

# Why I am an Annihilationist

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[This is a draft document, used as the basis of a podcast series]

I am an annihilationist. That means I think the Bible teaches annihilationism. Annihilationism is the view that eternal life is the gift of God, and that those who do not receive this gift will not live forever. Stated more negatively, annihilationists *deny* the more popular Christian claim that the Bible teaches the traditional doctrine of eternal torment in hell, and we affirm instead that the Bible teaches that the lost will one day die forever. It is important to realize then that annihilationism is not simply a denial that the Bible teaches eternal punishment. Rather, it is a particular view of what that punishment will consist of.

Not only am I an annihilationist, but I think that all evangelical Christians should be annihilationists, because the biblical case for annihilationism is very strong, and I think the arguments against annihilationism are very weak in comparison. That's not to say that there are no ambiguous texts of Scripture on the subject, or that there are no criticisms that need to be overcome. Remember – I said that the arguments for the other side are weak in *comparison*, but *every claim* about what the Bible teaches is going to have some explaining to do at some point.

Today I'm going to do two things: I'm going to outline a biblical case for annihilationism, and after each main point in favor of annihilationism I will address some of the main arguments against it. Robert Peterson (of Covenant Theological Seminary) and Christopher Morgan (of California Baptist University) are perhaps today's most vocal critics of annihilation and defenders of annihilationism – in fact their entire published careers, as far as I can tell, have been committed to the task, so I'll be using them as examples fairly often. After doing that I will then turn to some further arguments against annihilationism, and explain how they fail. In this presentation I will be using the term "traditionalist" to refer to somebody who holds what has become the traditional view of hell as a place of eternal torment.

While there are perhaps many biblical arguments for annihilationism, three stand out to me as the most important: The biblical question of immortality, the biblical vision of eternity, and the biblical language of destruction.

## 1. The Biblical Question of Immortality

The first (although not necessarily the most important) argument starts at the beginning, quite literally. In Genesis, God creates humanity in His image. In Genesis 2:7 we read that God formed man from the dust and breathed into him the breath of life, and then this dust formed creature “became a living soul” (AV). In this initial state, was man mortal or immortal? For my own part, I do not think that Genesis explicitly gives us the answer, but I am sympathetic to the claim that man before the fall was “immortable,” capable of becoming immortal, or capable of forfeiting that destiny. I think this is certainly faithful to the way the story of humanity in Genesis unfolds.

God tells Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or he would die (literally, “dying you shall die”). Calvin was right, I think, to see that this means not that man would drop dead on the day that he ate, but that Adam’s death commenced on that day and culminated on the day that he returned to the dust, just as God promised. Commenting on this verse, he said, “The miseries and evils both of soul and body, with which man is beset so long as he is on earth, are a kind of entrance into death, till death itself entirely absorbs him.” As we know, the first humans did rebel against God, and God judged them. The serpent had told Eve that in spite of God’s warning, in fact they would not die. They would gain knowledge, and lose nothing (Gen. 3:4-5).

As the story unfolds, we see that this was a lie. In Genesis 3:22 we see that God would not allow sinful man to remain alive indefinitely. In fact, the Hebrew text reveals an interesting feature we can call “the reticence of God.”

And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.”

So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Genesis 3:22-24

The NIV tidies up the grammar for us to make the language more digestible, losing much of the impact of this quotation. The Hebrew does not say that man must not be allowed to take of the fruit of the tree of life and live forever. Instead it reads as follows.

And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. And now, lest he reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever....."  
So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden

Notice the break in the sentence. God does not finish His sentence. The consequences are literally unspeakable. Man is not permitted to have access to immortality in his fallen state, and God will not even speak of such a thing. Human death entered the world.

But if this is so, then the lost cannot live forever, and if they cannot live forever, then the doctrine of eternal torment is false, because if it were true, then the lost would live forever. Contrast this biblical claim with the teaching of the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, in one of its "three forms of Unity," namely the Protestant confession of faith called the Belgic Confession. When speaking on the last judgment, in article 37, it says:

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.

This is contrary to what Scripture tells us about immortality. The hope of immortality was lost in Adam, and gained in Christ, but *only* in Christ. This is the message of Scripture from start to finish. The book of Proverbs tells us in 12:28, "In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality." Endless life is not a universal expectation. This is only affirmed more and more in the New Testament. In 2 Timothy 1, Paul tells Timothy about the saving grace of God:

This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

2 Timothy 1:9b-10

It is through the Gospel that life and immortality can be restored to human beings. The tragic corollary of this is that if you ultimately reject the Gospel, you will not have immortality.

This truth is expressed again in 1 Corinthians 15, where the death brought about by the first man Adam is replaced with immortality brought about by the second Adam, Christ. Paul says in verse 49 that "just as we

have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so we shall bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” He goes further still speaking of the resurrection of the saints who will bear Christ’s glorious image, saying:

For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

1 Corinthians 15:53-55

And so the first biblical argument is this: Contrary to what many Christians think, as shown in the example of the Belgic Confession, the unsaved will not have immortality, that is, endless life. Immortality is a gift of God that He gives exclusively to His people. This means, among other things, that a time will come when God’s people are partaking of immortality, but there are no unsaved people alive anywhere.

Additional to this argument (and the two should not be confused), annihilationists have pointed out that traditionalists are often (although not necessarily) committed to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. While this is not the *only* reason evangelical traditionalists believe that the Bible teaches eternal torment, the affect that this belief will have on the way one approaches the issue is obvious. If souls do not die then they have to live somewhere, and if they do not go to heaven then they will spend an eternity living in hell. But since the immortality of the soul is a claim that the lost either do or will have immortality, it must be rejected for reasons just outlined.

#### *Traditionalist responses*

The traditionalist response to arguments about human immortality must ultimately affirm that the Bible teaches that the lost will be made immortal, just as the Belgic Confession explicitly does. However, traditionalist responses tend to focus only on the second of the two arguments outlined above, while the first is generally overlooked. The response has been a defense against the claim that traditionalists skew biblical theology to fit their belief in the immortality of the soul. This is obviously a response that needed to be made, but the more substantial argument is the first one outlined above, namely what the Bible positively teaches about immortality.

Unfortunately, traditionalists have little to say about the direct Scriptural statements about immortality. Instead, the argument is that since other biblical texts (in the opinion of traditionalists) teach eternal torment, the lost

*must* somehow receive immortality. A couple of examples make this clear. While he does not address the first of the arguments discussed here, Christopher Morgan, when addressing the second argument on the supposed inherent immortality of the soul, replies:

It seems clear from Revelation 20:10... that Satan, the beast and the false prophet are punished forever. Do they somehow have inherent immortality? Of course not. God will keep them in existence endlessly in order to punish them. Similarly, the wicked will be punished consciously forever in hell, not because they exist as immortal souls but because God will sustain them.<sup>1</sup>

Morgan only interacts with an extreme argument here, namely the accusation that traditionalists believe that the soul is immortal in such a strong sense that God Himself could not destroy it. This is something of a straw man, as annihilationists do not make this attack in the first place. In fact, even the immortality that the saved will one day receive is not immortality in this strong sense. The real issue, which is obscured in this reply, is not whether or not the soul is “inherently” or independently immortal, but whether it is immortal at all – whether or not immortality will come to all or only to some. But as a response to this more substantial issue, Morgan’s words clearly put the cart before the horse. The annihilationist claim is that the Bible *teaches* that immortality will only come to the saved, and so the traditionalist interpretation of texts like Revelation 20:10 must be incorrect. It is not much of a reply to say that since the traditionalist interpretation of Revelation 20:10 is *correct*, annihilationists must be wrong about the biblical passages that speak directly to the issue of human immortality. By dealing only with the charge that traditionalists are influenced by their doctrine of the immortality of the soul and by *not* dealing more fully with the first argument concerning the Bible’s overall teaching on immortality, Morgan ends up failing to address this more substantial issue.

Unfortunately, failing to address the whole issue is a common theme among traditionalists who reply to annihilationist arguments. Robert Peterson engages in exactly the same reply to this argument: He filters out the first argument, addresses only the second, and does so backwards – by claiming that his interpretation of proof texts on eternal torment is the right one and *therefore* the argument from immortality should be rejected. When in dialogue with Edward Fudge on the subject, his reply does not even mention any of the texts that speak of human immortality. Although frankly admitting that the Bible only ever explicitly attributes immortality to God and the saved, he claims that *since* the Bible teaches eternal torment in Matthew 25:46 and Revelation

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher W. Morgan, “Annihilationism: Will the Unsaved be Punished Forever?” in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (ed), *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 205.

20:10, “Fudge errs when he rejects the immortality of the lost.”<sup>2</sup> This is nothing more than the refusal to allow biblical arguments to count against a traditional interpretation of Scripture on the grounds that one is already convinced of the truth of traditionalism. There is no getting away from the fact that traditionalism teaches that the lost *will* be made immortal (as Peterson grants, and as the Belgic confessions makes explicit), but there is likewise no getting around the fact that Scripture teaches that immortality is a gift for the saved only. Attempting to reverse this assessment by claiming that the Bible teaches eternal torment just shows us the unfortunate tendency some have to allow their doctrine to filter out other aspects of biblical teaching. Not only do human beings not have souls that are independently and necessarily immortal and immune from divine destruction (something both sides agree on), but the Bible makes it clear that immortality *at all* is a gift that God will give the saved.

## 2. The Biblical Vision of Eternity

My second argument is that the Bible paints for us a broad picture of what eternity will be like, a “big picture.” Not every detail is spelt out, to be sure, but as a grand cosmic layout, one fact of eternity is glaringly clear: There is no place for evil in it. Now I want to be very clear, I’m not going to say “well, this idea of hell is so grotesque that it is evil, so it won’t come true.” The argument is far more careful than that.

Scripture tells us that a time will come when evil will be no more. It does so explicitly on a couple of occasions. In the redeemed creation, God will have an unblemished slate. As an illustration (and only an illustration), recall the biblical account of the flood of Noah’s day. Recall God’s words.

