

Thoughts on Robert Peterson's Reply

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As is customary, when my paper criticizing Robert Peterson's case against annihilationism was accepted for publication (*JETS* 50:2, 2007), Dr Peterson was invited to present a reply to that criticism, an offer he, naturally, accepted. His reply does not succeed, for the most part, in deflecting the criticisms that I raised. Briefly, here's why.

Dr Peterson starts out by saying that while many published pieces on the subject of final punishment advance the debate, my critique of him, unfortunately, does not. I can only wonder as to whether or not he thinks his many articles in response to various annihilationists serve this role. I note that he uses more or less the same arguments in all of them. My own position is that while more and more pieces are published in favour of the traditional view of hell all the time, the responses to most of those arguments have already been published. I don't take the view that I have to say something that nobody has ever heard before in order to make a worthwhile contribution. I think there is great value in pointing out that much of what is currently being said is simply not good enough because it has long been rebutted. Peterson refers, for example, to the book co-edited by himself just before my piece was written, as an example of something I appear not to have read. In fact I have read it, and it seems to me that at best the authors of that book repeat arguments that Peterson himself has used, and which I consider to have been rebutted in print. I do not equate the latest publication with the best that can be offered. Often it is simply an echo of what was published before. Put bluntly, sometimes the best way to "advance" the debate is to tell people that they aren't nearly as far ahead as they appear to think they are.

The charge of misrepresentation

Recall that Dr Peterson says that to be precise, Edward Fudge agreed with Edward White, who claimed that Jesus' humanity died but his divinity did not. This enabled Peterson to claim that Fudge taught a separation of the two natures of Christ, amounting to Christological heresy. I called this a misrepresentation, on the grounds that Fudge did not make this claim, and neither did White before him (and nor, for that matter, do other evangelical annihilationists). All that Fudge had claimed was that 'Jesus' Death Involved Total Destruction' (the heading of the section in Fudge's book on this subject). In spite of Peterson's protests now, I maintain that this claim on my part is true. However, there is one concession I must make in Peterson's defense: I claimed in my critique that Fudge does not cite White at this point. As Peterson notes, in an earlier edition of *The Fire That Consumes* there in fact had been a quotation from White. This does not affect my claim that Fudge's theology is misrepresented, but it does mean that I was incorrect to say that Fudge never cited White at this point. For that error, I apologise. I will say, however, that the meat of my claim when I said this was here: **'Moreover, Fudge does not cite Edward White at this point, and even if he had, it must be pointed out that White never taught ('precisely' or otherwise) that Jesus' humanity was destroyed but his divinity was not, and neither is Peterson able to quote him as doing so'** [emphasis added]. It was the doctrinal misrepresentation that I was first and foremost concerned about.

But Peterson thinks that this complaint is not true. He quotes the following from White, in the apparent belief that it will vindicate his assessment that both Fudge and White taught that Jesus' human nature was separated from his divine nature:

If Jesus had been the Son of David only, He could not legally have risen from the dead. . . . He must have suffered everlasting destruction. His human spirit must have passed away for ever. The humanity which had been 'made under the law' must abide under that law; the representative of a guilty race could have trodden the path of life no more. But the Saviour was Divine. As man, identified with human nature, He died, and His death became a sin-offering; as God He could not die. As man He was 'made under the law;' as God He was above the law laid on creatures. And therefore, when the curse had taken effect upon the manhood, it was still open to the Divine

Inhabitant, absorbing the Spirit into His own essence, to restore the 'destroyed Temple' from its ruins; and, taking possession of it, in virtue of His Divinity (not, legally, as a man), 'to raise it up on the third day.' He arose, therefore, as the Divine Conqueror of death. . . and was thus 'declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by His resurrection from the dead' (Rom. i.4). He rose, not 'in the likeness of sinful flesh'; nor 'under the law,' but in the character of the 'Lord from Heaven,' 'our Lord and our God' . . . having delivered us from wrath by the death of His humanity, to endow us with immortality through the life of His divinity.

