate of the ungodly (2 Peter 2.6). God will burn them up like chaff at the end of the world (Malachi 4.1-3). Chaff symbolizes the wicked both in parables and direct analogies. They will suffer destruction just like beasts, which do not have immortal souls (2 Peter 2.12). At face value, the New Testament repeatedly says that the lost are "destroyed" and suffer "destruction." Now, I will address those passages and others much more in-depth, explaining why they are more than just loose symbols and types. For now, however, you have the final punishment of the unsaved being described, symbolized,

and typified in terms of utter destruction, yet this *must* ultimately represent eternal torment if Hell is a place of eternal torment. It cuts both ways. Either position requires one to take descriptions of Hell as symbolic of a fate that is very different from the symbol or picture.

With that said, why should one believe that the fate of being tormented day and night for eternity represents destruction in Revelation 20.10? For starters, since most would agree that we have to take some of the contrasting descriptions of Hell non-literally at some point, doesn't it make a lot more sense to do so when interpreting one single vision of Hell in the most difficult and imagery-packed book of the Bible, rather than in many straightforward descriptions by Jesus and the biblical authors? Of course, one understandably will probably need more than just this to reject the traditional interpretation, so that's what the rest of this section is for.

D. What John Sees Is a Symbolic Vision – Part I

The book of Revelation is a book full of symbols and Old Testament imagery from start to finish. Although there is plenty of debate about specific events pictured, this overall description is largely taken for granted. Jesus is shown as a lamb with seven eyes and seven horns that has the ability to open a scroll despite being a lamb. At the end, mass slaughter of the world's unbelievers occurs several times, including an event in which they are gathered by an angel with a sickle who crushes them in a giant winepress. The city of Babylon (which itself is probably a symbol) is represented by a prostitute. There are also a number of clear references to Old Testament scriptures, as brought up in Section XII (as well as more subtle allusions). Revelation is full of symbolism.

The vision in Revelation 20.10 is likewise symbolic, though it is necessary to explain what is meant by that. I want to make it clear, as I said above, that I am not arguing that

Revelation 20.10 says anything but what it says. I am not arguing that torment doesn't mean torment or that "for ever and ever" means anything but eternity. Every word is meant literally. I'm not saying that the word "torment" means annihilation or anything like that. What John literally sees is Satan, the beast, and the false prophet being thrown into a lake of burning sulfur where they are tormented for ever and ever.

With that in mind, then, how can I say that the vision is symbolic? Although the words are meant literally, the whole thing is one symbolic vision. John sees these things, yes, but the whole vision represents something (and I argue that what it represents is annihilation). We do this kind of thing all the time without even thinking about it. Consider the common idiom about how when things get messy, "the (feces) hit(s) the fan" (the normal version is more vulgar, of course). Now, every word is meant literally. Feces literally means feces. The word "hit" literally is referring to abrupt physical contact. The fan literally is referring to a set of whirling blades that moves air in a particular direction. None of the words are used metaphorically. We're meant to envision real poo poo being thrown at a fan. But that doesn't mean that when someone uses the term, someone else really threw doo doo at a fan! Every word is literal but the whole thing, the whole idea and vision of feces thrown at a fan, is one giant metaphor for things suddenly going awry. The same could be used of the phrase "a fly in the ointment." Fly means fly, ointment means ointment. There is no metaphorical or secondary use of those words in that phrase. But that doesn't mean that someone who uses that phrase has any ointment in the first place. The whole thing is meant to make you think of a fly in the ointment, and that whole idea is meant to convey that something is causing a problem. Or just think of Jesus's parables, where an entire fictional story, using words meant in their literal sense, ultimately is one giant metaphor. Likewise, here, I am saying that the whole vision represents something. But what does the whole

thing represent? What happens in real life? Just as the fact that John saw a lamb in the heavens doesn't mean that our Lord is actually a baby sheep on a physical throne in the sky, so the fact that John sees a lake of fiery torment that never ends does not mean that such a thing will come to be in real life. This is a vision like everything else, so what does this vision represent?

E. What John Sees Is a Symbolic Vision – Part II

Why do I insist that this is a symbolic vision? Why do I insist that John sees a series of events occur, and that that series of events is merely representative of a real-life series of events?

The first reason is the lake of fire and how it relates to the devil and his angels. It seems quite clear that “the ‘lake of fire’ of Revelation 20:10 is not literal since Satan (and his angels) is a spiritual being” (Beale 128). Remember, the lake isn't just a lake of fire, but specifically, fire and brimstone, showing that what John specifically sees in the vision is a normal, physical fire fueled by earthly elements. Even the description as a “lake” is nothing out of the ordinary. John isn't saying that he is seeing some swirling demonic torrent of supernatural fire that forms a big, lake-like void. On the contrary, in the earthy realm, sulfur melts at about 235 degrees Fahrenheit (“Sulfur”), meaning that in large enough quantities, plain old burning sulfur would form a lake of molten, burning sulfur. So with this in mind, how could we imagine that this physical lake of fire is literal, and that the devil and his angels are somehow affected by it?

Further evidence of the lake of fire's figurative nature (and that of the book in general) is the beast. We know that the beast is a symbol. After all, the beast is a scary looking creature that resembles a number of wild animals, one with multiple heads and horns who is nonetheless worshipped by many. Should we assume that this is a literal creature? If the nature of the beast didn't answer this, then the interpretation that the angel gives in Revelation 17.8-11 does. The 10

horns are 10 kings, the seven heads represent five past kings, a current king, and one to come. The beast itself is an eighth king. I will explain further down why there is more to the beast than an individual man, but what is clear is that the beast is a symbol. So already, one of the creatures we see thrown into the fire is explicitly symbolic. A similar thing can be said of the false prophet, for although a definition of him is never really given, it is unlikely that this creature with 2 horns whose mouth contains frog-shaped spirits is a literal being (especially since his partner, the beast, is not). It can be assumed that we as humans in real life aren't going to see giant monsters with horns and many heads being thrown into a fire pit, because no such beasts literally exist.

Now, one might unsuccessfully claim that even though the beast is a symbol, John is speaking of the people that he and the false prophet represent when he speaks of their doom in Revelation 20.10. In other words, when he says "the beast and the false prophet," he means "the people represented by the beast and the false prophet." Is this, however, a viable interpretation?

My first objection to this idea regarding the beast and false prophet is simply in what John does and does not say. He simply says "the beast" and "the false prophet." There is no reason why we should assume that they are not the same visible, symbolic monsters who John saw in Revelation 16.13. Neither title indicates that he is speaking of the persons they represent (if they even represent individuals, which I doubt). If he is speaking of them in that way, it is not apparent, and it is at best is a 50/50 possibility even before considering other factors.

If it is the people that John sees in the lake of fire in Revelation 20.10, and not the symbolic beasts, then John must also see the actual persons when they are thrown into the fire in Revelation 19.20 (since Revelation 20.10 is referring to the result of Revelation 19.20), and this raises some serious questions. John makes note in that verse that the beast and false prophet are thrown into the fire *alive*. This raises the question: If they have not died, how did they become

immortal? How did mere men get thrown into a raging fire and not burn up? If they are just men running around and conquering earth, and they get thrown into fire, then what we see hardly makes sense. Given that Matthew 10.28 affirms that both body and soul are destroyed (or not destroyed) in Hell, it surely isn't the case that their bodies burn up and their immortal souls get trapped and suffer. Now, one might argue that the beast did die earlier, and so when he came back to life that was his resurrection (see Revelation 13.1-3; 12; 14). However, this is problematic. We would have to show that the supposed individual who the beast represents actually died and came back to life. Later in this subsection, I will explain why I think that is untenable given how the angel interprets the symbolic parts of the beast. Even if we granted this, we furthermore would have to say that his coming back to life is not just a temporary raising to life like with Lazarus but is in fact a full-on resurrection where God, in accordance with what must be done in any biblically-based traditionalist schema, gives him an immortal body. And even then, the biggest problem remains: None of this is said to have happened to the false prophet! The false prophet just got thrown in alive, pure and simple.

Although it is not impossible that these men, or God's treatment of them, are somehow so different that all of this could be true, it sure requires quite a lot of unusual things to occur. They break the paradigm of men in just about every way. They never die, and they are never shown being judged (which Hebrews 9.27 says should happen to all men). Instead, they are inexplicably immortal and just get thrown into Hell that way. If, however, we just look at it as it is written, that the beast (a multi-headed lion-bear creature) and the false prophet (a two horned beast who spits out frog-shaped demons) are both thrown into a lake of fire, then there are no problems.

Now, it could be that they are supernatural men of some sort, but nothing like that is said anywhere in the text of Revelation. As far as I know, nothing of the sort is even suggested by any

traditionalist. I have actually seen the idea furthered by conditionalists though, such as Dr. Robert Taylor, author of *Rescue from Death: John 3:16 Salvation* (157). However, this view is problematic. First of all, I will give reasons shortly as to why the beast is likely not a mere individual in the first place, but rather a corporate entity, and those would obviously contradict this idea. Secondly, at least in Taylor's case, it relies on inconsistent literalism. For example, the beast is said to suffer a mortal wound (Revelation 13.1-3; 12; 14). But the wound specifically applies to one of the beast's heads (Verse 3). The angel explicitly tells us what the heads are; they represent mountains and kings (Revelation 17.8-11). More importantly, the beast is called an eighth king, meaning, if the beast is an individual, he is a separate individual from the seven kings represented by his heads. Therefore, the beast is a different person from the king who was represented by the head that suffered the mortal wound. In other words, if the beast represents an individual, then based on the angel's explanation, it was *not* the beast himself who died and came back to life in the first place.

What about the fact that the beast comes from the abyss in Revelation 11.7? Taylor draws attention to this fact as evidence that the beast is really a demon in the body of a dead person (157), but it's just an assumption that everything that comes out of this abyss is a demon. It isn't proven. Consider this: We see in Revelation 9.3 that the stinging locusts who torment the world for five months also come out of the abyss. It doesn't say that they are demons. To be fair, it doesn't tell us one way or another what they represent, but if we were consistently literal, we'd say that they are not demons, but locusts (really scary locusts, but still locusts). Already, Taylor and those who reason similarly are assuming that since the abyss is mentioned, these aren't literal locusts but rather represent some sort of demonic creature. They are just doing what I am doing; looking at this imagery and trying to figure out what it means based on the information

available to us. Who is to say, then, that the abyss doesn't have some other symbolic meanings besides just being the home of demons? Even if the abyss is thought of as the demonic realm, if the beast is a normal human or kingdom or something else that is not literally demonic, then showing the beast coming out of the abyss could be a great way to convey the idea that the entity it represents is inclined towards great evil, so much so that it is as if it came out of this home of demons. That's what symbolism and imagery do; they make a point without being literal.

Overall, the idea that the beast (and by extension, false prophet) are demons in human flesh may be possible, but it sure isn't a certain conclusion which we should then interpret the rest of the passage in light of. Some of my reasons for interpreting the beast as a corporate entity, given in Subsection I, will give us all the more reason to dismiss this idea.

Moving back to the question at hand, how literally we are to take the elements of his vision, the most unambiguous piece of evidence that this is not meant to be taken as literally as possible is the fact that even death is thrown into this lake of fire. Immediately after the devil is thrown into the fire in Revelation 20.10, we see what is often called "the great white throne judgment" in Verses 11-15. Now, we all know from Verse 15 that condemned humans are thrown into the lake of fire. The reasoning goes that since the lake of fire represented the eternal torment of the devil, beast, and false prophet in Verse 10, it follows that humans are also condemned to eternal torment. I don't necessarily disagree with the reasoning (aside from the initial premise, of course). But what happened in Verse 14? We are told, after death and *Hades* are shown having freed their dead, that they are cast into the lake of fire. Unless we are to argue that death and *Hades* are literal, physical persons, this poses a problem. How can an intangible, abstract entity like death be thrown into literal, physical fire? If there was any doubt, I think that this confirms the fact that this vision is symbolic. After all, John sees death cast into the fire. It

would follow that death is somehow shown as something tangible. Exactly how is unsaid. It could very well be that we are seeing the same “death” and “*Hades*” that we saw in Revelation 6.8: “I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him.” It doesn’t matter if not, though. To say that John saw an abstract, intangible entity cast into literal fire makes no sense. Given the symbolic nature of death in this vision, this vision must be symbolic. Thus, we aren’t seeing actual people going to what is literally Hell in the first place.

It is important to note that these arguments, although they build a stronger case together, are independent of one another. Even if one says that when John says “the beast” he really means the supposedly demonic man it represents and not the actual beast, you still have to contend with death and how its fate independently proves that this lake of fire vision is not literal. You would also have to deal with the problem of spiritual beings being thrown in a physical lake of burning sulfur. Likewise, even if one could argue against what I have argued from the significance of death in Verse 14, you still would have to contend with the other two issues. And even then, if one argues that death and *Hades* are not abstract entities but demonic creatures, they still have the same problem as the devil and demons (since they too would be non-physical beings that are tormented in a physical fire). This is a symbolic vision.

Now, the fact that this is a symbolic vision is itself essentially meaningless. It may be a symbolic vision, but what kind of message could be expressed but that of eternal torment? How on earth could the vision of eternal torment possibly be representative of a fate in real life other than eternal torment? The burden is on me to defend my explanation of how a vision of eternal torment can represent annihilation. By the end of this section, I will have met that burden, and I will probably have gone even further.

F. Reasons to Believe That Eternal Torment Can Represent Annihilation

After this subsection I will get into the real meat of the argument. However, one last bit of background must be established. The idea of representing annihilation with torment, as bizarre as it sounds, is actually seen elsewhere in the book of Revelation.

In Revelation 17, we first see the great harlot, a symbol for a great city, and what we see happen with her will be critical to this discussion. The city, referred to as Babylon but commonly believed to be another city for which Babylon is a code-name or metaphor, is destroyed in Chapter 18. We are given an idea of how complete the destruction is: “Then a strong angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, and will not be found any longer” (Verse 21). The city is destroyed. However, what happens to the harlot? In Verse 7, she is given “torment” and “mourning.” In Verses 10 and 15, we are told that the onlookers witness her “torment.” You can’t torment an actual city, but you can torment the feminized personification, which we know is in view because it is written: “She says in her heart, ‘I SIT *as* A QUEEN AND I AM NOT A WIDOW, and will never see mourning”” (Revelation 18.7b).

So she is tormented, which manifests itself in real life as the destruction of the city. Now, it isn’t necessarily a perfect analogy to the eternal torment in the vision of 20.10, since the harlot herself appears to get destroyed even in the vision (Revelation 18.8; 19.3). How Revelation 19.3 could show that the whore is destroyed will be explained in Section XV. Still, the picture is there. The torment of a symbol manifests itself in the destruction of what it represents. This seems all the more appropriate given that burning sulfur, which elsewhere in the Bible is almost always a means of destruction, is used here in the book of Revelation as a means of torture. That just seems to be the way that this book expresses things.

G. Death Is Thrown into the Lake of Fire

The first main argument regarding the lake of fire is over who joins men, the beast, the false prophet, and the devil. In Revelation 20.14, death is thrown into the lake of the fire.

This is huge, because unless we are to assume that death somehow lives in a state of ruin or torment, death is destroyed. It is written: “The last enemy that will be abolished is death” (1 Corinthians 15.26). The verb for “abolished” is *katargeó*, which can, like most words, have several different meanings, but the main thrust of the idea is to cease working. Specifically, to cease working because of destruction is a primary definition (Strong, “A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament” 40). In the case of death especially, speaking of its lack of power as destruction and abolition makes perfect sense. When death ceases to work, it is gone. If it stops working, it literally stops being. Death would literally cease to exist if no one is left to die. Since both traditionalism and conditionalism hold that in the end, there is no one left who is mortal, then those on both sides should agree that death is not abstractly consigned to Hell. Rather, it is written: “He [God] will swallow up death for all time” (Isaiah 25.8a). Death is something that is no longer part of creation. It is gone completely.

If death is thrown into the same lake of fire as men (as well as the devil, beast, and false prophet), then it would surely follow, unless something were to specifically tell us otherwise, that all would suffer the same real fate as well. However, when death is thrown into the lake of fire, isn't it eradicated in real life? Even if one were to assume that all the translators have all been wrong in applying words like “destroy” to *katargeó* in 1 Corinthians 15.26, it wouldn't greatly affect this argument. Death is not a person. It's possible that it is shown as one in the vision (John isn't clear as to what death looks like), but death is an abstract, intangible entity. If death no longer kills, if it is rendered powerless, then it no longer exists. Death is completely

done away with, yet everyone (lost humans, the devil, the beast, false prophet, and even *Hades*) are cast into the exact same lake of fire as death. That fate, as already shown, is symbolic. We know what it represents in the case of death. For death, a visible manifestation of death being cast into the lake of fire represents its destruction in real life. Why then would the symbolic lake of fire not have the same effect on the rest who are thrown into it?

H. Objections to the Argument from Death

1. Claims That My Interpretation Is Too Bizarre/Absurd/Complex

I can already envision some smug preacher with a smirk going, “I don’t preach from long, complex arguments. I preach from what the Bible simply says.” Honestly, if anyone is so shallow as to reject what I say because it is not nice and neat and simple, so shallow as to just reject it as “verbal gymnastics” without even paying attention to what I am saying, then I say that *that* person is someone not worth listening to. Be that as it may, I can assure you that there is no simple and clear explanation that adequately explains how death (and *Hades* to boot) can be thrown into the same lake of fire as men and the rest that still preserves eternal torment and doesn’t force us to adopt beliefs that we are apt to reject. For example, no mainstream commentator that I have come across proposes that death is a literal creature that could be tormented (although Gregory K. Beale does break the mold and suggest the possibility) (130). Most commentators simply do not address the fact that *Hades* and death are cast into the fire at all. Watch out for this. A lack of explanation does make for a very simple explanation, but it hardly is a sufficient one!

Some who do address it come up with essentially the same conclusion as I do regarding death, but they do not explain how the lake of fire, already established as a symbol, would

represent different fates for different things that are thrown into it. It's understandable that others would come to this conclusion about death. After all, we know that death is done away with, so seeing a manifestation of death being thrown into a raging fire makes perfect sense. J. Ramsey Michaels makes this observation (232). However, what they don't explain is how the lake of fire, which for death represents the destruction of an abstract entity (that obviously could not be thrown into literal fire), now becomes a symbol (or even a literal agent) of torture for the men in the very next line (or for the others in Verse 10, for that matter). Michaels, in the footnotes, even asks the question, "If the fiery lake is a place of torment for the beast, the false prophet, and the dragon, (19:20, 20:10), but a place of destruction for death and Hades (20:14), which is it for persons who are not found written in the book of life and who are thrown into the lake of fire?" (232). However, the whole question assumes that it means something different for one than it does for another. How would that even make sense? The lake of fire is a symbolic fate, and they all share that same symbolic fate. It must be noted that nowhere in Revelation are we actually told that death and *Hades* are destroyed. If anything, it makes sense to assume that death is seen as being eternally tormented (as I'll explain shortly). It is from the rest of scripture that we can assume that this clearly symbolic vision of death ultimately represents its abolition.

A lot of discussion comes out about the fact that the lake of fire is called the "second death" in Revelation 20.14. One question that comes up is whether "second death" is a name given to the fate of being cast into the literal lake of fire, or if the lake of fire is symbolic for a fate called the "second death." Given the arguments made previously in this section, it is not the former. That said, it cannot immediately be said that since the lake of fire represents the "second death" that this proves annihilation. That is in large part dependent on what death is (though as was demonstrated in Section XI, the weight of the evidence is on the side of the annihilationist).

The question may then be asked as to how, if the lake of fire is the second death, and all suffer the lake of fire, the fate of the second death could be applied to everything, including death and humans. There are a number of ways to interpret this, though my guess would be something like this: The original readers would have had some understanding of what the “second death” means (I of course would believe it amounts to annihilation), and the lake of fire, John explains, is what symbolizes it for humans. He doesn’t use the exact term with some of the others because of what they represent (things that don’t technically “die”), but they do suffer what amounts to the same thing, which is why they all suffer the same lake of fire. John calls it the second death for humans because their annihilation would elsewhere be called the “second death.”

2. “Verse 10 Is Different Because It Mentions Torment”

One might argue, since torment is specifically mentioned in Verse 10, that for the three creatures there the lake of fire represents eternal torment. Never mind the fact that the whole thing is a symbolic vision, full of symbolic beings and beings that, though by name not necessarily symbols (since there is a real devil and real lost people), are nonetheless just visual manifestations of the real thing for the sake of the vision. Never mind that they all suffer the same fate within the vision, the lake of fire. Never mind the fact that torment of a symbol and real-life destruction are tied directly together in regards to the harlot and the city of Babylon in Chapter 18 (discussed in Subsection F). Never mind everything that I think I have succeeded in demonstrating up to this point, showing how seemingly strong and simple theories neglect key points. If this argument is still made, then I suppose one last thing can be said.

Nowhere does it say that death and *Hades* are *not* tormented like the rest. It doesn’t say that they are, but then again, it doesn’t actually say that men are either. It is reasonable that death and *Hades* are to be “tormented day and night for ever and ever” within the vision. After all, the

only other time we see death and *Hades* manifested within the book of Revelation, they are shown as riders on horses (Revelation 6.8). If we apply the reasoning used by many traditionalists to demonstrate how the judgment envisioned here speaks of eternal torment for humans, then death and *Hades* would not be excepted. Robert Peterson sums it up like this: “Revelation 20:10 tells us that the devil will be thrown into the lake of fire. Five verses later we read that human beings will be cast into the same lake of fire. Wouldn’t normal hermeneutics dictate the understanding that human beings will be heading for eternal torment too?” (“A Traditionalist Response” 111). Wouldn’t normal hermeneutics also dictate the understanding that death and *Hades* will be heading for eternal torment too? But even if they are pictured as being tormented for eternity, that does not change the fact that death is done away with in real life. If death and *Hades* are envisioned here as the horsemen seen earlier, then this is actually the best case scenario for conditionalists. If they are not literal creatures, then they are symbols that are depicted as being eternally tormented in a lake of fire to represent the destruction of what they represent in real life. If they suffer not only the same lake of fire as the rest, but even the same eternal torment, and yet they are destroyed in real life, then what does that say about those in Revelation 20.10 whose symbolic fate would now be totally identical?

3. “Death and *Hades*” Means “The Whole Person”

The other response goes like this: when it says that death and *Hades* are thrown into the lake of fire, it is John metaphorically saying that the whole person is thrown in. Death and *Hades* are not even symbols shown in the vision, but rather just part of a phrase. This is usually tied into the belief that the lake of fire is literal, and that the second death is a name for the literal lake of fire. I have rarely seen this argument, but it exists.

First, I must ask where this idea even comes from. One commentary says nothing more than the following: “When we read that Death and Hades are cast into the lake of fire, it means the complete persons: spirit, soul, and body” (MacDonald 2378). I know of nowhere in scripture, or anywhere else for that matter, where one refers to the whole person as “death and *Hades*.” A.W. Pink makes a similar claim as MacDonald: “The meaning of this [death and *Hades*] is *the people* whom death and hades had seized—‘death’ capturing the body; ‘hades’ claiming the soul” (28). This argument will fall for the same reasons as MacDonald’s.

A second thing to consider is this: why would we assume that this particular vision is meant to be taken literally in the first place? This book is packed with symbolism and Old Testament imagery from start to finish. And never mind that the explicitly symbolic beast and non-physical devil are thrown into it too (as discussed in Subsection E).

Either way, this interpretation is problematic. If death and *Hades* represent the whole person in Verse 14, is the same true of Verse 13? But it must then be asked, is the whole person freed from the whole person? Are the people freed from death and *Hades* freed from the people who are freed from death and *Hades*? That wouldn’t even make sense. Now, this vision could mean all sorts of things. For example, I believe that, since death is death and *Hades* is the place of the dead (in one form or another), then showing these things both as tangible entities from which people are freed is symbolic of resurrection of the dead (or the last resurrection, if there is more than one). Resurrected people are no longer dead, and thus they are no longer consigned to *Hades* (whether it is a literal place or an abstract idea like many physicalists would argue). Thus, they are loosed from death and *Hades*. There could be other interpretations, but that’s not what’s important. There is still no good way to make “death and *Hades*” just mean the dead people themselves.

The only way that this would work is if the “death and *Hades*” that free their dead in Verse 13 are not the same “death and *Hades*” that are cast into the lake of fire in Verse 14. However, there is nothing in the context, nothing in what happens, and nothing in the language that would make us think that. One might say “death and *Hades*,” in Verse 14, is a form of metonymy, really referring to the dead that were in them. But this is hardly apparent, and John tells us the same thing, that the lost are cast into the fire, in the very next verse anyway. We are left with two options. The first is that John, in Verse 14, is telling us about the ultimate demise of the same “death and *Hades*” that he had just mentioned in the previous sentence, and then he completes his narrative by telling us about lost humans. The other option is that John, immediately after bringing up death and *Hades* (the places/abstractions), tells us about “death and *Hades*” but in doing so really means something different from the death and *Hades* that he just mentioned. Then, he tells us about the lost, *again*, and then never tells us what God does with the actual “death and *Hades*” that he mentioned before. Now, which of those two looks like an explanation that makes sense, and which one looks like the backwards bending of reason that annihilationists are usually accused of?

Death and *Hades* are one thing (or maybe two); humans are another. This makes especially good sense when we take the lake of fire as a symbol, which it is, and not as Hell itself. To say that the phrase means “the dead” becomes nonsensical when we compare Verses 13 and 14, and to say that John switches meanings, in this particular case, is without warrant.

I. The Beast Is a Corporate Entity – Part I

One of the core arguments by many annihilationists, one that I hold to, is that the beast represents not just a single person, but rather, a corporate entity of some sort. I am saying that the

beast ultimately represents something more than a person (although a person appears integral to it), a corporate entity of some sort, which by definition cannot suffer conscious pain but can be abolished. Now, nothing would specifically say that it specifically represents destruction, but if not torment, what else would God be doing to an impersonal enemy, changing its name? Samuele Bacchiocchi (214), Edward Fudge (*The Fire* 301-307), John Stott (“John Stott’s Response” 318), and Glenn Peoples (“Fire and Flood” 31-33) all argue along these lines.

It is important to note that the identity of the beast has been a subject of great controversy throughout time, and the idea that it isn’t a single human who can be tormented is not unique to annihilationists. Among today’s scholars even, variation exists. Peoples cites some examples that are representative of common interpretations: “Reformed preterist Kenneth Gentry sees the image as representing Rome, with Nero Caesar in particular as its representative. Dispensationalist/futurist John Walvoord sees it as the revived Roman Empire in the last days. Idealist Sam Hamstra sees the beast representing ‘the spirit and empires of the world’ (“Why I Am an Annihilationist” 41). I don’t hold to Hamstra’s view, although the idealist view would be all the better for my case (since you definitely cannot literally torment “the spirit and empires of the world” but you can torment, in a vision, a creature that symbolically represents this abstract idea). Other traditionalists have said similar things, interpreting the beast as something more than a single person. Peter Toon, regarding Revelation 19.20, writes, “The Roman emperor, empire, and their organization and priesthood for Caesar-worship are doomed, for the judgment of God upon them is sure, and it is a judgment like that meted out to Sodom and Gomorrah” (101). G.K. Beale, while defending the traditional view, writes ‘Neither are the ‘beast and false prophet’ merely two literal individuals but figurative for unbelieving institutions composed of people’ (128). The arguments made by some traditionalists (including Beale) that the beast being a

corporate entity is consistent with eternal torment will be directly addressed in Subsection K. For now, however, just note that this isn't peculiar to annihilationists who have no better options.

What reason do we have for suggesting that this scary, multi-headed monster represents a corporate entity in real life? For starters, bound up into this whole image is a collection of people and things. As we learned in Revelation 17.8-11, the 10 horns are 10 kings; the seven heads represent seven hills and seven kings. This on its own doesn't necessarily make my point, as one could say that the beast is still one person and that these are just things related to it (and thus are included in the symbolism). However, the way that they tie together is telling. I mentioned earlier how the beast dying and coming back to life is problematic for the view that the beast is a single king who literally dies and rises again. This is because what kills the beast as a whole is a mortal wound to one of its heads, heads that represent hills and separate kings. If the beast is ultimately just a single person, the death of another king (I'm assuming this isn't the destruction of a hill) wouldn't result in his death specifically. But the mortal wound to the head kills the beast. This seems to indicate that what the head represents isn't just related to the what beast represents; rather, the head (a king) is an integral part of the overall beast, just as a person's head is integral to the person. This makes perfect sense if the beast represents a corporate entity. To eliminate an integral part could lead to the downfall of the whole. The beast coming back to life could be the kingdom coming back into existence (or perhaps, coming back into prominence) after the death of the king who was represented by the mortally wounded head. Whatever the case, the parts of the beast seem to literally be parts of what the beast represents, and not just things related to it. Kings and hills can certainly be part of a kingdom, but not a king alone.

Separate from this argument, and probably more prominent and important, is the connection between the beast of Revelation and the beasts (the fourth beast most prominently) of

Daniel 7. It is surely from Daniel 7 that the beast imagery comes. Daniel shows four beasts; a lion, a bear, a leopard, and the final beast with 10 horns that represent 10 kings that come from the kingdom that is the beast. Revelation shows a beast that has parts of a bear, a lion, and a leopard, and also 10 horns which also represent 10 kings which are all part of the overall beast entity (though it is worded somewhat differently). Both John's beast and the fourth beast in Daniel are said to trample the whole earth. Both beasts were future to the ones who saw them (Daniel and John), and there is nothing to indicate that the final beast of Daniel's vision had come and gone by the time John saw his vision. Although one really needs to read both relevant chapters in their entirety to get the full picture, it should be apparent that these two, the beast of Revelation and Daniel's fourth beast, are quite likely the same thing. With all this in mind, it is quite significant that, in Daniel, we are told that the four beasts are each four kingdoms, not just individuals (Daniel 7.23). Daniel's final beast represents a kingdom; shouldn't the beast of Revelation do the same?

Lastly, there is one other point to consider. We know that the beast is said to be a "king," so if it is an individual, personal being, then it is presumably a human. It is an immortal monster in the vision, but the vision is interpreted at least in part in Revelation 17.8-11, showing us that the beast is not a literal beast. The question, therefore, is whether the beast is an individual human, who could feel pain and be tormented, or if it represents some sort of corporate entity that could be so closely tied to a human that the angel could refer to it as a "king" and yet still be describing a corporate entity (which the angel also does in Daniel, as will be explained shortly). If not a corporate entity, then the beast is a human (although this fact on its own doesn't technically disprove, 100%, the idea that he is a demon who took on human flesh).

Bear with me here; there is a point to be made. At points in Revelation, the unbelievers of the earth are shown being killed off. We see mass slaughters at the end of Revelation 19 and at the final battle in Revelation 20. At the great white throne judgment in 20.11-15, those who are released from the sea and *Hades* and death are all dead. It would appear, then, as is implied about the previous battles, that all of the unbelievers have died. Of course, that does lead to a question of what the sea is, but whatever the case, they are dead. We also see this same prophecy in Isaiah 66. The unbelievers, all who oppose God, are killed off one way or another. Then they are judged in some manner, as is indicated in Revelation 20.11-15.

If the beast is ultimately representing a human, and we don't accept the totally unfounded assumption that a demon took on the flesh of a dead human, then why is he never judged? Why is he never killed? The symbols, the beast and false prophet, are shown being tormented with the devil. Well, if John, in Revelation 20.10, meant by beast and false prophet "the literal individuals who are represented by the beast and false prophet," aside from being rather inconsistent with how symbols are used in Revelation, why are they never killed or judged? Why are these "humans" not treated as other humans? Why were they thrown into the fire alive, as John explicitly states (19.20), when all the other humans are said to be killed and eaten by animals? Why doesn't the fire kill them if they are mortal humans who haven't died when everyone else has to be killed before judgment? Of course, one could say that they are humans, but the symbols, not the people, are said to be alive, and therefore the actual people are treated the same as every other human. But if that is the case, why show it this way? Why make them different from every other human? Their literal fate would not be any different; why make their symbolic fates so different? And as soon as you concede that they are symbols when thrown into the fire, the whole lake of fire judgment cannot be literal, and that gives support to my arguments that require

the lake of fire to be symbolic (which is key both to this argument and the argument from the destruction of death).

This all doesn't conclusively disprove the idea that they are humans, but it sure weighs against that interpretation. They just don't seem like human beings. If the beast is a kingdom, however, and the angel was simply describing it as it as a king, a common practice in that time that was even shared by the angel in Daniel 7, then that might be why the symbolic beast and false prophet are never judged like men. Unless the beast imagery is only based on Daniel in the loosest way possible, or is a demon in human flesh (which the Bible conspicuously neglected to mention), then the beast is a corporate entity.

J. The Beast Is a Corporate Entity – Part II: Arguments that the Beast Is an Individual

I would venture to say that there are four main arguments for the view that the beast is a single individual and not something greater. The first is that a straightforward, literal reading of the passages in Revelation that speak of the beast speak of a personal being, not a kingdom or personification of an idea. The second, which is related to the first, is the argument that, since the beast is said to be tormented in Revelation 20.10, it cannot be an untorturable entity. The third would stem from the angel's explanation of the beast in Revelation 17.8-11. The fourth would be that, since the dragon (who is said to represent the devil) in Revelation 12 has the same seven heads and ten horns as the beast, these symbols are consistent with an individual being and should be read that way in the case of the beast.

Regarding the first, obviously the beast is shown as a personal being that is worshipped and so-forth, but the beast is also shown as a beast. In other words, it isn't meant to be literal! It's insisted that since it says the beast is worshipped that it must be literal worship of a person, but if

that is the case, why isn't it literal worship of a multi-headed lion-leopard-bear monster who died and then rose from the dead? No one is actually taking this literally or straightforwardly. The beast being a personal being within the narrative is clear and, as far as I know, not disputed by anyone. What matters is not just what is in the vision, but what it means. Is the vision meant to just be a little bit symbolic, so that everything is literal except that it is a man and not a beast? Or, is there more to it? After all, in Daniel 7, where this imagery clearly comes from, the beasts are also personal creatures in the vision, but *in real life*, they represent kingdoms, not personal entities. Just pointing out that the beast is spoken of as a human person doesn't mean that it is one, since the person being spoken of, ostensibly, isn't a human but a beast. Aside from Daniel 7, we see this kind of thing elsewhere in Revelation. In Chapter 12, John sees a woman clothed with the sun and wearing a crown of 12 stars. No one takes that imagery literally (since if they did, she would burn up...). More importantly, most interpreters throughout history have not even interpreted her to represent a human woman. Even those who take the Revelation very literally and insist that the beast represents a human don't say the same for this woman. A number of dispensationalist scholars who interpret the beast as a man nonetheless see this woman as representing Israel (e.g. Hitchcock 159; MacArthur, *Revelation 12-22* 4). But now hold on a moment; it doesn't say that she represents Israel. It clearly and literally says that she is a woman, not a nation! And yet, they don't say that she represents an individual woman. My point is, just because an interpretation of part of the book of Revelation isn't as literal as others doesn't mean that it's wrong.

The second argument poses no challenge because it is based on a misunderstanding of what we mean when we talk about the beast being a corporate entity (or an abstract entity, though I am not arguing for that position). It takes what we are saying as if we are saying the

beast and false prophet are symbolic, but everything else is literal. It is as if we are believed to be saying that throwing the beast into a lake of fire to be eternally tormented represents throwing a kingdom (or for the more idealist interpreters, an abstract entity) into a lake of fire to be eternally tormented. But I hope it is by now abundantly clear that I am saying that the whole lake of fire vision is symbolic. The torture of this creature, like the torment of the whore of Babylon, is merely symbolic of something else that is to take place in real life. I am not saying that the beast is an untorturable corporate entity within the narrative. Within the narrative, it is a beast with seven heads and seven horns that is tormented for ever and ever. It only is gibberish when you assume that the beast is not eternally tormented even within the vision, which I am not arguing.

The third objection is the angel's explanation of the beast and what it represents: "The beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth [king]" (Revelation 17.11a). On its own, at face value, this would seem to answer the question. The angel is specifically telling John what the imagery actually means. Whereas imagery may be hard to understand, the whole point of what the angel is saying is to help John understand! In doing so, he says that the beast is a king. How then can it be the same kingdom that Daniel spoke of? Doesn't the angel's interpretation show us that it is a human king and just that similar imagery is used?

This seemingly clear rebuttal, however, becomes much more muddled when one reads Daniel 7 in any fairly literal translation (i.e. something other than the NIV). The four beasts, which are kingdoms, are called, "kings" in Verse 17. The Aramaic word here is *melek*, which means king. As far as I can tell it's not a controversial term at all, it simply means king (The Lockman Foundation 1549). Kingdom, as used throughout this chapter, is *maliku*, a different word altogether. It is translated variously to mean things like kingdom, dominion, reign, etc. (1550). The four beasts are called kings (Verse 17), but the fourth beast (the important beast for

our study), is also called a kingdom (Verse 23). Now, the NIV somewhat unhelpfully interprets Verse 17 for us by using the description of “kingdoms” to describe the four beasts, even though they are called “kings” in the Aramaic (and most translations). Contextually, it makes perfect sense; the beasts ultimately represent kingdoms, so being a translation that aims at being thought-for-thought more than word-for-word, the NIV translates it so that its meaning makes more sense to the modern reader. Just keep that in mind if the New International Version is the translation that you are using to scrutinize what I say, because my argument here is more obvious with the literal translation of Verse 17.

So what do we have here in Daniel? In the parallel account of this beast, it is called a king but it is clearly meant as a kingdom (since it is explicitly called a kingdom in Verse 23). Just like in Revelation, the angel is explaining what the imagery means. And yet here, when talking about beasts who represent kingdoms, the angel literally refers to kings, just like the angel in Revelation refers to a king, not literally a kingdom. What it shows is that the beast in Daniel, though referred to as a king, is really the kingdom that the king represents. Would it then be surprising if the beast, when shown in Revelation, were also to be referred to as a king even though it is more than the single individual?

Why would the angel even use such unclear language in what is supposed to be the *explanation* of cryptic imagery? This seems quite odd to us, but that is because literally thousands of years have passed between then and now. Historically there’s always been a tie between king and kingdom. In ancient times especially, a king and kingdom together in one symbol is a “well known phenomenon” (Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* 206). Similarly, Mark Hitchcock, also a traditionalist, writes, “It is true that the beast in Revelation is both the empire and its emperor, The kingdom and its king. As we have often seen in history, a great leader at

times can hardly be distinguished from his kingdom.” (135). This is nothing out of the ordinary. It definitely isn’t out of the ordinary biblically, because we know that the Bible does this at least once, in Daniel 7. The language is fluid in regards to the beast because the whole of the beast is a kingdom, yet a king is referred to as well, being the representative of the whole kingdom that the symbolic beast represents.

One might object, saying that it would not be fair for God to expect the reader to know the Old Testament and be able to see connections instead of being able to just take it simply and at face value. But aside from the fact that, human philosophy notwithstanding, the Bible just isn’t that simple, it is also worth pointing out that, for the original readers who Revelation was directly addressed to, it is not as burdensome as it sounds. In the New Testament era, it was a cultural norm for Jews to be exposed to the scripture at a very young age. Jewish boys would even be taught to literally memorize the whole Torah. Jewish society was saturated with the scripture. That isn’t to say that it necessarily rubbed off on them (that much is clear by reading pretty much any part of the Bible), but even if some didn’t take it to heart, that doesn’t mean they didn’t know what it said. Even an ultimately faithless Jew would have head knowledge of the Old Testament that would probably rival most Old Testament scholars today. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to have expected those to whom the book was directly addressed to at least know where in the Old Testament to look.

Elsewhere, too, we see the importance of knowing the Bible as a whole. One thing that has been come up a lot in my studies is how much emphasis Jesus put on the importance of scripture. He probably declared “And the scripture cannot be broken” (John 10.35b), although that may have just been John’s inspired parenthetical commentary. In Matthew 19.5, Jesus credits the words of Genesis 2.24 to God Himself, even though that verse is, on its face, just an

explanatory note by the human author. Ultimately, God said it. This is in addition to many references to how the Old Testament pointed to Him, why the prophecies had to be fulfilled, etc. It is abundantly clear that Jesus expects us to diligently read the scriptures, including the Old Testament (especially since there was no New Testament when Jesus spoke about scripture). It wouldn't be unlike Him to expect readers of Revelation to consult the Old Testament.

Ultimately, in light of Daniel 7, even this third, more compelling argument that the beast is an individual does not succeed, since the angel who explained the meaning of Daniel's vision to him also called the kingdoms "kings."

The fourth and final argument against the beast being a corporate entity, though not one that is brought up much as far as I can tell (in fact I have never actually seen it, as far as I can remember), is the use of the imagery of 10 horns in regards to the dragon of Revelation 12. Initially, one might argue that what I am saying hits a snag when we take into account the dragon in Chapter 12. Revelation 12.9 tells us that this dragon is the devil. Like the beast, the dragon has seven heads and 10 horns, but the devil is a single, personal being in real life. One might argue, therefore, that just because such symbolism is employed does not negate the possibility of it being an individual, and that since it is a person here, despite resembling Daniel (in regards to the 10 horns), we should think the same is true for the beast in the next chapter.

That said, this is not as clear cut as it may seem. In the case of the beast, we know not only that he has the symbols, but also, we have an angelic interpretation of what they are. More importantly, even if we are to presume they have the same meaning in the case of the devil, we also know how they interact. As mentioned before, in the case of the beast, the killing of one head brought down the beast as a whole. Since the head is itself a king, it would make no sense to say that killing a separate king would lead to the death of the supposed single individual who

is represented by the beast. In the case of the devil, we have no such connection. Furthermore, while the devil is a dragon, the beast, as pointed out before, is undoubtedly alluding to the beasts of Daniel. The beast doesn't just have the 10 horns, but he also is, to put it crudely, the first three beasts of Daniel frankensteined together into one thing, which, like in Daniel, is referred to as a beast. The devil shares one element, but the beast shares many key elements with the beasts of Daniel. The allusion to Daniel, therefore, still suggests a corporate entity.

So what then of the horns and heads that are common among the dragon and the beast? That is where it gets complicated. This isn't to say that what I am about to say is exceptionally complex, but rather, it is simply the case that systematically interpreting every detail of this chapter is very challenging (whether annihilationist or not). The same, of course, can be said for the book of Revelation in general (which, as mentioned before, is also the only book that features a passage that actually mentions torment going on for ever and ever). But here it is especially so, and as you will see, Bible scholars, just within the conservative, Bible-believing camp, have varied opinions.

It could simply be that Jesus showed the devil to John in this manner to show the intimate relationship between the devil and whatever the beast represents (be it ancient Rome, revived Rome in the end times, a symbolic manifestation of all evil kingdoms, or whatever else). To figure out the logistics of this would require one to have a solid opinion of who or what the beast represents. Those who hold that the beast is ancient Rome might argue that such a bestial, God-hating empire as that is so evil that not only is it bestial (and therefore represented by a beast), but it is tied into the image of the devil himself. The 10 horns and seven heads wouldn't actually be integral to the devil's persona; it would essentially be a shout-out to the current reader. Imagine, if you will, that Revelation here written during World War II; the dragon may have

been shown with a funny little mustache and some German writing on its claws (as would the beast). Though Hitler isn't really the devil, it would nonetheless serve as a double insult; not only would Nazi Germany be the beast, but even the description of the devil would allude to them! It is layered and a bit complex but it would have rung true to the original reader. And it would not mean that Nazi Germany, in the grand scheme of things, was any more integral to the devil than any other evil kingdom, but it would be something that the reader at the time would appreciate.

Along these lines, if one takes a more idealistic approach, making the beast the manifestation of the spirit behind all evil empires, and it makes even more sense. Throughout all of history, evil governments and kingdoms and empires have been one of the key ways that the devil has worked his evil. To the reader of John's Revelation (whether in the 60's or 90's A.D.), that would never have been more true than in that day. Remember, the dragon is just a symbol; there are a million ways the devil could have been shown. He is shown this way to make a certain point. Here, for Christians, so horrifically persecuted, on a scale probably not seen in the world today (except maybe in North Korea), the link between the devil and the evil empires of the world (represented by the beast) is made in this particular symbolic representation.

As convoluted as such ideas may sound to those who insist that the Bible must never be very complicated, at least such interpretations acknowledge that when John tells us it is the devil, he means the personal one we commonly refer to as "the devil." Many conservative, traditionalist commentators have even less straightforward conclusions, conclusions which, if accepted, may even strengthen my case. Consider John Gill's interpretation: "And behold a great red dragon; the devil, as it is explained in Revelation 12:9; though not he in person, but the Heathen Roman empire." The late John Walvoord of Dallas Theological Seminary had a similar view:

The second sign appearing in heaven is a great dragon. From the similar description given in [Revelation] 13:1 and Daniel 7:7-8, 24, it is clear that the revived Roman Empire is in view. Satan, however, is also called a dragon later in [Revelation] 12:9, and it is clear that the dragon is both the empire and the representation of satanic power" (Walvoord 193).

Although they differ on some key details (Walvoord's interpretation, for example, was arguably more complex), both saw the imagery of heads and horns and interpret a kingdom from it. And such interpretations as those listed would work quite well with my point; if the dragon represents more than a single being, one obviously cannot then say that the matching imagery for the beast would be evidence for the opposite conclusion! I cited those two in particular because, as far as conservative Protestantism goes, the two are very different. One was an 18th century Reformed Englishman; the other, a 20th century American dispensationalist. And yet both came to similar conclusions here, so such an idea isn't unique to one hermeneutical or theological tradition. It is not out of the realm of possibility that when John speaks of the devil, he is tying into the picture more than just the devil. The fact is, John shows us these symbols that all represent elements of kingdoms as part of the one whom he tells us represents the devil, so it's not as though their interpretation doesn't make sense.

As for me, although I wouldn't say there is really any room for a simple solution, I am not sure how I feel about such interpretations that make the "devil" refer to more than just the personal being. This is because, in this particular passage, the devil isn't part of the imagery, but rather, John's description of what the imagery (a dragon) means. I suppose that John may be referring to the devil the way the angel in Daniel 7 (and Revelation 17) referred to a king to represent a kingdom. Although such an allusion may have made sense to the original readers, it

certainly isn't as clear. Nevertheless, I do not dismiss it entirely, and since I consider it possible, it's worth bringing up for those who, unlike me, find this a compelling explanation of what John describes.

K. The Beast Is a Corporate Entity – Part III: So What?

So let's say that we have established that the beast is more likely a corporate entity, and not just a man. Some who have accepted this still have argued that it is consistent with eternal torment. The main argument is one summed up well by Gregory K. Beale, who writes, "Institutions are composed of people, so that if the institution is said to suffer something, so will the people composing the institution" (127). But is he right? Well, he's not completely incorrect, in terms of the general nature of things. However, in terms of this case, he is wrong.

The thing is, you cannot torment an institution. Torment, by its nature, requires a conscious, sentient being. An institution is not that, be it a nation or a corporation or whatever else. Now, you can torment people of a nation, but the nation itself could not suffer eternal torment. You can't torment a corporation, even if you can torment its customers and employees. Torment is an action that absolutely cannot be applied to both an institution and the people within the institution. You can't say that the institution suffers eternal torment, and therefore so do the people. If the people do suffer torment, then they are suffering a different fate than the actual institution that they make up.

It does not follow that what an institution suffers, its people all directly suffer as well. Just think about that. If you ask someone if the Soviet Union still exists, they would all say no, right? Well, did all the people who were citizens of the Soviet Union all cease to exist when the country dissolved? Of course not! If the owner of one business buys another business, did he buy

the employees of the other business? Not in America! Indeed, they might still work for him, but he by no means owns them as he does the business. When Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile married and more or less united their two kingdoms, does that mean that every person in Castile became one person with every person in Aragon? “If a bank (a corporate entity) merges with another bank, it does not follow that all the customers of the first bank merge with all the customers of the second” (Peoples, “Thoughts” 5). Glenn Peoples further illustrates this idea:

Perhaps a good modern day example is the phenomenon of political cartoons. Just today I saw a political cartoon depicting an American eagle sharpening its talons. The message was that America was strengthening its resolve against terrorism. The eagle represented the United States of America, but it would be silly to think that the cartoon was telling us that every American individual is sharpening his or her talons. They don’t even *have* talons! Likewise, the corporate entity that is America was not literally sharpening its talons, because that would require that America be an individual personality with talons, and as a corporate entity, this is impossible (just as it is with the beast of the book of Revelation). (“Thoughts”)

Now, it is not as though people never speak of a corporate entity like a kingdom in order to speak of its people. Jesus probably does this regarding Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10.15). But it is important to note that in that case, the institution isn’t actually in view at all. Sodom and Gomorrah in that context is just used as a figure of speech representing the people involved. But in the case of the beast, it isn’t that an institution is said to be tormented, and that perhaps it could mean it’s talking about the people involved. It’s a personalized beast that is tormented. The idea that the beast being a kingdom signifies the tormenting of its people requires us to see the beast not as a symbol of a group of people, but as a symbol of a symbol of a group of people. It

is like Peoples' example of the eagle representing America. The personalized beast represents an impersonal institution. It isn't saying that an impersonal entity sharpens its talons and that therefore we might say its people sharpen their talons (if that were even possible). It's saying that the personalized symbol represents something impersonal. In the case of a beast, if the beast represents a kingdom or something like it, then the personalized symbol, the beast, is tormented to represent what happens in real life to an impersonal institution, which cannot be tormented.

One could say that the beast then isn't meant to represent any sort of institution, but rather it simply represents multiple people, a group as it were. But what would that conclusion be based on? It surely would not be based on the beast in Daniel 7, where the idea of the beast as a corporate entity largely comes from. What happens to the fourth beast of Daniel, the beast that represents a kingdom and is presumably the same beast we see in Revelation? It is slain with a sword and thrown into a raging fire (Daniel 7.11). Does this mean that literally every single person within the kingdom was to be slain with a sword and have their corpses thrown into fire? When the dream is explained to Daniel, he is told that the beast represents a fourth kingdom and it is destroyed and done away with. It isn't telling Daniel what will happen to the people of the kingdom. Indeed, that could be the fate for some, but it is not being said that the beast represents every single person so that each one will suffer that fate, the fate of being slain with a sword and thrown into the fire. It is saying that the kingdom as an entity will be put to an end, like a slain animal (and just like the Soviet Union).

The vision of the beasts was not Daniel's only vision of these things. In Chapter 8, he sees a vision of two rams. One is big and mighty, but it is killed by the other. In the interpretation, Daniel is told that the first ram represents the kings of Persia and Media, and the second ram represented the king of Greece (Verses 20-21). Aside from being one of the Bible's most specific

and clearly fulfilled prophecies (as shown by details that I have left out), this gives us another excellent example of the Bible using a living creature as a symbol for a corporate entity. In this vision, the kingdom of Greece is shown doing away with Medo-Persia, using personal creatures to represent what would happen. Importantly, seeing as how there are millions of Persians alive today, and given Alexander the Great's gracious treatment of the family of the slain Persian king (Breasted 436), the trampling death of the ram was clearly not referring to what happened to the people who made up the kingdoms that the symbol represented!

Although the rams specifically refer to the "kings" of Greece and Medo-Persia, it is clearly similar to the other vision where when it says it represents the kings; it actually means that the kingdoms as a whole are represented by the symbolic creatures. First of all, by the time Greece conquered the Persians in the mid-4th century B.C. (Breasted 434), there hadn't been a king of Media in over two centuries ("Astyages"). The king of Greece never killed the king of Media. However, Daniel need not have been wrong. The Greeks did conquer the Persian Empire, which had been more or less united to the conquered Median empire (thus historians still refer to it by names such as the "Medo-Persian Empire"). Although there was no Median king, the Median kingdom, for all intents and purposes, still existed. If this vision is more symbolic, i.e. Greece conquering Persia and Mede and putting an end to the Medo-Persian Empire, Daniel and the word of God are vindicated. The ram which represented the two kings ultimately represented the united kingdom (which is all the more appropriate, given that it is not two rams but a single ram with two horns, which sounds similar to something else). Secondly, Alexander the Great (king of Greece) did not kill Darius (the king of Persia) In fact, he explicitly opposed Darius' slaying, even punishing those who killed him (Breasted 435). It's hard to say that the king of

Greece killed the *king* of Persia, but Greece, under his leadership, did put an end to the Medo-Persian *kingdom*.

The same can be said when looking at the whore of Babylon. John is told, “And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire” (Revelation 17.16). Now, does this mean that when Babylon is/was destroyed that every individual would be stripped naked, have their flesh eaten by the beast, and be burned with fire? Or, as was the case with the death of the ram and fall of Persia in Daniel 8, is this terrible fate of the symbolic woman simply a vivid and spectacular way of saying that the entity that she represents (a city) will be destroyed?

Beale does continue with this idea, that what happens to an institution applies to the people as well. He writes, “We saw above with respect to Babylon that her suffering was not purely figurative but involved the demise of an economic and social system that caused suffering of people (though not necessarily the death of all)” (127-128). But to say that what happens to an institution can affect people within it is not the same as saying the institution literally is just the people within it. Suffering did occur as a result of the destruction of Babylon. However, it wasn’t uniform. In fact, for the righteous, the destruction of Babylon/suffering of the harlot was a blessing! John tells us, “I heard another voice from heaven, saying, ‘Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and receive of her plagues’” (Revelation 18.4). Those same people of God are later told to rejoice that vengeance has come, vengeance for what the harlot did to them (Verse 20). The harlot went through great suffering, but not everyone who was part of that city even suffered, let alone got eaten by the beast...

Suffering would result from the destruction of Babylon, but that is a far cry from what would need to be established in order to say that since the beast is a corporate entity, therefore

the people of the kingdom it represents suffer the same fate as the symbolic beast. In order for this to be true, we would have to say that when it says the whore is tormented with fire, it is saying that in real life, what happens to the whore happens to every person who makes up the institution. It would be as if a city were literally nothing more than the collection of people alive in it. It would be like “city = the people of the city,” not “city = an institution or entity in and of itself.” But we wouldn’t employ that reasoning anywhere else. If a city charter is dissolved, the citizens still exist. If a city is destroyed in war or calamity, that doesn’t mean there weren’t survivors. The harlot represents a city. Her suffering represented the destruction of a city. It is an odd way to show it for sure, but that clearly is what John is saying. The destruction would cause suffering for some, but it doesn’t mean that every person who makes up the city suffers the fate of the whore who, according to Beale’s line of reasoning, must represent every individual as opposed to any sort of actual greater institution that they are part of.

The torment of the beast, which represents the destruction of whatever the beast represents, would cause suffering to some, but only as a side effect of that destruction. And just as how the killing of the ram in Daniel 8 didn’t mean the death of all Persians at the hands of the Greeks, and just as how the people within the city of “Babylon” will not each be burned and eaten by the beast, so the fate of the beast in Revelation is only symbolic of what will happen to the whole kingdom that it represents.

L. Why Show The Devil, A Real Personal Being, alongside Symbolic Beings?

One might wonder why the devil, a real personal entity that could be tormented in real life, would be thrown into the symbolic lake of fire to be eternally tormented alongside symbolic creatures that represent larger corporate and abstract entities.

There are basically two responses that can be given. First of all, even if it does seem silly, it does not affect the reasons why Revelation 20.10 does not actually say there will be unending torment of anyone in real life. Death, an abstract entity, is there suffering the same fate as men and the unholy trinity, and that is that. The beast is quite likely a corporate entity and not an individual who can suffer conscious pain. If that is the case, then that is enough to make eternal torment a near impossible meaning. That a personal entity would be thrown in with symbolic corporate entities is no big deal; it's no different than men (personal entities) sharing the same fate as death and *Hades*. (impersonal entities) It actually does make some sense; John shows personal beings suffering the same fate as non-personal entities because in real life, the things that the symbols represent suffer the same fate as the personal entities. The overall point is that whatever is evil and opposed to God (e.g. death, sin, the devil, ungodly authorities, etc.) will be done away with, and chillingly, we as humans could find ourselves thrown out like the rest of the refuse if we don't repent.

Alternatively, there could be a symbolic element to the devil being thrown into the fire in Verse 10. I'm not saying that I think that the devil is not a personal being. He definitely is. Although much of what we believe about him comes from tradition and not scripture, it hardly makes sense to speak of some impersonal evil force directly talking to God (Job 1.6), confronting Jesus and speaking from scripture (Matthew 4), asking permission to corrupt Peter (Luke 22.31), being numbered among damned angels (Matthew 25.41), and just in general being spoken of as a personal being in all kinds of contexts. I am not saying that the devil himself is a symbol for something. I am saying that it is possible that in this particular context, "the devil" might be. John Stott suggests that what is in view in the vision is not the devil himself, but rather the dragon which, throughout the book of revelation, represents the devil ("John Stott's

Response” 318). Alternatively, John may know the dragon in the vision represents the devil, but the “devil” may be used as a placeholder for something more than just the literal devil. Consider this: we know that Hell was created for the devil *and his angels*, yet Revelation makes no reference to demons being thrown into the lake of fire. If everything from men to Satan to abstract entities are all shown as being vanquished and cast into the fire in Revelation 20, why no mention of demons? Perhaps the “devil” is meant to represent not only the devil, but also his angels. Tied into this image could be even more. Death is thrown into the fire, so why isn’t sin? Perhaps even sin is tied into this image of the “devil.” After all, he has been sinning forever, and all sinners are of him and are his children (1 John 3.8-10). It could be that none of the three from Revelation 20.10 actually represent individual beings but are all just personalized figures that represent other entities. This interpretation answers many questions.

Ultimately, the reasons why eternal torment is disproved are all true either way. The rest is all speculation, which I am at liberty to do because eternal torment is disproved either way.

M. Why Isn’t the Whore Tormented “for Ever and Ever” like the Others?

As I discussed in Subsection F, the whore of Babylon gives us at least some degree of precedent for the otherwise inexplicable use of torment as a sign of annihilation. However, she appears to be destroyed by the end, yet the beast, false prophet, and devil are shown as being tormented endlessly. Why is this?

I should note that this whole section assumes the symbolic woman is herself destroyed. I had assumed this to be the case, based on Revelation 18.8 and 19:3 (which will make sense when you get to Section XV). However, it has occurred to me that, just as there are multiple conditionalist-friendly ways to look at Revelation 14.9-11 in light of the rest of the book, so it is

with Revelation 19.3. If one thinks that the harlot is not herself destroyed, but rather is burned and tormented without end, then this whole section is unnecessary. In that case, she would be just like the beast and false prophet (and ultimately the devil as well); she would be a symbol that is tormented day and night for ever and ever but represents something that, as pointed out before, will be completely destroyed and done away with (Revelation 18:21).

Even if the symbolic woman herself is destroyed, one reasonable explanation for the vision of eternal torment in the lake of fire is because of the spectacular nature of what happens in that vision. In that vision, there is not only the devil, beast, and false prophet. They are cast into that lake of fire with sinners and *Hades* and even death itself. It brings to the reader's mind the ultimate vision of God's victory over all that oppose Him in the entire universe. Even if the beast specifically represents a particular kingdom, it could be that this particular kingdom's place in history is such that it stands in as a prime example of a kingdom set against God. As mentioned earlier, a myriad of views are held as to the beast's identity, but whatever he ultimately represents, "All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (*NIV*, Revelation 13.8). Whatever the beast represents in real life, he is something of unparalleled evil and power (at least within the narrative). Both Rome in this late New Testament era or a new world order at the end of time, for example, would fit the bill. Perhaps in such a grand vision, the most extreme punishment imaginable would make sense in terms of imagery used. Perhaps the reasons for this "might involve the desire to paint a truly frightening and spectacular picture of the end of this persecutor of the saints who were to read this letter, one that portrays a lasting tribute to the punishment of those who so cruelly treated the people of God on earth" ("Why I Am An Annihilationist" 43).

Now, admittedly, it would have made more sense to me for them all to burn up in the vision, or perhaps to be squashed like a bug under God's foot or a giant gavel. But perhaps for the intended audience, God's victory was best pictured in subjecting these creatures to eternal torment, even though they would ultimately have taken away its true meaning. One reason I can envision is this: we expect to see people die and kingdoms fall. It is our natural expectation, even if it is ultimately at the hand of God. Eternal torment, however, is a fate that is supernatural and can clearly only be done by direct intervention of God because only God can control eternity.

We see this played out to some extent. The symbolic city of Babylon (whatever it actually is) is a big deal, but ultimately, she is a city. Man can destroy a city. In fact, as will come up in Section XV, she is specifically said to be destroyed by the beast (Revelation 17.16). To show creatures enduring eternal torment could be a way of pointing out that the destruction of what they represent is special, done by the hand of God Himself. The city represented by Babylon didn't need this special treatment, but it would be worthy of the worst of the worst.

I admit that this is speculative. With a book like Revelation, it comes with the territory. Here, we have this one vision that, on its symbolic face, contradicts the Bible's teaching but can reasonably be interpreted as being different from how it looks and consistent with the rest of scripture. It is an unusual situation (though as pointed out in Subsection C, traditionalists can't avoid this problem either). If there is a time for speculation, it is here.

N. "Why Are the Beast and False Prophet Already in the Fire before the Devil?"

Much is made about how the beast and false prophet in Revelation 20.10 "are" in the lake of fire when the devil is thrown in. The reasoning is that, if the fire was annihilation, then they

wouldn't still be there. There are two main things to argue here. My first point is short and it is the only one that really matters.

The fact is, in the vision, they are in the lake of fire for eternity anyway. We know that to be the case because they are condemned to being “tormented day and night for ever and ever” (technically, they could move somewhere else to be tormented later, but that doesn't matter; the point is that they are alive eternally, which I already concede). The fact that they *are* there when the devil is thrown in doesn't matter. Of course they are there; where else would they be? But the whole argument against the traditionalist interpretation of Revelation 20.10 isn't that it somehow doesn't actually say that they are “tormented day and night for ever and ever.” Revelation 20.10 is a vision. I concede that *in the vision* they are tormented eternally. We don't even have to pay attention to the fact that they “are” there because we concede that *in the vision* they are to suffer eternal torment, the very thing that this argument about “are” tries to claim. What matters is what that vision literally means, and for the many reasons laid out above, the fate of these three in the vision does not mean that any creatures are condemned to eternal torment in real life.

USEFUL SEMI-TANGENT

Translations differ on how they translate Revelation 20.10. The King James Version reads, “And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet *are*, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (emphasis added). Most translations agree with the KJV and say “are.” The NIV, however, reads differently: “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet *had been thrown*, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (emphasis added).

These differences occur because there is no actual verb in the Greek. If you know Greek, then it makes perfect sense. In English, however, it literally reads something like this (taken from Young's Literal Translation, but with the "[are]" removed, as the brackets indicate added text): "And the Devil, who is leading them astray, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet, and they shall be tormented day and night -- to the ages of the ages." Notice how ungrammatical that sentence was without the added "[are]"? This is why translations differ so much. Proponents of the NIV rendering have defended "were cast" on the grounds that in the case of a silent verb, you must use the same verb and verb tense of the proceeding verb, being "was cast" (from *balló*) (Ritenbaugh).

I have not found much on why many say "are"; popular level consensus seems to be that it is simply based on context. If they will be tormented for ever and ever, then obviously they *are* still there after the 1,000 years. I would guess that that is exactly why it's translated that way.

END USEFUL SEMI-TANGENT

It's almost bewildering how often people point to the controversial first part of the verse, that the beast and false prophet "are" in the lake of fire, as the main reason why this verse is supposed to disprove annihilation. Not only is there the "are vs. were" controversy, but one could still say that just because they are there 1,000 years later (if it's a literal 1,000 years in Chapter 20), it doesn't necessarily mean that they are there for ever and ever. This statement, even in the context of the vision, is ambiguous. It's the second half of Revelation 20.10 that's relevant! That they are to be "tormented day and night for ever and ever" is what suggests eternal torment. Emphasizing the first part of the verse is like trying to kill a wild animal with a slingshot when you have a shotgun. The latter half is the one statement in the whole Bible that explicitly refers to eternal torment (some say Revelation 14.9-11 does as well, but in Section XV I will explain

why it does not). It is that part, the second half of the verse, which we conditionalists have to explain. I say that we have.

O. The “Partial Annihilationist” View

As I sort of alluded to in parts of this massive section, there is the view that some hold which teaches that annihilationism holds true for unsaved humans, but that the devil, his angels, and usually the beast and false prophet, will suffer eternal torment. I call it the “partial annihilationist” (or “partial conditionalist”) view, since it does not apply to all sentient, volitional creatures who are guilty of sin. This comes up a lot in dispensationalist circles, among those who see the compelling case for the end of conscious existence of humans, but who are hesitant to stray from a strictly literal hermeneutic in terms of Chapter 20 (and therefore, Verse 10). That said, no amount of literalism in regards to this verse makes it come out any more smoothly than my interpretation (unless perhaps one takes the plunge and says that death is a living creature in real life, but that view is extremely rare).

Whatever the case, this view does exist. I don’t find it completely untenable, but I do find it problematic, largely for reasons that have come up before (such as the fact that it’s the same lake of fire for men and the devil, and the fact that the beast and false prophet, if tormentable individuals in real life, would be men). It also goes against one key argument for annihilationism that I put forth in Section XLVII. Still, if you really just cannot accept what I say here, but think that it may still be worth investigating what happens to men despite this passage, the view exists (probably among greater numbers than my interpretation, in fact). I’ll let the authors who espouse the view defend it.

P. Concluding Points

Although what I have argued may not seem all that plain and obvious, that doesn't make it wrong. The argument that the beast is a corporate entity isn't mere conjecture; on its own, it is a likely conclusion from all the evidence. The argument from Subsection G isn't pulled out of nowhere, nor is it just a suggested possibility; it is simply looking at what is said and taking it to its logical conclusion. If I am right about the implications, what then? And for the reasons discussed in Subsection C and F, torment symbolizing destruction isn't so absurd after all.

But isn't there a simpler solution? Isn't just saying that the lake of fire is Hell and that the wicked go there to be tormented for ever and ever the most clear and straightforward way to look at it? Why shouldn't we assume this to be true and interpret the rest accordingly? Why should we even consider more complex ideas? After all, saying that torment symbolizes destruction is not exactly plain and obvious on its own.

We must consider other ideas, however, because the "straightforward" interpretation is virtually untenable for reasons laid out throughout this section. Subsection E, for example, gave several independent arguments against this interpretation. Are there logically possible alternatives? Sure. Maybe "death and *Hades*" has a meaning in Revelation 20.13 that is totally different from Verse 14. Maybe it is somehow possible for intangible entities like death to be thrown into a literal lake of fire. Maybe the lake of fire is symbolic of different things for different entities because it just is. Maybe all this time it turned out death and *Hades* were literal, sentient creatures after all. There are alternative possibilities to what I have suggested; all of them, however, also require a lot of explanation and are open to all sorts of rebuttals, so they hardly are the plain and obvious solution in contrast to me over-complicating things (as if the Bible ever promised to always be simple and straightforward in the first place).

Under any interpretation (traditionalist or conditionalist), there's no short and easy way to interpret this passage fully. Revelation is a hard book to interpret. People have been arguing over pretty much every detail (except that Jesus wins) for the last 2,000 years. Sometimes the study of God's word, like life, is complicated. Deal with it. Nevertheless, I can tell you that the conditionalist has coherent interpretations, and even if I have not shown that they are the most reasonable of all possible interpretations, they are reasonable enough to allow us to accept them in light of everything else the Bible says.

XIV. DEATH IS DEFEATED, SO THE UNSAVED WILL ALWAYS LIVE?

I referenced this argument in Section IX, discussing 1 Corinthians 15. I chose to wait until now because part of the response is based on the fate of death, which comes up in Revelation 20. Now that we've discussed that issue in Section XIII, I will address this unusual argument. On *The Interactive Bible*, it is argued that if annihilationism is true, then death will not have been "swallowed up in victory" since the unsaved would effectively die again ("Eternal Torment"). Therefore, the damned must be immortal, because the Bible says that there will be no more death.

This argument immediately runs into trouble when we take into account what the Bible says about death and sin. Sin leads to death (Romans 6.23; James 1.15; 5.20). Death is what we call the eternal punishment for sin. The unsaved even suffer a "second death" (Revelation 20.14; 21.8). If death is destroyed, and the lost cannot die after the resurrection, then how can they suffer any sort of eternal punishment? If the unsaved cannot suffer death at judgment, since death is abolished, then how can they suffer the second death? Following this line of reasoning, not only would the passages that warn the unsaved of "death" be wrong (since death is abolished), but furthermore, the only possible outcome wouldn't be eternal torment; it would be universalism!

The traditionalist of any sort would rightly respond that there are multiple kinds of death, but that's my whole point. When it says that death is destroyed in the Bible, it is speaking of physical death, the first death, the way that our bodies die whether we are saved or unsaved. This is the death that precedes the second death. It is not referring to the eternal punishment for sin, also referred to as "death." Physical death, what we might call the "first death," is destroyed. There is then a second death, which passages like Isaiah 25.8 and 1 Corinthians 15.26 do not

address. That is how we can say that, though “death” will be destroyed, the unsaved will still suffer the second death. Even *The Interactive Bible* elsewhere talks about the second death being separation from God (“Death”). In other words, even they believe in more than one kind of death. But that undoes their whole point. It is not as though the wicked suffer the first death a second time. In fact, if dualism is true, then just re-dying the first death wouldn’t even amount to annihilationism, since the conscious soul/spirit would still be around! The second death is not the same thing as the first: as discussed in Section XI, the first death can only kill the body, not the soul. The first death is the body being separated from the life-giving spirit/soul. The result is a dead body. The second death is different, where the whole person is separated from God’s life-giving sustenance. The result is the permanent end to conscious existence. Body *and* soul are destroyed. Though similar, they are quite different in what they can affect, how powerful they are, and how they ultimately result.

One might argue that, since the annihilationist interpretation of the second death is largely the same as physical death, except that it also destroys the soul, the first and second deaths are really is the same thing in annihilationism. They might argue that whatever the first death is like, the second must be categorically different altogether. If one turns that which dies into a corpse, the other must be so different that it leaves the thing that dies alive. Aside from the fact that one killing the soul and the other not killing the soul is quite an important difference, this argument fails for one other reason: One could easily turn this back on traditionalists. Under the predominant traditionalist view of “death,” death means separation. So, the first death is a separation, and the second death is also a separation. Both separations result in the person who suffered “death” being conscious and miserable. They both sound pretty similar, don’t they? It cuts both ways. And yet, in both cases, whether we are talking about “death” meaning separation

or death meaning what I argue the Bible says death is, the first death and the second death differ in important details, and so, the point is moot. The arguments from the similarities between the first and second deaths don't eliminate the traditionalist or the conditionalist view.

Both annihilationists and traditionalists believe that the damned suffer a second death. Death, which can only kill the body, is done away with. Both agree that what is called the "second death" describes something different that happens to the lost. Whatever they suffer in the second death, it is different from what all people suffer in the first death. Exactly how it differs from the death that God will destroy, the form of death that is His enemy and temporarily consumes His people, is what is up for debate. Either way, it's not what the unsaved suffer the second time around anyway.

Also, and independent from everything I said above, there is the issue of chronology. Death is the last enemy to be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15.26). Who is to say that this doesn't occur *after* the lost are judged and destroyed? Even if we ignore every point made above, what if God destroys the wicked, and once they are gone, no one ever dies again (since the saved are immortal), and therefore, death ceases to exist? Death would be abolished all the same. Even if physicalism is true and there is no separate death of the soul, this resolves the issue.

One last point should be brought up as well, regarding death's relationship to the second death. We know that death, the destruction of which they make such a big deal about, also suffers the same fate as men. It is thrown into the lake of fire, same as men and everyone else (Revelation 20.14). Death, in effect, suffers the second death! And we know what that means for death. So then, if the point hasn't been drilled home enough, what does it mean if unsaved men suffer the same fate as death, and death, as the page on *The Interactive Bible* emphasizes, is abolished?

XV. REVELATION 14.9-11

A. Introduction

Revelation 14.9-11 is one of the most commonly used ECT prooftexts because it brings human beings, torment, and eternity together. John observes the following in his vision:

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” (*NIV*)

It is not hard to see how this passage could be seen as speaking of eternal torment, or why it is so commonly used. We are told that these particular damned persons will be tormented with fire and sulfur, and that the smoke that results ascends for ever and ever. According to John Piper, “Revelation 14:11 is probably the most graphic New Testament statement of the eternal suffering of the unrepentant” (“The Echo”). Taken in a vacuum, eternal torment would appear to be the most logical conclusion. They are tormented by being burned. Being burned produces smoke. If the smoke rises for ever and ever, then it would follow that the burning which produces the smoke must continue for ever and ever.

How the annihilationist interprets this verse will be dependent on how one understands the Revelation narrative. There are two main ways to look at it. I will first address this passage under the assumption that the description of this group of damned persons is meant to be read

independent from other passages, specifically, 20.10-15. It will be as if Revelation is not like a single distinct story where one vision tells one part of the story, and the next vision continues the storytelling (like when one typically tells a story today). This assumes a non-linear narration, in which this vision shows something that another vision will also describe independently. This is how I often see Revelation treated, not just in discussions of eternal punishment, but in general. Subsections B-D are based on this idea. The second idea is essentially the opposite, which will be discussed in Subsections E-F.

B. The First Possibility

Assuming the first possibility, I would respond that, *in a vacuum*, we can take all these words completely literally and logically come to the conclusion of eternal torment. However, as I pointed out in Section XII, the book of Revelation draws heavily on the Old Testament. Is language like that used in Revelation 14.9-11 used anywhere else in scripture, and if so, what meaning does it convey? Consider Isaiah's following proclamation of doom of the city of Edom:

For the Lord has a day of vengeance,

A year of recompense for the cause of Zion.

Its streams will be turned into pitch,

And its loose earth into brimstone,

And its land will become burning pitch.

It will not be quenched night or day;

Its smoke will go up forever.

From generation to generation it will be desolate;

None will pass through it forever and ever. (Emphasis added) (Isaiah 34.8-10)

What do we have here? Regarding Edom, it is prophesied that it will be completely destroyed. How did Isaiah describe this? He described a fire that would not be quenched day or night (thus, the city would have no rest day or night). After the city was completely destroyed, would there be any reminder? Indeed there would be; the smoke will continue to rise *forever*. It seems quite clear that this ever-rising smoke is meant to represent the idea of something destroyed by fire and never rebuilt again. Now, I am not unaware that the Hebrew *olam*, which is translated as “forever,” doesn’t always mean “for eternity.” It can also refer to an indefinite but not everlasting period of time (“A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible” 86). Nevertheless, in such cases where there is an end, there is usually something to indicate that. Also, what other indefinite period of time would be in view? The smoke would have stopped rising after the fire stopped, which would have been only hours or perhaps a few days. It would not be expected to rise for a lengthy age on its own, and no end is in sight in terms of this use of “forever.” Here, “forever” most likely means “for ever and ever.”

How can smoke rise for eternity (or even an age) if the fire goes out? It doesn’t. I hope that I’m not surprising anyone when I say that the prophets sometimes speak poetically and idiomatically (especially Isaiah). That is the case here. Edom is not still burning nor is its smoke still rising. Furthermore, Isaiah wasn’t suggesting such a thing; he explicitly said that Edom would be destroyed. In this context, smoke rising forever is an idiomatic way of saying that the thing being burned will be completely destroyed.

This argument, based on the similarity between Isaiah 34.9-10 and Revelation 14.10-11, is not a new invention. Peoples makes this argument (“Fire and Flood” 22-30). So does Edward Fudge (“Part One” 76). Fudge also points out that the vision of rising smoke, which may have inspired Isaiah in his use of imagery, appears with Sodom. As he puts it: “Just as Sodom presents

the figure of burning sulfur, so it contributed the imagery of rising smoke. When Abraham went out the next morning to look on the scene, all he saw was ‘dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace’ (Gen. 19:28)” (*The Fire* 298). This gives us one more biblical example of rising smoke being associated with absolute destruction, an instance of absolute (earthly) destruction also used to directly foreshadow eternal punishment in the New Testament (2 Peter 2.6; Jude 7). Of course, the language of Isaiah 34.8-10 is much more significant here, but the additional use of this motif doesn’t hurt.