So the LORD said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

Genesis 6:7-8

Take note of what God says here: He is going to destroy humanity because He is sorry that He made them. No amount of suffering could alleviate the problem of thinking “I am sorry I have made them,” because they would still exist. What God was doing then was starting over, a new world with His chosen people as the inhabitants. It would be a world free of all the things that God regretted.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Peterson in Edward Fudge and Robert Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 103.

Of course, the flood is not the final judgment. It is, however, a story that is illustrative of the way in which God approaches punishment to achieve something, and as we know – and this will become relevant later in this debate – the flood is used as a picture that foreshadows God’s final punishment of the lost (2 Pet 3:3-13).

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. When the Apostle Paul wrote about God’s sovereign saving plan, ordained from all eternity, he said:

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

Ephesians 1:9-10

In context, Paul is saying that in Christ, God had purposed to save us from all eternity, so that the whole work of salvation gives glory to God alone. But notice that the work of sovereignly bringing us in under Christ our head is just part of God’s larger plan of bringing not only us, but literally everything in creation also under one head, namely Christ. This allows us two possibilities. Either those who reject the Gospel in this life will also, like us, be brought under one head, Christ, and be saved eventually as well, or else a time will come when there will simply *be* no people who persist in rejecting the Gospel, not because they have been converted, but because they are not alive anymore. In effect, we must choose: Annihilation or Universalism? I think the arguments for God’s eternal punishment upon the lost are much too strong to accept universalism, which leaves us with annihilationism as the way to account for the biblical vision of eternity.

One more example, stated differently, is in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” ... When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

1 Corinthians 15:24-28

Here Paul is discussing what will happen after the resurrection of the dead has occurred. What is made clear is that God’s enemies are no more, even death itself is no more (death itself is certainly not being tortured in

some far flung corner of creation, it will literally be gone), and using what is actually accounting terminology, Paul says that God sums up all the totals, and Christ is all in all – there is literally nothing that is not under Christ. The picture is one of perfect unity and peace everywhere. But given such a perfect picture, what room is left for evil?

Perversely, defenders of the doctrine of eternal torment have taught the opposite of Scripture here, and even worse: That not only will creation be forever divided into a stark dualism of glory and anguish, heaven and hell, but that this will actually be something that we take great pleasure in. Two examples will suffice to make this point, but many more could be shown. I will use one Catholic, and one Protestant. First, Thomas Aquinas (Summa Theologica, Third Part, Supplement, Question XCIV, “Of the Relations of the Saints Towards the Damned,” First Article):

In order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned ... So that they may be urged the more to praise God ... The saints in heaven know distinctly all that happens ... to the damned.

And secondly, Isaac Watts, the theologian and Hymn writer of the great awakening:

What bliss will fill the ransomed souls,  
When they in glory dwell,  
To see the sinner as he rolls,  
In quenchless flames of hell.

It requires very little effort to notice the very sharp contrast between this outlook and the biblical vision of eternity. What a different vision! How alien this vision of eternity is to Scripture’s vision of eternity. In Scripture, the glorious fact is that all evil is gone, all creation worships Christ, and He is all in all. In such a creation, endless torment of the damned is impossible, since there is simply nothing evil left to torment at all.

### *Traditionalist Responses*

Ironically, when replying to universalists, some traditionalists unwittingly fall into agreeing with annihilationists on this point. Professor of New Testament at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, David Ewert for example, while defending eternal torment, says:

Universalists... appeal to Eph 1:10, where the gathering together of all things in heaven and on earth in Christ is mentioned. While the verse does teach that in Christ all discordant elements of the universe are done away, it does not say that all will be saved eventually.<sup>3</sup>

The irony is that this reply comes in a book that is supposed to be defending the doctrine of eternal torment! Annihilationists couldn't agree more – although avoiding universalism in this way also deals a deathblow to the doctrine of eternal torment, because it admits that Scripture teaches that “all discordant elements of the universe are done away” with, and all things will be subject to Christ. Some traditionalists however do see the way that texts like this can be seen to support annihilationism, and address the argument. Looking at the array of texts that teach the ultimate end of evil and seeing how annihilationists use them, Christopher Morgan, to his credit, admits when reviewing this annihilationist argument as used by John Stott, that “at first glance, this argument seems persuasive.” After all, he observes, “The ultimate eradication of the wicked seems to be a better victory than endless punishment.”<sup>4</sup> Not only does it “seem” better, but I have argued that the future absence of all evil is actually indicated by some texts of Scripture. Frustratingly, however, Morgan does not offer an exegetical treatment of any of the texts that I mentioned in support of this annihilationist argument. Instead, he returns to the same well as when responding to the previous argument, and says:

But a better approach [than Stott's] 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. The final chapters of Revelation contrast the final state of the redeemed with that of the wicked.<sup>5</sup>

Morgan then cites Revelation 20:10 (again), concluding that because of what he thinks that text means, in fact evil will always exist – in hell. Because of that interpretation of Revelation 20:10, he nuances the claims of texts like Ephesians 1:10, and says that since evil will only exist in hell, it is being subdued and therefore does not contribute to a dualistic view of eternity. This reveals a troubling pattern of the way (some) traditionalists address challenges to their theology. Two arguments have now been brought against their interpretation of a range of biblical texts (texts including Revelation 20:10), namely the argument from immortality and the biblical vision of eternity, and in each case the arguments have been rejected *because of* the very interpretation that is being challenged (by quoting Revelation 20:10 as evidence). That interpretation, it would seem, is being

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<sup>3</sup> David Ewert, *And Then Comes the End* (Pittsburgh: Herald Press, 1980),

<sup>4</sup> Morgan, “Annihilationism: Will the Unsaved be Punished Forever?” 217.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan, “Annihilationism: Will the Unsaved be Punished Forever?” 217.

placed beyond challenge, and is *itself* used as the standard by which challenges to it are evaluated. A more clear-cut example of circular reasoning would be hard to imagine.

### 3. The Biblical Language of Destruction

Thirdly and lastly, the simplest argument for annihilationism is that the Bible directly teaches that the lost will be destroyed. It really is as simple as that sounds. The Bible uses a range of language to describe the fate of the lost, but overwhelmingly what we see is the clear language of destruction. This is probably the easiest of the three arguments to make, since the Bible overflows with very straight forward examples, so I've chosen just a selection.

In Matthew 10:28, Jesus tells his disciples that rather than fearing men who can kill the body, they should “be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” We know what Jesus meant with His reference to men who can kill the body. Here, the ultimate power to kill the whole person in Gehenna (unhelpfully translated “hell”) is affirmed by Jesus. Of course, we could try to avoid the annihilationist outcome by saying that this text merely asserts God’s *ability* to destroy people, not His intention to do so. But if this were so, then the same purpose would be served by some absurd warning like “be afraid of the One who can turn you into a melon.” The warning would be misguided because God is not going to turn anyone into a melon. But He is going to destroy the lost.

The fact is stressed so often and so emphatically in the Bible that the disinterested reader will see it without difficulty. Here are some further examples.

In Matthew 7:13-14 the Lord warns that we should seek the narrow path that leads to life, and that the way to destruction, by contrast, is wide, and followed by many. The two possible outcomes of the human person’s life here on earth are presented in uncomplicated terms: life and destruction.

In Matthew 13:40-42, Jesus clearly interprets His own parable of the weeds as follows:

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing

of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

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.

The Bible is literally packed with affirmations of this fact, but so often we simply don’t notice them. We are all familiar with nice simple evangelistic texts like Romans 3:23, but less often do we pause to think about the simple words they use – “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.” All that I am arguing in this debate is that we should let texts like this speak, and not subconsciously edit them so that by the time we have processed them through our theological reading filter, they say something else.

To avoid the monotony of citing verse after verse, all of which speak with one clear voice in the same direction on this subject, I’ll give just two more, then summarize. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 speaks of a future time, “when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power...”

And finally, 2 Peter 2:6 tells us of God that “by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.” I cannot conceive of a way to state it more clearly than this. The absolute annihilation that came upon Sodom and Gomorrah serves as “an example of what is coming to the ungodly.” As is said in law, *res ipsa loquitur* – The thing speaks for itself!

This evidence is not out of the ordinary, as a cursory examination of Scripture very readily confirms. I have merely offered a sample of the consensus in Scripture, given the normal way it speaks of the fate of the lost. Eternal torment is just not here. Annihilationism is. After surveying this overwhelming tendency of New Testament language that I have presented here, Clark Pinnock makes what I think is safe to call a very fair observation:

Our Lord spoke plainly of God’s judgment as the annihilation of the wicked when he warned about God’s ability to destroy body and soul in hell (Matt. 10:28)...

The Apostle Paul creates the same impression when he wrote of the everlasting destruction that would come upon unrepentant sinners (2 Thess. 1:9). He warned that the wicked would reap corruption (Gal. 6:8) and stated that God would destroy the wicked (1 Cor. 3:17; Phil 1:28)... Concerning the wicked, the apostle stated plainly and concisely: “their destiny is destruction” (Phil. 3:19)....

It is no different in any other New Testament book. Peter spoke of the “destruction of ungodly men” (2 Peter 3:7) and of false teachers who denied the Lord, thus bringing upon themselves “swift destruction” (2:1, 3).<sup>6</sup>

Well said.

### *Traditionalist Response*

The traditionalist response here is to claim that “destroy,” and similar words in Scripture should not be taken as simply or literally as the annihilationist interpretations of these texts take them.