In spite of having read the above, I still say that Peterson has misrepresented Fudge and White in accusing them of teaching that Christ's human nature and divine nature were separated. Dr Peterson has not appreciated the fact that what White is speaking of is whether or not a mere man could *legally* pay the price for sin and be raised again. Notice how the argument unfolds. As Peterson notes, the point is made for this reason: Some say that this annihilationism understanding of the cross falls short, since those who are lost will be annihilated forever, but Jesus was not annihilated forever. White replies by saying that *legally*, had Jesus been merely a man (not divine), only one born under Adam, then this objection would have merit, since legally he would have been in Adam only and under the curse. But as God, *legally* he was not under the law, and *legally* was not under death, and so once he had paid the penalty for sin on our behalf, he was able to raise up the "fallen temple" but "not, legally, as a man." The point is not something like "well, his human nature died but His divine nature remained alive, and then revived his human nature." Such would be a crude and completely unsympathetic way of reading White, missing his point altogether. After making this quotation, Peterson goes to some length to claim that Fudge will neither confirm nor deny whether or not the whole person of Christ really *did* die, thus (in Peterson's view) undermining the Trinity. However, that is not the issue. The issue is whether or not Fudge taught that the natures of Christ were separated, and pointing out that Fudge has not addressed some other question does not help to defend Peterson against this charge of misrepresentation – a charge which still looks to be true.

I also complained that while Peterson bracketed off Fudge's exegetical arguments about the death of Christ as an 'appeal to systematic theology,' dealing only with the issue of Christology, Peterson does not actually address Fudge's exegetical case concerning the death of Christ and final punishment. Peterson's reply is to

say that since Fudge argues: “(1) Jesus suffered the penalty of hell in his death; (2) this penalty consisted of his destruction, not his suffering everlasting punishment; (3) therefore, annihilationism is true and traditionalism is false,” Peterson is right to call it a theological argument and treat it separately from Fudge’s exegesis.¹ This simply will not do. Nobody denies that the argument is theological in the sense that its premises and conclusion have to do with theology (indeed, the entire debate on final punishment consists of “theological arguments” in this sense). My complaint was, however, that Peterson never once interacts with the substantial exegesis that Fudge presents in favour of his theological claims about what the death of Jesus involved. Merely bracketing it off as a “theological argument” is not a substitute for doing so, and the only practical effect that this had was to respond to the theological issue of Christ’s natures (mistakenly, in my view) instead of rebutting the exegetical argument in favour of the annihilationist view of Christ’s death.

Missed Points

To his credit, Peterson admits that he had, as I noted, missed the point of annihilationist claims about Revelation 20. He still doesn’t think the annihilationists have a rebuttal to his exegesis of that passage however. He agrees that the beasts are corporate entities, but now adds, drawing on Greg Beale, that “Probably, as throughout history, so at the end the individual tyrant is not to be distinguished from the kingdom or institution that he represents (as in Dan 7:17, 23).” Now, I grant this, but it simply doesn’t help Peterson at all. Let us say that the beast represents the corporate entity *and* its leader. It thus remains a corporate entity and not an individual. This does not give us leeway to reduce the image of the beast being thrown into the lake of fire to an individual being thrown into a lake of fire. Whatever the lake of fire represents must be something that could apply to the individual *and* to the corporate entity, and this was my point to begin with. Annihilation works, eternal torment does not. Peterson adds that since a corporate entity consists of individuals, we should think of this as a fate that applies to lots and lots of individuals. This, however, is simply to display confusion over what a corporate entity is. Peterson confirms that he – along with at least one other traditionalist – is

indeed confused about this. Drawing on Beale once more, he says: “even if ‘the beast’ signified an institution and not an individual in Rev 20:10 – a point that I do not concede-that would still not invalidate the traditional exegesis because, ‘Institutions are composed of people, so what an institution suffers, that also the people composing the institution will suffer’.” But this is not merely false, it is *very obviously* false. If a bank (a corporate entity) merges with another bank, it does not follow that all the customers of the first bank merge with all the customers of the second. If a charitable organization loses its registration, it’s not true that all the members of the organization lose *their* registration (that idea does not even make sense). We could come up with probably thousands of examples to show that Beale’s claim in the hands of Peterson is just untrue. But more importantly, Beale (and Peterson) have flagrantly begged the question here by just assuming that the image of the lake of fire does represent eternal torment. If the beast is a corporate entity, then *the lake of fire cannot mean this*, and therefore even if those who make up the beast suffer the same fate as the beast, they cannot be said to suffer eternal torment on the basis of this text. Perhaps a good modern day example is the phenomenon of political cartoons. Just today I saw a political cartoon depicting an American eagle sharpening its talons. The message was that America was strengthening its resolve against terrorism. The eagle represented the United States of America, but it would be silly to think that the cartoon was telling us that every American individual is sharpening his or her talons. They don’t even *have* talons! Likewise, the corporate entity that is America was not literally sharpening its talons, because that would require that America be an individual personality with talons, and as a corporate entity, this is impossible (just as it is with the beast of the book of Revelation). If the beast is representative of a corporate entity, then whatever the lake of fire signifies must be something that can be applied to corporate entities, and things that require an individual personal consciousness on the part of that entity simply do not fit the bill.