For good measure, I will also discuss briefly the reference to the cup of God’s wrath. This idea of God’s wrath given as wine occurs several times in the Old Testament (e.g. Job 21.20; Psalm 60.3; Isaiah 51.17; 22; Jeremiah 25.27; Obadiah 16). Fudge points out the following:

Since the cup’s strength reflects the degree of God’s wrath, the intensity of the punishment may vary. For God’s own people it may be a stroke which sends them reeling but from which they recover (Ps. 60:3, Isa. 51:22). For His enemies it often ends in total and irreversible extinction. The prophets use language like this: “They will drink and drink and be as if they had never been” (Obad. 16). They “drink, get drunk and vomit, and fall to rise no more” (Jer. 25:27). (*The Fire* 295)

Jeremiah also adds the following: “But if they refuse to take the cup from your hand and drink, tell them, ‘this is what the LORD Almighty says: You must drink it!’” (*NIV*, Jeremiah 25.28-29). In context, we are dealing with the wine of wrath, which they unsuccessfully seek to avoid. The important thing to note is that, in the Old Testament, the cup unmixed resulted in destruction; *destruction* was the worst penalty. Any continued existence would be wine served mixed, as was given to Israel. Now, I don’t put as much stock in this relationship as Fudge does. The idea of the wine unmixed itself only means God’s wrath at its fullest, which would fit eternal torment if that

were how God's wrath really did manifest itself. However, it certainly does not hurt the annihilationist argument that this symbol elsewhere means destruction, and I didn't want to leave that element alone, so there you go.

C. Connection to Revelation 19.3

It hasn't been overlooked by commentators on either side of the issue that very similar language is used later in Revelation. As we watch the destruction of Babylon, angels declare the justice of God. It is written: "And a second time they said, 'Hallelujah! HER SMOKE RISES UP FOREVER AND EVER'" (19.3). So what are we to make of this? At best, it doesn't help the traditionalist position. The question is, what is in view specifically, the symbolic woman, or the city she represents? If it is the city, then that is great for annihilationism. What happens to the city of "Babylon"? It is destroyed completely (Revelation 18.21). To represent the violence that will overthrow the city, an angel even throws a millstone into the sea. Yet just like Edom, the smoke is said to rise for ever and ever. That would be huge, for the image of eternally rising smoke would appear in the very same book to represent annihilation.

The alternative position, one which I am actually somewhat sympathetic to, is that the woman herself is in view here. Robert Morey appears to be arguing this when discussing Revelation 14.11, writing, "John uses the metaphor of eternally rising smoke to build the mental image of the eternal process of torment. He uses the same metaphor in 19.3, where the 'smoke,' i.e. torment, goes on 'for ever and ever'" (143). But this view, the view that she is tormented for ever and ever like the followers of the beast, is problematic. For starters, if Morey is right, then while that would at first seem to explain Revelation 14.10-11 in terms of ECT, it would cause new problems. If the whore is eternally tormented, then what we would have is this: the eternal

torment of a symbol representing the destruction of what the symbol represents. What then of the beast and false prophet? They too are eternally tormented symbols. Would not the most reasonable conclusion, given nothing to indicate otherwise, be that the same would be true of them, that the things they represent would be destroyed in real life? And if that is the case, what of the devil who suffers an identical symbolic fate in Revelation 20.10? What of people in Verse 15? This would lend enormous weight to everything I argued for in Section XIII. And as for the problem it would pose for annihilationism in regards to Revelation 14.10-11, that problem is addressed in Subsections E-F.

I don't think this will come into play though, because in context, I do not believe that eternal torment is not in view for the symbolic woman either (although it would make my job easier if it were). We must ask who burns her with fire. Her destruction literally comes at the hands of the beast. The horns "will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire" (Revelation 17.16b). God gave the beast power to fulfill His will (Verse 17). In other words, just as God brought judgment to nations by means of defeat and destruction at the hands of an enemy, God judges Babylon by letting the beast attack her. Obviously the beast does not rule for eternity, even within the vision, so how could He burn her with fire forever? Even within the symbolic narrative, if it is the beast that destroys Babylon and symbolically ravages the woman, then eternal torment cannot be in view for anyone. God does destroy Babylon and inflict upon the woman terrible suffering, but only by means of another (as He has in most cases, aside from the great flood and Sodom).

So what we then have is the unambiguous destruction of the city in view, or a description of the fate of the symbolic woman. The former helps annihilationism. The latter, ultimately, does as well. If the smoke of the woman is speaking of her being burned by the beast, what could be

in view except for her burning up (since the beast can't keep the symbolic woman burning forever)? Therefore, not only is the language of Revelation 14.10-11 found to speak of destruction in Isaiah 34.9-10; it also speaks of annihilation later in Revelation.

Lastly, even if one were to argue that the when it says "the smoke of her" it means the smoke of the people within the city, that still does not work. Aside from the reasons cited in Section XIII as to why the torment of a symbol of a corporate entity refers to the entity itself and not its people, this argument falls for one more reason. Just as it is the beast that torments and destroys the whore, it is the kingdom/king that the beast represents that attacks what the whore represents. Just as the beast would be unable to burn her forever, it is also true that neither the beast nor what it represents would be able to inflict eternal burning on anyone.

I should note that I am not making any grand claim about the destruction of Babylon picturing the end of the world or eternal destruction of any humans in and of itself. All I am saying is that something is destroyed, quite possibly on a simply earthly scale, and the identical language is employed. This supports the idea that when this language appears in Chapter 14, it is conveying the meaning of Isaiah 34.9-10 and not a new, more literal meaning. That is all I am saying in regards to Revelation 19.3.

D. Traditionalist Responses

Somehow, this whole argument from Isaiah 34.9-10 seems to elude many traditionalists. Either they are ignorant of it, or they don't bother even mentioning it. Either way, not much is given in response. Robert Morey ignores it entirely in *Death and the Afterlife* (even though he heavily criticizes Edward Fudge and *The Fire That Consumes*). In *Two Views of Hell*, which he co-wrote with Edward Fudge, Robert Peterson does not address this argument at all in his

response to Edward Fudge (although he does attack other arguments Fudge makes in his section on this passage). The sad truth is that in many other traditionalist writings, this connection to Isaiah 34 is simply ignored.

To be fair to them, however, this connection to Isaiah 34 seems to elude many annihilationists as well. Clark Pinnock, while defending conditionalism in *Four Views On Hell*, fails to point to Isaiah 34.9-10, instead only giving this vague explanation of Revelation 14.9-11: “Regarding Revelation 14:11, we observe that, while the smoke goes up forever, the text does not say that the wicked are tormented forever.” He concludes that, “The text does not describe the end of history either, which is termed the second death, an image very much in agreement with annihilation (Rev. 20:14)” (157). However, this response fails to explain why ever-rising smoke from people being tortured in fire wouldn’t signify that the burning and torture never ends, which it would appear to mean without knowing the Old Testament background.

John Wenham similarly misses the connection between these verses, leading him to call Revelation 14.11 “the most difficult passage that the conditionalist has to deal with” (178). However, it is not so difficult once you know how the language is used in the Old Testament. To be fair to them, Isaiah 34.9-10 is a pretty obscure passage. Who knows if I would have ever caught it had it not been pointed out to me? That isn’t to say that the original readers would have missed it; it is no secret that first-century Christians, especially Jewish Christians (who the book of Revelation is clearly aimed towards) were very well versed in the Old Testament, and would, simply by living in that time and place, be much more familiar with biblical idioms. My point is, it’s not outrageous that many expositors today would miss this (although now that it has been pointed out to you, you know better).

One argument against the annihilationist view is that the words literally mean eternal torment, and it is invalid to consider the use of Old Testament scripture that that writer alludes to in interpreting his words. Although Robert Peterson makes no reference to this argument in *Two Views of Hell*, he has addressed it before, albeit poorly. In *The Fire That Consumes*, Fudge makes essentially the same argument from Isaiah 34.9-10 as I do here. Peterson, in a critique of that book, has little of substance to say. He says, “Fudge has not allowed other Scriptures to inform his exegesis of Rev 14; instead he has substituted his comments on many other texts for the interpretation of Rev 14:9-11 itself” (“The Hermeneutics”). In other words, to see how certain phrases in the Old Testament are used and suggest they may mean the same thing when describing very similar circumstances in the New Testament is akin to ignoring the passage altogether. Peterson says that “Fudge has not explained verses 9-11 as John has put them together” (“The Hermeneutics”). But hasn’t he? Haven’t we? What part of this passage cannot be explained given the use of the same language in the Old Testament?

What Peterson seems to be saying is that the passage amounts to eternal torment when looked at without considering the Old Testament language, and so one must interpret the passage this way. Peterson elaborates on this idea even more in *Hell on Trial* when discussing Edward Fudge’s explanation of a different but similar verse, Mark 9.48 (a passage that I address in Section XXI). What is important to note is that Mark 9.48 actually quotes the Old Testament, and Fudge (and I) take note of this. In responding to this, Peterson writes, “Proper theological methodology involves allowing New Testament writers to move beyond their Old Testament background in keeping with the progress of revelation. Fudge errs by reading his supposed meaning of Isaiah 66:24 into the New Testament, where it does not fit” (*Hell on Trial* 63). If it’s not valid to take into account the way language is used elsewhere in scripture, especially when

relating the New Testament to the Old Testament which the writers would look to, then I guess I can't explain this verse. If using the meaning of an Old Testament verse when it is actually quoted in the New Testament is seen as improper, then you might see why less explicit allusions to Old Testament meaning are often ignored. Matt Slick takes a similar view of interpreting scripture with scripture (not specifically discussing this verse): "It's a mistake to use the Old Testament to interpret the New Testament. It is the New Testament that sheds light on the Old Testament" ("What Is Soul Sleep"). I guess that's why so many Old Testament authors quote the New Testament to explain their points and validate their arguments...

While trying to address the annihilationist interpretations of this passage, D.A. Carson takes this idea of using the New Testament to interpret the Old to an extreme. He reasons as follows: "If there is an allusion to the sufferings of Edom in Isaiah 34, I suspect that Edom has the same sort of typological reference to Hell that Sodom and Gomorrah have: 'they [Sodom and Gomorrah] serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire'" (bracketed statements theirs) (*The Gagging of God* 526). On its face, annihilationists would applaud since, indeed, Sodom and Edom do foreshadow Hell, and both were instances of utter destruction. However, Carson is a traditionalist, arguing for eternal torment. What Carson is arguing, in essence, is that, since Edom foreshadows Hell, (and we all know what Hell is like...), Edom somehow foreshadows eternal torment (as Sodom and Gomorrah apparently do). In what way would Edom foreshadow eternal torment? More specifically, how would the rising smoke of Edom, which there referred to destruction, foreshadow continued conscious existence? It seems that Carson is arguing that Edom was judged by God, and therefore so will the damned be. To make this point, John alludes to Edom. But John alludes to the destruction of Edom, just as Peter

alludes to the incineration of Sodom and Gomorrah in 2 Peter 2.6 (see Section XXXV). Not just judgment, but these particular aspects of the judgment, are what are pictured.

Peoples takes note of this, and is correct in asserting that a better explanation of this passage is the following: “1.) Revelation 14:9-11, in order to convey a certain meaning, uses the imagery and language of Edom and Sodom. 2.) The imagery and language of Edom and Sodom has a biblical precedent for conveying the idea of annihilation. 3.) Therefore the punishment alluded to (using imagery) in Revelation 14:9-11 is annihilation” (“Fire and Flood” 27). I think that that sums it up pretty well.

Gregory K. Beale also notices the connection between Revelation 14.9-11 and Isaiah 34.9-10, but argues against the annihilationist position. In fact, he begins this section by pointing out that the Old Testament background of this verse is Isaiah 34.9-10. He then poses the question, “Does the portrayal mean the annihilation of unbelievers so that their existence is abolished forever? Or does it refer to a destruction involving not absolute annihilation but the suffering of unbelievers for eternity?” (115). He even admits this much: “Since God’s judgment of Edom meant that she ceased to exist, the same meaning appears appropriate to Revelation 14:10-11” (115). Nevertheless, because Revelation 20.10 proves eternal torment, and because torment is mentioned, he nuances the way the language was used for Edom and comes to the conclusion that they are being continually tormented for ever and ever, with the smoke being “figurative of an enduring memorial of God’s punishment involving a real, ongoing, eternal, conscious torment” (117). In making the argument, connecting this passage to 20.10, Beale seems to be working from the second paradigm, which I will discuss in Subsections E and F.

Lastly, because mention of torment is made, specifically “the smoke of their torment,” some suggest that this indicates that the rising smoke is meant to indicate that the burning

continues. After all, the smoke is of their torment, and this only occurs while the fire burns, not after they are gone. But that ignores the way that Isaiah used the language, and the way the angels use the language in Revelation 19.3. Indeed, it is the smoke of the ongoing action, but this was the case in Isaiah as well. In the case of Isaiah, the picture of smoke may have been used as a memorial, but the smoke came from the ongoing burning. That's common sense. The place didn't start smoking when the fire died out. The smoke was of the burning. Isaiah didn't say "the smoke of its burning" because that would be redundant. Obviously the burning causes the smoke. Likewise, the smoke is caused by the burning (and torment) of the people described in Revelation. But if the picture of smoke still rising after the burning ceased was used in Isaiah, why couldn't that be the case here? In a sense, this argument regarding the "smoke of their torment" does little more than question the idea that smoke rising could continue after the fire stopped burning. Literally, that wouldn't happen. But that's clearly what Isaiah says happens. Why did the angel mention the torment in this case? Maybe it is because they will suffer at judgment. Or, quite possibly, maybe it was to make a stronger point. It's not as though Revelation ever leaves us with a want for imagery and vivid sensory detail. The point is, it doesn't really change what is said.

E. The Second Possibility – Part I

The second possibility gets a bit odd, but it nonetheless must be considered. The first interpretation assumed that this vision was separate from the judgment in Revelation 20.10-15. It assumes that when the angel spoke of this torment in fire and brimstone, rising smoke etc., it isn't meant to be referring to what we see after Satan is defeated and the dead are judged. Both are separate symbolic descriptions which describe, in different ways, the same or similar things,

things that will happen in real life. But if it is one linear commentary, and what the angel speaks of here is fulfilled in 20.11-15, then that changes things. Essentially, the angel's exact wording would be less important because we know what is seen in the lake of fire fulfills what the angel says. In other words, this passage would be largely dependent on Revelation 20.10-15.

If we are to say that normal hermeneutics demands that the men in Verse 15 are tormented as the unholy trinity are in Verse 10, then we would have to say that indeed, Revelation 14.9-11 does speak of eternal torment. However, if I have proven my case regarding 20.10, then the eternal torment in view of Revelation 14.9-11 would no more indicate eternal torment in real life than would the eternal torment seen in Revelation 20.10. Both passages would speak of the same eternal torment of the damned in the lake of fire that will take place in Revelation 20.10-15, which as I showed before, is a fate symbolic of them being destroyed.

F. The Second Possibility – Part II

Lastly, it could be argued that Revelation 14.9-11, while speaking of the fate of the lake of fire, could be used to interpret how the lake of fire affects humans in Chapter 20, and not the other way around. If this is the case, then I would assert once more that the use of the rising smoke imagery both in the Old Testament and in Revelation 19.3 means Revelation 14.9-11 is speaking of destruction. Thus, when men are thrown into the lake of fire, they are destroyed, and not tormented like the unholy trinity. After all, it never says specifically that men are tormented like the devil, beast, and false prophet. We tend to assume that they are since they are thrown into the same lake of fire as those three. But if we had reason to see their fates from that fire as being different, this would change.

I do not consider this a serious possibility at all, but if we were to say the fate of men in the vision is separate from the fate of the unholy trinity in the vision, this would complicate things. It would leave annihilationism most likely true for men, for if the fate of men even in the vision is destruction, then surely, without something else to indicate that this is symbolic of something different, we would say they are destroyed in real life. However, it would make ECT logically possible (although very unlikely) for the unholy trinity (by virtue of them having separate fates).

But in this case, what of the other players in the vision? Let's say that the beast and false prophet are men. One could say that they are tormented like the devil instead of being destroyed. But if this were the case, why would they be made immortal while the rest of the damned are destroyed? Are other damned people kept alive in the fire while some are destroyed by it? Would that not seem odd for Jesus to never mention that when warning the masses of being thrown into Hell, into the eternal fire? When we are told, of the ungodly, "These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thessalonians 1.9), does this refer to eternal torment for some yet literal destruction for others? When the unrighteous are thrown into the fiery furnace like tares (Matthew 13.36-43), are some burnt up (like tares) and some kept alive to be tormented in that fiery furnace? This is logically possible, but it hardly seems likely. Nevertheless, it must be true in order for eternal torment to be true for anyone (under the current circumstances we are considering regarding Revelation 14.9-11 and 20.10).

Anything else would result in ECT falling apart for the reasons explained in Section XIII. What if we were to say that the beast and false prophet suffer the same fate as other men, being men themselves? Since the devil suffers the exact same fate as them in the vision (eternal

torment in the lake of fire), why would he not suffer the same exact fate as them in real life? If they are corporate or abstract entities, then they would have to be destroyed in real life, which would raise the same issue. It would have to be that the beast and false prophet represent sentient beings in real life who could be tormented and are. However, given that the beast is said to be a king (Revelation 17.11), what would those sentient beings be but men? Even if the false prophet wasn't a man, the beast would be. If the beast is a man, then that raises the problem mentioned above. If the beast is not a man, what could it be but a kingdom or something like it? In that case, annihilationism is affirmed for the reasons brought up in Section XIII. Basically, unless the beast and false prophet are special, supernatural men who are uniquely immortal, ECT still falls apart under this interpretation of Revelation 14.9-11.

G. Points to Take Away

No matter which way we are meant to look at the fate of the followers of the beast in Revelation 14.9-11, eternal torment is never the only reasonable option, nor is it ever the most reasonable option. If we look at the passage on its own, the Old Testament language of destruction cannot be ignored. If we are to interpret it based on what we interpret from the judgment scene in Chapter 20, then this passage no more means that there is eternal torment in real life than does Revelation 20.10-15.

Of course, if you don't know the scriptural background, it makes perfect sense to make the logical progression that their fiery torment causes smoke, and if the resulting smoke rises endlessly, then the cause of it, the fiery torment, must go on endlessly. If one thinks the statement exists in a vacuum, then eternal torment would be the most simple and plain meaning. However, it doesn't say that there is eternal torment; it says something bizarre that admittedly

does make more sense as a reference of eternal torment when you are unaware of the background. Now, however, none of us are ignorant of the scriptural background.

Can it be said with 100% certainty that John is using the language of Isaiah? No. Does the idea fit well enough to make it a much more reasonable explanation than the traditional interpretation? I would say so. Does the use of this language in the Old Testament make it impossible to say that Revelation 14.9-11 definitely speaks of eternal torment? Without a doubt. Taking Isaiah 34.8-10 into account, this passage is no longer a powerful indicator of eternal torment by any means.

And of course, if it is meant to refer to the same fate as the fate of men in Revelation 20.10, then it would signify their destruction for the same reasons as it did for Revelation 20.10.

Ultimately, I'm not saying that there are not ways that eternal torment can be possible. However, it is not a given. This text does not disprove eternal torment, but it does not prove eternal torment either.

XVI. MATTHEW 25.41 AND 25.46

A. This Passage May Refer to Eternal Torment; That Does Not Mean That It Does

It is said that the judgment pictured in Matthew 25.31-46 shows that Hell is a fire that burns for ever and ever and endlessly torments the wicked. In fact, Verse 46 may in fact be the most commonly used traditionalist proof-text in the whole Bible. And it is understandable that this is the case. After all, the lost are subject to “eternal punishment,” punishment that we are told takes place in “eternal fire” (Verse 41). It is understandable that these verses could be seen to indicate eternal torment, especially when one already has the traditional doctrine in mind. However, what is at issue is not how well the words fit with the traditional doctrine on the surface (they do fit it well), but whether or not eternal torment is the only reasonable meaning, and whether or not there is anything in this passage that can be of help to the conditionalist.

Note: Translations of these verses and similar verses (e.g. Daniel 12.2; 2 Thessalonians 1.9) vary when it comes to “eternal” and “everlasting.” Nevertheless, both “eternal” and “everlasting” come from identical Greek and Hebrew words (the Greek *aiónios* and the Hebrew *olam*) (Johnson; “What Is Hell Like?”). The difference is a matter of style rather than meaning, so the two will be used interchangeably (they tend to mean the same thing in English anyway).

Because of the length of the arguments below, I will summarize my position: These terms are consistent with annihilationism. First of all, punishment does not necessitate pain. Secondly, I assume that the punishment does last for eternity, just as eternal life speaks of life that lasts for eternity, but that does not mean that punishment is actually inflicted continuously for ever and ever. I will show that annihilation is eternal punishment. Regarding “eternal fire,” the use of this

term does not mean that the lost themselves burn for eternity, or even that the fire lasts for eternity, as will be explained in Subsections H-I.

B. Matthew 25.46: Can Annihilation Be Called “Punishment”?

Some unsuccessfully claim that Verse 46 disproves annihilationism because punishment necessitates pain, which requires existence. Thus, eternal punishment requires ongoing conscious existence in ongoing pain and suffering. According to R.C. Sproul, “Punishment implies pain. Mere annihilation, which some have lobbied for, involves no pain” (*Essential Truths* 296). But does punishment always mean pain? Of course not. Now, torment could be the punishment spoken of, but that is not a given. For example, in some countries which don’t quite share the values we have here in America, amputation of limbs is a punishment, yet it is often done under anesthesia. There is little physical pain, but is that not a pretty serious punishment (especially for things like petty theft)? Or how about a monetary fine? Or prison time? Or being on probation or having to do community service? Punishment and pain are not synonyms.

Most relevantly, the infliction of death could be a punishment. When a person is put to death, they suffer capital *punishment*. It is often referred to as “the ultimate punishment.” What makes capital punishment “punishment”? Is it the fact that the person is dead, or is it the conscious suffering that occurs at the moment preceding death? Surely it is the former! If the punishment is only what happens when a person is alive to feel it, then a simple flogging would often be more severe. Indeed, punishment is *inflicted* when they are alive. It is when they are alive and able to know it that they are punished. However, the punishment doesn’t cease when the pain (if there even is any) and the act of punishing stop at death. Thus, Augustine of Hippo (who was by no means a conditionalist), writes the following in *The City of God*: “Then as to the

award of death for any great crime, do the laws reckon the punishment to consist in the brief moment in which death is inflicted, or in this, that the offender is eternally banished from the society of the living?” (782; bk. 21, ch. 11). The punishment is being dead. The punishment is that you don’t get to live (in the physical sense) while one was, by nature, meant to continue doing so. What if that punishment occurred, but to the soul and not just the body, on an eternal scale to never be reversed (the way the first death is undeniably reversed with the resurrection)?

The Greek is no different. The word for punishment, *kolasis*, is rare in the New Testament, occurring only here and in 1 John 4.18. Some older translations translate it as “torment” in 1 John 4.18, but this makes sense in light of those older translations. Consider the KJV: “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment” (1 John 4.18a). Fear is something you consciously experience, so any *kolasis* that is part of the fear, any punishment that the fear “hath,” will be something consciously experienced not only at its infliction, but so long as it lasts (the importance of this distinction will be clear later). Those same translators who felt confident specifying the type of *kolasis* involved in this verse did *not* do the same for Matthew 25.46. This is because nothing in Matthew 25.46 itself necessitates what kind of punishment, what kind of *kolasis* is in view the way that 1 John 4.18 does. A commentator on a conditionalist website pointed this out to me (Patrick).

Can something other than torment (such as execution) be called punishment (that is, *kolasis*)? It certainly can. According to Dr. Larry Perkins of Northwest Baptist Seminary, it is used in some Greek translations of Ezekiel 14 and 18 to describe the punishment of death inflicted on Israelites when God brought judgment upon them. It is also used in 2 Maccabees 4:38. According to Dr. Perkins, “The author recounts how Antiochus, the Seleucid emperor executed Andronicus, his deputy who had murdered Onias, the Jewish high priest. He concludes

that ‘the Lord thus repaid him with the punishment (*kolasin*) he deserved.’ A number of other examples speak of execution as a form of punishment. It is certainly not the only meaning of the word *kolasis*, but it was a common way for the word to be used in that time.

One might respond that, although physical death can be a punishment, physical death doesn’t make you non-existent, and therefore the punishment of death is not the same as annihilation. The traditional Christian view is that after death you are still conscious somewhere, so when you are dead, suffering the punishment of death, you are still conscious. However, the consciousness of the soul after death is not necessarily part of any sort of punishment. What about a murderer who comes to true repentance and faith in Jesus while on death row? He might be punished with death, but after he dies, he would hardly be suffering or lamenting anything. Nevertheless, they still call it “capital punishment,” not “capital send-him-to-heaven.” Even for somebody whose soul suffers torment after death, the death didn’t cause this to take place; it just makes it start sooner, and God can calibrate it to just the right amount of total suffering in light of any change of length. Capital punishment is an earthly punishment; it only punishes on an earthly level. Ultimately, I am not saying that annihilationism is the exact same thing as the death penalty. After all, men can only kill the body, not the soul (Matthew 10.28). However, the same is true of anything. Earthly torment doesn’t affect your soul either. I am only saying that the death penalty is a form of punishment where the central aspect is not the pain involved (especially in the case of death by lethal injection or firing squad, which can be almost if not entirely painless). Thus, you can have “punishment” that isn’t pain. This is considered common sense by most, and it is also shown in ancient literature as briefly discussed above.

The death penalty is directly relevant in one regard. If men can only kill the body, then the body alone is what dies. What if the punishment inflicted by God upon the whole person does

to body and soul what men can only do to the body when inflicting “the ultimate punishment”? If so, then that amounts to annihilation.

C. Matthew 25.46: Can Annihilation Be “Eternal”? – Part I

Now, it is clear that punishment need not be in the form of torment, and that on earth it could include something like the death penalty. Being annihilated is a form of punishment. However, the Bible doesn't only say punishment; it also says that the lost suffer “eternal” punishment. I have heard and read, more times than I can count, that the punishment lasts as long as the eternal life of the saved. Thus, nobody who takes the Bible seriously could ever even consider that this might possibly mean anything but eternal torment, and you needn't bother looking into it any further, right? Of course, since you've read this far, you obviously are willing to look into it further, and that makes me glad. But this raises the question: How can annihilation be called “eternal punishment”? If a person has been annihilated, you cannot continue to inflict punishment on them. It would be as pointless as beating a dead body, wouldn't it?

Although this is not my main argument (in fact, I will be assuming the opposite for our purposes here), some have argued that the Greek *kolasis aiónios*, “eternal punishment,” does not actually mean eternal punishment. The argument rests on the premise that the word for eternal, *aiónios*, has other meanings besides “eternal” or “everlasting.” Technically, they aren't wrong. The Greek *aiónios* does have a qualitative element. In other words, it doesn't always or only mean “eternal” (as in, “lasts for eternity”). Although Fudge admits that the Greek *aiónios* does often mean that something is never-ending (and in fact exegetes this passage assuming it is meant to refer to eternity here), he adds, “The adjective ‘aiónios’ distinctly carries a qualitative sense. It suggests something that partakes of the transcendent realm of divine activity” (*The Fire*

49). This could be the use in Matthew 25.46. This may seem a bit arbitrary, but if you look at the uses of *aiónios* in the New Testament (which you can get the gist of just by looking up the uses of “eternal” in a concordance), it almost always refers to something that, though eternal, also fits the qualitative definition. Eternal life is heavenly life. Eternal judgment is judgment from on high. Eternal salvation is salvation that comes from God. It’s not at all impossible that some (or even many) of these instances are actually meant only in the qualitative sense (though I by no means am going to assume that here). So it’s not that crazy of an idea that “eternal punishment” really just means something like “punishment from the realm of God,” not even defining its length. I am not arguing that this is the case; I am only acknowledging the possibility.

What then about the parallel between “eternal life” and “eternal punishment”? Some would argue here that language just isn’t that rigid. And this is technically not wrong. Jesus certainly could have meant “*aiónios*” in two different ways. However, the use of it twice in the same breath, without any apparent play on words, leans heavily in the direction of it meaning the same thing in both cases. That said, one could alternatively still respond that, because *aiónios* has the qualitative meanings, it could be used in the qualitative sense for *both* life and punishment. In other words, it isn’t saying “eternal life” but rather something like “divine life.” Contrary to what you may have been told, this would not deny that “eternal life” is eternal. It would just mean that, in this particular sentence, Jesus wasn’t saying “eternal life” in the first place. If He was saying something like “divine life” and “divine punishment,” that wouldn’t deny the eternity of life (or punishment, for that matter); it wouldn’t be saying anything about duration at all. Therefore, if one is willing to argue that *aiónios* isn’t referring to duration here, then the parallel between “punishment” and “life” wouldn’t prove the eternity of anything.

However, as I hope I have made clear by now, this is not my position. So assuming that *aiónios* does mean “eternal” in this passage, and that the punishment is eternal in the same way we typically imagine “eternal life” to be, how can the annihilationist justify his belief?

D. Matthew 25.46: Can Annihilation Be “Eternal”? – Part II

I do not grant the argument about *aiónios* that I described in Subsection C, but it ultimately doesn't matter, because annihilation is a form of eternal punishment. This is because in Greek, just like in English, a noun of action can speak of the result of an action, and not just the action itself. Punishment, like *kolasis*, the Greek word it is translated from, is a noun and not a verb. It does not say that the active inflicting of punishment continues eternally. That is a possible meaning, but it is not the only reasonable meaning. After all, what is punishment? It is the result of the act of punishing. For example, since floggings were much more common in the Bible era, the same can be said there. When a person is struck, the pain that results lasts longer than the act of striking them. Even more pertinent to our purposes here, consider again capital *punishment*. When a person is executed, they are punished in one moment, but their punishment isn't just the pain of being killed; it is the result, that they are dead. Annihilation fits this scheme perfectly. God punishes at one time (or during some finite period), and the result, the punishment, would last for eternity (thereby being eternal).

On several occasions, the Bible qualifies nouns of action as “eternal” when it is clear that what lasts for eternity is the result of the action and not the action itself. Note that in *none* of these cases does it actually say “the eternal results of X.” Exactly like the verse in question, they all refer to “eternal X,” and yet the action of X is not what has an eternal duration. Hebrews 6.2 speaks of “eternal judgment.” Unless we are to believe that God judging men is literally a

never-ending event, that God sits on the throne forever and continually judges men (despite their being a finite number of them), then this is a case where the result of the action, the “judgment” and not the “judging,” is what is eternal (Fudge, *The Fire* 44-45). God judges once, and the result, whether it be annihilation, being forever condemned to a fiery torture chamber, or entrance to Heaven, never changes. It would not be like a sentence from a judge on this side of eternity, where prisoners are either freed with time or die, and where the dead are raised by God. And this “judgment” is qualified as being eternal (Greek *krima aiónios*), same as the punishment in Matthew 25.46 (Greek *kolasis aiónios*). Fudge also cites Hebrews 9.12 (which speaks of “eternal redemption”), Mark 3.29 (the “eternal sin” of blaspheming the Holy Spirit), and Hebrews 5.9, which speaks of our “eternal salvation” (*The Fire* 45-46). I would also add Hebrews 9.15 which speaks of our “eternal inheritance.” We don’t continually inherit the kingdom of God; we inherit it once, and as a result, we have it forever. As can be seen from these examples, this crazy idea that a noun of action being qualified as “eternal” at least sometimes means the results of the act are eternal is not twisting language; it is letting the Bible speak for itself.

There are rebuttals, but they are not successful. Robert Peterson attempts to argue that Hebrews 5.9 does refer to an eternally ongoing process, citing Hebrews 7.25 (“A Traditionalist Response” 97). I suppose even if Peterson is right, it doesn’t really matter, as there are other examples which he doesn’t address. Nevertheless, I will say that I find this position quite problematic. Just how would Jesus be continuing to save people in the world to come who never sin? It is one thing to say that God will continue to sustain our existence, but that is not the same as saving someone. We won’t need to be saved if we are already safe. The act was done. Jesus died and rose again. The result is eternal. The same can be said of “eternal redemption.” In fact, seeing as how we are bought at a price (1 Corinthians 6.20), how could we be redeemed

throughout eternity without God continually paying a price? And what price could that be except Jesus dying for us? Certainly he isn't going to keep doing that throughout eternity! We were redeemed, and the result, the redemption, is eternal.

This is also significant in regards to another, albeit rare, argument used. According to Chan and Sprinkle, "Greek nouns that end with *-sis* (rather than *-ma*) tend to focus on the action of the noun rather than its results. For the small handful of people still reading this note, you can look at 2 Thess. 2:16 in the Greek to see a parallel, where *aiónios* modifies *paraklisis* ("comfort"), another *-sis* ending noun of action" (93-94). First of all, although the Holy Spirit will presumably continue to actively comfort us for eternity, it is not a given that even their example is itself referring to the ongoing act. What seems to be in view is the result of being comforted. It isn't what is being done that is in view, but what we receive. The act of the Holy Spirit (that He gives) is not what is eternal, but rather, the noun (comfort) that He gives is what is called eternal. He gives us a thing, and the thing lasts forever. But even if we grant that argument for that verse, Hebrews 9.12 serves as a counter-example. The word for "redemption" in "eternal redemption" is *lutrósis*, which has the same *-sis* (Greek *σις*) ending as *kolasis*. To be precise, in the two pertinent texts, both words are actually in forms that end in *-sin* (Greek *σιν*), but that doesn't affect my argument or theirs. The point is, the Bible only has these two examples, at least one of which is referring to the result of the act. Therefore, this doesn't serve as a significant challenge. Even if it is 50/50, my interpretation of Matthew 25.46 is still reasonable on its own, even before we look at the many biblical reasons to see Hell as a place of annihilation.

Aside from the biblical examples, we talk this way sometimes without even thinking about it. It isn't some special linguistic case that I have to resort to. Has anyone ever gotten their car fixed and been told that the work or labor was guaranteed for one year, or guaranteed to last

for one year? I've gotten this guarantee before. Now, just as one needs to be conscious in order for punishment to be inflicted upon them, one needs to be working in order to "work." Does this then mean that the mechanic was to continue working on my car for a year? If so, I would go to a different mechanic! Instead, he worked for a few hours. How can he guarantee the work? The work is not still being done. Put another way, how can the work be said to last for a year? He isn't working for a year...At this point, you might be thinking that I'm a moron; obviously he isn't saying that he will work for a year. He is saying that the results of the action of working, that your car is fixed, will last for at least a year. Well, that's my whole point!

A very interesting example we see in English comes from none other than Jonathan Edwards (who, for those of you who don't know, was a puritan preacher from the First Great Awakening period who made today's most fire-and-brimstone preachers look like little girls dressed as sunflowers). In describing the earthly destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he refers to it as "eternal destruction." Did he believe that God was continually destroying those cities? Of course not. It was because "those cities were destroyed, and have never been built since, and are not capable of being rebuilt; for the land on which they stood at the time of their destruction sunk, and has been ever since covered with the lake of Sodom or the Dead sea" ("Sermon IV" 174). Whether or not Sodom and Gomorrah are actually under the Dead Sea, his point remains. Edwards was certainly no conditionalist, yet he was well aware that God destroyed the cities once, and since the result, their being destroyed, would last for eternity, he could call their destruction "eternal." Even *the* Jonathan Edwards follows the same reasoning I am using here.

Robert Peterson has another rebuttal to my interpretation of Matthew 25.46. When Edward Fudge makes this same argument, Peterson calls it, quoting D.A Carson, a "selective and prejudicial use of evidence" (qtd. in "A Traditionalist Response" 96). He also asks, "Why does

Fudge find only six nouns of action among the 70 nouns used with eternal?” (“A Traditionalist Response” 96). At first, this sounds really convincing, since six instances looks like special pleading. It looks like interpreting “eternal punishment” in this way requires us to treat words and phrases in an exceptionally unusual manner. But is it the case?

First of all, Peterson is comparing things that should not be compared. Fudge does only cite six nouns of action out of a total of 70 nouns qualified with eternal (the 70 number is probably based on a translation Peterson had in mind, as differences in Greek manuscripts can cause the total number in the Greek to vary slightly). However, those 70 nouns are not all nouns of action! Even if every single noun of action was like “eternal judgment,” it would still not be 100% of the 70 nouns Peterson refers to. It is not fair to compare the six eternal nouns of actions to all the eternal nouns. Many are just regular nouns, referring to things like the dwelling places of the saved (Luke 16.9), God’s Spirit (Hebrews 9.14), and Christ’s glory (1 Peter 5.10). Those are irrelevant to this discussion. Fudge didn’t cite them because he didn’t need to. God isn’t Spirit-ing or dwelling place-ing anything! In those cases it’s clear what it means when it says they are eternal. They are things (not to depersonalize the Holy Spirit) that will always exist. The issue comes up with nouns *of action* because they could be speaking of an object, or they could be speaking of ongoing action (which is not the case with many of these).

Secondly, of great significance is the fact that almost all other times when a noun of action is qualified by *aiónios*, it is speaking of “life” (i.e. “eternal life”). Of the few uses of nouns of action that are not speaking of “eternal life” (Greek *aiónios zóé* or *zóé aiónios*), they are either clearly speaking of the results of the action (e.g. Hebrews 6.2), or are controversial but at least could be referring to the results (such as 2 Thessalonians 1.9, addressed in Section XVIII). In no case is it clearly saying that the one acting is engaging in the act for eternity. The only one left is

“eternal life,” which admittedly is the bulk of instances when a noun of action is qualified as eternal. I will explain below why this does not help traditionalism as much as you might assume.

The phrase “eternal life” does not literally say “living for eternity,” but rather it is the noun “life” that is qualified as being eternal, same as with “punishment.” The false assumption is made that “eternal life” is conceded to mean “living for eternity.” Is that the case? The fact that eternal nouns do not literally indicate the ongoing action is continuing for eternity is nothing that you need a degree in any language to understand. Literally, eternal life is a noun as well.

Although eternal life ultimately *results* in one living for eternity, it is not literally the same thing.

One better way of looking at it is to say that the “punishment” and “life” are nouns, intangible rewards that God gives to men at judgment. One receives a punishment of no longer existing.

That state, the noun that is received, lasts for ever and ever. The noun, the entity itself, lasts for ever and ever. It is thus qualified as eternal. In the case of life, a gift, being the entity of life, is given to the saved. That entity, life, also lasts for ever and ever, so it is qualified as eternal. It is not saying that the saved will live for ever and ever, but rather they will receive a thing, life, and that thing lasts for eternity. Of course, the saved will live forever, because if you have life, you live. If the life lasts forever, assuming you have it forever (which you obviously do), then you will live forever.

In the case of many nouns of action (especially the many uses of “eternal life”), the same principle is true. Now, usually it doesn’t matter. Like I said for “life,” to have life that lasts forever means that you live forever. The fact that “eternal life” does not literally convey “living forever” is, from a practical theological standpoint, irrelevant. However, in cases of other eternal nouns of action, the fact that these are nouns that result from the action can very well come into play when deciphering the meaning (as can be the case with “punishment”).

If the punishment is being non-existent (just as the punishment in capital punishment is being dead), then in order for the punishment to be eternal, the subjection to non-existence must continue for ever and ever. That seems pretty simple, does it not? Punishment and life would then be opposites. If you have life, then you are existent (in a state of joy and painlessness with God, no less). Thus, if you have eternal life, you would have to stay in that state for eternity. One thing makes you live in every sense of the word, and one makes you die in every sense of the word. Both are eternal in the same way. Of course, if the punishment isn't annihilation but rather pain, then eternal torment would be true. Nevertheless, the point is that both fit (as opposed to only torment fitting) when you take into account the fact that both life and punishment are nouns.

There is one more issue to consider when addressing this gospel of parallelism we see appealed to when dealing with this verse. Indeed, I have contended that since both are qualified as eternal, both life and punishment last the same period of time, as both last for ever and ever. That's not in dispute. However, some are still not satisfied. As Peterson asked, why do we not treat "life," a noun of action, as we do "punishment," also a noun of action ("A Traditionalist Response" 96)? After all, both are qualified as being eternal, so they must in other ways be exactly the same, right? So then, why are they not treated exactly the same way?

Well, how could we possibly treat "life" and "punishment" the same way? We do treat them the same in declaring them both eternal (since they are both qualified that way). But I have news for you; life and punishment are not the same thing. Think about it; how could "life" be a noun of action in the same way that punishment is? Indeed, life is a noun of action, but what action? The act of punishing is done by God unto the damned, but "living" isn't done by God unto the saved. Rather, it is an act that the redeemed people of God themselves do. God doesn't live the saved (that wouldn't even make sense), but He does punish the damned. The noun

“punishment” is based on a transitive verb; “life,” an intransitive verb. You need to have life in order to live. You certainly don’t need to have punishment (i.e. be punished) in order to punish (who could punish God?). They aren’t the same thing; how could one expect that they both be reflected grammatically in the exact same way? One reflects an action done to them; the other is a noun which, if resulting from any action, would be what they do themselves (which they do because they possess the noun in question, life, in the first place).

If one insists that since they are both nouns of actions they both must be treated the same way (despite the grammatical difference), and that the “life” must then refer to the results of the saved living, and therefore it is evidence against annihilationism (since nobody thinks that is what “life” is), then, in that case, they are arguing their own point into absurdity. They don’t have to be exactly the same just because they are both qualified as eternal. They just have to last the same period of time, which we all agree they do. Think about how this kind of argument would sound in other cases. Remember my car example? Well, not only is the labor guaranteed, but so are the parts. Now, “part” in this context isn’t a noun of action, but it could be. You could part something (such as hair), and the result would be a part. Would we insist that since both are qualified as lasting for a year, and since “work” is a noun of action, that in this case “part” must be the result of the verb of parting? It must be, because they are both qualified as lasting for one year. I suppose to make it even closer, we could make up a word and say that the work and the parts are “year-long-lasting.” Both are qualified the same way, so they must both not only last the same period of time, but they must be treated the same way grammatically and lexically, even though they are different. We must say that since work is a noun of action, then “part” is the result of the parting done, as opposed to what we all know it really means. But we all know better. Nobody would say that a fixed car was parted like a head of hair and that a part results.

Likewise, nobody thinks that Jesus is talking about the results of the saved living; rather, they are given life. The contrast is of the two things that God gives; life and punishment.

In the above scenario, saying that “parts” is referring to pieces of the car that themselves work doesn’t change the meaning of “work.” They are different. The “parts” could be interpreted to be nouns of action, bringing perfect parallelism, but we don’t have to treat them that way. Why would we? We know from the context that they aren’t to be treated the same, even though, in a vacuum, we might have thought that they are. They are different. So are “life” and “punishment.” What they have in common is the adjective that qualifies the amount of time they last. Both last for eternity. That’s it.

In the case of “life” and “punishment,” they do have one thing in common; both are nouns that describe the thing received, or perhaps, the state entered into, by the people involved. Both nouns are eternal. Neither one is treated as a verb. It does not say that the damned are having punishment inflicted upon them for eternity, nor does it say that the saved live for eternity. In the case of the latter, living for eternity is the result of having (or “going away to”) the noun of life. However, having continued infliction of punishment unto the damned does not result from being given “punishment,” for it is the infliction that results in the “punishment” they receive, the “punishment” that is qualified as eternal. There is no inconsistency here.

Now, I am not arguing from this passage that annihilation is the punishment that Jesus speaks of. What “punishment” ultimately means in this particular passage, based on this verse alone, is not clear. Again, pain is a form of punishment, and it could be the case that, as the traditionalist argues, eternal punishment means that the punishment of pain is inflicted on the damned for eternity. Or, perhaps they even have pain that lasts forever even if it is only inflicted once. However, the fact that both punishment and life are qualified as eternal cannot be used to

say that the punishment must be eternal torment. Exactly what punishment Jesus has in view, therefore, must be determined from other scriptures.

E. W.G.T Shedd on Matthew 25.46

William Shedd, in his oft-quoted work *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, unsuccessfully cites a number of reasons why he believes annihilation cannot be viewed as punishment. Some of them have been addressed, but some have not, and given the authority and praise that his book is given in the realm of evangelical theology, it would be an oversight to not address his arguments.

Shedd argues the following: “In order to be punished, the person must be conscious of a certain pain, must feel that he deserves it, and know that it is inflicted because he does” (92). First of all, pain is not the only form of punishment; that’s just an inaccurate assumption. Secondly, the person is indeed conscious when the punishment of being destroyed is inflicted. Now, if we wrongly assume that eternal punishment means that God was going to continuously inflict punishment on the person for ever and ever, then Shedd’s claim would matter, since they would need to be conscious forever in order to be continually punished. However, we have already dealt with that assumption above. Lastly, Shedd’s point about a person knowing that they deserve it is interesting. Is this true? What justification is given? Surely this is not the case in earthly settings. Has there ever been a criminal who has been rightly punished but did not agree that he deserved it? Does that mean that he was not punished? Of course not. What reasons do we have to assume that this is different in the heavenly realms? None are given. The Bible doesn’t say so. And even if Shedd’s point was granted, that doesn’t require the damned person to

be existent for ever and ever. They would only need to be existent when God declares the punishment and inflicts it, not for eternity afterwards.

Shedd also argues that, as creator, God would have the right to destroy any part of His creation for any reason, even if they are innocent of sin, and therefore extinction could not be punishment (since punishment has to be something that could only be just if it is done as a response to a sin) (92). But is this so? Obviously, in a vacuum, the Creator could surely destroy His creatures even if they were innocent. But what if the creator's intention is that the creation always lives? Was God obliged to keep Adam and Eve in His glorious presence in the garden of Eden or to provide them with the tree of life so that they would live forever? Yet was not the loss of both of these their punishment? What of a child who gets grounded? Admittedly, this is not a perfect example, since parents ideally punish children to discipline them, not to seek vengeance. Still, it is applicable. When a child is grounded, is the child ever deprived of things that we as a society rightly consider to be a parent's duty to provide (such as food, shelter, and physical safety)? If they are, and it is found out, then law enforcement often gets involved. But generally, when a child is disciplined in such a way, the child loses things that the parent had no moral obligation to provide in the first place. No parent has to allow their child to watch TV or visit friends or go to a birthday party or whatever else (although I believe that they should allow such things within reason). A parent could rightfully withdraw any of these privileges, just as God could rightfully withdraw life and existence. Yet in the first case, a parent will, as punishment, withdraw from the child things that the child had no actual entitlement to. And in most such cases, the child still has some privileges, and therefore still has *more* than he or she deserves. How much worse is it if God takes from the sinner all that He had given the sinner? By default, men were created to be with God and live for eternity, despite never having done anything to

earn those things. Men weren't created in a neutral position, but were initially entitled to those things simply because God made it that way. It certainly could be punishment for God to take away *all* that He had given them by default.

Lastly, Shedd claims that for some sinners, death is something they desire (93). How then could it be punishment? Well, some sinful men also believe God exists yet don't want to be with Him. Men have even turned away from God willfully, knowing without question that He was real and was there (Romans 1.20-23). The desires of men who are attracted by sin are grossly perverted. They don't want what is good. They would rather be without God. The devil, their father, the god of this world, blinds them (2 Corinthians 4.4). So today, some would rather be dead. However, this will not be the case when they see the Kingdom. It is not as though they will suddenly want God, but they will want all the good things that come with knowing Him, things that they will see and know they have eternally missed out on. Even on earth, some desire to kill themselves, yet when they fail, they end up being glad that they are still alive, and that occurs solely after seeing the good of this awful world. Just because sinful men desire something today does not mean that they will still desire it when they understand the truth. On that last day, they will not desire their fate (and even if they do, the Bible says what the Bible says).

With that, Shedd's major arguments as to why Matthew 25.46 proves eternal torment and disproves annihilationism have all been covered.

F. Taking Matthew 25.46 at Face Value

Now that I have established that "eternal punishment" need not mean "infliction of punishment continuing for eternity," there is a positive argument that can be made from this passage. Some complain that the annihilationist interpretation of this passage does not take

“eternal punishment” at face value. That may be true (although I’m not sure what I would have thought had I seen this verse before being told about eternal torment). Nevertheless, the annihilationist does take the verse as a whole at face value, unlike the traditionalist.

The reason for this is along these lines: “Although declaring both to be eternal, Jesus is contrasting the two destinies: the more unlike they are, the better” (“John Stott’s Response” 317). You either receive “eternal punishment” or “eternal life,” not both, meaning that “eternal punishment” is logically incompatible with “eternal life.” Taken at face value, what would “eternal life” be? It would be life that lasts forever, which in practice, means that the recipient lives forever. If I said “I’m going to live forever,” what is the simple, face value understanding of that? It would be that I physically live, or at least that I consciously exist, for eternity. And what is the opposite of that? Dying. And not only dying, but fully dying, permanently ceasing to have any conscious existence.

Traditionalists do not take this verse at face value because they do not take “eternal life” at face value. If they did, they would have to reason that the unsaved person would not forever have conscious existence, since that would be living forever (at face value). After all, the unsaved person does not get “eternal life.” And therefore, the “eternal punishment” that the unsaved person would suffer must be permanent death (i.e. everlasting end to conscious existence). This would, of course, be completely incompatible with any doctrine of eternal conscious punishment.

Now, one might say that “eternal life” has a qualitative sense beyond just being alive, and it’s not so simple in the Bible, and so forth. Thus I only make the case that we take it at “face value,” not that “eternal life” actually proves annihilationism. Nevertheless, once you start going down that road, you aren’t really taking “eternal life” at face value anymore, now are you?

G. Additional Points Regarding Matthew 25.46

Considering Matthew 25.46 to be consistent with annihilationism is nothing new. Irenaeus of Lyons, who, as discussed in Section X, was a conditionalist, saw no problem with calling annihilation a form of eternal punishment. As mentioned previously, he expressed explicitly conditionalist beliefs in Book 2 of *Adversus Haerese* (or *Against Heresies*). Later, in Book 4, Chapter 28, Paragraph 2, he speaks of the punishment of the damned, saying that their punishment is “not merely temporal, but rendered also eternal.” He didn’t specifically say “eternal punishment” (Greek *kolasis aiónios*), but it’s the exact same meaning. He was an ancient writer who would have known ancient Greek better than any scholar today (since he lived when it was a common language). He also saw no contradiction between punishment that was “eternal” and the truth that whoever rejects God’s grace “deprives himself of [the privilege of] continuance forever and ever” (bracketed statements theirs) (412; bk. 2, ch. 34).

Interestingly, even notable traditionalists, while defending eternal torment, see the eternality in annihilation. While rebutting the argument that some annihilationists make that finite sin should not warrant eternal punishment, John Blanchard writes, “If it would be wrong of God to punish finite sin with everlasting punishment, how can it be right for him to punish by annihilation, which by definition is itself everlasting?” (225). Robert Reymond argues similarly, writing that “annihilation is certainly eternal in its duration” (357). Most intriguing is Jonathan Edwards, possibly the most passionate fire-and-brimstone preacher of all time. While arguing against a similar argument made by annihilationists of his day, Edwards says, “It answers the Scripture expressions as well, to suppose that they shall be annihilated immediately, without any long pains, provided the annihilation be everlasting” (“Concerning the Endless Punishment” 401).

I do not even make this annihilationist argument which they are attempting to refute, so the fact that they call annihilation “eternal” can only help my case.

While some scream that annihilation cannot be true because eternal must mean eternal, nobody here is disagreeing. Annihilation is eternal punishment. Now with that, it should make sense why I, despite being a committed conditionalist, have no qualms about referring to the fate of unbelievers as “eternal punishment.”

H. Matthew 25.41: “Eternal Fire” – Part I

So we’ve dealt with “eternal punishment,” but what of the earlier reference to “eternal fire”? Even if “eternal punishment” is at least consistent with annihilation, how can the same be said of “eternal fire”? If the damned are punished by being thrown into an eternal fire, in a fire that burns for ever and ever, doesn’t that give us a pretty good idea of what their “eternal punishment” is?

The term “eternal fire” (Greek *pur aiónios*) occurs only three times in the New Testament (Peoples, “Fire and Flood” 18), and two of its uses don’t shed all that much light on what is meant. It occurs here in Matthew 25.41, of course. It also occurs in Matthew 18.8, where Jesus gives a number of warnings about sin, adding, “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the *eternal fire*” (emphasis added). In both cases, the term “eternal fire” speaks of Hell. In neither case does it say anything about the duration of the suffering or existence of the damned. Nevertheless, we assume that it means they are tormented for eternity because a fire that burns forever even after those in it are destroyed would seem pointless.

However, what if it is not a fire that burns for eternity in the first place? Or even if it is, what if there is still a reasonable explanation for how the wicked could be destroyed in a fire that burns for eternity?

The Bible's third use of this phrase draws into question the otherwise totally understandable assumptions we have about "eternal fire," and may actually give us reason to see the passage in question as evidence *for* annihilation, not against it. This is because, as we will see, the one time it is used in the Bible where the result and meaning are clear, it is not speaking of eternal torment, but rather, destruction. The third use is in Jude 7, which reads, "Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire..." What happened to Sodom and Gomorrah? Genesis 19 tells us the story: God rains burning sulfur down on the cities and completely destroys them and everyone dies a swift, fiery death. In the one case in which we actually know what happened when God punished sin with "eternal fire," it was *not* a fire that torments for eternity, but one that did what fire normally does.

Now, the question might arise as to why Jude would refer to it as "eternal fire." The first idea, though one that is not particularly common, is that the fire that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah, though it is obviously not still burning those cities, is itself an eternally-burning fire in Heaven. My friend Ronnie, who runs the *Consuming Fire* blog, for example, has suggested this idea to me, given that God is said to be Himself a "consuming fire" (Deuteronomy 4.24; Hebrews 12.29), and thus the larger fire that lit the burning sulfur that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah is in fact ever-burning. A second idea, which is very similar to the first, is suggested by Homer Hailey, the late Church of Christ scholar: "The punishment of the wicked is 'eternal

destruction' from the face of the Lord (II Thess. 1:9), and 'eternal fire' (Jude 7) because it emanates from the 'eternal God'" (emphasis added) (144). It is called "eternal" because it comes from God and He is eternal. This may actually be what Ronnie had in mind, but either way, it is one additional idea to consider. The third idea is that, because of the different possible meanings of the word translated as "eternal," Jude (and Jesus) may not have actually meant that it was everlasting in the first place. The fourth and final idea is that, as is the case for other things which the scripture calls "eternal," what is eternal is not the fire itself, but the results or effects .

Regarding the first idea, it can be argued that, when God is called a "consuming fire," it is a bit more literal than I had initially imagined. It is not to say that God is literally fire, but that, perhaps as a manifestation of His divinity, in His presence or exuding from His fully eternal person, is fire. Interestingly, as will be discussed much more in Section XXIX, some theologians (including John Calvin) have interpreted Isaiah 33.14, which refers to "everlasting burnings," as referring to God Himself. Those who can withstand this everlasting burning are the righteous. This first interpretation of Jude 7 would be a sort of literal take on that idea. Although it has been suggested that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by a volcano or other natural source (e.g. Packer, *Knowing God* 84), it could be that the burning sulfur was itself lit by a literally heavenly fire that comes from God and is always there in some way or another. Thus, although Sodom and Gomorrah do not continually burn, the fire itself that destroyed them, in heaven, is in fact burning for eternity.

This first point is analogous to the Olympic Flame. Months before the games begin, a torch is lit by the light of the sun. That torch is carried some distance, where it is then used to light a different torch. The holder of the second torch takes his or her torch to light a third torch, and so forth, until the final torch bearer reaches the site of the games, where it is used to light a

fire that is kept burning for the duration of the games. Now, this isn't considered the Olympic *Flames*, but one flame. Is the fire in the last torch literally the same fire that was lit by the sun months earlier? Of course not. However, we consider it the same fire, because the first fire lit another fire which lit another fire which lit another fire and so forth until the fire at the site of the games is lit. That's why there is an elaborate relay as opposed to someone just rubbing some sticks together at the site of the Olympics on the opening day. They want the fire that started in Greece to be the fire that burns at the site of the Olympic Games. In a similar fashion, the fire that continually burns in Heaven was used to rain burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah. Of course, while this would make "eternal fire" mean "a fire that burns for eternity," it sure wouldn't help the traditionalist case. After all, Jude would show us just what the ever-burning fire of God does; it reduces to ashes, which we know because that is what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now, some may rebut that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah did not cease to exist. However, everything that the fire would burn, the city and their bodies, were destroyed. If body and soul share the same fate in Hell, but only the body is killed at physical death outside of Hell (Matthew 10.28), then that would explain why God would have not destroyed their souls. No one is said to have been tormented for any substantial length of time, but everything that the fire touched was destroyed, as one would expect. The only thing everlasting about the fire, if this definition of "eternal fire" is true, is that it burns forever, not that what God destroys with it itself burns forever. Eternal fire obviously didn't torment eternally when it fell on Sodom and Gomorrah (although it does serve as an example of what would happen to the lost)...Why can't the same be true when the term is used in Matthew 18.8 and Matthew 25.41?

Regarding the second idea, not too much need be said. It is similar to the first in that it appeals to the source of the fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, not the fire that literally touched them. However, in contrast, the source is the only thing in view in calling it eternal, as it is not like the analogy of the Olympic torch, considering one fire to be the same as a fire that does in fact burn forever. I am not particularly sympathetic to this view, as I don't know of any clear examples of this kind of thing happening elsewhere. However, with Isaiah 33.14 in mind, if God is in view, it could give reason for the biblical authors to come up with this metaphorical phrase. If God is rhetorically called something like "eternal fire" in Isaiah 33.14, and from Him actual fire rains down, then it's not the craziest idea that fire from Heaven could likewise be called "eternal fire." This idea is worth pointing out because, at the very least, it never hurts to be familiar with the annihilationist approaches to this term.

Regarding the third possibility, the nuances of the Greek word *aiónios* (translated "eternal" or "everlasting") do make it possible that Jude was referring not to a length of time, but to the nature of the fire. This came up in Subsection C. Could it be that in this case, *aiónios* is used only to emphasize that the fire is divine, from God, and not for the purpose of explaining duration? Although such use is rare, if there is one time where it would be the case in scripture, it would be here. After all, the one thing that the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah definitely have in common with the fires of Hell is that both are fires kindled by God. In fact, while they may not *only* be *aiónios* in this qualitative sense, both are definitely *aiónios* in that sense, as both partake directly in the realm of divine activity.

Regarding the fourth idea, there may be some similarities to the way that "eternal" can qualify nouns of actions, as discussed in the previous subsections. Although "fire" isn't a noun of action in this case, it is much like Jesus's declaration that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is an

Nevertheless, what the context makes clear is that eternal fire is what fell on Sodom and Gomorrah, yet nobody is being tormented eternally by it. Sodom and Gomorrah, which were burned by eternal fire, are not still burning. It likely is not referring to an ever-burning fire in the first place, and even if it is some ever-burning fire of God, we know that what was burned by it, Sodom and Gomorrah, is not still burning even if the fire is. Thus, the fact that the term “eternal fire” is used to speak of Hell does not mean that whatever is in the “eternal fire” will burn for eternity. In fact, since the phrase “eternal fire” refers to a fire that burned everything up (as fire is apt to do) in the only place in the scripture where the effect of “eternal fire” is made clear, wouldn’t normal hermeneutics then incline us to think that it would mean the same thing in other places if there is nothing to indicate otherwise?

I. Matthew 25.41: “Eternal Fire” – Part II

Further contemporary uses of this term only serve to strengthen the argument that “eternal fire” (Greek *pur aiónios*) is completely consistent with (if not evidence for) annihilationism. As mentioned previously in Section X, both Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus of Lyons taught that the wicked will cease to exist, yet referred to their fate as being in “eternal fire.” To these two (who wrote in the same ancient Greek that the New Testament authors used), the biblical idea of eternal fire was not contradictory to the (also biblical) idea of the final extinction of the lost.

Lastly, although they were written in Hebrew and not Greek, some intertestamental literature, (writings that followed the last of the prophets and preceded Jesus and the New Testament), refer to “eternal fire” when speaking of a fire that destroys those who are thrown into it. Here is an example from the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran: “Be thou cursed in all

works of thy guilty ungodliness! May God make of thee an object of dread by the hand of the avengers of vengeance! May he hurl extermination after thee by the hand of all the executioners of judgment! Cursed be thou, without mercy, according to the darkness of thy deeds. Be thou damned in the night of *eternal fire!*" (emphasis added) (1 QS 2:2-8). In the same breath, the speaker wishes "extermination" unto his enemies, and wishes that they be damned in the night of "eternal fire." It would hardly make sense for him to wish that they be exterminated yet also tormented for eternity. It must be pointed out that the same writing also says, "And all their time from age to age are in most sorrowful chagrin, and bitterest misfortune, in calamities of darkness till they are destroyed with none of them surviving or escaping" (4:14). Here, the same fiery pit is described, and those who are in it suffer "till they are destroyed." Now we can confidently say that the "extermination" spoken of above is not just an earthly one, since they burn for ages prior to their destruction. In the same fire spoken of that burns in the "night of eternal fire," they suffer until they are destroyed. Here we can't just say that "destroy" must really mean "ruin" or "suffering," because they suffer *until* they are destroyed. Obviously, they don't suffer until they keep suffering; that wouldn't even make sense. Furthermore, *none survive or escape*. The meaning is pretty clear. The Dead Sea Scrolls are discussed a lot more in Section XXXII, but even here, we can see that they used a term with at least a similar meaning (since both are translated the same) in order to speak of a fire that annihilate its victims. Although not as significant as the use of the term "eternal fire" in Jude 7, it is pretty significant that a similar if not equivalent term is used in contemporary eschatological writings to unambiguously refer to a fire that completely destroys.

The fact that some intertestamental writings speak of annihilation in eternal fire is especially important since some traditionalists (though certainly not all) claim that

intertestamental literature uniformly spoke of eternal torment. It is further claimed that, because of this premise, Jesus must have been referring to eternal torment when He mentioned terms used in the literature like *Gehenna* (the Greek word for “Hell”; see Section VI). More on those claims will be discussed in Section XXXII. For now, however, consider this: what if that reasoning were applied here? If Jesus’s language about Hell is so often drawn from intertestamental literature, what about His use of “eternal fire,” a phrase that in this piece of intertestamental literature refers to annihilation? It can only help the annihilationist that this term, when used outside of the Bible, not only didn’t mean eternal torment, but in fact spoke of annihilation of the unsaved.

J. Conclusion

Although it is understandable that one would see “eternal punishment” in “eternal fire” and think that people will endlessly be consciously punished in fire, upon closer examination, this assumption cannot be made. Annihilation is a form of eternal punishment, and “eternal fire,” as defined by the Bible and contemporary writings, annihilates those whom it burns. Given a proper and thorough examination, other than being quick and easy to quote, this passage does not help the traditional doctrine at all.

XVII. JUDE 7

A. Some Logistics

Because its relevance is largely tied into Matthew 25.41, this could easily have been part of the previous section. However, in the original piece of writing that this is from, it was its own section, and because it is long and deals with other aspects of its meaning outside of Matthew 25.41, I will leave this as its own section. Nevertheless, I do recommend that you read this section following the previous section on Matthew 25.41 and 46, and not prior to it.

B. Translation Issues That Need to Be Accounted For

This is a pretty important annihilationist passage since it qualifies what would otherwise be a pretty traditionalist-friendly term, “eternal fire.” Simply the fact that Sodom and Gomorrah foreshadow the fate of the wicked does help the annihilationist position. After all, Sodom and Gomorrah suffered swift death and destruction; there was no prolonged torture or suffering. However, much more significant is this: most translations, including almost all of the most literal (like the NASB), say that eternal fire is the very thing that hit Sodom and Gomorrah. They weren’t just a sign of eternal fire; what they suffered *was* eternal fire. But they aren’t still burning, which means that eternal fire doesn’t necessarily mean “a fire that burns for eternity” or “fate of eternal torment in fire.” This means that Matthew 18.8 and 25.41 do not prove eternal torment. Jude 7 is very important to annihilationism.

It has been argued, however, that it is wrong to translate this verse as saying that Sodom and Gomorrah themselves suffered eternal fire. In fact, quite often, as we shall see, despite what the common and literal translations actually say, one common rebuttal is that it really means that

Sodom and Gomorrah foreshadow eternal fire but were not actually destroyed by “eternal fire.” As to how they foreshadow Hell isn’t exactly clear when some writers make that claim, given what they think Hell is actually like (you’ll see what I mean in Section XLIV). A handful of translations follow suit. For example, The New Living Translation renders Jude 7 like this: “And don’t forget Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring towns, which were filled with immorality and every kind of sexual perversion. Those cities were destroyed by fire and serve as a warning of the eternal fire of God’s judgment.” Now, the wording doesn’t necessarily exclude the idea that the fire that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah was eternal fire, but it gives the reader an out. It only serves as a warning; it needn’t be a case of actual eternal fire. Morey takes for granted that the Greek reads more like the NLT does (although he does not specifically cite the NLT). He doesn’t give much of an explanation, however. He simply quotes three obscure translations (one of which doesn’t even really make his point) and leaves it at that (140-141). Traditionalist R.C.H Lenski does delve into the Greek some. According to Lenski, “These cities lie before (the eyes) as a ‘deigma,’ ‘indication or sign,’ (not ‘example,’ our versions), that points like a finger to eternal fire” (Greek words from the original transliterated by me) (625). Neither argument is very strong; I simply bring them up because the NASB rendering is not without question.

Annihilationists do have responses, however. Fudge argues against Lenski’s interpretation of *deigma* by pointing out that the word was used to describe “samples of corn and produce,” meaning it is an example in that it is a form of the very thing it exemplifies (*The Fire* 286). Lenski’s argument ultimately sounds like it is based more on theology than the language (since the rendering of that single word *deigma* wouldn’t affect the whole sentence). Neither Morey nor Lenski give much grammatical explanation as to why the actual Greek reads like the

NLT. Lenski argues for this interpretation mostly because of this assertion: “The Cities of the Plain are not ‘suffering the punishment of eternal fire’” (625). Ultimately, however, this is a circular argument. The conclusion is not based on language, but simply on the assumption that “eternal fire” means a fire that burns them endlessly, which is the very assumption that I argue is challenged by this verse. Lastly, as Peoples sums it up, “In the case of Lenski’s argument, whether we translate *dei’gma* as ‘example’ or ‘sign’ [sic] (although there is good reason to read ‘example’), the point is that served as this ‘sign’ or ‘example’ *by* ‘undergoing the vengeance of eternal fire’” (bracketed statements theirs) (“Fire and Flood” 21). The passage speaks for itself.

What do other Bible scholars say? Well, Robert Morey wrongly asserts the following: “The annihilationists depend solely on the authorized version [KJV], and because of this they are led astray in a proper interpretation of this passage” (141). Right or wrong about the Greek, the claim isn’t even remotely true. Granted, the NLT does not translate the verse as having Sodom and Gomorrah themselves being hit with eternal fire, but just about every other major Bible translation does. To be fair to Morey, a few like the NRSV and the ESV did not exist at the time *Death and the Afterlife* was written, but many translations available at the time are just like the KJV (e.g. the ASV, NASB, RSV, NKJV, arguably the NIV, and countless translations that many people have never heard of, like the very literal Wycliffe New Testament and Darby Translation). Even worse, according to the copyright page, the NASB (which I quoted and myself use by default) is in fact the default translation used in *Death and the Afterlife*. Morey’s erroneous claim about the KJV being unique is not an easy mistake to make at all. The only major translations I have found that side with Morey are among the much less literal translations (NLT, The Message, etc.). How hard is it to just check a few additional translations (including your own main translation)? That aside, the Greek scholars who have translated the Bible into English over the

last 400 years have much more often than not translated it like the NASB, indicating that eternal fire is what fell on Sodom and Gomorrah, not what they simply foreshadow.

Along those lines, it is telling to me at least that so many traditionalist commentators, when commenting on this verse, assume that the KJV, NASB, and the like, are the proper way to translate the passage. Although their interpretations of the passage differ from mine and from one another, the fact that those with every reason to want to interpret it like Morey and the NLT do not do so can only help the annihilationist case (if anything).

Of the scholarly discussion I have found on the grammar of Jude 7, Lenski has probably given the strongest argument that indeed almost all of our Bibles are wrong. That's not saying much. Many traditionalists simply cite Jude 7 as a prooftext for eternal torment (because it mentions "eternal fire"), and they aren't even looking at NLT. For example, the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry website cites the NASB translation as one of "a few verses that show the eternity of the Hell and punishment" ("Is Hell Eternal?"). Hoekema reasons similarly (*The Bible* 272). Of course, Jude 7, in the translations they are using, doesn't say that Hell is eternal fire, but rather that eternal fire was what fell on Sodom and Gomorrah...

C. But Doesn't It Say That Sodom and Gomorrah Are Still Burning?

Some have suggested that Jude was not referring to a past event, but instead was accurately saying that Sodom and Gomorrah were still burning in real eternal fire. This is different from the argument that Sodom and Gomorrah didn't suffer the fate of eternal fire (despite the fact that even the translations they cite indicate that this is the case). This argument is that the eternal fire is applied to Sodom and Gomorrah, but in fact, they *are* suffering in it; it was not just talking about the one-time past event. Thus, "eternal fire" is still referring to an

ever-burning, tormenting fire, and not the fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. This claim is made because Jude refers to Sodom and Gomorrah as “suffering,” not “*having suffered*” God’s vengeance of eternal fire. The Greek is in the present tense. The word for “suffering” is a present participle (B. Thompson). Although Greek is generally much *more* flexible in regards to verb tense and time than is English (Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* 67), which would mean verb tense would be less of a concern than in English, I cannot say that Greek might not be more specific than English when it comes to verb tenses in their specific application to this verse. Therefore, it is not impossible that this matters.

However, a rule that is special to Greek, one which is never actually mentioned or identified by Thompson or anyone else, is what would be required because this point is not evident in English translations. I didn’t even think of it until it was brought up to me. Not many commentators suggest that this present participle means that Sodom and Gomorrah are currently in eternal fire. There are numerous reasons why any theologian would be hesitant to make this claim, as we shall see shortly. On February 14, 2010, I asked Glenn Peoples about this, and via email, he gave me an example of a similar sentence: “Jesse Owens is set forth as an example of a man who courageously went against unjust social norms, running in the Olympics in Berlin under Hitler’s rule, in spite of being black.” Owens obviously isn’t still running in the Olympics, despite the use of the present participle. It’s clear from the context that what we’re talking about is a past event. Let’s modify this even more; imagine that a history teacher raises a black and white photo of him running and says: “As you see here, Jesse Owens is set forth as an example of a man courageously opposing unjust social norms, running in the Olympics in Berlin under Hitler’s rule, in spite of being black.” Even though nothing in the sentence is in the past tense, and on its face it does sound more like an ongoing action, we know from the context that this is a

past event, and therefore nobody would suggest that he's still running. We know that the only thing that is actually currently happening is Jesse Owens being "set forth" (just as Sodom and Gomorrah were and are still set forth as an example despite the event in question being past). The context of the events determines whether we interpret it as meaning that he currently is running or that "running" is simply what he was doing at the time. In English at least, this argument about Jude using the present participle, though it is convincing at first, doesn't necessarily work.

Lastly, even if there were something to the Greek that required ongoing action (which I highly doubt), this statement by Jude could plausibly have the earthly judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah in view. First of all, Jude never says they are currently undergoing anything eternal. The vengeance, which is what would be qualified as ongoing, is not qualified as eternal. The fire is what is "eternal." Regarding the vengeance, the Greek term used is *dike*, which has the connotation of justice, of a righteous judgment. It amounts to the "execution of the sentence" (Vine 614). Well, what was the sentence that was inflicted upon Sodom and Gomorrah? The most obvious thing inflicted upon the cities (and the people) was death and destruction. It at least could be said that they are as dead and destroyed as they were when the punishment was inflicted upon them. God's just sentence was that they be destroyed with eternal fire. Today, they are all still dead, their cities still destroyed, and they are still remembered as being Sodom and Gomorrah. They are still undergoing the sentence in that sense. It is important to note that, although older translations render *hupechó* as "suffering," it literally means to be held under (Vine 1104), not suffer torment. Its use here is obviously figurative, as Vine also remarks (1104), since they aren't being held under a literal surface. The point is, they are under God's vengeance. We would say that they "undergo" it (thus it is rendered as such in modern translations). It's not

even a disagreement over translation; to undergo or endure something is to “suffer” it in archaic English. It’s just important to note that it isn’t talking about literal “suffering” as we would think, which would demand conscious misery.

This idea that the ongoing suffering of God’s vengeance is Sodom’s continued state of death and destruction is not unique to me or to conditionalists. Robert Andrew Fausset, commenting on “suffering,” explains its meaning as “undergoing *to this present time*; alluding to the marks of volcanic fire about the Dead Sea” (544). Given that Fausset, like most theologians after the first few centuries of church history, was a traditionalist, he has no need to try to save annihilationism. Nevertheless, to him, this interpretation was not only plausible, it made more sense. As will be described in the next subsection, there are a number of contextual and theological reasons to deny that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah are being tormented in eternal fire today, even if it means adopting this seemingly stretched interpretation (which is only necessary if the Greek differs from English and requires that they still be undergoing the vengeance of eternal fire, which doesn’t seem to be the case).

D. Context of Jude 7 and Theological Considerations

So then, how should we interpret Jude 7? Should we take this verse as meaning that eternal fire is currently tormenting them? Linguistically, it would make good sense. However, the context of Jude’s statement, as well as other theological concerns, tell us that we definitely should not interpret it this way.

First of all, just the fact that Jude says that Sodom and Gomorrah are an example of the fate of the unsaved seriously challenges Thompson’s view. Think about it; you cannot see a disembodied soul being burned in fire in some other realm. Since we haven’t heard enough from

Glenn Peoples in this section already: “Sodom’s serving as an example by undergoing the vengeance of eternal fire would scarcely be served by their present sufferings in Hell, since whether or not they are now suffering is quite beyond our powers of observation. If that is an example, it is the most hidden ‘example’ in history!” (“Fire and Flood” 22). In contrast, people from all around saw Sodom and Gomorrah being destroyed (Genesis 19.28). Likewise, nowhere else in the Bible does it specifically talk about the people of Sodom and Gomorrah currently suffering in fire. However, Old Testament references to the destruction of the cities are quite common (e.g. Deuteronomy 29.23; Isaiah 13.19-20; Jeremiah 50.40; Lamentations 4.6; Zephaniah 2.9). The physical destruction of the cities also comes up in warnings of God’s eternal judgment in the New Testament (2 Peter 2.6).

Along these lines, the suffering of their souls in the intermediate state would also be a terrible “example” because there is nothing special about it. If dualism is true and their souls can be off suffering in the first place, then wouldn’t it be the case that every unsaved soul would be in the intermediate state, suffering the same fate as them? How would they be at all noteworthy? They’d be just like everyone else. Whatever is happening to them today, it wouldn’t be anything special. And if it were something special, why isn’t that special punishment exhibited to us for an example in the Bible? However, few examples of judgment are as grand and memorable as what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah on earth. Burning sulfur falling from the sky and destroying several large cities does not happen every day. Now *that* is an instance of God’s judgment against them that sets them apart. If God wanted to make an example of someone, then that makes so much more sense than invisibly sending them to Hell (as He is said to do for every bad person anyway). Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction, as recorded in Genesis 19, would make a great example of what awaits the unsaved; their souls suffering today would not be.

The similarities to 2 Peter 2.6 also force us to question the idea that Jude has in mind the supposed suffering of the souls of the Sodomites in the intermediate state. 2 Peter 2.6 also points to Sodom and Gomorrah as an example of what will happen to the wicked. Peter speaks about how God had been avenging Himself against sinners throughout time, adding, “And *if* He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing *them* to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly *lives* thereafter...” As Glenn Peoples also wrote in his email to me (mentioned above), “I would ask why there is an uncanny resemblance between Jude’s intention here (using them as an example to warn sinners) and what Peter does in 2 Peter 2:6.” Indeed, both look to Sodom and Gomorrah in a pretty similar fashion, but with one key difference: there is no ambiguity in what Peter says. There is nothing that one might see and think is a reference to anything ongoing today. Peter is referring to what happened in the days of Abraham, and nothing since. Given how both appeal to Sodom and Gomorrah as examples of what will happen to the wicked, and just in light of how closely Jude parallels 2 Peter throughout his epistle (I figured it was about time to give you some further reading), Peter’s chronically unambiguous statement gives us one more reason to see Jude as referring to the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and not something after.