Take just one example from 2 Peter 3:6-7, where Peter writes that the world of wicked people living at the time of the flood “perished,” and the world is now reserved for fire until the day of judgement and the “destruction” of ungodly men. The same Greek word referring to destruction is drawn on in both instances here. Don Carson uses the rebuttal that I have just described, namely to say that the term does not literally mean destroy here. Carson has sought to remedy this situation for traditionalism by fending off the apparently strong language of destruction in 2 Peter. He concedes that there is an at least reasonable case to be made for annihilationism by appealing to the biblical texts that speak of the destruction of the finally unsaved. He admits while describing the annihilationist view, listing 2 Peter 3:7 as an example, “Fair exegesis of the words involved suggests *total* destruction, i.e., cessation of existence.”<sup>7</sup> But ultimately Carson rejects such arguments, calling them “too hasty.”<sup>8</sup> “The ἀπόλεια word-group,” he explains, “has a range of meanings, depending on the context.” While it might literally refer to destruction, it need not always have this meaning in some contexts. He points to examples where this is the case: The “lost” son and lost coin of Luke 15, the “ruined” wineskins of Matthew 9:17 and similar examples. None of these things is simply “destroyed,” so we might legitimately read the *apoleia* terms as referring to ruin or loss, and not complete destruction.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Clark H Pinnock, “The Conditional View” in William Crockett (ed.), *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 146.

<sup>7</sup> Don Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 519.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Carson has undermined himself here, committing what he elsewhere categorizes as an *Exegetical Fallacy*, one that he calls the “unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field.” This fallacy “lies in the assumption that the meaning of a word in a specific context is much broader than the context itself allows and may bring with it the word’s entire semantic range. This step is sometimes called illegitimate totality transfer.”<sup>10</sup> He commits the fallacy as follows. He listed 2 Peter 3:7 as an example of a “destruction” text used by annihilationists. He then argued that the *apoleia* word-group has a much wider semantic range than this meaning, and it can mean loss, ruin, waste etc., depending on the context in which it appears. The obvious implication is that *in this text*, which is cited by annihilationists as supporting annihilationism, the words of the *apoleia* group can mean ruin, or loss or waste or something else, over and against “destruction.” But this is not the case if, as Carson pointed out, the context is to be the determining factor in which meaning we find in the word. Peter has just used the verb to refer to what the flood did to those living long ago, now in the same breath he uses the noun to refer to what God will do in the future to the godless. To avoid the meaning of destruction (which is clearly the meaning present in the context, as seen from the flood example), Carson would have us prize open the fullest semantic range in mind of the word so that we can select something like “ruin” or “loss” instead, as though *all* the possible meanings of the word were available to us. The presence of the Scriptural precedent for destruction in the previous sentence is the factor that tips the scales against this possibility. Carson’s comeback, while making a serious attempt to engage the exegetical issues in 2 Peter, is unsuccessful. Remember – our concern should not be with the range of possible meanings that a word is able to express. Our concern should be with what the most likely meaning of a word is given its context. Notice, for example, that many of my examples of the language of destruction come from the synoptic Gospels. Here’s a piece of relevant background information to take into account: When the verb *apollumi* is used in the synoptic Gospels to refer to the actions of one personal agent against another (e.g. Matt 2:13, Matt 9:22) – apart from the texts on eternal punishment – it always refers to someone literally killing another. What Carson and other traditionalists are doing then is asking us to engage in special pleading.

And so the case I am presenting has a veritable landslide of biblical weight behind it, and it will take something absolutely impressive to set it aside. Everything Scripture directly states about the final fate of the lost trumpets their eventual destruction, and the doctrine of eternal torment is a full frontal attack on this unambiguous message of the Bible. It is therefore unevangelical to affirm it, and eminently proper for evangelical believers in Jesus to affirm the doctrine of annihilationism in its place.

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<sup>10</sup> Don Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 62.

## **Four important features of the case for annihilationism**

I want to stress four things about the case for annihilationism that I have outlined here, features that – from an evangelical perspective at least – make the case particularly strong.

Firstly, these are *biblical* arguments. I can't remember the number of times that I have read or heard evangelicals dismiss annihilationism with a wave of the hand as an emotional reaction or a philosophical construct. It's important to see that the arguments I have presented depend solely on considerations of what biblical texts affirm. If the reader is not convinced by them, that conviction must not depend on assumptions about the nature of justice or theological constructs about what holiness demands and so forth. Objections to an exegetical case need to be exegetical in nature.

Secondly, these are *thematic* arguments rather than proof text arguments. Granted, individual texts have obviously contributed to the arguments, but the arguments are not solely derived from one verse per argument or anything like that, as some evangelical arguments unfortunately do. Instead, each argument is about a widespread and frequent phenomenon in Scripture – themes that are developed throughout the Bible.

Thirdly, none of these three arguments involve special pleading. At no point have I tried to appeal to a novel or unusual understanding of particular phrases or words. I grant, there is a time to admit that the genre of a particular text requires a non-literal reading, a fact which I think many arguments for eternal torment fail to appreciate as we will see shortly, but absolutely normal rules of hermeneutics have been employed in these three arguments.

Fourthly and lastly, the arguments are *independent*, rather than cumulative. That is to say, each of them in isolation counts as a reason to believe that annihilationism is biblical. Granted, when treated as a cumulative case, the three arguments are much more impressive than one, but it would be a mistake to think that this case is like a chain of three links, which falls apart if even one of the links fails. I don't think any one of these three arguments does fail, but the thing to note is that the success of the other two would in no way be impaired even if the reader thought that one of them had shortcomings.

## **Arguments Against Annihilationism**

Having given three arguments for annihilationism, I'll now give five arguments against annihilationism. As with the case for annihilationism, these are not all of the arguments that are used, but I think it is fair to say that

these are among the most common arguments one is likely to encounter. The first is not really a particularly serious group of arguments, but unfortunately they are arguments that annihilationists are likely to encounter. I know, because I see them all the time.

### ***Unhelpful tactics***

The first type of argument is unfortunate, but needs to be included just because this type of argument has an unfortunate tendency to rear its head in some types of evangelical polemical writings.

#### – Misrepresentation

Robert Morey wrote a popular level book in 1984 called *Death and the Afterlife*. It's a book that enjoyed some popularity, and advocated a popular evangelical view of death and the afterlife, and in particular a traditional view of hell. Unfortunately, it's also a book that exhibits much of what is *wrong* with popular evangelical theological writing. It is careless, frequently inaccurate, it makes simply *bad* arguments that invite the criticism that evangelicals just don't think about what they believe, and – relevantly – it badly misrepresents the views of those whom Morey was seeking to critique.

Edward Fudge, in his review of Morey's book, notes a shocking number of outright misrepresentations of the annihilationist point of view. Consider the following 12 examples. Morey claimed that annihilationists:

1. admit no degree of punishment (p. 154);
2. deny that *aion* ("eternal") has any sense of endlessness (p. 129);
3. deny that the traditionalist view appears in the Pseudepigrapha (p. 123);
4. have no emotional problem with the thought of extinction (p. 101);
5. teach that the wicked pass into non-existence at death (p. 87);
6. say that Sheol means the physical grave (p. 75);
7. deny an afterlife (pp. 67-68);
8. think Socrates and Plato didn't teach the survival of the soul after physical death (p. 56);
9. assign one rigid meaning to "soul" throughout the Bible (pp. 49-50);
10. refuse to allow the New Testament to give new meaning to Old Testament words (p. 23);
11. teach that no one has "everlasting" life now (p. 27);
12. dismiss Luke 16:19-31 as "nothing" (p. 30).

I suppose it is preferable to call this incompetence than malice, but *what* incompetence! It's as though in this type of writing (and I'm definitely not trying to imply that Morey is the only example this bad), the evangelical author is safely assuming that his evangelical audience will already share the author's view, and already consider annihilationists to be wrong, meaning that care and rigor can be thrown to the wind when describing the annihilationist view, and nobody will notice.

In case you were wondering, *not a single accusation on that list* is true of the annihilationist position. It seems that there are a cluster of falsehoods that circulate in the anti-annihilationist camp. For example, in the book *Four Views on hell*, authored by three scholars plus John Walvoord (if that seems harsh, then please reserve that judgement until you've actually read Walvoord's contribution to this book), Walvoord repeats the allegation that annihilationists deny the resurrection of the lost (p 13). Walvoord goes further, saying that annihilationism “challenges the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy” (p 167) which in context just means that annihilationism denies the biblical teaching is true! He adds that annihilationists literally “ignore” (that's his own terminology) the fact that the Bible uses the word “eternal”(p 170)! How can people like that even be reasoned with?

Just as bad as all this is the charge made by Robert Peterson when it comes to annihilationists and the atonement. Dr Peterson – in a number of places – claimed that Edward Fudge and Edward White before him *taught* – not that Peterson drew this as an inference from their writings, but that they actually *taught* – that in dying as a substitutionary sacrifice, Christ's human nature became separated from his divine nature, and thus annihilationists reject Chalcedonian Christology, and are heretics. It's just amazing that such a weighty and specific claim would be made in what is supposed to be a serious critique of annihilationism. The claim is just not true. The claim does not appear anywhere in Fudge's work or Peterson's work. I deal with this major misrepresentation in a couple of articles at the *Beretta* site in the theology section, but just let me say now how low this is. A Christian audience has just been told that annihilationists hold to Christological heresy, when they hold to *no* such thing, and the individuals accused have never indicated any such thing. Some people, fortunately, will look further into the matter and find out that the accusation is completely baseless, either by reading the accused authors, or by reading responses to Peterson like the one recently published in *JETS*, but for many readers, the damage will never be undone.

– Guilt by Association

From time to time you might hear someone say that annihilationism is suspect because it's something that the Jehovah's Witnesses believe. Robert Morey, for example, makes an issue of this claim. Firstly, it's not quite

true, and suggests a hastiness to lump superficially similar ideas together. Jehovah's witnesses teach something different and far more complex involving a second probation of the lost followed by the annihilation of some of them, but there's no need to delve into all that. The second point is the more important one: To reject annihilationism because of this type of similarity is fallacious, representing incredibly lazy thinking. Many traditionalists, for example, agree with some teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses: The inspiration of Scripture, the freedom of the will, the atoning death of Christ, and so forth. Moreover, 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?