This is to say nothing of my point about the Old Testament imagery that shows the beast being slain rather than tormented, imagery which, if interpreted using Peterson’s method, creates an awkward contradiction.

Exegesis

One of the passages where I faulted Peterson's exegesis was 2 Thessalonians 1:9. Peterson claimed that the term "everlasting destruction" here cannot mean annihilation, since Paul went on to say (according to Peterson) that the lost will then be "shut out from the presence of the Lord," meaning that they must still exist. As I pointed out, "and shut out" is not present in the Greek. The NIV translators added those terms, which forces one particular interpretation. Those additional words, I observed, require that the destruction is separate from being shut out from God's presence. Literally the verse says that the wicked "will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord," making the destruction either come from the presence of the Lord, or it is the thing that removes the lost from His presence. The events are one and the same. Peterson replies by quoting this verse from three of his favourite Bible translations, and then issuing a challenge:

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction *away from the presence of the Lord* and from the glory of his might (ESV; italics supplied). [The margin gives as an alternative "destruction that comes from."]

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and *shut out from the presence of the Lord* and from the majesty of his power (NIV; italics supplied).

These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, *away from the presence of the Lord* and from the glory of His power (NASB; italics supplied).

Did the translation committees of each of these versions of the Bible fail to see that the italicized words were not in the original Greek? Are all three translations therefore unreliable at this point?

Peterson thus sets up a false challenge, for I only complained about *one* of these three translations, namely the NIV. The problem is not the italicized words as shown above, but only the addition of "and shut out" in the NIV. The other two translations here do not split the event into two: the destruction and the separation. Peterson thus misrepresents my criticism, and poses a reply that is quite irrelevant because it supposes that I am faulting the wording in all these translations when I clearly am not. Peterson then draws on the argument of Douglas Moo.² Moo argues against annihilationist conclusions on this passage by appealing to Isaiah 2, on the

grounds that Isaiah says that on the day of judgment, men will try to hide from the Lord and “the splendor of his majesty.” An example is Isaiah 2:19, “And people shall enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth” (ESV). These people still exist while they are trying to hide, reasons Moo, and so we should conclude that here Paul is drawing on Isaiah’s language, and so he must conceive of the lost being separated from God’s presence and continuing to exist. This appeal to Isaiah is ultimately not successful, however. It should be fairly clear that in the text in Isaiah, the punishment following the judgment has not yet been handed out. The people spoken of are *unsuccessfully* trying to hide from the presence of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty, but it is impossible to do so. In 2 Thessalonians, however, Paul speaks directly about what will happen when God *does* punish the lost, and there they will in *fact* be destroyed from God’s presence (or alternatively, their “destruction” issues from the presence of God). That Peterson finds Moo’s argument persuasive does not speak favorably of his care in comparing the two passages. Peterson then repeats, via Douglas Moo, his claim that the second clauses stretched out by the NIV proves his point: “It makes little sense to describe people who have been annihilated as being separate from the presence of God.” But I already anticipated this in the article Peterson is replying to. There are two plausible meanings, if the extra words are not added (as they are not in the ESV or the NASB, quoted above, or in *most* biblical translations, the NIV being an unfortunate anomaly). Either the destruction comes from God’s presence, or the destruction is the very thing that removes them from God’s presence. It is not true that these possibilities “make little sense,” as they appear to make ample sense. Peterson is merely repeating the assertion that my critique rebutted, and such is hardly a defense of that assertion.

A second point of exegesis on which I critiqued Dr Peterson is 2 Peter 2:6. This text teaches that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, reducing them to ashes, and making them an example of what God will do to the wicked in the future, and it thus teaches annihilationism. Peterson claims that in spite of appearances, it is just “better” to take this passage to refer to eternal torment after all. No exegetical data from 2 Peter was

given in support of this claim, and so understandably, I regarded this is a lack of exegetical evidence. Peterson disagrees, however, because he gave, as his reason, the claim that Jude 13 and “nine other texts” teach eternal torment, and we should therefore make our understanding of 2 Peter 2:6 harmonise with those texts. The problem, however, with saying this, is that it implies that *absolutely no matter what* 2 Peter 2:6 said, it would have to be read as teaching eternal torment. This is simply indefensible. What is equally indefensible is that some of those ten texts that Peterson appeals to are among the texts where I fault Peterson’s exegesis in my article. I maintain that I was correct to note a lack of exegetical grounds *within this passage itself* for Peterson’s claim about the “best” way of understanding it.