Although this is more a matter of systematic theology than anything related directly to Sodom and Gomorrah, the idea that people are currently burning in eternal fire is unbiblical. Jesus doesn’t say, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, [back] into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25.41b). Whatever the intermediate state of the damned is like in *Hades*, they are not in eternal fire. Even if we were to say that *Hades* is a place of torment, and they were consciously undergoing punishment, they wouldn’t be in “eternal fire” (which means their ongoing fate wouldn’t tell us that the eternal fire they suffered burns them

forever). I went over this some in Section VI. The place or state of *Hades* is the intermediate state. It is *Sheol*. It is emptied of its dead, and then those dead (as well as *Hades* and death) are cast into the lake of fire in Revelation 20.13-15. That's the eternal fire. Whether that is literal or metaphorical, it seems pretty clear that it is saying *Hades* is only temporary and is separate from the eternal fate of unbelievers (since *Hades* is not the lake of fire). If it is temporary, how can it be eternal? As one traditionalist commentator accurately points out:

The term translated “Hell” in Luke 16:23 is the Greek word *hades*, and is not to be confused with the word *gehenna*...So *gehenna* is **Hell**. “Hades,” on the other hand, occurs ten times in the New Testament, and always refers to the unseen realm of the dead—the receptacle [sic] of disembodied spirits where all people who die await the Lord's return. At that time, our spirits will be reunited with our resurrection bodies. (Miller)

Even if dualism is true, the lost are not in their eternal abode, so how can we say that the souls of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah are in “eternal fire”? This thorny issue is usually overlooked in the occasional traditionalist commentary that adopts Thompson's view.

If they are in eternal fire right now, we have various theological problems (both in terms of systematic theology and in the very context and words of the passage itself). And if they are not in eternal fire now, how can we say that their suffering now has anything to do with “eternal fire” at all? The punishment that they are or were undergoing was that of “eternal fire,” so either eternal fire was what destroyed them, or it's what they are in now. Only the latter allows us to deny that eternal fire is what destroyed the city and killed everyone, giving us reason to at least reconsider the idea that “eternal fire” means a fire that burns for eternity and torments for eternity. And yet this latter idea gives us a lot of problems and just doesn't at all fit Jude's point.

What we are left with is the one interpretation that, given the context and theological concerns, works. Sodom and Gomorrah were punished with eternal fire when fire rained down from the heavens. By undergoing that action in the past, and perhaps by remaining in their state of death and destruction and shame after being burnt up in “eternal fire,” they serve as an example of what will happen to the unsaved. God made them an example of what would happen to the ungodly by having reduced them to ashes in the days of Abraham (cf. 2 Peter 2.6). What is eternal fire? It is what fell on Sodom and Gomorrah and destroyed them.

XVIII. 2 THESSALONIANS 1.9

A. The Significance of “Eternal/Everlasting.”

This is an unusual verse in that it is used by both camps (although I would say more often by traditionalists). Paul tells us, in this passage, of the end of the world, when the Lord Jesus Christ will come, “dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1.8-9).

At face value, this passage actually fits very well with annihilationism, as the damned are said to suffer “eternal destruction.” That’s exactly what we believe happens to the lost! More importantly, it gives some insight into the vague “eternal punishment” of the damned that we see in Matthew 25.46. The penalty they pay is “destruction.” Seems pretty simple, right?

However, the fact that it says “eternal” destruction is used as evidence for traditionalism. Some make the false assumption that it is saying that the act of destroying, the act of inflicting the destruction, must continue for ever and ever, and therefore it must not be literal destruction (since if the person were destroyed, you could not continue destroying them). Anthony Hoekema seems to make this argument. When examining this verse and the Greek word translated as destruction, *olethros*, he says, “Annihilation, by definition, must take place in a moment; what sense does it make to speak of ‘endless annihilation?’” (*The Four Major Cults* 366-367). This interpretation is probably not the more common one among scholarly sources, although I daresay it tends to be a more popular argument made by the lay Christian.

The annihilationist response is similar to that of Matthew 25.46 in Section XVI. A verb and a noun of action are not the same thing, and *olethros* is a noun, not a verb. The results of the

action, and not the action itself, may be what is called eternal. Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle make this very argument while arguing for the traditional view in *Erasing Hell* (110). Eternal annihilation would make perfect sense, because the result of annihilating, “annihilation,” would be eternal, just like the “judgment” of God is eternal (Hebrews 6.2). Even traditionalist Douglas Moo shows some understanding of the annihilationist argument:

A more promising way of squaring ‘aiónios’ with annihilationism, therefore, is to argue that the word refers not to the action itself, but to the results of the action. The ‘destruction’ has ‘eternal’ consequences. There is some point to this claim. In other New Testament passages where “eternal” describes a noun of action, it is sometimes the results of the action that are indicated. The “eternal sin” of Mark 3.29, for instance, means a sin whose consequences last forever (see also Heb. 5:9, 6:2, 9:12, Jude 7). (106)

With this I would agree wholeheartedly, for this is the annihilationist argument.

Moo argues further, however, that the eternal aspect of the fate of the lost necessitates eternal torment: “Nevertheless, even if this is the sense of the word here, one must still ask how a destruction whose consequences last forever can be squared with annihilationism. For eternal consequences appear to demand an eternal existence in some form” (106). No reasons are given to justify either claim about how eternal existence is necessary. Glenn Peoples gives a good response to this idea.

And yet here’s the thing: Eternal consequences do *not* always demand eternal existence of the person. That may be the case for *some* consequences, like the consequence of being in pain, or the consequence of being miserable, but there is absolutely no way that the consequence of being *annihilated* could demand that

the person always exists! Indeed, if the person ever came back into existence, then the consequence of annihilation wouldn't be eternal, it would merely be temporary. (“Why I Am an Annihilationist” 23)

As he adds in his podcast, “So, in order for the consequences of everlasting destruction to be eternal, the person has to not exist, forever!” (Episode 006: 35:52-35:59). Even traditionalists admit that the result of this “destruction” at least could be what is qualified as “eternal,” so if it is eternal, and the destruction is literal, then that means the result is non-existence (which must last for eternity).

B. What of *Olethros*?

The word used for “destruction” in this verse is *olethros*. How is this word defined? Well, this actually varies. Strong defines it as “ruin, i.e. death, punishment – destruction” (“A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament” 51). Some sources are more annihilationist-friendly. In the *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, for example, it is translated as “destruction, death” (1669). There seems to be some ambiguity to the word.

In the Bible, it is used far less often than words from the *apóleia* word group (which will be discussed more in Section XL), and only twice does it directly refer to the fate of the damned. It describes the “destruction” that will fall on the damned suddenly (1 Thessalonians 5.3), and it is used here. In neither case is its meaning apparent, as context would determine the definition, and what happens at the end of the world is what is being debated in the first place. In the case of 1 Thessalonians 5.3, there is also the question of whether Paul is specifically referring to events immediately occurring at the end, or more holistically looking at the overall fate of the damned

(including judgment) when Christ returns. Earthly death, eternal annihilation, or a vague sense of ruin in either an earthly or eternal sense are all possibilities on their own.

The word appears in 1 Timothy 6.9, where there is also some ambiguity. This passage speaks of the love of money. It says, “People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction” (*NIV*). It is typically translated as “ruin” in this verse. However, this needn’t speak against annihilationism. For starters, it is put alongside *apóleia*, so it is understandable that it would take on a translation other than “destruction,” since that meaning is conveyed via the use of *apóleia*. Secondly, while the contrast between “ruin” and “destruction” might help the traditionalist on this verse, it also means that *apóleia* is translated as “destruction” in contrast to “ruin,” which helps annihilationism in many verses that use *apóleia*. Lastly, ruin is hardly inconsistent with annihilation, especially when paired with “destruction.” Obviously the damned face ruin; being destroyed is a bad thing! That the damned face ruin is agreed upon by traditionalists and annihilationists alike; we further agree that they face ruin *and* destruction. This particular use of the word does lend some support to the idea of *olethros* as “ruin” and not necessarily destruction, although in context the passage doesn’t do all that much damage (if any) to my case.

The use of *olethros* in 1 Corinthians 5.5 also has some ambiguity, albeit less so. In the chapter dealing with the immoral brother, Paul declares the following: “*I have decided* to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Now, this verse is somewhat complex due to the disagreement over exactly what Paul meant by “destruction” of the “flesh.” Some have suggested that to hand the man over to Satan would result in physical death but also to his ultimate salvation (e.g. Moore 21). Others view this “destruction” not as death, but as suffering, which I find much more reasonable. Others

take the reference to destruction of the flesh much less literally, which I find most likely. The Greek *sarx*, which translates as “flesh,” is in many cases figurative, referring essentially to a propensity to sin. In fact, the NIV, prior to its 2011 update, translated this word as “sinful nature” on a number of occasions (e.g. Galatians 5.19). Therefore, it could be that “destruction of the flesh” might simply be referring to the destruction of the man’s propensity to sin. If that is the case, then that helps the annihilationist case (since we believe the lost are done away with, as would his sinful nature). If death is in view, it also helps the annihilationist, since the destruction of the flesh that death causes, if applied to a body and soul, would amount to annihilationism. If just suffering is in view, then it would be less helpful to annihilationism. It would be speaking of ruin, damage, and the like, and not destruction. Of course, ruin and destruction are not at all mutually exclusive, as the ruin of the damned could be destruction (see Section XL). However, ruin does not help annihilationism the way that destruction and death would. Thus, ambiguity exists, although there are ways that it could certainly help annihilationism.

In response, Wayne Grudem unsuccessfully argues that in any case, literal destruction cannot be in view (1150). But why? If referring to the man’s literal flesh, it certainly can fit with annihilation, although this is dependent on what is actually in view. I’m assuming here, however, that Grudem is talking about the man suffering, not being killed. In that case, he is right that literal destruction would not be in view. That wouldn’t disprove annihilationism, but it certainly wouldn’t serve as evidence for it either. He is absolutely wrong, however, to say that the destruction of the sinful nature fits traditionalism. Indeed, in practicality, the man’s sinful nature would not be totally done away with. Nobody’s is in this life. However, when Paul speaks of the destruction of the flesh, if flesh means sinful nature, then he isn’t saying what is going to happen. He is clearly saying what the purpose is. Destruction is the goal. The reason for this is well stated

by reformed theologian Oswald Allis: “Sinless perfection is the goal after which every Christian should strive. That fact that it cannot be achieved in this life does not warrant us in lowering the standard” (294). After all, any sin is intolerable. Just read 1 John 3.9-10 (though fortunately, the same apostle also writes, “If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”) (1 John 2.1b). With that in mind, the purpose of handing him over to Satan (whatever that means) would be to put his sinful nature to death, not just to damage it. If that is how *olethros* is used here, and later it describes the ruin of the lost, then it would lend enormous weight behind annihilationism. The unsaved will be eternally done away with, just as we attempt to do away with our sinful nature. Given the ambiguity of this verse, the meaning of *olethros* here cannot be conclusively attained. However, its use here certainly cannot be used as evidence against annihilationism.

C. Separation from the Lord

The second main argument for eternal torment from this passage stems from the second part of the verse: The wicked suffer eternal destruction “*away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power*” (emphasis added) (2 Thessalonians 1.9b). Because the lost are separated from God, they must always be conscious and miserable, so the thinking goes.

It should be noted that virtually nobody on either side believes that there is any part of creation where God is literally absent. Both annihilationists and traditionalists are well aware of passages like Psalm 139.7-8 that demonstrate God’s omnipresence. When we speak of presence, it is more along the lines of God’s fellowship, blessings, and active involvement in things.

However, it has been pointed out that God’s assumed omnipresence may bolster the case for annihilationism, based on passages like 2 Thessalonians 1.9. If separation from God as

spelled out in this passage (in most translations) is taken more literally, how could one still exist outside of God's presence if there is nowhere where God is not present? The only logically sound interpretation is that the person ceases to exist, if they are indeed cut off from the one who both sustains creation and is absolutely everywhere in creation. Where is there that they could go? Nowhere. That's the point. John Wenham seems to take this approach (or at the very least, it is the logical conclusion of his statement): "This concept of banishment from God is a terrifying one. It does not mean escaping from God, since God is everywhere in his creation, every particle of which owes its continuing existence to his sustaining. It means, surely, being utterly cut off from the source and sustainer of life. It is another way of describing destruction" (172). I tend not to take talk of being cut off from God's presence in such a literal sense. That said, it certainly doesn't hurt that the annihilationist *can* take the biblical idea of the unsaved being separated from God in a more literal fashion than can the one who argues that those cut off from God are still consciously existent beings for ever and ever.

Now, as to the issue of separation from God in this verse, it should be pointed out that the separation element of this verse is not 100% clear. The King James Version is more literal than most, simply speaking of those "who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power." A bit of controversy comes up regarding the meaning of *apo*, which translates to "from." Translated directly and literally as the King James does, it could mean one of several things, though *apo* does, in many contexts, mean something to the effect of "away from," (Strong, "A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament" 14). This traditionalist argument assumes that it should be rendered like how the NASB and many other translations render it. Because even the translators, being experts in Greek, don't always agree, it is probably impossible to say definitively.

However it should be translated, it doesn't really matter as far as this debate goes. Ultimately, I don't deny the idea that the lost are cut off from God anyway. So then, let us assume that their destruction occurs "away from" the Lord's presence. Does that necessarily mean that they are consciously miserable? What if separation from God, the one who gives life to the saved and unsaved alike, causes the soul to die (in every sense of the word)? After all, even John Calvin, definitely not a conditionalist, wrote, "And though the soul remain alive after it has departed out of the prison of this body, yet has it no support in itself...But if God withdraw his grace from it, the soul will be but a blast, no less than the body is dust" ("Psalm 103" 34). Is it unreasonable to suggest that, apart from their creator who gives life to every person, the lost could die off?

This debate is in some ways muddled by how the New International Version renders this verse. Although I view the NIV favorably, it is not among the most literal translations, and at times it does significantly alter the actual text in an attempt to make its meaning clearer. Usually this is without controversy, but for a few texts regarding eternal punishment, it is very significant. This verse is one of them. While a more literal reading would read something to the effect of KJV or NASB, the NIV translates it as follows: "They will be punished with everlasting destruction *and shut out* from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (emphasis added). Based on the NIV, it is sometimes argued that the "destruction" and being "shut out" are two separate events, indicating that, even after destruction is inflicted upon them, they still exist (and are then shut out). Thus, according to J.I. Packer, this passage, "by affirming exclusion, rules out the idea that 'destruction' meant extinction. Only those who exist can be excluded" ("Evangelical Annihilationism"). In other words, if the lost were annihilated when they suffered "everlasting destruction," they could not afterwards be excluded from God's

presence, since they would be gone. However, the words “and shut out” are not in the Greek at all (Peoples, “Why I Am an Annihilationist” 24). That is why the literal translations don’t have them or anything like them. It is not the case that they are destroyed, and then after that, they are shut out from the Lord’s presence. It is not two separate acts. They suffer destruction, and they suffer this destruction away from God’s presence. All agree that the unsaved exist during the moment when they are cast away from God. What matters is what their destruction consists of.

Is it the case, if one is said to be cast away from God, that they must always be consciously existent *after* they are sent away from God? According to Douglas Moo, “It makes little sense to describe people who have been annihilated as being separate from the presence of God” (108). However, if their being separated causes their annihilation, then it certainly does make sense. The annihilationist would simply claim (as I do) that their being shut out is at least part of what destroys them, since without the presence of the Creator, the creation completely perishes (in the most literal sense). Just as one being cut off from a respirator would suffer death away from the presence of it, and by being separated from it, so one could say that the damned suffer eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord, the creator and giver of life.

Now, I should note that it may be the case that God, when sending the lost from His presence, also acts to actively destroy them. This is dependent on the sometimes subtle differences in how this passage is translated and interpreted. This also comes up in the judgment pictured in Matthew 25.31-46, which I addressed in Section XVI. Among other things, the Lord says to the unsaved, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25.41b). It could be that they are sent away from the Lord and into the fire (be it literal or a symbol for a destructive force), and in doing so, God both withdraws His protection and destroys their mortal souls and bodies. I think that actually

fits the imagery better, although the exact mechanics do not really matter here, and so I see no need to be dogmatic. Whether they just die off from being apart from God (they are destroyed by being separated from God), or are destroyed in a place apart from God's fellowship (they are destroyed away from God), they are destroyed, and I argue that that destruction is...destruction.

I do not argue that it is impossible that the unsaved, according to this verse, suffer eternal torment. I am not saying that eternal torment is not a possible interpretation of this verse on its own. What I am arguing is that this passage does not prove eternal torment, or even come close. Why could it not be that they are condemned to an eternal state of destruction, literal destruction, and that this destruction occurs when they are destroyed outside of the Lord's presence (or, alternatively, that their destruction is caused directly by being cut off from God's presence, like how a person who needs a respirator dies when cut off from it)? The assumption that since they are separated from God they must therefore remain conscious in that state forever is just that, an assumption. Eternal torment is possible, not proven.

This of course assumes that *apo* is meant to say they are "away from" the Lord's presence in the first place. It is at least possible that their destruction does indeed come from the Lord's presence, that His presence is what leads to their destruction. While not confirming annihilation, it would surely fit the doctrine. The Lord comes and inflicts destruction upon them (whatever "destruction" means in this case).

What is clear about 2 Thessalonians 1.9? What is clear is that it speaks of the wicked, "Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power" (*KJV*). Whether they are destroyed by His presence, by being separated from it, or are simply destroyed apart from it, it can hardly be said that their eternal destruction must be something other than, well, eternal *destruction*.

XIX. THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS (LUKE 16.19-31)

A. No Matter What This Passage Means, It Does Not Prove Eternal Torment

This story, told by Jesus, is said to be a prime description of what the afterlife will be like. Two people die. One goes to a good place, and the other, rather than being annihilated or just staying dead, immediately goes to a bad place where he cries out, “I am in agony in this flame” (Luke 16.24b). In Verse 23, the place is even called “Hell” in two of our most popular Bible translations (NIV and KJV). The man is described multiple times as being in torment, and he is even aware that others will go there if they do not repent. He died and went to Hell, and it was just as we’ve been taught, right? How much clearer could it be?

There are two things that need to be said about this passage. The first is shorter and more important. Whatever is true about this story, it says nothing of eternity. Even if traditionalism were correct, the man wouldn’t be in his eternal abode. That alone disproves the idea that this passage proves eternal torment. The second point is that this story is almost certainly a parable, not a true story. More importantly, there is evidence to indicate that this story is not like many other parables which tend to be based on the natural order of things. Rather, there is a good chance that Jesus uses material from common fables and bits of popular religious fiction, something that would have been well-understood by his listeners, to make a bigger point.

B. The Rich Man Is in the Intermediate State, Not the Eternal State

The rich man is in the intermediate state, not “Hell” as we think of it. As described in Section VI, the Bible does speak of an intermediate state between death and the resurrection. Now, what that state is like is hotly debated, but we know that it is not the case that you just die

and your immaterial soul goes somewhere and you are there for ever and ever. The place that the rich man goes to, translated as “Hell” in KJV or NIV, is *Hades*. This *Hades* is the intermediate state, as discussed in Section VI. Traditionalist C.I. Scofield is at the very least on the right track when he writes the following while commenting on Verse 23: “Gr. *hades*, ‘the unseen world,’ is revealed as the place of departed human spirits between death and resurrection” (1098).

Traditionalist Church of Christ scholar Dave Miller likewise made this point in Section XVII, Subsection D. The place we think of as “Hell,” the place the unsaved go after judgment, is *Gehenna*, not *Hades*. They are not the same. It is for this reason that some conditionalists will actually hold this to be a true story. Not all annihilationists consider this a parable. For example, according to Homer Hailey, “Neither Jesus nor Luke refer to it as a parable; but Jesus related it as if it were a historical fact. It should be viewed as historically true for persons known only to Jesus and those of the unseen realm” (178).

That the intermediate states of the two men are in view is also evident from Verse 22: “Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.” Now, it’s not impossible that in this story there was a resurrection between “the poor man died” and “and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom,” but that’s a pretty big detail to leave out. It sure sounds like Jesus is saying he went there right after dying, does it not? A similar thing can be said about the rich man, for it is immediately after we are told that he died and was buried that we read, “In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom” (Luke 16.23). The fact that this is the pre-resurrection state is further confirmed by the fact that the rich man seeks to send Lazarus from the dead to his brothers so they can be led to repentance, indicating one of two things: Either so little time has passed that he has every reason to assume that his

brothers are still alive, or that he somehow overlooked that it was the end of the world and that billions of people had risen from the dead along with him. Abraham also speaks of the brothers as being alive, pre-resurrection, since he says they still presently have the chance to repent (see Verses 29-31). They wouldn't be alive and in the position to still repent while the man is in *Hades* if the resurrection had already occurred.

This matters because the intermediate state and the eternal state are not the same thing. In this illustration, the rich man is tormented in the intermediate state. Even if there is torment of unsaved souls in the intermediate state, it doesn't matter as far as annihilationism is concerned. What matters to the debate about eternal punishment is what happens after the final judgment. We don't know what happens to the rich man in this story after judgment. Once he goes to *Gehenna*, once he is cast into the "eternal fire" (Matthew 18.8; 25.41), he could be tortured endlessly, or he could be destroyed. In fact, based on this passage alone, we can't even say that the rich man wasn't in some sort of purgatory and wouldn't eventually be saved like Lazarus. After all, many universalists believe that those who die impenitent have to go through a painful reform process after death that can be avoided if they repent in life. If I were a universalist, I might actually find this passage helpful to my case. The story doesn't tell us what comes later. Since it only says what happens to him in the intermediate state, and says nothing about what happens after judgment, this verse no more proves eternal torment than it does universalism.

Lastly, if anybody disagrees with the premise that the rich man is in the intermediate state because he is in *Hades* and not *Gehenna*, they should remember Revelation 20.11-15. Verse 13 speaks of how the dead are removed from death and *Hades*. In Verse 14, the now emptied death and *Hades* are thrown into the lake of fire. Even *Hades* itself is thrown into the lake of fire with death. Whatever the case, *Hades* is thrown into the lake of fire, but only *after* it is emptied of

people. It is not as though people stay in “Hell” (being *Hades*) and it just gets moved. Lastly, the judgment vision ends in Verse 15 with this declaration: “And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” Then the people themselves are thrown into the lake of fire, not back into *Hades* (which I would argue gets destroyed in real life anyway). This is all in addition to everything else about *Hades* that was brought up in Section VI. There is surely a great deal of symbolism involved in the Revelation narrative, but it nonetheless makes clear that there is a difference between *Hades* and the eternal fate of the wicked. Thus, I am in agreement with traditionalist Eldon Woodcock, who writes of this passage, “This makes it clear that in this text *hades* is not Hell. Rather, it is the realm where the wicked are kept imprisoned from the time of their death until that of their final judgment. It is an intermediate state” (137).

Furthermore, I am not arrogantly saying that all the translations got Luke 16.23 wrong by translating *Hades* as “Hell.” The King James and NIV Bibles are actually unusual in their rendering of *Hades* in Verse 23. Most other mainstream translations (ASV, NASB, RSV, ESV, even the NLT) either leave *Hades* transliterated, or render it in other ways to distinguish it from the place of final punishment. There is a reason that two distinctly different words are used when referring to *Gehenna* and *Hades*. They are two different places. Therefore, even if eternal torment were true, it would take place in a lake of fire and brimstone (or whatever that represents), not in *Hades*, which is the “Hell” that the rich man was in.

C. Why I Think This Is a Parable

Although Subsection B is what really matters as far as annihilationism is concerned, I will explain why I think that this story is probably a parable and not a true story. After all, other

theological questions and discussions are impacted by this story (like those regarding the intermediate state). Even just for the sake of truth, it matters whether or not we properly understand it. Now, the idea that this is a parable is nothing new. Even Robert Yarbrough, who advocates the traditional doctrine based in part on this very story, concedes this point: “It is widely accepted that this story is parabolic and not intended to furnish a detailed geography of Hell” (74). There are a number of reasons why commentators on both sides come to this conclusion.

1. It Starts out Like Many Other Parables

Jesus, preaching to an audience whom He often taught in parables (Mark 4.2), begins by telling them: “Now there was a certain rich man, and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, faring sumptuously every day” (ASV, Luke 16.19). Some assume that since he was a “certain” rich man (in some translations) that he must be a real person and not the figure of a parable (e.g. Greene 52). However, multiple parables that preceded this one begin with mention of a “certain” man of some sort (Luke 14.16; 15.11; 16.1). This statement doesn’t distinguish it from the parables; it is something that it has in common with the other parables. Different parables have different beginnings, but the introduction of a “certain” individual, even a “certain rich man” (ASV, Luke 16.1), is not unusual. Frankly, I’m bewildered as to why so many people assume that this is a true story when it starts off like so many other parables (after a string of similar parables, no less). Along those lines...

2. Elements of the Story Sound like Symbols of a Parable That Jesus Would Preach

Abraham: Not once in this parable is God actually mentioned. It is Abraham whom Lazarus is with, against whose bosom he rests (which was common for close male friends back then). The rich man cries out not to God but to Abraham. Jesus was preaching to rebellious and

ungodly Jews who assumed that they were right with God because they were descendants of Abraham. Remember what John the Baptist told a group of Pharisees: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (NIV, Luke 3.8). This melds into my next point; basically, the one who was “poor,” perhaps representing “sinners,” or more likely Gentiles, and not the rich man (the Pharisees), is the one who ends up with Abraham and under his wing, even though the one rejected refers to Abraham as his father (as Jews did).

Eschatological Reversal: Similar to the part about Abraham, there is the clear element here of fortunes being reversed at death. Joachim Jeremias notes the following: “This parable is one of four two-edged parables (see p. 28). The first point is concerned with the reversal of fortune in the life to come...” (147). He also notes the importance of Lazarus’ discovery, that, “God is the God of the poorest and most destitute” (146). He’s right, and how appropriate that rich and poor get switched in the end (especially given the previous parable).

It’s unclear if this story was told to the same crowd to whom Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son to in the previous chapter, or if this was a separate event that Luke simply recounted right after, but either way, it follows a similar thematic idea (which might explain why Luke would put it so near). Just as in that parable of the lost son, where the good child becomes bad and the bad child repents and illustrates what is good, so too is there a complete reversal regarding Lazarus and the rich man. Their parable probably follows the parable of the shrewd manager because that deals, in one way or another, with financial wealth. This parable ties the two ideas together. The Pharisees thought their wealth was a sign of God’s approval, yet Jesus sticks it to them in this parable and the prior, calling them out on their abuse of what is God’s, and showing that in the end, the first will be last and the last will be first.

Furthermore, there could be more to it still. After all, the rich man was evidently a Jew (given his relationship with Abraham). The Jews to whom Jesus was speaking had throughout the centuries been God's chosen people, given every spiritual blessing. However, those who will not repent will find themselves rejected like the rich man, crying out to Abraham, relying on their bloodline to no avail. Meanwhile, those whom it seemed God rejected, the Gentiles, the sinners, etc., were to be saved. This is nothing new. Jesus declared to the religious leaders that "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you" (Matthew 21.31b). This particular story in Luke may be more relevant to Gentiles than "sinners," but it's not as though Luke, believed to be the Bible's only Gentile writer, doesn't put a fair amount of emphasis on God's reaching out to all people.

This story has been broken down and dissected by many, coming up with many conclusions, but I hope it is evident that there is a lot to this, a lot more than is told by simply a story about *Hades*.

Other Elements Added – Some have argued that Jesus using a name suggests that it is not a parable (e.g. Alcorn 62). However, naming a parabolic figure "Lazarus" would itself be rich with symbolism. His name means something like "the help of God" (Lightfoot 158). While there is disagreement over exactly who he represents (Gentiles, repentant sinners, the poor), he nonetheless represents those who are helped only by God. Regarding the rich man, when hoping that his brothers could be saved by a miracle, he is told that if his brothers do not repent given the revelation of Moses and the prophets, not even someone rising from the dead would make them repent. Consider the Jewish leaders; they were experts in scripture yet did not obey it from their hearts. Is it coincidence that Jesus, who rose from the dead yet was not believed by these religious officials, would end the story with that somber declaration by Abraham?

3. There Are Problems with a Literal Interpretation

First of all, the rich man is in *Hades*, yet he and Lazarus somehow have body parts. As discussed in Section VI, *Hades* is a pre-resurrection state. His immaterial soul would be there. His body would obviously be in the ground, so how does he have a tongue? Unless they are given temporary bodies, how would he expect Lazarus to have a finger to dip in water?

Secondly, there is no mention of righteousness. We are never told that Lazarus was righteous or that the rich man wasn't. That's kind of an issue. Do people get saved simply for being poor? Do people go to Hell simply for being rich? If this were a parable about eschatological reversal, then the lack of such pertinent information wouldn't matter because the point would simply be eschatological reversal. Those who looked like they were favored by God on earth ended up being rejected, and vice versa. A rich man going to the bad place and a poor man going to the good place definitely expresses that point about as well as could be expected.

Lastly, why would Jesus, in the middle of a string of parables, just break into a true story about two men? There was no question or any sort of intervening event in Luke's account that would prompt this story. It makes perfect sense, however, when told as a parable. It's just one more parable of many. Why, though, would He just tell people a short and vague story of Hell (not that this even speaks of eternal punishment), as many believe is the case?

D. This Story Sounds like Common Fables of the Time

Even if it is a parable, are not parables usually based on the true order of things? Wouldn't this, even if it were a parable, still indicate that the intermediate state is as Jesus describes? Typically parables are based in reality. However, according to scholars, a number of fables regarding such reversals of fortune were being circulated at the time. Fudge writes:

The plot of the parable, the reversal of earthly fortunes after death, was familiar in popular Palestinian stories of Jesus' time. Hugo Gressman cites a Greek parallel from the first-century Egyptian papyrus, and he says there are at least seven versions of the story in Jewish literature. One of the most famous involved a poor student of the Law and a rich publican named Bar Ma'jan. (*The Fire* 203-204)

Similarly, Roman Catholic writer Edmund Flood gives a vague but noteworthy concurrence: "A legend about a rich man and a poor man that had been circulating in the East for some centuries could be turned into something that could help those around him to understand what he was saying" (48). Peter Toon, who ultimately finds Jesus's story somewhat revealing of the nature of the afterlife, nevertheless concedes the following: "It is possible that in creating this parable Jesus has adopted a folk tale of a rich man and a pious poor man whose fortunes are reversed in the afterlife" (42). German New Testament Scholar Joachim Jeremias attributes this parable in part to the Egyptian tale that was popular among Alexandrian and Palestinian Jews, a story which was adapted as a story that would make its way into the Talmud (which will come up shortly) (145). It is therefore possible that Jesus was not even basing the parable on the true nature of things (as He usually did), but rather, He was using a similar sounding story, common at the time, to make the point.

Stories in the Talmud offer possible insight as well. John Lightfoot, a 17th-century Christian scholar, identifies many elements (Lazarus' sores, the men's ability to see each other in the afterlife, the angels attending to the saved person, and the unsaved person unable to reach water) with various stories from the Talmud (159, 164-167). Bar Ma'jan, which Fudge mentioned and which will be discussed below, also have Talmudic origin (although it comes from the Palestinian Talmud, not the more common and prominent Babylonian Talmud).

Attributing Jesus's story to the Talmud can be tricky because of ambiguity in terms of dating; the Talmud came well after the time of Christ, but was made up of works from throughout many centuries prior. Nevertheless, the numerous ties between the Talmudic material and Jesus's story are worth considering, even if they are not always conclusive.

Of the Talmudic sources, Bar Ma'jan is probably the most significant. The story can be found in the sixth chapter of the Sanhedrin tractate (see *The Talmud* 181-182). German New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias makes note of the use of this fable both in this passage and in relation to the parable of the great feast in Luke 14.15-24. He relates the beginning of this story to the parable of the great feast as follows: "Jesus was using some well-known story material, namely the story of the rich tax collector Bar Ma'jan and a poor scholar, which appears in Aramaic in the Palestinian Talmud. That Jesus knew this story is confirmed by the fact that he used it again: he used its ending, as we shall see later, in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus" (141). For our purposes, all you need to know is that both characters die (the lead up has little to do with this passage, although much to do with the other parable). The ending, which is relevant to this discussion, goes like this:

We have already told the beginning of the story, how the scholar's funeral was unattended while the tax collector was buried with great pomp. Now here is the end of it. One of the poor scholar's colleagues was allowed to see in a dream the fate of the two men in the next world: A few days later the scholar saw his colleague in gardens of paradisaal beauty, watered by flowing streams. He also saw Bar Ma'jan the tax collector standing on the bank of a stream and trying to reach the water, but unable to do so. (145)

You can see how a scholar might suggest the possibility that Jesus was basing his parable on this story. Again, there is possibly an element of ambiguity here, as it is not totally clear when Bar Ma'jan was first written (although Jeremias and some others kind of take it for granted that Jesus knew of Bar Ma'jan). That said, it is not something we can write off as meaningless.

Now, regarding Bar Ma'jan and other similar folk stories, they are not word for word identical (as far as I am aware), though really, it's what the Lord adds that matters in the first place. Both stories entail eschatological reversal of a rich man. Jesus then adds various parts as discussed in Subsection C, such as the references to Abraham, the allusion to his death and resurrection and the unbelief of many Israelites, and also other possible additions that may have also been introduced to make other, more subtle points. It is those parts that are significant. It's like what Edmund Flood says in the book *More Parables for Now*: "Once again, Jesus takes something from His audience's experience. This time it is a popular story. As writers and other artists have always done, he fashions existing material to His own purposes" (48). Like the more realistic backdrops of parables, the backgrounds of parables are just that, backgrounds. They in themselves are not always all that significant, That the rich fool is a farmer in Luke 12.13-21 is a matter of history and Jesus's audience; If Jesus were to have His earthly ministry today, and were to tell the story replacing the farmer with a modern businessman, it would change nothing. The fact that stories like Bar Ma'jan existed in Jesus's time and were popular gives at least the possibility that the backdrop of this parable is such a story and not the real order of things.

Using fiction to make a true point may be unusual, but it is not unheard of. Before I was a believer, I was a big fan of the TV show *Family Guy* (not so much anymore for obvious reasons). In one episode, Brian, the family's talking, anthropomorphic dog, uses a story from the *Star Wars* trilogy to illustrate to Peter, the father, how badly he was behaving upon inheriting a

mansion from his wife's aunt ("Peter, Peter, Caviar Eater"). It is hardly as though Brian would be affirming the truth or even the plausibility of the events of *Star Wars*! He used a familiar, fictional story as a backdrop for his point, and that is what Jesus would have been doing here.

E. Arguments against the Interpretation That Jesus Based It on a Fable – Part I

Aside from a few I touched upon already (such as there being mention of a "certain" rich man), the primary argument that Jesus didn't use a fable as the backdrop of this story is the argument that "Jesus wouldn't lie!" Let's break this argument down. The reasoning goes like this: Jesus would be saying something that is not true (that there's torment in *Hades*, pleasure with Abraham for the saved, etc.). He never explicitly says that the stuff in this story is not based on what is true, so therefore everything must be true, or else He'd be lying. We know that no deceit was found in Him (Isaiah 53.9; 1 Peter 2.22). That said, if Jesus were basing a parable on a fictional story, would it be a lie in the first place? They say, in essence, "He teaches it, and doesn't say it isn't true, so it must be true!" But does He actually teach anything about the intermediate state here?

What if the audience to whom He was speaking would obviously know it was a reference to Bar Ma'jan or a similar story? Jesus wasn't speaking directly to those who would read His recorded words 2000 years later. He had a conversation with a group of people who lived in that time and that culture. *We* are unfamiliar with the popular fables of the time (although God has arranged that this particular fable's source has survived the centuries), but His audience wouldn't have been so unfamiliar with them. If you expect the audience to know what you mean, it isn't a lie. There would be no intent to deceive. That's just common sense. We aren't lying when we tell someone that there's a "fly in the ointment"; we know that the listener knows that it's an idiom

and isn't going to think we are telling them that our ointment has a literal fly in it. Jesus makes up a story which, to His listeners, clearly isn't true or literal, but rather, is based on a fable. It is no more a lie than any other parable He made up. It is no more a lie than if one goes to a costume party dressed as a cowboy. You pretend to be a cowboy, but there is no deception; people know that you aren't a cowboy, and you intend it to be that way. Even just from the standpoint of common sense, the argument that Jesus would be a liar if He based the parable on a fable simply fails.

Furthermore, this kind of thing happens elsewhere in scripture, and nobody cries "liar!" Francis Nichol points out the parable of the trees told by Jotham in Judges 9.7-15 (116-117). In a nutshell, some trees ask a number of different trees to be their king, each of which refuses, until they ask the thorn bush (i.e. the worst tree they could have gotten). It was an analogy to the situation in Shechem, in which the people choose to be ruled by Abimelech, and not the 70 sons of Jerub-Baal. In the context of the situation, it's clear that it's an allegory, but never does Jotham point out that in real life, trees cannot talk. If we followed the "Jesus is not a liar" line of reasoning, we would have to insist on one of two things: Either the Bible teaches that trees and vines and bushes talk and have their own civilized societies, or the righteous and God-fearing Jotham wasn't just making an analogy to express a point, but rather was a dirty liar for making up untrue facts about trees...

Even more specific to Jesus, consider how, in the book of Revelation, Jesus is shown as a lamb. I doubt many who read this think that we are going to worship a lamb on a throne. But where does it say that the Lamb represents Jesus? Now, there is a clue that it is symbolic, given that the seven horns and seven eyes represent the seven spirits of God (Revelation 5.6). Even then, however, who's to say that the seven spirits don't each manifest themselves in the form of

an eye and a horn? After all, it says that those parts *are* the seven spirits of God, not *are representative* of them...Jesus shows John something about Heaven and never says it isn't true. Are we going to worship a sheep? We must be, or else Jesus would be a liar! Now if this sounds absurd, why does it sound absurd? It's absurd because Jesus would know full well that the reader of Revelation would know that there isn't literally a lamb in Heaven. Well, it's no different in the case of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

F. Arguments against the Interpretation That Jesus Based It on a Fable – Part II

One last argument used is that Jesus would never have used a fable to make a point. This argument stems from Titus 1.14, in which Paul tells Titus to make sure the brothers from Crete were, among other things, “not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth.” As a page on *The Interactive Bible* declares, “Arians [because of course everyone who denies eternal torment is an Arian, i.e. someone who denies the deity of Christ] must explain why Jesus would confirm ‘Jewish fables/myths.’ (see Titus 1:14 ‘not paying attention to Jewish myths/fables’)” (“Rich Man and Lazarus”). Does Titus 1.14 mean that Jesus could not have been using the story of Bar Ma'jan or similar folklore to make His point?

This can simply be chalked up to taking a verse out of context. The passage doesn't say that Jewish fables should never ever be spoken or used under any circumstances. The people who tell these fables are those who turn away from the truth. They were unbelievers and probably corrupted members of the church, many of whom are Jews (Verse 10). They were also “ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain” (*NIV*, Verse 11b). In context, Paul is telling them to rebuke Cretans so that they will be good and strong in the faith, not paying attention to the unbelieving Jews who try to lead them

astray. One of the ways they probably taught was in fables, fables that went against the word of God. It wouldn't be the first time Paul had to deal with Gentile converts being unduly influenced by unbelieving Jews (consider the entire book of Galatians, for example) The point is this: avoid false teachers. This doesn't mean that any person who might use a Jewish fable as a backdrop for a parable while preaching the word of God is a false teacher. Those in view are those who try to lead weaker brothers astray. The fables in view are those that were being used by them *against* the gospel. Context matters.

So with that said, I think it's safe to say that the interpretation of Jeremias and others are at least reasonable possibilities. Ultimately, even if this is a true story, or even if it is a parable that uses as its backdrop an accurate depiction of *Hades*, it says nothing about annihilationism in the first place.

XX. DANIEL 12.2

A. The Existence of Contempt Does Not Equate to the Conscious Existence of the Unsav

The appeal to Daniel 12.2 is a common argument for eternal torment, but not one that is particularly challenging. The passage reads as follows: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.” Basically, it speaks of the resurrection of both the saved and the unsaved. But aside from the fact that this does not speak of inherent immortality, it doesn’t say anything about eternal conscious existence for the damned, period. I am not questioning the eternal duration of the contempt for the wicked, nor do I disagree with the following: “Grammatically, there is no difference here between the length of time mentioned for life and that for punishment; rather, there is simply eternal life and eternal death” (Driscoll & Breshears 430). But while both are eternal, that does not mean that both groups of people exist for eternity.

Consider this: Adolf Hitler is dead, yet don’t we still revile his name? Yet even if his soul is conscious in some intermediate state, he probably can’t hear us or read our minds when we scorn his memory. Does this mean that when we think of Hitler we don’t think of him with contempt, since he is gone? Of course not! Even an atheist who does not believe that Hitler exists in any form would still say that he is looked upon with contempt. His contempt is ongoing, even if he isn’t (though he will certainly be resurrected). Just in terms of common sense, being disgraced and a subject of contempt does not by any means prove conscious existence.

Furthermore, consider the significance of Isaiah 66.24: “And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh” (KJV). At first,

it is not apparent why I quoted this passage. It does come up quite a bit in Section XXI, but it also sheds some light on Daniel 12.2 once we understand the Hebrew behind the word for “an abhorring.” The Hebrew term *deraon*, translated “an abhorring” in Isaiah 66.24, is the same word translated as “contempt” in Daniel 12.2 (Bacchiocchi 199). But notice that Isaiah says that carcasses, dead bodies, will be loathsome or abhorrent. How conscious is a dead body? How much shame can a dead body feel? None, obviously. That doesn’t mean that others won’t feel abhorrence or contempt towards them, however (as the passage makes clear). Secondly, even if one thinks that the corpses are actually conscious living people (not that such an idea is really reasonable, see Section XXI), the fact is, the word is describing not how they feel, but how they will be viewed by others. They will be an abhorrence to the others, meaning the people who look upon them will hate them. It does not describe the feeling of those who are the recipients of this contempt. Seeing as how that is a perfectly logical meaning of what Daniel 12.2 says, that they rise to everlasting contempt [by God towards them], the fact that it is used this way elsewhere, and the fact that it is used this way to describe corpses, no less, is significant.

Facing contempt does not require one to be there to be scorned. It does not necessarily mean that one can actually feel the scorn. As a matter of common sense, it just simply doesn’t. Dead people like Hitler face contempt whether they know it right now or not. Even concepts and non-personal entities can face contempt. Who doesn’t hate death with a passion? Who here has at least some degree of ill will towards the now defunct Soviet Union? To this day the non-existent, non-living Soviet Union is disgraced and looked at with contempt, yet obviously it never could feel anything in the first place! Peoples gives us another example of this occurring now:

It makes sense to talk this way even today. In preparing this part of the presentation, I did a quick look on the internet to see if any of this type of

language was out there, and one of the first results I found was an example of a person condemning the integrity of a certain political figure, saying (and I quote) that “after he and his kind are dust, only their shame will remain.” (“Why I Am an Annihilationist” 26)

Although it is true that the unsaved who awake to disgrace and everlasting contempt will not always be awake, the disgrace and contempt outlives them. Absolutely nothing is said in Daniel 12.2 about life or existence for the damned. It does not prove eternal torment, because it does not mention anything about eternal existence. Why does it seem to mean eternal torment to so many people? Perhaps there is something to the idea that, because of tradition, we assume that everyone lives forever somewhere, and so of course arising to eternal contempt means they are eternally there to feel the shame.

B. The Significance of “Life”

One last thing to consider is this: The fate of the wicked is contrasted to those who have “eternal life.” On its face, contrasting them with those who have life sure doesn’t sound like they have conscious existence forever (especially in light of what I went over in Section XI).

What about “life” in Daniel 12.2? Well, the word “life” in the Bible doesn’t always mean knowing God. This is much clearer in the Old Testament, since much more focus is put on earthly things (which is not to belittle the Old Testament at all, it’s just a matter of what God, in His perfect wisdom, knew best to focus on at a given time). A lot of different words are translated as life. Like “life,” they certainly could be used metaphorically, but at times, they clearly aren’t. The word *chay*, which is what Daniel 12.2 says the saved awake to, is used in many such contexts. It refers to all the living creatures created throughout Genesis 1. It is used to

describe the earthly life of human beings in Deuteronomy 4.10. It describes how God lives forever in Deuteronomy 32.40. In 2 Chronicles 25.12, it describes those left alive after being captured by the army of Judah. Psalm 63.3 says, “Because Your lovingkindness is better than life [*chay*], / My lips will praise You.” In that context, I think it is safe to say the David isn’t saying that God’s love is better than knowing God! He’s saying that even the most important thing man knows, staying alive, can’t compare to how great it is to be loved by God. Although it can be used figuratively (Strong, “A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible” 38), it doesn’t seem to have nearly as much of a figurative, qualitative use as the Greek *zōé*, the “life” usually attributed to believers, is said to have. Of course, even *zōé* can refer to simple biological life, such as the life that God gives all men which Paul mentions in Acts 17.25 (Vine 666). That said, it certainly can’t hurt that Daniel contrasts the contempt that the damned awake to with what may be life in its most literal form, something that elsewhere in scripture is even contrasted with God’s love (although it is also ultimately a result of it).

This is the significance of it all: It is assumed that contempt means receiving bad things, so life, in contrast, must mean good things, not just conscious existence. And yet, if that is what is contrasted with contempt, it would seem that part of being contemptible to God is that you are not made to always exist. One of the good things is life (in the classic sense of the term), and one of the bad things is death (in the classic sense of the term). Why is that such an outlandish idea? Life might mean something in this passage likened to how we usually think of life. If anything, it *helps* my case that this passage contrasts the fate of the unsaved with “life,” which on its face, especially in a Hebrew context, sure doesn’t sound like two groups consciously existing (i.e. living) forever. Ultimately, Daniel 12.2 fails to prove the eternal conscious existence of those who do not have eternal life, and therefore, it fails to disprove conditionalism.

XXI. MARK 9.43-48

A. Undying Worms and Unquenchable Fire Do Not Mean Eternal Torment

According to the Lord Himself, Hell is a place for the lost “where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED” (Mark 9.48). Why does this passage not speak of eternal torment? After all, the fire is “unquenchable.” It will not be “quenched.” Does that mean, however, that it will burn endlessly? Also, if the worms do not die, does that mean that in Hell there will be worms that presumably eat the damned but are simultaneously able to keep eating them for eternity?

At first glance, it may seem like it would, but we all know that things don’t always end up being what they seem. This fits with eternal torment only if we bring in our own assumptions, look at it as literally as possible, and ignore where Jesus’s words actually come from.

B. Unquenchable Fire

Mark 9.43 refers to an unquenchable fire (as do other passages such as Matthew 3.12). Similarly, Verse 48 speaks of a fire that is not “quenched.” This leads some, like Robert Peterson, to see it as a fire that burns for ever and ever: “Although all earthly fires eventually consume their fuel and go out, the fire of hell never comes to an end because its work is never done” (*Hell on Trial* 64). But does an unquenchable fire necessarily refer to a fire that never goes out? Not at all. To “quench” primarily means to “put out” or “extinguish” (“Quench”). If a fire that is not quenched always means a fire that burns forever, then we’d have to say there has never been a fire at any point in history that has not been quenched. But surely there have been. Any beach bonfire that is allowed to burn itself out is a fire that has not been quenched.

Not only does common sense indicate this, but so does scripture. In Ezekiel 20.47, God tells the prophet, “Say to the southern forest: Hear the word of the LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to set fire to you, and it will consume all your trees, both green and dry. The blazing flame *will not be quenched*, and every face from south to north will be scorched by it” (emphasis added) (NIV). The fire, that will not be quenched, is said to consume the forest. It obviously isn’t going to burn forever, but it will be unstoppable. It will burn until it has burned all that there is. I know of no forests that have been continually burning for the last 2,500 years, but the Bible says that the fire was not quenched (nor could it have been). Similarly, God warned those in Jerusalem that if they continued breaking the Sabbath, He would “kindle a fire in its gates and it will devour the palaces of Jerusalem and *not be quenched*” (emphasis added) (Jeremiah 17.27b). Was God warning that He would move Hell to Jerusalem, or was He simply saying that the fire could not be put out by anyone and that it would burn until nothing remained to burn?

This is what is true of the fire of Hell. Nobody can put it out. God’s judgment cannot be overridden by anyone, and any fire He kindles would be unquenchable (although I think we would assume God Himself could extinguish any otherwise “unquenchable” fire if He wanted to, but He won’t and that’s the point). However, that doesn’t mean that it burns for ever and ever. It *could* mean that of course, but it doesn’t have to. No matter how long it burns for, if it cannot be extinguished, and it is not put out, then it is unquenchable and not quenched.

Now, I am aware that the NIV can complicate the matter by turning the Greek *asbestos pur*, which means unquenchable fire, into “the fire that never goes out” (Mark 9.43b). Robert Yarbrough makes a big point of this, declaring, “It requires a studied effort not to see eternal conscious punishment implied in the words ‘where the fire never goes out’” (74). However, the

only “studied effort” required is to look at more or less every other remotely literal translation (ASV, KJV, NKJV, NASB, RSV, NRSV, ESV, YLT, Darby Translation, and even the non-literal NLT), and to notice that they all correspond with what the Greek literally says. It is no secret that the NIV (which is the default translation used by Yarbrough in *Hell under Fire*), though generally accurate and fairly literal, does at times take liberties in order to make the meaning clearer (usually without controversy, unlike in this case). Now, it is understandable that they would come to this conclusion. After all, this particular fire, which is unquenchable, will never go out (because eternal torment is true), so why not make it clear? Of course, since here we are interested in what the scripture specifically says in order to challenge these very assumptions, I think we are safe in taking “unquenchable fire” to simply mean unquenchable fire.

What ultimately matters here is what the Greek *asbestos* (English “unquenchable”) really means. It is “from 1 (as a neg. prefix) and 4570;” and is defined as “unquenched, unquenchable” (The Lockman Foundation 1636). In other words, it means what pretty much every translation says; the fire is unquenchable. It doesn’t mean that it burns forever, just that it is not extinguished and will not be extinguished. As noted before, we see unquenched fire today (a bonfire left to burn itself out), and in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 17.27; Ezekiel 20.47).

It should be noted that the fire is what is described with the adjective *asbestos*. It is not saying that the bodies of the unsaved will be made like the material called asbestos (which is flame retardant and does not burn up, which is why it was so popular in building insulation until people realized it caused mesothelioma). I say this because this comparison has come up. In his sermon “The Resurrection of the Dead,” for example, Charles Spurgeon makes the following analogy: “You have seen the asbestos lying in the fire red hot, but when you take it out it is unconsumed. So your body will be prepared by God in such a way that it will burn for ever

without being consumed.” Now, it must be noted that Spurgeon is not exegeting these verses or appealing to the Greek *asbestos* as to support his mistaken claim that the lost will become like asbestos. His claim is totally separate. *He* is not citing the Greek use of *asbestos* as evidence for his claim, but in the event that one might, I remind the reader that it is the fire, not the people or their bodies (which aren’t even mentioned) that is qualified as being “unquenchable” (Greek *asbestos*). This passage is not saying that the lost will be made like asbestos.

C. Old Testament Background of the Fire and Worm References

The statement about fire that is not quenched and worms that do not die in Mark 9.48 is not new with Jesus. This comes directly from Isaiah 66.24. In context, Isaiah is speaking about a mass slaughter at the end of the world. In the preceding verses, it is written:

For behold, the Lord will come in fire
And His chariots like the whirlwind,
To render His anger with fury,
And His rebuke with flames of fire.
For the Lord will execute judgment by fire
And by His sword on all flesh,
And those slain by the Lord will be many. (Isaiah 66.15-16)

After declaring the fate of the righteous in the end, God concludes the book by declaring, “And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh” (*KJV*, Isaiah 66.24). This is what Jesus quotes in Mark 9.48. As God declares, they will be looking not at resurrected, immortal creatures being tormented in Hell, but at dead bodies.

So then, what of the reference to undying worms and unquenched fire? The general assumption regarding this passage is that the undying worms and fire that never goes out (mistaken definition of “unquenchable fire”) indicate that the damned are in Hell for ever and ever, being subject to worms and fire. John Piper asks, “If annihilation (the view that some simply cease to exist after death) were in view, why would the stress be laid on the fire not ever being quenched and the worm never dying?” (*Let the Nations* 121). But the fact that Jesus is quoting Isaiah 66.24, which is all too often ignored by those who cite Mark 9.48, challenges Piper’s conclusion. Here, we see dead bodies subject to forces that, in everyday life, would consume them. It would seem that what Isaiah has in view is a scene of mass death and destruction, nothing like the idea of immortalized humans being eaten yet never devoured by worms and fire. The fate of the condemned is like the fate of the dead bodies of Isaiah 66.24.

Now, it is true that this at least appears to take place in an eschatological context, but that doesn’t prove that this vision is speaking of eternal torment. For starters, it is not clear on what side of final judgment we are looking at (assuming that this is eschatological). We know in the previous verses that God has basically accomplished a mass slaughter of the world’s unbelievers. Is this literal? If so, and it is simply people being slain, then this really isn’t speaking of eternal judgment at all, but rather of the events of the apocalypse that precede judgment, culminating in a slaughter of the unsaved who are still living. These are just the corpses of people who will be resurrected anyway. If it is not so literal, however, and it is speaking of the final fate of the resurrected wicked, then this still only helps the annihilationist case. If the corpses are referring to the aftermath of judgment, then, well, they are corpses. If them being slain like in an earthly context and left as corpses is symbolic of something, it at least isn’t obvious that it is referring to them being alive and conscious! If anything, saying that the end of the world entails the lost

being nothing but slain corpses bolsters my view. In short, either these are literal corpses, or these are corpses being used as symbols for the result of the end of God's judgment. As an annihilationist, I am quite comfortable with either outcome.

That said, what about the fact that the fire is not quenched and the worms do not die? Doesn't that show that this is an ongoing condition, and that therefore, the reference to corpses should be seen as symbolic merely of "spiritual death" (i.e. separation from God), meaning that they are really conscious and suffering (and not in a similar condition of corpses)? I will explain why this is not the case.

First of all, let us say that Isaiah is saying that the fire and worms continue on for ever and ever. If we are to be that literal about it (not that a fire being quenched necessarily means it burns forever even when taken literally), then why wouldn't we take the reference to carcasses equally literally? We'd be left with a very bizarre picture, since they'd have to somehow always have matter to be eaten, but even then, we still wouldn't be left with eternal torment. Isaiah would be saying there are literally corpses lying around that worms eat for eternity. That would be what Jesus is citing in Mark 9.48, and the meaning of eternal torment, at the very least, would not be obvious.

Secondly, there is no real reason to assume that these things are literally lasting forever. Worms and fire are consuming agents; they'd be a very strange thing to pair with corpses if the message was meant to be that the corpses are *not* consumed! The unquenched fire is easy to envision with the destruction of corpses (once we establish that it doesn't mean "a fire that never goes out"). It just means that it is not extinguished, not that it won't itself go out when it has burned everything. It is no different than Ezekiel 20.47 and Jeremiah 17.27, referenced above. It

makes perfect sense, really. The corpses are burnt up, which was normal to do with corpses of those whom you were not deemed worthy of proper burial.

As for the worms, it isn't quite as clear cut as with the fire. If the worms never ever die, that would initially seem to contradict the idea of the unsaved ceasing to exist. According to Alan Gomes, "Worms are able to live as long as there is food for them to consume. Once their food supply has been consumed, the worms eventually die." Thus, the damned whom they eat must continually exist. However, we must remember that it is not as though it says that the worms will always exist for eternity, continually eating the corpses (whether this is to be taken literally or as a metaphor, as some commentators argue in regards to Mark 9.48). It just says that they will not die. God doesn't say they will *never ever* stop eating whomever they are eating. That is an assumption. As consuming agents, we would imagine that they finish eating the corpses, and then, being still alive (as the prophecy says), they move on.

It is worth noting that the reference to worms has some parallels with other passages, passages that clearly aren't speaking of eternal torment. In Jeremiah 7.33, for example, God describes an earthly judgment. After this occurs, "The dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky and for the beasts of the earth; and no one will frighten *them away*." This would itself be fulfilling the warning God gave to the Israelites centuries before, as they approached the promised land. If they were to turn from Him, among His laundry list of curses was this: "Your carcasses will be food to all birds of the sky and to the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten *them away*" (Deuteronomy 28.26). Who is to say that Isaiah didn't have that in mind when forecasting this final slaughter? We have many of the same elements. Dead bodies of those slaughtered in divine vengeance are strewn about. Animals come to devour them, and nothing stops them. In the two passages just cited, it is clear that the animals

are not there for eternity. Just because it says that no one will scare the animals away doesn't mean that the animals will always be there. They will be there so long as there is something for them to consume, because, just like worms, that is what they do when dead bodies are involved. Here, lifeless corpses are devoured by animals. In Isaiah, lifeless corpses are consumed by worms. In Jeremiah and Deuteronomy, it is slaughter and destruction in view, and that sounds a lot like the passage at hand.

It is also worth noting that, just like the worms, it is said of many that they will not die, and yet they did not live forever. The priests, upon entering the temple, were told to observe the various laws so that they would not die (e.g. Exodus 30.20; Leviticus 8.35). Seeing as how they all have died, does that mean that they all disobeyed the purity laws? Of course not. They did not die *prematurely*. Instead of dropping dead for their error, they lived full lives. It is no different than a man who has been shot who reassures his frantic wife by telling her that he will live, or alternatively, "don't worry, *I will not die*. I will recover." Would she think that her husband has become immortal? Certainly not. Well, neither Mark nor Isaiah say that the worm will never die any more than the priests or wounded man will never ever die.

Who is to say that Isaiah didn't have something like that in mind here? It certainly is reasonable, in the context of worms and fire afflicting *carcasses*, that consumption is in view, and that the worms not dying simply means that they will not die until they finish. That may sound silly at first, but think about it; if the worms died before consuming all the flesh, the utter destruction would not be complete, just as if the fire were put out prematurely. In nature, a worm, after consuming its hosts, would not die. It would move on to another host. In nature, the worm that completely consumes is the worm that lives on. It does not die. If a worm were to die while consuming its host, the host would remain unconsumed. So, looking at nature and using that as a

picture, an undying worm could be seen as a *consuming* agent. They, in a sense, outlast the corpses; when the corpses are consumed, the worms remain. Thus, the worm does not die.

Now, one must ask if Isaiah is trying to be completely literal, saying that worms, or specifically, a worm, will continually live, or if he is looking at nature to make an analogy as I am saying. Either one is possible, and even if Isaiah means everything is there forever, since he is speaking of corpses, it is more absurd than harmful to the annihilationist doctrine. That said, the fact that he refers to corpses, and not damned persons, certainly makes the idea of an analogy far more likely. He is using a familiar picture, that of corpses exposed to fire and worms, to make his point. The undying worm and unquenched fire would seem to be going with this picture. Isaiah's words are another way of saying that they will completely consume them as one would expect in real life. It would go *with* the picture of corpses in real life, not against it.

D. Are We Unduly Restricting the New Testament Meaning with the Old Testament?

Some will claim that this interpretation puts too much emphasis on the Old Testament, and not the actual passage in view. When Edward Fudge made a similar claim as I do in *The Fire That Consumes*, Robert Peterson countered with this: "Once more Fudge imposes his annihilationist reading of the OT upon the NT text" ("The Hermeneutics"). However, like me, all he "imposes" is the meaning of the particular Old Testament text unto the New Testament when the New Testament directly quotes it. As I mentioned in Section XV, Peterson also says, "Fudge errs by reading his supposed meaning of Isaiah 66:24 into the New Testament, where it does not fit" (*Hell on Trial* 63). Does not fit? In other words, even if Fudge's interpretation of Isaiah 66.24 is correct (simply being that it isn't speaking of eternal torment, which it isn't), Peterson actually argues that it still should not be applied to the New Testament passage that quotes it. But

why would Jesus have quoted it if it did not fit? Is it not at least a reasonable possibility that Jesus would want to convey something like the meaning of the text He quotes?

Now, it is true that Old Testament texts can have secondary meanings beyond what they literally speak of, and they can be used to mean something different than what they literally spoke of when used in the Old Testament. For example, Matthew took note of the words of Hosea 11.1 when Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Egypt to flee from Herod. Of their later return to Israel, Matthew writes, “*This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON’*” (Matthew 2.15b). Matthew wasn’t literally saying that something God had done in the past was a prophecy for the future (although occasionally direct prophecies of the future can be written in past sense). In the same verse from Hosea, it is clear that God’s “son” is the kingdom of Israel, and that God is recounting how He freed them in the days of Exodus. This idea was nothing new in first-century Judaism; ancient Jewish belief was that prophecies had secondary, messianic meanings. Although a prophecy literally spoke of a particular thing, it also had applications to the Messiah. In Luke 24.45, we are told the following about when the Lord met with His disciples: “Then He opened their minds to understand the Scripture.” Does one need divine intervention to see the clear and literal messianic references such as in Psalm 110, stuff that others like the Bereans of Acts 17 could easily see, or would one need such help rather to understand the subtleties? When was David, while recounting a battle in the Psalms, speaking only of himself, and when would the things he said also apply to Jesus? Those secondary references to scripture that literally spoke of something else but also apply to Jesus are common in the New Testament. Jesus points to them at times (such as His reference to Psalm 41.9 in John 13.18). So I agree that New Testament quotations of Hebrew scriptures can have meanings apart from what was literally written before.

However, just because passages *can* have these secondary meanings doesn't mean that this specific passage *must* have a secondary meaning of eternal torment. Mark 9.48 isn't pointing out how the Old Testament was worded by God in such a way that its words apply to Jesus despite talking about something else. Now, I'm not saying that Jesus is saying the exact same thing as Isaiah: Jesus is speaking of eternal judgment whereas Isaiah might not be. As some traditionalists would argue, what we also see in Isaiah 66.24 is a type, and Hell is the antitype. However, there is no reason to believe that mass slaughter and fire and worms represent eternal torment and not something much more similar in nature to mass slaughter and fire and worms (i.e. eternal annihilation). Why does the antitype have to be eternal torment? We certainly aren't told that it is. After all, all that Jesus does is quote the verse. Is it because He is speaking of Hell, of *Gehenna*? I agree wholeheartedly; He is speaking about *Gehenna*, and He uses a picture of slaughter and destruction of corpses to shed light on it. Why then couldn't the antitype of the type be something that is similar to the type but greater? Why must it be something considerably different, and only that one particular something different (being eternal torment)? Why does allowing the New Testament to expand upon the language of the Old require that Jesus had to mean eternal torment? Why can't death and slaughter be a type for the antitype of eternal destruction?

The way that Jesus uses Isaiah 66.24 can certainly make sense when keeping the image of the original passage. Why would we assume that when Jesus makes a reference to the destruction of corpses, He isn't suggesting the same kind of fate for the unsaved? If the Lord wanted to speak of worms and fire that tormented for eternity, or of some picture painted by them to spell out eternal suffering, if He wanted to say something new, why did He not just do that?

E. Other Possible Meanings of Isaiah 66.24

According to Robert Peterson, the end prophecy of Isaiah should be viewed much more symbolically, spelling out eternal punishment (that is, eternal torment):

For exposed corpses to be eaten by worms or burned was a disgrace. In all other cases, the worms would die when they had finished their foul work (cf. Isa 14:11), and the fire would go out once its fuel was consumed. But in the prophet's picture of God's judgment of those who rebel, the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched! The punishment and the shame of the wicked have no end; their fate is eternal. (*Hell on Trial* 32)

Let's stop and analyze what is said so far. Peterson makes the assumptions I discussed in the previous subsection, namely that the undying worm and unquenched fire mean eternally-burning fire and eternally-living and devouring worms. Based on those assumptions, it is argued that Isaiah is discussing an eternal fate, and that eternal fate includes consciousness. It's all really just saying that there is eternal shame for the lost. The fact that they are dead bodies, which by their nature cannot feel or think or suffer, seems not to matter.

Peterson continues:

Isaiah here does not give us (as the New Testament does) a developed doctrine of Hell. He doesn't speak of the resurrection of the dead, or of the Last Judgment. Instead, he uses earthly imagery – corpses, worm, and fire – to point to the final doom of the wicked. He gives us an early description of eternal punishment: though dead, the rebels will continue to suffer forever. (*Hell on Trial* 32)

Not referring to these tormented rebels as corpses would have helped Peterson a lot. He is right that there is an element of shame. After all, they are a source of contempt and disgust. However,

shame and destruction are not mutually exclusive. Why does Peterson assume that they are suffering conscious punishment? After all, they are dead bodies. In real life under normal circumstances, the worms and fire that consume the bodies also bring shame, just as Peterson says. To have your corpses exposed to the elements was terribly shameful, but it didn't bring any conscious pain. I'm sure the corpses of some godly people were left in that shameful state, yet surely they weren't suffering after death!

Secondly, even if Isaiah is saying that the fire and worms go on forever, and this is a symbol of shame, it would only be a symbol of shame. What I mean is that Isaiah is clearly not referring to literally unending fire and worms, unless of course the corpses are magic corpses that never burn up and continually grow rotting flesh to sustain the worms. Peterson isn't claiming that either. The eternal worms and fire would be symbolic. Therefore, Jesus would not be saying that there are worms that never ever die in Hell if He meant anything like Isaiah did. He would then be referring to the eternal shame.

How does this then translate into eternal torment? The reasoning is that if a corpse is exposed to worms and fire, as opposed to being buried, it is subject to shame. That is indeed correct. The idea is taken further; if the fire and worms, which cause shame, continue forever, the shame continues forever. That apparently means that eternal torment is true.

If Isaiah does mean that both the fire and worms continue forever, then Peterson is right in that it would likely stand for unending shame. But so what? How would that prove eternal torment? It doesn't do so any more than it did for Daniel 12.2. The wicked die and their corpses are shown as always being subject to shame as a symbol for the shame that the actual damned suffer. However, in the case of Isaiah, they are dead bodies. More importantly, they suffer a shame that can *only* be applied to dead bodies (that is, the shame of being unburied and left to the

elements). The fact that these are dead bodies makes it very hard to say that for one to be an abhorrence, he must be conscious to know it. Even if the unsaved person's soul is conscious, the corpses, which are what are in view, are certainly not conscious to know anything. It also doesn't help traditionalism at all that the picture of them is of corpses and the picture of their shame is one that *only* a lifeless corpse, and not a living, sentient being, can suffer. Their shame is specifically like that of a corpse! If you looked out and saw corpses left out, it would be an abhorrence, but they wouldn't be there to feel it. Isaiah would be using earthly images to make a point, but he would be using what are probably the worst earthly images he could have possibly used to make the point of eternal existence and eternal torment.

Even if it is a picture of shame, one must read the eternal conscious existence into it. If this, unending shame, is the meaning from Isaiah, and Jesus is applying it to Hell, it still doesn't prove eternal torment. The only way that Jesus could be definitively speaking of eternal torment is if He were saying those words on His own, and only if the reference to worms never dying was taken in the most literal sense, that them not dying means that they never ever die. That is how many interpret Mark 9.48 on its own (along with a misunderstanding of what it means to quench a fire), but Mark 9.48 is not on its own, and to treat it as it were is a far worse bit of hermeneutics than "imposing" an Old Testament meaning on a quote from the Old Testament.

F. The Book of Judith and Rabbinic Literature – Some Concessions (and Rebuttals)

There is nothing in Isaiah 66.24 itself to indicate eternal torment, and nothing in how Jesus uses it in Mark 9.48 to indicate that it didn't carry the same picture that was in the original passage (albeit on an eternal scale). But what about the idea that Jesus would have expected His

words to carry a radically different meaning to His audience due to uninspired theological writings of that time?

The book of Judith is part of the apocrypha, the books that are accepted into the canon by the Roman Catholic Church but that are not part of our 66-book protestant Bibles. Judith 16:17 refers to undying worms that torment people forever: “Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment; fire and worms he will give to their flesh; they shall weep in pain for ever” (*RSV*). This passage is significant because it does give an alternative possible meaning to what Jesus says in this verse about undying worms and unquenchable fire: After all, if Judith used fire and worms as a means of eternal torment, maybe that was the view Jesus was appealing to.

That said, I do not believe it to be likely that He was alluding to Judith, given that Jesus’s words are so similar to Isaiah. Just look at the wording. Yes, Jesus makes a reference to fire and worms, as does Judith, but not all references to fire and worms are the same. If Jesus was drawing on Judith or something like that, why did He quite clearly refer to Isaiah? Judith makes no mention of worms not dying or fire not being quenched, but Jesus and Isaiah do. Neither Jesus nor Isaiah mention eternity, or even pain, but Judith explicitly does. Jesus’s words have a very loose connection to the words of Judith, but as numerous translators are also aware, they are quite clearly a quotation of an Old Testament verse, that being Isaiah 66.24 (albeit slightly altered, which Jesus does to Old Testament verses many times). If Jesus wanted to say what Judith said, why didn’t he just quote Judith? That would have been so clear. If Jesus had done that, the traditionalist would have a much stronger argument, to say the least. Or why not just generically refer to worms and fire, if such imagery was clearly a sign of eternal torment in the first century (which I doubt it was)? However, the Lord quite clearly and unambiguously uses the

language of Isaiah. Who, upon hearing His words or reading the Gospel of Mark in the first century, would not have seen this?

A stronger argument can be made from the way that Isaiah 66.24 was used in a piece of rabbinic literature. In the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Rosh Hashanah, Chapter 1 (27), it is quoted in reference to eternal torment of a group of individuals. It certainly cannot be said, then, that it would have been impossible for Jesus to have had eternal torment in mind, as this verse had been applied to the fate of eternal torment at some point near Jesus's time.

However, a number of important things must be said. First of all, that this view existed is not to say that it was even common, let alone universal. It clearly wasn't what Isaiah himself was speaking of; it's no secret that the application of scripture by rabbis in the era wasn't exactly known for being precise or literal. Jesus *could* have had this use in mind, but that is not the same as saying that He clearly did.

Furthermore, this passage of the Talmud doesn't teach only eternal torment as some argue that the rabbinic literature does. First of all, although it teaches eternal torment for some, it also teaches that many of those who go to *Gehenna* eventually find salvation. It is not like the traditional Christian view, because for many it is essentially a form of purgatory, not final punishment. Many are freed because God has mercy on them (26). Was Jesus warning just of going to a place of punishment that for some would just be temporary? Some, such as those who sin with the body, who are clearly some of those Jesus was appealing to in Mark 9.43-48 (given the references to cutting of body parts if they lead to sin), are not eternally tormented but annihilated after 12 months (27). If Jesus were appealing to this rabbinic view, His warning was as much one of annihilation as anything else.

Aside from the above, Jesus's teachings were counter to several aspects of this Talmudic passage. This same passage also says that the eternal suffering of the worst sinners would continue "even when Gehenna will be destroyed" (27). Whereas Jesus applied Isaiah's words to *Gehenna*, the Talmud here applies them in spite of it. In other words, although there is eternal torment for some, *Gehenna* itself is temporary! If Jesus was mimicking the same figurative application of Isaiah 66.24 as is expressed here, He would have also had to have been saying that *Gehenna* lasts for eternity, since it is *Gehenna* where the worm does not die and so forth. In other words, He would have to also be saying that *Gehenna* is *not* temporary. If Jesus meant to express eternal torment by quoting Isaiah, as this part of the Talmud does, He would be disavowing the view of *Gehenna* which the Talmud expresses, being that it is temporary. Therefore, He could not be saying that He agreed with its whole teaching. Jesus either disagrees with the Talmud's nature of *Gehenna*, or the application of Isaiah 66.24, or both. He could not have simply been parroting this rabbinic view, as no matter what, He diverged from at least part of it.

More thematically, Jesus seems to differ in how He views the fate of all sinners overall. As noted above, the Talmud here separates different sinners and their fates, holding a detailed, developed theology of the end times. Jesus, however, just sorta lumps them together. Those who sin with the body (whom the Talmud here says face annihilation) and those who lead others to sin (whom it says face eternal torment) all face the same *Gehenna*, and more importantly, all are described by His use of Isaiah 66.24. Whereas rabbis "progressed" theologically, coming up with all sorts of ideas and "developing" their theology from that of the vague Old Testament teachings, Jesus seems to be stuck in the old ways and old ideas of God simply either saving or destroying. Jesus is hardly parroting the rabbinic teachings. Death is death, sinners are sinners, and all the wicked fall into the same fate. Now, we would agree with that idea, because that is what the

Bible teaches, but He sure isn't following the Talmud in His teachings here. Who is to say that He also held to a sense of Isaiah 66.24 that shares the slightest resemblance to the Old Testament meaning (as opposed to this particular rabbinic view)? Why must He be parroting this passage of the Talmud, especially when He diverges from it on so many other parts?

G. What about the Claim Luke 16.19-31 Is From A Fable?

One might ask how one can claim that the story of the rich man and Lazarus is from a fable and yet deny that Jesus would teach from uninspired writings here. Well, my response is this: there is a fundamental difference between Mark 9.48 and Luke 16.19-31. With Mark 9.48, the question is whether Jesus is referencing the Old Testament or something else. However, nobody is suggesting that the story of the rich man and Lazarus is based on the Old Testament. No scriptural reference is made. There is no Old Testament description of *Sheol* (Hebrew equivalent of *Hades*) that describes it as we see it in this story. Either Jesus is introducing a description of *Hades* that amounts to a new teaching about what the intermediate state is like, or He is using an already existent bit of folklore as the background of a parable in order to make the points that He wanted to make (as described in Section XIX).

It is a matter of folklore vs. entirely new teaching. In Mark 9.48, it is a matter of folklore versus scripture. For Luke 16.19-31, I gave a number of reasons why the story uses elements of folklore in the background of a parable. This passage is different, and if a passage appears to directly quote the Old Testament, especially when giving a direct, non-parabolic description of something, I am much more inclined to believe that the reference is being made to the God-breathed Old Testament and its meaning than I am to think that it is a reference to folklore.

H. Now to Complicate the Issue...The Targum

One theory put forth (not specifically to defend eternal torment) is that Jesus's words come not just from the inspired Hebrew version of Isaiah (which He almost directly quotes), nor from the book of Judith, but from the targum of Isaiah. For those not familiar with the targums, they are translations of the Old Testament into Aramaic from a few centuries prior to Christ (the exact dates are not clear). However, unlike the Greek Septuagint, which is known to be quite faithful to the Hebrew text (so much so that New Testament authors would sometimes quote it verbatim in their inspired writings), the targums are known for adding outside information and meaning to the texts. If we compare them to English Bible translations, the Septuagint would be like the NASB or ESV, and the targums would be more like the NLT (at times, even more like *The Message*).

This comes into play because of this: Jesus may have been referring to the targum of Isaiah when He made this reference. According to Steve Rudd: "The Hebrew and the Septuagint say nothing about 'Gehenna', but the targum has: '...will not die and their fire shall not be quenched, and the wicked shall be judged in Gehenna...'" That is a good point. Jesus may have been referring to the picture painted by Isaiah, or He may have been giving approval to the concept in the targum, that Isaiah speaks of *Gehenna*. Obviously, the scriptural Isaiah doesn't literally speak of *Gehenna* (there is no mention of anything of the sort in the actual inspired passage), but we know that some scriptures have deeper meanings beyond what is literally said. How many Psalms that are literally about King David does Jesus point to as being about Him? If Isaiah is painting the picture of eternal judgment beyond just the final slaughter of the unrighteous, it could be that the targum authors had the right interpretation, and that Jesus, by tying Isaiah to Gehenna, was making a reference to their interpretation (which would validate it).

What does this mean for the debate of eternal torment versus conditional immortality? Really, it very much muddies the whole issue. Traditionalists (not in defending traditionalism but rather in taking it for granted) see the connection between *Gehenna* and the targums (as does *The Interactive Bible*). However, if this is true, and Jesus is referring to the conclusions drawn in the targum, it still doesn't help the doctrine of eternal torment. If anything, it might strike a blow to it. Here is Isaiah 66.24 according to the targum: "And they [the righteous] shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men, the sinners who have rebelled against my Word: for their souls shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched; and the wicked shall be judged in Hell, till the righteous shall say concerning them, 'we have seen enough'" (bracketed statements theirs) (*The Chaldee Paraphrase* 226).

Indeed, saying that "their souls" will not die instead of "their worm" is certainly very good for the traditionalist view. However, what then does it say? It says that they will be judged in Hell *until* the righteous say that they have seen enough. How long until they say that they've seen enough? The contemporary Babylonian Talmud says that for most sinners, the period of time in Gehenna is limited to 12 months (Rich). Regardless of an exact number, the fact that the torment continues until the righteous put an end to it at least makes reasonably possible that they will one day say "enough," meaning that the suffering of the wicked is not eternal.