– Implied character assassination

I won't say too much about this one, but if you're familiar with anti-annihilationist rhetoric you will have seen this come up from time to time. Annihilationists, it is sometimes suggested, lack missionary zeal because they don't anticipate that the unsaved are going to suffer forever anyway. Or how's this gem from Jon Braun, author of *Whatever Happened to Hell?* He says that annihilationists "wanted to be universalists but just couldn't bring themselves to justify it" (p 49). Robert Morey makes the accusation that annihilationists are people seeking to "silence their conscience," "justify their wicked lives" and "defend their evil ways" (*Death and the Afterlife*, p 157).

I'll end my summary of unhelpful tactics there. The kind of venom and heat directed at the annihilationist point of view is both spectacular and disappointing, coming as it does from a professing *Christian* community and directed at other *Christians*. If these are the careless, fallacious and ungracious tactics believers use against each other, who can fault unbelievers from thinking that Christian scholarship has gone to the dogs?

In fairness, attacks like these do not make up the bulk of the critiques of annihilationism. I'll turn now to what I think are the major biblical arguments against annihilationism and for eternal torment. You may notice – and yes, this is intended as a critique – that the arguments are not nearly as *thematic* in nature as the arguments I gave for annihilationism, but rather they have a stronger tendency to be based on individual (dare I say "isolated"?) passages or even verses. That being said, let's get into it:

### ***The Rich Man and Lazarus***

I've started out with the story that Jesus tells in Luke 16:19-31 – the story of the Rich man and Lazarus – because a) it's a common text used to combat annihilationism, but also because b) I want to explain why it actually doesn't even *address* the subject that annihilationism speaks to, so I can set this argument aside and get on to some arguments that are more relevant.

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is the story of a rich man and a poor man who die, and are immediately taken to their respective destinations in the afterlife – Lazarus to a place where he rests with Abraham (not, by the way, to a place known in Jewish theology as “Abraham's Bosom,” as there was no such place in Jewish theology. This was merely a place where Abraham was, and Lazarus was able to rest against him, as one might at a table with a friend in those days), and the Rich man is taken to *hades*, a place of great heat where he is unable to access water. And so, we are told, this passage in Luke presents us with a picture of what hell will be like, and it consists of ongoing torment, and not final annihilation. In the 2004 work *Hell Under Fire*, edited by Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson, and contributed to by nine evangelical scholars altogether, this passage in Luke's Gospel is cited no fewer than five times as indicative of what *hell* will be like – in a book where the term *hell* refers to the doctrine of eternal punishment.

This passage, then, is taken to teach that hell is a place of eternal conscious separation from God in a state of suffering. There are a couple of replies to make to this. The first reply is the more complicated one, and it's actually unnecessary, given the second reply, but I'll touch on it just briefly. The first reply is that there is no decisive reason to think that this story a) is true at all, or b) was intended as a teaching on the nature of the afterlife at all. Now to some who really aren't familiar with the cut and thrust of new Testament scholarship, that may come as a bit of a shock, and to those people I say: Just wait until the next argument. But the fact is, and this is the subject of a piece of writing that I'm working on at the moment, there is very good evidence that this story was not original with Jesus. In fact, I'd suggest that the listener who is skeptical of this just consult a few weighty critical commentaries on Luke's Gospel and you'll notice something: Virtually all commentators, regardless of their view on the eternal state, will acknowledge this. Even some more popular level works on the parables will candidly say this much. Edmund Flood, for example, notes:

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.

...

Jesus, in this story, *didn't* want to speak about the afterlife. He wasn't telling His audience what

would happen in the future when they had died. That was just the ‘backdrop’ to what he wanted to say: the furniture he was taking over from a familiar set.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the foremost German New Testament scholar of the mid twentieth century, Joachim Jeremias, explains that Jesus actually refers to the same story twice, namely the story of the rich tax collector *Bar Ma'jan*, a tale that appears in the Palestinian Talmud. Jesus draws on several details of this story in the parable of the great feast, but here in Luke 16 the parallel is even closer.<sup>12</sup> In the original, a teacher of the law and a rich tax collector die, and, in accordance with the prejudices of the religious community, a friend of the legal scholar is shown in a dream the fates of the two. The teacher of the law is relaxing by a flowing stream in Paradise, while the tax collector is suffering on the other side, without being able to access the water. The similarity is obvious, but so too is the difference. The thing that Jesus' audience will immediately recognise is the way the story is changed. Anybody familiar with Lukan scholarship in general will be aware that *the* dominant theological theme in Luke is that of eschatological reversal. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Jesus is explaining to them how badly the Jewish leaders understand God's kingdom. Wealth, status and religious authority were taken as evidence of God's favour, and Jesus shows them how they have got it wrong. "You know this story you tell," says Jesus, "where you exalt yourself and shun those undesirable elements? You have it backwards!" The reason Lazarus is named here is that the name means "God helps," that is, when man would not help because of his prejudice, God helps because of his grace.

David Wenham is therefore right, in my view, when he issues the warning that "the parable was not intended as a map of the afterlife, though it has often been used or misused that way."<sup>13</sup>

But secondly, even if you have no interest at all in the first century (and earlier) background of this story, if you find all such critical scholarship a bit liberal and complex, just think about what the story itself purports to be about. Annihilationism or eternal torment are positions on the nature of the eternal state following the judgement. This story makes no claim to depict any such state. Instead it paints a bizarre picture of the *intermediate* state immediately following death. This is further confirmed by the fact that the place the rich man finds himself in is called *hades* in the Greek. This term refers variously to the grave, to the state of death, to

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<sup>11</sup> Edmund Flood, *More Parables for Now* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1981), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke, New Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1963, rev. ed.), 183.

<sup>13</sup> David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus: Pictures of Revolution*, The Jesus Library (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 145.

the intermediate state, or in mythology to the underworld. The final state we call “hell” is referred to with the Greek term *Gehenna*, for example in Matthew 10:28 where Jesus warns of God's ability to destroy body and soul in *Gehenna*, and that term is not present here in Luke 16:19-31 at all. So this passage has literally nothing at all to say about whether or not annihilationism is true.

Incidentally, I highly recommend having a look at the origin of the term *Gehenna* in the New Testament. It's the Greek form of the Hebrew *Geh-Hinnom* or sometimes *Geh-Ben-Hinnom*, meaning the Valley of Hinnom or the Valley of the son of Hinnom. This is an actual place just southwest of Jerusalem, a place long associated with mass death and destruction, and according to many sources, a place of burning where rubbish was thrown, being consumed in the flames. The perfect picture of final destruction.

### **“Eternal Punishment”**

One of the major arguments – in fact possibly the major argument – used by traditionalists against annihilationism is the fact that the Bible uses the phrase “eternal punishment” to refer to the state of the lost. A number of other texts that use the word “eternal” are then taken to refer to this text, making the argument appear stronger, and so it is argued, this is a reference to eternal torment in hell. This interpretation is strengthened by the reference to eternal *fire* that also occurs in this passage, which occurs at the end of Jesus' illustration of the sheep and the goats.

Matthew 25:41, 46

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’. ... And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

So there are the terms in question: Eternal fire and eternal punishment. To this list I'll add a couple of others that are often mentioned as well because of their use of the term “eternal,” namely Daniel 12:2 which refers to “shame and everlasting contempt” and 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10, which uses the phrase “everlasting destruction.” Incidentally, the terms “everlasting” and “eternal” are translated from identical Greek and Hebrew words, which is why I'm happy to switch between them.

I'll deal first with Matthew's use of “eternal fire.” The gist of the response I would make here is that what is qualified as “eternal” is not any duration of suffering, or the people who are subject to eternal fire, but only the

fire itself. If you find that a little strained, keep listening and you may be surprised at what comes next. The phrase (*puros aionios*) is rare in the New Testament, occurring only three times. The first occurrence is also in Matthew's Gospel, in 18:8 where it says that it is better to enter life missing a hand or a foot than to have all your hands and feet but to be thrown into the eternal fire. Apart from the phrase itself, nothing else about anything eternal is said in that instance. The second occurrence is here in Matthew 25, as already quoted. Given a traditionalist mindset, you'd expect that the third use of this phrase occurs when describing the flames of hell as well, right? Wrong.

Have a look at Jude verse 7

Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

How did Sodom and Gomorrah serve as an example to the world? By undergoing, as the AV puts it "the vengeance of eternal fire." The Greek word for "example" here literally refers to a *sample* of something. If you want to know what eternal fire is like – just look at what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah.

But what *did* happen to Sodom and Gomorrah? It's recorded in Genesis 19:24-28

Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.

But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the LORD: And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace.

If that's what eternal fire did to Sodom and Gomorrah, then there's no basis for just assuming that when the phrase appears in the Gospels it must refer to a fire that torments people forever.

But what about this phrase used in Matthew 25 - "eternal punishment." Does that suggest eternal torment?

Consider this question: "Does the book title *crime and punishment* mean *crime and torment*?" The answer is obvious: No, not at all. Granted, torment might be one kind of punishment that could be inflicted on people, but

it is hardly the *only* thing that could be called punishment. This type of argument is what's known as committing the fallacy of *begging the question*. Begging the question – also called engaging in *circular reasoning* – occurs when a person tries to argue for a certain conclusion, but actually smuggles that conclusion into the argument itself, meaning that they were presupposing the outcome all along.

For example, let's say that I believe that hell will actually be eternal annihilation: annihilation forever, from which there is no coming back. Now let's say I quote Matthew 25:46 as proof of this claim. "There it is in black and white: *eternal punishment!*" And since punishment is annihilation, this verse proves my position! Well, no, I wouldn't have proven my position correct, actually. I would have just *assumed* my own view of divine punishment and smuggled it into the verse, so no wonder I ended up finding it there. Likewise, if we just *assume* that punishment means torment, the phrase "eternal punishment" will end up meaning eternal torment. But we have to do better than just assuming that our view is correct. The disagreement over this verse is not over the meaning of "eternal," but rather over the content of the punishment. A whole range of things can be referred to with the term "punishment," including torment or execution, or any number of things. Interestingly, no straightforward narrative or didactic passage of Scripture ever uses a phrase like "eternal torment" or "eternal suffering," but in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, he does refer to "everlasting *destruction*." There is now no ambiguity about what the "eternal punishment" consists of. It will consist of destruction.