Miscellaneous Fallacies

Once more to his credit, Peterson accepts that he was incorrect in his accusation that Fudge uses an “argument from silence.” He was wrong to fault Fudge for noting that key passages on final punishment say nothing at all about eternal torment, and he admits it.

Peterson takes offence, however, because according to him I have *judged his motives* in making this observation. He says that “Peoples is wrong to judge my motives in doing this and to conclude that my intention was to “avoid dealing with the exegetical arguments rising from these texts.” Although I am sorry that this impression was given, I have to note that this is not what I claimed. What I claimed is that “By labeling them as arguments from silence and telling readers to disregard them, all that Peterson has done is to avoid dealing with the exegetical arguments arising from these texts.” I claimed that Peterson, in using this argument, *has avoided dealing with the exegetical arguments here*. I never claimed that this was his only reason (or even that it was his intention at all) for making the accusation. The accusation in my view was merely a mistake, not an evasive tactic – even if, in practice, arguments were avoided. That was my view then, and it remains my view now. And in spite of his reply that he really does address those exegetical arguments,

the argument that I was speaking at the time about, in Daniel 12:2, was avoided. I realize that in his section in favour of eternal torment, Dr Peterson comments on an annihilationist view of that verse, but there he does not address the arguments that he is dismissing when he replies to Fudge. Was it too strong to call the label “disingenuous,” given that it was being used to refer to a type of argument that Peterson himself used? I did not think so at the time, given that Peterson (as far as I could tell) was criticizing Fudge for doing something that he very obviously did himself, in a way that I could not see a man of his expertise not noticing. However, I must accept his explanation that he genuinely did misunderstand what an argument from silence is, and retract my claim. I apologise. Dr Peterson was not disingenuous, he simply didn’t know what the terminology meant when he used it (and this is not necessarily as bad as it naturally sounds, it is something that many of us have done in the past).

Lastly, in my comments about emotional appeals and ad hominem arguments, I raised concerns about Peterson’s suggestion that annihilationism might cause sinners to underestimate their fate, and that it might undermine evangelistic zeal. In raising concerns about the consequences of teaching annihilationism, Dr Peterson asks us to note that he didn’t *call* those appeals “arguments,” he only called them “implications.” This, in my view, does not wash. They were, as far as I can tell, quite plainly serving the role of arguments, effectively saying “if we don’t teach eternal torment, and if we teach annihilationism, then these things might happen,” the net result being a reason to teach eternal torment and not annihilation. My reply (although not stated in these terms) is that annihilationists are not utilitarians. They teach annihilationism because they think it is biblical, not because of what they think the consequences of this teaching will be. Moreover, I noted that there is no evidence that the doctrine does undermine evangelistic zeal. Now, Peterson replied that he still thinks that some sinners really *might* underestimate the seriousness of their fate if we tell them that annihilationism were true. How does this change anything? That is not the way to persuade us not to teach annihilationism, since we should care about the *truth* of the matter. In regard to his comments about evangelism, he adds now that “I continue to be concerned about the possible detrimental effects of

annihilationism on missions-and I am not alone in my concern.” To prove that he is not alone in this concern, he footnotes Don Carson, who, apparently shares this concern. But how does this in any way answer the case? Not only is there no *evidence* that holding an annihilationist view weakens one’s missionary zeal, but even if there were some evidence to this effect, the answer is not to deny annihilationism *just so that* our missionary zeal will be strengthened, surely!

Dr Peterson closes by asking me to respect the right of traditionalists “to teach what they believe is biblical and to express their concerns about the possible detrimental effects” of annihilationism. Were it not for that right, of course, there would be nothing for me to respond to, since his material would never have been published. And of course I respect that right for traditionalists as much as for anyone else. But respecting a person’s right to say something is a far cry from refusing to speak up when what someone says is mistaken, all the more so when, so far as I can tell, what is being misrepresented is the character, justice and word of God. Although Dr Peterson disagrees with my assessment that it is he, rather than I, who is misrepresenting these things, I am sure he, like I, appreciates the importance of responding, just as he has done so often.

¹ Incidentally, Fudge happily uses the term “eternal punishment” to describe the fate of the lost. What he denies is that this punishment consists of eternal torment.

² Douglas Moo, “Paul on Hell,” in Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson (ed), *hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 106-108.