The targum of Isaiah seems to indicate that their torment may likely end, at least in this passage, and therefore, it is not a big help to the doctrine of eternal torment. What happens after the righteous say "enough"? Do the wicked souls then die? Are they sent somewhere else for a different punishment? Are they let into the kingdom, as is prophesied in the Ethiopian text of *The Apocalypse of Peter*? There is no way to know. This argument from the targum of Isaiah ultimately cuts both ways.

I. Why It Might Be Hasty to Assume Jesus Was Referring to the Targum

If Jesus were making reference to the targum, why would He not quote it as such? Think about it; Jesus says that their *worm* won't die, which is from the Hebrew Isaiah. The targum replaces "worm" with "soul." If Jesus wanted to make reference to how the targum interprets it, why did He say worm? As far as I know, the Hebrew *towla*, which is translated as worm, does not in any context mean soul, nor does the Greek *skolex* (which Mark writes of). I suppose that since I don't know Aramaic, maybe their word for worm might also mean soul unbeknownst to me and this was a mistranslation. Nothing surprises me when it comes to translations, but I don't think we have to worry about this one. Souls and maggots are not exactly similar...

Although Jesus does make a reference to *Gehenna*, which is consistent with the Targum of Isaiah, the phrase He explicitly uses is in Isaiah and not in the targum. Doesn't it make much more sense that He is simply referring to *Gehenna* and quoting the Old Testament, the sacred scripture that He created, as it is applicable to make his point? Isaiah does not mention *Gehenna*, this is true, and it would be nice and simple if Jesus was referencing a directly eschatological work like Judith or the targum, but He isn't. Looking at simply what is said, He's quoting Isaiah, the inspired Hebrew text.

J. Jesus and Source Materials

Jesus wasn't making an even remotely obvious reference to Judith, and He quotes the Hebrew Isaiah, not the targum. It's not impossible that He meant to give it a totally new meaning as some had, but acknowledging that it is possible is a far cry from insisting that it must be what He meant. Jesus may very well have been alluding to the passage He quoted, and not alternative

views, even if that doesn't fit the nice linear narrative of theology progressively developing from the Old Testament to the rabbis and intertestamental literature to the New Testament.

That's okay. Jesus doesn't have to base His teachings on the writings from between the Old Testament and the New. He wasn't just some rabbi; He is the Lord. He could preach that saying hinkle-finkle-dinkle-doo would make it rain malted milk balls, and it would be true, even if no previous writings had said so (though obviously He never said such a thing and it isn't true – I've tried it). I have noticed the following tendency: Jesus always seems to be referencing some uninspired work when it comes to eschatology (if it supports ECT) as opposed to referencing the Old Testament or simple reality. Of course, if you try to suggest that the story of the rich man and Lazarus from Luke 16.19-31 might be from a Jewish fable...

I'd imagine that He simply is using the picture and imagery of the Old Testament to explain His teaching of Hell. And if anything, Isaiah's prophecies are more closely related to Hell than are some of the references to the Messiah that Jesus reveals from obscure passages of the Psalms and Old Testament. After all, Isaiah prophesies about an event that takes place at the end of the world. He speaks specifically about the death and destruction of those slaughtered en masse at the end of time. If this is an earthly slaughter (which I believe), then Jesus would just simply be pointing out that the literal mass slaughter that occurs at the second coming would be foreshadowing the mass eternal destruction of the damned that follows right after that in *Gehenna*. The tie in is very close.

If Jesus were referring to the targum (which wouldn't really help the traditionalist case anyway), and not the Hebrew scripture, why does He make the reference to worms, something only in the Hebrew, and not to souls (as only the targum does)? If He was referring to Judith, why did He so radically alter it? If He wasn't quoting Isaiah, why did He say something that

sounded so similar? Looking plainly at what is said, He is citing the inspired Hebrew writings of Isaiah, and although it is possible that He meant to allude to a new and totally different meaning that popped up in writings He otherwise disagreed with, it is only a possibility, not the definitive factor in how to interpret Mark 9.43-48.

Mark 9.43-48 is not absolutely inconsistent with the traditional view, but it is hardly the clear reference to eternal suffering that we have been led to believe. This oft-cited passage that we have been told is Jesus's declaration of eternal torment in Hell turned out to be a reference to the lifeless corpses of the slain enemies of God. This is the kind of eternal torment proof-text that turns traditionalists into annihilationists.

XXII. MARK 9.49

Now, you might be wondering why Mark 9.49 has its own section, seeing as how the previous section went up to Verse 48. The reason for this is two-fold. First of all, although they are part of the same discussion, there isn't really much connection between how they are used. In attempting to prove eternal torment, they are often treated very much in isolation. The second reason I separated this verse from those in the previous section is because of how often they are used (or not used). Mark 9.48 and the preceding verses are used across the board. It is exceedingly rare to come across a book or even a short online article that does not mention at least Verse 48. However, although they may have been more common in past centuries among reformed theologians, as noted by Albert Barnes (366), appeals to Verse 49 are now about as rare as a book or article on Hell that does not mention the verses prior. It wasn't even until a later revision of this treatment of Hell that I was even made aware that people appeal to this verse at all; it really is that rare. However, since my emphasis in this work is to be thorough, it seemed appropriate to address this verse (albeit briefly).

Here is the verse in question: "Everyone will be salted with fire."

The main traditionalist argument from this passage is that salt was used as a preservative in ancient times, and since Jesus says that everything will be salted with fire, that fire is said to be a preserving agent. The fire Jesus speaks of preserves the lost (the way that salt preserves food), and thus, this verse proves that they are never destroyed. John Gill is the only big name I know of who has furthered this theory, though there may be others. He writes:

That fire shall be to them, what salt is to flesh; as that keeps flesh from putrefaction and corruption, so the fire of hell, as it will burn, torture, and distress rebellious sinners, it will preserve them in their beings; they shall not be

consumed by it, but continued in it: so that these words are a reason of the former, showing and proving, that the soul in torment shall never die, or lose any of its powers and faculties.

The first problem I have with this interpretation is that fire is fire. In order for this interpretation to work, it isn't enough to simply argue that the fire doesn't destroy the lost. It has to be the case that the fire *preserves* them. The fire keeps them from dying/being destroyed. It's not just that it doesn't destroy, but rather, it also keeps what would otherwise be destroyed from being destroyed. Am I off base to assume that most of you reading this would have never thought of fire as a preservative until now? It is one thing to suggest that God makes the bodies of the unsaved impervious to fire. Although humans as we know them would burn up and die, it's not as though it would be impossible for God to change that in the future. But something which only destroys must in this world must now be seen as a preserving agent. It would be one thing if the Lord had actually said "the fire will preserve them." I certainly would accept that God was going to create a special, supernatural fire that preserves its victims if God actually told us as much. But He didn't. All Jesus did was tie fire to salt; Gill and others filled in the rest.

Of course, it is not enough for me to just say that an interpretation is absurd, baseless, and totally counter-intuitive; I need to be able to give some reasonable alternative. Well, in terms of this verse, interpretations abound. This is because the verse just isn't that straightforward, and it leaves a lot of room for speculation. As Ezra Gould says referring to this verse (and Verse 50), "This is confessedly one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the N.T" (180). According to Presbyterian theologian Albert Barnes: "Perhaps no passage in the New Testament has given more perplexity to commentators than this; and it may be impossible now to fix its precise meaning" (360). Bruce Milne says "The linkage [between salt and fire] is not crystal clear, and

the form of the text is somewhat uncertain” (147). The interpretation of this verse is made all the more difficult by Verse 50, where Jesus famously speaks of the salt that is the disciple. The passage reads as follows: “Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty *again*? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” The use of the salt imagery here is straightforward, referring to the purity and godliness of the disciples. In other words, Verse 50 is speaking of salt in a way that has nothing to do with Hell or final punishment.

Because salt is used to speak of the aspects of a disciple in the same passage as Jesus’s declaration of everything being salted with fire, a key universalist interpretation makes sense. The fire of Hell purifies those in it, and thus it is compared to salt. This would give the salt the same meaning as we see in Verse 50. God salts (purifies) everybody with fire. That makes sense. Fire is not a preserving agent, but it can purify things (such as precious metals). The wicked will experience this in Hell (where they are kept until purified enough for Heaven). The righteous already are salty (i.e. godly), and thus they are warned not to lose their metaphorical saltiness in Verse 50. Of course, since this is not *The Bible Teaches Universalism*, I do not follow that interpretation, though that does not mean that it is not a reasonable one.

A number of non-universalist interpreters don’t even see the unsaved being brought up in this passage to begin with (largely in light of Verse 50). A number of these of interpreters allude to Leviticus 2.13. The passage reads as follows: “Every grain offering of yours, moreover, you shall season with salt, so that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.” The fact that they are salted might be an allusion to Levitical sacrifices. Albert Barnes sees Verse 49 leading into Verse 50; as sacrifices unto God, the disciples must remain morally pure (represented by salt and fire), or else they will be useless (as salt that has lost its saltiness) (366). John Calvin reasons similarly,

contrasting Verse 48 with Verse 49: “According to Mark’s narrative, our Lord, having spoken of eternal *fire*, (Mark 9:48) exhorts his own people, on the contrary, to offer themselves now to God to be seasoned *with fire and salt*, that they may be devoted sacrifices, and that they may not draw upon themselves, by their sins, that *fire* which is never extinguished” (*Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke* 239). According to Edward Fudge: “Jesus offers His disciples a choice: the fire of persecution now or the fire of Gehenna later” (*The Fire* 187). These interpretations are quite reasonable, given the context.

Alternatively, this passage has been seen as speaking specifically of destruction. Weston Fields of Grace Theological Seminary suggests that the Greek may in fact be a translation of a Hebrew idiom that means to destroy completely (302). According to friend and fellow conditionalist Chris Date (of the Theopologetics Podcast), Edward Fudge has more recently come to this view as well (“Salted with Fire”). If that is the correct interpretation of this passage, it certainly cannot hurt my position.

My initial interpretation prior to all of this was far simpler. I just pictured *Gehenna* being “salted” by fire, meaning God sprinkled fire liberally over things (like someone pouring salt). This scene, likely at least somewhat figurative, would be consistent with any of the three views of final punishment, since what the fire does (torment, destroy, or purify) is not mentioned. I figured that Jesus used it as a segue to talk about the figure of salt (being purity) in the following verse. I still believe that that is a reasonable interpretation, although given the significant meanings of salt, it is hardly a given. I’ve come to largely the same conclusions as commentators like Barnes and Gould; this passage is cryptic to us now, and many of the different interpretations work. There is no reason why we have to turn around everything we know about fire just because Jesus said “salted.”

XXIII. “WEEPING AND GNASHING OF TEETH”

A. Introduction

A number of passages speak of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” when describing the demise of the unsaved (e.g. Matthew 13.42; 50; Luke 13.28). It is often taken for granted that this is a description of the pain that the lost will suffer for ever and ever as they are tormented in Hell. However, this is an unwarranted assumption. First of all, weeping and gnashing of teeth do indicate distress, but they do not necessarily indicate the infliction of torture. Secondly, and most importantly, the Bible never says that the lost will weep and gnash their teeth for eternity.

B. Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth Do Not Necessarily Indicate the Infliction of Torment

1. Weeping

People weep for all kinds of reasons: sadness, grief, anger, as well as physical torment. Somebody who is rejected by God because they rejected Christ, who sees Heaven but is about to be thrown into the fire of annihilation, would be unspeakably devastated. And like someone condemned to the traditionalist conception of hell, they would be absolutely hopeless. Even if the fate that awaits them is ultimately less terrible than eternal conscious burning, what they face will still be more terrible than what we can imagine in this life. We as Christians don’t know what that’s like, and we never will, because we always can call on the Lord. Just like anyone headed for eternal torment, they would be begging for mercy, regretting everything they ever thought or did. Imagine every regret or moment of hopelessness you’ve ever had. Those of you who, like me, were not raised in a church environment will understand this especially well. Well, no regret or lack of hope could ever compare to what they would go through. Worst of all, they

have no chance of redemption. There are two elements to the issue of eternity. There is the endlessness of duration, but there is also the irreversibility of it. If anything is eternal, its definition is irreversible. How much would the damned wish they could change their fate, but they can't! It's over for all eternity, irreversibly. And they will know it.

People often think that annihilationists believe in a wimpy God; "Oh, they just face a peaceful death, not punishment," is how one might falsely characterize my position about the lost. Maybe those who do were raised in Christian homes and never really knew life in the world well. Or maybe they simply forgot what it was like being in the world. Either way, regular people fear death more than anything (despite that study where more people chose public speaking). It's wired in us. The whole biological reason we feel pain is to prevent death (neither of which will be an issue in the world to come, of course - Revelation 21.4). Worldly people often weep and do anything they can to avoid certain death, and that's just to go back to a life on earth that is, well, far from ideal. Imagine being faced with extinction after seeing God's kingdom, and knowing that it's all your fault and that you can never ever make up for it, ever. Ever. We no longer know what it's like to be without redemption; we can always be redeemed. They can't. The worst hopelessness we may have felt before we knew Jesus is only enough to make us understand that hopelessness can exist; they, however, will know it in its absolute fullness.

You know how sometimes we get that unquenchable desire to finally meet Jesus, even just to kiss his feet like that woman in Luke 7? This will be nothing compared to the want that they will probably have when they see God. Granted, I believe wholeheartedly that their desire will ultimately be for the perks and not for God Himself, but could you imagine knowing that it's there and that you can never ever have it? For us, our desire is just a matter of anticipation, our wanting what we will one day have. For them, it will be regret beyond regret and despair beyond

despair. Nothing on earth could compare to the weeping and wailing of those about to be thrown in the eternal fire, even if it will annihilate them instead of torturing them for ever and ever.

2. Gnashing Of Teeth

On top of the references to weeping and wailing, we have “the gnashing of teeth.” People see that and assume that we’re referring to awful pain and torment. Just imagine the imagery.

However, if you look at gnashing of teeth in the Bible (except for passages about the end of times, which are being debated here), that phrase is actually indicative of anger and/or hatred, not pain.

Job 16.9 – (Job talking about God’s apparent anger and hatred towards him):

His anger has torn me and hunted me down,

He has *gnashed at me with His teeth*;

My adversary glares at me. (Emphasis added)

Psalm 35.16 – (David referring to his enemies): “Like godless jesters at a feast, / They *gnashed at me with their teeth*” (Emphasis added)

Psalm 112.10:

The wicked will see it and be vexed,

He will *gnash his teeth* and melt away;

The desire of the wicked will perish. (Emphasis added)

Acts 7.54 – (the unbelieving Jews right before they stone Stephen for telling them about Jesus): “When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and *gnashed their teeth* at him” (emphasis added) (NIV).

Although the NASB phrases it oddly in the applicable passages above (e.g. “gnashed at me with His teeth”), the point is clear (as David and Job weren’t being bitten by anyone). A

number of other passages speak of gnashing of teeth (use of a website like Biblegateway will make searching easy). All of them that don't speak of the end of the age are just as the four that I chose above (I don't count the controversial ones for obvious reasons).

Even outside of theology, is gnashing of teeth ever seen as a sign of pain rather than anger? I will point to some popular culture. There are two episodes of the television show *The Simpsons* in which this famously comes into play. In a nutshell, Homer, the main male character, becomes the manager for a young female country singer, which angers his wife Marge. During the recording of the song, the studio manager refers to a mysterious grinding sound that was picked up, at which point the audience sees a furious, wide eyed Marge loudly gnashing her teeth ("Colonel Homer"). Similarly, when the characters involved are reunited some 16 seasons later, a similar scene occurs, drawing on the scene in the music studio ("Papa Don't Leech"). In neither case is Marge in pain; rather, she is angry. In fact in the latter episode, the teeth gnashing occurs after her son says "I can't remember how Mom felt about it" (paraphrased). Regardless of one's opinion of that show, the point still remains that we see it in the Bible and popular culture alike; people grind their teeth in anger, not pain.

There's nothing about gnashing of teeth that is inconsistent with the idea of a final end. As scripture and popular culture indicate, gnashing of teeth is a sign of anger, not a physical reaction to pain (like gnawing one's tongue in agony, as seen in Revelation 16.10). According to the theory of annihilation, they gnash their teeth out of anger at themselves, or hatred of God, or hatred of the angels who throw them in the fire, or one of many other reasons along those lines.

Now, this doesn't in any way prove annihilationism over eternal torment. The same exact things could be said if they were going to be burned alive for ever and ever. They'd weep and gnash their teeth all the same. The point is, however, that weeping and gnashing of teeth reflects

that they are sad and angry, which could be true of either annihilation or eternal torment. This is important because passages that mention weeping and gnashing of teeth are sometimes used as proof-texts of eternal torment, but they fit in with annihilation too.

C. “Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth” Does Not Suggest Eternal Existence

Why would one right off the bat insist that one who weeps and gnashes his teeth cannot do so and then be destroyed? Something quite like that is seen in scripture, in a verse cited above, no less. Although this is likely just a reference to earthly death, David says of his enemies:

The wicked will see it and be vexed,

He will *gnash his teeth* and melt away;

The desire of the wicked will perish. (Emphasis added) (Psalm 112.10)

In that context, they gnash their teeth in anger, and then die off. That fits annihilation pretty well.

The issue of location comes into play, and it can be one of the traditionalist’s strongest (i.e. only) arguments regarding weeping and gnashing of teeth. Let’s look at Matthew 13.41-42: “The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (NIV). Initially, I did miss the importance of the Greek preposition *ekēi*. It means “there,” but in the sense of location (The Lockman Foundation 1646). Some older, very-literal versions, such as ASV, translate Verse 42 differently: “And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.” I initially had misunderstood the use of *ekēi* for “there” as simply being an indicator of future action, as the ASV and similar translations appeared to be saying. However, as it does mean something like “over there” or “in that place,” it does speak of a place where the weeping and gnashing of teeth

will occur. Because of this, one can be led to believe that it is saying that inside the fiery furnace of Matthew 13.42 is where the weeping and gnashing of teeth will occur. Since weeping and gnashing of teeth require consciousness, the people are consciously existent in the fire, or so the argument goes.

The first thing that the annihilationist must point out is that it is not always clear where this place is. Does the weeping and gnashing of teeth in Matthew 13.42 occur inside the furnace, or in the place or places where the angels are as they are throwing the men into it? Is the location the furnace itself, or the place where the events spoken of (the angels throwing them in) are taking place? Regarding the former, David Powys states flatly, “This is not the natural sense of the expression [*ekei*]” (283). If it is the latter, it is no harm at all to the annihilationist case. It could then simply be as Powys interprets it, where “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is being used “to express reaction at the prospect of destruction” (282).

With this in mind, it must be noted that in at least one case, the location spoken of almost certainly is not the place where the damned are cast, but the place they are at when they are cast away. This is significant, because if the weeping and gnashing of teeth occur at the place where they are judged, then it only indicates that they are consciously existent at their judgment, which is a given. In Luke 13.24-28, Jesus speaks of those who try to enter the “narrow door” and cannot. Jesus speaks about the owner of the house, saying that he will tell them they are not welcome. The Lord then concludes with this declaration, essentially explaining its meaning: “In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out” (Verse 28). Now, where is this gnashing of teeth supposed to take place? There is no mention of Hell. There is no mention of another “place” that Jesus can mean. There is no “fiery furnace,” no “outer

darkness.” The only place mentioned is where they are when they see the patriarchs in the kingdom. Where would this have to be? Since they are said to be thrown out, this would be in God’s presence, probably at the entrance of God’s kingdom (to whatever extent there can be an entrance). This place is where they are judged, not where they are sent to after. The place where they weep and gnash their teeth is the place where they are cast from, not the place that they are cast into. It parallels the end of the parable in the previous verse, where they come to the door, see the house, but are rejected and sent away. This would be the place from where the angels take the unsaved and cast them into the fires of Hell, as Jesus describes in His explanation of the parable of the tares in Matthew 13.42. Ultimately, what other “place” could be in view?

Whereas many of the instances of weeping and gnashing of teeth are from parables, it is important that Luke 13.28, like Matthew 13.42, is not a parable but an explanation of one. The parables that describe these world-ending events and speak of weeping and teeth grinding are meant to describe what Jesus talks about in Luke 13.28. In the case of Luke 13.28, it very much seems to be speaking of the judgment, not their state in Hell after. Nevertheless, one might argue that it is not wise to completely dismiss the possibility that passages like Matthew 13.42 may be speaking of Hell and not just the judgment. What then can be said?

Although the weeping and gnashing of teeth statements apply to the judgment, when the lost are thrown into the fiery furnace Jesus speaks of, there can be weeping and gnashing of teeth in Hell for a short time until they are destroyed. This does not necessitate any extended time of torment; it’s just the natural effect of being thrown into fire. This makes good sense when you understand that weeping of gnashing of teeth do not automatically mean pain as many assume. It is not as though once they enter Hell, they start to weep and gnash their teeth because of the pain. This reaction would have come before they enter Hell. When they see the saved, and are cast out,

then there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Luke 13.28). The weeping and gnashing of teeth would not start in the fire; it would end there. The unrepentant are condemned by God, and they gnash their teeth in anger and weep in anguish. Angels take them and cast them into the fire, and they continue weeping and gnashing their teeth during this whole process, even as they are in the fire in the moments before they are destroyed. The angels throw them into the fire, and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

D. Even If the Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth Was a Reaction to Pain...

Furthermore, although I believe that the lake of fire represents destruction, it is certainly not impossible that they do feel agony and torment during their destruction. Perhaps on the Day of Judgment the damned suffer terrible agonies before they are finally destroyed. Given what is discussed in Section XXIV, and just given the obvious fact that the judgment day will be terrible for the unsaved, some sort of conscious suffering certainly occurs at the judgment (although what it is like and how it occurs is by no means clear).

Now, conscious suffering post-resurrection doesn't necessitate an extended time of suffering beyond the judgment. In fact, I believe that it makes more sense if this is not the case. Nevertheless, given what the scripture does tell us, and what it does not, this scenario is possible. Therefore, maybe the destruction itself causes pain. A slow burning fire would cause someone unimaginable pain before it finally consumes them (like how they are said to be consumed in Hebrews 10.27...). Any means of destruction (like the fire, be it literal or symbolic) might not be instant. The process would be terrible, so they could be conscious to weep and gnash their teeth for a time, and it still wouldn't necessarily mean eternal torment.

XXIV. DEGREES OF PUNISHMENT

A. Degrees of Punishment Are Often Explained Using Examples of Finite Punishment

Many argue that the Bible teaches that there will be degrees of punishment in Hell, and therefore annihilationism cannot be true. The reasoning goes that since some will suffer worse than others, it cannot be the case that all are annihilated, since you can't annihilate somebody worse than somebody else. However, although there are texts that might indicate differing degrees of punishment, this only indicates eternity if you already believe in eternal torment.

Let's begin with the analogy in Luke 12.47-48 of the bad servants who either receive many stripes or few. This is probably the most commonly cited passage indicating degrees of punishment. In a nutshell, Jesus gives the illustration of two servants, one who willfully disobeys the master, and one who does wrong without knowing it was against the master's will. You can imagine which one gets punished severely and which one much less so. From this, it is put forth that Jesus is teaching that in Hell, some will suffer much worse than others.

However, if Jesus is even setting forth a principle to be applied to final punishment in the first place, consider this: both servants, after being beaten, go back to their regular lives as if it never happened. That fits in perfectly with the idea of finite conscious suffering before one is annihilated. They'd ultimately be in the same position despite one being punished so much more severely. It's their finite punishments that set them apart, not their fates after. If anything, this fits *better* with annihilation (or universalism), because it's something finite, not something that is forever (as in life-long), that sets them apart. Their ultimate, permanent fates are not what differ.

This is aside from claims by some, such as Glenn Peoples, that this passage may not be referring to final judgment at all, but rather, the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 ("Degrees of Hell?").

This may be the case, but I am not willing to fall on one side or the other at this point. If that is ultimately what is in view, then all the better.

B. Relevance of the Day of Judgment

The warnings given to bad cities by Jesus always talk about “that day” (being the Day of Judgment). Whether the “day” is a single day or an age, how could it last for eternity? I don’t think I’ve ever even heard someone suggest such a thing. Obviously, the *results* are what are eternal, which is true whether you believe in annihilation or eternal torment. The actual day, the actual period of God judging the dead, does not last forever. However, what is spoken of as being more or less bearable is the *Day* of Judgment. What is being spoken of as being more or less bearable is the sentencing period itself, not eternity, which means that those passages do not speak of eternal punishment.

Of course, it could also be referring to the eternal punishment handed out, but that isn’t a given. What goes on at judgment that is more or less bearable? I don’t know. Maybe there is some sort of conscious torment. Maybe God zaps them with pain like lightning, or something like that. Or, maybe what’s unbearable is just the damned person’s conscience, or God’s declaration of guilt and the weight that that will bear on the condemned sinner. It’s not all too uncommon for people today to think of Hell as really being the pain of one’s conscience; why can’t that be what inflicts misery upon a person at the judgment? Either one fits, although I think the latter makes more sense overall. Those who had more chances to follow Jesus, like the Pharisees, might be more haunted by their consciences and by the fact that they had more chances to have eternal life but turned away. After all, it is written that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin (John 16.8). Whatever the case, ultimately, there could be eternal

torment or annihilation after, but all that the text affirms is different degrees of suffering in a finite period, and not into eternity.

C. Greater Damnation

What then of verses like Luke 20.47 that speak of some receiving “greater judgment/condemnation/damnation” (depending on translation)? Well, first of all, those terms are pretty generic and don’t have to mean eternality of consciousness. What is the judgment/condemnation they are talking about? Who knows? It could be referring to eternity, or to something finite that separates the various classes of the unsaved. Simply put, it doesn’t necessitate eternality in regards to the difference in punishment. Quite literally, one extra slap to the face before being thrown into the fire amounts to a more severe punishment and greater damnation. These statements only indicate that something can be greater or worse, and that could mean a whole lot of things for any length of time.

Furthermore, these terms, all stemming from the Greek *krima*, do not necessarily mean torment at all, at least by their brute definition. The word means essentially what we’d think when we see “judgment.” Depending on context, it means anything from a declaration of guilt to the right to judge to the sentence given at a judgment (like in court) (Vine 214, 611). So, what exactly is in view? Are they specifically sentenced to a greater punishment? If so, it still doesn’t require eternality, though it would mean that if annihilation is true, some sort of additional conscious punishment is inflicted prior to the second death.

Alternatively, the idea of a greater condemnation may be consistent with other ideas. What if the Pharisees (spoken of in Luke 20.47) are declared even more unrighteous than the “sinners” of that day? What if their greater condemnation is God’s declaration of their greater

guilt, and the greater weight of the shame and terror that it bears upon them? Or, since the damned do arise to everlasting contempt (Daniel 12.2), who's to say it's not just a matter of the level of abhorrence by God and the saved? It's not uncommon for some unbelievers to worry about their legacies and how they are remembered even though they believe they won't even exist after death. This would be all the more fitting in the honor-shame culture of ancient Israel. The clear point is that these "religious" leaders were not only not viewed highly by God, but they were among the worst of the worst. This is just speculation, but it is fitting, and even if that is not the case, greater punishment still does not necessitate eternity, because finite punishment of some sort, inflicted at judgment, can obviously vary in severity.

D. Where's the Justice?

Firstly, one might wonder, if the unsaved are annihilated, what difference any finite suffering would make in the long run? What then is the point of any degrees of punishment? Actually, that is a good question. Nevertheless, the Bible still says what it says. Remember, a flogging only lasts seconds or minutes. The *Day* of Judgment is what is spoken of as being more or less bearable. Damnation is generic and by no means has to be referring to a difference in their eternal condition in the passages where is mentioned. There doesn't have to be eternal torment for there to be the gradations of punishment and/or suffering *that the Bible describes*.

Some argue that if God's justice is fulfilled by finite conscious punishment of the unsaved (which it isn't), then it would be unjust for God to annihilate them. The reasoning goes that if their conscious suffering ends, it must mean that their debt of sin has been paid. However, if their debt had been paid, they should be given eternal life, as opposed to suffering annihilation. The alternative would be that God destroys them, freeing them from paying their debt when it

has not been paid. That would likewise be unjust. Wayne Grudem points to this seeming dilemma as an argument against the justice of annihilationism (1151).

This dilemma is a false one, however. It assumes that only conscious suffering can satisfy God's wrath, as if only conscious suffering counts as punishment. But that is not true. Does the Bible say that that is the case? Of course not. As established in Section XVI, annihilation is punishment, and it is eternal. Nevertheless, Grudem has stumbled onto something. When Jesus paid our debt, when He atoned for our sins, He didn't buy us the right to be annihilated instead of being subject to eternal torment. He gave us eternal life! If one had paid off their debt, if they had atoned for their sin, then they would be given eternal life, not annihilated. But for that reason, it is ridiculous to say that annihilationists think that God annihilates the lost because His wrath is satisfied. No one can atone for their sins, this is true, but atoning for one's sins doesn't result in annihilation. Rather, it results in eternal life. It is because their sins are *not* atoned for that God destroys them. Being destroyed *is* their just punishment, and it is their punishment in its fullest. God does not destroy them after satisfying His wrath, or instead of fulfilling His wrath. It is only after they are destroyed that God's wrath will be satisfied. Therefore, God destroys them *in order to* fulfill His wrath, which leaves us with no problem.

The question then may be raised as to why there would be any conscious suffering at all. That finite punishment would be necessary on top of the eternal punishment of annihilation would be odd. If one sin warrants eternal punishment, why would additional sinning only warrant additional finite punishment? Nevertheless, there is almost certainly some distinction between different sinners, and some sort of finite conscious suffering occurs before their destruction, even if it is just the weight of their guilt bearing on their consciences at the final judgment. Therefore, this needs to be addressed.

First of all, to whatever extent the Bible does talk about any difference in the fate of different sinners, it is not often emphasized. Often times, that there are degrees of punishment is lauded by traditionalists as a sign of God's justice, and understandably so. It seems to separate someone like Hitler from some seemingly innocent farmer in Zimbabwe. According to Robert Morey: "Since there will be degrees of punishment, God's justice will be revealed" (154). We emphasize it because it sounds good to us. However, such references are really quite rare in scripture. Now, the fact that they are there at all of course means that the doctrine is true.

However, Jesus didn't emphasize God's justice in His wrath by emphasizing how the so-called heathen would be punished less severely than the unrepentant Pharisee. His emphasis was always on the stark contrast between saved and unsaved, repentant and unrepentant. No mention of degrees of punishment is explicitly given in Revelation; rather, all are lumped together and thrown into the same fire. Paul emphasizes "eternal destruction" in 2 Thessalonians 1.9 and leaves it at that. Either you have "death" or you have "life." It doesn't seem that the degrees of punishment were honestly that important to the biblical writers. It was a truth that had to be expressed, because God is truth, but it wasn't a very major aspect of discourse on eternal punishment.

What about the lack of significant distinction between the worst of the worst and the relatively benign sinner? After all, in comparison to their eternal similarity, what separates them is incredibly small. However, although this may seem wrong, it must simply be the case that the difference between sinners is smaller than we imagined. It is wrongly assumed that sin is like a straight line on a graph. The more sins (or worse sins) that one commits, the higher the level of wrath. One sin equals x amount of wrath, and two sins equals twice as much wrath. However, in practicality, few on either side really look at the fate of different sinners as being so starkly

different. Just think about what the traditional doctrine teaches. Both a mass murderer and some joker who was generally nice to everyone are both condemned to being burned alive (or its equivalent) for ever and ever. Both suffer an infinite amount of pain and suffering worse than we could ever imagine. Now, it may somehow hurt less for the run of the mill sinner, but his fate is way, way more like that of the worst sinner on earth than it is to the child of God. The least serious sinner is treated nothing like someone who has no sins held against them, but very much like the worst of sinners. The difference that one sin makes from sinless to sinner is far, far greater than the difference between those who sin a little and those who sin a lot. The difference between Heaven and Hell is surely far greater than the difference between the harshest part of Hell and its most bearable realm (according to the traditional view). Even according to the traditional doctrine, we find that being a sinner is what matters; what separates them, in comparison, is small. In the case of annihilationism, this just means that the difference is even smaller than we thought. Conscious torment would just be the icing on the cake, showing the very small differences between one condemned person and another.

How can it be that God can justly look at sinners this way? How can a kind and gentle unbeliever be punished so similarly to a serial killer? As Robert Morey writes: “If annihilation were true, then God’s justice would be imperiled, for He could not take into account the life of a sinner in determining the degree of punishment that is due, but all sinners would simply pass into the judgment of nonexistence” (154). Under any annihilationist scenario, in light of eternity, there is indeed very little that separates the worst sinner from the least evil among them (though there would be more than nothing).

However, when it comes down to it, sinners are sinners. The Bible reminds us of this fact: “As it is written, ‘THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE’” (Romans 3.10).

The human heart is full of evil (Genesis 8.21, Ecclesiastes 9.3). It is full of deceit (Jeremiah 17.9) Now and from the beginning, when everyone knew exactly who God was and what He desired, men have turned away, worshipping idols and engaging in every form of evil (Romans 1). From a practical standpoint, it doesn't take much to make "good" people do evil. Didn't the Israelites, God's chosen people, burn their infants alive as a sacrifice to Molech for no real reason other than the fact that everyone else was doing it? How many "good" Germans either looked away or gleefully took part in the Holocaust, only to later look back in disbelief? *Lord of the Flies* or Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" weren't based on nothing. Acts of evil and cruelty (e.g. systematic theft, lying, honor killings, burning widows alive) are now just chalked up to being part of a person's "culture." Consider soccer matches worldwide; I'm not even kidding. We laugh about how extreme fans throughout the world react, but think about it seriously. For no real reason other than their team losing (or winning), "good" people, including people who look like me and therefore are considered "civilized," commit all kinds of evil. They destroy the property of others. They rape. They murder. And all of this is viewed as a big joke by outsiders, which itself says much about the natural human condition. Just think about that. Really think about that. No people group is more or less evil than another; the only difference between the savage and civilized man is what forms of sin and evil are to them second nature.

People don't just go around sinning 24/7, but it doesn't take much to get them going. Sometimes all it takes is someone to order them to do so, like in the famous Milgram experiments. When ordered to do so, experimental subjects delivered painful, even potentially lethal electrical shocks to someone screaming in pain in the next room. Only a small minority refused to do so when the shocks got to a dangerous level. As it turned out, the screams were just a recording and there was no real person being shocked, but the subjects weren't aware of that

(for more on this, see Milgram). There's also the famous Stanford prison experiment, where college students were put in a mock prison. Those put in the position of the guards turned so cruel that the experiment had to be cut short after less than a week (for more on that, see Zimbardo). When it comes to the heart, there isn't much that separates one sinner from another. If all men are full of evil, who is to say, had they switched places at birth, that a nice unsaved person might not have been a dictator who cruelly murdered millions of people, and vice versa? Why then should there be much difference between them in their eternal destiny? What little there is that does separate them would be demonstrated in the difference of their suffering on judgment day, in whatever form it takes.

Of the utmost importance is this: We as believers must remember that the only thing that distinguishes us from them is the power and the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus, on our own, none of us would be any different.

Some may still be unsatisfied, but this isn't about philosophy. This isn't about what is emotionally satisfying. What the Bible says about degrees of punishment is consistent with either annihilationism or eternal torment (or even universalism, for that matter). Therefore, if the Bible says that annihilationism is true, which I will show is the case, then annihilationism is true. It may not separate the monsters of history from the everyday sinner enough to satisfy some, but so be it. We don't decide what is fair. God and only God can settle the accounts to make everything right. God and only God knows what is just. Isn't that pretty much the first thing we are taught when we first start questioning the righteousness of God torturing people for ever and ever? I agree wholeheartedly with traditionalist apologist A.W. Pink:

But who are *we* to pass judgment upon the justice of the decisions of the All-Wise?

Who are *we* to say what is consistent or inconsistent with *God's* righteousness?

Who are *we* to determine what shall best vindicate the Divine benevolence or equity? Sin has so enfeebled our power of righteous judgment, so darkened our understanding, so dulled our conscience, so perverted our wills, so corrupted our hearts, that we are quite *incompetent* to decide. We are ourselves so infected and affected by sin that we are altogether incapable of estimating its due merits (7-8).

It was true when Pink preached it to defend eternal torment, and it is just as true now!

Jesus only says that there will be more or less suffering (specifically, on Judgment Day). That much is all that we are entitled to say for sure. Jesus's statements, when you remove your emotions and outside philosophy from them, are compatible with annihilationism.

XXV. DEMONS AND “TORTURE” (MATTHEW 8.29; MARK 5.7; LUKE 8.28)

A. What Does the Demon Mean by “Torture”?

It is written of one group of demons: “And they cried out, saying, ‘What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?’” (Matthew 8.29). Some have taken this as proof that all demons will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. After all, torture is mentioned, so this must of course be referring to the eternal torture of the demons in Hell...However, two things must be said:

1. Even on its own, this verse doesn’t say that they will be tormented forever (or even that they actually will be tortured).

2. Both Mark and Luke add details not included in Matthew, which help shed light on what exactly is happening in this passage. According to Mark 5.6-10:

Seeing Jesus from a distance, he ran up and bowed down before Him; and shouting with a loud voice, he said, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment me!” For He had been saying to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” And He was asking him, “What is your name?” And he said to Him, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” And he *began* to implore Him earnestly not to send them out of the country.

After referencing torment in Luke 8:28, Luke gets even more specific. He adds, “They were imploring Him not to command them to go away into the abyss” (Verse 31). Isn’t it at least implied here that the “torture” the demon was speaking of was not being burned alive, but being sent away? After all, in Mark, the demon begs Jesus not to torture him, and when Jesus doesn’t

respond, the demon repeatedly asks not to be sent away. The demons weren't begging Jesus to not physically torture them. They didn't want to be sent way, sent into the abyss (whatever that is). That was the "torture" they feared. Jesus let them go into some pigs instead.

Matthew's account, when taken alone, might make it seem as though they were simply asking if Jesus had come to send them to the lake of fire early (if that were even possible). However, Mark and Luke's parallel accounts make it clear this is not the case. Unlike Matthew alone, from them we learn two very important things: Firstly, it would appear that the "torture" wasn't their eternal judgment, which they would be anticipating, but rather something to occur right then. Secondly, their being tortured and their being sent away seem to be one and the same. In both accounts, after the demons themselves are quoted as asking not to be tortured, the writer adds that they repeatedly asked not to be sent to another place. It was being sent away, not being condemned to eternal torment, that they feared.

What then is the "abyss" that Luke mentions? The answer is not entirely clear, as very little is said in the Bible about this place. It could very well be the same place that Peter calls *Tartarus* in 2 Peter 2.4 (translated as "Hell" in many translations). That would make sense. Many demons were held there for judgment, and in mythology the term *Tartarus* would refer to a place of torment (albeit only a temporary one in the Bible). That would seem like a good place for mischievous demons caught by Jesus to be sent for the time being. It would also make a solid connection between torture and being sent away. Alternatively, traditionalist John Blanchard suggests another possibility: "The 'bottomless pit' (modern Bible translations tend to call it the 'Abyss') is the temporary home and headquarters of Satan and his demonic angels. There is a hint of this early in the New Testament when Jesus was about to cast demons out of a man and, 'They begged him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss' (Luke 8:31)" (135).

Thomas Aquinas suggests that from the demons' perspective, being sent away from people who they can lead astray is itself a form of punishment, and the abyss is part of what is generically called the "dark atmosphere." While reflecting on Luke 8.31, he writes the following: "They asked for this, deeming it to be a punishment for them to be cast out of a place where they could injure men. Hence it is stated, 'They [Vulg. 'He'] besought Him that He would not expel [Vulg. 'him'] out of the country' (Mark 5:10)" (I, Q 64, A 4). Whatever the abyss is, cross referencing all three accounts gives a much different picture than what might be wrongly inferred simply by what Matthew said.

If *Tartarus* is the place that is mentioned, and if *Tartarus* is a place of torment, wouldn't that indicate that eternal torment is true? It would not, because God "committed them to pits of darkness, *reserved for judgment*" (emphasis added) (2 Peter 2.4b). This place referred to as *Tartarus* is not an eternal state, or the place of eternal judgment. As traditionalist Eldon Woodcok notes, they are "to be held there *until the final eschatological judgment* (2:9)" (emphasis added) (133). It is their waiting room, not their eternal abode. No matter what happens there, eternal torment would not be proven by the angels being cast there, or by Legion worrying about getting sent there by Jesus.

B. Other Things to Consider

Some might not be satisfied that torture might simply be referring to them being sent away (even though the place they are sent to might be a temporary place of torment); they must be speaking of Hell! Is it *possible* that there's some bizarre meaning other than the one I have brought up? Sure, it's possible. Maybe the demon asked if he was being sent to Hell early (recorded only by Matthew), and after finding out that he wasn't (recorded nowhere), he was

afraid of him and his friends being sent to the abyss for the remainder of his grace period (recorded only in Mark and Luke). Nevertheless, given what is said, we can much more easily come up with a clear and simple meaning as I have laid out above, if we're willing to accept that the demon isn't talking about eternal punishment. There's no reason to think that the three accounts are talking about two completely different ideas, or that the demon used the term "torture" (same Greek word) to refer to two different things. They can more easily be in harmony, if we are willing to say that not every mention of torture or pain or punishment in the Bible is speaking of the eternal torment of the wicked in Hell.

What of the fact that the demon knew there was a time for him to be sent away (Matthew 8.29)? Does that mean that he must be referring to eternal judgment? After all, what other time for him being sent away (that is, tortured) would there be?

There are a number of other possibilities, although I am most sympathetic to the idea that the demon is talking about the binding of the devil at the millennium. From the premillennial perspective, one might ask what point there would be in binding the devil for 1,000 years, destroying what is represented by the beast and false prophet, but then leaving demons around? I think there's a good chance that they are sent to the same abyss as the devil. If the millennium has literal elements to it (i.e. the devil really being sent into an abyss), it's not a stretch to imagine that demons go there too. That could be the appointed time and place. Alternatively, amillennialists tend to see the binding of the devil in Revelation 20 as a metaphor for his being restrained by the gospel. Perhaps the cross, or Christ's resurrection, or something along those lines was the appointed time that the demon speaks of. Maybe the demon figured that at that point, he would be sent into the abyss, the "torture" in view. Or, maybe his whole talk of torture is metaphorical in other ways. Perhaps he knew that if God succeeded and the cross happened,

then the demons would be tormented by their defeat. Jesus showing up before His death to force the demon to retreat to the abyss (following Blanchard's interpretation), was, in a sense, to torment him with defeat before the defeat of the devil at the cross. His attitude would be kind of like, "Why are you here now? That's not fair! You're not supposed to come yet!"

Alternatively, as an individual on Facebook once suggested to me, the demon might not be saying that there is ever an appointed time to be tortured/sent away/sent to the abyss. Some have inferred that "the time" means "the time (to be tortured)," but the demon doesn't actually say as much. Perhaps the demon refers to the Day of Judgment as "the time." If annihilationism is true, then the demon would expect destruction at "the time." When the demon saw Jesus and knew it was not "the time" (i.e. the Day of Judgment), he would know that Jesus was not there to destroy him because it was not yet "the time." In other words, the demon wasn't expecting torture because Jesus would torture him at "the time." Rather, he was fearful of being tortured because torture was *different* from what he expected to happen at the "the time."

Or, maybe every demon is told that on some specific date they'll go to the abyss. Or something else. Who knows? We're never told what the demon is talking about. What reason is there for assuming that eternal torment is in view except for the fact that the demon mentions torture in the first place? Would someone who was new to the Bible and did not already believe in eternal torment read this mention of torture and automatically see it as evidence for the doctrine of eternal torment? I am really not so sure.

In short, we have every reason to believe that the demon wasn't referring to torture in Hell, and no real reason to believe that he was. Just because the word "torture" or "torment" comes up in a passage does not mean that eternal conscious torment in Hell is true.

XXVI. PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT (MATTHEW 18.21-35)

A. This Is a Challenging Passage, but It Is Not Insurmountable

This is admittedly a challenging passage, and my answer may be relatively weak compared to that of the other verses I tackle here (though it still gets the job done, and that's what matters). Now, you might find it odd that I would say that, given that it never says anything explicit like Revelation 20.10, or anything as picturesque as Matthew 25.41. However, this one does make a good deal of sense when interpreted as referring to eternal torment. After all, the bad servant is sent away to be tortured until he can pay off a debt that he could never, in practicality, pay off. After this, we are told that this is how God will treat us if we don't forgive our brothers from the heart.

My best defense is simply this: It's a parable, and although partially explained, parts are vague enough as to not require eternal torment. I would argue that although eternal torment may make sense here, it is not the only reasonable interpretation, and because of the overwhelming evidence against eternal torment, it should not be what is taken from this parable.

B. Interpreting Unclear Scripture with Clear – Why I Am Justified

One might ask how my overall argument from this passage is any different from traditionalists arguing against the verses that suggest the unsaved soul is mortal by using verses like Revelation 20.10. I mentioned this in Section XIII, and it comes up from time to time in this debate. The difference between that line of argumentation, and what I argue here, is that those verses they attempt to address and the overall themes in scripture painted by them are clearer in their support of conditionalism. This passage is not totally clear, and I will give reasonable

alternative interpretations from the passage itself. I won't simply say that annihilationism is true and therefore the passage must not mean what it appears to mean. After all, you can't just say that some other clear passage says otherwise and leave it at that. That only leaves you with a contradiction. Clear scripture is to interpret *unclear* scripture, where there can be more than one meaning inferred when a passage is left alone. In the case of this parable, there are multiple ways in which one can interpret it. Jesus explains its application (that if we don't forgive then we won't be forgiven), but not the meaning of every part of it. It is valid to use other scripture to help us choose the best interpretation, because it never clearly refers to eternal torment.

Now, this isn't to say that every seemingly clear verse must mean what it appears to clearly mean. Taking into account the way the Bible uses certain words and idioms may make a seemingly clear meaning less clear. Are we to genuinely disdain our parents and loved ones (Luke 14.26)? Well, consider how God "hated" Esau and loved Jacob (Malachi 1.2-3; Romans 9.13). God gave Esau good fortune and a mighty kingdom (Edom). He even defended Edom's God-given right to the land when speaking to the Israelites, His chosen people (Deuteronomy 2.3-5). He "hated" Esau the individual (which Paul spoke of) by choosing Jacob instead of Him to be the father of His people. How this manifested itself on earth (which Malachi spoke of) was not in God treating Edom with disdain, but in that, centuries later, He destroyed the kingdom as its sins deserved whereas Israel as a nation was spared. God "hated" Esau only in that Esau got less special treatment and undeserved good fortune than Jacob. Consider also Mark 9.48; it certainly appeared to be literally saying one thing until we took into account the fact that Jesus was quoting an Old Testament verse that meant something quite different. Even if the meaning of a passage seems clear and unambiguous (which is not the case with Matthew 18.21-35 in the

first place), actually taking into account the relevant factors may open our eyes to something new. This parable's teaching on Hell is not clear in the first place, but this was worth bringing up.

Ultimately, I am justified because I actually exegete the passage. I point out relevant factors that are overlooked by those who just assume that it is clearly symbolizing Hell as it is traditionally seen. When two verses seem to contradict each other, you need to explain why at least one does not mean what it was thought to have meant. You need to explain how both can be true. If we just say that it is the word of God which cannot contradict itself, so therefore we should assume that the minority of texts simply mean what the majority of texts seem to say, then what would stop a Muslim or Hindu or someone from some made up cult with its own new "scriptures" from looking at a contradiction in their respective "holy" books and saying the same thing? How could we argue against it? Their "holy scriptures" could say that a person, at a precise moment in time, was wearing only red with no other colors whatsoever, and then later that that same person, at that same precise moment in time, was wearing blue, and who could argue against them? After all, they would say that it's not a contradiction because it is the word of God. Why should an unbeliever believe us if we reason this way? When passages of scripture seem to contradict one another, we must reconcile them, even if that only means giving reasonable speculation as to how they can be reconciled. By the end of this section, I will have shown how this passage can reasonably be consistent with the biblical teaching of conditionalism.

C. Alternative Explanations of the Parable's Meaning

Indeed, one might be more inclined to see eternal torment in this parable on its own, but it is not the only possible or reasonable way of interpreting it. Here are other ways to look at it:

1. Viewing The Parable A Bit More Literally:

View the parable more closely and literally, and you will notice a few important things. First of all, it's a finite debt. It wouldn't be eternal. Secondly, the servant will eventually die, and once that happens (whether or not the debt would be discharged under Roman law), he would be freed of the debt because he'd be dead. From the standpoint of the servant, as far as he's concerned, the debt is paid with his death. The servant would suffer in prison his whole life, but he would eventually die. His "torture" would go on until he was gone. It represents hopelessness (for he has no hope of anything better since it ends with death), but it does not represent unending pain. Harold E. Guillebaud takes this position when addressing Matthew 5.26, dealing with the same analogy of a person being condemned to prison until he can repay his debt: "A prisoner who never comes out of prison does not live there eternally. The slave who was delivered to the tormentors till he should pay two million pounds would not escape from them by payment, but he would assuredly die in the end: why should not the same result be at least a possibility in the application?" (21). Nowhere is it actually said that anyone is tormented endlessly.

2. If You Take it a Little Bit More Figuratively:

Alternatively, I may be over-analyzing it. Undeniably, the main point that Jesus is trying to get across is the profound importance of true forgiveness. Maybe the details weren't meant to be taken that far. The point is, the king withdrew his forgiveness and made him pay the full debt, as will God do to those who are not merciful. The main point of the servant owing such an enormous debt to the king is to remind us that the metaphorical debt we owe God because of sin, the debt that He forgives, is way more than what we must forgive of one another, and it is indeed something that we could never pay.

The first thing that can be said about the servant being sent away for what amounts to forever (in a temporal sense) is this: “The debtor, cast into prison (Matt. 5:26; 18:34), indicates that the debt is inescapable and irrevocable” (Froom 291). Jesus’s chilling point is just that: There is no escape, except by one’s own efforts and merit, which in the parable of the unmerciful servant, and in real life, are insufficient.

Secondly, these events in the parable are surely told this way to represent what would happen in real life in such a scenario, and not all of them are necessarily representative of what will happen in real life. Like in many parables, details that aren’t necessarily pertinent or even consistent with the point of the parable are included to make the story make sense. Everything in this parable is along the lines of what would happen in real life under the same circumstances. The mention of the tormentors follows this pattern, as according to Edmund Flood, “Torture was employed in the Middle East (though not in Palestine) to discover where debtors had hidden their money or to persuade relations or friends to pay” (18). A debtor in that situation on earth would indeed end up in debtors’ prison and would be unable to free himself, given the size of the debt. But does that mean that Hell is like a prison where one is tortured until they are able to earn freedom, or could it be that some elements of the parable are not directly analogous to real life?

We see elsewhere in other parables that elements are added which do not correspond to real life or even the point of the parable. Consider the parable of the fish that Jesus tells in Matthew 13:47-50. A fisherman catches a net full of fish. The bad are thrown away, and the good are put into containers. Just think about this. The good fish represent the saved. What are the saved like? They are fish who are pulled out of water (Verse 48). Fish die when left out of water, and then they get cooked and eaten. Even the saved fish suffer a terrible fate. It would have been better had they not been caught in the first place! Why, then, would Jesus put this in

the parable? The answer is simple; a fishing story wouldn't make sense otherwise. What else would happen to the fish caught by a fisherman? The whole point of that parable is simply that the good fish are chosen, and the bad fish rejected, and it is told in a way that would make sense to the audience (many of whom were fishermen). These things are what happen to fish when they are rejected and accepted. This parable does ultimately allude to men's eternal fate, given the explanation, but the details were not at all meant to be taken as descriptive of the afterlife.

Along these lines, we have the parable that Jesus tells in Matthew 21.33-41. In that parable, the vineyard owner in the story, who represents God, sure is out of touch with how his tenants react to things. God is omniscient. God is never wrong. Yet the vineyard owner, unlike God, is mistaken about things, not the least of which is his belief that his tenants would respect his son, who they end up killing. Surely God didn't mistakenly think that Jesus wouldn't get murdered! Even just the fact that Jesus told this parable about His death shows that God knew what would happen. And yet the one who represents God in the parable, as part of the parable, is flat wrong about something. Why would this happen? This happened because the characters of parables are people. What kind of vineyard owner would send his son to the vineyard, knowing that he would be murdered and that nothing good would come of it (within the parable)? Knowingly sending his son to his death would correspond better to real life, but it would not be fitting to a parable any more than a fisherman sending the fish he caught to a happy fish habitat would be. Not every detail of a parable corresponds to real life.

One last passage worth mentioning is Matthew 24.46-51. In this parable, we see a wicked servant cut into pieces and thrown into the darkness. Because I am a (partial) preterist and believe that Jesus is speaking in Matthew 24 about the fall of Jerusalem and not His future physical return, I don't know how much eschatology can be read into this. It may only have

meaning in regards to Christians in Jerusalem and the fear of physical death. Nevertheless, I bring it up because if any eschatology can be read into this portion of the chapter, as many believe is the case (including some preterists), it would only help the annihilationist argument. In the parable, the wicked servant, one who is sent to “outer darkness” no less, would here be shown as being slaughtered, not sent somewhere to be tortured forever. Would this then be a reflection of the afterlife, just as the mention of tormentors in this parable of the servant is said to be? If so, isn’t that a bit of a problem? Is Hell like being slaughtered, or is it like being tortured in prison forever? That would be a problem, wouldn’t it? Or might you say that the details aren’t meant to be taken that far (which is evidently how most take the parable in Matthew 24.46-51)? If so, why would that not at least be possible with the parable of the unmerciful servant?

Even within the parable of the unmerciful servant it is at least implied that the king is not in all ways like God, whom he represents. Consider this: Does an omniscient God need His servants to tell Him about what is going on on the earth? Wouldn’t He know already? However, it wouldn’t be fitting in a parable about a king to give the king magical powers that allow him to know everything that goes on. Therefore, Jesus mentions that the servants of the king all went and told him what happened, which then leads to the king taking action (Verse 31). It is implied that this is how the king found out, because, in life, that is how a king would find out, because human kings are not omniscient. In theory, it could be that the king was omniscient and already knew when they told him, but is anybody really going to make that claim? With this in mind, and with the other, admittedly clearer examples from other parables in mind, it could be that Hell is just like a prison where people are held until they can free themselves (which in this case would be never), or it might not be. Clearly being sent to debtors’ prison where the guards are called

torturers makes the point that he will suffer greatly by not forgiving, but how directly the mention of tormentors applies to the afterlife is not clear.

Parables do not have to stand on all fours, in part because there is always a greater point brought up at the end. The details that lead to it can have direct carryover into real life, but as shown already, many do not. As mentioned before, in the literal parable world, the torture would eventually end when the servant dies. Some might object that that would mean that the debt to God is not paid. However, parables do not stand on all fours. Whereas in the parable world the death of the servant ends the torture without paying the debt, why can't it be the case that in real life, the final destruction/death/annihilation of the unsaved person is what satisfies the debt (that is, the retribution due to them, which the metaphorical "debt" we often speak of represents)? Annihilation is not relief; if annihilationism is true, then annihilation is the dreadful, ultimate alternative to having your sins atoned for by Christ. If Jesus doesn't pay it, then the only way the debt is resolved, the only way justice is satisfied, is in the eternal destruction of the debtor, a process which will certainly contain some degree of conscious suffering (if nothing other than the terror of standing before God in condemnation), which means the reference to torture is not totally meaningless. The point of the parable, as Jesus makes clear at the end, is that God can forgive the metaphorical debt of your sin, or you can pay it, and the consequences of having to pay it are absolutely dreadful.

Lastly, given our predisposition to believe in eternal torment, we must consider that in cases like this where it's a matter of what we infer to be more reasonable, and not what is said flat out, it may simply not have been meant as we see it. The same can be said for Matthew 5.25-26, for which many of the same things can be said as with this parable, if Jesus is even making a metaphor about Hell and judgment in the first place, which is not a given (see Grudem

819; Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke* 254). If we didn't have eternal torment in the back of our minds, would we automatically see the connection between tormentors, a huge debt, and eternal torment in the first place? For now, I will simply say this: The passage doesn't say eternal torment, and although eternal torment is a reasonable interpretation, the interpretation that this passage means eternal torment is by no means the only reasonable way to read this parable. It doesn't have to contradict the strong and thematic biblical arguments for annihilationism that are laid out in Part 3.

XXVII. THE SUFFERING OF JUDAS (MATTHEW 26.24)

A. Do Not Assume What Is Not Written

Jesus, when discussing His future betrayal at the hands of Judas, said, “The Son of Man *is to go*, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (Matthew 26.24).

This is another text that is commonly cited to argue against annihilationism. The thinking goes like this: If someone is annihilated, that is not so bad that a person would have been better off having never been born (since the result of never being born and no longer existing is the same). Therefore, Jesus must be saying that when Judas dies, that he will suffer horrible torture for ever and ever.

However: there are two things that must be pointed out.

Firstly, even if I were to grant that Judas being better off unborn must mean conscious suffering after death, that doesn't in the least require an eternal duration. Think about it; even in this life, people can be so miserable, whether from physical pain or emotional trauma, that they truly and genuinely wish that they had never been born. What if instead of being thrown into an eternal torture chamber, Judas simply suffers some sort of misery as the second death, his ultimate destruction, is being inflicted? The traditional view of Hell is that the damned are consciously burned alive for ever and ever (or that this is a metaphor for an even worse eternal fate). But what if he burns for only 100 years? What if he burns for just one year? What if it only lasts a month, or a week, or a day? What if it takes 10 minutes? Would any person subjected to 10 minutes of that not wish they had never been born? We humans are naturally averse to pain; that's why most people won't bet a large amount of money on a coin flip; they lose more in the

loss than they gain with a victory. Being conscious for 10 minutes as the body is consumed in flames (which could never happen in this world because a person would die much sooner if they were totally consumed) would certainly be worse pain than a lifetime of good things past could make up for.

Perhaps you find my 10 minutes assertion insufficient. Well then, let's say that he suffers for every day he lived, plus one additional day. After 30 years or so, and Jesus's statement is true. Or if not a lifetime's worth, then for argument sake, we'll say 1,000 years, or 1,000,000 years, or a googol of years. Can anyone say that after a googol years of burning, a person would not have been better off having never been born? And even after that, if it stops, there is still all of eternity left; you have just as much time as before, with conscious torment no longer happening.

Even if that statement requires torment after death, which I don't concede at all, it by no means logically requires eternal existence once you actually think about it.

B. Alternative Ideas

I have alternative ideas for what Jesus says that would eliminate the need for any post-resurrection conscious torment at all. However, even if you reject my ideas entirely, that still does not ignore the fact that, as I argued in Subsection A, Jesus's statement does not by any stretch of the imagination require an eternal duration to any conscious punishment that is inflicted.

As I hope I made clear in Section XXIII regarding weeping and gnashing of teeth, I believe that the Day of Judgment and condemnation will be beyond terrible for the lost, if for nothing but the sheer terror of it. I have little doubt that that alone will be so terrible that the lost, not just Judas, will all have been better off unborn. Similarly, what if Jesus is speaking only

about the torment of Judas's conscience when he is judged? Again, all that needs to be true is that it is so bad, even just the pain of guilt for those last moments, that it is worse than the joys of a lifetime.

Alternatively, maybe Jesus wasn't even speaking of Judas's eternal fate in the first place. Perhaps He was referring to Judas's shameful legacy. Even unbelievers who believe they will have no existence after death still care about how they are remembered. These same unbelievers revile Judas's name to this day. Judas used to be one of the most common names in that era. Even another one of the 12 was named Judas (although he probably later changed his name to Thaddeus for obvious reasons, thus the apparent "discrepancy" between the lists in Matthew and Mark when compared to Luke and Acts). Today, who would ever name their son Judas?

How about his death? While we know he hung himself (Matthew 27.5), it is revealed to us in Acts 1.18 that he fell headlong and was basically disemboweled. Now, the exact circumstances behind that occurrence are unclear. Did he unsuccessfully hang himself, and while still alive and moving break the rope and fall headlong somewhere? Was his body being carried and then dropped/thrown? Who knows? The thing to note here is this: his death was really gruesome. How do a person's bowels simply fall out of their body? It makes no mention of wild beasts or anything attacking his corpse. Perhaps this gruesome (and if he was still alive, painful and horrifying) occurrence was orchestrated by God as a sign of his wrath. About 1,600 years later, hanging, drawing, and quartering would become the form of execution in many European countries for the worst criminals. Here, though he wasn't quartered, Judas suffered the worst parts of that sentence, the hanging and drawing (since the quartering actually causes the death; the hanging and drawing are to inflict pain and terror). Maybe that is all that Jesus was talking about; it wouldn't be the first time the Lord used hyperbole and metaphor.

There could also be a combination of several factors. After all, the man and his name are eternally reviled, and he also suffered a gruesome death for all the church of God to speak of (as was noted in Acts 1.17-19). He likely had no heirs, but instead was completely cut off. Maybe his death and shame might have been the wrath that God promised for him in particular (beyond his eternal destruction). His death and shame made an example of him for all mankind to remember.

Also worth considering, there is likely a subjective element to what makes it better for a person to have never been born. The human heart and mind do not always work according to the laws of economics. If we look at it like economists, then it would take a lot of suffering to make it so that Judas was better off unborn. If we compare the units of joy that he accumulated over a lifetime, minus the units of unhappiness, the amount of suffering would have to exceed that difference. However, if we look at it more humanistically (since Judas was a human), I would argue that it wouldn't take nearly that much suffering to make it better that he was never born. Remember Solomon? In Ecclesiastes, he doesn't look back on the past and say, "Well, I realize now it was all meaningless, but it sure was fun, so I can count the enjoyment I had at the time as I measure the worth of my life." All the joy of the past did him no good as he looked back on how his life had turned from God. Just as humans are averse to pain and loss, when things get bad, this likewise tends to overshadow what was once good. Imagine someone finding a half-eaten cockroach in their dessert at a 5-star restaurant; a bad ending can be all that matters. Judas was so distraught and hopeless that he killed himself. The weight of the guilt was so heavy that he may very well have suffered enough in those few moments to make all the good he had ever known meaningless, and in that case, he would have been better off unborn, all other miseries aside.

Maybe the bad doesn't actually outweigh the good objectively, but Jesus may not have been speaking objectively. When Judas hung himself, he clearly was under so much distress that he wished he was dead. It's not a stretch to think that he may have wished he were never born. If Judas felt that he was better off unborn, does it really matter if we as outsiders don't think that he was right? Who cares how much joy we see as outsiders if he is too miserable to even wish he had been born? As useful to society as economics and other quantitative studies of people are, and they really are extremely important, humans just simply can't always be quantified. I hope I can leave it at that.

Subsection A suffices to answer the question, and beyond that I think I have given more than enough to answer this one. Jesus said Judas would have been better off unborn, not that he would be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

XXVIII. LUKE 20.35-36 AND THE IMMORTALITY OF ANGELS

Jesus, when questioned by the Sadducees about the resurrection, mentions something very important about the saved that, though not directly proof of the resurrection, is sometimes used to show that the devil and his angels are immortal. This matters in this discussion, for part of my argument for annihilationism, as will come up in Part 3, is that the Bible indicates that all evil will be eliminated in the new world to come. However, if the devil and his angels are immortal, this would fly in the face of that claim. They could not then be destroyed, meaning that they are either condemned to eternal torment, or will be redeemed one day in the future (neither of which is true). Here is the passage in question: “But those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.” Somewhat ironically, this verse is usually brought up not by traditionalists, but by members of the older “Church of God” who believe in the annihilation of unsaved humans. It is among the proofs used by Herbert W. Armstrong, the founder of the original Worldwide Church of God, to show that the devil is immortal (24). Does this passage show that the fallen spiritual beings are immortal?

This passage does not prove that the fallen spiritual beings are immortal, because this passage is likely only speaking of God’s holy angels, not all so-called angelic creatures.

The first reason to believe that only holy angels are in view is because of the word *isaggelos*. This word comes up only once in the New Testament, being a combination of *isos* and *angelos* (The Lockman Foundation 1657). It stems from *aggelos*, which means messenger but typically refers to angels, and *isos*, which is along the lines of being like or equal to something (Strong, “A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament” 7; 38). Exactly how

one interprets this description of men being like angels is of key importance. Some translations are like the NASB above, indicating just a similarity between men and angels. Others, however, translate Luke 20.36 like the ASV does: “For neither can they die any more: for they are *equal* unto the angels; and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (emphasis added). This decision isn’t necessarily based on how literal the translation is either; the NASB, quoted above, is among the most literal translations. YLT concurs with it. Others, like the ESV and KJV, are like the ASV. How one is to interpret the use of *isaggelos* is key, because those whom Jesus compared to the angels are the saved. If it means that the saved are *equal* to the angels, then would it not be hard to justify the claim that this is including all spiritual beings? Certainly the saved, who are even called children of God in this verse, are not equal to demons and the devil! If it is meant to point out equality, and not just similarity, then this passage is certainly only referring to the holy angels who are in heaven today. This would disprove Armstrong’s claims. The fact that this is even a reasonable possibility alone means that this passage does not prove the immortality of the devil, though it still allows for Armstrong’s interpretation to be possible.

Another reason to believe that the angels in this passage are holy angels is because of Matthew’s parallel account. Matthew does not include Jesus’s statement about the immortality of the saved and the angels. Nevertheless, he does include Jesus’s statement that the saved are like the angels, and he adds one key detail: “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels *in heaven*” (emphasis added) (Matthew 22.30). When Matthew describes Jesus answering the same question of the Sadducees as Luke, Jesus says that those who are resurrected are like angels in Heaven, not simply angels in general. This would certainly not include demons, nor would it include the devil, whom Jesus saw fall from the heavens like lightning (Luke 10.18). The one possibility that remains for one who insists that the devil is

immortal is that when it says “angels in heaven,” it might just be saying that the saved will be like angels, and also they will be in heaven. They will be “like angels, and also in heaven,” is how it would go. I don’t know enough Greek to say that that is not possible, but at most, that’s all that that is, a possibility. Matthew’s account, at the very least, gives us one more reason to think that there is a good chance that these angels are only the holy angels of God.

Would it make sense to just say “angels” and yet be speaking just of God’s holy angels? Yes it would, as this is a very common practice in the New Testament. Only six times is the term *aggelos* used to definitively refer to demons (Matthew 25.41; 2 Corinthians 12.7; 2 Peter 2.4; Jude 6; Revelation 12.7; 12.9). On a few occasions, it can apply to human messengers (e.g. Mark 1.2; Luke 7.24; James 2.25). On a few occasions, it is ambiguous (e.g. 1 Corinthians 6.3; 11.10). The number of times this word occurs varies somewhat from version to version due to differences in the Greek manuscripts used, but it is used well over 150 times (181 different verses in the KJV) (“Aggelos”). Most of these uses are clearly speaking of God’s holy servants in heaven. This makes good sense when we remember that the term for angel does literally refer to a messenger (Vine 47). Satanic beings no longer work for God as His messengers the way that holy angels and even His human servants do. Thus, this title is almost always reserved for God’s servants. It should be no surprise, therefore, if that kind of angel is what Jesus was talking about when referring to how the saved are like angels.

In conclusion, it is not impossible that Luke 20.36 is talking about all angelic spiritual beings, but it is by no means certain. Given how the Bible usually speaks of angels, given that many translations place these angels equal to the saved (as opposed to far below them), and given Matthew’s parallel account, there is more than enough reason to believe that Jesus was likely saying that God’s angels, and not all spiritual beings, are immortal. At the very least, we

cannot say that this verse proves the immortality of the devil and demons as Armstrong argues. Therefore, this passage poses no problem for the arguments that will be made later on that God will rid His creation of all evildoers, not just lost humans.

XXIX. ISAIAH 33.14

This passage does not come up very often in the annihilationism debate, though it will pop up in the occasional book or pamphlet (e.g. *Hell: Suppose It's True after All?*; Erickson 1246; Hendriksen 202). The verse reads: “The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling hath seized the godless ones: Who among us can dwell with the devouring fire? who among us can dwell with *everlasting burnings?*” (ASV). The reason for this should be apparent. It speaks of “everlasting burnings.” This is very much like Matthew 25.41, which spoke of “eternal fire.” Nevertheless, there is a reason why this passage is not often used by traditionalists: it doesn't do a very good job of proving eternal torment.

Although “everlasting burnings” itself sounds like there is burning that goes on for eternity, everything else said about the lost in this chapter sounds like annihilation. In the same verse, it is called a “consuming fire.” What is said of those who will be consumed by this fire? They are called chaff and stubble, and are described as being set ablaze by the breath of God (Verse 11). Furthermore, it is written: “The peoples will be burned to lime, Like cut thorns which are burned in the fire” (Verse 12). As Edward Fudge sums up accurately, “No metaphor could describe a destruction more complete” (“Part One” 31). This “everlasting burnings” is describing a consuming fire that destroys.

This should not surprise us, given what has already been said about “eternal fire” (especially in Section XVI). Any differences that do exist between this passage and the passages that speak of “eternal fire” only serve to help the annihilationist argument. Although the term “eternal fire” pops up twice in the Bible in contexts not speaking directly and unambiguously about destruction (Matthew 18.8 and 25.41), the only time “everlasting burnings” (Hebrew *olam moqed*) comes up is in a passage that is clearly describing annihilation of one sort or another.

There exists another possibility as well; the “everlasting burnings” may be a reference not even to Hell, but to God Himself. After all, it is written: “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4.24). Rather than it being a rhetorical question, saying that nobody can dwell in literal fire, it could be following the pattern of Psalm 15, where “[Isaiah 33.14] asks a question which is answered by the verses that follow” (*The Fire* 109). In other words, “He who walks righteously and speaks with sincerity...” (Isaiah 33.15a), is the answer to the question Isaiah poses in Verse 14 (as opposed to it being a separate declaration). In other words, who can survive in the presence of God (the “everlasting burnings”)? The righteous, that’s who. Fudge is not alone in making this suggestion. Also appealing to God as a “consuming fire,” John Stott cites this verse as one among several that demonstrate the separation between God and sinful man that exists apart from the atonement of Jesus Christ (*Basic Christianity* 71-72). Most notably, John Calvin appears to make the same argument in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, citing this passage not as proof of eternal torment, but rather as proof of sinful man’s inability to stand before the throne of a perfectly righteous God (676; bk. 3, ch. 12).

One way or another, despite the seemingly traditionalist-friendly phrase in Isaiah 33.14, the whole picture painted by the passage is clearly one of annihilation. The lost are completely destroyed, and Verse 14, whether referring to the fires of Hell or to God, does not change that.

XXX. JUDE 6

It is written: “And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day.”

Since it does speak of “eternal bonds,” it at first may seem to demonstrate eternal torment. A few authors, here and there, appeal to this verse in this way (e.g. Hendriksen 197; Morey 135-136). However, there is a reason why this verse is so rarely cited. They have been kept in chains specifically for the judgment day. It is their holding cell, as it were. The RSV says that they “have been kept by him in eternal chains in the nether gloom *until* the judgment of the great day” (emphasis added). The ESV is similar. They are not kept in them for eternity. Even if the chains are literally “eternal,” it would just be saying that the chains themselves last forever. It would not be referring to the length of their imprisonment. The angels are not kept there for eternity, but only until the judgment (when one way or another, they are sent somewhere else, not in these mysterious “eternal bonds”). For this reason, many authors simply don’t bother with it. Those that do tend to make the same observation; the angels’ fate up until judgment, not after, is in view (e.g. Blanchard 242; Greene 84; Peterson, *Hell on Trial* 84). It parallels 2 Peter 2.4, where the angels are held in *Tartarus* until judgment. Whatever the case, this does not speak of the angels’ eternal fate, as they are awaiting judgment, not in an eternal prison.

Is it possible that it could be interpreted as referring to the future? Yes (depending on how one renders the Greek). However, it’s far from a given (seeing as how this is in the past tense). This is likely why the relatively few commentaries on this passage seldom treat it that way. Many see the statement as symbolic, such as traditionalist Andrew Robert Fausset, who speaks of them wandering the earth as they, “like condemned prisoners, await their doom” (544). Traditionalist John Gill gives several possibilities that are consistent with conditionalism,

including the idea that the “eternal bonds” represent “the power and providence of God over them.” Universalist Lee Salisbury sees the everlasting chains as being literal. The angels will not always be held in them (since they will be saved, he believes), however, the chains “will always be a symbol of the severity of God’s corrective measures.” Whatever is meant by “eternal bonds,” it is doubtful that the passage is saying anything about their final, eternal judgment in the first place.

XXXI. LESS COMMONLY USED PROOFTEXTS (FROM *THE INTERACTIVE BIBLE*)

A. I Address Only the Less Common Prooftexts in This Section

The page titled “Eternal Torment Proved...Annihilation Refuted” on the website *The Interactive Bible* had a big influence on me as a fairly young Christian, and therefore I had to be sure I could refute every one of their arguments. In the original letter that this is based on, I devoted a significant part of this to addressing them point by point. What you are reading now is more comprehensive, and is arranged more by topic, so most of their points are covered in other sections. For example, they point to Daniel 12.2, and earlier I addressed Daniel 12.2. Every significant point of theirs is addressed somewhere, either in another section or in this one.

One section that I did keep was a response to a chart on their page, one that quotes eight passages and claims that each proves eternal conscious punishment and not annihilation. Four of their most commonly used prooftexts have already been covered: Revelation 20.10 (Section XIII), Revelation 14.10-11 (Section XV), Matthew 25.46 (Section XVI), and 2 Thessalonians 1.9 (dealt with in Section XVIII). I will now touch upon the rest.

B. Matthew 22.13

In this verse, at the end of a parable, Jesus says, “Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’” This represents what will happen to the lost. Since there is darkness and “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” then eternal torment must be true of course...

However, the picture of somebody being tied up and thrown out into darkness is consistent with annihilationism. If one were put in the man’s situation, one of three things would

happen. The first is that he somehow is freed, either by his own power or by being rescued. That would definitely not be what Jesus is suggesting; if it were, it sure wouldn't spell out eternal torment. The second possibility is that he gets killed by man or perhaps beast. The third possibility is very similar; he would be left there until he dies of thirst because he has no way to obtain water. His doom in the parable would be death, not a miserable remainder of his natural life. The focus of course is his exclusion from the banquet, but the result of that exclusion would be death. There is no middle ground. The death would not be instant, but it would be quicker than a natural death. Just imagine the picture of someone tied up and thrown into the dark night. They weren't in the modern town where someone would drive by and call for help. He's thrown into danger. Robbers could kill him, beasts could kill him, or he'd die of thirst. The picture is one of terrifying danger, but it's the danger of unnaturally quick death, not artificially extended existence for the purpose of suffering pain. He is excluded, and therefore he is doomed to die.

This picture of death by means of exclusion is a good description of the conditionalist view of final punishment. Without God, the Creator, one cannot have life in any sense, and while there is more to life than existence, the two go hand in hand, and the lost will not exist forever. Remember 2 Thessalonians 1.9? It's the same idea here. One is cast out of God's presence, which obviously makes them very sad and regretful (weeping), as well as angry (gnashing of teeth). But what happens to those who are cast out? Their being sent away from God and into "outer darkness" is their part of destruction. The question is, do they continue to exist, or is God's presence the source of all life (in every sense of the word)? Can any living creature live on apart from God and his life-giving power (the river of life, tree of life, and other such symbols that are in his kingdom)? What the lost person is being excluded from in parables like this represents the Kingdom of God. Can one have any sort of existence outside of the Kingdom?

The assumption is made that one can, although I believe that this comes less from these teachings about being cast out (either in parables or in more straightforward warnings of Jesus such as in Luke 13.28), and more from the general Christian idea that the soul is immortal. I think I quite adequately addressed that issue in Section VIII. As to whether or not the unsaved can go on existing outside of God's kingdom, I argue in Section XXXIV that they cannot.

C. Matthew 24.51

In a very similar story to the one in Matthew 22.13, 24.51 tells us that a master will find a wicked servant, “and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” But like the passage discussed in the previous subsection, it never mentions eternity or even where the place with the hypocrites is. Is it a place where they are separated from God and consciously burned alive for ever and ever (or something that such a place allegorizes), or is it a place where they are burned to ashes?