But what about this text in 2 Thessalonians? How is it, that it is appealed to *both* by traditionalists *and* annihilationists? The passage refers to those who reject the Gospel, and "who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power."

On the face of it, it seems clear enough why the annihilationist might appeal to this text. It's similar to the biblical reference to "eternal punishment," but it's more specific in that it actually specifies what *type* of punishment is in view, namely destruction. Why then do traditionalists appeal to this text as though it supported their position?

The argument is twofold, and is as follows: Since the word "eternal" is used, the destruction cannot be literal in the way the annihilationists think, and secondly, because the lost are said in this text to go on existing outside of the Lord's presence, they clearly have not been destroyed in the literal sense. So let's look at each of these arguments in turn.

Douglas Moo, writing against annihilationism, presents the first argument as clearly as anyone has:

In the nature of the case, a punctiliar action, such as “annihilate,” cannot be “eternal.” By so qualifying *olethros*, therefore, Paul indicates that it must describe a state (“ruin”) rather than an action.

Let's stop there to analyse the argument so far: Firstly, note that annihilationists *agree* that everlasting destruction is a state rather than an act. Of course the *act* of annihilating cannot be eternal, but the resulting “annihilation” or “destruction” clearly could be. “Destruction,” after all, is a noun and not a verb. So it appears that Dr Moo is attacking something of a straw man. But what basis does Moo give for asserting that the state must be one of “ruin” instead of literal destruction? Unfortunately, that straw man argument is all there is.

Notice what comes next however: Moo unwittingly and yet completely destroys his position. Observe:

Read from Moo, p. 106: “A More promising...”

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.

Here's the second traditionalist argument from this verse in 2 Thessalonians, this time presented by Robert Peterson. He says of this passage:

Furthermore, does it make sense for the apostle to describe unbelievers' extinction as their being “shut out from the presence of the Lord”? Does not their being shut out from his presence imply their existence?

So the argument is that *not only* are the lost punished with everlasting destruction, but the text goes on to say that they are also (Peterson quoted the word “and”) “shut out” from God's presence, suggesting that even having had destruction inflicted upon them, they still exist.

Douglas Moo uses the exact same argument:

A second reason for thinking that “destruction” refers to the end of any prospect of a meaningful relationship with God is that Paul expands the concept of “destruction” with just this idea: People are “shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess. 1.9b).

Both authors deliberately choose the NIV as their translation of choice here, and for good reason: Had they chosen instead the AV, the ESV, the NASB or any number of literal translations, they would simply have been unable to make this argument. This is because the words “and shut out” are not found in the Greek at all. The only preposition found here is *apo*, which answers to the translated word “from.” Hence the AV has simply, “who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.” So it's not the case that this verse is saying that they shall suffer everlasting destruction and also they shall be shut out from the presence of the Lord, as the NIV misleadingly suggests. Rather, they will be removed from the presence of the Lord *by* being destroyed with an everlasting destruction. Yes, it refers to exclusion, but not *in addition* to destruction. It is exclusion *by means of* destruction, which is how the verse reads in the AV, the NASB, the ESV and others, following the Greek much more literally than the NIV at this point.

The last text I'll cite that is used by traditionalist because it uses the word “eternal” is Daniel 12:2.

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame *and* everlasting contempt.

Daniel Block, writing in favour of the doctrine of eternal torment, says: “Prior to Daniel 12:2, we find no clear evidence of belief in hell, if by hell we mean a place of eternal torment and judgment for the wicked.” As an aside – by the word “hell” we shouldn't just *mean* a place of eternal torment. We should only mean the place or state of future punishment. Whether it involves eternal torment should not be an a priori matter of brute definition that we just smuggle into the word, otherwise a debate about what hell is like would be pointless: it just *means* eternal torment and that is that.

But clearly what Block is saying is that Daniel 12:2 is a reference to eternal torment. He is not alone. Robert Peterson likewise claims that the shame and everlasting contempt referred to here “indicates a never-ending conscious existence that corresponds to the never-ending conscious existence of the righteous.” But why is

this? Where does this belief come from? After all, the text doesn't actually *state* this. It is only the righteous who are specifically said to receive any kind of eternal life at all. What is shown to the wicked is only shame and contempt, and not life.

I would like to be able to peel back the surface of traditionalist arguments about this verse and dig deeper into them to see all the mechanics of how their conclusion is reached, but unfortunately what you've just heard really *is* as deep as it gets. That's the whole argument. The observation about shame and contempt is made, and then a claim about *everlasting* conscious existence is tacked onto the end. So let me go out on a limb here and try to help the traditional case out.

Perhaps the traditionalist might want to insist that in order for a person's shame and/or contempt to go on existing, it must be the case that the person in question is still alive. But what good reason is there to think that this is true? In fact, there's a biblical example that shows that this is *not* true.

Isaiah 66:24 – in this context God has just victoriously slain his enemies, in vv 15ff

For behold, the LORD will come in fire,  
and his chariots like the whirlwind,  
to render his anger in fury,  
and his rebuke with flames of fire.  
For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment,  
and by his sword, with all flesh;  
and those slain by the LORD shall be many.

At the close of this same passage we see a reference to righteous, who:

shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

What has happened to the wicked? Simple: They are dead. But notice the word “abhorrence” here in the ESV. It varies from one translation to another, “they shall be loathsome” or “they shall be an abhorrence” are common. But here's the thing: It's the same word translated “contempt” in Daniel 12:2, *dara'ōn*. Here in Isaiah, the contempt is held *by* the people of God, *for* the slain enemies of God. Likewise in Daniel 12:2, it's the contempt, not of the wicked, but of the people of God, or perhaps even of God Himself, that is eternal.

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.”

## ***Worms and Fire***

### ***Mark 9:43-48***

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

This is Mark’s first reference to *Gehenna*, translated “hell,” but perhaps better left untranslated (being a proper noun). This is a well-known passage used to support the doctrine of eternal torment, for a fairly obvious reason. Jesus warns His listeners about the possibility of going into Gehenna, “where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” On the basis of this saying in Mark, William Crockett claims that “There is no doubt that the New Testament writers expected extended suffering to take place in the next age.”<sup>14</sup> Robert Yarbrough goes further, saying that “in Mark 9, then, Jesus teaches that hell’s agonies are ongoing and neverending.”<sup>15</sup> He says, rightly, that Jesus teaches about hell by quoting the view expressed in Isaiah 66, but it has to be said, given that he realises this, the fact that he still thinks that it teaches eternal torment suggests a certain lack of objectivity. Before any reasonable conclusion about its meaning can be made, the

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<sup>14</sup> William V. Crockett, “The Metaphorical View,” William V. Crockett (ed.), *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 71.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Yarbrough, “Jesus on Hell,” in Peterson and Morgan, *Hell Under Fire*, 74.

background of this saying must be fully taken into account. This is a direct quote from Isaiah chapter 66, which I'll quote here, along with some context to help establish the meaning.

The LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to pay back his anger in fury, and his rebuke in flames of fire.

For by fire will the LORD execute judgement, and by his sword, on all flesh; and those slain by the LORD will be many.

...

From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the LORD.

And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

(Isaiah 66:15-16, 23-24)

Here, eternal torment is not present. Instead, what is in view is a scene of God's enemies having been killed off, and now all that remains is a pile of corpses, being consumed by maggots and fire, a scene of disgust and abhorrence. How does this bear on Jesus' use of verse 24 in Mark's Gospel? It seems that at very least, it can be said that it isn't obvious that Jesus' saying requires us to see Him as teaching eternal torment. Commenting on Mark 9:48, R. Alan Cole notes that

The Old Testament context (Is. 66:24) helps to explain this solemn imagery. It has reference in Isaiah to "the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me." Gehenna, the eternally smouldering rubbish-dump outside Jerusalem, is the symbol of the final state of those who have rebelled against God, amongst whom Jesus warns us that we may find ourselves, unless we enter God's *kingdom* (verse 47), equated with *life* (verse 45).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> R. Alan Cole, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1989, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 224.

Reflecting on the way this passage is frequently used in traditional theology, Douglas Hare advises us that

It is clear in the Isaiah passage that the apostates whose worm and fire are unending are “dead bodies.” There is no suggestion that these evil persons will *suffer* eternally; their carcasses will remain indefinitely as a reminder of their rebellion against God.<sup>17</sup>

While it appears to be true that eternal suffering is not in view, even here, it seems we are being asked to swallow too large a camel. How can carcasses “remain indefinitely” – especially those being consumed by maggots and/or fire? In Isaiah, it would be a reasonable inference that we are being shown how such language can be used – to stress permanence and irreversibility.

The traditionalist usage of this passage in response has been less than satisfying. Often in traditional defences of eternal torment, the verse is quoted without comment as though its meaning does not need expounding. It is generally treated in isolation from the text Jesus is quoting from Isaiah. When Edward Fudge, for example, makes the observation that the worm in this picture “is a devouring worm, and what it eats – in Isaiah’s picture here quoted without amendment – is already dead,”<sup>18</sup> Robert Peterson’s retort comes as a surprise:

Once more Fudge ***imposes*** his annihilationist reading of the Old Testament upon the New Testament texts. Does this sufficiently explain Jesus’ words about the worm’s not dying? Would the worm not die when it had consumed its host? Should not a conditionalist theologian address the traditionalist arguments arising out of the text? [emphasis added]<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Mark*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 117-118.

<sup>18</sup> Edward W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 114.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Peterson, “The Hermeneutics of Annihilation: The Theological Method of Edward Fudge,” in Michael Bauman and David Hall (eds.), *Evangelical Hermeneutics: Selected Essays from the 1994 Evangelical Theological Society Convention* (Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1995), 201.