First of all, I question whether or not this parable even has any sort of direct eschatological significance at all. Although this goes well beyond the scope of this discussion, I am an orthodox preterist, and therefore I believe that Matthew 24 is speaking not of the end of the world, but rather of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the violent end of the Old Covenant system. Is this a description of Jesus's physical return at the end of the world, or was it a warning to be on guard for when the fall of Jerusalem will come, lest the Christians there be killed with the unbelieving Jews. Lazy and careless professing servants of the Lord would fail to pay attention to what Jesus had said to them, as recorded and likely interpreted in Luke's account of this conversation. In Matthew 24.15 and Mark 13.14, Jesus makes a cryptic reference to Daniel 9.27 and Daniel 12.11. However, Luke, who is believed to have been writing primarily to

Gentiles, interprets it for us: “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near. Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are in the midst of the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city” (Luke 21.20-21). It is commonly acknowledged that very few Christians (if any) died in the Roman siege and attack on Jerusalem, in contrast to up to 1.1 million Jews who lost their lives (Josephus 485; bk. 6, ch. 10). It appears that many heeded Jesus’s words. Those who didn’t take Jesus seriously, however, would have found themselves among those who suffered and died when the city fell. They would be like a slave in 1st century Rome who neglected his duties.

Secondly, if this is eschatological, then that would in some ways help the annihilationist argument. Of great importance is the first half of Matthew 24.51. Much emphasis is put on the weeping and the grinding of teeth, and the element of darkness, but often overlooked is the fact that the servant is also *cut into pieces*. This would mean one of two things. The first possibility is that the man, by being cut asunder, is killed. If someone being killed and their body thrown out into the darkness represents final punishment, then that is an excellent picture of annihilation, not eternal existence in torment. It could also be the case that he has been mutilated though not killed, and is then thrown into darkness. This would be dependent on whether the weeping and gnashing of teeth refer to the man in the parable, or to what it represents. Either way, what would happen to such a person? Would not a person cut asunder and thrown out into a dark street or wilderness die rather quickly (if alive)? He ends up dead or dying. If that is the model, then what more need be said? The parables that Jesus tells regarding those who do not serve God all paint their fate a little differently, but none paint it in a way that would go against this picture of a man being left for dead. This one is just more detailed. Them being cast into darkness is akin to dying, so if their being cast into darkness does actually represent them being cast into Hell, what then?

The last idea that must be addressed would be the idea that, since the master represents God, the servant being sent into outer darkness after being killed (if he is supposed to be killed by being cut asunder) is representative of God/Jesus killing a damned person and then after death, throwing them into Hell. Indeed, God would kill a person physically and then ultimately send them to Hell (Luke 12.5). However, although the master represents the Lord, the master himself is a mere mortal man. He could not inflict eternal conscious separation from himself on a dead man the way that God is said to do to the wicked in real life. Within the parable, these are just men. By the nature of things, the man could not be said to kill a man and then punish him further. Within the parable, it would have to be that the men are bound by what the laws of nature indicate that men can do. No mention of any supernatural ability is made. To give a picture of how He would act, Jesus tells how men would react in a certain situation. Any conscious punishment would have to be represented by something done to the servant in this life, because the story involves only acting upon men. While God Himself can be a character in a parable, such as in Luke 12.12-21, that is not the case here. The picture here is ultimately that of death as a result of separation, which does not fit the picture of eternal torment at all (but does work well with the idea of conditional immortality).

D. Revelation 22.15

The assumption here is that in order to be outside of God's kingdom, you must exist (consciously). The passage reads, "Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying." But does it say they will be consciously existent and outside for ever and ever? Not explicitly. So, is that the case?

If we say that Revelation is a linear narrative, and that because of Revelation 20.10-15 we know that the lost are still existent outside, then the traditionalist runs into the same problem that comes up with Revelation 20.10. Of course the unsaved are eternally outside, specifically in the lake of fire, but this is only in the vision. If I have proved my case in Section XIII, that it is only a symbolic vision which ultimately represents the destruction of all involved, then the same would be true here, since it is following the same narrative as the judgment. Just as them being thrown into the fire and tormented day and night for ever and ever is symbolic of their destruction, so them being outside of the kingdom, in that same lake of fire, wouldn't be any different.

Now, if this is not a linear vision, then there are other very reasonable annihilationist interpretations as well. One possible idea is that the heavenly Jerusalem of which the lost are "outside" actually represents the church (Boa and Bowman 364; Bray 226; Mathison 35; Noel 191-193). After all, the holy city is compared to a bride (Revelation 21.2), as is the church in Ephesians 5.22-31. Also, given that it is in the present tense (outside *are* the wicked), taken literally it would refer to something present which the wicked are not part of. The church fits this to a T. If that's the case, then one could make the argument that this passage doesn't matter, as it would just be God saying that evildoers are not part of His church.

If what is in view is not just the church but the abode of the saved (which I am much more sympathetic to), then the annihilationist position can still stand. Contrary to what seems to be assumed, that they are said to be outside is not necessarily the equivalent of saying that they will spend eternity outside of this future place/state. Seeing as how God was speaking to John at what was then the current time, in present tense, God is likely speaking of a future fate in present tense. That is actually the basis of the traditionalist interpretations (since if it were speaking of

their current condition before they have even died, it wouldn't be speaking of eternity). In other words, my crazy ideas about the future being spoken of as present reality in Section XI aren't so crazy! However, instead of God saying what it will be like for all eternity, what if He is speaking of what the judgment will be like? At the judgment, they will be kept away. It's like the judgment in Matthew 25.31-46. The saved are told to enter the kingdom (Verse 34); the lost are sent away (Verse 41). They are condemned to be outside, where they perish.

Why would this be a viable option? Well, for starters, *it never says that they are eternally existent outside*. That's the biggest thing. If this is speaking of something future, it doesn't specify how this is the case. It doesn't say they will always be conscious outside, just that that is where they will end up. Seeing as how this heavenly city is where the tree of life is located, if anything we should expect that the lost are cut off from immortality in every sense (more on this is Section XXXIV). So then, what the passage actually says, in contrast to the unwarranted assumptions about its meaning, implies that the lost would *not* live forever!

Furthermore, the fact that God says that they are outside could just be His way of saying "you don't have to worry about them being here." Most literally, saying that they are outside would indicate that they are somewhere, but God could simply be appealing to John's familiarity with gated cities. And unless this is a literal gated city, the idea of it being a city (one that is over 1 million square miles) is itself figurative, so why wouldn't God describe it with city imagery? The abode of the righteous is described as a city, one from where evildoers are kept out despite the fact that its gates never close (Revelation 21.25). Thus, to make the point that evildoers and sin and the like cannot affect us, the lost are said to be kept out of the metaphorical city. Even if God is saying what things will always be like, it need not be taken absolutely literally.

In short, there are any number of ways that this passage can be interpreted, but whatever the case, it does not disprove annihilationism.

E. Jude 13

In this passage, Jude, using a string of metaphors, speaks of a certain group of unsaved, ungodly people who have infiltrated the church. Most relevant is the final description he gives, calling them “wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 13b).

The traditionalist claim tends to be something to this effect: like stars, the damned go to darkness. They are in that darkness “forever.” Therefore, they are always existent in a state of misery represented by darkness. References to this text are less common than others, but they do pop up occasionally (“Eternal Torment”; Peterson, *Hell on Trial* 86; Morey 141).

1. The Response

I initially had some trouble with this, and so I emailed Glenn Peoples (no surprise there). In his response from November 26, 2008, he pointed the following out to me:

To say that they are eternally or permanently consigned to darkness does not obviously speak of endless suffering. On the contrary, darkness in Scripture certainly can refer to the silence of death. Here are some examples: In Job 3:3-6, Job wishes that he had never been born. He wishes that the day had never occurred at all, that it would be erased from history, and he repeatedly expresses this idea by saying that he wishes that it would be consumed by “darkness.” Not suffering, but nonexistence. In Psalm 88:10-12, the psalmist refers to death, destruction (Abbadon) and the grave as “darkness,” expressing the fact that he, a

believer in Yahweh, does not want to die. If a person believes [sic] in annihilationism, he believes that the lost will be dead forever. Sure, you could get all metaphorical and decide that this really means “spiritual” darkness, or sadness or something else, but that’s hardly the obvious meaning.

What Peoples points out is quite important. The fact that it speaks of “darkness” shouldn’t automatically be read as a reference to misery or godlessness (although it could mean that). Darkness can refer to unconscious “death” in the classic sense (as Job 3:3-6 ties it to), or to the grave from Psalm 88.12 (which would be speaking neither of suffering, as the psalmist is a believer, nor of any possible blessings in the intermediate state, as that would hardly be undesirable). Its uses vary; in some contexts, it speaks of sadness (e.g. Lamentations 3.2, Joel 2.2). Sometimes the meaning of the metaphor is unclear, as death or suffering both fit the context (e.g. Isaiah 47.1, Zephaniah 1.15). In most contexts, it refers to literal darkness. What does it mean in this case? What kind of darkness is in view? That depends; what is the fate of the lost...?

2. Additional Points to Consider

Dr. Peoples also brought up the fact that it is not clear how directly the star metaphor points to the eternal destiny of the lost. The reference to stars follows a string of metaphors, none of which are commonly seen as symbols for Hell. Those in view are compared to clouds swept about by wind in Verse 11, indicating their lack of any sort of spiritual foundation. They are likened to waves, their shame like sea foam (Verse 13). Not much in the way of any sort of eternal fate is evident there. Jude’s comparison of fruitless trees that are dead and uprooted in Verse 12, it could be argued, sounds more like annihilationism than eternal torment (since dead trees are dead and usually get burned up in fire, as a few passages that will be brought up in Part 3 talk about when referring to the fate of the lost). John Calvin, in his commentary, makes no

reference to the darkness as being their fate, instead pointing out that they are like wandering stars in that they briefly show light, only to return to godlessness (“Commentary on Jude” 313-314). Robert Peterson takes a similar view regarding the lost appearing to be godly, though he does also believe the reference to darkness refers to their fate in Hell (*Hell on Trial* 86). Other commentators reason in a similar manner, even suggesting that Jude is comparing them to comets (Morey 141; Fausset 545). This use of the darkness metaphor, referring to the lack of the light of God in one’s conduct, pops up in several places in 1 John (and arguably in 1 Thessalonians 5.4-6 as well). This would fit this picture especially well. After all, a comet appears brightly in darkness for a moment, then disappears into darkness, never to be seen again. Of course, some comets do become visible again, but this is only a metaphor, appealing to what people see, not to what necessarily is the case in real life.

An aside, nobody is impugning Jude’s inerrancy by suggesting that he called a comet a star (well, at least I’m not). Today, we use the term “star” (and its Greek equivalent) to refer specifically to a specific type of celestial body (luminous, made of superheated gas and plasma, etc.). But if they didn’t define stars as we do today, then Jude isn’t wrong. The words wouldn’t have meant the same things back then. It’s not as though Jude would necessarily be saying that comets are the exact same thing as the sun and other stars, only that it moves (which would be woefully inaccurate). It’s a bright celestial body, so back then they all used the same names. Today we’re more specific. Jude called it what people called it. It’s not an issue.

Now, the point of the description is that for a brief time, they appeared godly (showing light), but are in truth permanently and irreversibly godless (dark). I should note that the Greek *aión*, here translated forever, literally refers to an age and doesn’t always refer to eternity (times where we see “for ever and ever” it is something different). Therefore, it may not even be

eternity in view per se, but a reference to the fact that these people show light for a moment, only to ultimately reside in darkness (i.e. godlessness). It's no less pictorial than any of the other descriptions. He isn't saying that they are like stars, and then also that they are going to darkness forever as their punishment. He would be saying that comets briefly shine a light in darkness, but quickly and permanently return to it, and in a similar manner, these people appear to be part of Christ's body, but quickly and permanently return to godlessness.

Furthermore, it is not clear that when it speaks of "forever," it is saying they will be there forever in the future. It could be saying that "forever" is how long the darkness has been waiting for them. In other words, it has always been God's will (whether eternally or simply since the beginning of something, e.g. creation) that false believers would be cast into darkness. The Calvinist/Arminian debate of whether Jude is speaking of the individual people or just false believers in general is beyond this analysis. Nevertheless, no matter who specifically is in view, this interpretation would seem quite fitting given Jude's clear reference to their destruction being ordained from long ago (Verse 4). It could be the case that for them, the darkness began waiting for them however long ago "forever" is, and it is still awaiting them.

The above should be evident by just reading the passage. The verb *téreoó*, which means to reserve, is in the perfect passive indicative tense. That's why most literal and fairly literal translations (NIV, ESV, RSV, NASB, ASV, though not the KJV), translate it as something to the effect of "*has been reserved...*" Now, the fact that it has been reserved doesn't mean it has stopped being reserved; it clearly still is reserved for them. Nevertheless, what matters here is that it was already reserved for them when Jude wrote it. It's like if I was told that a hotel room "*has been reserved for two days.*" It could mean that a reservation has been made and it is for a two day period (which it probably would in that context), or it could mean that 2 days ago it was

reserved, and it has been reserved for the past two days. It is not clear if Jude means a reservation for the hotel room of darkness has been made, and it is an eternal reservation, or if it has been reserved, has been waiting forever, and will wait until the day they come. If it is the latter, then all that Jude is saying is that they will go to darkness, which could mean any number of things.

This passage by no means proves annihilationism, but it does not prove eternal torment either. As demonstrated, there is more than one reasonable way to interpret what Jude means by “darkness,” how it applies to the people mentioned, and how, if at all, it applies to eternal punishment.

XXXII. GEHENNA, JEWISH BELIEFS, AND INTERTESTAMENTAL LITERATURE

A. It Is Claimed That *Gehenna* Always Meant a Place of Eternal Torment before Jesus's Time

In a nutshell, the argument goes like this: Jews of Jesus's day believed that the damned would suffer eternal torment, and would do so in *Gehenna* (discussed in Section VI), so given that Jesus spoke of the damned going to *Gehenna* and never said it was *not* a place of eternal torment, it follows that He was confirming their belief. Robert Morey makes a big point of this in *Death and the Afterlife*. D.A Carson writes, "In the context of first-century Judaism, Jesus could not have used such words as these without being understood to be in line with Pharisaic beliefs on the matter, beliefs that also took Gehenna as a model for eternal, conscious punishment" (*The Gagging of God* 521). It pops up on the occasional website as well (e.g. B. Thompson; "Eternal Torment").

I am aware that this discussion isn't really about scriptural exegesis, and that this traditionalist claim isn't usually a core argument (since it is about uninspired literature). Nevertheless, the beliefs of Jews during this time as expressed in the literature is used to directly interpret what scripture says, and therefore I have included this section here in Part 2.

B. Was Eternal Torment *the* Dominant View? Part I: *Gehenna* in Rabbinic Literature

Indeed, I am no expert on the Jewish literature that was written between the prophets and Jesus. However, neither are most of the commentators who point to the intertestamental literature as evidence that Jesus must have taught eternal torment. From what I have researched regarding this topic, it hardly seems the unanimous belief of scholars that Jews during this time all believed in eternal torment, or that *Gehenna* just simply meant the traditionalist Hell and that is that.

The fact that some writings did speak of *Gehenna* as a place of eternal torment certainly is evidence that Jesus meant it that way when mentioning it in the gospels. However, it wasn't the only way it was used, making this argument for traditionalism less than airtight (especially when the rest of this section is also taken into account). Edward Fudge argues that, in contemporary Jewish thought, *Gehenna* could have many different meanings:

The Babylonian Talmud had the worst Jewish sinners sentenced to Gehenna for 12 months. Then “their bodies are destroyed, their souls are burned, and the wind strews the ashes under the feet of the pious.” All who enter Gehenna come out, with three exceptions: those who committed adultery or shamed their neighbors or vilified them. In the end, God would take the sun from its case, and it would heal the pious and punish the sinners. There would be no Gehenna in the future world.

Some rabbis were sympathetic; others were harsh. One can find quotes of torment by snow, smoke, thirst and rebellious animals. Others speak of the righteous observing the torments of the damned, “tossing in their pain like the pieces of boiling meat in a cauldron.” Still others, more benevolent, said light flooded even Gehenna each Sabbath, and the wicked, too, had a day of rest.

On the duration of the punishment, the rabbis contradicted each other. Some believed that the pain would continue forever with or without Gehenna, while others ended punishment with the last judgment. Whether this last view allowed a future life for the wicked or looked for their total annihilation cannot be determined conclusively. (*The Fire* 163)

Along these lines, Jewish scholar Tracy Rich of the *Judaism 101* website tells us the following about the Jewish view of *Gehenna*:

The period of time in Gehinnom [*Gehenna*] does not exceed 12 months, and then ascends to take his place on Olam Ha-Ba. Only the utterly wicked do not ascend at the end of this period; their souls are punished for the entire 12 months. Sources differ on what happens at the end of those 12 months: some say that the wicked soul is utterly destroyed and ceases to exist while others say that the soul continues to exist in a state of consciousness of remorse.

Interestingly, all three fates mentioned above (temporary punishment, destruction, and unending suffering) can be found applied to various levels of sinners in The Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Rosh Hashanah, Chapter 1 (27). However, *Gehenna* itself is *not* the place of eternal torment! *Gehenna* itself will be destroyed, and many of its inhabitants will ultimately be saved. Those who are condemned to eternal torment suffer even after *Gehenna* is destroyed, not in *Gehenna*. So much for the claim that *Gehenna* meant a place of eternal torment...

Eternal torment was not a uniform belief about of *Gehenna* in Jesus's time, and it was definitely not the uniform view among Jews at the time. That both annihilation and eternal torment were seen in this period is attested by various scholars. While defending the traditional view, Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle conclude this to be the case (56). That eternal torment was by no means universally believed will be even more evident as you read on.

C. Was Eternal Torment *the* Dominant View? Part II: The Dead Sea Scrolls

The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947 has had a significant impact on how we understand the Jewish views on final punishment. Much of what was thought has had to be

reconsidered. For example, Alfred Edersheim, who, according to Bert Thompson, “stood without equal as a Hebrew/inter-testamental period scholar,” concluded that “the doctrine of the Eternity of Punishments seems to have been held by the Synagogue throughout the whole first century of our era” (789). Bert Thompson uses Edersheim’s authority on the matter as evidence to support his claim that Jews all believed in eternal torment. Robert Morey also cites Edersheim’s work as evidence that 1st century Jews universally believed in eternal conscious punishment (89). However, Edersheim died in 1889 (“Biography”). He did not have access to the Dead Sea Scrolls, which, as is about to be shown, challenge the idea that eternal torment was the universal or even central view of the Jews around the time of Christ. Although the following passages don’t mention *Gehenna*, it is significant that many powerful references to annihilation are in the Dead Sea Scrolls (all translations by A Dupont-Sommer except where otherwise noted).

According to the Thanksgiving Hymns of Qumran:

The Sword of God shall hasten and all His sons of truth shall rouse themselves to [destroy] ungodliness and all the sons of transgression shall be no more. And the Valient One shall bend his bow and shall siege [and scatter them] abroad without end, and the gates shall send out weapons of war and they shall be migh[ty] from one end (of the earth) to [the other]. [And they shall battle] [against them] [and there shall be no] deliverance for the guilty inclination; they shall trample (them) underfoot unto destruction leaving no rem[nant]. (Bracketed statements theirs)
(IQH 6:29-32)

According to the writer, they “shall be no more...” and will be trampled underfoot “unto destruction leaving no remnant.” Now, that particular passage on its own appears as though it is speaking of an earthly war, but it is only a metaphor. In fact the entire Hymn is essentially a

stream of metaphors. In context, the writer was “like a man who entered a fortified city” (Verse 25), in which, regarding God, he writes, “And I lea[ned] on thy truth, O my God. For it is Thou who wilt set the foundation upon rock...in order to build a bui[ld]i[ng] such that will not shake, and none that enter it will stagger. For no stranger shall enter [there]...” (bracketed statements theirs). This “building,” which commentator A. Dupont-Sommer calls “the community of the just” (220), is the “building” that the wicked attempt to besiege when they are destroyed. Ultimately, their end can be likened to how the writer speaks of them with the coming of the “Shoot” which “may grow into branches of the eternal planting (Verse 15). This “Shoot,” presumably a messianic reference from Isaiah 11.1, will be a “well-spring of light, as an eternal unflinching fountain.” Regarding the wicked, “In its brilliant flames all the son [s of darkness] shall be consumed, [and it shall be] a fire to consume all guilty men unto destruction” (Bracketed statements theirs) (Verse 17-19). That is hardly language of eternal torment. Rather, this clearly eschatological description reveals the same fate as in the later metaphorical victory of good over evil, that the wicked “shall be trampled underfoot, leaving no rem[nant]” (bracketed statements theirs).

If Jesus is said to use terminology from the intertestamental writings (usually, as opposed to scripture), what of the Dead Sea Scrolls and their references to annihilation? Elsewhere, Jesus uses language that mimics that of the Qumran writings (as do other New Testament writers). For example, the designation “sons of light,” which Jesus applies to His followers (Luke 16.8; John 12.36) is also the designation applied by the members of the Qumran community to themselves (Vanderkam 34). With this in mind, consider how, in Section XVI, I referenced 1 Qumran, the Scroll of Rule, and how it spoke of “eternal fire” as something destructive. The passage reads, “Be thou cursed in all works of thy guilty ungodliness! May God make of thee an object of dread

by the hand of the avengers of vengeance! May he hurl extermination after thee by the hand of all the executioners of judgment! Cursed be thou, without mercy, according to the darkness of thy deeds. Be thou damned in the night of *eternal fire!*" (emphasis added) (1 QS 2:5-8). One of the few examples of the term "eternal fire" that predates Jesus is *not* speaking of eternal torment, but rather, extermination. If Jesus is appealing to the language of intertestamental literature when speaking of *Gehenna* (not that the intertestamental literature is in agreement on what *Gehenna* is like in the first place), what about His references to "eternal fire?" Granted, the words translated as "eternal fire" in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls are not identical, as the Qumran Scroll of Rule is in Hebrew and not Greek. Nevertheless, they are similar enough to be translated the same way across the board. Why not use the same principle here as some traditionalists do with texts like Judith 16.17? What is the difference? Well, the difference is, in this case, there is *not* a passage of scripture to which Jesus could be alluding to (that is, quoting) instead of the intertestamental writing. In Mark 9.48, Jesus could have been referring to Isaiah 66.24 instead of the uninspired Judith 16:17, but nowhere in the inspired Old Testament is there a reference to "eternal fire" that Jesus could be using...Ponder that one.

One passage, 1QS 4:11-14, is worded in an unusual manner, at least in English:

And as for the Visitation of all who walk in this [Spirit of Perversity], it consists of an abundance of blows administered by all the Angels of destruction in the everlasting Pit by the furious wrath of the God of vengeance, of unending dread and shame without end, and of disgrace of destruction by fire of the region of darkness. And all their time from age to age are in most sorrowful chagrin and bitterest misfortune, in calamities of darkness till they are destroyed with none of them surviving or escaping. (Bracketed statements theirs)

How long does their suffering, which is “without end,” continue? It goes on until they are destroyed completely, with “none of them surviving or escaping.” Annihilationism was clearly a view among the Qumran community, typically believed to be part of the Essene sect (Wright 45; Fudge, “The Plain Meaning”), although some question the idea (Wise, Abegg, and Cook 13-34). Regardless of the specific group(s) involved, these intertestamental writings clearly taught the annihilation of the lost (while not denying the afterlife of the saved like the Sadducees did).

So what then of scholars from the 19th century? Without the Dead Sea Scrolls, it is more understandable that one would hold the view that eternal torment was the universal or near-universal belief of Jews (besides the Sadducees) in this period (although other works which were available at the time, such as those that will be explained below, still challenge this view). However, this view is clearly untenable knowing what we know now. Fudge is right when he says, “We must not fault men like Edersheim in this regard. He did the best he could with the materials he had, and he was not accountable for anything more.” After all, The Dead Sea Scrolls wouldn’t be discovered for nearly six decades. Nevertheless, Fudge is also correct that, “It is a different matter, however, for an author working today to be content to repeat Edersheim’s opinions” (“The Plain Meaning”). Morey, Thompson, and the many others who make this claim based on the word of 19th century scholars like Alfred Edersheim are without the excuse of having died before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered.

D. Was Eternal Torment *The* Dominant View? Part III: The Apocrypha

What do annihilationists say about the apocrypha? Fudge points out that no book of apocrypha, except Judith and possibly Ecclesiasticus, actually mentions eternal torment (*The Fire* 132). 1 Maccabees 2:62-63, speaking of the wicked, states, “Do not fear the words of a

sinner, for his splendor will turn into dung and worms. Today he will be exalted, but tomorrow he will not be found, because he has returned to the dust, and his plans will perish (RSV). This isn't clearly eschatological, although if it does paint any picture of the lost, it would be non-existence. Little if anything can be found directly regarding eternal punishment in the apocryphal books of Tobit, 1 Esdras, 1 Baruch, Epistle of Jeremiah, Prayer of Manasseh, the additions to Daniel and Esther, and Wisdom of Solomon (although Wisdom does speak in terms of death and destruction for the immoral, and immortality for the righteous).

What of traditionalist claims from this literature? At the risk of arguing from silence, even Robert Morey, who boldly claims eternal torment was the universal Jewish view, doesn't actually point to where most of these books speak of eternal torment, except Judith (which does in 16:17), Ecclesiasticus, and 2 Maccabees (which is debatable) (Morey 120-122). Ecclesiasticus, furthermore, is unclear because of translational issues (*The Fire* 127). Morey also points to Wisdom of Solomon. It never mentions eternal torment, but Morey does argue that 2:23 proves man's immortality is part of his being made in God's image (122). It reads, "God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity" (RSV). However, the author directly contrasts God's design with the current situation in Verse 24: "But through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it." In other words, because of the devil, the immortality previously mentioned has been lost (at least for some). The issue of immortality does come up in the next chapter, however. Regarding the *saved*, the author writes, "For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality" (3.2). The righteous live forever (5.15). Also regarding immortality: "The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction, and concern for instruction is love of her, and love of her is the keeping of her laws, and giving heed to her laws is assurance of *immortality*" (6:17-18).

It is not clear that the Wisdom of Solomon teaches the immortality of the lost (and that is an understatement). Although eternal torment comes up in Judith 16:17 (as discussed in Section XXI), and possibly in one or two other places, it is not a common motif in the apocrypha.

E. New and Reformed (I Don't Mean Calvinist) Teachings

Now, is it relevant that the teaching was out there? Of course. The fact that the people whom Jesus spoke to would have been exposed to the teaching of eternal torment does give some reason to think Jesus could have used these references of *Gehenna* to evoke in the minds of His listeners these things. It is itself a valid argument. After all, what a teacher would have reasonably expected his pupil to believe after hearing his words gives quite a bit of insight as to what the teacher meant. Of course, it is something else entirely to claim that the belief was anywhere close to universal (never mind that a significant Jewish sect, the Sadducees, didn't even believe in the resurrection). It wasn't universal. There was also a fair amount of conditionalism, not to mention the number of writings that simply aren't as clear as Judith 16:17 (for ECT) or the selected Dead Sea Scroll writings (annihilation). We cannot assume, therefore, that eternal torment was in the minds of everyone Jesus spoke to about eternal punishment.

Furthermore, one must ask why we should assume that Jesus was just going along with the popular beliefs in the first place. One mustn't overlook the fact that Jesus sometimes introduced new teachings and didn't always make them explicit to everyone (like when He told parables to the masses and only explained them to the few who asked). He also doesn't always rebuke false beliefs. Remember in John 9.1-9 when He healed the man born blind and the disciples asked if the man had sinned to cause it? Might you have thought, "how could someone have sinned to have been *born* blind?" Well, I heard somewhere (I can't remember where,

although it's pretty evident from the very passage) that there was a Jewish belief at the time that the unborn could sin. Unless we are to take Psalm 51.5 extremely literally and believe a fetus can actually sin (which I'm pretty sure few people believe), it must be noted that Jesus taught something but did not correct a false view associated with it (at least not in the recorded speech). With such strong biblical evidence in favor of conditional immortality, is it crazy to believe that Jesus taught conditionalism even if ECT was a belief of many who heard its message?

F. Greek Philosophy?

The Interactive Bible claims that there is no evidence that Greek thought entered Jewish theology during this point ("Eternal Torment"). I would argue that the evidence is in the literature itself. Read the Old Testament, and then read the book of Judith, or the Greek edit of Ecclesiasticus. What more evidence do we need? Do they expect us to find a series of scrolls by Jewish writers explicitly saying that they had decided to infuse their beliefs with Greek philosophy? Where in the Old Testament is talk of eternal torment in fire? It's one thing to claim the Old Testament doesn't say much about the afterlife and that the New Testament clarifies by teaching eternal torment. That's not true, but the point is, Jesus hadn't come yet, so where are these Pharisees coming up with this talk of eternal torment in fire? That seems like a pretty good indication of outside philosophy, which wouldn't be surprising given the fact that during this time they were under the control of the heavily Greek-influenced Roman Empire, and that they had previously escaped from heavy oppression under the Greek empire. Coincidence?

Furthermore, William Crockett openly concedes that the Jews of the era were influenced by Greek thought, and he unsuccessfully uses it as evidence *for* eternal torment. Crockett supports his conclusions by quoting Martin Hengel, who writes, "In Hellenistic-Roman times,

Jerusalem was an ‘international city’ in which representatives of the Diaspora throughout the world met together” and that “Palestinian Judaism must be regarded as Hellenistic Judaism” (qtd. in Crockett 68). F.F. Bruce agrees, arguing that the belief in a naturally immaterial soul in some Jewish circles was of Greek influence and that it was “not a characteristic doctrine of Judaism” (91). Crockett makes this claim in an attempt to refute Edward Fudge’s claim that Greek philosophy came into the church in the late 2nd century and was a major source of the marked increase in traditionalist belief during that time (68). His reasoning is that Greek thought had influenced Judaism before the New Testament was written, and therefore Jews, including Jesus’s audience and even the New Testament authors, must have believed in eternal torment.

However, Crockett misses the significance that the people at *The Interactive Bible* did not. If Jews in the time of Christ were influenced by pagan thought (as Crockett claims), and not the teachings of scripture, shouldn’t that make us question all the more the idea that Jesus would be appealing to contemporary Jewish ideas? To admit that the Jews of that time got their views of the afterlife from pagans, and not from God’s word, is to do just that; it is to admit that Jews from that time got their theology from pagans and not from God’s word. This is why most traditionalists try, albeit unsuccessfully, to demonstrate that eternal torment can be gleaned from the Old Testament. When it comes down to it, people might not be above ungodly influences seeping into their religion, but we as Christians are not normal people. The New Testament writers, who Crockett argues must have agreed with the Greek view because it was popular, definitely were not normal people. It is one thing if you are an unbelieving religious studies professor who assumes that Christianity is just another “religion” and that like all “religions” it is based at least in part on lies (sugar coated with euphemisms like “mythology”). In that case, you may have no trouble saying that Christianity is just the bastard child of Greek Platonic thought

and Judaism. However, we are children of God and children of truth. Who is Jesus but the one promised by the Jewish scriptures? What are we Christians but true Jews at heart, true children of Abraham and of promise, Jews and Gentiles who together love God and therefore love His promised, Jewish Messiah? What is Christianity but the fulfillment of Judaism?

The Greek influence in Jewish thought should lead us to question all the more that Jesus was really affirming their beliefs. It is not impossible that Jesus was just making the best of it, appealing to their pagan beliefs that happened to be right, but it never hurts annihilationism for one to concede that the immortal soul became popular because of the influence of the godless.

G. *Gehenna* in the Old Testament

Jesus taught from the Old Testament ubiquitously, and it's hardly safe to ignore the possibility that the Lord himself would draw from the scriptures in this instance. Where in the Old Testament is there this talk of fire and torment? Nowhere. Seldom do any serious traditionalists even say there that is any such talk except in Isaiah 66.24 (which doesn't mention torment or even consciousness), Daniel 12.2 (which doesn't mention fire or torment), and perhaps Isaiah 33.14. If not for the fact that the Old Testament doesn't talk about eternal torment, would it be considered unreasonable to think that Jesus, the Son of God, the one through whom everything including the scriptures was created, was expecting His listeners to know the scriptures and figure out what He meant by them and not by uninspired literature?

The link between *Gehenna* and judgment isn't new to the intertestamental period. In arguing that it is new to the intertestamental period, traditionalist Kendall Harmon asserts the following: "The word *Gehenna* which Jesus uses frequently to describe Hell, for example, is a term not found in the Old Testament" (207). Now, Harmon is correct that the term "*Gehenna*"

doesn't appear in the Old Testament per se, but that is only because the Old Testament is written in Hebrew, not Greek. As mentioned in Section VI, *Gehenna* in Greek simply refers to *Ge Hinnom* in Hebrew, which is the Valley of Hinnom. The Valley of Hinnom (i.e. *Gehenna*) is mentioned in the Old Testament in no fewer than 11 verses (Joshua 15.8; 18.16; 2 Kings 23.10; 2 Chronicles 28.3; 33.6; Nehemiah 11.30; Jeremiah 7.31; 32; 19.2; 6; 32.35). Now, some of the references have nothing to do with judgment and for our purposes can be ignored. This would include Joshua, 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, and Jeremiah 32.35.

Jeremiah 7.32-33 is among the passages that do speak of judgment: “Therefore, behold, days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when it will no longer be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of the Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth because there is no *other* place. The dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky and for the beasts of the earth; and no one will frighten *them away*.” The context of Jeremiah shows that it is God bringing down judgment upon Judah. The valley, where all kinds of idol worship occurred (including burning children alive as a sacrifice to Molech, mentioned in Verse 31) was where the dead would be buried. They would die as judgment over what went on in that valley. Thus it would be known as the “valley of the Slaughter.” God gives the same warning about the Valley of Hinnom in Jeremiah 19.6. One might notice a few similarities to Isaiah 66.24, which was looked at in Section XXI. The latter of fire and worms that will not cease to consume the dead bodies of the evildoers in view. The former speaks of beasts that likewise will not be stopped from devouring the dead in the valley. This connection to Jeremiah is not really the most important thing, but I do not think that it's a coincidence that *Gehenna* in Jeremiah describes a scene that is similar to what Isaiah sees in Isaiah 66.24, the scene in Isaiah that Jesus then references when speaking of eternal punishment and *Gehenna* (Mark 9.48).

Perhaps even more compelling is the mention of the valley in God's judgment in Isaiah 30.33. The Valley of Hinnom itself is not mentioned by name, but Topheth, which is part of the Valley of Hinnom (2 Kings 23.10), is central to the forecasting of the king of Assyria's fate:

For Topheth has long been ready,

Indeed, it has been prepared for the king.

He has made it deep and large,

A pyre of fire with plenty of wood;

The breath of the Lord, like a torrent of brimstone, sets it afire.

There is fire and even an allusion to burning sulfur (i.e. brimstone), and yet it is a funeral pyre, not a place of conscious suffering. The Israelites sacrificed their children to other gods in fire in Topheth (Jeremiah 7.31), and so Topheth would be a place of slaughter not only to the Israelites who are judged, but to the pagans by whose influence they turned to such wickedness. *Gehenna* was indeed a place of fiery judgment in the Old Testament. However, the fire was not of torment but of a funeral pyre to consume the slain enemies of God.

Just look at the picture being painted of *Gehenna* in the prophecies above. God's judgment on Judah and their pagan corrupters was mass killing, and *Gehenna* would be where the bodies were burned in pyres or eaten by animals. There was shame. There was destruction. There was bodily death. There was everything that, if used as a symbol for final judgment, paints a truly horrific picture, but a picture of the truly horrific fate of eternal destruction and death to the fullest, not miserable conscious existence. *Gehenna* is not shown as a place of torment, as some argue that it was shown in intertestamental literature. *Gehenna* is likewise not shown as being meaningless, which is how its uses in the Old Testament are usually regarded. This is not to say that Jesus was saying that the above prophecies were themselves actually about final

punishment and to be fulfilled in the end times. The literal earthly fulfillment surely came to pass centuries ago. Nevertheless, it is not the least bit unreasonable to say that by referencing *Gehenna*, perhaps Jesus was applying Old Testament language and imagery regarding judgment to the eternal realities of the final judgment. If that is the picture that He is painting, then He is painting a picture of destruction, not torment.

We know that Jesus knew the scriptures by heart, and that He expected His followers to know them as well. What if Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, was appealing to scripture? Jeremiah repeatedly speaks of *Gehenna* as a valley of slaughter. Isaiah speaks of it as a funeral pyre. Even in Jesus's day, dead bodies were possibly among the things thrown into the (at least supposedly) burning garbage dump that was once a lush valley. He's Jesus. He's telling His Jewish disciples and Jewish religious leaders of the terrors that await them should they turn from God (as many of the latter did). The Valley of Slaughter would certainly make a good figurehead for divine wrath.

It is often said that the Old Testament is silent on the afterlife, only vaguely referring to some dreary place called *Sheol*. But we can't say it is silent in cases where it appears that Jesus Himself is drawing off the Old Testament picture to describe eternal realities. Sure, it's not impossible that Jesus was changing the meaning, using words like *Gehenna* or pictures of fire and worms that originated in the Old Testament but using them in a different way. However, we can't just assume that to be the case with Old Testament figures like the Valley of Hinnom. Just like when Jesus directly quotes a line that is about destruction and not eternal torment (e.g. Isaiah 66.24), it must at least be considered that He might be using the pictures painted by the Old Testament to describe eternal punishment. He had the earthly arena of God's judgment right in front of Him; it should not surprise us if He made use of it.

H. Overall

Overall, there are two key problems with the traditionalist argument from intertestamental literature. Firstly, they assume that eternal torment was the universal view, which it wasn't. Secondly, they ignore that Jesus had scripture to draw from; He didn't have to appeal to uninspired literature or popular consensus in the first place.

XXXIII. CONCLUDING STATEMENTS AGAINST THE TRADITIONAL DOCTRINE

A. Up until now, I have gone over most of the major arguments for eternal torment (and some that aren't so key or common). And yet, I, like John Paul Jones, have not yet begun to fight. I have looked at every important passage used to prove eternal torment that I know of (and several that are not that important). However, I have not made much of a positive case for annihilationism. So far, all that I have really shown is that eternal torment is by no means a clear teaching of any passage, and that some of the prooftexts for it actually make a good deal of sense in light of annihilationism (and some even lean more in that direction). A considerable amount of evidence for annihilationism has been put forth just by nature of the passages involved, but largely my goal here has been to refute the interpretations that lead to the belief that Hell is a place of eternal torment. Therefore, much remains to be said in Part 3.

B. There is a method to my madness. If in the back of our minds we are still thinking that the passages discussed in Part 2 clearly teach eternal torment, and if we think that the Bible is replete with good arguments for the traditional view, then there will remain great temptation to read the passages that teach annihilationism in light of "tormented day and night for ever and ever." Don't get me wrong; I give very strong arguments for annihilationism. Part 3, although shorter than Part 2, is not just based on superficial readings of passages that really need to be read more in depth. One reason why Part 3 is shorter is simply because it doesn't take as much effort to show how passages that say that the wicked are burned to ash at judgment or have their souls destroyed in Hell amount to the conditionalist doctrine. The positive case is quite strong and it is in some ways a bit simpler. However, my case for annihilationism will be a lot stronger now that

I have already shown that the passages which are used to demonstrate the traditional view are all consistent with annihilationism, some even leaning in the annihilationist direction. There isn't much of a foundation for the traditional doctrine when you seriously look at its biblical basis. In fact, for some annihilationists I know, the lack of a good biblical case for traditionalism was much more influential to them becoming annihilationists than was the positive case *for* annihilationism! Whatever the case, once we establish that, despite what we are told, eternal torment is neither clearly taught nor ubiquitously mentioned, we can look anew at the things that the Bible does positively and repeatedly say about the unsaved. That is why I have gone about this the way that I have.

C. I understand this phenomenon well. Before I was an annihilationist, I simply took it for granted that "death" and "to perish" in Christianity simply meant going to Hell to be tormented for eternity. After all, Romans 6.23 mentions death, John 3.16 mentions perishing, the wicked go to Hell, and in my mind, Hell just simply was a place of eternal torment by definition. So, what else could perishing and death have meant? It makes perfect sense that this is true of most Christians, which is likely why the passages I will address in Part 3 are often treated so superficially. They just simply can't teach annihilationism because the Bible clearly teaches that eternal torment is true, and that is that! So, "destroy" always just means "ruin" when applied to future punishment. To kill a soul is to separate it from God and keep it conscious forever, as opposed to making it like a dead body (or a dead anything else...). Fire is a metaphor for sadness or pain, (or, though said increasingly rarely, a literal agent of torment), because nobody ceases to exist. Thus, it obviously can't destroy the wicked or be symbolic of their annihilation (even if they are directly compared to things that burn up or are even straightforwardly said to be turned

to ashes). One analogy that I have heard thrown about that I think is quite appropriate is that of someone who is born wearing glasses with blue lenses (or whatever color you choose). If the person never takes them off, how does the world look to him or her? We would say “blue,” but he or she would say that the world looks normal! If from day one we are told that Hell means eternal torment, obviously everything is going to be read in light of that until someone pulls off our shades. If I have done my job so far, and your shades are gone (or you at least are questioning how you’ve viewed things), then Part 3 will be of great use to you.

D. Given what we have been told that the Bible unambiguously teaches, one would have expected to find a very strong case for eternal torment, replete with many unabashed and unambiguous references to the unending torments of Hell. However, most of the passages I have examined thus far don’t even mention torment in the first place. That conscious suffering is meant from them is inferred, and at times, even just assumed. The few that do speak of torment I have explained sufficiently well to where, at the very least, they can no longer be seen as adequate to build a doctrine of Hell upon. It is already clear that eternal torment is not the clear teaching of the Bible.

E. Furthermore, given at least a few of the passages, there is already some reason to believe in conditional immortality. For example, when Mark and John allude to or even quote passages of Isaiah that speak of death and corpses and destruction while they describe the eternal fate of the unsaved, if anything, that makes passages like Mark 9.48 and Revelation 14.9-11 lend weight *towards* the conditionalist view, not against it. The same thing can be said of traditionalist prooftexts that say annihilationist-friendly things like “eternal destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1.9),

or even of the seemingly traditionalist-friendly phrase “eternal fire” (Matthew 18.8; 25.41) when we see how the term is used elsewhere. And given that “death” in the Bible typically refers to what happens to a body at the first death, in contrast to the soul, passages that warn of death (especially death of the soul) can do nothing but give weight to the annihilationist view.

F. As will be shown in the Part 3, we will see that, where we would have expected to see torment and eternal suffering, we will see death and corpses, destruction, ashes, and a world without sin and evil. Fire will not forever torment, but it will do what it normally does on earth. It will destroy what is bad (the damned, the demons, and the devil himself), thereby purifying what is good (creation). Now that it has been shown that eternal torment is not proven by even the most commonly used prooftexts, we can dig into the rest of what the Bible does clearly teach about those who resist God until the very end.

PART 3: IN FAVOR OF CONDITIONALISM

XXXIV. WHO IS IMMORTAL?

A. Immortality as It Pertains to the Saved

In not a single instance of scripture are the damned ever said to be immortal in any sense of the word.

Regarding the saved, two words are used to describe them (and God as well). As discussed in Section VIII, God is said to possess *athanasia* in 1 Timothy 6.16 (and He alone possesses it). That word simply translates to “immortality” in its most literal sense. The bodies of the saved put on *athanasia* according to 1 Corinthians 15.53 and Verse 54. All other times the English translations of the Bible use the term “immortality,” it uses the word *aphtarsia*. Strong defines it as “*incorruptibility; gen. unending existence; (fig.) genuineness – immortality, incorruption, sincerity*” (“A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament” 17).

Similarly, we read:

Immortality (861) (aphtharsia [word study] from a = not + phthartós = corruptible from the verb phtheíro = to corrupt, shrivel, wither, spoil by any process, ruin, deprave, defile, destroy) is literally that which cannot decay or be corrupted (deteriorated or lowered in quality, implying loss of soundness, purity & integrity) and is that which experiences unending existence. Aphtharsia is a state of not being subject to decay or death – immortality, incorruptibility (state of being free from physical decay), perpetuity. It speaks of an unending existence, of that which is not capable of corruption. (“Romans 2:7-8 Commentary”) (Bracketed statements theirs)

This word comes up, quite significantly, when describing the kindness of the Lord in light of hardship:

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with *me* in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. (2 Timothy 1.8-10)

How did Jesus bring life and immortality? Through the gospel. Our savior brought both life *and* immortality through the gospel. What of those who do not follow this gospel? How would they receive this immortality? How would they receive it without the life that comes with it? Or, if Paul means that Jesus brought life and immortality through his death and resurrection, which is the gospel (1 Corinthians 15.3-4), then to say that He brings immortality through it to all, yet life only to some, would be completely arbitrary. The text makes no such distinction. Immortality is part of the package that Jesus brings, the package that includes “life,” and therefore does not apply to the unsaved. Well then, why bother to mention immortality as part of what He brings to the saved if it is universal?

Most significant is the use of *aphtarsia* in Romans 2.7. It is written that, “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life” (*NIV*). This is directly contrasted to the evil deeds of the damned, and their fate, which is discussed in Verse 8. If all people either have or will have immortality, then why bother to seek it? Why describe the righteous as seeking what they would have either way? This is as exclusive to them

as glory and honor, which they also seek. This immortality, *aphtarsia*, belongs solely to the saved, not all men. Not only does it not describe the “immortal” soul, but Romans 2.7 almost certainly excludes the damned.

The only thing that keeps this from being a final death blow to traditionalism is the fact that *aphtarsia* can potentially have more metaphorical and qualitative meanings than simply “endless existence.” Although no form of immortality is ever said to apply the damned, Romans 2.7 only speaks of *aphtarsia*. It is therefore not impossible that in that particular case, and in 2 Timothy 1.10, Paul only means it in the most figurative sense. Context is everything, which leaves us with a lot of ambiguity. Therefore, it could be the case that *aphtarsia* is used as a specific form of immortality, and not immortality in the broad sense of the word, the sense in which all men are wrongly said to have “immortal” souls. It’s not exactly a straightforward or “face value” reading of the text, but it is possible. It is possible, from the strict meanings of the words, that all men will be given *athanasia* by God, but only some will have *aphtarsia*. That said, there is no passage regarding immortality to even make this appear to be the case. Like I said, only to God and the saved are any forms of immortality every attributed in scripture.

The argument for the “qualitative” aspect of *aphtarsia* is often quite overplayed. The Romans 2.7 commentary from earlier in this section concludes that *aphtarsia* has such a sense because they believe everyone is immortal (“Romans 2:7-8 Commentary”). That is seriously the argument. Everyone will be immortal, so *aphtarsia* cannot refer to endless existence (since only the saved receive it). Admittedly, because it is used in contexts in which it quite likely has meanings regarding quality and purity as well as continued existence (such as describing a true believer’s love for Christ in Ephesians 6.24), the qualitative aspect and its implications cannot be overlooked. Nevertheless, the fact that the saved alone receive “immortality,” incorruptibility,

imperishability, and the like, makes it seem much more likely that the scripture is saying that they alone will be kept forever alive (in the normal sense of the word).

In order to establish the immortality of all men, you really do need to show that eternal torment is true. Will God give *athanasia* to the damned as well as the saved? That much is never said in scripture. As Robert Peterson candidly admits, “I do not believe in the traditional view of Hell because I accept the immortality of human beings, but the other way around. I believe in the immortality of human beings because the Bible clearly teaches everlasting damnation for the wicked and everlasting life for the righteous” (*Hell on Trial* 178). Obviously I disagree with Peterson’s overall conclusions (although I do believe in “eternal damnation” and “eternal life”). However, in light of the Bible’s deafening silence when it comes to anywhere directly (or indirectly) affirming the doctrine of the immortality of all men, Peterson is right that this doctrine, if it is true, must be demonstrated by proving eternal torment, and not the other way around. The Bible only ever ties immortality of any sort to God and the saved, and I believe I have successfully refuted the affirmative scriptural case for eternal torment. What then is left?

B. The Tree of Life

Granted, it’s usually not best to argue a point from something that is only in Revelation, given its use of symbolism and metaphor. Nevertheless, in this case, a point can be clearly seen whether we are dealing with symbolism or something literal. This is the case regarding the tree of life, which is specifically found in God’s kingdom (Revelation 22.2).

So, I’m sure we are all familiar with the tree of Life from Genesis 2 and 3. If you are not, you should reread the first few chapters of Genesis. Its fruit allowed one who ate of it to not die, thus one with access to it could live forever. It was not only a source of food for Adam and Eve,

but eating from it was necessary for them to stay alive. After the fall, after they first sinned, Adam and Eve were denied access to the tree of life, and because of that they died. It is written:

Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.
(Genesis 3.22-24)

Adam and Eve sinned, and God would not allow them to eat from the tree of life, lest they “live forever.” There is nothing here to indicate that by “live,” God is speaking of fellowship. Indeed, when Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden and the level of intimacy they had with God decreased (as noted in Section XI they never were totally cut off), this had the effect of cutting them off from the tree as well. But the fruit of the tree was obviously not causal to their intimacy with God, their so-called spiritual life, as it were. The tree was simply for those already in God’s presence and good graces so that they would continue to consciously exist, in that wonderful state, and in both body and soul, forever.

Now, here’s the kicker: Several times in Revelation, we are told that the tree of life is in God’s kingdom. It’s not just a decoration; rather, it is the reward for the saints, for the saved (Revelation 22.14; 19). If the bodies and souls of damned and saved alike live forever by default (whether intrinsically or by God’s future sustenance), why would the saved need to eat from the tree of life? If everyone will consciously exist (i.e. live) forever and it’s just a matter of where

you are, either with God or away from Him, who cares about the tree of life being in God's kingdom awaiting the saved? Why bother showing it in John's vision at all?

To cover all bases, it is important to note that it is not as though it could be the case that God forces the damned to eat from it so that they can stay conscious and be tormented. Aside from it simply being odd that God would use the reward of the saved as a punishment for the lost, Jesus gives the following warning in Revelation 22.19: "And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, *God will take away his part from the tree of life* and from the holy city, which are written in this book" (emphasis added). Jesus wouldn't threaten to take away the right to eat from the tree of life if everyone ate from it whether they wanted to or not...Obviously then, nobody is forced to (although I am aware that KJV replaces "tree" with "book" in that verse). Secondly, and independent from any manuscript variations, the tree is located within the kingdom of God, in the great city (Verse 2). It is surely out of the grasp of the unsaved, who are permanently kept outside of the city in John's vision (Revelation 21.27). The Bible justifies the gut reaction that I imagine most would have to such an idea as God force-feeding the fruit of the tree of life to the lost; it would be really weird.

Is it possible the tree of life is in the holy city simply because it has "life" in the title, and therefore it is just a symbol of God's presence? It is possible, but then it would be not even a symbol but rather a symbol of a symbol. If the tree is literally there, it would be the source of immortality as it was in the garden of Eden (if we assume the story of Adam and Eve is at least mostly literal, which I do). If it is a symbol for what the tree represents, it would represent the immortality, which is only available in God's kingdom, based on the immortality only available in Eden. What we'd have to further claim is that the tree represents physical life, and furthermore that physical life is symbolic of knowing God. It is not impossible, but it is not all that likely

either. If it just represents God's presence, then the reader is already shown all that it would represent by being shown God's kingdom, and by being told that God will call them His children (Revelation 21.7), and by being told that they would see His face (22.4), etc. Eternal life is knowing God and Christ (John 17.3), and we know that they are the temple and that Jesus is the metaphorical lamp through which God's light shines (Revelation 21.23). Our joy is already symbolized by the gold streets and unbelievable beauty. We are already told straight up that we will no longer know misery (Verse 4). The tree of life always symbolized immortality before; why change that now for the sake of utter redundancy? Why would we say it wouldn't carry the meaning it always had before, or at least something like it? Again, I'm not saying the tree of life probably isn't symbolic. It probably is a symbol. But if it was always what granted physical immortality, not joy or peace or godliness but physical immortality, is not the most obvious and reasonable interpretation that it represents the physical immortality all believers will have?

Now, I know there is more to life than just existing. However, just because life is knowing God, that does not mean that we can just assume that spiritual death entails continued existence. If you know God, you are in his kingdom, right? And life is being in his kingdom isn't it? At the very least, if not synonyms, the two are closely related. Consider Jesus's words; "If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter *life* lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell" (emphasis added) (Mark 9.45). What does He follow it up with? "If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter *the kingdom of God* with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell" (emphasis added) (Verse 47). Therefore, it would seem that if you aren't thrown in Hell, then you are in God's kingdom, equated with life. Here's the thing; if Chapters 21 and 22 in Revelation speak literally of a kingdom, then only within that kingdom can you access immortality (via the tree of life). Even if entrance to the

kingdom is symbolic for life, a symbol of being with God, then only by entering the symbolic kingdom, that is, by obtaining life, can you access the symbolic source of immortality. Only by gaining life can you gain immortality. Life and immortality are intertwined.

We assume that if life is knowing God (which obviously requires conscious existence), then death must then be conscious separation, but it seems here that to know God, to have life, to enter the kingdom, is the only way to have immortality. The a priori assumption that since eternal life is not merely conscious existence but includes conscious existence that therefore death must also include conscious existence is false. Logically, it is a flawed assumption. There is no guarantee that what life is, knowing God, is not also what is needed to maintain physical existence. Adam and Eve, when separated from God, also suffered physical death because of it. The first time the tree of life popped up, immortality and life with God were a package deal. In that case, they didn't completely die "spiritually," and likewise their physical deaths are not permanent. Put this all on an eternal scale and see what happens. Here, it is illustrated for us in God's kingdom. Within God's kingdom, within the state of life, there is immortality, and outside of this, Jesus warned, you cannot have it.

XXXV. 2 PETER 2.6

A. 2 Peter 2.6 Is Hard to Read Any Other Way

For context, here are Verses 4 through 10, which in most translations are put in a single sentence that is so long it would make even Ernest Hemmingway blush:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; and *if* He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing *them* to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly *lives* thereafter; and *if* He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard *that* righteous man, while living among them, felt *his* righteous soul tormented day after day by *their* lawless deeds), *then* the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in *its* corrupt desires and despise authority.

Now, the pertinent verse here is Verse 6, which reads, “and *if* He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing *them* to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly *lives* thereafter...” What better example for annihilationism could there be than cities being incinerated by God? Just as God incinerated their city and their bodies, so He will incinerate the ungodly, those who are destroyed not just in body (like the Sodomites were), but in soul as well (Matthew 10.28).

A handful of translations, based on a textual variant (Riddle), make the point even more powerfully. As the NIV translates 2 Peter 2.6, “If he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of *what is going to happen to the ungodly*” (emphasis added). The English Standard Version follows suit. If that is the case, it is all the more powerful, as Peter would undeniably and explicitly be speaking of a judgment that was still to come (being the eternal judgment that almost all of 2 Peter focuses on). Either way, while many great acts of divine judgment could have been an example for the ungodly, God points to Sodom and Gomorrah in the scriptures.

B. Traditionalist Response – Part 1: Fire, Not Destruction, Is the Example

The first claim that I could see being made is that Sodom and Gomorrah do serve as an example of the fate of the wicked, not because they were destroyed, but because they were burned with fire and sulfur. This response would require a more literal interpretation of the traditional doctrine, the interpretation that Hell is a place of literal fire which torments the lost.

However, that interpretation fails to take into account the language of the passage. I will say that despite the relative brevity of my rebuttal, this is actually a stronger position regarding this verse than that of those who believe that the fire of Hell is symbolic. That said, it must be asked why Peter, if he had wanted to emphasize the fire and sulfur, didn't mention the actual fire or sulfur? What he does mention is that the town was destroyed completely, by being reduced to ashes, and in causing that to happen, God made them an example. Obviously, incineration requires fire, but if the goal is to highlight the actual element of fire, and not the utter destruction it causes, it makes little sense to bring up only the utter destruction and not the fire itself.

C. Traditionalist Response – Part 2: It Is an Example Because It Was Judged

The other general response given, mostly by those who hold that the fire of Hell is symbolic, is that God made an example of Sodom and Gomorrah, but only in the loosest sense. They were an example of the lost simply because God judged them. Their destruction shows the wicked that God will be stern, but it does not shed light on any specifics that would apply to their final fate. Robert Peterson argues, after hardly touching the actual text, “It is better to take Peter’s words as more generally predicting the downfall of the wicked than to understand them as foretelling their precise fate—reduction to ashes” (“Part Two” 156). When Glenn Peoples gave a rebuttal to this argument and called attention to Peterson’s lack of exegesis of the actual passage (“Fallacies in the Annihilationism Debate” 339), Peterson gave this very significant response:

Here I appeal to the systematic principle, the notion that because all Scripture is inspired by God its message is coherent and does not contradict itself. All theologians, and in fact all exegetes, at times appeal to this principle. That is because the Bible is a big book of many writings penned by many writers over a long period of time for various purposes addressing various contexts etc. I do not know of a single doctrine that has no ‘problem passages’ associated with it. 2 Peter 2:6 is such a problem passage for traditionalism. I do not believe in the historic view of Hell because of 2 Pet 2:6. I believe in it because of the message of ten biblical passages that I exegeted in Two Views of Hell: Isa 66:22-24; Dan 12:1-2; Matt 18:6-9; 25:31-46; Mark 9:42-48; 2 Thess 1:5-10; Jude 7, 13; Rev 14:9-11; 20:10, 14-15. (“Fallacies in the Annihilationism Debate?” 354)

So then, Peterson was using the “systematic principle.” Although Peterson is correct that every doctrine probably does have at least one “problem passage,” there is one glaring problem with his comeback. As Peoples said on his website in response to the response:

No exegetical data from 2 Peter was given in support of this claim, and so understandably, I regarded this is [sic] a lack of exegetical evidence. Peterson disagrees, however, because he gave, as his reason, the claim that Jude 13 and “nine other texts” teach eternal torment, and we should therefore make our understanding of 2 Peter 2:6 harmonise with those texts. The problem, however, with saying this, is that it implies that *absolutely no matter what* 2 Peter 2:6 said, it would have to be read as teaching eternal torment. This is simply indefensible.

(“Thoughts”)

I would go as far as saying that Peterson’s argument was stronger *before* he responded to Peoples. There are obviously times when a verse means something other than what we would have imagined before referencing other scriptures. Of course, even then, some exegesis of the passage is still needed. That’s one thing, and that is what I would have assumed Peterson thought he was doing. I would have given Peterson’s argument the benefit of the doubt, that he simply had not gone into much detail about his exegesis and why 2 Peter 2.6 didn’t foreshadow annihilation. However, given his response when he had the chance to defend and clarify his position, Peoples appears to be right. After all, the Bible teaches eternal torment in many verses, so what a single verse says cannot overrule what the rest says, and that is that.

We can’t just say “other verses say one thing, so this cannot be what this verse means.” Indeed, the principle that all scripture is God-breathed and therefore will be reconciled to itself is true and a good guiding principle to solving exegetical difficulties. However, it is just that, a

guiding principle. With that in mind, we must then look at the passages and see where we misunderstood one or the other. We cannot say that two texts say different things so one must just mean what the majority of others say and that is that. Nevertheless, that is more or less what Peterson is suggesting. We need more than just the so-called systematic principle.

Before I address the rest of Peterson's argument that Sodom and Gomorrah simply foreshadow "the downfall of the wicked" ("Part Two" 156), I will bring up a similar argument from *The Interactive Bible*. They say, "Annihilationists are forced to TAKE LITERALLY that Hell is literal fire, brimstone, lake of fire, the garbage dump of Jerusalem (gehenna)" ("Eternal Torment"). They also point to Colossians 2.17, and how certain Old Testament figures are simply a shadow, a sample as it were, of what is to come. What of these claims? Must I take everything said about Hell in the whole Bible absolutely literally if I am to see 2 Peter 2.6 as speaking of annihilation? Is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah a mere shadow of what is found in Christ? If so, does that even change anything?

First of all, I should point out that I have dealt with every passage that Peterson claimed taught eternal torment, which already defeats his entire argument.

Regarding weightier arguments, I will start by saying that Colossians 2.17 does not say anything about Sodom and Gomorrah, nor does it say anything to indicate that it refers to *everything* that occurred in the Old Testament. In fact, Verse 16 tells us exactly what is in view: "Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to *food* or *drink* or in respect to a *festival* or a *new moon* or a *Sabbath day*" (emphasis added). Those are the things that are a shadow of what is to come. Not everything in the Old Testament was just a symbol for something totally different.

Along those lines, nobody is arguing that Hell is literally exactly the same as Sodom and Gomorrah; the annihilationist argument is just that it shares even the slightest resemblance to

Sodom and Gomorrah. It's important to note that the minds behind *The Interactive Bible* view Hell metaphorically, saying, "It is impossible for our five senses to detect Heaven and Hell. How then can God describe for us something that we cannot see, taste, touch, smell or hear? He employs the use of symbols" ("Photogallery of Heaven and Hell"). If Hell is a place of eternal torment, yet not a place of literal fire, how is Sodom and Gomorrah in any way an example of Hell? Is it the fire and sulfur? No, because according to this view, there is no fire or sulfur. Was it the swift destruction? No, because Hell is a place of endless existence, so no such destruction ever occurs. It must be an example in only the loosest sense, as Peterson seems to suggest.

However, to say that the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah foreshadows the fate of the lost only because it foreshadows "the downfall of the wicked" (Peterson, "Part Two" 156) makes Sodom and Gomorrah a rather lousy example of the fate of the lost. Any instance of judgment, any earthly downfall of a kingdom or people or anything of the sort would be just as good of an example, be it of the earthly doom they might face or the eternal fate that they surely will. In fact, 2 Peter 2 speaks of other instances of God's judgment throughout time, and they are better examples of what would happen to the lost if eternal torment were true. So why was only the complete destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah called an example of the fate of the ungodly? Why didn't Peter say that the angels who sinned were an example? After all, God "cast them into hell [*Tartarus*, not *Gehenna*] and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment" (Verse 4b). If Hell were a place of unending fireless torment, then *that* would be an example of what would happen to the lost. Similarly, if the point was just that God would deal with sin decisively, why not call the flood the example of the unsaved? Peter brought it up in Verse 5, and that was a far greater, far grander judgment upon sinners. Of course, the great flood entailed God defeating His unrepentant enemies by killing them, so if this were pointed to as foreshadowing

Hell, it would hardly be a problem for the doctrine of annihilationism. But Peter didn't point to the flood. Instead, Peter cited the fiery annihilation of two cities as God's "example." If Robert Peterson is right, then of all the instances of divine judgment that Peter the apostle had mentioned, Peter seemed to have picked the worst possible one to call an "example" of what will come to the wicked.

Because this view fails to make the utter destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah any sort of meaningful example of what will happen to the lost, and because even the exegete who holds the literal view of Hell's fire still fails to take into account the language of 2 Peter 2.6, I will say this: God made an example out of Sodom and Gomorrah by reducing them to ashes and condemning them to extinction.

XXXVI. THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS (MATTHEW 13.24-30; 36-43)

This passage illustrates final judgment both in a parable and in its explanation, and in doing so, it paints a picture of final judgment that is very supportive of the annihilationist position.

The parable itself comes up in Matthew 13.24-30. In a nutshell, Jesus tells a story about a farmer who was growing wheat when his enemy plants weeds in the same field. The farmer tells his servants not to pull the weeds until both the wheat and weeds are grown, lest they accidentally uproot wheat. When the plants are fully grown, the wheat is kept and the weeds (also called “tares” or even “darnel” in some translations) are burned up in a furnace.

Most significant is when Jesus gives the explanation of the parable: “And He said, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and *as for* the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil *one*; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels’” (Matthew 13.37-39). Most pertinent to the discussion is what follows:

So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then **THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN** in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. (Verses 40-43)

As Glenn Peoples importantly points out, “Notice that I am not simply basing my claim on the parable Jesus told earlier in this chapter, but on His own interpretation of its meaning. There is no secret meaning of ‘fiery furnace’ here, no code language being employed that is not explained.

Just as weeds are destroyed in a furnace, so evildoers will be rooted out and destroyed at the end of the age” (“Why I Am an Annihilationist” 11). Froom is correct in saying, “The destruction is declared complete, leading to utter and final disintegration” (286-287). Just as weeds are burned up in a raging fire, so are the lost.

Note also that the damned are not even spoken of as evildoers to be punished, but as weeds, as waste to be done away with. No amount of torment would solve the problem of their existence, one which is detested like the existence of weeds is detested by a farmer. Their fate is said to be just like that of weeds, which are burned not as punishment, but in order to get rid of them. Obviously the destruction of the damned is punishment, but that’s not the point here. Jesus Himself explains that they are to be burned up like tares, not like immortal souls.

The main traditionalist argument is that, since there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, it must be a place of terrible pain. It is a place of fire, and there is horrible pain (which they argue is what the phrase means), so this is a perfect picture of eternal torment in Hell. Most simply point out that there is a furnace and weeping, and leave it at that. Robert Peterson touches this passage briefly, but concludes that annihilationists are wrong because the passage speaks of weeping and gnashing of teeth, and therefore, “When he [Jesus] interprets the burning of the weeds, he speaks of pain, not consumption” (*Hell on Trial* 51). However, I covered weeping and the gnashing of teeth in Section XXIII, which changes the whole dynamic.

What of the lack of consumption, as Peterson pointed out above? These claims overlook Verse 40; “So *just as the tares* are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age” (emphasis added). It is true that Jesus never says “the lost will be no more” or something like that, but isn’t consumption clearly implied by saying that the lost will be burned just as the weeds? What better image of something that burns up could Jesus have possibly used?

What happens to weeds when you burn them? They burn up, and they burn up about as quickly and easily as anything that they would have had access to in the 1st century. Just as those are burned, so the unsaved are tragically burned up in the same way.

Perhaps one might rebut that Jesus might simply be saying that both are burned, not that the unsaved are distinctly burned in the way that weeds are. This idea that tares are just a backdrop to point out that the lost are sent into a fire could be possible if one sees Hell as literal fire (which Peterson and many modern commentators do not). Technically, He doesn't have to be saying that their burning is like the burning of tares. However, there is not much in the context to support such an idea, and plenty to suggest otherwise. Of all the things that are burned, Jesus compares the lost to tares. Not only do tares burn up, as do other combustible items that are used to metaphorically describe the unsaved (such as fruitless trees); tares are especially destructible in that they burn up really quickly. Burning tares are about as different from an indestructible body or immortal soul as anything that could be imagined.

Lastly, along these lines, one might unsuccessfully point to the fact that Jesus, when comparing their fates, only says that the tares are burned, not burned up. Thus, what both have in common is just that they are burned. While tares burn up when burned, humans do not necessarily do so (if men are all immortal). However, this distinction between “burn” and “burn up” is arbitrary. The Greek word used, *katakaió* is used elsewhere to describe complete destruction by fire. It describes the burning of 1/3 of the world's grass and trees in Revelation 8.7. The converted magicians of Acts 19.19 burned their books of spells. Burnt offerings were burned this way in Hebrews 13.11. It signifies, “to burn up, to burn utterly, as in chaff” (Vine 151). Strong defines it as “to burn down (to the ground), i.e. consume wholly: – burn (up, utterly)” (“A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament” 40). In the *New American*

Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible it is defined primarily as “burn up” (1659). The fact that it is rendered as it is in many translations is at best a matter of conservatism (given the controversy over whether or not the damned can be burned up). Nevertheless, the fact that *katakaió* is the word used in this passage only helps the annihilationist, as it gives us all the more reason to believe that by “burned,” the Lord means “burned up.”

Overall, this passage lends strong support to the doctrine of annihilationism. The traditionalist could potentially latch onto the line about weeping and gnashing of teeth as possibly indicating that people remain alive and suffering in the fire, but that is not a particularly strong rebuttal. Even if the burning only lasted for a moment, we would expect there to be weeping and gnashing of teeth during the whole harvesting process until death finally comes. With Section XXIII in mind, it is that much harder to get away from the implications that the unsaved will be burned like dry, flammable weeds and not like indestructible bodies with immortal souls.

XXXVII. WARNINGS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (LUKE 3.8-9; 17)

A. The Lost Are like Trees and Chaff That Burn Up

Like Jesus in the parable of the weeds, John the Baptist used the imagery of dead plants and fire to describe the fate of the damned. When some Pharisees sought baptism, he said the following: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (*NIV*, Luke 3.8-9).

What would happen to the Pharisees if they did not repent? They would be like a tree that is cut down and thrown into fire. Trees definitely are not tormented in fire. They are destroyed. John the Baptist goes on, telling of the one to come, being Jesus, and how “His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Verse 17). What are the damned like? They are like dry trees disposed of in fire, which burn up. They are chaff, which will likewise burn up in a raging, unquenchable fire. Nothing remotely like torment is spoken of there.

The main argument against my interpretation is the fact that the fire is said to be “unquenchable.” After all, “If it continues to burn, it seems that there must be something to burn” (Moore 19). So rather than saying the fate of the damned is like that of weeds which are burned up, John is using a mix of a metaphor and a real life description, affirming that they will go into a fire that never goes out. Of course, we’ve already gone over “unquenchable fire” in Section XXI. That the fire is unquenchable simply means that it won’t be put out but rather will consume everything. Once that is out of the way, there isn’t really anything here to challenge my

case. The damned are likened to weeds thrown into a fire. Furthermore, in terms of context, we have a pretty good idea of what John the Baptist means by “unquenchable fire.” It is the kind of fire you throw chaff into. The chaff will be thrown into a fire that is raging and burns everything in it, one that is not extinguished. That’s what people naturally do with chaff, just as that’s what they naturally do with dead trees. This normal, everyday activity represents the fate of the unsaved.

What if John the Baptist is switching focus from metaphorical (chaff on the floor) to the literal (the damned are thrown into unquenchable fire)? This is what traditionalists who make the argument from “unquenchable fire” assume, because otherwise, this ever-burning fire wouldn’t be Hell; it would just be a mystical ever-burning fire somewhere where people throw their weeds. If this is what John is doing (not that there is any real indication that he is), this is still is a hard picture to reconcile with eternal torment. The unsaved would be said to be thrown into unquenchable fire (something that both sides agree on, though some on both sides would take this fire to be figurative). John would be saying that they are thrown into the fire, after he just called them chaff (which burns up quickly and easily). Does that sound like people who never burn up? Obviously not.

B. What about A.D. 70?

I have heard it suggested that this passage may be speaking of God’s rejection of the Jewish religious establishment as manifested in 70 A.D, and not the end of the world. The uprooted tree and the chaff would be Israel. It might be argued that if they simply represent Israel, then this doesn’t affect eternal destruction of individuals. Now, I want to make it clear that I am not saying that God rejected His people; He didn’t (Romans 11.1). For starters, Jesus Himself

was a Jew. The apostles and prophets, the foundation of God's household (Ephesians 2.19-20), were all Jews. Jews were the first believers and have believed in Christ and been saved throughout time. I think both dispensationalism and so-called covenant theology as systems both get some things wrong, though I side more with the latter. It is my belief that all the promises to the Jews will be fulfilled because believers receive not only Mt. Zion but the full kingdom of God, and a remnant of descendants of Jacob, assuredly from all 12 tribes, have believed in Christ. Thus, the Jews will get everything promised to them, and far more, because they are among the saved. And they are the tree that the rest of believers were grafted into, not the other way around. That said, as a (partial) preterist, I am sympathetic to views that see these kinds of statements as referring to the fall of Jerusalem, and that would take some of the bite out of my argument.

Nevertheless, there is certainly an individual aspect here as well, even if the fall of Jerusalem is in view. The rejection of the unbelieving Jewish establishment was predicted before they rejected Jesus (Matthew 21.33-45). It was foreknown. Warning the people to repent to save Israel would be meaningless. However, warning individuals to repent to save themselves makes total sense. Advice to various kinds of individuals is given, not just to "you, O Israel." Individuals are also being warned for their own sake, so that they can avoid likewise being uprooted and thrown into the fire. These factors make the idea of this referring to the fall of Jerusalem all the less likely. Even if this is about the fall of Jerusalem, it is likely that John the Baptist is still warning of eternal judgment as well. This is evident for the reasons above, as well as others such as those that follow: the fact that many of those whom John the Baptist was preaching to would have died in the 40 years between then and the fall of Jerusalem, the fact that repenting of sins leads to eternal salvation, and the fact that Jesus's judgment includes the fall of Jerusalem but goes far beyond that for individuals.

XXXVIII. THE THEME OF THE OLD TESTAMENT (DESTRUCTION)

It is no secret that the majority of scripture discussed by apologists for both sides comes from the New Testament. Although I do believe that often the Old Testament doesn't get the respect it deserves, I think it is understandable that in regards to eternal punishment, we refer mostly to the New Testament. The New Testament talks far more about eternity and the new age. That's just the nature of the case. I do believe that revelation is progressive and selective. Not every prophet or apostle knew everything about everything, and more was revealed later on as it became more relevant. When forming Israel, for example, what would be a bigger priority, teaching about the apocalypse, or teaching Moses and the Israelites how to put together the infant nation that would yield the Messiah?

That said, the Old Testament is not silent on the issues. Traditionalists point to Daniel 12.2. A few point to Isaiah 66.24 (although all too often it is essentially just said that it means what Mark 9.48 is supposed to mean, which everyone knows is eternal torment...). In support of annihilationism, I point to an Old Testament passage in the next section. But in large part, the Old Testament doesn't say much else that is clearly regarding eternal punishment. I'm not saying that it does so, at least not directly (I will explain at the end why, indirectly, it says a lot). What I am saying is this: when the Old Testament does speak of judgment, be it earthly or ambiguous, the focus is destruction, not torment or sadness or pain or extended misery. Admittedly, it is not as though God bringing death and destruction to the damned on earth necessarily means that the afterlife has to be like that. Nevertheless, it sure doesn't hurt my case that the mode has almost always been destruction (especially since not all judgment descriptions are necessarily earthly). The best case scenario for traditionalism is that the destructive judgments of the Old Testament are not meant to foreshadow eternal punishment at all, at last not in any clear or direct way

(although in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, their destruction is explicitly said to do so). Here is a sampling from the book of Psalms:

Psalms 21.9 – “You will make them as a fiery oven in the time of your anger;
The LORD will swallow them up in His wrath,
And fire will devour them.”

Psalms 37.20 – “But the wicked will perish;
And the enemies of the LORD will be like the glory of the pastures,
They vanish—like smoke they vanish away.”

Psalms 92.7 – “That when the wicked sprouted up like grass
And all who did iniquity flourished,
It was *only* that they might be destroyed forevermore.”

Psalms 112.10 – “The wicked will see it and be vexed,
He will gnash his teeth and melt away;
The desire of the wicked will perish.”

Elsewhere, the scripture points us to spectacular and noteworthy examples of God’s wrath. What is lacking is an instance of extended torture. What we do have, is death and destruction.

Genesis 6 – God wipes out almost all of mankind with a massive flood.

Genesis 19 – God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah with burning sulfur, swiftly and violently killing the wicked and reducing them and their cities to ashes.

Numbers 16 – Korah and his followers, who resisted Moses, were all killed when the earth opened up and swallowed them.

Deuteronomy 20.17-18 – When the Israelites reached the promised land, God commanded them to wipe out everyone, not because their skin was too dark, but because they were lost in sin and because they would only spread it to the Israelites if left alive.

2 Kings 1.10 – When men threatened Elijah, he called on God who sent fire from Heaven that did not torment them without consuming them, but rather killed and devoured them.

This is all just a sampling of what the Old Testament says about the end of the wicked; there is plenty of the same throughout. The Psalms alone use over 50 verbs to describe what God will do to the wicked, only bolstering the picture painted above (Fudge, *Hell: A Final Word* 68). In all of this, where are the descriptions of extended torture? Were not those whom God judged killed off as a result? And did not the most serious crimes (murder, blasphemy, adultery, etc.) require execution? The shadow of the Old Testament is consistently death and destruction, never torment.

Is it any surprise that few Old Testament commentators talk about “Hell” outside of Daniel 12.2 (and maybe Isaiah 66:24)? They don’t, because there isn’t much that sounds like eternal torment elsewhere, and therefore they don’t see Hell anywhere else. For what it’s worth, those who do will tend to look at “Hell” in the Old Testament merely by saying that *Sheol* means the eternal afterlife when speaking of the damned (and only the damned). Although the term *Sheol* is used to describe the righteous dead and unrighteous dead alike (much like the common, figurative use of “the grave” refers to the state of being dead), it is reasoned on theological (not linguistic) grounds that *Sheol* has a fundamentally different meaning when describing one group versus the other. After all, the New Testament tells us that eternal torment is true. Since this is the case, when the damned go to *Sheol*, in the end aren’t they really just going to Hell (the

place of eternal torment) anyway? And therefore, the Old Testament actually speaks of eternal torment fairly often.

This blatant use of circular reasoning aside, the picture of judgment in the Old Testament is destruction, not torment. Some of these instances are definitely earthly; context is everything. However, if even one of these predictions of the fate of the wicked is eschatological, then that may deal a death blow to the doctrine of eternal torment. If at the judgment, the damned melt away, or are made like the fat of burnt offerings, or like vanishing smoke, then that sounds a lot more like annihilation than immortality in a state of suffering.

Lastly, I should also note what Edward Fudge pointed out about these descriptions of the fate of the wicked (specifically in regards to Psalm 34): “But as often as not, men do not reach these destinies in earthly life. The righteous sometimes die in unjust suffering, and shame; the wicked sometimes die in prosperity and peace. The psalm therefore looks beyond the present life for its infallible fulfillment. In that sense, at least, it speaks of blessing and punishment in the world to come” (*The Fire* 92). In other words, these don’t *directly* speak of eternal judgment (at least not necessarily), but what of the fact that these generalized statements about destruction often aren’t fulfilled in this world? I think Fudge’s point is worth considering; to fulfill the scriptures, it at least would seem necessary that some of these things happen to the wicked in the next world, which amounts to annihilationism. And that leads us into what may very well be the most important Old Testament passage on this issue.

XXXIX. MALACHI 4.1-3

A. The Pronouncement of the Sinner's Doom

This is one of the few destruction passages in the Old Testament for which there is little ambiguity regarding its time of fulfillment. It refers to the end of the world and things beyond just the earthly judgments of Babylon and ancient kingdoms that God brought about. In fact, it is the only one I consider clear enough to cite on its own. Speaking of a coming day, it is written:

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze,” says the LORD of hosts, “so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day.

(Malachi 4.1-3)

You can see why annihilationists might point to this passage. God will destroy the wicked. He will set them on fire like chaff, and no remnant of them will remain. Then He says that they will be like ashes under our feet. Whether mostly literal or highly symbolic, how much clearer could the picture of final destruction possibly be?

B. Traditionalist Responses

The first of the main traditionalist responses (besides just ignoring it) is that the passage is figurative for eternal torment. Jeff Spencer writes:

This passage also uses figurative language to refer to the wicked. It claims that because of divine punishment they will be left with ‘neither root nor branch.’ This means that none of the wicked will escape the judgment of God. Certainly, the wicked are not literal roots or branches, neither is their punishment a literal burning down to ‘stubble’ or nothingness. Furthermore, this passage is another comparison between the wicked and the righteous, showing that the same ‘Sun’ which punishes the wicked also makes the righteous glad. (15)

What’s missing is any reason why a picture of being burned to ashes should be seen as figurative of eternal torment (or even just a generic fate that could include eternal torment). It’s not enough to just say that an element of a prophecy is figurative and that therefore everything is symbolic of whatever you want it to be symbolic of. Imagine if I had said of Revelation 20.10, “it’s a figurative book, so eternal torment is figurative for annihilation; the eternal torment just means that they can’t escape,” and then left it there! The only difference is that Revelation is a much more figurative book than Malachi...

The other main argument against the annihilationist interpretation is that this passage does not refer to the final damnation of the wicked. It has been claimed that, since in Verse 5 God speaks of sending Elijah beforehand, it is speaking only of Jesus’s first coming (“Eternal Torment”). This is because of Matthew 11.14, where the Lord said, “And if you are willing to accept *it*, John himself is Elijah who was to come.” But was the day that Malachi spoke of fulfilled then? Is this referring in unusually vivid and metaphorical detail to what happened when Jesus came 2000 years ago? Similarly, one could argue that it is speaking generically of some earthly judgment, such as the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Gill), not the judgment of all mankind

at the end of the world. But is this interpretation correct? The answer is “no,” as both arguments have key weaknesses.

The day of the LORD did not come and go with Jesus’s *first* coming. Elijah did come, but that doesn’t mean the day of the LORD came and ended right after. It would hardly seem that what Malachi predicted has come to pass if you read what else God speaks of in Chapter 3. In context, God is responding to claims that it is futile to serve Him. After all, sinners were fat and happy while God’s people were suffering. Malachi is shown a vision of God holding a scroll on which the names of His servants are kept. The idea of God keeping a book of life is seen elsewhere, of course (e.g. Psalm 69.28; Philippians 4.3; Revelation 20.15). What then does God say of those in the scroll? “‘They will be Mine,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘on the day that I prepare *My* own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him. So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him’” (Malachi 3.17-18).

What has to be pointed out is that this day of reckoning that is in vision here must be something that would matter to the people Malachi was writing to. After all, God is not just telling them about the future; he is telling them of the future and how *their* actions matter. The fiery condemnation of Chapter 4 is what the servants of God, written on the scroll, are spared from. The final judgment obviously fits, but what earthly judgment would? In order to fit this criterion, we have two options. The first is that all of those on the scroll were alive at the time, and the judgment occurred while all were alive (so that they were all spared). However, for this to be true, it must have been fulfilled in some massive earthly judgment that occurred very shortly after Malachi was written. This already means that it cannot be referring to Christ’s first coming or the fall of Jerusalem (as they happened centuries later, when everyone was dead). The

other option is that the scroll is long-term, recording names throughout the generations (like the book or books of life that are mentioned elsewhere throughout the Bible). In that case, those in the book would include those who had died already at the time the judgment in Chapter 4 would have been fulfilled.

Which one is most likely? Well, the latter doesn't require that something happened within the lifetime of every single person who was alive in Malachi's day (or at least the majority of them) and was on God's scroll. It also fits the language far better: All the broad, general references to those who fear God in contrast to those who do not do so simply refer to the righteous and the wicked in the most general terms. When it generically speaks of those who serve God, it could literally refer to all who live or lived for God, and not just a particular, totally unnamed group, the righteous members of which were recorded. It could be exactly what it sounds like; those who fear God are spared, and the rest are not. It would not simply be a relatively small group of people in one place who get but a finite taste of God's love and wrath. The distinction between righteous and wicked would be complete and in no way qualified. All of God's people will be rewarded, and none of the wicked will escape. It would be exactly what it sounds like Malachi is saying...

Of course, if the latter is true, then what event, besides the final, eternal judgment, can be in view? What event could have the righteous of Malachi's day all be able to be fully distinguished from all of the ungodly even of his day? Except for the last judgment, what event could possibly entail the servants of God who have fallen asleep even being around to be spared in the first place? And if it is the last judgment, how much clearer of a picture of annihilation could there be?

But what then of the obvious prophecies that have been fulfilled by Jesus? Really, there is only one (which comes up in Subsection C). Still, are we left with a book of false prophecies? Of course not. We all know that the messianic prophecies refer to more than a single coming. How else could the Messiah be a suffering servant who dies rejected (Isaiah 53.9) yet also one restores peace, slays the wicked, and rules over all people (Isaiah 11)? Jesus came and was the suffering servant, as it is written:

He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth. (Isaiah 53.7)

We know from 1 Peter 2.23 that this is about Jesus. However, the story isn't finished yet. Malachi doesn't give us a specific timeline. He simply tells us things will happen at some point; some already have, and the rest will later. More on that below.

Whatever one is to make of exactly how everything will be fulfilled, the things in view seem to clearly be eschatological, something that involves the judgment of all people. If the righteous are spared while the damned are burned up like chaff, made like ashes under our feet, what else need be said?

C. What of Malachi's Predictions of the *Day* of the LORD?

Now, there are different interpretations of exactly what Malachi is talking about. However, the above problems still remain for those who say that all of these things have happened already. I myself am very sympathetic to the view that this "day of the LORD" begins

long before it is fulfilled. It culminates in the great judgment at the end, but it is not a literal day, but rather an age, starting with the ascension of Jesus and ending at the end of the world when we actually see everything coming into fruition. It should also be noted that the Hebrew *yom* can and sometimes does refer to ages and not literal days (Grudem 293). Would I therefore be saying that the “day of the LORD” is the whole church age? Well, yes and no. It’s kind of complicated (which I know some people hate, but complexity is unavoidable in this passage, since it ties Elijah with something eschatological). The focus is on the end of the world. For all intents and purposes, this “day of the LORD” mentioned here speaks of the last things.

However, it isn’t just one day where all of a sudden things just start and end right at one moment. Once Jesus came, things were set into motion. Jesus has been ruling from Heaven since the ascension. Behind the scenes, His enemies are being put under His feet. I think this is consistent with what we are told in Psalm 110 and 1 Corinthians 15.24-28. Jesus reigns not after the enemies of God are defeated, but amongst them (Psalm 110.2). In that sense, the kingdom of God is already here, but at the same time, it quite obviously isn’t fulfilled the way it will be in the future when we can actually see the full fruits of it. Jesus is already the King of kings, so when we see the kingdom and are resurrected and join Him and the patriarchs at the big banquet and all that good stuff, it’s not as though it just popped out of nowhere in a day or moment. It’s the same thing here. Everything has been set into motion, everything is a sure thing. We’re really not at the part that matters, the part that the reader would be looking forward to, but Elijah (i.e. John the Baptist) did come and lead the way for the one who would start everything that will one day come into fruition. Malachi doesn’t specify how much time would pass between the coming of Elijah and the day of the LORD. Technically, Malachi would be right even if the day of the LORD in no sense began with Jesus’s first coming. However, though in a sense there is an

enormous gap between Elijah and the day of the LORD, the fact that Elijah (John the Baptist) came and introduced the Lord Jesus ties him to it all. After all, the Lord Jesus set it all in motion, and He will fulfill it in the end. I think this kind of interpretation fits best with this verse. John the Baptist, in the spirit of Elijah, came, making the path for the Lord who God would send in Malachi 3.1 (being the Messiah, Jesus), and this was the beginning of the end.

Elijah did come before the Lord Jesus Christ (in a figurative sense that was well understood beforehand by the very Jewish Zechariah, as seen in Luke 1.17-18). If my interpretation is correct, then he preceded the day of the LORD by a few years, as opposed to him preceding it by thousands of years. The claims about what will happen in this “day of the LORD” describe things that do ultimately happen later, but that started with Jesus’s first coming, the way all kinds of spiritual developments did. This directly parallels what the New Testament tells us: Jesus currently reigns, but it is an ongoing process until it finally culminates at the end of time with His physical return when we can fully partake in God’s kingdom.

It doesn’t matter if you don’t think that; any other interpretation has the same effect on annihilationism. This is because, though the day of the Lord may have started, been inaugurated as it were, with the coming of Jesus, the events spoken of are clearly eschatological. Now, this is not always the case in the Bible when we see “day of the LORD;” this phrase appears often in the Old Testament, and it does appear to be used to refer to different instances of divine judgment, making it a somewhat generic phrase (Bray 235; “What is the ‘Day of the Lord?’”). That’s how I can suggest that Malachi’s “day of the LORD” began with Jesus and comes to fruition at judgment, whereas Isaiah used the term to describe Babylon’s fall to the Medes (Isaiah 13.6), and Paul used the essentially equivalent “day of the Lord” to describe the events of the (what I believe to be) resurrection of the dead (1 Thessalonians 5.2).

Whatever you make of Malachi's prophecies, there are serious problems if we are to take this passage as describing events that have already occurred in their entirety. Therefore, we should not so easily discount Malachi's prophecies about the fate of the wicked, that they will be burnt up, and that they will be made like ashes under the feet of the saved. Malachi is referring to the end of the world, and how much clearer could he have described the final destruction of God's enemies?

XL. THE MANY DESTRUCTION PASSAGES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

A. Where We Would Expect Talk of Torment, We Find Destruction.

Here is where the face value and apparent meaning of scripture sides with the conditionalist, turning the table on claims that we overcomplicate things and don't let God's word speak for itself. Conditionalists don't have to go fishing for obscure passages because they don't want eternal torment to be true. All one has to do is just think about the words that are right in front of them as they read the New Testament. It is nothing you have to search for, because references to destruction of the damned are rather common.

Aside from the pictures, the parables, and the explanations of parables, there are many direct references to the destruction of the damned. For starters, consider Matthew 10.28: "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to *destroy* both soul *and* body *in hell*" (emphasis mine). Although it technically only says that God *can* destroy a person in Hell, what would be the point of such a warning unless God actually *would* do it if the warning is not heeded? Otherwise, "the same purpose would be served by some absurd warning like 'be afraid of the One who can turn you into a melon'" ("Why I Am an Annihilationist" 10). Likewise, God will "destroy" those who destroy His church (1 Corinthians 3.17). The fate of the damned is "destruction" (e.g. Matthew 7.13; Romans 9.22; Philippians 1.28; 3.19; 1 Thessalonians 5.3; 2 Thessalonians 1.9; 2 Peter 3.7). The coming "man of lawlessness" (whoever that is) is even called the "son of destruction" (2 Thessalonians 2.3). Destruction is a common motif.

Furthermore, all this talk of destruction does not stand alone but further fits into a broad theme in scripture. We have already seen here in Part 3 examples of the unsaved, in

eschatological contexts, being said to be reduced to ashes and compared to things that burn up. In addition to this are the many references to the unsaved being subject to death, as discussed in Section XI, as well as many instances where the unsaved are said to “perish: using the same Greek words as those translated “destroy” and “destruction” (e.g. John 3.16; 1 Corinthians 1.18; 2 Corinthians 2.15; 2 Thessalonians 2.10; 2 Peter 3.9). It is true that torment pops up a few times in Revelation and once in what is likely a parable based on popular folklore (Luke 16.19-31). However, in plain, straightforward teaching, the unsaved suffer death and destruction. It is powerful testimony to the influence of tradition that far more people do not see these passages and at least consider the possibility that the wicked might cease to exist as sentient creatures instead of living in a state of death where no one dies and a state of destruction that never culminates in anyone ever being destroyed.

Why then is this section so long? The reason for that is simply that there are a lot of rebuttals to address. In nearly 2,000 years of church history and at least 1,600 years of traditionalism being the dominant view, the passages I appealed to above (and others that will come up) have not gone unnoticed. Consider Section XI, when we looked at “death” in the Bible. Was not my presentation of what the Bible does teach about death rather short in comparison to rebutting the traditionalist arguments that claimed otherwise? In this case, less of a positive case for eternal torment is made from these passages as was the case with “death,” which is why these two fairly similar sections are in different parts. Here, this section is less defensive and more offensive (you know what I mean). I’m really going to drive home the point that, while it is not *impossible* that the traditionalist is right and none these passages ever amount to an end to conscious existence, there are so many good reasons to think that a reasonable person should have serious doubts about the eternal conscious existence of the unsaved. To do that, I have to

present a lot of evidence that we should read “destroy” and “destruction” and similar phrases as meaning annihilation (i.e. the eternal end to conscious existence). After all, at face value annihilation is quite evident, but other factors come into play.

What other factors will come into play? Most notably, the New Testament was written not in English but in Greek. It is argued that the Greek words involved never mean “destroy” in its primary sense, at least not when referring to the final fate of unsaved humans. It is always figurative, meaning to be ruined or lost or something of the sort. Thus, despite how a passage like Matthew 10.28 may appear in English, it really should say that God will “ruin” your soul or make it useless for worship. At times, theological assumptions can come into play as well, sometimes overtly (e.g. “the soul is immortal so it cannot be literally destroyed”), and sometimes more subtly, going hand in hand with the linguistic argument from the Greek. Quibbling over the English (e.g. “destroy doesn’t mean annihilate!”) also comes up, although in light of Section V (and Subsection H below), that shouldn’t be a real problem anymore. Ultimately, I think traditionalist John Gerstner explains it well: “Traditionalists say that the contextual meaning of the words show that they do not have their usual literal meanings but indicate eternal perishing, eternal death, and eternal destruction” (173). I agree that they teach eternal death and destruction, but not in the way he means...Put another way by another traditionalist writer, “Annihilationists say that the word ‘destroy,’ which is often used to describe punishment, should be taken to mean what it *literally* means. If that were so, then the destroyed person would cease to exist. But we know that much of the vocabulary describing judgment is figurative. Could not ‘destroy’ also be taken *figuratively*?” (emphasis added) (Fernando 41).

Now, I think we all know what the English word “destroy” literally means. Just like “death” and “die,” it has a normal, primary sense that traditionalists would never apply to the

soul in normal parlance (nor would Plato, as we will see in Subsection C). Now, although it's not terribly uncommon for traditionalists to appeal to figurative uses (e.g. "we destroyed the other team"), I would imagine that most wouldn't want to say "it is always figurative" in so many words. After all, although interpreting biblical texts as being figurative is certainly not always wrong, it is not exactly something one wants to have to rely on. Nevertheless, it is what it is. If someone said that a building was destroyed, if I were to take it at face value I would imagine that it burned down or collapsed, not that it had widespread toxic mold and was therefore useless or ruined. That is literal destruction. If the passage says that the lost will be "destroyed" or that they will face "destruction," either they are gone like a destroyed building, or the use is figurative. Taken at face value, to destroy something may not mean to cosmically zap it out of existence, but it does mean to make it cease to be. The glass of a shattered window may still be glass, but glass shards strewn about are not a window anymore. Since the traditional doctrine teaches that the lost are clearly around, still able to feel pain and be miserable, they aren't destroyed literally. Indeed, words like "destroy" do have secondary, figurative meanings, like to ruin or to be deprived of worth, "but we should also remember that the only reason words have secondary meanings is because they have primary meanings first" (Fudge, *Hell: A Final Word* 92).

Although having to call all "destruction" passages figurative may be a hard pill to swallow, for most traditionalist arguments from these passages, the only options are that, or mistranslation. Consider the word *apollumi*, translated as "destroy" in Matthew 10.28. Those who don't pass it off as figurative will attempt to argue that the actual Greek word doesn't mean destruction in the literal, primary sense I am appealing to. After all, that word, and words from its word group, are sometimes used when literal destruction is clearly not in view. One example would be the "lost" sheep of Luke 15.4. The sheep was not even dead, but rather, it was just lost.

We similarly have the “lost” coin of Luke 15.8, using the same word. Elsewhere, *apollumi* can describe ruin, such as the “ruined” wineskins that are said to burst in Matthew 9.17 (although the idea of a wineskin bursting and becoming just inert leather is not all that contrary to the annihilationist position). Because there, the word didn’t mean literal destruction/annihilation, it is reasoned that in the cases where humans are involved, it would not mean that either. Any number of traditionalist works will make this argument from at least some of these very verses, as well as from others (e.g. Boa and Bowman 108; Morey 90). The thing is, though, in Matthew 10.28, it is translated across the board to say that God will “*destroy*” body and soul. If it was supposed to be “ruin” or something like that, why wasn’t it translated that way? If the inspired writing meant “ruin,” to the exclusion of literal destruction, were our translators wrong? After all, if Matthew meant to have it straightforwardly mean ruin or the like, if *apollumi* just does not mean what it looks like in the English translations, then our translators are wrong to translate it that way. Or, if Matthew meant to use the word for “destroy” but meant it figuratively, then the translators were right to translate it as “destroy.” However, in that case, it would be figurative! Therefore, either the passage, and many like it, were all meant figuratively, or they were mistranslated (or, they say what annihilationists believe they say...).

This is just scratching the surface. So far in this section, my goal has only been to show the commonness of “destruction” and make the point that traditionalists are not the only ones who can rely on what scripture says on the surface. They have to insist it is figurative or that the Greek really doesn’t mean what the English says (thought they would never phrase it that way). We just have a lot of passages that sure sound like annihilation. When that many passages say exactly what annihilationists believe (in English), it suddenly becomes much more palatable for one to have to dig deeper to see if that’s what they actually mean (which we will now do).

In the rest of this section, though not beyond any shadow of a doubt, I will show that these passages do indeed weigh very heavily in favor of the annihilationist position. They are not merely compatible with annihilationism; rather they do ultimately mean what they seem to say.

B. “‘Apollumi’ Doesn’t Mean to Annihilate” – Part I: Matthew 10.28

I pointed to Matthew 10.28 above because it is among the most commonly cited verses by annihilationists. Jesus contrasts the power of God with the relative weakness of hostile men, telling His disciples: “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy *both soul and body* in hell” (emphasis added). You can see why annihilationists like me love this verse. It doesn’t just say that God will “destroy” the damned; it says that He specifically will destroy their supposedly immortal *souls*, and He will do so *in Hell!* God destroys the damned in Hell! Their souls and resurrected bodies are both destroyed, *in Hell*. Hell is therefore not a place of torture where the unsaved are stored away for ever and ever, but it is *the* place where they are destroyed (like how a fiery furnace is where weeds are burnt up - e.g. Matthew 3.12, 13.40)

I obviously agree with these overall conclusions. But what of the ambiguities that traditionalists point to (as noted above)? Many of the references to destruction come from the *apóleia* word group. The word used here, translated as “destroy,” is *apollumi*, the verb form of *apóleia*. Traditionalists point out, and rightfully so, that although it is translated almost universally as “destroy” in this verse, there are times when *apollumi* (like *apóleia*) describes situations in which absolute destruction is not involved. Now, I think the context alone of Matthew 10:28 challenges any interpretation of eternal conscious ruin in this verse, but we will get to that further down in this subsection. What of the word *apollumi* and its use elsewhere?

Although there are a few examples where *apollumi* clearly does not refer to something ceasing to exist, sometimes it clearly does. Robert Morey writes, “In every instance where the word *apollumi* is found in the New Testament, something other than annihilation is being described. Indeed, there isn’t a single instance in the New Testament where ‘*apollumi*’ means annihilation in the strictest sense of the word” (90). What does that even mean, “annihilation in the strictest sense of the word”? It is true that *apollumi* isn’t generally used in the Bible to refer to cosmic, cataclysmic annihilation. It doesn’t speak of God zapping things into absolute nothingness. Then again, when does that ever happen in the Bible at all? What thing ever is annihilated “in the strictest sense of the word”? Whatever the case, *apollumi* certainly is used in ways that are consistent with destruction and non-existence (in terms of a person as a conscious being). James uses the word to describe how the beauty of a flower “perishes” (James 1.11). Now, he isn’t saying that the flower is destroyed; he is describing the beauty of the flower, something which literally does pass away into non-existence. It perishes, it is lost, and it is gone. Obviously, it isn’t a verse about eternal punishment, but then again, neither are any of the verses that traditionalists point to show that *apollumi* doesn’t mean to annihilate. In this case, *apollumi* is referring to something that in fact vanishes away and ceases to exist.

Regarding the same point, the heavens and the earth are all said to perish (Greek *apollumi*) in Hebrews 1.11. Some argue that the universe will not be truly and completely annihilated (believing it will be renewed, not remade). However, unless we are to say that Hebrews 1.11 is using *apollumi* to speak of renewal (which is the opposite of *apollumi* and certainly isn’t what the traditionalist thinks happens to the unsaved), disagreements about things like atoms and subatomic particles and whether the matter of the universe is really annihilated isn’t all that relevant. For the purposes of Hebrews 1.11, which also compares the current universe to an old

garment that wears out and is replaced (Verse 12), the heavens and earth as we know them will be gone. As one overall sort of entity, the world, the current heavens and earth, will be gone, if for no other reason than the fact that everything has been rearranged to make it a better world. Furthermore, we also have other insight as to what God will do with the current creation. It is written: “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up” (2 Peter 3.10). The word for “destroyed” is different in that verse, but that tells us what Hebrews 1.11 means when it says that the heavens “perish” (Greek *apollumi*).

Some authors, such as John Bray, suggest that Hebrews 1.11 is figurative, referring to the Jewish system that God did away with when Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70 (229). If anything, this would make Hebrews 1.11 even stronger evidence for annihilationism. This is because the Old Covenant system, described with the verb *apollumi*, would be something that really is done away with, not just ruined or left suffering.

It is the case that some instances where *apollumi* is said to not mean ceasing to exist, it actually means just that. Robert Morey cites John 6.27, asking, “Is food annihilated when it spoils?” (90). First of all, it is not clear that in this context, Jesus is referring to spoilage in the first place. Robert Taylor makes a good point when he writes, “However, the backdrop, the feeding of 5,000 (Jn. 6:1-14), points to food which is eaten... ‘Do not labor for food which *perishes* [i.e. is eaten and is gone], but for the food which endures to everlasting life’ (6:27)” (bracketed statements theirs) (48). Now, I suppose that one might say “the food still exists, it just is ruined by being digested,” but, seriously? That’s not what anyone has in mind when they think of food being eaten. Food is gone. It is destroyed, and no one after about 24 hours would say it is still food in any form! Sorry about the imagery, but you get the point.

Second, even if spoilage is in view, although it may not amount to the food being instantly “annihilated,” the food does eventually decay into no longer being food (unless it has an immortal food soul or is sustained by God so that it remains in a state of being destroyed and in decay that never actually culminates in complete decay or destruction...). Exactly what becomes of it is affected by the organisms that find it first (e.g. worms, bacteria, fungi, etc.), but whatever the case, after long enough, a banana is no longer a banana. It is no more a banana than the ashes of a burnt tree are a tree, and nobody is going to say that that does not amount to annihilation (except, of course, when attempting to refute annihilationism, which came up in Section V and is addressed further in Section XLVII). I’m perfectly happy comparing the unsaved to food which perishes and spoils; they decay and will eventually be gone. And indeed, what the damned reap is decay according to Galatians 6.8. Spoiled food isn’t abstractly “ruined” or deprived of meaning; it really is done away with, even if it’s not “annihilated.”

Something worth noting is the fact that, as mentioned before, humans and inanimate objects are profoundly different. Inanimate objects are sometimes shown as being in ruin and not obliterated, but when speaking of men on earth, for whom life is more than just the sum of their physical parts, forms of this word almost always refer to death (most notably, when used in the Synoptic Gospels, which of course includes Matthew). Basil Atkinson points to 24 clear examples of this, such as Matthew 2.13, Mark 3.6, Luke 8.24, and Acts 5.37 (96).

Regarding the context of Matthew 10.28, the implication is that God can do what men cannot, i.e. kill the soul. Of all the meanings and connotations that *apollumi* could have in a vacuum, the contrast between what God can do and what men cannot do sheds light on what meaning is meant: killing. Now, assuming dualism, it is true that to kill someone is not to make them non-existent (Moore 19; Morey 90). However, this is because, as Jesus reminds the

disciples, men kill the body, not the soul (Matthew 10.28). The verb for “kill” is different, mind you, but consider this: God can destroy body and soul, not just body, in Hell. In contrast, anything that men can do, they can do only to the body, or so would be the logical implications of Matthew 10.28. When it is said that men destroy (using *apollumi*) other men, then in practicality, all they are destroying is the body. It isn’t said verbatim, but what else could it mean? When a man destroys another man, he can only destroy the body. The soul, whatever it is, is left alone. One might argue that it ruins the man because it is still a bad thing. However, for some, men destroying their body might even benefit them. For a martyr, being killed would hardly amount to ruin! No, it isn’t used because of some abstract ruin; it is used because to kill someone is to destroy their body. Perhaps this is somewhat figurative, as a body may remain physically intact for a short time, but it sure is closer to any literal meaning than the traditionalist definition. And what happens when you kill someone? According to Jesus Christ, what do you kill when you kill someone? The body, and only the body, all in contrast to God’s ability to do it to both body and soul. And what are dead bodies like?

Now, one might point out that the Sodomites were “destroyed” by the fire and brimstone that fell on them (Luke 17.29), and that this was done by God, yet their souls were not eternally annihilated. Since God can destroy the whole person, one could say that the whole person was only “ruined” (by being torn apart, body and spirit separated). However, it never said that God destroyed their souls or that He destroyed their “whole” persons, as it were. Presumably, the fire wouldn’t touch their souls and in fact, only affected their bodies. The same can be said of the water that “destroyed” the people of Noah’s day (Verse 27). Now, it’s possible that it could refer to the water and burning sulfur “destroying” the whole person (meaning it simply ruined them by tearing soul from body). However, I think it is more likely that it is referring to what the fire and

brimstone did to their bodies, since neither one can affect the spirit/soul (assuming that the soul/spirit is in fact an immaterial component that maintains consciousness after physical death in the first place). After all, a man can also kill another man with fire or with water, yet all that is killed is the body. It could be like how we commonly speak of someone dying. When we say that a person dies, that really just means that their body died, even though we say the person, not just the body, died. We don't specify that it was only the body that died because it is a given. Since water and fire can only destroy the body, just as man can only destroy the body, it is still talking about the body. Those things did to the body what God will do to the soul at judgment. Even if I am wrong, at best the traditionalist can say that this is one example where to "destroy" is only referring to generic ruining. An example such as this would help the traditionalist case, but it would far from make it, and even this only occurs if the whole dualistic person is in view, even though water and fire can only affect the body.

Lastly, Morey makes the following claim based on the authority of Greek scholar Joseph Henry Thayer: "Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon defines *apollumi* as 'to be delivered up to eternal misery.' Since Thayer himself was a Unitarian who did not believe in eternal punishment, his definition could only be the result of his knowledge of the meaning of this Greek word" (90). First of all, although I could not obtain the same edition that Morey used, Thayer makes a note in the older edition cited that the use of *apollumi* to mean "eternal misery" is metaphorical (64). That is, he notes that the word is used that way in the Bible, not that it is what the word literally means. What that seems to say is that Thayer believed that the Bible taught eternal torment, and because of this, when *apollumi* refers to what happens to men, it is used as a metaphor for eternal torment. The fact that Thayer says this word is used metaphorically in the Bible to mean eternal torment shows that he did in fact believe that the Bible taught eternal torment. It doesn't matter

that he thought the Bible was wrong; he nonetheless believed that eternal torment was taught in the Bible, same as every other commentator, and thus he shared the same bias. Did he believe eternal torment was biblical because of the language of *apollumi*, or because of the doctrine's popularity and passages like Revelation 20.10?

I cannot read the late Thayer's mind, but in the edition I cite, he explains why he thinks certain uses of *apollumi* were metaphorical for eternal torment. His reasons, such as his take on how John defines "life" and its application to John 3.15-16, are theological, not linguistic (64). He used the doctrine of eternal torment to help define *apollumi*, not the other way around. Because he believed that the Bible taught the doctrine, he gave *apollumi* a secondary meaning of eternal torment. To then take the fact that he defined *apollumi* that way as an argument that the Bible teaches the doctrine is to beg the question (i.e. us circular reasoning). Morey's point is therefore no help to the traditional view, at least in regards to the meaning of *apollumi*. Although Thayer may not have believed in eternal torment, he believed that the Bible in fact taught it for other reasons. Morey is therefore wrong to say that Thayer's definition was solely based on the language.

C. Plato's Use of *Apollumi* And Other Words of Destruction

One key way that translators and scholars define words is by looking at their usage in literature from the preceding centuries. If the words used in the Bible to describe the doom of the unbeliever were elsewhere used to speak of annihilation (in the annihilationist sense), then this would be evidence in favor of my interpretation.

With this in mind, consider the words of Edward White: "No fact in literature is capable of clearer demonstration than the majority of these nouns and verbs, denoting *destruction* of

some sort, are used by Plato again and again in the *Phaedon* [otherwise known as *Phaedo*]." (360). Plato's use of this language is especially important. Not only was Plato an ancient Greek writer, but as mentioned before, he is famous for his belief in the immortal soul and for the way that it influenced Greek philosophy. Believing in the immortality of the soul was kind of his schtick. So what did Plato, of all people, say about the unsaved soul, its fate, and how the words that the Bible uses were applied to it? White also tells us:

The reader's attention, therefore, is now invited to the terms in which that idea is set forth throughout the *Phaedon*. They are precisely the terms generally chosen in the New testament to denote the punishment of the wicked; - with this difference, that Plato says the soul will not suffer θανατος [thanatos - death], απωλεια [apoleia - destruction], ολεθρος [olethros - destruction], φθορα [pthora - corruption/decay]...while the New Testament writers declare that the wicked shall suffer what is denoted by these terms. In Plato's dialogue these words stand for extinction of life, for that idea only, and in the strongest possible contrast to the idea of perpetuation of being." (361)

So then, we have arguably the world's most famous proponent of the immortality of the soul telling us that everything the Bible says will happen is not to happen. Being that he lived in and grew up in ancient Greece, he obviously would know quite well the meaning of those words that the New Testament would later use (I'm aware that Plato's classical Greek is different from the Bible's Koine Greek, but they aren't *that* different...). To him, the language that the New Testament would employ was pretty clear; it meant that the soul would cease to exist, and so he emphatically denied it.

D. Proof from Tertullian That Annihilation Is a Viable Meaning of Matthew 10.28

Also significant is the discussion of Matthew 10.28 by the early church father Tertullian. Now, he actually believed in eternal torment (sometimes regarded as the first church father to explicitly state this). He did not believe that souls are ultimately destroyed. Regarding Matthew 10.28, he says:

If, therefore, any one shall violently suppose that the destruction of the soul and the flesh in Hell amounts to a final annihilation of the two substances, and not to their penal treatment (as if they were to be consumed, not punished), let him recollect that the fire of Hell is eternal— expressly announced as an everlasting penalty; and let him then admit that it is from this circumstance that this never-ending “killing” is more formidable than a merely human murder, which is only temporal. (570; ch. 35)

Why then would I cite Tertullian if he believed in eternal torment? Well, if Matthew 10.28 could not be seen as referring to destruction, if *apollumi* never means annihilate, if the Greek does not say this but instead we are just reading what is meant as a nuanced English translation too literally, why would Tertullian have to address the verse at all? If *apollumi* were inconsistent with literal destruction, why would Tertullian be arguing against those who think that God might destroy body and soul instead of just ruining them and keeping the person alive forever?

Although Tertullian was known for writing in Latin, he knew ancient Greek (Chapman), surely better than any scholar studying the ancient dialect nearly 1,800 years later. This was from the turn of the 3rd century; there was no English language. He wasn't reading “destroy,” but rather, “*apollumi*.” The same would be said of his contemporaries, including those he spoke against who believed that the Bible taught that the unsaved would be annihilated (a belief that

supposedly didn't exist until way later, of course...). He and others who were exposed to the Bible (or at least large parts of it) in its own language saw that it at least could be speaking of destruction. Granted, he believed ultimately that it must not mean that, but this was for theological reasons, such as his belief that the damned being resurrected just to be destroyed would be silly (561; ch. 35). That belief will be addressed in Section LIII.

Just as Plato's use of this language demonstrated that ancient readers prior to Christ saw the Bible's destruction language as referring to annihilationism, so Tertullian's use demonstrates that ancient readers after Christ would have seen the same meaning as at least a possibility.

E. Greek Scholars Say That Utter Destruction Is a Key Meaning for *Apollumi*

Many people who actually have a background in biblical Greek admit that destruction is a common meaning of *apollumi*. According to William D. Mounce, the New Testament editor of the English Standard Version Bible, "There is nothing in the word that necessitates *apollumi* means a permanent and total destruction. It certainly can carry that meaning, but it is context (including one's theological understanding of the ideas conveyed by the word) that make the final decision." Obviously, Mounce does not say that it means destruction and that is that. In fact, his emphasis is on the fact that it does not always mean destruction. However, with that said, "it certainly can carry that meaning," and context is the determining factor.

James Strong's "A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament," part of his *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, defines *apollumi* as "to destroy fully (reflex. To perish or lose), lit. or fig. – destroy, die, lose, mar, perish" (14). It includes definitions besides "destroy", but it leads with "destroy fully." Thayer is similar (64), despite giving an additional, explicitly metaphorical secondary definition consistent with the traditional view (as mentioned

above). I could cite any number of lexicons and websites, but I can assure you that they all read in a very similar way.

It is significant that those who most unambiguously say that *apollumi* doesn't mean "to utterly destroy" or something like that are not usually Greek scholars, but theologians, all too often just citing *Death and the Afterlife* and pointing to a few examples where it means ruin or loss. Of course, I am not a Greek scholar either, but at least I agree with the Greek scholars! Just simply looking at the many times the *apóleia* word group is used, it is hardly simple. The words are used in different contexts. If they simply didn't mean literal and complete destruction, why would so many translation committees translate them in terms of destruction? These words can be applied to anything from beauty that vanishes to rotten fruit to people being slain or incinerated to what will happen to the heavens and the earth. Destruction, i.e. annihilation of the unsaved, is a definite possibility, something that has been known as far back as the time of Plato.

F. "Two Different Words Are Used for 'Kill' and 'Destroy,' So They Must Be Different"

A somewhat unusual though significant argument brought up by *The Interactive Bible* is this: In Matthew 10.28, Jesus used two different Greek words to describe what man does and what God will do in Hell. In short, because Jesus said that man can "kill" (Greek *apokteino*) the body, but God will "destroy" (Greek *apollumi*) body and soul, He must not have meant to indicate the fate for the damned body and soul is the same as that of a murdered body ("Eternal Torment").

This is a serious argument that needs to be addressed, although it ultimately comes short of being persuasive.

If you just read it in English, would the switching from kill to destroy make you think that it must mean ruin because if they really meant destroy, they would have just said “kill” again? If so, why is it so rare to hear a traditionalist quote Matthew 10.28 when not dealing directly with annihilationism? Sometimes I even hear Luke 12.5 and question if they were starting to quote Matthew and then stopped. Why such reticence to quote Matthew? Is it because the way it sounds in English makes it a bad verse to quote regarding eternal punishment (since it says God will “destroy” the immortal soul in Hell)?

I should emphasize that it is not as though they are pointing out some aspect of Greek that differs from English. Their argument is simply that since it’s a different word, Matthew must have meant to make you distinguish between them, and not only that, but that they are distinguished in such a way that makes literal destruction impossible to read from this verse.

First of all, must there necessarily be a significant distinction in meaning? Have you never used two words that mean essentially the same thing in a sentence or phrase like this? What if someone said the following: “My head hurts, but what causes me the most pain is my foot”? Would one, upon hearing that, suggest that the speaker must mean that the foot causes a different kind of pain (like emotional pain) because different words were used and the latter had the possibility of meaning something different? Must we assume that their foot doesn’t hurt in the same way that their head does because they phrase it differently? That’d be silly, but it’s the same idea, essentially. Man can kill, but God can do a word that can mean “to kill,” something like “to kill,” or something else. According to them, since different words are used, the author *must* have intended to distinguish them. They base this not on a rule in Greek that is foreign to English, but rather they expect you to accept it as a given, as common sense. But it’s not a given, as I have shown above. Indeed, that can be the case, but it’s wrong to say that it must be the case.

Furthermore, they may be different words, but it's a pretty obvious parallel. I could simply say that Matthew was just writing the way that normal people do; the Holy Spirit is the Author of the scriptures, but their authors are human. Maybe Matthew (or Jesus who is quoted) didn't want to sound like a broken record. The emphasis in Jesus's words (which may not be recorded exactly, since Matthew and Luke's rendering are worded quite differently), appears to be not on what God does as much as the fact that He can do it to both body and soul, unlike men. Otherwise, why contrast it directly to men who cannot kill the soul?

As far as distinction goes, there could be intent to distinguish. Men kill, God completely destroys. Further, the verb *apollumi* does have more of a feeling of ruin to it than *apokteino*. Perhaps Jesus wanted to minimize the significance of the death brought on by men even further. If a man were to kill one of His sheep, the follower's ruin would be slight in light of eternity (although what is done to their bodies is at least somewhat similar to what God does to body and soul according to the doctrine of conditional immortality). Ultimately, I am saying there is not much of a literal, material distinction as much as there is simply a distinction in tone. Killing a body does pretty much ruin it and render it useless, just as God does with the body and soul. However, to "destroy" sounds more powerful. Like I said, in general the idea of making a soul and body like a corpse fits, but if God does indeed destroy the body and soul, it would make sense that rather than saying He will kill them, Jesus said He will "destroy" them. In a sense, He will "kill" both entities in the ultimate sense. Maybe it's like saying rather than just stabbing them, He'll blow them up. Or maybe it just sounded better at the time. Maybe the translation in virtually every English version might actually mean what it says when taken at face value?

There is further reason to believe that Jesus did not mean to make a complete material distinction in the way that *The Interactive Bible* suggests. Jesus had made the point about how

men can *kill* the body but not the soul. Wouldn't that indicate that He wanted to emphasize not the change in the nature of how one or the other can harm you, but rather emphasize the fact that God *can* do it whereas man cannot, so you should fear Him? Is it not odd to be saying, "Do not fear him who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul? Rather, fear Him who cannot/will not do it either"? Wouldn't it have made more sense to say that men "cannot harm the soul" or "cannot ruin the soul" or even "but leaves the soul untouched"? What would have been the point of bringing up the fact that the other guy cannot kill the soul if God won't do something that is at least very similar? Indeed, in this context "to destroy" complements "to kill" just fine. After all, from the perspective of the recipient of the action, the results are the same. The one whose soul is destroyed in Hell is no better off if God merely kills the soul instead. This is not true if the opposite of "to kill," "to keep alive," is in view. To literally destroy certainly fits with killing; to destroy a person is to kill them, just more so. Yet to torment the soul, or to do anything that doesn't involve death and destruction, wouldn't distinguish between men and God much at all.

What then of claims that killing and annihilating are not the same thing? Hans Scharen makes the interesting argument that indeed, Matthew used *apollumi* specifically because it is so similar to kill, as I have argued. However, because it is meant to convey the idea of killing, he also argues, "This again weakens the force of the argument that *apollumi* means 'to annihilate' or 'to cease to exist'" (461). Simply put, to kill is not the same thing as annihilating, so this verse does not say that the soul and body are annihilated. Now, it is true that killing and annihilating are not the same thing, but this whole argument is based on the misunderstanding of what annihilationism means that was dealt with in Section V. If Matthew did mean "kill" by his use of *apollumi*, then he would be saying that what man can only do to the body, God will do to the body and soul of the wicked person. I am hoping that if you have read this far, you will find the

following question a bit redundant: What is a dead body like? Men have the power to kill the body. They cannot touch the soul, but they are able to turn a living, vivacious, conscious body into a corpse. Following Scharen's reasoning (and mine), God will do that to the soul as well. It may not be literal, cosmic annihilation, but it absolutely would amount to the end of a person's conscious existence, i.e. annihilationism.

G. "‘Apollumi’ Doesn't Mean to Annihilate" – Part II

Just from my impression of how quite a few traditionalists approach the idea of annihilationism, I get the feeling that annihilation is not seen as being a particularly awful fate. To many, it would just be a peaceful end to existence for the wicked person. R.C. Sproul even says that it would be a form of escape from Hell (*Essential Truths* 296-297). For that reason, some might say, the ruinous aspect of the *apóleia* word group wouldn't fit annihilation, since it speaks of ruin and loss, not neutrality.

However, that is not my position at all. It is not a pleasant, peaceful end. It is not eternal rest. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Rather than being glorified, rather than being called children and heirs of the one whose image they bear, the unsaved are ravaged, ruined, and deprived of all use and meaning. That seems to be consistent with the general feel of the word. But why do we assume that their being destroyed ruinously, their "eternal destruction," cannot culminate in...destruction?

A big thing is made about how *apollumi* really means more like to ruin or be lost, and thus man is lost or ruined, and therefore not destroyed. But even if *apollumi* only meant to ruin or be lost (which it absolutely doesn't), why would that go against annihilation? We must remember, man was meant to live for eternity. Man was made in God's image. What could

possibly be more horrific, more shameful for somebody created in God's image than to pass out of existence like a beast? Several traditionalists argue against annihilationism for this very reason, as I brought up in Section VIII. Granted, I don't argue that man is annihilated at physical death as Morey accused (37-38); I follow the biblical teaching that there is a resurrection of saved and damned alike (John 5.28-29). That said, the point remains. If the fate of annihilation is so horrible, so unspeakable, that it is considered by some traditionalists to be too awful to be true, how could it not be considered terrible ruin?

The Bible describes the damned's end in many ways; it compares it to incineration (Matthew 3.12; 13.36-43; 2 Peter 2.6), death (James 1.15, 1 John 5.16), decay (1 Corinthians 3.17; Galatians 6.8), and in many cases, references are made to ruin/destruction with words from the *apóleia* word group. None of these logically exclude any of the others. Death, absolute annihilation, and decay of one born in the image of God sounds like an immeasurable ruin of them, does it not? Man suffers ruin. His ruin is being burned up like weeds (Matthew 13.40). They are totally ruined because they die like beasts (after the resurrection and judgment that is). That sounds pretty unspeakable. The damned are condemned to perdition (as KJV tends to translate *apóleia*) because they are condemned to be eliminated. Importantly, this idea might also explain why their fate is usually described using the *apóleia* word group as opposed to words that tend to refer to simple destruction.

Now, some might say that nobody stops existing when you kill them. This may be true, but their body, which is what is actually killed at physical death (Matthew 10.28; James 2.26), does stop living in any sense of the word until it eventually decomposes. Even when it still "exists," it is a corpse. I might not have said this before, but if the unsaved people, body and soul,

are made like corpses, then even if that means that they “exist,” annihilationism would be true (quibbling about the name “annihilationism” aside).

I will also say this to those who insist that since *apollumi* doesn’t seem to literally mean “annihilate,” annihilation can’t be true: the word *apollumi* also doesn’t literally mean torment (or anything close to it), so by that logic, eternal torment must be false, because what God does to body and soul is not literally “torment.” Ultimately, what is the *apóleia* of the damned like? Well, the biblical pictures and examples include the incineration of cities, the burning of dry grass, and the vengeful (albeit justified) killing of many.

H. Even Meanings Other than Annihilation Fit Conditionalism

I discussed in Section V about how all too often, it is said that these Greek words do not speak of utter annihilation or ceasing to exist, and therefore they speak of eternal existence and the resulting torment and misery. I just want to point out that, even if more nuanced forms of “destruction” are applied to the meaning of these words, they still don’t help the cause against conditionalism very much. After all, as I said, I don’t need to prove the utter discreation of the whole person. All I need to show is that the person has no conscious existence, that just as one who believes in no afterlife wrongly assumes that the dead are gone completely at physical death (even though a corpse is there), so the person is gone in eternity. For all I care, their previously resurrected corpses and spirit matter lie around dead forever (although I doubt that will happen).

With that in mind, let’s see how the meanings of death and decay and ruin are illustrated in order to disprove annihilation. According to Timothy Keller:

For example, when Jesus speaks being [sic] ‘destroyed’ in Hell, the word used is *apollumi*, meaning not to be annihilated out of existence but to be ‘totaled’ and

ruined so as to be useless for its intended purpose. The image of ‘gehenna’ and ‘maggots’ means decomposition. Once a body is dead it loses its beauty and strength and coherence, it begins to break into its constituent parts, to stink and to disintegrate.

Let’s stop and analyze what he is saying so far. Rather than showing a picture of annihilation, Keller is saying that Jesus really wants us to see decay, and attribute such a picture to a soul. Annihilationists would agree wholeheartedly. As he says himself, after dead bodies lose their beauty and strength and coherence and start to stink, they disintegrate. They disintegrate...Within a relatively short time, worms and bacteria and the like eat away at all organic matter, leaving bones which, unless they become fossilized, eventually return to the earth as well. How is that not a good picture of conditional immortality? I’m looking at his own description. He didn’t even stop at the idea of decay and argue that it’s a loose metaphor for spiritual uselessness. The lost soul is like a dead decaying body. So far I agree. The body is dead. It is useless. It has no life (the spirit has left). It ceases in all biological activity. It has no animation. It cannot feel pain or pleasure. It decays into something as close to nothingness as can be seen in this world. It isn’t “annihilation,” but it is not a picture of any sort of continued conscious existence.

From there Keller continues: “So what is a ‘totaled’ human soul? It does not cease to exist, but rather becomes completely incapable of all the things a human soul is for--reasoning, feeling, choosing, giving or receiving love or joy.” Now, that just isn’t true, at least not according to the traditional doctrine. Some aspects are surely true; a person lost in an eternal state of torment and misery probably cannot receive or give joy. Odds are, Keller is right that they cannot choose anymore; someone in the traditional “Hell” is stuck there for ever and ever, irreversibly. However, how could they not feel? Physically, they would feel pain. Emotionally,

they would have all kinds of negative feelings (sadness, regret, anger, etc.). If they know that they are in Hell, and why they are there, then they would be reasoning to that extent. If you can't feel or think, how can eternal torment be true? This picture of a "totaled" soul sounds just like a dead body, not a miserable person.

These analogies are nothing new, as was the case with Moo's tornado analogy in Section V. I know this looks like quibbling, but that's not my fault. This kind of discussion requires quibbling! If the argument is that these words don't really describe one kind of destruction, but rather another, and yet both kinds of destruction fit the bill, then that needs to be addressed.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and extrapolate. It seems that often, in these discussions, the burden of proof is put on annihilationists to prove absolute obliteration as opposed to the burden being put on the traditionalist to show that God will continue to sustain the damned for ever and ever. I will dare to say that it often seems that anything short of cosmic annihilation fails to satisfy skeptics because the default position is that all people ultimately continue to exist for ever. Since souls are seen as immortal, pictures of ruin and decay and death and destruction are viewed within that prism. It would therefore be perfectly fine to see pictures of decay as consistent with eternal torment since the decay would never culminate in actual destruction. Although the lost are corruptible and able to be damaged beyond use, they would always exist and keep the person in conscious existence. But in fact, the soul is not immortal.

I. A Note about *Apóleia* and Revelation 17.8-11

In Revelation 17.8 and 11, we have another reference to destruction. Verse 11 tells us, for example, "The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his *destruction*" (emphasis added) (*NIV*). Verse 8 is similar, as both verses entail

the angel telling John about what the beast symbolizes. This is significant because, as Robert Peterson points out about this verse in response to annihilationist Edward Fudge:

The New Testament vocabulary of destruction does not teach annihilationism. As further evidence of that fact, I point out that the word *destruction* cannot bear Fudge's meaning in Revelation 17:8, 11. There "destruction" is prophesied for "the beast." We read two chapters later the beast and false Prophet are "thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur" (Rev. 19:20)...Furthermore, John teaches that the beast, false Prophet, and Satan "will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev. 20:10). The Beast's "destruction," therefore, is not annihilation, but eternal punishment [i.e. eternal torment]! ("Part Two" 95)

Aside from how this applies directly to the beast, implicit in this argument is that "destruction" (Greek *apóleia*) refers to eternal torment, or at least that there is precedent to see it that way, since that is how it is used in this passage.

Even if "destruction" is referring here to the eternal torment of the beast, two things must be said. First of all, even if we grant that it meant eternal torment in one passage, since the eternal torment in John's vision is symbolic of real-life destruction (see Section XIII), it doesn't prove eternal torment of anyone. Second, supposing that John this one time called eternal torment "destruction," it doesn't mean that that is the meaning we should apply in all the other instances. After all, the term is used a lot in the Bible; one figurative use, especially in Revelation of all books, certainly does not make a rule.

That said, this passage actually lends no weight to the traditionalist position at all. This is because it is not the "beast" we see tormented for eternity that goes off to "destruction." Rather, the one whom the angel says goes to destruction is the one whom the symbolic beast represents.

A close reading of the verse and its context makes that clear. In the same breath that the beast is said to go to destruction, we are told that the “beast” is an eighth king, who is also one of the seven. It is the eighth king who goes to destruction. I argued in Section XIII that the “king” is in fact a kingdom, not just an individual person, but the point remains whether or not I was right. Whatever the case, the destruction refers not to the fate of the symbolic beast in the Revelation narrative, but to the fate of the person or entity that the beast represents. What we ultimately, have, then, is simply an angel saying that a man or kingdom will be sent to destruction. Because the one spoken of is not actually the one being eternally tormented in Revelation 20.10, we can’t say that Revelation 20.10 means that “destruction” is used to speak of eternal torment even in this verse. The beast suffers eternal torment in the vision, but the angel tells us about the beast in real life; he/it suffers destruction.

I will go even further: this passage backfires and actually gives weight to the annihilationist argument. Peterson’s reasoning is that we should interpret this passage and the meaning of “destruction” in light of Revelation 20.10. But Revelation 20.10 is part of a vision; Revelation 17.8-11 is part of a divine *interpretation* of the visions in Revelation. The angel is talking about real life. Therefore, the angel’s description, including the fate of “destruction” for the beast, should be used to shed light on the meaning of the visions, and not the other way around. Clear scripture should interpret unclear scripture. The straightforward description of what will happen in real life should interpret a vision full of symbolic creatures and vivid apocalyptic imagery. Taken at face value at least, reading that the beast will go off to “destruction” sounds like annihilationism. When John later saw the fulfillment of the angel’s promise symbolized as torment forever and ever, he would have already known that the angel’s interpretation was the truth, so the torment must be a symbol along the lines of other torments in

the Scripture, as discussed in Section XIII. So Peterson's argument, rather than proving that "destruction" means torment, has actually given reasonable and independent evidence that "torment" means destruction.

J. A Note about *Apóleia* and 2 Peter 3.5-7.

There is one important use of *apollumi* and *apóleia* in 2 Peter 3.5-7, although it is somewhat ambiguous. The passage reads as follows:

But they [those who mocked believers because the Lord had not yet come] deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the Day of Judgment and destruction of ungodly men. (NIV)

The verb *apollumi* is used to describe how the waters destroyed the world of Noah's time. The "destruction" of ungodly men is translated from *apóleia*. Thus, the same words are used by Peter in the same passage to describe what the flood did to the world and to describe the fate of ungodly men (Fudge, *The Fire* 285). The question then arises, what does Peter mean when he says the world was destroyed? If the "world" in this context refers to the planet, then it was not literally "destroyed." This would probably indicate that the "destruction" Peter speaks of is not literal destruction, but rather ruin, like what the flood waters did to planet earth. *The Interactive Bible* argues for eternal torment based on this idea ("Eternal Torment").

However, this interpretation of "world" is not a given. Now, the Greek *kosmos* technically can mean the actual planet earth, but it often refers to things like the following: It

refers to the “world” that God so loved that for it Christ died (John 3.16), the world that we are not of (John 15.19), the world that is the enemy of God (James 4.4), and the world whose sins Jesus died for (1 John 2.2). That world, the collection of men (not the individuals, but the “world” of them as a whole), was essentially annihilated (with the exception of Noah and his family of course). If that is the world that Peter writes of, then this verse very strongly *supports* annihilationism. The verb form of the word that describes the fate of the damned was used in the very same thought to describe God wiping humanity off the face of the earth. One might say that since Noah survived, the world wasn’t annihilated, but if we take it so literally that it means the world *including Peter*, then the world, if anything, was purified (at least to an extent), since the world carried on without the ungodly. And purification definitely doesn’t fit traditionalism!

Another reason to see the “world” as meaning “the people of the world” (a common way we use the word in English) is because the earth, both the planet and the land of the planet, didn’t really suffer much in the way of ruin. From the standpoint of humanity, the flood was a disaster that remains unparalleled. Everybody but Noah and his family was killed. However, whatever damage was done to the earth (Greek *ge* in Verse 5) that was formed out of water, its ruin would have been temporary and reversed within a fairly short time. Life on earth fairly quickly revived. One might even argue that the flood may have caused changes to the post-fall planet that have in ways improved it (such as geological or climatic changes that have made the world better at sustaining life). How could we say that the planet was really subject to *apollumi* in any sense? If the “world” means the world of mankind, then the use of *apollumi* makes perfect sense.

The difference could be much more subtle as well. God also killed off everything that had the breath of life in it (Genesis 6.17). Peter could have meant humanity, or he could have been referring to the whole harmonious order, in this context, the biosphere. The word “kosmos” can

refer to the generic order of things (Vine 1245). That would have the same idea as if we were speaking of humanity, for the whole order of nature was indeed annihilated (with the exception of those on the ark of course, exceptions that I do not think are part of what Peter speaks of in any case, as they suffered neither literal destruction nor ruin).

I must also point out that this discussion assumes that the flood was global. Some, like Richard Deem of *godandscience.org*, have argued that, although the flood killed off all of mankind (except for the eight people saved in Noah's ark), it was geographically limited. Just as humans after Noah had been slow to spread out, as seen in Genesis 11, it's not a stretch to think that the same was true before, which makes a local yet universal flood possible. The arguments for this conclusion are based in part on complexities in Hebrew that I am not at this time capable of sifting through (it actually has little to do with the supposed absurdity of a global flood), which leaves me undecided. I will just note that a local flood would only help my case, because it would be pretty hard to justify the claim that water in any way "destroyed" planet earth if it only covered a small portion of it (meaning the that "world" in view was human world).

I will note that annihilationism is helped a lot more by this working with annihilationism than it is hurt by it referring to the planet. If the world of people is in view, and the same fate of the world applies to unsaved men (as is strongly suggested by the context), then this is great for annihilationism. Not only would it be another instance of the word applying to annihilation, but it would use the verb to describe the act of annihilating in the same breath that the noun is used to describe the destruction of men. If, however, the earth is what is destroyed, then while this would not help annihilationism in any way, it would not be as detrimental as is sometimes suggested. Of course the damned are ruined, made useless, put to waste, etc. All secondary meanings of "destruction" and the *apóleia* word group do apply to the damned under any

eschatological scheme. They are lost and ruined and condemned as much as they are destroyed. Even if Peter was just referring to their doom in the abstract sense, that doesn't eliminate annihilation. Again, that is just a false dichotomy that is sometimes put forth, that the fate of the damned can either be literal destruction or destruction in the more metaphorical, qualitative sense, and not both. The two are not mutually exclusive. Peter would be speaking of their ruin in a generic sense. What would he say their ruin is? Well, we do know that he said in the same epistle that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an example of that generic ruin...

K. Other Words of "Destruction"

Other words appear in scripture that describe the "destruction" (and similar ideas) of the lost besides *apóleia*, and although they all do carry some degree of ambiguity, overall they are certainly helpful to the annihilationist cause.

Phthora and phtheiró – According to Galatians 6.8, "For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." The damned reap "corruption" (translated as "destruction" in the NIV). The word used here, as discussed in Section IX, is *phthora*. Using the verb form of this word, *phtheiró* it is said that God will "destroy" those who destroy His church (1 Corinthians 3.17). This group of words tends to have the general feeling of decay. The noun form is not particularly common in the New Testament. It describes the "corruption" in which our mortal, destructible bodies are sown in, in contrast to the incorruption that our glorified immortal bodies will rise in (1 Corinthians 15.42). It is applied to commandments of men regarding the touching and eating of certain things (or the things themselves, translations vary – Colossians 2.22). It can also describe moral corruption (e.g. 2 Peter 1.4). Of course, I think it is safe to say that God is not

going to inflict upon the damned moral corruption, lest we say that He does indeed tempt men to sin, which would directly contradict James 1.13-14.

The strongest annihilationist point regarding these words can be found when the wicked are compared to animals, although textual variants and the complexity of the Greek can muddy the waters. Modern translations follow the NASB's lead, as follows: "But these [ungodly men], like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed" (2 Peter 2.12). Those are enormously helpful to the annihilationist case. In the same breath, Peter says that the lost will be destroyed, and they are like beasts that are likewise destroyed. The word *phtheiró* is used for both the wicked and the beasts. What is done to a slain beast (not a slain man, but a slain beast) is the same word, used in the same breath, that describes the fate of the wicked (after a direct comparison is made to beasts to be slain). Those like the King James Version, however, are less clear, as they do not specifically say that the unsaved perish like animals: "But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption" (*KJV*). It doesn't hurt that the wicked "utterly perish," but the direct comparison to animals is not there, making it more ambiguous.

Katargeó – On two occasions, the verb *katargeó* is applied to personal entities. Jesus came for the purpose of doing this to the devil (Hebrews 2.14). He will also destroy the mysterious ungodly figure of 2 Thessalonians 2.8. This same verb is applied to the fate of death (1 Corinthians 15.26; 2 Timothy 1.10). It is also applied in cases where the thing it applies to is not really destroyed but merely rendered inoperative, such as the Law in relation to the believer (Romans 7.6). Strong defines it as, among other things, "to be (render) entirely idle, lit or fig."

and “abolish, cease, cumber, deliver, destroy...” (“A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament” 40). The man of lawlessness is presumably killed, but with this in mind, it is unclear exactly how it is meant in regards to the devil. If it speaks of him being abolished and done away with, as is the case with death, then that would speak of annihilation. However, if it is meant as “render inoperative,” then it technically could fit with eternal torment as well. It still wouldn’t fit as well, but it could logically just be saying that Jesus would make him powerless and meaningless, not dead and gone forever.

Diaphtheiró – Similar to *phtheiró*. Refers to anything from moth-eaten clothes (Luke 12.33) to dying bodies (2 Corinthians 4.16) to destruction of boats (Revelation 8.9) (Fudge, *The Fire* 294). In Revelation 11.18, it says that God will “destroy” them that “destroy the earth.” The same word is used for “destroy” in both its uses. Exactly what the angels mean by those who “destroy the earth” is unclear, which makes it a little unclear in this passage.

Esthió – In most contexts it has nothing to do with death, destruction, or the lost. Primarily, it “signifies to eat” (Vine 345). Nevertheless, it is used in to describe a “raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (NIV, Hebrews 10.27b). The fire spoken of is the one reserved for those who sin deliberately and willfully, knowingly choosing sin over God. This is clearly eschatological, as their fate is contrasted to the merely earthly death of sinners in Israel (Hebrews 10.28-29). A fire will consume the enemies of God. That sounds pretty clear.

What traditionalist responses are there? The main rebuttal is that “consume” can be used in many figurative ways that have nothing to do with destruction, so that is what the Bible means when it speaks of consuming fire. *The Interactive Bible*, for example, points to examples where things were “consumed” but not annihilated (Psalm 78.45; Lamentations 3.4; and Ezekiel 13.13).

They also argue, “Even in English we speak of people being consumed with ‘grief, greed or lust,’ yet we do not mean that the person has ceased to exist” (“Eternal Torment”).

Now, what do they say about the actual verse in question? Nothing. But surely more needs to be said. When one is “consumed” with emotion, we know that it’s figurative. It’s literally impossible for a feeling to actually consume a person the way that fire could. Context usually makes it pretty clear how literal or figurative we are being, as is the case with anything else. In the KJV English of Ezekiel 13.13, hailstones “consume” a wall by knocking it down. Again, obviously it’s figurative; hail can’t literally consume anything. But fire does consume! One might add that fire consuming is itself figurative because fire, unlike humans, cannot eat. That’s not really important, however, because we know what it means when a fire consumes something. Even if technically figurative, fire consumes in a way sadness cannot. What on earth would we expect the author of Hebrews to mean when he speaks of a fire that consumes? The *Interactive Bible* article in question is even dedicated to the burning bush of Exodus 3.2 because it “was not consumed by fire” (“Eternal Torment”). Indeed, the fact that Psalm 78.45 speaks of flies consuming the Egyptians might show that something that can literally consume can be spoken of as figuratively consuming. However, even that is debatable. We know little about what kinds of flies these are, but if they are said to consume or devour, then they certainly bite. If they sucked blood or were in a likewise manner parasitic, then they literally would consume blood/flesh, albeit in minute amounts. True, they wouldn’t consume the full person, so it would still be in part figurative, but part of that arises from the fact that flies are not expected to devour a whole person. Fire, on the other hand, is. Furthermore, just as large swarms of ants or other insects can completely consume the flesh of a large animal, who is to say that some were not killed and their flesh completely consumed? It might be literal. And if not, it is worth noting that

the very nature of the writing, being a poetic psalm, gives us a contextual indicator that there is at least some figurative element to this description. This is not the case in the book of Hebrews.

When compared to the Old Testament, the idea of a consuming fire makes the meaning of Hebrews 10.27 even clearer. Obviously the word used is different (being from a different language), but what can we learn when we look at fires that consume in the Old Testament? For starters, the fire that consumes the wicked in Hebrews 10.27 stands in contrast to the bush that was burned but *not* consumed by fire in Exodus 3.2. There are no other instances in the New Testament where we see fire “consuming” anyone using the same words as in Hebrews 10.27. However, throughout the Old Testament, fires that consumed were consistently shown as fires that, well, consumed (Leviticus 6.10; 9.24; 10.2; Numbers 11.1; 16.35; 21.28; Deuteronomy 5.25; 2 Kings 1.12; 2 Chronicles 7.1; Job 15.34; 20.26; Jeremiah 21.14; 49.27; Ezekiel 15.7; 19.12; 20.47; 28.18; Amos 1.4; 7; 10; 12; 14; 2.2; 5; Obadiah 18; Nahum 3.13; 15). These passages all use variations of the Hebrew *akal*, Strong’s number 398. Even in instances where metaphors and figures are being employed (e.g. Psalm 78.63), what is figurative is not the consumption, but the fire itself. It still speaks of death and destruction. Even then, the metaphorical fire still literally consumes; there just isn’t actually a fire. Like *esthió*, *akal* often refers to eating (Strong, “A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible” 12). When fire would “consume” something, or, “eat it”, it would almost always do just that. In the book of Hebrews, whose name emphasizes who we traditionally believe to be the original audience, fire consumes the wicked, only now, it is on an eternal scale.

Exolethreuó – This word appears only once. Acts 3.23, warns that those who do not follow the prophet Moses says will come in Deuteronomy 18.18 (Jesus) would be “utterly destroyed.” According to Edward Fudge, it is “a very intense word,” one that was used in the

Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) in passages that spoke of the world being destroyed in the flood and of capital punishment (*Hell: A Final Word* 123). Vine defines it as “to destroy utterly, to slay utterly.” This word is applied directly to the fate of those who do not follow Jesus, so make what you will of that.

Olethros – See Section XVIII, Subsection B (and there you have it).

L. To Sum It Up

If on one single occasion these words are used in the sense of destruction, if on just one occasion the English translation can be taken straightforwardly and literally and not figuratively when referring to men, then annihilationism is true. Even if the biblical authors generally use these words in an abstract, figurative sense of facing ruin and being lost, and only once say that the unsaved perish like the beauty of James 1.11’s flower, then annihilationism is still proved true. If just once the Bible is saying that the fate of a corpse is likened to that of a whole person in the hands of the living God, then annihilationism is confirmed. As demonstrated in this section, there is ample evidence that these passages mean just what the English says: the unsaved will be destroyed, doomed to annihilation as defined in Section V.

Therefore, do not be distracted by red herrings about how the words in question do not describe cosmic obliteration. After all, as pointed out in Section V, that’s not what annihilationists mean either. Do not be distracted when someone argues that the words for “destroy” and “destruction” really speak of ruin. After all, the ultimate extinction of someone made in the image of God is such a terrible form of ruin that some traditionalists will not even consider it possible. Tradition is a powerful influence over one’s ability to interpret the truth, but in the end, the Bible speaks for itself.

XLI. DEALING WITH AMBIGUITY – SUMMING UP DESTRUCTION

Some may still ask why the Bible authors didn't just say that the damned will "cease to exist completely and will never come back." Aside from pointing out that some would probably still believe in eternal torment even then, I would simply ask why they never explicitly say anything about everlasting torment in any piece of straightforward writing (or for that matter, anything other than Revelation 20.10, which was dealt with in Section XIII)?

One may be quick to point out the ambiguity in the verses on destruction, but the sword cuts both ways. One might argue that Paul could have stated annihilation a little more clearly, but he definitely could have been way clearer in speaking of eternal torment if that's what he intended. The arguments from silence against annihilation pale in comparison to those against traditionalism.

Why didn't Jesus or the apostles in the book of Acts give such lurid details and descriptions like these of puritan preacher Thomas Vincent's sermon "Fire and Brimstone in Hell, to Burn the Wicked"? Where are the details of "the smell with suffocating odious and nasty stench, worse than of carrion, or that which comes out of an open sepulcher" (ch. 3). Where are the descriptions of how the fire "will pierce through and through every part of the body" (ch. 4). You will never hear the Bible echo these words: "All the tortures that ever were invented by the most mischievous mind, or executed by the most cruel tyrant on whom they have had the greatest spleen unto, are not so much as the least gentle touch in comparison with the torture which the least member of the damned shall endure in hell" (ch. 8).

Where are the lurid details of Hell that we see in the Qur'an? When does our heavenly Father, the only true God, say, "Those who reject our Signs, We shall soon cast into the Fire: as often as their skins are roasted through, We shall change them for fresh skins, that they may taste

the penalty” (*Yusaf Ali Translation*, Surah 4:56)? Why, if the Bible meant to describe conscious existence in a state of horrifying pain that never ends, would it describe the fate of those damned with descriptions of death, pictures of utter annihilation, words that at best for the traditionalist are ambiguous and often do refer to death and utter destruction, all the while failing to mention torment, eternal conscious existence, and other basic details?

The Bible is at times ambiguous, but the fact that ambiguous terms are often used to describe the lost doesn't prove eternal torment. The fact that the terms are ambiguous means that they don't clearly say either one (or else they wouldn't be ambiguous). The times when the Bible is clear, what is said? Immortality is inherent to God only and is something that men must seek (meaning it isn't a given). Sodom and Gomorrah and dry chaff thrown into a furnace are all used explicitly as direct examples of the lost. Even the parables of the lost that traditionalists point to (many of which I don't think are even eschatological) almost always involve the figure representing God slaying the damned. The pictures of exclusion (“outer darkness,” being kept out of the Kingdom etc.), which for some reason people fallaciously assume must mean continued conscious existence, all involve the person being slain or deprived of the source of physical life (such as the tree of life in Revelation).

So despite the fact that the Bible never says anything quite as clear as say, Irenaeus of Lyons (recall Section X, Subsection G), the ambiguity argument comes back to bite the traditionalist even harder.

XLII. THE BIBLICAL VISION OF ETERNITY

A. In the New Creation, There Will Be No Evil

Using a term borrowed from Glenn Peoples (“Why I Am an Annihilationist” 1), I will elaborate on the argument against eternal torment based on the new creation and the “biblical vision of eternity.” The argument is essentially that, in the new creation, in the age to come, there will be nothing in existence that opposes God; “The New Testament anticipates a creation in which there is no cause for divine regret. Everything that lives will be under Christ in His kingdom” (“Why I Am an Annihilationist” 7). This would require one of two things to happen. The first possibility is that all men and even the devil and his angels will be redeemed and saved. In other words, we’d have universalism. The other possibility is that all that opposes God will be destroyed and done away with. Either way, eternal torment is impossible, for all that oppose God must either be saved or destroyed. Given that the wicked suffer “eternal punishment” (Matthew 25.46) and “eternal destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1.9), and given that they await a “raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (*NIV*, Hebrews 10.27b), I do not seriously consider universalism. This leaves us with one conclusion: the Bible teaches annihilationism.

Now, a lot of passages speak of the eternal state and vaguely describe God’s victory over evil, but we will focus on just a few key passages in the New Testament that go beyond just general redemption and victory. I want to make this clear: the argument isn’t just that the destruction of the damned is necessary for God to have ultimate victory over sin. Now, I do think that ridding all creation of sin and evil is a better victory for God, but that’s not the argument. Traditionalists are correct in saying that the idea of victory over sin can potentially be consistent with eternal torment. If eternal torment is indeed justice, then eternal torment could be victory

over sin (pending other factors). But there is more to this than just the scripturo-philosophical idea that God must rid the world of evil to have victory over it. The argument is that some passages actually indicate that evil will no longer exist, and that no one and nothing will exist apart from God; it is not merely that God will conquer sin.

B. 1 Corinthians 15.24-28 and Ephesians 1.9-10

Two key passages to this discussion are Ephesians 1.10 and 1 Corinthians 15.24-28. Ephesians 1.9-10 speaks of God, and how “He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him...” Regarding the other, it is written:

Then *comes* the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

Looking first at 1 Corinthians 15.24-28, it is suggestive of the end of the existence of evil because it places God as being all things in all places, filling creation in a way that is not the case today. Jesus’s reign over the world, as outlined in Psalm 110, will end when He has accomplished everything outlined in the passage (including the destruction of death, which,

again, is illustrated in Revelation 20 as death suffering the same fate as unsaved men and the unholy trinity). Now, I do think that there are subtleties to the issue of kingdom transference; I don't think any of us are going to say that God the Father will at any point be out of the picture. At the very least, regarding the judgment, Jesus Himself said "I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 5.30). But that aside, what is the ultimate outcome said to be? After Jesus destroys all dominion and authority, destroys death, and puts His enemies under His feet, how is God now put in relation to His creation? He is "all-in-all." If that means anything like what it sounds like, how can we reconcile it with eternal torment? If God really does fill His whole creation, if He is everything in everyone, something that isn't true now (or else it wouldn't need to be made so in the future), then how can people still exist who resist God? How can there be people who are in any way cut off from God's fellowship? He is all in all. Likewise, all things in Heaven and on earth (in other words, everything, not just the church), will be united *in Christ* at the end of time according to Ephesians 1.10. How do the ungodly in Hell fit into that picture?

Everything is united in Christ, and when He is made subject to God the Father, God will be all in all. I see a direct parallel here with what Jesus prayed about in John 17.20-23:

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

Jesus's prayer for believers was not only unity among them, but that they would be unified with Christ in them, and God in Christ. If Christ is in us, and He and the Father are one and the Father is in Him, doesn't it follow that God is in us? By bringing the saved to God, Jesus is fulfilling what Ephesians 1.10 and 1 Corinthians 15.24-28 say. God abides in us as believers, at least when we love one another (1 John 4.12). When everything is united with Christ, and Christ is put under the Father, then the Father will be all in all. Doesn't that sound a lot like us? We are united in Christ, and God lives in us. Some of what is in Heaven and earth is already united in Christ. This reaches its ultimate fulfillment at the end, when all things are made this way. But how can we say that the damned in Hell are united in Christ as we are and, more importantly, will be?

Now, one might respond that God being all in all doesn't indicate fellowship, but only that He is present. After all, even as the wicked face the fiery wrath of God in Revelation 14.10, it is in the presence of the Lamb. However, God is already literally everywhere. The highest heavens cannot hold Him, at least according to Solomon (1 Kings 8.27). No matter where you go, to the heavens or even to *Sheol*, He is there (Psalm 139.7-8). If that is all that "all in all" means, then God would already be all in all. Something new needs to be accomplished in the future.

Lastly, it is important to note that Ephesians 1.10 is most often cited by universalists, and for good reason. It is very universalist-friendly. On its own, it sounds more like a universalist passage than one speaking of annihilation. However, if, in the end, all who do not believe are done away with entirely, then it can still be said that all things have been united in Christ, because nobody else is around to not be united. It still means the same thing either way; when all is fulfilled, everything will be in Christ. This can reconcile the idea of eternal punishment with what is clearly said. However, if believers are united in Christ while the damned remain in Hell, that does not fit at all. Not everything in Heaven and on earth would be united in Christ.

C. Traditionalist Responses

What are typical traditionalist responses to the case being made? There aren't many. Often times, the actual significance of the passages is overlooked. An argument is made that God's victory is compatible with eternal torment, and that since the Bible teaches eternal torment, the argument must be true. But as I emphasized at the beginning, we're not just talking about God's victory, about the philosophical belief that evil must cease to exist for God's victory over sin and evil to be complete. There is more to it, which is usually neglected. These passages actually say that everything is united in Jesus. They say that God is all in all. They not only say that God will defeat evil; they also say how. Everything will be united with Him. There is nothing that is not in Christ. God fills everything in creation, because Christ, who all things are united in, is under Him and in Him, just as we are in Christ and under Christ.

In analyzing the texts in question, all too often traditionalist authors have failed to give much that addresses the actual texts themselves. When addressing John Stott's referring to the fact that God will be "all-in-all," Christopher Morgan rebuts, "Yet, Stott falls into the same trap [as universalists] by presupposing a certain understanding of what God's being 'all in all' means" (217). Fair enough. How then should we interpret "all-in-all," according to Morgan? No exegesis of the passage itself is given. Morgan continues: "But a better approach is to ask: What do the Scriptures teach about the final victory of God? The Bible seems to teach that God's ultimate victory is compatible with the endless punishment of the wicked" (217). From there, he points to Revelation 20.10, Matthew 25.41 and 25.46, and concludes that, like Heaven, "Hell will also continue forever" (218). Therefore, "all-in-all" doesn't mean anything to the extent of God's presence and goodness filling His whole creation, being everything in everyone, because

the Bible says eternal torment is true. But we've already addressed those passages, so now what? What of the actual text in question?