To use an understanding of the meaning of Isaiah to interpret these words of Jesus then is an *imposition*, which does not allow one to understand this New Testament passage properly. The apparent assumption is that we must treat these words of Jesus as though they do not mean what Isaiah meant. To be sure, taking Isaiah into account (as Jesus clearly did by *quoting* it) makes it more difficult to find eternal torment in these words of Jesus, but that hardly makes it inappropriate to do so (unless of course our aim all along was to find eternal torment here). When contemporary preachers quote the New Testament to teach on a particular doctrine, we do not reject what they say on the grounds that they are “imposing” a New Testament understanding upon an issue. On the contrary, what they say will be ***bolstered*** by the authority of the New Testament. The same is true of Jesus’ use of Isaiah.

But what of the reference to the “unquenchable” fire here in Mark 9? Well, firstly, keep a close watch on what traditionalists say when they quote this verse. Since *they* have a developed theology of what they think this phrase refers to, you might notice that from time to time they misquote it, unintentionally substituting their own interpretation for the words of Scripture. Going back to Robert Yarborough, he quotes this verse as referring to “the fire that never goes out.” Be on guard for that kind of thing, because all it takes is a subtle change of wording to give an altogether different impression. The reference in Mark 9 is to an unquenchable fire.

Larry Dixon, in response to the suggestion that the fire of Mark 9 might be a consuming, rather than a tormenting one, quotes Alan Gomes, and leaves it there as an adequate rebuttal.<sup>20</sup> Gomes’ response is a good example of the way traditionalists read this text:

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. But the torments of hell are likened to *undying*, not dying worms. This is because their supply of food – the wicked, never ceases.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Dixon, *The Other Side*, 80.

<sup>21</sup> Alan W. Gomes, Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell, Part Two, *Christian Research Journal* (Summer 1991), 11.

So he actually slightly doges the question of fire and goes back to the worms – but you can see the nature of his argument. Lest it be thought that this is only the peculiarity of one defender of eternal torment, this identical argument is marshaled in the semi-official statement of the Master’s Seminary, where Richard Mayhue reasons,

The “unquenchable fire” of 9:43 must have an endless supply of fuel (otherwise it would be quenchable), which would be impossible if one took the annihilation view. Since the worm does not die, it implies an endless supply of food which could not be with the annihilation view.<sup>22</sup>

The argument then seems to be:

- 1.) Worms require food or they *will* die
- 2.) This text in Mark says that the worms in hell (be they literal or metaphorical) will *not* die
- 3.) Therefore this shows (either literally or by way of metaphor) that the lost people in hell will never be consumed/destroyed

But clearly such an argument impugns the way Scripture itself uses such language. It would imply for example that Isaiah was wrong to use this language in connection with the corpses of God’s slain enemies. It also entails an absurdity. One might ask – what are the worms doing? Gomes calls the wicked “food” for the worms, so it would seem he thinks the worms are eating. But if they are actually eating, and if (as Gomes asserts) the food source will never be dissipated, what we need to further posit is that either the unsaved are eternally growing in hell to replace the tissue that the worms have eaten, or that when people go to hell they acquire infinite body mass so that regardless of how much is eaten, more food for the worms will always remain. Likewise with the comment Mayhue makes

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<sup>22</sup> Richard L. Mayhue, “Hell: Never, Forever, or Just For a While?” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9:2 (1998), 138. This statement is being referred to as a “semi-official” statement on the part of The Master’s Seminary because it comes from an issue of the Master’s Seminary Journal dedicated to the topic of Eternal Punishment where faculty members of The Master’s Seminary contributed all the articles, all of which come to the same conclusion (i.e. that eternal torment is true and any opposing view is false). It seems clear that the intention of the journal issue was an effort on the part of TMS to espouse its position (not that there is anything wrong with this in itself of course). As an aside to the comments Mayhue makes, we suggest that his grasp of the physics of fire is somewhat lacking. It is patently absurd to say “The “unquenchable fire” of 9:43 must have an endless supply of fuel (otherwise it would be quenchable).” No matter *how* much fuel a fire might have to consume, we could still conceive of the fire being quenched (i.e. put out) before it does so. Mayhue seems to think that when a fire “runs out of fuel,” it has thereby been “quenched,” and vice versa.

about the fire. If the unsaved really are the “fuel” that sustains the fire then in order for them to provide a perpetually undepleted source of fuel they would quite simply have to keep producing more material to be burned or they would need to have infinite mass. In response Gomes and Mayhue might object to such a bizarre literalism, but to use a playground retort – they started it. The absurdities do not arise if we allow the Scriptural use of the terminology to guide our interpretation of it.

It appears that the mere appearance of reference to fire that is not quenched calls to mind a familiar view of hell that involves fire, and that view is then found in the statement itself. Robert L. Thomas demonstrates this for example when he says, while defending eternal torment, that “[t]he picture of being victimized [sic] by worms whose appetites will never be satisfied and of **a fire that will never run out of fuel** is repulsive beyond imagination” [emphasis added].<sup>23</sup> It may indeed be repulsive, but the truth is that this passage doesn’t refer to a “fire that will never run out of fuel.” This is another one of those traditionalist slips – the subtle misquotes of Scripture, slipping their theology *into* incorrect quotes from Scripture. Mark 9 refers to a fire that will never be quenched. Thomas might *think* that this entails a fire that will never run out of fuel, but no such meaning is intrinsically present in the words, especially when their usage elsewhere in Scripture is considered (as we will shortly see). A fire that is not “quenched” is one that is allowed to burn unrestrained (i.e. “unquenched”) until it has consumed the object being burnt. This is exactly how such language is used, for example, in Ezekiel 20:47-48.

[S]ay to the forest of the Negeb, Hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord God, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree in you and every dry tree; the blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be scorched by it. All flesh shall see that I the LORD have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.

It seems clear enough that what is in view (whether the picture itself is literal or figurative) is a blazing fire that will destroy the forest, and nobody is going to save the forest, because the fire will not be quenched by anyone. An unquenched fire is simply one that is not prematurely snuffed out. This has no implications for whether or not the fire will *last*

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<sup>23</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “Jesus’ View of Eternal Punishment,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9:2 (1998), 164.

*forever*. Apart from common sense then, we have good Scriptural precedent in Isaiah 66 and Ezekiel 20 for understanding it this way. If this is the case, then Morna Hooker is surely right when he says of Mark 9, “It should be noted that nothing is said here about eternal punishment: on the contrary, the image seems to be one of annihilation, in contrast to life; it is the fire, and not the torment, which is unquenchable.”<sup>24</sup>

Let me add something at this point – it's true that the New Testament writers, or Jesus, are quite entitled and able to take Old Testament passages and give them new meaning. That is done with a number of Old Testament texts that are said to be fulfilled in the life of Jesus for example. But in the cases under consideration, note two things: *firstly*, the New Testament writers and Jesus do not give any indication that we are supposed to attribute new meaning to the Old Testament material that they are drawing on, and *secondly*, traditionalists aren't even making the claim that this is what Jesus is doing. Their claim – or at least the claim of many of them – is the erroneous claim that the Old Testament text of Isaiah *itself* teaches eternal torment, and as we saw by having a look at the context of Isaiah 66, that is simply not the case.

Time for a break, I'll be back in a minute.

### ***Apocalyptic imagery***

I've saved this category of argument until the end because these arguments constitute the most powerful argument for traditionalism. Notice, I didn't say that they constitute a strong argument, I said that they constitute the most powerful one. In spite of that, I think it is still relatively weak. I personally find it telling that *the* strongest argument for the doctrine of eternal torment is drawn from this kind of writing – and really only from one book in particular, the book of Revelation, a book notoriously replete with symbolism. I think the situation is analogous – very similar in fact – to the situation in eschatology where futurists gain a doctrine of the millennium almost exclusively from Revelation 20 (not that they interpret it carefully, in my view, but that's another story). This alone should send off alarm bells, if for no other reason than the fairly common sense judgement that clear Scripture should be used to interpret less clear Scripture and not the other way around. Notice how in episode 5 we saw that traditionalists have a habit of deflecting what look like clear biblical

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<sup>24</sup> Morna D, Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1991), 232.

arguments against their position, drawn from a wide array of texts, by reaching into the imagery of Revelation 20 and using their interpretation of *that* to fend off arguments drawn from many diverse types of text.

That said, here is the basic traditionalist argument from the book of Revelation.

### **Revelation 14:9-11**

Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, “Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, they will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name.”

According to Robert Peterson, this text is one of the three “most revealing biblical passages on hell.”<sup>25</sup> Like many, his conclusion is that “Revelation 14:9-11 teaches that hell entails eternal conscious torment for the lost.”<sup>26</sup> Millard Erickson reflects on this vision, saying, “What would produce smoke, unless something was burning?”<sup>27</sup> It would surely follow that if the smoke goes up forever, then the unsaved must burn forever. The exegete who does not believe in eternal torment then, is in a position where she needs to show why this passage should *not* be interpreted to refer to the traditional teaching.

The Book of Revelation is replete with Scriptural language and imagery, and this passage is no exception. It is “rooted in the Old Testament. This is where we find the clues to the meaning of the various symbols – comparing scripture with scripture.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, while unlike most NT books this one never *cites* the Scriptures, it

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Peterson, “The Case for Traditionalism,” 160. We would want to point out that the term “hell” (whether translated from *hades* or *gehenna*) does not appear in this text, and at no time in the book of Revelation is the word hell used in connection with the punishment in fire that is alluded to here, except from when *hades* is cast into the lake of fire (20:14). The other two passages that Peterson counts among the most significant are Revelation 20:10-15 (which we will cover next) along with Matthew 25:31-46, which lies beyond the scope of this work.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>27</sup> Millard J. Erickson, “Is Hell Forever?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:607 (1995), 271.