Other theologians tend to make the same error. According to Robert Peterson, "What does God deem compatible with being 'all in all'? The Bible's final three chapters answer: God's ultimate victory does not involve the eradication of evil beings from the universe" (*Hell on Trial* 175). He then cites Revelation 20.10 and a few others that we have already gone over. John Blanchard, after bringing up 1 Corinthians 15.28, simply responds with this: "Yet why should the promise of God's final victory over evil be inconsistent with the everlasting punishment of the wicked if this is what God has ordained?" (221). In his case, he not only says little about the actual text, but he makes the mistake mentioned at the beginning. He essentially addresses just the abstract philosophical argument that only annihilation of evil constitutes God's victory over it. He does not even touch upon the significance of "all in all," the line from the actual text that sure makes it sound like God fills all of creation and is all things within it. He doesn't even give an alternative meaning to the phrase that would make any sense in its specific context, nor has any traditionalist writing that I have come across.

Charles Hodge goes into the argument from Ephesians 1.10 a little bit deeper, but it still falls short. He insists that this reference to "all things" really just means all believers. He writes, "It cannot mean absolutely 'all things,' the whole universe, including sun, moon, and stars, for they are not susceptible of reconciliation to God" (871). He also writes, "It cannot mean all men, for the Bible teaches elsewhere that all men are not reconciled to God" (877). Thus, he reaches his conclusion. Of course, he confuses this passage with the similar but (rather importantly) not identical words of Colossians 1.20. Ephesians 1.10 doesn't specifically speak of reconciliation, but only that all things will be in Christ. As far as this restoration of all things, the rest of creation,

even things that are not men, have a place in it. It is written: “For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now” (Romans 8.22). All creation has been under a curse, and all creation awaits redemption. And it is all creation. Had Paul wanted to only speak of the sons of God in Verse 22, why did he then say, “And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” (Verse 23). What Paul mentions in Verse 22 is not what he mentions in Verse 23, namely the saved. Obviously more is in view than just the saved. Non-human creation would also be subject to the curse, and be among those Paul mentioned in Verse 22. Was not the very ground cursed at the fall (Genesis 3.17)? There is no reason that Ephesians 1.10 cannot be referring to other elements of creation, which today are cursed. Therefore, there is no reason to limit the scope of Ephesians 1.10 for that reason. Lastly, I should also note that in Ephesians 1.10, Paul did not just say “all men,” but spoke of all things in heaven and on earth. He could not have been more inclusive (well, Philippians 2.10 does also add people who are “under the earth,” but I don’t think leaving out those was meant to make a distinction, unless we think Paul, in Ephesians, meant to exclude dead believers, who are among those who would have been “under the earth”). If all things are in Christ, then nothing can be outside of Christ. Thus, the lost are either redeemed or destroyed.

D. What Of Ephesians 1.23?

What of the fact that Ephesians 1.23 also makes a reference to “all-in-all”? It reads (starting with Verse 22), “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” One might argue that since Jesus doesn’t really fill unbelievers in the way that I’m saying God

will fill creation, this phrase needn't mean what I say it means. Now, I'm not trying to build up a straw man that I can knock down to look stronger. When I was studying this, I did seriously consider this point, and you might too. Nevertheless, I can answer it as well.

First of all, if this is actually speaking of Jesus in the present, it is something different than it will be for God. God being "all-in-all" will not occur until after the end, when Jesus has defeated His enemies etc. So whatever Jesus being all-in-all now means, it isn't what we're talking about with God. A lot of important changes will occur then. When God is "all-in-all," it will be after the events of Ephesians 1.10 have occurred, and it therefore could be radically different.

Secondly, whereas in Verse 10 there was a reference to all of creation, all of creation is not mentioned here. It could very well be that Paul is speaking of Christ filling the church all-in-all. He does indeed live in the collective body of believers. He does fill us all in all. That could easily be what is in view here. In that case, it is more or less like what it would be like with God and all creation, though to a lesser degree of course.

Thirdly, and not by any means mutually exclusive from my second point, I believe that Paul isn't referring to Christ's current position as much as He is saying what Christ is doing and will do. Is everything already under Christ's feet? No, because if it were, 1 Corinthians 15.25 wouldn't say, "For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet." Obviously the end hasn't come, because there hasn't been the resurrection yet, which precedes it. Is this a contradiction then? Not at all. This passage is proleptic. The Christianese idiom "now and not yet" is fully based on how the Bible speaks of the end. For example, death has not been destroyed yet, since it will be destroyed at the end (1 Corinthians 15.26). However, Paul says that Jesus has already destroyed death in 2 Timothy 1.10. How can this be? It's not a contradiction. In

that same letter, Paul speaks of his own imminent death. It is written: “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4.6-7). Obviously Paul wasn’t saying that death had actually been destroyed. He was about to die and knew it! However, death was as good as gone after the cross. Nothing can stop God. It’s all just a matter of when God decides to bring it all into fulfillment. Paul knew that he would not remain dead. He reassured Timothy and himself, saying, “In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing” (Verse 8). The day in view is almost certainly the resurrection, when all of those who love God will all receive their inheritance together and be raised in the immortal bodies spoken of in 1 Corinthians 15. On that day, death will no longer be able to harm us.

Just as Christ hasn’t literally destroyed death, yet it is guaranteed that He will, so too it is guaranteed that all things will be under His feet. He is also currently destroying death and putting His enemies under His feet. He is reigning in the midst of His enemies (Psalm 110.2), and will until they are defeated once and for all (1 Corinthians 15.24-26). I believe that, likewise, when it says Christ fills all-in-all, it is saying that He is currently filling all in all, and one day, He will do so completely.

E. Philippians 2.10-11, God’s Final Victory, and the Claim that Sinners Will Forever Sin in Hell

Before I get to Philippians 2.10-11, I need to set the stage for what I am talking about. This pertains to a view that I have found surprisingly common (especially in Reformed circles). The view is that the wicked, when sent to Hell, will continue sinning there for eternity. Even

more problematic is the claim that this is proof of eternal torment. The idea is that they go to Hell, and there they keep sinning. With each sin, they earn more wrath. Since they hate God, the more He justly punishes them, the more they resist Him (as opposed to acknowledging His justice). The more they resist Him, the more wrath they earn, and so on, in a sort of vicious, eternal cycle.

Where does this idea come from? Does the Bible ever teach that sinners go to Hell and then keep sinning and then enter into this eternal cycle of torment? Certainly not. The closest thing to a passage that actually says such a thing is Revelation 22.11. The passage doesn't say anything of the sort, but that doesn't mean that it isn't sometimes appealed to. The passage reads, "Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and the one who is filthy, still be filthy; and let the one who is righteous, still practice righteousness; and the one who is holy, still keep himself holy." Wayne Grudem is an example of a usually astute theologian who points to this verse in this way (1151).

The first problem with this line of reasoning is that it simply says far more than the actual passage does. The passage doesn't say that the unsaved will sin again and again throughout eternity. It doesn't even say that they will sin after judgment. At face value, it would appear that the angel is giving John some sort of exhortation (although that need not actually be the case). That this is to mean "the lost will keep sinning after death and after judgment" is not clearly what the angel says. To take the angel's words to mean this *and then* to mean that they will sin after judgment, be punished, curse God and incur more wrath, be punished more, curse God more and so forth again and again for eternity, is speculation, not exegesis.

Furthermore, such an interpretation ignores the immediate context of the passage. Indeed, it is at the end of Revelation, so it may seem fitting to think that the angel is saying what eternity will be like. However, it cannot be assumed that the eternal state is in view at this point. John is

no longer looking at the future kingdom. At this point in John's account, the vision has ended, and the angel, *after* telling him to keep the scroll of his vision unsealed (i.e. share Revelation with the church), says the above. The angel is giving a concluding pronouncement to John, who was living in the same world we are in now. The angel was not ostensibly saying what the future is like after the end.

Interpretations vary in regards to exactly what we should make of this. Surely we can reject the idea that the angel is actually telling John not to in any way stop those who do wrong from doing so (such as by bringing the gospel to them), so we will move to other possibilities. For example, perhaps the angel is just making the point that until the end, there will be righteous and wicked. There will continue to be sinners and there will continue to be saints. That is not the most literal interpretation, but neither is the idea that the angel is saying that there will be sinners sinning for eternity (since the literal words of the angel would be an exhortation, not a declaration of fact). It makes good sense. It could be like the parable of the weeds that Jesus tells in Matthew 13.24-30, where the point is that during this age, God lets the righteous and the unrighteous remain together as a farmer who does not uproot the weeds until they are fully grown and distinguishable from the wheat.

Thirdly, even if the angel is saying how things will be in the end, one must read their systematic theology into it to come up with the claim that this passage outright says that sinners will keep sinning, earn more wrath with each new sin, and thus stay on this sin/Hell treadmill for eternity. The angel doesn't go nearly as far as to say that the lost will sin again and again for eternity. What if the angel is just saying that the wicked will remain evil and opposed to God? It is one thing to say that once the end has come, the wicked will never become righteous or the righteous sinful. Annihilationists would agree; God destroying them certainly doesn't make them

righteous! Who is to say that God would not inflict upon them final destruction, exercising the fullness of His wrath and putting an end to this awful never-ending sin cycle? If their additional sins do require the infliction of additional punishment that wasn't already taken into account by God, God could simply incorporate that into the destruction process or infliction of conscious punishment prior to the ultimate punishment of annihilation (as to the various ideas about this, see Section XXIV).

Here's the bottom line: The only reason we would infer that the unsaved must still be sinning for eternity would be if we already granted that God won't destroy them and that they will be alive and unredeemed for eternity. In other words, there's no actual reason to think that this is the case, at least no reason that poses a real challenge to alternative interpretations. There is no independent reason to think that sinning continues for eternity, and that therefore sinners must always consciously exist. It certainly isn't because this passage actually says so.

Of course, there are other reasons to reject this idea that sinners will continue to sin in Hell throughout eternity. While the general idea of God's victory over sin does not require annihilation or salvation of the wicked, it is hard to balance the wicked eternally resisting God and hating Him with the idea of victory over sin. But much more important than philosophy is what the Bible says about this topic. Jesus died and rose again so that every knee will bow and all tongues will confess that He is Lord (Philippians 2.10-11). But if the wicked are constantly giving God the finger throughout eternity, can we say their knees have bowed or their tongues confessed Christ as Lord? It's not really a philosophical assumption to say that if everyone bows their knee to Jesus, they aren't still fighting Him! This isn't the same as them being under God's feet or being silenced; bowing and confessing are voluntary actions. The picture here is the opposite of this claim that the unsaved continue to resist God throughout eternity.

One might argue that if everyone bows their knee to Jesus, then the unsaved might be doing it out of forced submission and not out of a change of heart; therefore, they could still be resisting God in their hearts and earning wrath. However, I do not think that this is so. Although not all annihilationists agree with me, I believe that we have good reason to believe that what we see in Philippians 2.10-11 is not merely a physical act of submission, but rather, willful submission and worship of the Lord. If this is so, then it lends strong weight against traditionalism because, unlike annihilationism and universalism, the traditional view does not allow for a universe of only redeemed, regenerate people.

The reason I argue that Philippians 2.10-11 shows only those who love and worship Christ, and not enemies bowing their knee while hating God in their hearts, is because Verse 10 is specifically tells us that God's aim, the telos of Him raising Christ in Verse 9, is that every knee bow to Jesus. It isn't an incidental result. Yet we know that God does not accept phony worship. We know this implicitly. We also know that Jesus called people out for empty claims to follow God: "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me'" (Matthew 15.7-8). With that in mind, why would we expect that God would desire people who are against Him in their hearts to go through the motions? Rather, it seems evident that God's aim is that literally every person will bow their knee to Jesus, free from hypocrisy, close to Him in heart and deed. And if so, who would we reasonably expect to still be alive? The saved and the saved only.

F. Conclusion

All in all, God will be all in all, and I have yet to be convinced that that does not mean exactly what it sounds like. Not only will we enjoy a renewed creation, but all creation will be

renewed. Sinners will not be resisting God and sinning for eternity, nor will the devil and his angels. All things, in Heaven and on earth, will be united in Christ, and in God. There will be no room for evil, and no room for some place that God does not fill with His glorious presence in a way unknown in our world today.

XLIII. EZEKIEL 28.11-19 (A POSSIBILITY)

A. So Who Thinks That This Is About The Devil?

I once heard this passage mentioned in a church service, claiming that it was a prophecy about the devil (I could not tell you when or what sermon it was). Now, I had heard this claim before, that Ezekiel 28.11-19 was a reference to the devil, but never in traditional evangelical circles, so I was very surprised. I almost wanted to ask the preacher if he had ever read the prophecy all the way through. As it turns out, a number of well-known traditionalists interpret it this way. They include Bill Wiese (152), Mark Driscoll (along with Dr. Gerry Breshears) (158), and John MacArthur (*Revelation 12-22* 8). This view is likewise held by other evangelical writers like David George Moore (34) and Oliver B. Greene (14-16). Similarly, Charles C. Ryrie concludes that it is likely that both Satan and the king of Tyre are in view (161-162), although whether or not he believes that every word of this passage fully applies to Satan is not totally clear.

Note: If you don't believe Ezekiel 28.11-19 to be a prophecy about the devil, then this need not concern you at all; feel free to move on to the next section. Everyone else, pay special attention to the final verse, Verse 19:

All who know you among the peoples
Are appalled at you;
You have become terrified
And you will *cease to be forever*. (Emphasis added)

If this is about the devil, then how straightforward is that? Satan, who unlike a man is not going to die and then be resurrected, will “cease to be forever.” How could that possibly be

consistent with the idea of eternal torment? Any number of other translations (e.g. the NASB, ESV, ASV, KJV, YLT, Darby Translation) all speak of ceasing to be in a similar manner. Now, there are a million things that could have been said here that would at least be somewhat more consistent with the idea of eternal torment (in the traditionalist paradigm): “You will die...you will face death...you shall fall forever...you shall face irreversible doom...never again shall you reign...you are forever doomed...you have come to a horrible end (and stop right there).” There are so many ways that it could have been said that would have at least allowed the interpretation of eternal torment, but ceasing to be, being no more, etc, that doesn’t get any clearer.

So then, if you believe that this is referring to the devil, then please enlighten me as to how this doesn’t speak of annihilation. And I know by now that we all know better than to just go running to Revelation 20.10.

B. Why This Is Only “a Possibility”

The reason this is only “a possibility” is because, although many interpret it as referring to the devil, it never actually says so explicitly. It literally is a condemnation against the king of Tyre (Verse 12). I do not know if it really does, in a secondary manner, refer to Satan or not. In fact, I’m not really all that sympathetic to the idea. Since we’re all in agreement that part of this is literal and part of it is metaphorical (no one is saying that the king of Tyre was a literal cherub), I find it more reasonable that the prophet is being literal when describing who his message is aimed towards (since the whole point of being a prophet is to get the message to the actual recipient), and that he is speaking figuratively and poetically when leading up to the description of the king’s ultimate fate, that he would be no more. However, since this being about the devil

is a surprisingly common view among evangelicals, I cannot help but point out that, if it is about the devil, then the devil is to be no more!

For that reason, I really wish it were explicit in saying it was about the devil; that would make my job so much easier (or if it were explicit in saying it wasn't, at least then we wouldn't have to waste time on it). If it's about the devil, then I'm not sure there are any passages that better support annihilation. However, because it might not be referring to the devil, it might not be relevant to the discussion at all. Granted, it doesn't hurt that a king is told that he will be no more, but at least that wouldn't necessarily be in an eschatological context as it would necessarily be with the devil. Therefore, Ezekiel 28.19 is only a possibility (since some believers do believe it is about the devil).

XLIV. WHY THE METAPHORICAL VIEW OF HELL FALLS SHORT

A. This Nearly Untenable View of Hell Is Very Popular

This section focuses on a particular version of the traditional doctrine that I will call the “metaphorical view.” I figured it was worth mentioning after the discussion of 2 Peter 2.6. By “metaphorical view,” I am referring to the view that William Crockett represents in the book *Four Views on Hell*, the view that when Hell is described as a place of fire, this fire is a symbol of torment (or something along those lines), and not a literal part of Hell (43-76). This view affirms that the lost do exist, for ever and ever, in a state of suffering, but it views the fire as imagery, as one of many metaphors for how awful the eternal conscious punishment of the unsaved is.

This issue of the metaphorical view is important because it is rather popular among many respected theologians today (and to a lesser extent, in past generations since the reformation). Chan and Sprinkle hold to this view (154-155), and they cite a number of others who concur:

Most evangelical Christians who believe that Hell is a literal place and that its duration is forever do not interpret the fire imagery literally. Well-known figures such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, C.S. Lewis, Billy Graham, D.A. Carson, J.I. Packer, and Sinclair Ferguson all understand the fire images non-literally. Other conservative commentators and theologians, such as Charles Hodge, Carl Henry, F.F. Bruce, Roger Nicole, Leon Morris, and Robert Peterson agree. (154)

A number of major names can be added to that list. Robert Morey also expresses this view (29-31), as does Millard Erickson (1248) and John Blanchard (138). R.C. Sproul at least suspects that the images of Hell are symbols (*Essential Truths* 296). Apologist J.P. Holding considers the

fire to be symbolic of God's judgment, in contrast to the water that is His Spirit (*What in Hell*). Popular Presbyterian writer and preacher Timothy Keller expresses this view in "The Importance of Hell," although he emphasizes that he believes that Hell will be more awful than being burned alive. Websites like *The Interactive Bible* advocate this view ("Photogallery of Heaven and Hell"). I hear it from lay Christians on a regular basis. Now, it should be noted that F.F. Bruce, mentioned in the above quote, came to accept annihilationism as an "acceptable interpretation" and ultimately considered himself "agnostic" on the issue before he died (Dudley-Smith 354). But among those who are actually traditionalists, this view is quite common. If the literature that I have come across is any indication, then what Chan and Sprinkle said above about it being the view held by most evangelical Christians may be correct.

The main Biblical reason for this goes along these lines, as Leon Morris explains:

The fact of Hell is certain. The nature of Hell is less clear. It is true that the fate of the finally impenitent is spoken of in terms of "the hell of fire" (Matt. 5:22). But it is also spoken of as the "outer darkness" (Matt. 8:12), and it is further described in terms of the "worm" that "does not die" (Mark 9:48). It is not always easy to connect the realities of fire, darkness, and a place where the worm does not die.

And this is only the beginning [of seemingly contradictory pictures of Hell]. (34)

In short, since seemingly contradictory things are said about Hell (most notably that it is both dark and full of fire), this should lead us to consider the various elements to be figurative in some way.

Other explanations for this view are given as well. For example, William Crockett, in defending the metaphorical view, appeals to the apparent cruelty of the literal traditionalist view

(or, as I call it, due to the historical emphasis of the church until the reformation, the “actually traditional” view). He writes:

But is this what Hell is like? A place where the damned twist and shriek, their eyes bulging with fire, forever consumed [metaphorically] by the wrath of God? If this were true, says theologian Nels Ferre, it would make Hitler “a third-degree saint, and the concentration camps...picnic grounds.”

If we really think about it, the literal view of hell is not much different from the graphic views of Dante or the apocryphal writings of early Christians. Of course, no one today believes in a hell of snakes and boiling blood, but how is it different to say that sinners will roast in eternal fire? As Celsus, the second century critic of Christianity, put it, God becomes the cosmic cook. (50)

Mind you, this cruelty argument, more often tied to annihilationists than to those who hold to eternal conscious punishment in some form, is not universal. Sproul, for example, warns, “We must not think of them [the symbolic elements of Hell] as being *merely symbols*. It is probable that the sinner in hell would prefer a literal lake of fire as his eternal abode to the reality of hell represented in the lake of fire image” (emphasis added) (*Essential Truths* 296-297) In other words, he argues that Hell is actually *worse* than being burned alive for ever and ever!

Ultimately, what matters is not why it is held, but simply the fact that this is a very popular view, one that is also very problematic.

B. Some Descriptions of Hell Don't Make Sense If Hell is Eternal but Without Literal Fire

I should make clear right off the bat that I think a case can be made that the fires of Hell are literal fire. It's okay if you disagree, because it's actually better for my case if you can

convince me that Hell is not a place of literal fire. You see, the argument I am about to make does not really apply to the belief that Hell is a place of eternal torment in literal fire. Previously, I had set out to explain why I think the fires of Hell could be literal, but that seemed to me like a bit of a tangent. Just know that I concede that it is possible, even though it would be better for my case if Hell in the Bible had to be metaphorical (that is, without literal fire).

With all that said, as the heading indicates, the metaphorical view becomes extremely problematic in view of certain descriptions of Hell. Consider Sodom and Gomorrah, and their use as a model for God's judgment in passages like 2 Peter 2.6 and Jude 7. We all remember Sodom and Gomorrah. God famously rained fire and sulfur from the heavens and destroyed those cities (and others in the area). Now, how can Sodom and Gomorrah's fate be seen as an example of eternal punishment under the metaphorical view? Is it the swift destruction and death? No, because those in Hell never die and are never destroyed. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed quickly (Lamentations 4.5), but the lost are never destroyed at all. God makes them live forever (even if they don't have "life"). So then, is it the fire and sulfur that serve as an example of Hell? The traditionalist who sees Hell as a place of literal fire could say so. It wouldn't do justice to the passages, but it at least is coherent. One who holds to the metaphorical view, however, cannot even do that. How does the fiery annihilation of a city and its inhabitants (on an earthly scale) foreshadow unending existence in fireless misery?

Many other pictures of the sinner's doom pose the same problem. As you recall, in Section XXXVI we looked at the parable of the weeds and Jesus's explanation of it. We are told that the damned will be thrown in the fiery furnace just as the weeds are. In what way is this indicative of the lost? Is it how they are burned up like weeds? No, because if their fate is likened to weeds, then they would be destroyed, not endlessly tormented. Is it because they are thrown

into a fire? If one takes the view that Hell is a place of fire, this is at least plausible. It's less likely given that the whole point of the parable is that they are like weeds, even directly likened to them in Verse 40. Nevertheless, it's possible at least. Jesus could be using the weeds simply as a backdrop to say that they are thrown into fire. Yet if fire is a metaphor, then they are not thrown into fire either. So what on earth could Jesus have meant when He said the following: "So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age" (Matthew 13.40)? They aren't destroyed like weeds, and they aren't thrown into fire, so how is the picture of weeds being burnt up in fire anything at all like the fate of the damned?

If Hell is neither a place of destruction nor fire, why have the lost being cast into a lake of fire and brimstone as a symbol of torment in Revelation? After all, how is fire and brimstone used throughout the Old Testament? It is a means of destruction. If we are to say that Hell literally is fire and brimstone, then this is less of a problem. One could say that God used burning sulfur in earthly judgments in order to foreshadow His use of it in Hell. On earth it kills, which is the greatest judgment that can be done. However, in eternity, it is even worse because it burns them alive, subjecting them to pain worse than anything else imaginable, worse than what even the most creative medieval writer could come up with. However, why use an Old Testament figure in the New Testament to represent something so radically different from what it meant in the Old, especially in a book like Revelation which is clearly written to an audience of largely Jewish believers? The only time fire and brimstone are directly used to speak of Hell is in Revelation, a book largely based on figures and symbols from the Old Testament. Their meanings help explain Revelation, not the other way around.

Now, before I conclude this subsection, I will say that I don't think the idea that fire and brimstone was used on earth to kill in order to foreshadow its use as a tool of torture is

particularly strong. The only time we see fire and brimstone used this way is in Revelation. As I said before, Old Testament figures are represented quite a bit, and their meanings in the Old Testament are used to convey the meaning in Revelation (like a lamb, which was sacrificed for sins, being used to represent Jesus, who was sacrificed for sin). The lamb doesn't represent something radically different from its Old Testament counterpart. The lamb didn't suddenly come to represent the devil or a murderer. The meaning has quite a bit of thematic relation to the symbol. A greater destruction than earthly destruction (which is temporary) would most reasonably be eternal annihilation, not a noticeably different fate (like eternal existence in torment). But at least the argument that it is literal fire and sulfur makes more sense than using burning sulfur as a symbol for fireless torment. Once again, the fiery source of destruction would represent neither fire nor destruction if the metaphorical view of Hell were true.

C. The Fire Metaphor and Annihilationism

Unlike with the traditional doctrine, if one believes in annihilationism, the fire can still be metaphorical and the pictures of Hell and analogies made about the unsaved can still make good sense. The damned are like burned weeds because, like burnt weeds, they are totally destroyed. The damned are like Sodom and Gomorrah because they are swiftly destroyed in a spectacular demonstration of God's vengeance and power. Burning sulfur, which caused destruction throughout the Old Testament, is used as a symbol in Revelation to represent destruction.

As for me, I am not totally committed on whether or not there really is fire involved or not, but I do personally think that there probably is fire or something quite like it that God consumes the wicked with. Given how often fire is spoken of, this seems more likely than it all being a metaphor for destruction. The exact mechanics are unclear to me, as this fire would need

to destroy both men and spirit creatures. I don't think it could be literal burning sulfur (like the lake of fire in Revelation). Perhaps it is special fire, or perhaps there is ostensible fire and within it God exercises His ultimate power in destroying the spiritual elements of those that are cast into it. And again, it may be the case that it is just a symbol. After all, if God destroys the lost, then fire being a symbol in the Bible's descriptions of Hell still works really well.

Like I said, this doesn't really prove annihilationism, since historically, many have believed that hell consisted of eternal torment in real fire of some sort (and some still do). Nevertheless, since so many traditionalist scholars today view the fire of Hell as metaphorical, and for many this affects the way they argue for eternal torment, I figured it would be relevant to bring it up in this discussion. Whether the fire is literal or not, the wicked will be ashes under our feet all the same.

XLV. CONCLUDING STATEMENTS IN FAVOR OF CONDITIONALISM

Having dealt with, in Part 2, all that muddies what the Bible teaches about the damned, what do we see about the fate of the wicked? They will be burned like chaff (Matthew 13.40). They will be ashes under our feet (Malachi 4.3). Sodom and Gomorrah were incinerated to make an example of the wicked (2 Peter 2.6). Man can only kill the body, but God will destroy the wicked, body and soul, in Hell (Matthew 10.28). As brought up in Part 2, they not only suffer death (James 1.15, 1 John 5.16), they also suffer the fate that death itself suffers, the second death (Revelation 20.14-15). What is their eternal punishment? It is eternal destruction (2 Thessalonians 1.9). Over and over again, we are told they will face destruction and be destroyed. Fire will consume them (Hebrews 10.27).

Men are not immortal, but are subject to their Creator. He will give to those who fear Him the right to eat from the tree of life (Revelation 22.2). Those of us who fear Him will rise again, glorified and immortal (1 Corinthians 15). The lost will rise as well, but only to decay (Galatians 6.8). They will be destroyed like beasts (2 Peter 2.12). In eternity, God is all in all (1 Corinthians 15.28), and all things are to be united in Christ (Ephesians 1.10). Where can sinners be in this? Either they are in Christ like us, or they are done away with, and citing Revelation 20.10 doesn't solve that problem (plus, we now know better anyway).

Now that we have dealt with Revelation 20.10 and the other prooftexts, what is the problem here? It is what it is. The Bible teaches annihilationism.

PART 4: A WORD ABOUT UNIVERSALISM

XLVI. A WORD ABOUT UNIVERSALISM

A. Universalism Requires Many Unlikely Things to Happen

My main focus here is on refuting the traditional view of Hell as a place of everlasting torment and demonstrating the truth of the doctrine of conditional immortality. Not a great deal of attention will be devoted to universalism, but I figured it would be good to address. Although I am not a universalist, I do not dismiss the idea without thought, as I fear some Christians do. And it is not impossible that universalism is true. However, some pretty unlikely things have to be true in order for universalism to be biblically possible, and they all must take place together; any of these not being answered defeats the doctrine.

1. Almost All of the Biblical Arguments for Annihilationism Must Be Refuted

All of the passages that talk about “destruction” and the wicked being “destroyed” must speak only of ruin, not actual destruction (in this case, a temporary though possibly lengthy state of ruin). The decay that the wicked inherit (Galatians 6.8) must only be temporary. All of the passages that annihilationists point to that describe or foreshadow the fiery doom of those who reject God (e.g. Malachi 4.1-3; Matthew 13.40; 2 Peter 2.6; Hebrews 10.27) must all be speaking of a fate other than utter destruction in eternity (and the fate that they do speak of must either be temporary or not actually pertain to the sinner but only their sinfulness or something like that).

The one key annihilationist argument that is consistent with universalism is the biblical vision of eternity. If everyone will eventually be redeemed and regenerated same as us, then the world to come will be just as free from evil and full of God’s presence as it would be if the wicked were destroyed. Still, if I have done my job in Part 3, then that doesn’t matter much.

2. “Eternal” Cannot Really Mean Eternal When It Speaks of the Fate of the Lost

All the passages that speak of “eternal” destruction or “eternal” punishment, such as 2 Thessalonians 1.9 and Matthew 25.46, must not mean “eternal” as we know it, since both the destruction and the punishment, both the actions of destroying and punishing and the results (destruction and punishment), must end. This is not impossible. The words from the Greek *aión* word group do have their root in the idea of an age. This is often the basis of arguments against the eternality of the condemnation of the unsaved (e.g. Bell 58, 91; Ferwerda 145-156; Talbott 45). This is technically true even of *aiónios*. Similarly, the Hebrew word *olam*, often translated as “eternal” or “everlasting,” does not always refer to things that are literally eternal. Strong even puts one of its meanings as “(practically) eternity” (“A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible” 86). This is a key biblical argument made by universalists, and understandably so. You cannot have destruction or punishment that is in any sense everlasting and also have every person who has ever lived being saved in the end. However, to make such an argument requires one to reject almost all mainstream Bible translations and many Greek scholars, something which I certainly am not comfortable doing given that I am not a master Greek scholar myself.

3. Revelation 20.10

In Section XIII, I made a case for how the passage that speaks of creatures being “tormented day and night for ever and ever” can manifest itself in real life as annihilation (given the symbolic nature of Revelation and a detailed and oft-neglected look at what actually occurs in the vision). However, I cannot for the life of me think of how the vision of the lake of fire can be consistent with temporary fire and suffering. The only thing I can think of is that the Greek *eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*, translated as “for ever and ever,” is based on the *aión* word group, same as with the words for “eternal.” Thus, one might argue it’s just speaking of ages, a really long

time, and not eternity. Young's Literal Translation translates it as "to the ages of the ages." Now, it is true that "forever" and the Greek and Hebrew words that lie behind it can refer to things that simply continue until the end of whatever is in view. Nichols, in defense of annihilationism, references this fact about "forever" (as well as other uses of the relevant Greek and Hebrew words where they are not translated as "forever" in the first place) (117-118). However, this is not the case with the Greek *eis tous aión ton aión* (in whatever form). The term always refers either to things that are controversial (like this), or to things that are unending if anything is at all unending (the length of God's life in Revelation 4.9). In other words, "forever" and "for ever and ever" are not interchangeable. That's why I had to devote so much time to Revelation 20.10, rather than making Nichol's argument that it doesn't really mean unending for all eternity. And as was the case for passages where words from the *aión* word group are translated as "eternal" or "everlasting" when dealing with the fate of the lost, so here does almost every mainstream Bible translation go against the universalist interpretation.

If it is not safe to make the claim that "for ever and ever" means something else short of eternity, than the universalist must find another interpretation of Revelation 20.10 that makes sense with universalism. If they could, then there would be only two more unlikely events that would need to occur. However, I don't foresee it, nor have I heard any such interpretation. Revelation 20.10 is a hurdle that makes universalism all the more unlikely.

B. Passages Used to Affirm Universalism – The "All" Passages

Some passages, such as John 12.32, speak of "all" men when it refers to matters of salvation. For these, it must be remembered that the Greek *pas* does not require that "all" refer to literally every single possible person (nor does the English "all"). We see this in passages such as

Acts 2.17. Here, Peter quotes Joel 2.28, declaring fulfilled what was written, that God would pour out the Holy Spirit on all people or “all” flesh/mankind. Do unbelievers have the Holy Spirit? Of course not. For vast numbers of people, this promise is meaningless. What God was saying through Joel was that no longer would only a few select people (e.g. Jewish kings and prophets) receive the power of God’s Spirit. Instead, God’s people of every kind would taste this blessing, whether Jew or Gentile, be they kings or paupers or humble fishermen. The same could be true of John 12.32. God could be drawing all types of people to the Messiah, not just His Hebrew kinsmen. There can even be an element of hyperbole, using “all” simply to refer to many. Was Gamaliel respected by literally every person on earth (Acts 5.34), or for that matter, even just in Rome? Did literally every Jew know about how Paul lived his life (Acts 26.4)?

Furthermore, if the Wesleyan conviction that God gives every man the ability to chose or reject Christ and salvation is correct, then a number of these passages do not necessarily say that every human will be saved even if every human who has ever lived is in view. For example, when Jesus says in John 12.32 that He will draw all men to Him, it could simply mean that all men will have a chance to be saved. They will be drawn to Him, but some will resist. Discussions about election go well beyond this discussion, but it does possibly give another interpretation to the “all” passages.

What of passages like 2 Peter 3.9 and 1 Timothy 2.4, which indicate that God Himself desires that all men be saved? There is the argument that we don’t necessarily know that it means literally all humans who have ever lived. In each case there are at least possible contextual indicators, such as when Timothy is told to pray for kings and authority figures, lending support to the idea that “all *kinds of* people” are in view when it says “all men.” One could argue that similar things could be said of 2 Peter 3.9.

Beyond that, every human being can be in view without proving universalism in these kinds of verses. Just like with John 12.32 and similar passages, if God gives men the ability to choose or reject Him, then just because God desires their salvation does not mean they will be saved. And even if this is not the case, God desiring their salvation need not mean they will be saved, so long as there is something that God desires even more than their salvation that is only achieved by some not being saved. This is not as hard to imagine as it sounds. Consider those who believe either that men are not so depraved that they might still choose Jesus on their own. Consider also those who hold that men are too depraved to ever choose God on their own, but that God intervenes enough in each man's life to make their choosing Him a real possibility (but not a sure thing). In either case, God honors their decision, and in doing so, shows that He considers their free will more important than He considers all people being saved. For the Calvinist, I don't personally know what other things there would be that God would want more than universal salvation, but that doesn't mean that there can't be something.

In any case, the "all" passages, though obviously very consistent with universalism, do not prove universalism, given the ambiguity of the language and the fact that they simply do not go as far as actually saying "every single human who has ever lived will be saved."

C. Passages Used to Affirm Universalism – The "World" Passages

Similar to "all," when we hear about the "world," it can refer to less than all of mankind. We know that in many passages, the "world" (Greek *kosmos*) is specifically those who are not believers (e.g. Matthew 18.7; 1 Corinthians 5.10; 1 John 2.15). It cannot, then, always refer to all people. In other instances, it clearly refers to less than all of humanity. All the world went after Jesus, according to the jealous Pharisees (John 12.19). The Greek *kosmos* literally refers to order,

and can speak of anything from the whole earth to humanity on earth to “the present conditions of human affairs, in alienation from and opposition to God” (Vine 1245). It refers to “order, the world: - adornment” (The Lockman Foundation 1662). Exactly what, in the way of the order and nature of things, is in view, is not always 100% clear and can vary. When the unbelieving Jews found Jason and some other believers, they cried out, “These men who have upset the world have come here also” (Acts 17.6b). Obviously there, it wasn’t even a large segment of the whole world that was in view.

It could also be referring not to every literal human, but to how the net that God has cast covers people of every nation, tribe, and language. Consider the Jews, how a remnant has been saved by grace while most have turned away from salvation, and how this is no different than has always been the case (Romans 11.1-5). A relatively small number of Jews returned from exile, but by preserving a remnant, God spared Israel as a nation and fulfilled His promises, never rejecting His people as a whole. So too is this the case now, as the Romans passage makes clear. Because a remnant has been saved, God has saved His people, Israel. Likewise, if a remnant of every nation and people group comes to be saved, then could God not say that He has shown mercy to “the world”? Just like with Israel, God so loved the world that He intervened to save a remnant of the men who were part of it, thereby saving it.

Whatever these passages precisely meant in terms of the order of things, in terms of the “world,” it is clear that they did not mean all of humanity.

Also, as was the case with the “all” passages, it may only refer to the chance of salvation. For example, when 1 John 2.2 says “and He Himself [Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of the whole world*,” it may simply be saying that not only the church as it currently stood was covered by the cross, but that any person could theoretically

come to Christ and be likewise covered by His blood. Under that scenario, Jesus would have died for everyone's sins, giving the world a chance, though not all would take it.

D. Passages Used to Affirm Universalism – Specific Key Passages

Ephesians 1.10 and 1 Corinthians 15.28; these passages are compatible with annihilationism, as addressed in Section XLII.

Colossians 1.19-20 – “For it was the *Father's* good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, *I say*, whether things on earth or things in heaven.”

This is a strong universalist passage, as it does seem to be better read, on its own, as saying that not only will all things be in Christ, but that all things will be reconciled. If all things are reconciled, then one would imagine that they have not been done away with. It sounds as though it is not just speaking of the end result, but the process in getting there. All things will be in Christ, it appears, specifically because everyone will be made right with God.

One thing that helps the annihilationist case is what is in Verses 21-23.

And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach — if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

Paul says that the Colossians themselves have been reconciled to God, and that now they can go before God as righteous people. However, this is conditional. If their salvation and reconciliation

were guaranteed by virtue of their being humans, if God were going to reconcile literally all things in Heaven and on earth that needed to be reconciled (humans, angels, etc.), why would Paul say that their standing before God would continue *if* they continued in their faith? This makes me question the idea that Paul, in Verse 20, was saying that all things that presently existed would be reconciled to God. Is it possible that Paul was just speaking hypothetically and God would ultimately make sure they all held strong and were saved? Yes, but this does open up at least some reasonable possibility that it is possible for some not to be saved in spite of Verse 20. Even if they fell away, if universalism were true, ultimately they would be brought back before God, holy and blameless, at some point. Paul would only need to be concerned with the timing of it happening, not the reality of it. Yet Paul gives us at least a reason to wonder if there isn't a real possibility that someone could end up unreconciled to God.

What could be the case here is that, although not all things that exist today will ultimately be reconciled to Christ, all things that exist when all is over will have been reconciled to Christ. Therefore, it could be that the final state is in view. When it says that God seeks to reconcile all things, the end result, the fact that no things will oppose Him, is what is in view. God will not directly reconcile all things that exist today, but rather He will make it so that in the end, all things are reconciled to Him (since anything that is irreconcilable will have already been eliminated). When it says that God will reconcile all things, it means that He will make it so that all things are, upon the fulfillment of His kingdom, in a state of peace with Him. This could still be accomplished by the elimination of all things that will not be reconciled to God. This may not seem like the best interpretation when viewing the passage on its own, but it is reasonable enough to make sense of this passage in light of the enormous biblical weight in favor of annihilationism, as well as Verses 21-23.

Philippians 2.10-11– Indeed, at the end of time, all knees will be bowed to Christ, and all will declare Him Lord. This could mean that all are saved, but it could also mean that only the righteous are left when the dust settles.

Romans 5.18 – “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.” Like Colossians 1.19-20, this passage seems very universalistic. On its own, it seems to directly compare the extent of Christ’s saving power to the universal extent of Adam bringing death to all men. However, like Colossians 1.19-20, tensions within the text and surrounding verses also make this less clear.

What Paul says in the previous verse causes tension with the universalist interpretation. In Verse 17, it also compares the saving effect of Jesus with the effect of the curse brought by Adam and Eve. However, in this verse, Paul writes, “For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” So, right before he says what he says in Verse 18, Paul specifies what group is justified; those who receive the gift. Who receives the gift? That much cannot be said from this passage alone. Indeed, it does not disprove universalism; it could be that the gift is given to all men just as all men inherited the curse of sin from Adam. But that much isn’t said here. Figuring that out would require us to answer the bigger question. Universalists of course would say all men receive the gift, so Verse 17 does not exclude anybody. Annihilationists and traditionalists would argue that not all men do, and therefore Verse 17 is, at least in all likelihood, excluding a group. To say one way or another and to then use Verse 17 as proof for or against universalism would be circular reasoning.

However, with Verse 17 in mind, it would not necessarily be as arbitrary to see a difference in the “all men” that Jesus saves from the “all men” who Adam brought death to. What Verse 18 means is dependent on what Verse 17 means, and that is dependent on what other scriptures say. One non-universalist position is that, for both Jesus and Adam, it is speaking of not literally all humans, but to the humans each one affects. All men are under Adam’s curse. His curse applies to all men. All whom Adam directly affects, and all men in general, are one in the same. But this is not the case with Jesus. Put another way, “In the same way as Adam *directly* affects all those connected to him (i.e., all humanity), so also Christ *directly* affects all those connected to him (i.e., all those who receive his grace)” (Herrick).

Furthermore, if the reference to the gift is referring to the saved, then that narrows down what Paul means in Verse 18. Adam brought death to all the saved, and Jesus saved them all from death and gives us life. The “all” is referring to those who received the gift (whom Paul had just mentioned). In that case, we can grant the parallel between Jesus and Adam, as in that particular case, Paul is only talking about all who are saved, not all men. This also makes really good sense in Verse 17, as it would explain what Paul means when he says that we have life in Christ much more than we had death in Adam. Adam brought us death, but thanks to Jesus, it was only a temporary, physical death. Jesus’s gift of life is much greater, because it is eternal life.

Now, ultimately this leaves us with a bit of a stalemate. If everyone receives the gift just as everyone received the curse, then Verse 18 shows that all people will be saved. How do we know if everyone receives the gift? We have to find out by examining the rest of the Bible. This passage doesn’t further the annihilationist cause, but it doesn’t offer an insurmountable biblical challenge to it either.

1 Corinthians 15.22 – “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.”

Not all men are in view, but only those who saved (or at least, those redeemed prior to Christ’s return). How do we know this? Well, the passage on the whole is referring to the resurrection of the saved. It is a resurrection unto life and glory. This was established in Section IX, Subsections B and C. Unlike the somewhat rare traditionalist who argues for universal immortality from this passage, both conditionalists and universalists agree that no one being mentioned here is eternally condemned and all are saved and glorified. However, what the universalist who makes this argument overlooks is that not everyone who is resurrected is resurrected unto glory. Jesus explicitly teaches the opposite: “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good *deeds* to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil *deeds* to a resurrection of judgment” (John 5.28-29). The lost rise to damnation! The resurrection spoken of in 1 Corinthians 15 is clearly not one of damnation, and it occurs at Christ’s coming (Verse 24), so those who rise to damnation cannot be included. Therefore, this passage does not prove universalism.

Now, what I have just shown does not disprove universalism, it just shows that 1 Corinthians 15.22 does not lend weight to it. It theoretically could be the case, based on John 5.28-29 alone, that after they rise to damnation, they undergo further disciplinary purification and are eventually allowed into Heaven or something like that. But even if it is temporary damnation, they rise to damnation nonetheless, and not the glory of 1 Corinthians 15.

What then of the comparison to Adam? Paul’s language is precise; he makes note that it is *in Christ* that all come to life just as in Adam all die. Literally all people are in Adam at some point, but not all are in Christ. In a vacuum, the question would have to be asked, will all be in Christ? Will all who die rejecting Christ eventually be in Christ, and thus it is saying that all will

be in Christ and then made alive? Or, is it saying that all who are in Christ will be made alive? If the latter, then it doesn't teach universalism, as it does not tell whether or not all will be in Christ. Given what I have shown, we can safely go with the latter. Even if it is the case that universalism is true and all will be made alive in Christ some day, that isn't what this passage is referring to.

E. Concluding Remarks

I don't think that all universalists are a bunch of pie-in-the-sky liberals who make light of sin and can't accept the true gospel. Plenty are, but some really do think that it is what the Bible teaches and that therefore, God is simply so merciful that even those who do reject Jesus in this life will eventually be brought to repentance and to acceptance of Jesus's gift of salvation. I do not believe this to be true, but I do think there is more to it than can be sufficiently addressed with just a wave of the hand and a quick theological or philosophical assertion. For example, Bruce Milne is correct that "sin is too serious to overlook" (316). But that alone cannot refute universalism. After all, on its face that idea would mean no one can be saved! What are we as believers but sinners who have been forgiven and not punished for our sins? Now, we would say that our sins, as saved children of God, are not overlooked, but dealt with in Jesus's death and resurrection. But what if His death likewise dealt with and atoned for the sins of literally every person who has ever lived? Their sins would be no more overlooked than ours. We couldn't say that they can't be saved because sinners must be punished or because sin is too serious to overlook without calling our own salvation impossible! The scripture is not on the side of universalism, but as is pretty clear by my responses to it in this section, it's not as though the position is based on nothing.

Ultimately, I stand by my conclusions that I have reached here. As I said, it is theoretically possible that universalism could end up being true. However, given the weight of biblical evidence against it, and the fact that the evidence for it is not as strong as it seems at first, I am quite secure in saying what I have been saying all along: the Bible teaches annihilationism.

PART 5: REFUTING ADDITIONAL NON-SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENTS

XLVII. “ANNIHILATION” AND THE LAW OF CONSERVATION OF MATTER

A. It Is Claimed That Annihilationism Is Scientifically Impossible

This is not that common of an argument, but it is out there. The argument is that science shows us that matter cannot be annihilated, but instead can only change form. Therefore, it is impossible for humans to be annihilated, meaning everyone lives forever. According to Don P. Halsley in *Evidence for Immortality*, the following is evidence for universal immortality: “It is one of the truisms of science that no particle of matter, though it may be changed by the forces of nature into many varied forms, can ever wholly lose existence, and the same is true of force or energy” (32). Leslie Woodson similarly appeals to this line of reasoning in *What the Bible Says about Hell* (49). If you don’t already see the flaws in this line of reasoning, I hope I will make clear by the end of this section why this is a relatively uncommon argument against annihilationism.

Like several of my arguments, as you may notice, I have two main points, one that is important though speculative, and one that is conclusive.

B. What about God?

This argument makes several assumptions that I am not willing to make. It assumes that God is bound by physical laws. In this case, the law being appealed to is the law of conservation of matter. This traditionalist argument requires that God be bound by physical law because if God is not bound by the law of conservation of matter, then He could destroy matter, and this argument would be disproved right off the bat. The most we could say is that God may or may

not choose destroy matter, unless He were to reveal to us that He specifically would not (and He has not done so).

This also raises the question as to the creation of matter in the first place. The law of conservation of matter does not only apply to the destruction of matter; it also says that matter cannot be created. It is theoretically possible that God created matter and only afterwards put the law of conservation of matter into place. It is either that, or matter is itself eternal and uncreated, since if this law has always existed, and God is bound to physical laws, then He never could have created matter either. Regardless of what the case is here, this creation side of the law will come into play as well.

C. Even If God Himself Could Not Destroy Matter, This Argument Fails Completely

Even if God Himself could not destroy matter, this would not defeat conditionalism at all, because although men are made of matter, men and matter are not the same thing. Animals and plants and water are, like men, made of matter, but they aren't men (nor are they matter).

Matter has existed since before there were humans made of matter. God created man after He created the universe as a whole, and after He created many other types of animals and plants and creatures. But if matter could exist before the humans who would be made of matter, then matter existing does not automatically mean that humans exist. So even if we can say definitively that matter cannot truly be annihilated, either because it is uncreated or God chose to bind Himself, and therefore matter will always exist, this would not prove that all humans will always exist.

Humans and matter are not the same thing. If they were, then humans would have existed for as long as matter has existed. This traditionalist argument assumes that if matter exists,

humans exist. And yet, we know that this is not true. Part of this comes from a misunderstanding of what “annihilation” means in the context of “annihilationism” (which I addressed in Section V). Many traditionalists think of annihilation as meaning that God will completely obliterate even the very atoms and subatomic particles that make up a person. Therefore, they reason that if they can show that God does not do that, then they have disproved the theological doctrine called annihilationism. But as I have surely made clear by now, permanently ending someone’s conscious existence does not require anything that is anywhere near that extreme. And likewise, the existence of inert matter is not the same as the conscious existence of a tormentable human being.

If matter existed before the first human, Adam, then that must mean that God, when creating man, arranged already-existent matter in such a way that it became a person (this may of course include adding an immaterial soul – more on that below). If that is the case, then God could rearrange the matter to uncreate the man, just as one can burn a wooden table to uncreate the table; the matter exists, but it sure isn’t a table anymore! Fire changes how the matter is arranged, and as a result, the table is gone. Just as God would have arranged matter to create a living human, so He also could rearrange matter to make that human no longer exist and return the matter that made up the person to the condition it was in before. Even if He leaves the form of the human body (and a dead soul, however that would work), the “person” that remains cannot be subject to torment.

Even if we grant that God is bound by the law of conservation of matter (which I don’t), the creation and destruction of human beings is not prevented or ruled out by the law because neither creation nor destruction of a human being requires the creation or destruction of matter itself. This argument from science simply fails.

D. But What about the Soul?

Another argument is that if matter cannot be destroyed, then surely the soul cannot be destroyed either. Henry Morris makes this very argument:

One other point is worth noting. Modern science has demonstrated the principle of conservation of matter and energy to be the most certain and universal principle of science. Matter and energy can change forms but can be neither created nor annihilated. And if mere physical matter cannot be annihilated, the far more important entity of the human soul/spirit complex (in particular the created “image of God” in man – note Genesis 1:27) can surely not be destroyed, as claimed by the so-called “annihilationist,” or believers in conditional immortality. Every human being ever conceived, possessing a divinely-created human soul and spirit, will exist forever somewhere. (270)

First of all, this argument makes the same assumptions that I discussed in Subsection B, that God Himself could not destroy matter. Secondly, as was the case in Subsection C, the matter that would have made up the soul would have already existed, either because matter is eternal and uncreated like God, or because God only instituted the law of conservation of matter after He was done creating matter. Therefore, when God creates a human soul, He is not creating soul matter (since matter cannot be created) but is only rearranging whatever sort of building blocks make up a “soul/spirit complex” to form a living, human soul. And if God were to destroy the soul, He would not need to destroy the soul matter. He would only need to rearrange the soul matter to how it was before the person ever came into being.

Now, one might object, saying that an immaterial soul is different because, being immaterial, it is not made of matter (at least not physical, natural matter). Therefore, there could

be ways in which the creation of souls is different, and therefore arguments for traditionalism from the existence of the soul might not have the shortcomings of arguments for traditionalism that appeal to the existence of matter and the body. The problem with that is that the soul is indeed different. And because it is different, because it is not made of matter, there is no way in which the law of conservation of matter applies to it in the first place! The whole thing is therefore a non-starter. But if all the same rules that applied to physical matter did apply to the substance that makes up the soul, the argument would still fail because the matter argument itself is unsuccessful.

Morris' argument also brings in a different element, namely that the soul is so important that obviously it must be indestructible. The argument is basically that if matter is indestructible, and the soul is even more important than matter, then the soul would therefore be indestructible as well. It's just a variation of the argument, dealt with in Section VIII, that human beings are so important that they simply must be immortal even if they are unsaved. It fails for the same reasons.

E. Shedd on Birth and Death.

In W.G.T Shedd's seminal work on the issue of eternal punishment, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, Shedd makes this type of error on a number of occasions. The answer in pretty much every instance is the same as it is with the examples above and with every other traditionalist who appeals to the law of conservation of matter or anything similar. He confuses the component parts of a person, the physical material and potentially some sort of building blocks of a soul, with an actual person who is alive and sentient and who can be tormented. He argues against a form of cosmic discreation, a form of utter annihilation on such a grand scale

that it involves God eliminating the very molecules that a person was made from. But he never actually demonstrates that this means that God can't or won't end a person's conscious existence if they end up apart from Christ.

The best illustration of this is when he appeals to the nature of a dead animal: "The death of an animal substance makes an alteration in the relations of certain material atoms, but does not put them out of existence. Dead matter is as far from nonentity as living matter" (91). The problem may be evident to many who read this already: Shedd talks about death by looking at the still-existent and still-whole atoms that make up an animal carcass. But that is a red herring; atoms don't die in the first place! So-called animal substance does not die in the first place. Who on earth has ever said that atoms die? There is no such thing as "living matter" to begin with, nor can you ever really say that matter is dead since it isn't something that ever lives. It is the animal itself that lives and it is the animal itself that dies (or more specifically, the animal's body). When the matter changes its relationship to other matter, this causes the death of the animal's body, the entity that actually dies. Death is not a change in relationship; it is the result of a change in relationship.

He also writes, "In like manner, the death of the soul, or the spiritual death, is only a change in relations of the soul, and its mode of experience, and not the annihilation of its substance" (91). Shedd is comparing a dead soul to the atoms of a dead animal's body (which do not die) when he should be comparing the soul to the animal's carcass itself (which is what is actually dead). When an animal dies, its substance isn't annihilated. But a living creature is more than just its substance. There is more to a functioning, conscious, tormentable body than the atoms and molecules and general physical material that make it up. And there is more to a soul than its soul-atoms (or whatever makes up a soul). Shedd's whole analogy is false, since he bases

what death is on inert matter that cannot die in the first place. And, like the previous examples, he makes an argument for the continuing existence of mere substance and thinks that this proves the continuing existence of a consciously existent creature.

On a practical level, all one has to do to see the flaw in Shedd's argument is to see what a dead animal carcass is like. Can you torture a dead animal? Can a dead animal feel anything? No. You can poke its body with a stick if you want, but no conscious, sentient creature will notice. Following Shedd's logic, the ashes and burnt remains of an animal that is sacrificed should still be sentient. After all, its substance, on an elemental level, still exists. There has just been change in relationship...

Any traditionalist who makes these kinds of arguments about atoms and matter and substances not being annihilated fails to take into account that atoms and matter and substances are not the same thing as the living creatures that are made from them. These substances existed before living creatures existed, and they can exist even when the living creatures are gone. Living things, even bacteria and plants, are greater than just the substance that creates them. An animal wasn't an animal before God assembled the matter into an animal and breathed life into it. The same is true of men. The same is true of men's bodies, and if men have immaterial souls, then the same is true for those souls as well. It is all just a change of relations between substances and building blocks. Nevertheless, that change in relationship makes the difference between your pet dog and the wood that your furniture is probably built out of.

If we are going to look at the body of a dead animal to see what a dead soul is like, as Shedd does, then by all means, that is fine with me. That is a great picture of what happens to the soul when it dies; it is like the rotting, unfeeling, completely dead corpse of an animal. Its substance might not go through cosmic discreation, but it sure cannot suffer torment.

XLVIII. A WORD ABOUT ARGUMENTS FROM CHRISTOLOGY

A. The Bible Leaves A Lot Unsaid

Christology, or the study of Jesus Christ, is obviously a pretty important aspect of theology. Yet it is also in some ways quite murky, especially when we attempt to apply arguments based on Christ's nature and the cross to the discussion of eternal punishment. These arguments tend to be based on His death. What does Jesus's death say about eternal punishment? Truth be told, I'm not sure, and I think too many arguments from both sides rely too much on speculation and not scripture.

This section deals heavily with philosophy, speculation, and human reasoning, not scripture. If you aren't all that concerned with all of this, which I frankly am not (though I must address it because it comes up so much), feel free to skip this and come back if it becomes more relevant to you.

B. Jesus Did Not Suffer the Exact Fate of the Unsaved – Conditionalist Arguments

Regarding conditionalism, it is common for annihilationists to look at the death of Jesus as something that foreshadows the eternal death of the damned. The reasoning goes that Jesus was killed, not subject to eternal torment. Because He took on the punishment of sinners, they would suffer what He suffered.

However, such a claim opens up some cans of worms. If Jesus's death was a matter of Him ceasing to exist, what does that then say? Can one who is in His very nature God (Philippians 2.6) ever actually cease to exist, or even be unconscious? That also forces one to ask if one who is to be resurrected can really even be said to stop existing. Such a one certainly has

not stopped existing, at least in the ultimate sense, as all who die will be resurrected, but those who suffer the second death are gone permanently.

Furthermore, Jesus didn't really suffer any sort of eternal punishment, at least not ostensibly. Jesus was not annihilated, nor was anything else that happened to him eternal. He neither stayed a corpse forever, nor was He tormented forever. Jesus didn't really suffer what the damned suffer under either theory. Everyone still dies, whether saved or unsaved. Likewise, the saved are not spared from suffering as Jesus did. The Bible makes no bones about this (e.g. Romans 8.17). Many were burned alive. The apostle Peter is even said to have been crucified upside down. How can we say that they are spared precisely what Christ underwent?

The only other possibility I see is that since Jesus was and is an essentially eternal being like God (being God), His temporary suffering and temporary death was the equivalent of a finite man facing eternal condemnation. This is entirely speculative, and not unique at all to the conditionalist position. If this is the case, and if Jesus was not conscious for those three days in the grave (by no means a given, for a number of reasons), then this would be close to the equivalent of eternal destruction. Maybe it could work, given that, once we delve into the whole infinite person = equivalent of infinite punishment business, there is a lot of room for possibilities. This is the only scenario in which Jesus actually suffered the equivalent of any view of eternal punishment. It is impossible to say He suffered the equivalent of eternal torment without causing bigger problems. Only if annihilationism is true, if Jesus was fully dead and unconscious in the grave for three days, and if His three days is the equivalent of eternity, can we say that Jesus suffered the equivalent of any form of eternal punishment.

I grant that this as possible. However, it is still speculative, and so I do not rely on it.

C. Jesus Did Not Suffer the Exact Fate of the Unserved – Traditionalist Arguments

Appeals to the cross are not unique to conditionalists. It is not uncommon for traditionalists to point to the cross as evidence that the lost will not be annihilated. The reasoning goes that since Jesus remained conscious in death (according to dualism), the unsaved will also remain conscious forever, since He suffered the fate of the lost. It is assumed, as mentioned with certain conditionalist arguments above, that what Jesus suffered would be the equivalent of a normal human suffering it for eternity, since Jesus was an infinite person.

However, there are problems with taking this route as well. Jesus did not suffer eternal torment by any means, nor did He, in any sense, suffer the exact fate of the lost to begin with.

First of all, as Chris Date accurately points out (“Clutching at Straws”), Jesus’s body lay dead in the tomb while He was dead, which makes it almost impossible for a traditionalist to say that what happened to Jesus is what would happen to the unsaved. Even if He was a conscious soul during that time, His body was dead. But according to the traditional view, the bodies of the lost will not be dead. They will be alive (in the literal, non-theological sense) and able to feel pain and so forth. Hell, after all, is where God destroys (or, doesn’t destroy) both the soul and body (Matthew 10.28). Whatever happens in Hell happens to the whole person, not just the soul. Jesus’s body stayed as dead as a doornail, unable to feel pain or anything. This is a major difference between what happened to Him and what happens to the unsaved in eternity according to the traditional view. Therefore, we can’t just say “X” was true about Jesus, so “X” must be true about the saved. We can no longer assume, under the traditional view, that they suffer the same fate in every regard.

In response to the above, it is possible that one could argue that the use of *apollumi* in Matthew 10.28 means something different for the soul than it does the body, but from what I can

tell, such an argument is exceedingly rare. What reason would we have to say that? Is it because the soul is immortal so it can't be destroyed...? And just think about how much heat an annihilationist gets when making the argument (which I do not make) that "eternal" (Greek *aiónios*) has a different meaning the first time it is used in Matthew 25.46 when compared to the second. Imagine if an annihilationist tried to say a word meant something different when it is used *once* to qualify two things! Unless one is to arbitrarily argue that Matthew 10.28 means literal destruction of the body but figurative destruction (suffering) for the soul, then the traditional view would affirm (as it has throughout history) that both body and soul stay alive (in the literal, non-theological sense) in Hell for eternity. And once that is affirmed, then the whole idea that Jesus suffered the exact punishment of the unsaved is refuted.

Secondly, even if the bodily death of Christ does not show that what Jesus suffered was not exactly what the unsaved will suffer (under the traditional view), there is still an enormous problem with appealing to the consciousness of Jesus after death as proof that the lost will always be conscious after judgment. First, it assumes that He was conscious while dead. Secondly, and less controversially, not only did Jesus not suffer torment for eternity, He did not suffer after death at all. It might be one thing if He spent the three days with his spirit/soul being tormented, but I doubt many traditionalists would be willing to say that. I have heard many even call such a view heresy. After all, it is written: "Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit" (John 19.30). If He was about to die, if the metaphorical debt were to be paid upon His death, that would make perfect sense. However, if he had days of hellish suffering to come, He could hardly say that it was finished. And what else did Jesus say? It is written: "And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.'" (Luke 23.46). If His "spirit"

were His immaterial self that lives on after death, does that sound like He was going to a place of suffering? And if Luke 23.43 is speaking of where Christ's soul/spirit went at death with the thief, as dualists tend to argue, then the place He would have gone to was not Hell, but "paradise." To argue that since He was conscious after death the lost must therefore be conscious for eternity (since He suffered what they suffered) would destroy the whole traditional idea of Hell. Surely, the lost don't await a painful death followed by eternity in paradise with God!

Some, like Robert Peterson, counter that Jesus's suffering on earth *before* His death was the punishment of the condemned that he took on Himself ("Part Two" 175). However, it must be asked, why God, had He wanted to use Jesus's suffering as the substitution for the punishment of the damned, had to then kill His son? Why not just rescue Jesus after? A not uncommon slight against annihilationists is that annihilationism makes Christ's death unnecessary (usually because it isn't considered terrible enough to warrant the cost of saving us from it). However, if it was Christ's suffering on the cross, and not His death, that atones for our sins and was what the lost will suffer (be it the physical pain, temporary forsakenness by God, or both), wouldn't *that* make His death unnecessary? Wouldn't this defense of traditionalism make Jesus's death unnecessary?

Along those lines, why, although His suffering is mentioned sometimes (usually to encourage believers who suffer), is it specifically the death of our Lord Jesus that is repeatedly said to lead to our forgiveness? Why was it His life, not His comfort, that God made an offering on our behalf (Isaiah 53.10)? It is His blood that was poured out for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26.28; Hebrews 10.19; 1 John 1.7), and life, after all, is in the blood and represented by it (Genesis 9.4; Leviticus 17.14). The gospel is that Jesus *died* for our sins, then rose again (1 Corinthians 15.3-4). No mention of suffering is even made in that passage. His death wasn't just a by-product, and it wasn't just something that had to be done for Him to be resurrected and

perfected; after all God can transform and renew those who never die, which He will do for believers alive at the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15.52). It may not look like “Hell” the way that torment does, but it was by dying, not just by suffering, that Jesus atoned for our sins.

If He did not suffer the ultimate fate of the wicked under traditionalism, we certainly cannot have the pot calling the kettle black and start arguing against annihilationism because Jesus was not annihilated.

D. The Important Thing

The important thing is that Jesus died when He didn't deserve to die in order to save those who did. The righteous was given for the unrighteous (1 Peter 3.18). He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf (2 Corinthians 5.21). The mechanics of how His death leads to our forgiveness, as far as I can tell, can legitimately be called a mystery. What matters is that the Bible makes clear that the death of Jesus Christ leads to our forgiveness, both explicitly and in figurative language (e.g. Matthew 26.28; Romans 5.10; Hebrews 9.26; 10.10; 1 John 1.7; Revelation 7.15). Because Jesus did not suffer eternal torment, and because, whatever happened during the three days in the grave, He did not cease to exist eternally, what He suffered was not the actual punishment of the damned that He saved us from. Potentially, He could be said to have suffered the cosmic equivalent of annihilation by being infinite and by being dead for a finite period (if physicalism is true). That is as close as any view can get to saying that Jesus actually suffered the equivalent of hell, and it does not hurt my view at all that this only works under a particular form of conditionalism. But even if the cross is a less-than-perfect picture of what Hell is (although some pictures are better than others), that's okay; Jesus suffered and died not to tell us what judgment is like, but to save us from it.

E. Traditionalist Arguments from Christ's Nature

A similar line of traditionalist argumentation appeals to the nature of Jesus, how it affects views of the atonement, and how those views are affected by the different views about final judgment. These objections appear in many different forms and appeal to different principles and creeds. Many of them are based on the false assumption I just wrote about above, that Christ's death had to be exactly like the eternal punishment of the sinful. I will explore a few of the arguments I have run into, and attempt to read them in the most useful and valid way possible.

If one holds to conditionalism and dualism, with every person's spirit or soul existing and conscious through the first death, as did Irenaeus of Lyons, then their view of Jesus's nature would in no way differ from the common traditionalist view, and this objection would be moot. So if I firmly believed in dualism, I would just stop there, as all of these arguments only affect physicalism (or potentially some forms of the similar doctrine of soul-sleep). However, I do not take a stance here, and because many annihilationists are physicalists, I will to address these arguments.

First of all, those who actually say that people cease to exist between death and the resurrection don't mean it in such a strong sense that is as they need to literally be recreated. The idea of a Christian resurrection presupposes that, in some way, one's personal identity is maintained. The person who dies is the person who rises from the grave; it is not someone else who merely has the same name and memories. And this correspondence between the one who dies and the one who rises again occurs not just abstractly, but at the body level. For example, in Matthew 5.29, Jesus says that the eye that leads you into sin in this life is attached to the body that would be cast into *Gehenna* (which occurs after the resurrection). Similarly, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15.53 that "this perishable body," which has died, puts on immortality, rather than

there being a new body that's already immortal being created. How exactly that is achieved is a very active question for philosophical debate, but since the Bible says that God will do it even for our bodies, which undeniably are purely physical, we do not need to know how; we simply need to believe. Remember that the next time you read an accusation like this:

Fudge, by implication compromises the doctrine of Christ. To hold that Jesus was annihilated when he died means either that his whole person (deity and humanity) was annihilated or that his human nature alone was annihilated. Either conclusion is disastrous. To hold that the person of Christ ceased to exist in death is to explode the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. It is to assert that the second person of the godhead went out of existence. It is to assert that the resurrection was a recreation of the second person of the Trinity so that henceforth one person of the Trinity is a creature, not the Creator. (Peterson, "A Traditionalist Response" 106)

Even worse than Peterson's words in their proper context, in a book in which Fudge responds to them, is Larry Dixon's use of them in *The Other Side of the Good News*. Upon introducing the idea of annihilationism, Dixon quotes the above, saying "One of Peterson's more powerful points is made when he challenges Fudge on the issue of the definition of death as a cessation of being" (87). He then moves on to discuss the views of other annihilationists. What person, if they didn't know better, wouldn't read that and consider annihilationism to be unmitigated heresy?

Are Fudge and the like really all heretics? Of course, Fudge has an answer, and I do as well. First, however, the rest of Peterson's argument should be noted. Peterson continues his argument from the above quotation, claiming that if it is only Christ's human nature that is "annihilated," then that would contradict core Christian teachings, specifically, the conclusion of the council of Chalcedon of 451 A.D. ("A Traditionalist Response" 106, 177-178). The creed is a

little long for me to copy here, but it is easy to find online, or in the back of Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, where I got it from. The key thing to note is that Jesus is said to have two separate natures, but they are natures that are "preserved, and concurring in one Person and Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ" (1170). It's like the old adage goes; He is "fully God and fully man," and for good measure, the two natures of His person can neither be mixed nor separated. Fudge responds with the following:

Peterson himself admits that Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane to "let this cup pass" signified deliverance from death and that God answered that prayer by raising Jesus from the dead. Because Jesus' prayer was not empty mockery, he must have considered it possible that God might not do what he was requesting. If God had not raised Jesus from the dead, he would have remained dead forever. Although Peterson believes that the dead are not truly dead or at least that part of them remains alive, he still faces the same dilemma that lays on me. If God had not raised Jesus, would Jesus' divine nature have remained dead and would the Trinity have thus been reduced to a Binity? Or would Jesus' human nature have remained dead although the divine nature remained alive – separating the two natures and violating Chalcedon? This is a sword that cuts both ways. ("A Conditionalist Response" 205)

I think Fudge makes some good points, although I find it to be even simpler. If we say that Jesus's divine nature cannot be distinguished from His human nature, then that means that we cannot say that "Jesus did not die in His divine nature," and we actually can say "God died." Of course, that may sound great for a Good Friday service, but how does an immortal God die?

Michael Burgos writes, “Consciousness is an essential property of the being that is God.” and he cites the Septuagint translation of Exodus 3.14 as saying “I Am the Being,” as well as John 8.24 and John 8.58). He adds, “Should one of the divine persons be said to have operated in such a way that is essentially different to properties of the divine being, monotheism has then been discarded for something else.” By this reasoning, he argues that physicalists deny Trinitarian monotheism. The problem is, by that same reasoning, Trinitarian monotheists themselves would deny Trinitarian monotheism. It may be that Burgos is right about consciousness, but the Bible is even more clear about God's immortality (Deuteronomy 32.40; Daniel 12.7; 1 Timothy 6.16). Following Burgos' reasoning, both the Father and Holy Spirit must have experienced whatever the Son's divine nature did, since they have the same divine nature. Yet Jesus was undeniably mortal, subject to death. It would have to be the case that the Father and Holy Spirit became mortal and died as well, according to Burgos' argument. But surely none of those things happened. Therefore, one of two things must be true; either the human attributes that the Son took on must be personal rather than essential, or His natures must be distinguishable, even though they are not truly separate.

If Jesus's divine nature cannot be distinguished from His human nature, Philippians 2.5-11 might mean that Jesus was able to submit Himself to death, even in His nature as God. He personally became mortal while the Father and Holy Spirit were personally immortal. It would be God's seemingly paradoxical way of dying and yet staying both immortal and God over the universe. God is still alive, and always was, despite the death of God the Son.

On the other hand, if we are allowed to distinguish the two natures so that we can say that the natures participated in the same action in different ways, we can say that Christ died not in

His divine nature, but in His human nature only. So Philippians 2.5-11 means that Christ participated in death in His human nature.

Honestly, I don't think that the Bible is entirely clear one way or another. Either way, being so dogmatic on either interpretation is unwarranted. Those who are fiercely committed to one view or another tend to miss something somewhere along the line, because these debates go much deeper than the Bible takes us.

This specific question of whether or not Christ's natures could be separated and/or distinguished in Him, particularly at death, is not a question where Christendom falls on one side or the other. Robert Peterson has fallen on one side. Martin Luther agreed with him, at least insofar as God (in Christ's divine nature) dying (Luther 77; Peters 2). However, other big names, both modern and from past generations, disagree. Matt Slick, the fully Trinitarian traditionalist founder of the Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry, writes, "Jesus has two natures, not one. It was the human part of Jesus that died on the cross, not the divine" ("God Cannot Die"). Renowned Christian philosopher and Talbot School of Theology professor William Lane Craig reasons similarly. He writes: "The Christian view is that Christ died in his human nature, that is to say, Christ's human nature died. He obviously did not die in his divine nature" ("Question 213"). Reformer Ulrich Zwingli apparently held to this view (Gallant; Peters 2). R.C. Sproul not only insists that it was just the human nature of Jesus that died, but he goes as far as saying, "If we say that God died on the cross, and if by that we mean that the divine nature perished, we have stepped over the edge into serious heresy" ("Is It Accurate"). To the limited extent that this question has come up, the responses seem to be mixed. My research into this matter has not been deep enough to know what more early church and medieval writers as a whole believed, and certainly not deep enough to know which of those scholarly figures to agree or disagree with, but

I would imagine, like with most things, they differed on this exact detail when they even talked about it at all. If not, why would they have needed a grand council in 451 A.D at all? Again, I don't think that the Bible attempts to teach this point, and that's what matters most.

F. Additional Points Regarding Physicalism, Dualism, and Christology

I want to reiterate that nobody is saying that God has to literally recreate men at the resurrection the same way that He created them originally, despite what Peterson suggests. The mechanics are certainly not clear, but so what? One way or another, we all agree that the person who dies is the same person who rises again.

How is this accomplished? The idea of an immaterial soul continuing on in the interim would fill the gaps in our knowledge, if it is true. However, that doesn't mean God cannot somehow do it another way if that's what scripture demands. Maybe it's something as simple as God keeping a single atom from the octillions that make up a human body. Or, perhaps there can be a gap in a person's existence without changing their identity. Glenn Peoples brings up a hypothetical situation: Imagine that you and someone else are in a room, and the person suddenly disappears while you are looking at him. The person pops back into the room five minutes later, startled, having no memory of what happened during those five minutes. You would be shocked, but you wouldn't ask who they were. There is a gap in their existence, but you know intuitively that it is the same person that was there before ("Episode 032" 39:42-40:15). Even if physicalists cannot fully explain how God preserves the identity of a dead person, that doesn't mean that such a thing can't be envisioned. Perhaps, if this is the case, there is a reason why it is such a mystery. Perhaps it is as Joel Green suggests; "This reminds us, again, that the capacity for 'afterlife' is not a property of humanity, but a divine gift" (100). Even those for whom it is not a

gift, those who are resurrected just to be destroyed, will be reminded once and for all that it is God and God alone who can give life and take it away. Whatever the case, we know that one way or another God will raise the same person who died. If the Bible were to teach that a person ceases to consciously exist until the resurrection, then all that that would mean is that we wouldn't know how God maintains a person's identity, not that He must create a new person.

Under any legitimate annihilationist or physicalist scenario, Christ did not truly cease to exist, as one way or another, His identity, like the identity of any person between death and the resurrection, is maintained. And it's not as though anyone is saying that Jesus must have just disintegrated on the cross, as Robert Morey suggested (103). Besides that, soul-sleep, or perhaps a state of existent "death" (in the classic sense) need not amount to full non-existence. That's kind of implied in the name "soul-*sleep*," since it is likened to sleep, where a person is not conscious yet clearly exists (just as Jesus undeniably slept most nights when He walked the earth in His first coming). What if, when the spirit returns to God (Ecclesiastes 12.7), it is something beyond just the common breath of life? What if it is like a "soul," just one that has no animation without the body, or without God's breath of life? This is all aside from the fact that annihilationism at least grants the possibility that the soul can continue consciously existing in the intermediate state. Whatever the case, the second person of the Trinity would not have had to have been "created," whatever the intermediate state is like.

G. The Insufficiency of Creeds in Evangelical Theology

Fudge doesn't deny the Chalcedonian creed; rather he questions Peterson's application of it. After all, the creed does not teach that there is no distinction at all between Christ's human and divine natures. For example, it reads in one part, "The distinction of natures being by no

means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved” (Grudem 1170). And we know that this plays out in the number of ways that Jesus, on earth, acted contrary to what we know about God, such as when Jesus grew tired or was tempted to sin (though He never succumbed) (Grudem 558, 560).

That said, Fudge does justify the idea that the creed might be amendable with this simple claim: scripture supersedes tradition. He writes, “Even presuming that it were possible to know for certain all the implications and applications of the pronouncements set out at Chalcedon, if some declaration of Scripture is found to contradict them, faithfulness to Christ requires us to reject the Council’s words in favor of language taken from the Word of God” (“A Conditionalist Response” 207).

Consider this: how many of you who are reading this believe that baptism is actually done for the forgiveness of sins? I don’t, and I’d imagine many of my more evangelical-oriented readers will not either. Well, an older and generally more conservative creed, the Nicene Creed, as revised at Constantinople in 381 A.D., affirms this very doctrine. It includes the following: “We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins” (Grudem 1169). Of course, I would argue that the phrase “baptism for the forgiveness of sins” does not inherently indicate a belief that baptism actually causes forgiveness of sins (or else I would presumably believe in baptismal regeneration based on Acts 2.38). However, by this point in church history, the vast majority of Christians took for granted that baptism was essential for salvation. This is true regardless of whether or not the council had decided to add that line. But we know full well what that line would have meant 350 years after Jesus. And by adding that line, they added one more doctrine that all who affirm the creed must likewise affirm.

However, many of us deny this aspect of the 381 A.D. revision of the Nicene Creed. Peterson, being Presbyterian, does as well. He writes, regarding baptism, “My comment is it does not actually affect salvation, but signifies it” (“Means of Grace” 7). You could see why I might take issue with Peterson making such a stink about Fudge allegedly denying the teachings of the Chalcedonian Creed when Peterson himself denies the earlier and fundamental First Council of Constantinople’s teaching on baptism. Do not do likewise, no matter how persuasive the cries of Christological heresy may sound at first. Like Peterson and Fudge alike, we put the scripture above tradition when they conflict.

Lastly, even if you accept the entire Niceno-Constantinopolitan doctrine, there have been a lot of creeds which have said a lot of things, and I doubt most of you would agree with absolutely all of it. As I said from the start, this whole thing is written from the Protestant perspective, assuming that the Bible supersedes all creeds and traditions, which are not inspired as scripture is. Those in charge of the church can get it wrong. Over time, things strayed from the truth. That’s why we had the Reformation (and the later Restoration movement that, although flawed, has had a much bigger influence on the evangelical Christianity of today than many realize). And Chalcedon wasn’t exactly early Christianity. A lot had changed by then. I think most of us will agree with Fudge that, when it comes down to it, men are fallible, and their doctrines, no matter how well-intentioned, do not always match up with the truth found in the scripture.

So what about arguments from Christology? To quote the old (and often abused) Church of Christ adage, we should speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent.

XLIX. NEAR-DEATH AND OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCES

A. General Observations

In discussions of Hell, stories abound of people claiming real visions and even experiences of Hell and its eternal torments. Some die and get a glimpse of it before they are quickly revived. Others have bizarre, out-of-body experiences. Some aren't quite sure what happened. Whatever the case, are not their accounts good evidence for eternal torment?

There are two answers to this assertion. The most important answer to this question, like any other, is this: the word of God, as it is expressed in the scriptures, always takes precedence over the fallible minds of men. Secondly, there are good reasons not to take such experiences as being particularly reliable or helpful to the traditional doctrine of "Hell."

B. Many Near-Death Experiences Indicate Universalism or Something like It

The first problem we have is summed up well by world-famous evangelist (and traditionalist) Billy Graham: "What bothers me about the life-after-death stories is that regardless of whether the person is a believer or not, seldom does death appear to have any negative consequences – which is a direct contradiction of the Bible's teaching" (20). There have actually been some quite extensive studies on those who claim to have seen the afterlife when clinically dying. For example, Jeffrey Long, an oncologist who did a study on this topic titled *Evidence of the Afterlife*, studied over 1300 cases of these experiences. In an interview with Bill O'Reilly, he said, "We found that, when you study people that have led what we call good lives or not-so-good lives, they still seem to have the same near-death experience." He describes it as a "wonderful afterlife for all of us." He also affirms that, although not totally uniform, accounts of

things like “bathing light,” peace, euphoria, and seeing relatives are all common. Dr. Raymond Moody, who has made something of a career out of this over the last four decades, writes the following (along with Paul Perry): “This world [the afterlife] is attended by deceased relatives bathed in glorious light and ruled by a Supreme Being who guides the new arrival through a review of his life before sending him back to live longer on earth” (2). Although some of Moody’s subjects included devout Christians (Moody 56; Moody and Perry 49), the wonderful afterlife that they report is not unique to believers; “Their religious background does not alter the core NDE experience” (Moody and Perry 182). Now, obviously I don’t believe that anyone who ultimately rejects Christ will have this kind of afterlife any more than you do. But for every person who says that they died and went to “Hell” and were doomed to being burned for eternity, there are many who claim to have seen something like “Heaven,” even though the Bible says that they are condemned.

Some who die and are revived not only see a happy afterlife for themselves, but also for humanity at large. Dr. George G. Ritchie, who famously had such an experience during World War II and recalls it in two books. In the first book, *Return from Tomorrow*, he gives a general overview of what happened, focusing largely on the effect it had in his life. He claims to have seen Jesus, a being of pure light and unconditional love, one who did indeed show that love on the cross (Ritchie & Sherrill 55). In the second book, he describes the various realms of a place of future punishment, areas of “Hell” as it were, but they are entirely remedial and temporary. In that place, angels stand by the fallen until they change their ways (Ritchie 41). In a nutshell, this man sees an afterlife in which Jesus pays for the sins of men (Ritchie & Sherrill 117), the fruits of which they will enjoy upon learning to love. It is important to note that, unlike Moody and Long, Dr. Ritchie isn’t surmising this truth about the afterlife based on his studies. He actually

saw and experienced these things himself (just like those who claim they died and saw Hell). If we are going to start letting these NDEs and visions of the afterlife guide our theology, then Richie's eyewitness accounts should lend all the more weight to the studies that indicate the afterlife is blissful and wonderful regardless of your relationship with Jesus.

Frankly, you're going to find people who have had "near-death experiences" and visions that will corroborate any belief about the afterlife you seek to prove. Who then should we believe? Dr. Long and his 1,300 subjects? Dr. Ritchie who preaches that there is the possibility of post-mortem conversion and/or repentance? Dr. Raymond Moody and the first-hand accounts he has studied? Are we going to start letting these visions, some by believers, some by unbelievers, guide our theology? Why not? After all, near-death experiences are taken as reliable accounts of the afterlife when the subjects see visions of Hell, so why not here? Or, are we only to listen to those who conveniently tell us what we already believe (i.e. those who go to "Hell" and back)?

C. Unoriginal and Unbiblical Descriptions of Hell

One thing I notice about these experiences of "Hell" is that they never show us anything new to popular culture. There is nothing that you couldn't find on any cartoon when people fall into Hell and little red devils poke them with pitchforks. We're pretty familiar with these pagan, Dante-inspired images that even many traditionalists know aren't biblical. Yeah, you're in cave and there's fire everywhere. I see that on boxes of cinnamon candy. There are scary looking monsters? Has anyone ever seen an episode of Power Rangers? Remember Dark Specter from *Power Rangers in Space*? He makes one heck of a demon; he's huge, red, all scaly, and he looks like he's made out of lava. Hell is usually at the earth's core (as opposed to earth's core being composed of solid iron surrounded by layers of molten rock and silicate). Within it are giant

caves full of fire pits and snakes and rats (that apparently can survive in the earth's core). Find me a medieval mythological writing on Hell that doesn't say the same thing. It's all as predictable and unoriginal as a bathing white light and seeing your relatives on clouds.

Also, they all tend to suffer from a lack of scriptural backing. Hell is just a fiery place in the center of the earth where souls go right after you die, and that is that. While all too many Christians believe this, we know there is so much more to this (like, for starters, a bodily resurrection). It is often demons and the devil that torment the damned, and according to most, they always will. This is all despite the fact that we know that the devil and his angels will be eternally punished one way or another (Matthew 25.41; Revelation 20.10), and the fact that many are currently bound up in some way or another (2 Peter 2.4; Jude 6).

Also, why is God sending people these visions in the first place? This is especially pertinent regarding those who have prophetic visions while alive. I deal with a couple of these later in this section. For example, Bill Wiese, who was already a devout Christian when he had his experience, writes "The reason I was shown this place was to bring back a message of warning" (xiv). Why is God using these visions to alert people of "truths" that, if true (which they aren't), are supposed to already be in the Bible? Remember how the story of the rich man and Lazarus ended? Whatever the actual context and backdrop, the final point being made by Abraham was glaringly clear. When the rich man asked for Lazarus to rise from the dead to convince his brothers to repent, how did Abraham respond? "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead'" (NIV, Luke 16.31)? Even then, when all they had was the Old Testament, the scripture was enough to bring to repentance anyone who would come to it. Now we have more of God's revelation, not less. Why would special messengers need to be sent now? If unbelievers (who

typically are said to be the primary recipients of the message) don't respond to us when we tell them the good news of Jesus, and don't repent given what is in the scriptures (which are more available now than ever before), why would they believe anything special? If someone who was affirmatively dead and buried came back, and even this wouldn't convince the unrepentant, why would they be convinced by some guy that they've never heard of who had a vision in his sleep?

Along these lines, regarding believers (who are secondarily pointed to), I have news for you: those believers who believe these "visions" are usually those who already believed in eternal torment. They might take it more seriously now, but like the vast majority of believers, they already believed it. Some who don't believe in "Hell" (by which I mean eternal torment) might deny ECT on emotional or philosophical grounds, and maybe for them, having someone have this vision might convince them to take the scripture seriously (which for many of those people, who tend not to know the scriptures, means believing eternal torment, since they are told that the Bible unequivocally teaches it). However, people like me who actually base their conclusions on scripture aren't going to be convinced by what a man or woman says, especially if, in trying to corroborate his experience with scripture, they end up interpreting it poorly.

In short, there is more than enough evidence to cast reasonable doubt on these visions, at least to the extent that I have been told of them. They are unoriginal, they are unbiblical, they have plenty of similar visions that contradict them, and they just tell us what most Christians happen to believe in the first place (despite it being unbiblical).

D. Bill Wiese and *23 Minutes in Hell*

Although not a near-death experience, Bill Wiese's 23 minute trip to "Hell" may be the most well-known account of such an out-of-body event. Having read his book *23 Minutes in Hell*

and sat through multiple video presentations given by Wiese, I think I have a pretty good grip on what he claims happened. So then, should we believe Wiese?

First off, consider how his experience occurred. He was asleep. I have out-of-body experiences when I sleep as well. They are called dreams. Bill Wiese insists that it could not have been a dream because it shook him up more than any dream would, and because his wife's prayers were necessary for his subsequent nervous breakdown to end (87-88). However, I can tell you from personal experience that dreams can be pretty terrifying. Even more terrifying is sleep paralysis. For those who don't know, your body goes into paralysis when you enter the REM stage of sleep. The paralysis is supposed to end when you wake up, but sometimes it doesn't. Your mind is awake but your body cannot move. It's not really even a dream anymore, because you are awake, although it can be hard to tell the difference. It is pitch black, and you can't move, so even though you are "awake," your mind can go wild. Nightmares needn't just be scary dreams that you soon forget about. In fact, as I was writing this, I had an episode so terrifying that it would not break until I repeatedly prayed and cried out to God to end it.

Most similarly, I once had another experience so terrifying that I thought I was about to be thrown into what I thought of as Hell. It was many years ago, before I was a believer (though I was kinda curious about Christianity). It started out with me being trapped in a raging fire at my grandmother's house, one that killed me. That wasn't the scary part; it was so quick I couldn't even understand what had happened. It was what came after that marked the scariest moment of my entire life. It was pitch black, and I couldn't move. I heard screams, screams like you could never imagine. Somehow I just knew I was in a terrifying situation. I can't really explain how it was – I just knew it was terror beyond terror. There was no fire, but I believe that I had a fear that I was going to go to "Hell." And yet, I woke up. It was just a dream. I was alive,

my grandmother's house never caught fire; it was all just a dream. Something else helped confirm the similarity of this nightmare to Wiese's experience, which I will explain later in this subsection.

Along these lines, Wiese would have had all the more reason to be traumatized by a nightmare of what he saw. Normally, after any sort of frightening sleep experience, you quickly realize that it wasn't real. Thus, you quickly get over it. Wiese, already being a Pentecostal Christian at the time, would not have had that luxury. He believed in Hell, believed in visions and supernatural experiences, and lo and behold, he had a clear and vivid experience where he even saw the Lord telling him that it was real. He, upon waking up, would have believed that he actually did go to Hell. It doesn't matter whether or not it actually happened; in his mind, it happened. Of course he'd be traumatized by it!

Wiese also claims that the next day, God gave him a second glimpse upon his request (56); however, this is less telling than it seems. One might understandably say that this makes it unlikely that he had a nightmare. After all, it happened again when he was awake, upon his prayers no less. Of course, it could be that he's just lying, but even that need not be necessary for this to not prove he really went to Hell. Wiese could be entirely honest, and have had a bad dream, and this could still make sense. After all, whether a dream or not, in Wiese's mind, he really saw Hell. By his own testimony, he was traumatized by it (88). Just imagine how devastating it would be to all of one's faculties if they had this experience and thought that it was real. In the book, Weiss even recounts an incident where he was almost killed by sharks, and how he didn't go near the water for two years, despite having been an avid surfer (23-24). Such an experience could easily cause post-traumatic stress disorder in someone, and according to Wiese, that wasn't nearly as scary as his trip to Hell (24). PTSD isn't just for soldiers anymore,

and it is no secret that a common symptom is having flashbacks. Of course, we don't know enough about Wiese to say whether or not he fits the definition of PTSD. Nevertheless, if people who suffer extraordinary trauma have flashbacks against their will years later, how much less should it surprise us if the day after the incident, someone who wanted to relive a traumatic event does so? It is true that according to Wiese his second glimpse set him more as an observer than as a participant (56). However, according to Dr. Matthew Tuller, that is not uncommon in PTSD flashbacks. The 10-second experience, according to Wiese, was still so terrifying that he needed 20 minutes to regain his composure (56). Was Wiese's second glimpse a prayer granted? Maybe, or it could have just been him reliving a traumatic event like countless others do...

Although it's not the quite same thing (because both times I was asleep), I had a somewhat similar experience regarding my disturbing hellish dream I mentioned earlier. Not the next day, but months later, I had a sick and bizarre desire to relive what had happened before. That night, after a bizarre series of incidents, I found myself in the same situation. There was the same darkness, the same screams, the same paralysis, the same helplessness, and even the same terror. But this time, I knew I could wake up, and I did. As vivid as the first dream was, and it was the scariest event of my life, it was just that, a dream (one that I could willfully relive, as Wiese did with his trip to Hell). At the time I had sort of started to believe in Jesus, and would have had no reason to want to disprove that Hell was real. I just simply wanted to relive my dream, and I did. In doing so, it affirmed what I already knew was true; it was all in my head.

Another reason to doubt Wiese's account is that he was conveniently spared the types of pains that he would not have known on earth. He sees people being burned alive in a pit of fire (29), but he himself never gets burned. He does, however, say that there was heat far beyond what could sustain life (xiv). Has anyone ever left a car out in the summer time and gotten in? It

is far hotter than the air outside. It can be over 140 degrees (hotter than anywhere on earth). You break immediately into a sweat, your skin turns red, and you may even start panting like a dog. It's not only uncomfortable but actually painful. If you leave a dog or a baby in that heat for just minutes, they die. It literally is too hot to sustain life. I think most of us can relate to heat so hot that it feels like you would quickly die. Get too close to a furnace or even a large bonfire and you understand this even better. However, most have not been badly burned over our entire bodies. Is it a coincidence that he would feel something he probably has felt before (dangerous heat), yet is conveniently spared the pain of being engulfed in flames (which few people who are alive today have felt and most can only imagine)? At another point, a giant demon tore his flesh into ribbons and threw his body against a wall, breaking many bones. He points out that he was spared most of the pain (6), exposed to it just enough so that he could tell people that there is literal pain in Hell (103). Likewise, a lot of us have probably been beaten up, or in car accidents, or even been in a rough sport where we get cut and bruised and are painfully thrown about. Few of us have felt our flesh being torn off and our bones being broken by a wild beast. Bill Wiese only felt the former. How convenient; in this situation, he only felt as much pain as he would reasonably have been expected to have felt in real life, as much as his mind would have known, as he slept...

There are scriptural issues with his account (aside from just the fact he speaks of eternal torment). Wiese cites several Old Testament passages which speak of "Hell." Given what I talked about in Section VI, we're not talking about "Hell" when we look at the Hebrew *Sheol*. Wiese also looks at Jonah 2.6, which reads "I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God" (*KJV*). He claims that many commentators believe Jonah went to *Sheol*, which he says is right outside of Hell ("Reference" 10:37-10:49). I guess nobody told him that when the

King James Old Testament mentions “Hell,” it is referring to *Sheol*. When it says “Hell,” it literally is *Sheol* in the original language. There is no other “Hell” in the Old Testament. Thus, every time he quotes a passage about “Hell” that came from the Old Testament (and he does it a lot), he is unknowingly talking about this *Sheol*. It should be no surprise that, by the time the book was written, this comment about *Sheol* being outside of “Hell” wasn’t included.

According to Wiese, you have a body in Hell (2). Importantly, he cites Matthew 10.28 as evidence that you have a body in Hell (15). The word for “Hell” in that verse is *Gehenna*. Given the distinction between the Biblical terms, as discussed in Section VI, this would not be where Weise was. It is not the same as *Sheol*. But hey, what matters isn’t the original language (since it has good and bad going to the same place in the Old Testament), but that the King James and a few other related versions use the word “Hell” both in Matthew 10.28 and the Old Testament verses Wiese uses...We also know, just by the power of observation, that the bodies of the dead are in the earth. We can see corpses. If the damned have bodies where he was, what of the whole, ya know, resurrection? Even Dante Alighieri includes talk of a future resurrection in his *Inferno* (13:100-108). Is it not also written, “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace *and* everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12.2)? Obviously their souls aren’t in the dust, because they are in Hell, according to this scenario. Well then, are their bodies in the dust? We’d all say that this is the case, but Wiese says that their bodies are in “Hell.” I guess the Bible never explicitly says that you don’t get a separate interim body that differs from what you die in and from what you are resurrected in, but still.

One major problem comes up with his description of his torment at the hands of demons. Wiese said, as the demons tormented him, that he knew they would do it forever (“23 minutes”

24:45). He didn't say that this is what the Bible said, but what he himself knew would be the case in "Hell." Demons will be assigned to torture you *for eternity* (26:45-26:50). But, aside from the fact that the demons will ultimately be destroyed (as will men), theologians on both sides are well aware the demons are themselves to be punished, not reigning forever. The eternal fire was prepared for the devil and his demons (Matthew 25.41). In the actual book of *23 Minutes in Hell*, which I assume came after the video, Wiese even contradicts his testimony in the video. According to Wiese, "The Bible says that demons will be in torment along with the people after Judgment day when death and hell are cast into the lake of fire...However, I believe Scripture indicates that currently in hell (*Sheol* or *Hades*), God does allow the demons to torment the lost souls" (130). In other words, demons will *not* torment men for eternity! Hell isn't prepared for them as their kingdom. They will surely be with the devil, who (though destroyed in real life), would, according to the logical conclusion of traditionalism, be tormented for ever and ever in the lake of fire (Revelation 20.10). How are demons going to be able to torture the damned not only today (which is at least theoretically possible), but also in eternity? Wiese even admits later that they won't, but in the video, he says that, while in Hell, he was aware that they would. Therefore, he contradicts both himself and the Bible.

Other little things pop up here and there which should draw his overall exegesis into question. He said that the demons smelled horrible. That itself isn't particularly significant, except for the fact that he uses verses like Mark 9.25 which speak of Jesus casting out "foul" spirits (150). I can't be 100% sure that the Greek *akatharta* can't be referring to the demons smelling bad, but I have a feeling that when it speaks of unclean spirits, it isn't referring to their hygiene. That might be why modern translations don't use the word "foul" like the brilliant but very antiquated King James Version does. Wiese also points to the fallen angels being in "Hell"

in 2 Peter 2.4, even though the verse itself tells us that they are in *Tartarus* (not *Gehenna*) to be held until judgment (as discussed in previous sections). It is not permanent like his so-called Hell. Also, he speaks of screams and crying out (8), yet King David seems to associate the defeat of the wicked with silence in *Sheol* in Psalm 31.17 (Hisgraceandtruth 2). Although that passage may not have *Sheol* translated as “Hell,” what is the Old Testament written in, Hebrew or English?

Many verses, though not necessarily significant, get taken out of context or have things added to them. He cites 1 Kings 18.28 as an example of demons tormenting people on earth (127). The verse speaks of Elijah challenging the followers of Baal to get Baal to show his existence by consuming a burnt offering. When he does not, we are told, “So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed” (NIV). And yet, if you read the passage, the torture is self-inflicted. No mention of any evil spirit is made. In fact, it specifically says that they did it because it was their custom. Now, being idol worshippers, there obviously is evil influence behind what they do, as there is with any sin, but they aren’t doing it because a demon is actively intervening. The Bible has several incidents of demons actually tormenting people, which he does accurately point to. However, this isn’t one of them.

Another example is Psalm 63.9. It reads: “But those that seek my soul, to destroy it, shall go into the lower parts of the earth” (KJV). Wiese uses this as evidence that Hell is in the center of the earth (109). However, couldn’t David just be saying that God will protect him by killing these people? After all, what happens when people die? They get buried in the earth. Verse 10, the very next line, reads: “They will be delivered over to the power of the sword; They will be a prey for foxes” (KJV). No mention of *Sheol* comes up in this Psalm. There are many other

examples of this, like his pointing to Matthew 24.51 as proof that there are degrees of punishment (119). It speaks of the master who will find a wicked servant, “and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Aside from everything about that verse in Section XXXI, Subsection C, it never mentions different fates for anyone. All it says is that his portion is with the hypocrites. If anything, it looks more like the “hypocrites” are all the same, since they are just lumped together with no distinction being made. No explanation is given for why a passage that lumps everyone together is seen as evidence that sinners are distinguished from one another. Things like this happen a lot, which should raise some eyebrows.

It is at least a bit odd how he intertwines the idea of a lake of fire with Hell. Within Hell, there are pits of fire (29), and even a lake of fire (“23 Minutes” 29:45). The Bible never describes a lake of fire *within Hades*. Is it impossible that there is one? No, but might it be that Wiese, as a Christian who admits that he was not well-studied in the scriptures on Hell prior to this, had mixed up descriptions and pictures of Hell in his mind before his experience? After all, sometimes when people talk about Hell, they talk about a lake of fire, just as others talk about other elements of Hell that Wiese conveniently saw in his sleep (jail cells, devils tormenting people, a cavern-like landscape with rocks and pits of fire etc.). Even though the lake of fire is completely distinct from *Hades* (the “Hell” that he’d be in and that is thrown into the lake of fire in Revelation 20.14), it is all called “Hell,” right?

Ultimately, the relationship between “Hell” and the lake of fire is at best very hard to comprehend, and at worst, completely unbiblical and/or contradictory. According to Wiese, Hell is currently at the center of the earth, and will later be moved to the lake of fire (107). Here’s where the problems arise. When discussing the heat, he writes, “Some scientists have reported

that the core temperature at the center of the earth is approximately twelve thousand degrees. To endure that for eternity is unfathomable” (22). Aside from the fact that those same scientists would say that the center of the earth is not a hollow cave with jail cells and fire pits, there is another issue here. Given his above quote, it appears that in Wiese’s vision people don’t actually leave the so-called Hell in the center of the earth. If they did, they wouldn’t be enduring the 12,000 degree heat for eternity. It would appear then that Wiese is saying that Hell is a unit, like an RV of torture, and it will be moved from one place (the center of the earth) to another place (the lake of fire). The unsaved stay in this RV of pain wherever it goes. And yet, we know that the dead do leave *Hades* (his so-called Hell) in Revelation 20.13. Then they go to the lake of fire (Verse 15). They don’t stay in this metaphorical recreational vehicle. The only other possibility is that Hell is not a contained unit, but when he speaks of Hell, he just means the place of future punishment. In that case, the lost would be moved from the center of the earth to the lake of fire. This would fit the Revelation narrative. However, if this were the case, then they wouldn’t be enduring the 12,000 degree heat of the earth’s core for eternity. That’s not to say that the lake of fire wouldn’t be just as bad or even worse, but it wouldn’t be the same thing. Either way, as I see it, it does not work.

What then do I think of Bill Wiese’s vision? Do I think he is a liar looking for a quick buck, as some have claimed? I don’t know. I am inclined, given the nature of his the experience, to think that he blamelessly and without guile had a nightmare, and having mistaken it for a real event, was traumatized and permanently affected by it. That’s not to say all the effects have been bad of course; assuming that Wiese isn’t a liar, it led him to be a more passionate evangelist. But that doesn’t mean that he went to Hell. Whatever Wiese’s heart and intentions, he’s wrong. I do not see this unbiblical Hell that he saw in his sleep as being anything powerful enough to seem

any different than any other vision of the afterlife, including those false visions of Heaven by unbelievers.

E. Mary Kay Baxter

Before Bill Wiese had a 23 minute-long bad dream, Mary Kay Baxter reported a lengthy experience of Hell on which she elaborates in her book *A Divine Revelation of Hell*. Needless to say, I have some thoughts about it.

First of all, beyond the biblical point that souls do not live forever in the first place, there are specific biblical problems with her account of Hell. Like Bill Wiese, I take issue with the fact that people were screaming. Anything Baxter sees would be the intermediate state, since the Hell she describes the events she sees as taking place now, not in the future. But in the intermediate state, the vanquished wicked should be silent (Psalm 31.17).

There are practical problems as well. Many of them are shared by most other such visions, such as the idea that the center of the earth is hollow. Specific to Baxter, she writes, while observing a pit of fire (which “Hell” is full of), “Brimstone was embedded in the side of the pit and glowed red like hot coals of fire” (7). That seems rather odd. Sulfur (i.e. brimstone) melts at about 235 degrees Fahrenheit, way below the temperature of even a relatively cool fire. If it was glowing and in fire, it would be in liquid form, emitting a blue flame (“Sulfur”). It wouldn’t stay embedded like a glowing coal (and a red one at that). Now, I can imagine that I’m inviting people to indignantly point out that she’s not a chemist, and that there won’t be a post-mortem chemistry exam at the judgment. However, I’m not faulting Ms. Baxter for failing to correctly balance a reduction-oxidation reaction. What she says happened, at least how she makes it sound, doesn’t fit with what we know about sulfur. And we’re not talking about anything theoretical or

microscopic. Sulfur melts. It's not really something that is questioned. Pressure could come into play, but that is tricky, since that would be based on the kind of scientific assumptions that say the earth's core isn't hollow...If sulfur is hot enough to glow, it should melt. That's presumably why John describes a "lake" of fire and brimstone in Revelation. A large quantity of burning sulfur would resemble a burning lake. Even if the pressure kept it from melting, it wouldn't be red, and it would still ignite, as opposed to glowing red like a rock. I see this as evidence that Baxter, knowing that people speak of "fire and brimstone," would imagine that it would glow red in fire, like a really hot (brim)stone. Thus, she talks about it that way.

Furthermore, the story is full of talk of demons tormenting the damned. Where are all the angels who are being held in chains until judgment (2 Peter 2.4; Jude 6)? Baxter even references this when she speaks of the angels putting her in a cell (because like with Wiese, her Hell is full of cells). She says, "I stopped singing, and at long last they put me back into the cell. I remembered a Bible verse about fallen angels who were reserved in chains until final judgment. I wondered if this was my judgment" (63). It was my understanding that those passages that speak of fallen angels are talking not about men but, well, fallen angels.

No mention is made of a resurrection. People's souls just go to Hell when they die. But people's "souls" will not always just remain in "Hell." There is the little matter of the resurrection. The souls have to leave "Hell" (which we know is just *Hades/Sheol*) at some point (at which the whole resurrected person is thrown into *Gehenna*, shown as the lake of fire in Revelation, the "Hell" that Jesus warned of). You really get the feeling reading this that the current torments of the damned never really change. When she would see sinners in a pit of fire, Jesus would recite a portion of the King James Version of Revelation 21.7-8, "[insert type of sinner] will have their place in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone" (14). Yet none are in

the lake of fire. They are in “Hell” which she even says will itself be thrown into the lake of fire (27). Despite this, she’s saying that these verses are applying to the damned in “Hell” (that is, *Hades*). Now, according to Baxter, a separate “lake of fire” also passes through “Hell.” I guess this is supposed to explain how Jesus would apply Revelation 21.7-8 to those in *Hades*. The thing is, I really am pretty sure that when God speaks to John about the unsaved going to the lake of fire in Revelation 21.7-8, He’s referring to the lake of fire that John sees, the one that is actually in John’s vision (or for that matter, the Bible). This biblical lake of fire is where their so-called Hell goes, not what is in it now.

Along these lines, at one point she sees a woman in a burning pit. Baxter comments, “She must burn forever in these flames” (11). Now, this may have occurred before she was told that there will be a resurrection, but she never corrects herself (or mentions the souls leaving *Hades* and being resurrected etc.). Even if eternal torment is true, the woman (that is, the woman’s soul) isn’t going to burn in those flames forever (even if traditionalists are right). Then again, who needs a resurrection? Each “soul” is in the form of a body and has its senses anyway.

F. What Then of These Visions?

If people, especially professing believers, are having false visions, then what does that mean? I don’t know. Maybe for some, lying spirits showed them the vision, and God allowed it. Consider this: this story makes Christians look less than forward thinking. The center of the earth is a cave that is hospitable to animals? How foolish would this and every other part sound to an unbeliever? Also, given how many unbelievers are turned away from God by the idea of eternal torment, such lurid descriptions of how God deals with the majority of mankind would hardly help. Maybe the devil intended to push unbelievers away. Perhaps many have actually been

saved by these accounts nonetheless. If that is the case, then Satan's plan ended up serving God. It would not be the first time that God gave the devil or sinners free reign when it would end up doing good. Remember the story of Job? Or think back to when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. God didn't put the hate and evil in their hearts, but when they decided to act on it, He made sure they succeeded. As Joseph later said of it, "As for you, you meant evil against me, *but* God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Genesis 50.20). God will allow lying spirits to deceive those who deny the truth of Jesus, most likely to clearly distinguish them from believers (2 Thessalonians 2.10-12).

For others, maybe some are not healthy in their minds. There are mentally ill people who profess a belief in Jesus Christ (truly or falsely, I'm not sure). Maybe some are just dirty liars, wolves in sheep's clothing who will find themselves facing the wrath of the God whom they are secretly laughing at (though not in the "Hell" that they describe of course). Maybe some, in a sick and twisted way, think that making up visions of Hell is the right thing to do (though as I said before, I am very skeptical of any "Christian" who would willfully and deliberately lie about God). Maybe some had bad dreams, or visions based on what they had been told as children. After all, believer and unbeliever alike, it's not as though many aren't familiar with unbiblical, pagan-inspired views of Hell like this one from *Paradise Lost*:

A dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great furnace flam'd, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Served only to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes

That comes to all; but torture without end

Still urges, and a fiery Deluge, fed

With ever-burning Sulphur unconsum'd." (I.61-69)

I admit, I would rather imagine that all Christians who have visions are always honest and are always reporting true visions and not visions given to them by lying spirits, their minds, their dreams, or whatever else. I also don't want to say that any person who professes Jesus as their Lord is a wolf. It really bothers me that any of the above happens. I am not a cessationist, and I love it when our brethren report the supernatural benevolence of God in all forms, including visions. None of us should be liars or victims of lies or mistruths about God. But, I guess it is what it is. Somebody is wrong for some reason or another. Either somebody is lying, or somebody is having some sort of false visions for whatever reason. Like I said before, the holy word of God has to take precedence over fallible men.

L. GOD'S JUSTICE

A. "God's Justice and Infinite Holiness Demand Eternal Conscious Punishment!"

There are a lot of philosophical arguments I have encountered, but only a few I will devote whole sections to (and the answer is more or less the same for all of them anyway).

It is all too often that annihilationists are accused of not taking sin seriously, because if we did, we would understand that God is so holy that a sin against Him deserves eternal torment. According to Alan Gomes, "Indeed, sin against an absolutely holy God is absolutely serious. For this reason, the unredeemed suffer absolute, unending alienation from God; this alienation is the essence of Hell. It is the annihilationist's theory that is morally flawed. Their God is not truly holy, for he does not demand that sin receive its due." In context, it's slightly less aggressive than it sounds, as he is responding to claims that eternal torment is immoral. But you get the point.

First of all, I find eternal annihilation to be absolutely serious as well. Imagine the pinnacle of creation, the creatures made in God's image, being utterly destroyed by God. This is such a serious matter that, as mentioned in Section VIII, a number of traditionalists consider it too awful to be considered. How then is it not serious? Secondly, and more importantly, I would like to ask those who make this argument to show me one passage in the Bible that actually says that God's justice or holiness demands eternal torment.

I'm waiting...

There isn't one. So don't use this argument. The claim that God's justice and his holiness demands eternal torment is not in the Bible.

That idea comes from the following logical progression:

1. God is just and holy (I think we all agree there).
2. God torments the damned for ever and ever (which is believed to be biblical).
3. Therefore, eternal torment is just and holy.

The thing is, this argument that eternal torment is what God's justice demands is entirely dependent on eternal torment being true. Therefore, we can't say that eternal torment must be true because it's what God's justice demands. In other words, you can't just say "eternal torment is true because God's holiness and justice demand it; we know His holiness and justice demand eternal torment because eternal torment is true." The argument is completely circular.

This whole argument probably rose out of the need for a decent philosophical explanation for how God could continuously torture people for ever and ever and still be considered good, a question commonly posed by unbelievers. Now, if I'm wrong and eternal torment is true, then it surely would be an expression of God's holiness and justice. Nevertheless, given how often this argument is made in order to prove the traditional doctrine of Hell, it is clear that in the minds of many, the cart has gone before the horse. Until you have independently proven that ECT is true, saying that God's justice and holiness requires that it is true is merely an assumption about God, one that nobody is qualified to make.

If I were to say that the traditional idea of Hell couldn't be true because eternal conscious torment is evil and God's justice demands a fair punishment, or that sin is so horrible that a holy God couldn't allow sinners to even exist in eternity, would not the whole Christian world say, and rightfully so, that you can't determine what is fair based on emotion or philosophical supposition, but rather by what God says is right and wrong in the scriptures? Would you not reply that "our sense of justice is perverted, twisted, and distorted," and would you not say, "What we as humans deem to be fair can many times be far removed from what God says"

(Moore 29)? Tell me, what is the difference between these hypothetical annihilationist claims and the claims of Gomes and others?

B. The Argument from Sin against an Infinite God

One common version of the argument from justice is that since God is infinite, sin against Him requires infinite punishment (and thus, infinite torment). The idea is that the severity of sin and the punishment due are determined by the honor and greatness of the one sinned against, and God is obviously the highest being there is (being infinite, fully eternal, and perfectly righteous).

As far as the strength of this argument goes, it is rhetorically powerful, but it is strictly philosophical. Does the Bible say “God is infinite; sin against Him is therefore an infinite crime, and therefore infinite torment is the necessary vengeance for sins”? Not at all. And what the Bible does say, not what any man says, is what matters.

Besides, despite what is presented by some conditionalist authors, there isn’t really much disagreement here between annihilationism and the traditional view. What has my position been this whole time? The unsaved, as a result of their seemingly finite sins, will suffer a permanent and irreversible destruction to where their whole person will be destroyed completely. They cannot pay the metaphorical debt, so to satisfy His just wrath, God destroys their whole being; they lose everything *for eternity*. I am not arguing, as some annihilationists do, that annihilation is better because it is a finite punishment. Annihilation is a form of infinite punishment.

You need not be a conditionalist to see annihilation as an infinite punishment, satisfying the strictly philosophical argument that God’s infinite nature requires infinite punishment. Reformed German theologian Herman Witsius conceded that indeed, annihilation could satisfy the need for infinite punishment:

But whether it be necessary, that God should continue for ever the sinful creature in a state of existence, I am ignorant. May it not, in its measure, be reckoned as infinite punishment, should God please to doom man, who was by nature a candidate for eternity, to annihilation, from whence he should never be suffered to return to life?...Here at least let us hesitate, and suspend our judgment. (108)

Numerous other traditionalists point out, in arguing against annihilationists who claim that infinite punishment is unjust, that annihilation is itself unjust by that standard (meaning that it is infinite). Robert Reymond and John Blanchard said as much, and Jonathan Edwards followed suit by conceding that annihilation would amount to eternal punishment (see Section XVI, Subsection G). Sam Petitfils of Bibletruth.org takes the same position. In response to the argument that “the punishment seems disproportionate to the sins committed,” he rebuts with the following: “If this is the case, then God could only ‘annihilate’ sinners for a small period of time, since eternal annihilation would also not seem to fit the crime.” Craig Blomberg follows suit: “The problem of infinite punishment for finite sin is not resolved by annihilationism; those who would cease to exist would still do so for an infinite period of time” (4). Well, this sword cuts both ways. If it is infinite punishment, then, well, it is infinite punishment. If annihilation is infinite punishment, and sin requires infinite punishment, then annihilation fits that requirement. And as Witsius accurately said, men are by nature candidates for eternity; to deprive them of that eternity would be an infinite punishment.

Of course, this all assumes that God somehow demands infinite punishment in the first place. I do think that annihilation is in a sense infinite, and therefore it must be the case that God demands an infinite punishment. But notice that I base my belief that God requires infinite punishment (in the form of annihilation) on the fact that the Bible teaches us that annihilation is

true. Since God is just, and since annihilation is a form of infinite punishment, it must be the case that this type of infinite punishment is what God's justice demands. I am not arguing for annihilation based on the philosophical claim that God requires infinite punishment. Frankly, I don't think one can justify that philosophical claim without basing it on what they already think Hell is (as I do). And if you can't justify the claim apart from basing it on how you already understand the nature and duration of Hell, you can't then use the claim to prove your understanding of Hell.

Some might still object, arguing both that you somehow can prove that God requires infinite punishment independently, and that annihilation just doesn't count because the infinite punishment must specifically be infinite suffering. In response, I would simply quote traditionalist John E. Colwell, arguing against those who those who argue that finite sin only warrants finite punishment, no less: "We simply are not in a position to assess either the utter purity of divine holiness or the utter depravity of human sinfulness. We therefore ought not to pontificate on what is or what is not just" (300). Even the minds behind *The Interactive Bible* do get one thing right about Hell: "Just as no one can actually understand the logic behind God's mercy in saving us through Christ dying on the cross, we probably can't understand God's justice with hell" ("Hell: Not a Place You Want to Spend Eternity!"). If the Bible teaches that the eternal punishment of annihilation is sufficient to fulfill the justice of God, then no amount of human wisdom is sufficient to refute that.

LI. THE “IMPLICATIONS” OF CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY

It is not at all uncommon, when reading a defense of the traditional doctrine for an argument to be made not from scripture, nor even from philosophy, but simply from the possible negative effects of preaching annihilation. The most common way this comes about is in one of two arguments that ultimately say that teaching annihilationism will result in fewer people being saved. The first accusation is that annihilationism hampers missionary zeal. If we don't believe people will suffer forever in hell, we won't care as much about reaching the unsaved with the gospel. According to Dr. Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary: “There is little doubt that a proper, biblical, evangelistic zeal for reconciling men and women to God is easily quenched if one seriously believes that the worst that can happen to the non-Christian is that he or she simply ceases to exist” (5). The second is similar, that if you preach annihilationism, the unsaved will be less likely to repent since they will likewise think that they will just be annihilated and it won't, therefore, be worth following Jesus. When called to task by Glenn Peoples for his past use of these kinds of arguments, Robert Peterson replied that he was not making an argument for eternal torment, but only reflecting upon the “implications” (“Fallacies in the Annihilationism Debate?” 355). That is why, in the section title, I refer to “implications” in quotation marks.

Rather than devoting a lot of time and space to addressing the arguments themselves (and I assure you, I can), all I really need to say is that, true or not, they are completely irrelevant. Again, I don't agree with Dr. Blomberg or others in the first place, but even if I did, whatever the outcome of preaching this doctrine is, the outcome has absolutely no bearing on whether or not the doctrine is true. It is really that simple. What makes something better has absolutely no logical bearing whatsoever on whether or not it is true. I believe that this may be the single worst argument against annihilationism (although a few here in Part 5 are in the running).

Consider this: It would be better, at least in my opinion, if it were to be true that in my bank account there was \$100 million (as opposed to what is in it now). Does that mean that there is \$100 million in my bank account? Or say a student, who receives an 80% on a test, says to the teacher “I think I got a 100%. See, that would be better for my grade point average, so it’s actually better that I get 100%. Doesn’t that mean I got a perfect score?” Would such a student not be laughed out of class? Well, it is the same argument!

What makes something true: it being a good evangelism tool, or it being true?

If you don’t think annihilationism is true, then say that you don’t think that it is true. However, if you believe the doctrine we preach should be based on what is convenient, or even what might help others, and not on what is actually true, then you are a liar, and you have every reason to be concerned about what Hell is like (Revelation 21.8)...

Now, I don’t think most traditionalists who make this argument are liars. I think Robert Peterson and others genuinely believe that traditionalism is so obviously true that it is legitimate to voice their opinions about why it is better to believe it in this manner. In their hearts, I don’t believe most are trying to convince anyone to believe something contrary to the truth. I don’t think they are actually saying, “Believe this, even if it is false, because it is better for evangelism.” This argument assumes that eternal torment is true, and it is probably very affirming to one who already holds the belief, so it surely sounds like a solid argument if one does not actually think about it. Now, that may sound harsh, but it’s either that, or they are simply dishonest (which, of course, is worse). This argument really is that fallacious.

Although I touched upon the importance of getting our doctrine of Hell correct in Section IV, did you notice how I ultimately made no claim as to why either doctrine was actually better than the other? I certainly have some strong beliefs about the implications of the various views,

but my goal is not to convince people that annihilationism is “better” than traditionalism. My goal is to convince people that annihilationism is true! Put another way, “annihilationists are not utilitarians. We teach annihilationism because they think it is biblical, not because of what they think the consequences of this teaching will be” (Peoples, “Thoughts” 9).

The doctrine that is best is the doctrine that is factually true. What if I were to argue that annihilationism was a better motivator for evangelism? What if I were to argue that it would make unbelievers more likely to repent? What if I were to convince someone that way? What good is that? How does that serve God? If I cannot convince you from scripture that conditionalism is true, then I haven't really convinced you, have I? Truth is truth, whether it makes you happy or sad or indifferent.

LII. “ANNIHILATIONISM IS WHAT CULTS BELIEVE!”

This is an argument that really should just never come up, but it sometimes does. Sometimes, conditionalism is viewed with suspicion because some cults and fringe groups (most notably Jehovah’s Witnesses) also believe it, or at least something like it, to be true. Even Harold Camping, the church leader who falsely predicted that the world would end on May 21st, 2011, was brought into this because he apparently holds to some form of annihilationism (Simpson). It has surprised me that Camping hasn’t become a bigger boogey-man for the doctrine, although it should be noted that Harold Camping repented prior to his death and promised not to try to predict the date of Jesus’s return again (Kwon).

Now, while I certainly do not like being identified with groups that hold to what is at best seriously flawed theology, this whole guilt-by-association argument is among the very weakest arguments against annihilationism. I’ve been hesitant to even address this, because it is irrelevant and can distract us from what the actual Bible says. Nevertheless, because it is somewhat popular, I’ll throw in my two cents.

First of all, it’s common sense that you don’t dismiss a belief just because someone who is wrong about something else also holds it. If we took that position, we couldn’t believe anything that anyone says. Someone with an IQ of 50 could tell you that the sky is blue. People who think that the earth is flat still believe $2+2=4$. People who like mayonnaise still know what day it is.

Secondly, if we dismiss everything that members of these less-than-savory groups believe about God, we’d have quite a problem, because we agree with them about a lot. Among the beliefs that Jehovah’s Witnesses share with most mainstream Christians are the following: the all-sufficient atonement made by Christ (at least in theory), the inspiration of Scripture, the

introduction of death through Adam, the future elimination of death, water baptism, and the belief that we are no longer required to observe the Sabbath (i.e. specifically consecrate Saturdays for worship and rest) (“What Do They Believe”). Are we going to say that those doctrines are suspect because Jehovah’s Witnesses believe them too? Bring Seventh Day Adventists into the picture (who, by the way, should not necessarily be called members of a cult), and it gets even worse. They believe all of the above (except for the end of Sabbath observation), and they also believe in the Trinity, salvation by faith alone (at least in writing), the bodily resurrection of Christ and of all men (unlike JW’s), premillennialism (not a core doctrine, but a common one among evangelicals), and a number of others (*Seventh Day Adventists* 21-23). Are *those* beliefs suspect now too?

Lastly, as Glenn Peoples points out, “Any traditionalist who tries to smear annihilationists by associating us with Jehovah’s Witnesses has opened the door to a barrage of similar attacks on his own position. Mormons and Muslims, for example, believe in eternal torment. Does that make it false?” (“Why I Am an Annihilationist” 17). Well, according to the logic behind these claims against conditionalism...yes, yes it does. I think that that sums it up pretty well.

This is about what the Bible teaches, not what some people believe and whether they are right or wrong about other things. And as I believe I have thoroughly demonstrated by now, the Bible denies the Islamic view of Hell and instead teaches annihilationism.

LIII. ANNIHILATION AND THE RESURRECTION OF THE LOST

A. If the Bible Says That It Is True, Then That's What Matters

Some have argued that, if the lost will be destroyed and not subject to eternal misery, it would be pointless for God to resurrect them. Assuming physicalism or possibly soul-sleep (which not all annihilationists hold to), A.W. Pink writes the following: "The absurdity and unscripturalness of Annihilationism are easily exposed. If at death, the sinner passes out of existence, why resurrect him in order to annihilate him again?" (12). Consider also what Sinclair Ferguson said while preaching at the Desiring God conference for Pastors in 1990. Assuming dualism and conscious punishment in the intermediate state, he argues that the resurrection of the unsaved prior to annihilation "must be viewed as some kind of cynical joke in the heart of this All-Righteous God, that he punishes men and women and then raises them from the dead simply to annihilate them out of all existence." Annihilationism is true; nevertheless, we know that there will be a resurrection of saved and unsaved (Daniel 12.2; John 5.28-29). How can this be true?

First and foremost, if the word of God says that there is a resurrection of the unsaved and that they will be destroyed after, then it really doesn't matter what any person thinks. Indeed, the Bible does teach that all will be resurrected, and as I have shown throughout this essay, it also teaches that the wicked will be destroyed once and for all. That is all that matters. It is written:

For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord.
For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55.8-9)

B. One Good Explanation – Part I

That said, there are good reasons that even humans can imagine. In the following three-part argument I will lay out why it makes perfect sense. The first part is that for justice to be done, the dead cannot just die and disappear, but rather they must go before God to be declared guilty and condemned. If physicalism or soul-sleep are true, then this alone would explain the need for a resurrection because only at a resurrection could the unsaved stand to face God. Secondly, as will be addressed in the next subsection, they must be judged in the presence of all of God's children. In order for this to happen, they cannot simply be judged at death, or even after a period of torment in the intermediate state. There must be a time when all of God's people, and all of His enemies, are alive and conscious, which will not occur until all people have been resurrected at the end of the world. Thirdly, if the unsaved were not raised bodily at this judgment, but were just immaterial souls, then their destruction before the saved would be less powerful and significant than the sight of God punishing the entire person, body, soul, and spirit. No matter what final punishment consists of, a resurrection is necessary to fulfill these things.

Regarding the first part of the argument, one might ask why a grand judgment is important at all. Why can't the wicked just die and have whatever comes to them come to them? The reason it is so important is because there is more to justice than simply punishment for wrongdoing. There needs to be that moment where the judge declares the wicked guilty and the righteous innocent. It's wired into us, I would even say. Let's say a murderer, not eligible for the death penalty, drops dead during their trial. Now, isn't that the best justice of all? What fate is reserved for the most heinous crimes? Death. He was only going to face jail time, but instead, he died young, in his prime, and didn't get years of living and ham sandwiches and Friday night

movie privileges that he was going to have. Isn't that great? Isn't justice fulfilled? I'm not sure we'd say that it is. The jury never declared him guilty. The judge never banged his gavel, declaring him a murderer and issuing the just sentence. The family of the victim never got to address the killer. Despite ending up with what is actually a worse fate, the killer never had to face what he did.

If the ultimate fate of the lost is annihilation (which it is), then some sort of final judgment prior to their final destruction is of great importance. Just imagine the murderers and child rapists and world dictators who die in their sins, happy and without fear. Some may even die with hope, like the Muslim suicide bomber who murders innocent people as well as himself in order to please Allah and enter paradise. With them it would be all the worse. Even though they face the punishment of non-existence, how dreadful if they were to never know it! How unjust if they died in happiness and hope, never having to acknowledge God or their evil, never having to answer for what they did. And all this is in spite of their *eternal* loss of life! But the biblical teaching is not that they exit in peace. Rather, though the wicked are destroyed, killed in the ultimate sense, no wicked person just fades away. Rather, they face the raging fire of God in the ultimate terror. It's not enough to know that they simply die and are gone forever (as Jehovah's Witnesses believe about some). In order for there to be that finality, that fulfillment of justice, they need to be there to stand before the judge, even if the outcome is ultimately the same.

C. One Good Explanation – Part II

I have so far explained why the wicked need to stand before God to be declared guilty, but one might ask why God couldn't just judge them at death? God is always alive; it shouldn't

matter to Him when judgment occurs. Waiting until a time when all people are alive at once is only necessary for people (notably, the saved) to see the judgment. So then, why do God's people all have to be around to see all the wicked being judged, which would require a point where everyone who has ever lived is alive again?

The reason for this is twofold. First of all, God's people need to all see the judgment so that God is vindicated in front of them and He can receive from them the praise for His justice that He rightfully deserves. Secondly, many of the unsaved have committed no end of evil against God's children. Not only will God be vindicated, but so will the righteous. They will be avenged. A 1st-century believer in Rome who was burned alive by Nero has every right to be there when Nero and his henchmen who lit the flames stand before God, in fear and terror, as He declares them accursed and throws *them* into the *eternal* fire (unless of course, unbeknownst to history, they all miraculously repented and found Jesus before death, which would be ideal...but you get the point). Because the wicked have sinned against God's people as well as against God (though such sins are ultimately all against God), it surely matters to God that His people can be vindicated when He judges those who have harmed them.

Now, the claim that the saved should be at the judgment in order for them to rejoice at God's punishment of the unsaved may not sound very loving or merciful, and the claim that the saved would desire vengeance against those who have unrepentantly caused them harm may even sound unchristian at first. However, even the most godly and merciful of us know it to be true that in our hearts we desire to see evildoers punished (if they do not turn to God, that is). Most importantly, the claim that God's people are to praise God for His condemnation of sinners, especially those who have afflicted His people, is entirely biblical.

For starters, it is no secret that the Old Testament is full of calls for divine judgment. Psalm 69.24 reads as follows: “Pour out Your indignation on them, / And may Your burning anger overtake them.” In writing this God-breathed scripture, “(And the scripture cannot be broken)” (John 10.35b), the psalmist not only declares that the guilty will be judged, but he is *asking* God to judge them. Verse 28 also adds, “May they be blotted out of the book of life / And may they not be recorded with the righteous.”

Even psalms that are not “imprecatory” psalms and have almost nothing to do with judgment will throw in a call for judgment somewhere. Consider this gem from an oft-quoted psalm about God’s presence and provision:

O that You would slay the wicked, O God;
Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.
For they speak against You wickedly,
And Your enemies take *Your name* in vain.
Do I not hate those who hate You, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?
I hate them with the utmost hatred;
They have become my enemies. (Psalm 139.19-22)

What may be especially surprising to a Christian audience is what we find in Psalm 143.12. Even after acknowledging his own sinfulness and appealing to God’s mercy, the psalmist nonetheless still cries out to God:

And in Your lovingkindness, cut off my enemies
And destroy all those who afflict my soul,
For I am Your servant.

Furthermore, when the prophet Jeremiah's life is in danger, he makes the following plea to the LORD:

Yet You, O Lord, know
All their deadly designs against me;
Do not forgive their iniquity
Or blot out their sin from Your sight.
But may they be overthrown before You;
Deal with them in the time of Your anger! (Jeremiah 18.23)

Like the psalmist, Jeremiah does not merely ask that they be prevented from harming him, but that God deal with them in anger. In the following chapter, God responds by telling of coming judgment against Israel, which would include those who were after Jeremiah. I could go on, but this should be a sufficient sampling of the Old Testament's calling for God's vengeance.

This phenomenon did not stop after Jesus and the New Testament came. Consider what we see in the book of Revelation. When John sees the souls of those beheaded for professing the gospel, they cry out, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6.10b). While what we are to make of the details of that vision is debated among scholars, it is clear that it is appealing to a desire for vengeance against the wicked. And how are their imprecatory prayers responded to? It is written: "And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until *the number of* their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also" (Verse 11). The martyrs in the vision were not rebuked and told to re-read the Sermon on the Mount; rather, they were affirmed and told just to wait until the appointed time.

Later, we see a judgment scene play out. When Babylon is destroyed, how do those in heaven react? God's judgment on that city is met not with weeping of those in heaven, but with rejoicing. John describes it to us:

After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.' And again they shouted: 'Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever!'"
(*NIV*, Revelation 19.1-3)

The angels even cry out, "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment *for you* against her" (emphasis added) (Revelation 18.20). It is not merely for His generic justice, but also the justice for His people that will compel us to praise God all the more.

Rejoicing over the judgment of God can be seen elsewhere in the New Testament, albeit a bit more subtly. Consider what is written in Romans 12.19: "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath *of God*, for it is written, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord." Why are we to not take revenge ourselves? Is it because we don't want vengeance at all? No. Rather, vengeance is God's, and He will avenge us. We refrain from avenging ourselves only because we trust that God will do it for us. Leaving vengeance to God is not the same as forgiveness, and it is certainly not how we are to regard other believers, but it is the case that God has promised justice for the righteous against those who make them suffer unjustly.

Consider also what Paul said to the Thessalonians in the broader context of a passage discussed earlier:

Therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. *This is* a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is *only* just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and *to give* relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thessalonians 1.4-10)

Paul doesn't specifically say that they are to call on God for vengeance like the psalmist does, but in context, he is clearly trying to bring them comfort in their afflictions, given that it is in the backdrop of the afflictions that they endure. How does Paul do so? He reminds them that they will be avenged. The vengeance of God against their abusers is something for them to rejoice over.

Now, this isn't to say that we should not show kindness to our enemies, pray for them, and tell them the good news so that they might be saved and spared from judgment. This is one of the great tensions of the Christian life (though it is certainly not the only one). Ideally, they

will come to know God, be forgiven, and brought into the family of God as we are. After all, we were once like them, and have been saved and reformed by mercy, not by anything we earned. However, if they do not repent, and instead they hate God and His children until the end, the Bible comforts us with the fact that evil will not win, that no one will get away with their cruelty, and that we will be there to praise God for His justice.

From the Old Testament saints to the Romans to the Thessalonians to every one of God's children who has ever lived and ever will, they are to be there to see God's judgment, which means that the wicked cannot just be judged at death or permanently cease to exist at death.

D. One Good Explanation – Part III

Having established the need for all of the wicked to be judged at once in front of all of the saved, the question may still remain as to why God would give the lost bodies, as opposed to just presenting them as immaterial souls before us on judgment day (if that is how they were in the intermediate state). I will note that this third point isn't so much a discussion of what the Bible says; instead, it is largely philosophical and speculative. Then again, the same could be said about the objection against annihilationism that this whole section is responding to in the first place. In other words, the objection by Pink and Ferguson and others isn't about what the Bible says, but about what they think is silly. So, I'm giving reasons why it is not so silly.

So what about this third good reason (perhaps better referred to as the third part of the good explanation)? First off, the same question could be asked of any traditionalist who holds to body-soul dualism (i.e. almost every traditionalist). If God could torment the souls of the wicked prior to the resurrection, why even give them the dignity of a body? If I, in order to be taken

seriously, have to answer what should legitimately be seen as a mystery of God, then I give the same question to the traditionalist.

But why would God raise them bodily? First off, now that we have gotten to this point where it is explained why they would have to be freed from their intermediate state and presented before the great white throne (which itself would probably qualify as a “cynical joke” even without the resurrection), is God taking the next step and resurrecting the unsaved that hard to believe? I might also ask, why would He not? And only by raising them bodily and destroying them as whole persons will the fullness of God’s power be shown. He will be shown to the wicked as the one who controls life (by resurrecting them), and death (by having killed them the first time around, and by destroying them once and for all). And lastly, if it is the whole person who lived on earth, living a life against God, then it makes sense that it would be the whole person, not just an immaterial spirit/soul, who has to stand before God at the final judgment. I imagine a traditionalist would give a similar response, and it is a good answer, so I think that takes care of that.

E. Regarding Sinclair Ferguson’s Comments

As mentioned earlier, Sinclair Ferguson said that to resurrect the damned just to destroy them would amount to a “cynical joke” on the part of God. He also adds, “There is something in it that is altogether out of keeping with everything that Scripture says about the utter integrity of God and his dealings with men and women.” Well, the idea may not sit well with Dr. Ferguson, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t biblical. I wish he would go more in depth and explain how that amounts to a “cynical joke.” The condemned might lament their being resurrected, but so what? Indeed, it will be terrible for the lost, but there is nothing unjust about it. God does not lie to

them in doing so. He does not give them any worse than they deserve in doing so. There is no lack of integrity. Where does that claim even come from? Does God somehow owe it to the wicked to not destroy them if He resurrects them?

Furthermore, a similar problem arises if eternal torment is true. Death is the enemy of God and man. The lost are raised from the dead and made immortal. Men throughout time have dreamt of being able to be immortal. The curse is reversed. Yet all this, which appears so good, would be done simply so that they could be tortured in Hell. Might the damned not then lament, “This is a cruel joke! Why would you raise us from the dead just to torture us forever? We wanted immortality, but this isn’t what we had in mind!” In fact, if the souls of the lost are being tormented before the resurrection, then it’s even worse. Might they not then also lament, “Why did you pause our suffering to give us immortal bodies? Why did you make us think, for a moment, that we were like the saved, crowned in joy and glory, only so we could suffer again?” If anything, *that* sounds more like a cynical joke...It doesn’t matter though, because what is biblical is what is biblical, no matter what I or Sinclair Ferguson says.

F. Conclusion

Why is there a resurrection of the lost if God will just destroy them? I cannot say for certain, but I can say that it is biblical. Beyond that, it makes sense that God would raise the lost so that the “whole” wicked persons can all be judged at one time when all of us are there to see it and glorify Him for it. Perhaps there are other reasons that people can come up with that make equally good sense. What makes the most sense is this: What matters is what God reveals in His word, so if it teaches that the lost will be resurrected and destroyed (which it does), then that is that.

LIV. REGARDING PHILOSOPHICAL AND EXTRABIBLICAL ARGUMENTS

A. This Isn't About Feelings...

I really hope that by now, whether right or wrong, I have shown that annihilationism is not a doctrine that you can dismiss as being largely emotional and ignorant of scripture. In fact, I would say that it is based on a more thorough and honest analysis of what the scriptures say and what is therefore the truth. But whatever the case, I really don't want to hear this doctrine treated as so obviously false that a wave of a hand and maybe a verse or two is sufficient to refute it.

B. I Won't Lie; I Cannot Be 100% Objective

Obviously there is an emotional aspect to this. That is not to say that I am basing my conclusion on the fact that it sounds better or makes me feel better. I at least try to ignore emotions here. No good scriptural argument is ever helped with the claim that it just sounds more right in your heart, especially given what God told the prophet Jeremiah:

The heart is more deceitful than all else

And is desperately sick;

Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17.9)

But while I like to say that I am completely neutral and objective, this is not entirely true, and I know this for the following two reasons:

1. No person is ever emotionally neutral. It is impossible to be fully objective in anything (and if emotions don't get in the way, pre-suppositions, biases, and the like, will).

2. Truth be told, I kind of had to pooh-pooh the idea of annihilation and be in favor of eternal torment for a little while, and this was out of emotion.

As for #2, this wasn't because I wanted the doctrine of eternal torment to be true in my heart. I can imagine a few scenarios where one might (e.g. if one thinks that annihilation is actually a worse fate, or if one is beholden to tradition). However, that was not the case with me. No, I inclined myself towards the doctrine of eternal torment because I did *not* want it to be true. Like everyone else, I initially believed in eternal torment. Some time later, I actually believed in annihilation for a short time until I read Revelation 20.10 and thought that that it proved eternal torment. Because annihilation understandably made me feel a little better, I didn't want to again make the mistake of following a fragile doctrine, becoming emotionally involved, and then finding out that it was not true. So, even as evidence mounted and hard questions were answered, I stuck with ECT. The way I saw it, nobody could accuse me of approaching this issue emotionally if I believed what I didn't want to believe! Of course, that still is an emotional reaction when you get right down to it...

So I can't claim that I have been perfectly scholarly about all of this. Nevertheless, annihilationism is the better argument. It doesn't matter if it's nicer sounding to the conscience (at least mine). That doesn't make it false. I'm sure the fact that God loves you certainly makes you feel good, but we all still believe that to be true, now don't we?

C. Complexity of Arguments

Eternal torment may be simple and easy to argue in small spaces, but that doesn't make it right; it just makes it easy for its defenders to sound big. It's easy to throw at someone "tormented day and night for ever and ever"... 'the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever'...'eternal fire'...'eternal punishment'...you can't deny eternal torment is true." To refute the

bombardment of single verses is far more difficult, especially given the many angles they can be argued from.

If anybody looks at how lengthy my answers are and thinks to themselves that since my defense of annihilationism is so long I must just be resorting to fancy rhetoric and verbal gymnastics, just think about how Jehovah's Witnesses might say the same about us. Jesus told His disciples that "the Father is greater than I" (John 14.28b). Jesus calls the Father "my God" on a number of occasions (e.g. Matthew 27.46; John 20.17; Revelation 3.12). In John 17.3, Jesus says to the Father, "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." Now, with that in mind, explain, as you would to a skeptic, how God can be triune and how we can say that Jesus is God without being untrue or blasphemous. It would take some time and effort. Fortunately, it won't be nearly as long as my defense of annihilationism, but then again, I had a lot more to tackle.

D. Annihilation Is Not the Philosophical Cure-All Its Detractors Like to Claim That It Is

Some might wrongly believe that annihilationists hold this position simply because it sounds better philosophically, and not because it is biblical. It is true that a few philosophical questions are answered by this doctrine. These include the very common question from outsiders about how a loving God (or anyone who isn't pure evil, they might say) can torture people for eternity. The annihilationist answer is obvious. However, it's not as though annihilation makes everything perfect and rosy and solves every hard question and therefore binds me to follow it no matter what the Bible actually says.

Many of the largest and most difficult questions still remain. Why didn't God stop Adam from sinning (or kill the devil)? How is it fair that we are sinful and therefore damned

because of what Adam did? Why didn't God step in somewhere? Why did He let Adam procreate? What of those who never hear of Jesus? How can God send someone to Hell just because of what they believe? Why doesn't God make it clearer that Jesus is the way? Why doesn't God just show himself instead of expecting "blind" faith? If God is so mighty to save, why will so few people be saved? Is God unable to save most of the world or simply unwilling? Doesn't God's love fail most of the time (since a large majority of people are probably damned)? How can finite sins that are committed within a short, finite period of time demand eternal punishment (annihilation is eternal punishment; if someone does one small sin, they lose eternal life forever)? I'm not saying that these questions don't have good answers (or aren't adequately accepted as unanswerable in faith that God's limitless wisdom and justice will resolve any issues). What I am saying is that annihilation doesn't help me at all. The questions like these that the unbeliever will pose are not answered by annihilationism. Whether defending the faith to unbelievers or to oneself, so many reasons for not believing in Jesus exist with or without annihilationism (not that they are good enough to keep us from believing, of course).

Now, there are some false doctrines that could answer some if not all of these, but you don't see me believing them. Whereas annihilationism (a true doctrine) can take some of the sting out of some philosophical questions when compared to traditionalism, universalism makes most objections practically irrelevant. The fact that everyone goes to Heaven in the end makes any difficulties much easier to swallow. But I am not preaching universalism. I am also not preaching that the saved today were pre-selected and everyone else is blinded but will have a perfect chance to accept the gospel between death and judgment. Some of the fringe groups within the Church of God traditions (e.g. "Worldwide" and "Restored" denominations) generally teach this. If you want a cure-all, that belief answers almost every question one could ever

imagine. But I can't defend it biblically. True, there are a few obscure prophecies that could possibly on their own be seen to suggest something like that (Ezekiel 37, Romans 11.26), but it is biblically unlikely. Without going into it, such an interpretation is not the only reasonable interpretation, and that extremely literal interpretation is hard for me to accept just given what Jesus says over and over about judgment day (like speaking of Sodom and Gomorrah expecting future condemnation, not evangelism). And even if taken absolutely literally, those prophecies only apply to Israel, not the whole world.

I don't deny that I really would love for universalism or this distinctive Church of God doctrine to be the case because, like I said, virtually every philosophical question and most if not all emotional problems with believing in Christian doctrine are solved by it. Think about how wonderful it would be. We wouldn't have to worry about anyone's soul because if they don't accept the gospel now. What of those who never heard of Jesus? No worries; they will hear the gospel perfectly in the next age. Even if we see a person die without Christ, we would know they would at least have a chance to accept Jesus later and could take comfort in that. Maybe, if the belief of those in the Church of God fringes is true, they might still deny God in the next life and be destroyed, but by that point, we would be glorified and have one mind with God and know in our hearts that their destruction is right. No unbeliever could ever trip us up with those hard questions above! I can't think of anything I'd like more. I'd never have to worry about anything! But it's not biblical.

Furthermore, while annihilation is easier on one's psyche and on one's emotional health than eternal torment is, it isn't nice. I don't have visions of most people I have ever met burning alive for ever and ever, but nevertheless, every unsaved person still brings to my mind utter darkness if I think about it too much (or at all). They are all doomed. Most people you will ever

meet are eternally condemned. They won't be A-okay. They are the rejects, the refuse, eternally left without redemption. They will never know God. They will never be able to cry out "*Abba*" like we do. They will see His glory but be sent away for ever and ever. They never have their happy ending. It is the ultimate tragedy with nothing to make it better ever. It really is as bad as it gets, and it ends that way.

My heart is ever troubled by them. The feeling is described best with just simply darkness. It is not the impassioned terror and resultant callousness that I felt before, when I believed in eternal torment. Rather, it is utter joylessness, utter hopelessness, utter darkness. And so few will we ever reach in our lifetimes! This whole world is a pit of despair and misery and condemnation. It still makes me ill. No, I am not put at ease by annihilationism. I prefer it greatly, but if I based my beliefs on what makes me happy or even just at ease, I would be a universalist, or at least a believer in the Restored Church of God twist on salvation.

E. Philosophical (and Scripturo-Philosophical) Arguments

I have not really made any philosophical arguments against eternal torment and in favor of annihilationism. I clearly do not deny that I have issues with traditionalism beyond it just being unbiblical. But while there are more philosophical arguments I could make against it, they are not relevant here. Furthermore, I don't bother arguing that much against most philosophical arguments in favor of eternal torment. As I said in those sections, all that matters is scripture, and that pretty much applies to any philosophical argument against the idea of conditional immortality. Don't get me wrong; I am ready and willing to go more in-depth if need be. If you're interested, ask me about them and I'd be happy to discuss it further. The last thing a traditionalist apologist should ever do is to try to use philosophical or emotional arguments to

defend the doctrine of God torturing people for ever and ever! However, what matters is not philosophy, but scripture. It matters not what we think the truth should be, but only what it is. I did not want to take away from my scriptural arguments and build straw men and smoke screens against my own position for people to destroy.

For us all who believe the scripture to be God-breathed and fully authoritative, it doesn't matter what we think. It doesn't matter if some think that men are too important to die out like beasts, or if it's hard to believe that most people throughout history could be wrong about man's immortality. It doesn't matter if someone thinks that being "saved" doesn't mean as much if you aren't saved from eternal torture, or if you think that "passing out of existence trivialize[s] the seriousness of the choices we make in life and the importance of our response to God's loving offer of community" (Grenz). It doesn't matter if some, like W.G.T. Shedd, take the absurd position that only if eternal torment is true would Jesus have had to die (153). And even if Jesus did preach about Hell more than Heaven (which He didn't), that doesn't tell us what Hell is. I argue from God's word. This whole issue isn't about philosophy; it's about what is true. And what is true is that the Bible teaches...well, you know.

F. God is Merciful, But So What?

This issue, despite how some frame it, has nothing to do with God's mercy vs. His justice. Some who believe in annihilation, rather unfortunately, claim that God is too merciful to send people to burn forever, so He destroys them out of mercy.

However, saying that God is too merciful for eternal torment to be true is no better an argument than the argument that God's justice demands eternal torment. In fact, it is worse, because the Bible actually makes statements about God's judgment which make the opposite

case, that the damned are shown *no mercy*. Of those who do not repent, they, like those who worship the beast, will receive God's wrath in its purest and strongest form, like wine that is unmixed and undiluted (Revelation 14.9-11). God is not merciful towards the damned in terms of their eternal judgment. God of course is merciful towards the unsaved in that when they repent, He will forgive them and they will become saved and as much His Children as we are. After all, we were once them (some, like myself, more so than others). To those who fear him, He is the King of mercy to whom nobody can compare. His love endures forever. It never fails. However, for those who deny God by denying Jesus to the bitter end, there is no mercy.

Rather, more serious annihilationists simply believe this: annihilation *is* the ultimate punishment. God's justice and fury, in their absolute fullness, are fulfilled in eternal destruction, in complete annihilation. Annihilationism is not "partial salvation" as Leslie Woodson calls it (55). I agree wholeheartedly with R. Todd Mangum: "Jesus and the New Testament writers confirm that God's future outpouring of wrath will be horrific," and "The prophets warn that God executes his wrath *without pity*" (emphasis added). The wicked receive God's wrath in full, and therefore, nobody is spared anything.

Sometimes people talk of anything short of eternal torment as being mercy, as not being God's full wrath, because, well, what could possibly be worse than eternal torment? Nothing. There is really nothing that the human mind could come up with that is worse than one's whole body being completely burned in fire (not to mention, while being separated from God), yet you never die, and it goes on not for a week or a month or a lifetime or a million years, but for ever and ever without end ever, so that after even a googolplex of years, there is still as much time left of it as when it started. Of course, with that in mind, the idea of God destroying the damned *sounds* like mercy. Now, Glenn Peoples does assert that we can't know for sure that annihilation

isn't actually worse than eternal torment ("Fallacies in the Annihilationism Debate" 346), and technically he is right. Still, even if annihilation is actually worse, although we would know that on the other side of eternity, I would imagine that most modern people would, knowing what we know now in this life, choose to be snuffed out of existence rather than being endlessly burned alive (or subject to some suffering that being burned alive represents). To our minds now, eternal conscious burning is a more horrifying fate. We can't imagine anything worse than that, but we can vaguely imagine it. So of course anything short of that would seem like mercy. "God could have burned them alive for eternity but punished them less, so He was merciful" is how the thinking goes.

However, it's not mercy if God never would have burned anyone alive forever in the first place. God could also turn the unsaved into chickens, but it's not out of mercy that He doesn't. It's not that He's too kind or loving or merciful. He is not merciful or kind or loving to the damned at all (at the judgment). I agree with the typical traditionalist on that. What they deserve is annihilation (not the man-made idea of eternal torment), and God gives them what they deserve. There is no mercy or compassion in it. God destroys them because it fulfills His just wrath. They get everything they have coming to them. God's wrath, unmixed, *is* annihilation.

G. Therefore...

I wish I could be 100% objective here, and I try my darndest to be, but this can never be the case. However, I will never say that annihilation is true because God is too loving to torture anyone forever. If that's what I believed, why did I ever believe in eternal torment to begin with? No, I believe what I believe because I believe it to be true. To advocate any other belief would be to lie. Believing something about God because you just assume the alternative is too awful to be

true is foolish, and making such a claim is one of the reasons why annihilationists have such a bad reputation today. When all is said and done, and all the dust clears, I rely on scripture.

That said, who among us can be 100% objective? Not only annihilationists get emotionally involved. Remember that bit about Robert Peterson's students from Section VII, about how they became physically ill when they had to consider that God might actually not torture people forever (presumably not because they wanted Him too but because that would mean their trusted teachers and beloved theologian had gotten it wrong)? Think about how this applies to other things. We genuinely believe that Jesus actually is the Son of God and that He really did die for our sins and rise from the dead (i.e. it's not just a "religious" belief). However, are we not also emotionally attached to this belief being true? I would say that out of faith (and I don't mean this pejoratively), we will believe the gospel when the degree of objective certainty is far less than what it would take to believe other things. I'm not sure what you could do to make me stop believing the gospel. Maybe if Allah or Science came from the sky and revealed that it is the true God, then I might believe otherwise. I would imagine it would be the same for all of us. That isn't to say there is no evidence for Christianity; there is in fact a lot more evidence than most people realize. But at the end of the day, once we are in and believe, we stick to it. We don't one day believe, and then abandon belief the next day when a good argument against Christianity is presented to us, and then believe again the day after when we find new evidence. Ultimately, we are way, way more emotionally involved with the belief in the gospel than I am with annihilationism.

So then, while it is true that I certainly cannot be trusted to be 100% objective, this isn't some philosophical construct or emotional claptrap. Conditional immortality is the real deal.

PART 6: SUMMING IT ALL UP

LV. CONTINUE TO BEWARE OF PRE-CONCEIVED NOTIONS

A. It's Hard to Shake an Old Paradigm

When all you've ever known is the idea of eternal conscious existence of all people, and therefore eternal torment for the wicked, it can be very hard to shake that paradigm from your mind. I am a committed conditionalist, and yet from time to time even I get caught up in my previous assumptions about Hell. If I, of all people, can sometimes still think in the old paradigm, then you all, whether you have experience with the doctrine or whether this is your first time ever investigating it, need to be all the more careful!

B. An Example – James 3.5-6

The first half of James 3 (which I think we all need to pay attention to in our everyday lives), is on the power and potential destruction of words, and Verses 5-6 are relevant here: “Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (NIV).

Here is the only use of the word *Gehenna* outside of the gospels and by anyone other than the Lord Jesus Himself, probably because most of the rest of the New Testament was written to Gentiles who wouldn't be familiar with the Valley of Hinnom (that is, *Gehenna*). James basically says here, in context, that one who can control his tongue can control his whole self, but the one who cannot sets his life on fire with it, as his tongue is lit by the fires of *Gehenna*.

Now, when I first came upon this passage (in this study; I'd read it before), I initially saw it as a challenge to my newly annihilationist position. I saw a reference to *Gehenna*, imagined the huge and (supposedly) fiery garbage dump of ambiguous scriptural meaning, and automatically associated the idea with ruin, not destruction. Basically, I thought of trash, not fire.

Why would I think this? Well, obviously one wouldn't naturally see destruction in a reference to fire (especially after a reference to a massive forest fire)! Rather, it is because whenever one speaks of *Gehenna*, it just simply is a place of torment and shame and eternal conscious ruin, so of course it makes sense that I would see it as a reference to someone being burned alive.

My above sarcasm aside, why on earth would anyone *actually* think that about *Gehenna* in James 3.5-6? Those implications of being on fire are neither obvious nor intrinsic to the text. He said a life is on fire. Aside from the fact that this is a metaphor that doesn't even directly speak of eternal judgment in the first place, the backdrop of this fire is a forest fire, which is hardly inconsistent with destruction. Why would that automatically mean eternal torment in fire? It only does so because even today, I still sometimes have my traditionalist glasses on.

The only way we would naturally read eternal torment in such a statement would be if we already established that eternal torment is the truth. That argument, which I myself started to make in my own head, is completely circular. The person is eternally on fire because that's what we think hellfire means. We can't then use that fact to say that this is what hellfire is like (although such arguments do pop up in books on the subject). And who saw this passage and foolishly begged the question this way? I did! In putting together my refutation of the doctrine of eternal conscious punishment, I went and circularly saw hellfire and used the fact that hellfire is

mentioned as proof that hellfire burns for eternity but never destroys because, well, that's what hellfire is like. After all, humans are special, right? They can't burn up. They just are immortal...

Be aware of things like this. If even *my* perception can cause me to unreasonably impose traditionalism on a passage that at best for traditionalism says nothing of eternity, how much more might a traditionalist be at risk of doing the same?

Because we think of hellfire as never burning out and people never burning up, we assume that since Hell is mentioned, the person is on fire but never destroyed. After all, that's what hellfire does right? It burns but never destroys and never goes out. Therefore, since hellfire is mentioned, this passage proves eternal torment in Hell.

That just doesn't cut it. There is no mention of torment or immortality, but only an analogy made comparing what the tongue does to what a spark does to a forest, and since trees are neither immortal nor to be made immortal, we know full well what it means there. Nothing in James 3 in any way supports the doctrine of eternal torment, so beware lest you see something like this and think it does, as even I am prone to do.

LVI. CONCLUSION

So, now that you've trudged through all that, I hope it has been useful. I don't expect to convince all of you (although I think I have given enough to do so). Nevertheless, I do hope that, at the very least, I have successfully defended my right to believe in annihilationism. I'm not just holding on to it because I like it better or in order to ease my fears about anything. It isn't just a philosophical construct. Right or wrong, I, and those whose shoulders I stand on, have given you no end of scriptural support, none of it twisted or abused or taken out of context. Do I believe that you should all believe in annihilation? Yes. Nevertheless, I do understand that I've probably asked you to turn a huge part of everything you believe upside down. I'm basically asking you to change your view of eternity itself. I'm putting forth a position that has had rather little explicit acceptance throughout Christian history (although it is by no means a novel doctrine). However, we're not a religion based on the teachings of men, but on the teachings of God Himself.

Ultimately, as serious as this is, it's not as though any of us will be damned by getting this wrong. We'll find out the truth when the time is right. Nevertheless, scripture shows it to us right here, that eternal life is a gift for the saved, and the rest will not live forever in any sense of the idea. The Bible teaches annihilationism. The love of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

PART 7: ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although it may sound a bit cliché, one certainly cannot write such a theological treatise as this without thanking the Lord Jesus Christ, who saved us from the judgment we deserve (and will save anyone who turns to Him).

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And lastly, thank you for reading!

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