<sup>28</sup> David and Pat Alexander (ed.), *The Lion handbook to the Bible* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1973), 645-646. While a list of contributors is given, it is not stated who wrote the article on the book of Revelation.

remains true that “**No** book of the NT is more thoroughly saturated with the thought and language of ancient Scripture than the book of Revelation” [emphasis added].<sup>29</sup> This fact should alert us to be extra sensitive to the scriptural background of the imagery that is employed in this book. The language used here of the followers of the beast is almost exactly like that used in the prophecy against Edom in Isaiah 34:9-10

And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into **sulphur**; her land shall become **burning** pitch.

**Night and day** it shall not be quenched; **its smoke shall go up forever**.

From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one shall pass through it forever and ever.

No exegete has ever suggested that Isaiah 34:9-10 is a reference to the eternal torment of the inhabitants of Edom. On the contrary John Watts observes,

The effects of the ban bring an end to Edom’s existence as a country and as a people. The resulting desolation is pictured in three ways which may remind a modern reader of the anticipated results of a nuclear bombing. The countryside will smell of *burning pitch and sulfur*. *Pitch* ... occurs in the OT only one other time ... but *sulfur* ... was rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24) in a place very near to Edom... In Ezek 38:22 God allows sulfur and fire to fall on Gog and Magog. And in Isa. 30:33 the breath of Yahweh is pictured as a stream of sulfur. The desolation is pictured as lasting forever, burning day and night.<sup>30</sup>

Otto Kaiser likewise finds himself concluding, “It is clear enough that he [the poet] thought of the end of Edom in a similar way to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.”<sup>31</sup> It seems self-evident that the language of endlessness here (fire never being quenched, smoke rising forever) is not intended to portray eternal misery but rather “the perpetuity of the destruction.”<sup>32</sup> The image of smoke used here in Isaiah is taken directly from the account of Sodom’s destruction in Genesis 19:28, where Abraham looks upon the remains of Sodom the following day and sees “dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.”

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<sup>29</sup> J.R. Michaels, “Old Testament in Revelation,” in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (eds.), *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 850-851.

<sup>30</sup> John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987), 12.

<sup>31</sup> Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, trans. R.A. Wilson, Old Testament Library (London: SCM, 1974), 358.

<sup>32</sup> John N Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 614.

There is, therefore, a biblical precedent in prophetic literature for the intended meaning of the images of subjection to fire and sulphur, along with the accompanying picture of ascending smoke. Although a strictly literalistic interpretation might imply burning that lasts for all eternity and smoke that will continue to rise, the *point* being made via such imagery is that the destruction is total and irreversible. We see the same kind of imagery appearing in the book of Revelation elsewhere as well. For example, we are told that “the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again” (18:21). Yet when this overthrow is depicted we see a re-appearance of the language from Isaiah, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever” (19:3). What is in mind here appears to be the overthrow of a godless kingdom, and as with Sodom and Edom, the smoke rising forever and ever emphasises the totality and irreversibility of the judgement. It is these observations that lead Fudge to say that eternal torment “is a possible interpretation – if we ignore how the Bible itself uses the same language elsewhere.”<sup>33</sup>

G.K Beale notes this connection between Isaiah 34 and Revelation 14 and 19 but does not seem to fully appreciate its significance. He notes that the reference to Babylon’s smoke ascending forever “comes from Isaiah 34:9-10, where the portrayal of smoke continually ascending serves as a permanent memorial to God’s punishment of Edom for its sin.”<sup>34</sup> However, when commenting on 19:3 he notes what appears to him to be an interpretative difficulty, and offers his own solution:

Rev. 14:11 also [i.e. in addition to 19:3] alludes to Isaiah 34:9-10 to describe the never-ending effect of God’s judgment of the beast’s followers. Here Edom’s fall is taken as an anticipatory typological pattern for the fall of the world system, which will never rise again after God’s judgement. Why does John reapply the Isaiah allusion from 14:11, which there referred to the eternal punishment of unbelievers and here to Babylon’s judgment? What is the link between the two similar descriptions? It is perfectly natural that ungodly individuals whose lives were inseparably linked to the great city should also suffer the same fate as that city, a linkage borne out in 18:4.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Edward Fudge, “The Case for Conditionalism,” in Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, 75.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 929.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 929. It should be noted that when Beale uses the words “eternal punishment,” what he *means* is “eternal torment,” “punishment” being used in a qualified, interpreted way.

Beale sees the connection between the destruction of Edom, and the destruction of this city of “Babylon,” and notes the obvious, that the latter is using the language of the former to make the same point – that it will be permanently done away with. However, when he sees that the identical imagery is applied to the fate of those who follow the beast in Revelation 14, he sees a problem. The problem is that Beale, like other traditionalists, does not believe that the ungodly people *will* suffer the fate suggested by this imagery – permanent destruction. How, asks Beale, can the imagery on the one hand mean “eternal punishment” (by which he means eternal torment), and yet only a few chapters later mean everlasting destruction? It should be clear that this problem will only arise if we approach the book of Revelation believing in eternal torment to begin with, otherwise no conflict would arise when we see the destructive imagery of Isaiah being applied to the followers of the beast. We might also note that Beale’s solution does not really achieve the end he seeks. When he acknowledges that these texts show the ungodly individuals suffering “the same fate as that city,” it is apparent that he has not taken eternal torment off the proverbial hook at all. Rather, he undermines it, given that he has described the “fate” of “that city” as being like that of Edom, permanent destruction, and he has already noted there that the smoke rising forever need not imply eternal torment, but rather it serves as a “memorial” of its punishment.

Carson’s rejection of the view of Revelation 14 presented here is almost staggering. He says:

If there is an allusion to the sufferings of Edom in Isaiah 34 [in Revelation 14], I suspect that Edom has the same 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” (Jude 7).<sup>36</sup>

If Edom, like Sodom and Gomorrah really *do* serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire (as we have argued that they do), then the result is an *acceptance*, rather than a rejection, of the annihilationist understanding of Revelation 14:9-11. It appears, however, that this is not what Carson wants his readers to think. The context of his words shows us that he is defending eternal torment (or at least something like it) as a definition of hell. His argument cited above then, can be broken down as following:

- *Hell* is eternal torment
- The imagery of Sodom and Edom foreshadows *hell*, which is what is presented here in Revelation 14 using the imagery of Edom and Sodom
- Therefore, Edom and Sodom foreshadow eternal torment.

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<sup>36</sup> Don Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 526.

The circular nature of this argument is obvious. Unless premise 1.) is present the rest of the argument falls to the ground. If we simply switch 1.) for 1a.) Hell is annihilation, then the conclusion would be transformed into 3a.) therefore Edom and Sodom foreshadow annihilation. Carson might object to having his argument cast in such an unfavourable way, but unless 1.) is taken for granted then his statement is puzzling indeed, for it no more endorses eternal torment than it does annihilation. Surely a more persuasive argument is:

- 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.

Peterson does nothing to rebut this interpretation of Revelation 14:9-11, although he does appeal to this text as though it clearly excludes the annihilationist view. It is noteworthy, however, that although the person he is interacting with (Edward Fudge) points out the Scriptural imagery that is being drawn on here from Isaiah, Peterson makes no reference to Isaiah's words in an attempt to account for their reappearance here.<sup>37</sup> Other defenders of eternal torment have offered similar approaches to this passage. Buis, for example, quotes it without comment along with Revelation 20:12-15 (also without comment), and apparently assumes that this will silence those who do not believe in eternal torment.<sup>38</sup> His later comments on the verses he has cited focus on proving that the Greek term for "forever" really means "forever."<sup>39</sup> It will be noted that this fact is not in dispute here. Rather, it is being pointed out that the vision itself is drawing on earlier imagery that we accept as referring to complete destruction. The conclusion that we may legitimately draw from this is that the visions in the book of Revelation are not intended to be taken absolutely "literally." Rather than trying to impose what we think would be a "natural" reading of the text (i.e. as literal a reading as possible), we must allow the Scripture to spell out its own vocabulary for us. This is especially true in light of the very nature of apocalyptic literature, as Sam Hamstra explains:

Scholars describe this pictorial presentation of truth as apocalyptic: a style of communication and writing characterized by bold colors vivid images, unique symbols, a simple story line, a hero, and a happy ending. Thus, in Revelation you meet angels, animals, and numbers. You see

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<sup>37</sup> Peterson, "The Case for Traditionalism," 159-164.

<sup>38</sup> Harry Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957), 46-47.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

lightning and hear thunder. You witness earthquakes and battles. You see the sparkle of jewels and a woman clothed with the sun facing a terrifying dragon. You see a rider on a white horse and hear the lyrics of the Hallelujah chorus.<sup>40</sup>

When we forget the genre that we are dealing with, and begin to treat the book of Revelation like simple historical narrative or a didactic piece of writing about the nature of the world to come, we are misusing it and cannot hope for any reliable results. When we do take the genre seriously into account, and allow Scripture to interpret its own symbols, we are surely on much safer ground.

A final observation on this passage is that made by Ralph Bowles regarding the “immediate context of Revelation 14.”<sup>41</sup> A fact that seems to have eluded most traditionalist theologians commenting on Revelation 14:9-11 is that it does not depict any kind of punishment at all!<sup>42</sup> Rather, it depicts an angel *announcing* a punishment on the followers of the beast. These are the words of the angel, not a description of the punishment that John sees. The punishment itself does not occur until verses 14-20. The Son of Man and His angels harvest the earth with sharp sickles, and the grapes are thrown into the winepress of God’s wrath. Verse 20 tells us, “And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.” Here we have yet more imagery drawn from the Scriptures (Isaiah 63:2-6), further confirming the annihilationist thesis. Rather than endless conscious suffering, the picture of being crushed until the blood gushes out for many miles is a ghastly picture of a gruesome death. But admittedly, simply to see the image and conclude that this is a snapshot of what final punishment will be like would be to commit the same error that traditionalists commit with verses 9-11. The point is though, using the same kind of hermeneutic that traditionalism uses for verses 9-11 to find eternal torment, we can find a model of final punishment in verse 20 that contradicts eternal torment.

The Conditionalist interpretation of Revelation 14:11 fits the immediate context much better than the eternal torment reading. There is no tension between the terms of proclamation of final judgement in Revelation 14:9-11 and the description of final judgement in Revelation 14:14-20. The traditionalist reading has a tension between the eternal torment supposedly predicted in

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<sup>40</sup> Sam Hamstra, “An Idealist View of Revelation,” in Marvin C. Pate (ed.), *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 97.

<sup>41</sup> Ralph Bowles, “Does Revelation 14:11 teach Eternal Torment? Examining a Proof-text on Hell,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 73:1 (2001) 28.

<sup>42</sup> For example Robert Peterson, Larry Dixon, Harry Buis and William Shedd offer no evidence that they are even aware of this fact, let alone that they have a responding argument to what follows.

Revelation 14:11 and the picture of final annihilating destruction that follows in Revelation 14:14-20.<sup>43</sup>

It is not clear how the traditionalist (if any *had* shown an awareness of this problem) might justify taking one image so literally (vv 9-11) yet clearly not applying the same kind of literalness to the imagery that appears only a few verses later, but we suggest that such a decision would be purely arbitrary.

### **Revelation 20:10**

And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

It scarcely needs explaining why those who believe in eternal torment would use this text. Here we have the necessary elements for the traditional doctrine – the lake of fire, conscious suffering, and an eternal duration. The devil is thrown in to suffer along with the beast and the false prophet, and only verses later we read that “whoever’s name was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire” (v.15).

Jürgen Roloff holds back from offering any explicit comment as to the nature of the lake of fire in verse 10, saying that like the Beast and the false prophet, the devil “is thrown into the lake of fire – considered an inaccessible place beyond the world. The power of the evil one is thereby ultimately eliminated.”<sup>44</sup> He does however use verse 14 to give meaning to the image:

Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire; the powers of death themselves are ultimately killed. God deals with them as with Satan and his other associates (cf. V. 10; 19:20). At issue here is not punishment but, as John observes in a clarifying postscript, eternal destruction – the lake of fire is the “second” (i.e., eternal and final) death.<sup>45</sup>

When Death is thrown into the lake of fire, it is “killed.” This raises questions over the meaning of the lake of fire. If an entity like *death* can be thrown into it, then does this not make it difficult to conceive of it as a place or state of conscious suffering? It seems clear, as Roloff notes, that the point of depicting Death being cast into

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<sup>43</sup> Ralph Bowles, “Does Revelation 14:11 Teach Eternal Torment?” 29.

<sup>44</sup> Jürgen Roloff, *Revelation*, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 229.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

the lake of fire is to show that death itself will one day be done away with altogether. This in itself seems to suggest that the lake of fire itself signifies an end, a “death.” Mounce affirms this understanding, connecting death’s fate in the lake of fire with Isaiah 25:8, which declares that our God will “swallow up death forever.” Mounce notes the final annihilation of death, followed by the explanation of the lake of fire as being “the second death” (20:14). “It is the second death, that is, the destiny of those whose temporary resurrection results only in a return to death and its punishment.”<sup>46</sup>

It is obviously important to do this kind of analysis, comparing one part of the vision with another and ensuring that we do not interpret one part in a way that is inconsistent with how we interpret another. At the same time however we need to remember where this imagery came from. It is not original with the book of Revelation, but is taken directly from the earlier books of Scripture – in this case largely from the book of Daniel, chapter 7. Here Daniel has a vision of four beasts (vv. 1-14), and then, unlike the vision in the book of Revelation, Daniel’s vision is explicitly interpreted for us (vv. 15-28). Even a cursory reading of Daniel 7 and the book of Revelation reveals that the beasts are clearly representative of the very same entities in both cases. We cannot possibly hope to do justice to a study of the beasts of Daniel and Revelation in the space allowed here, but we can make some general observations. The beasts are *kingdoms* that exist on earth, with one kingdom being distinguished as more terrible than the ones preceding it (the fourth beast in Daniel, or the second beast in Revelation). This interpretation is not expressly given in John’s Revelation, but it is made clear in Daniel 7:17, 23, “The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth... The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it.” It appears to be this fourth Beast that is given the infamous number 666 in Revelation 13:18.

Interpreters right across the theological/eschatological spectrum, while they do not agree on much about eschatological matters, appear to be agreed that the Beast of Revelation represents, not one single individual, but a kingdom, a “system.” Reformed preterist Kenneth Gentry sees the image as representing Rome, with Nero Caesar in particular as its representative.<sup>47</sup> Dispensationalist/futurist John Walvoord sees it as the revived Roman Empire in the last days.<sup>48</sup> Idealist Sam Hamstra sees the beast representing “the spirit and

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<sup>46</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 367.

<sup>47</sup> Gentry devotes an entire work to establishing this thesis, *The Beast of Revelation* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody press, 1966), 199.

empires of the world.”<sup>49</sup> While all these views of the beast clearly differ from one another, they demonstrate the consensus that the beast is not a personal entity, but rather a symbol for an abstract or corporate entity of some sort. This much at least seems unavoidable given the divine interpretation of Daniel’s vision. This, however, throws a spanner in the works for the traditional interpretation of Revelation 20:10. The difficulty is spelled out briefly by Fudge, who notes that “According to many Bible scholars these [i.e. the beast and the false prophet] are not actual people but represent governments which persecute believers and false religions which support those governments. Neither institution will be perpetuated forever, ***nor could they suffer conscious, sensible pain***” [emphasis added].<sup>50</sup> Peterson has a comeback:

However, Fudge fails to mention the devil, who, along with the beast and the false prophet, is cast into the lake of fire. I understand the beast and the false prophet to be individuals capable of suffering pain, but I’ll put that to one side for a moment. What about Satan? Fudge, as an evangelical Christian, refuses to depersonalize [*sic*] the devil. So here is one personal being who will suffer in everlasting torment. 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?<sup>51</sup>

Peterson has not grasped the point of the argument. The observation that Fudge makes does not deny that some humans will share the fate of the devil and the beast. Rather, Fudge’s comments are set in the context of his discussing the nature of the *lake of fire*. If it depicts a fate that will be suffered by an impersonal or corporate entity (the beast), then clearly whatever it is, it is not conscious suffering, since this cannot *be* applied to such an entity. In other words, whatever the lake of fire signifies, it must be a fate that can be applied to both personal entities (such as the devil or lost human beings) *as well as* impersonal entities (such as the beast). Destruction would certainly be a possible interpretation, but conscious suffering would not. Presumably, Peterson’s reply would be that the beast *is* a person, and it *will* be consciously tormented. It is bewildering then that this is the very aspect of the argument that he chose to “put to one side for a moment,”

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<sup>49</sup> Sam Hamstra, “An Idealist View of Revelation,” 118.

<sup>50</sup> Fudge, “The Case for Conditionalism,” 78.

<sup>51</sup> Peterson Peterson, “A Traditionalist Response to Conditionalism,” in Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views*, 111.

since this was the whole point of Fudge's observation – this fact demands an annihilationist interpretation rather than the traditionalist one.<sup>52</sup>

The scriptural background to this passage creates problems for the traditional interpretation in at least one other way as well. Like the book of Revelation, Daniel 7 records the fate of the beast, in Daniel's dream and in the interpretation of that dream. In Daniel's vision, "I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire." When this part of the dream is interpreted, we learn that in historical terms it refers to a godless kingdom that will oppose the saints of God, but a time will come when "the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever" (v. 26). In Revelation 20, the fate of the beast is described as being "tormented day and night forever and ever" in a lake of fire. If the traditionalist were to apply the same method of interpretation to both Revelation and Daniel, we would end up with a glaring contradiction, because if one is *slain* then one cannot *also* be kept alive and tormented day and night forever and ever (quite apart from the fact that the beast is not a "someone" who *can* suffer such a fate). If, however, we accept that the same point is being made in both apocalyptic passages, using a variation in similar imagery, then the point in each case is that the kingdoms that oppose the kingdom of God will be overthrown forever, they will come to an end. A question may then be asked: *Why* does the author of the apocalypse use the terms "tormented day and night forever and ever," over and above the language that he has borrowed from Daniel? We can first note that whatever the answer to this question is, it will not be a threat to the position advanced here, since as we saw in Daniel, what happens to the beast in the vision is *symbolic* of what happens to the kingdom in history. I would also note that nowhere else in Scripture is a picture of the eternal torment of anyone pictured, including the devil, the "man of lawlessness" (2 Thes 2:3), or the coming "Antichrist" (1 Jn 2:18), and certainly not an earthly kingdom. The only kind of suggestions I would make are somewhat speculative, but they 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.

The same then must also apply to the devil and all those who follow him, since they too suffer the fate of the beast in Revelation 20. If the beasts represent kingdoms or systems, then the message of Revelation is the same as that of Daniel 7, which is essentially a recurrence of the message of Daniel 2, in Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the statue, which Daniel interprets. The parts of the statue represent various kingdoms, which are

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<sup>52</sup> We might also observe that Peterson has subtly begged the question with respect to the nature of the beast in the above quotation. He says that Fudge "refuses to depersonalise" the Devil. Implicit here is the suggestion that Fudge has depersonalised the beast. However, it is only possible to *depersonalise* the beast if the beast is a person, and this is what Fudge's comment was calling into question to begin with.

obliterated by a rock (representing God's kingdom) that grows to fill the earth. The interpretation is given in verses 44-45:

In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.

If traditionalists are not prepared to seriously tackle this point then F.F. Bruce's claim can be regarded as unchallenged, "Since the beast and the false prophet are figures for systems rather than individual persons, the permanent destruction of evil is evidently meant."<sup>53</sup> Clark Pinnock's observation rings true: "I take John's primary point to be that everything that has rebelled against God will be overcome and come to an end."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> F.F. Bruce, "Revelation," in G.C.D. Howley, F.F. Bruce, H.C. Elison (eds.), *The New Layman's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 1708.

<sup>54</sup> Clark Pinnock, "The Conditional View," in *Four Views on Hell*, 157.