

Fire and Flood

How the New Testament Uses the First Testament to Teach on Final Punishment

G. Andrew Peoples

Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.

It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.

It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed.

Jesus in Luke 17:26-28

Introduction

The New Testament contains a lot more explicit teaching on final punishment than the First Testament.¹ However, the New Testament very frequently employs the Scriptures to present such teaching. What follows is an examination of some cases where the New Testament does this, and of what appears to be taught in these New Testament passages about final punishment.

Some clear limitations of the scope of this undertaking must be laid down. While there is a wealth of study that could be (and has been) done on the beliefs of second temple Judaism with regard to final punishment, and any exhaustive study on New Testament teaching on final punishment would be incomplete without covering intertestamental developments of eschatology and related issues, that is beyond the scope of what is intended here. What is presented here is a study of what the New Testament appears to

¹ I intentionally avoid using the term “Old Testament” for two reasons. Firstly, the New Testament is also very old, and secondly, calling it the “old” one makes it sound obsolete, as though it has somehow gone out of date. This at least is the impression I get from the way the term is sometimes used (e.g. “but that’s in the *Old* Testament...”). Here it will be referred to as the First Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, or simply Scripture, because when the New Testament was being written, the First Testament, to the writers of the New, was simply Scripture.

say about final punishment, in particular in passages where it appears to be employing the First Testament. Within the literature outside the canon of Scripture it is widely acknowledged that a range of different (and conflicting) views on final punishment can be found, and if our intention was to interpret the New Testament *in the light of* such literature, we would be somewhat in the dark – or at any rate unsure of which light to read the pages of the New Testament under. An assumption is being made here that while intertestamental developments may be of great historical interest, and may explain why various first century groups may have believed one thing or another, of greater significance is canonical scripture. That is to say, when seeking to establish the relationship between two canonical passages, it is more important to read New Testament revelation against the backdrop of *canonical writings* than of pieces of writing that are not part of the canon.² It might be denied that this assumption is warranted, but it is the presupposition that underlies all that is said here, and a defence of this assumption is beyond the scope of this work. Perhaps a revised name for our topic might be – “An analysis of what the New Testament teaches where it employs the earlier Scriptures to teach on final punishment – *given* the assumption about the place and authority of canonical scripture over and above other literature that is outlined above.”

There are a number of ways the New Testament uses the Scriptures to teach about final punishment. It uses direct quotations. It uses historical recollection, where an event in the first Testament is described or referred to without actually quoting any Scripture verbatim. It also uses imagery that clearly has its origin in the First Testament, where the meaning of the imagery has already been given meaning in earlier revelation, making it possible to bring up a meaning by presenting the same image again.

² We might put this somewhat more bluntly: It is better to use inspired Scripture to interpret Scripture than it is to attempt use uninspired writing. Obviously fairly conservative assumptions are being made here about the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

It will be argued here that these New Testament passages on final punishment that employ earlier Scripture, when studied closely, do not sit well with traditional interpretations. This is because the traditional concept of final punishment entails eternal torment of the lost, whereas the message of these texts seems to run counter to this concept (even though they feature among the key proof-texts for eternal torment). Doubtless, if the New Testament is read against the backdrop of the assumption that eternal torment is true, it might be possible to forge a way of harmonising these texts with the doctrine. Doubtless also – these texts are not *all* that the New Testament has to say on final punishment. It is not being suggested that the New Testament usage of earlier scripture on this subject is possible because the older Scriptures teach a clear and comprehensive doctrine on final punishment (regardless of whether the Scriptures *did* do this or not). However, positively stated, it will be argued that not only do these texts lack good grounds for belief in eternal torment, they are better understood as teaching that God will finally destroy His enemies forever.

Matthew 24:36-41 and Luke 17:26-37

Matthew 24:40-41 has long been a popular catch phrase in premillennial circles. Larry Norman immortalised it in his hit song about the rapture, “I wish we’d all been ready”:

A man and wife asleep in bed, she hears a noise and turns her head he's gone, I wish we'd all been ready.
Two men walking up a hill, one disappears and one's left standing still, I wish we'd all been ready.
There's no time to change your mind - The Son has come and you've been left behind

The impression one gets is that this song was intended to invoke a strong emotional response. How terrible – to be *left behind!* One will be taken and another left, and, it is

said, it is far better to be taken than left behind. Like many premillennialists, Douglas Moo also finds the rapture in these verses. He writes,

The verb for “taken” is used of the Rapture in John 14:3 (although, to be sure, it is used in other ways) and it is significant that the verb for “take” *in judgment* [sic] in verse 39 is different than the one used in verses 40-41. And the analogy to the flood may suggest that just as Noah was saved by being taken away from the scene of judgment, so believers at the Parousia will be taken away, through the Rapture, from the scene of judgment.³

R.T. France uses a similar semantic argument, reasoning that “*taken*” is the same verb used, e.g., in 1:20; 17:1; 18:16; 20:17; it implies to take someone to be with you, and therefore here points to the salvation rather than the destruction of the one ‘taken’.⁴ But this is wholly unpersuasive. Moo’s aside comment is correct, it is certainly true that the Greek term for “take” here is used in “other ways” than to signify the “rapture” in John 14:3 (if we concede that the rapture is a biblical concern at all, and that it *is* present in John). It is about as ambiguous as our English word “take,” and as such has no intrinsic value (positive or negative) attached to it (as we will see from John Walvoord shortly, it is also capable, for example, of being used of a man “taken” away to be executed). There is no basis for making the unqualified term for “take” have a qualified meaning of “take to be with God” in and of itself.

Moo’s comment about the word for “took” in v.39 also needs comment. He sees it as significant that it is different from the word used in v.40, suggesting that the word for “took” in the flood refers to terrible judgement, but the word for “taken” in reference to the return of Christ refers to the glorious rapture, and that these meanings are somehow evident in the two different words that are used. But this argument is no stronger than the previous one. The verb in v.39 (**αἵρω**) is just as ambiguous as that used in v.40 (**παράλambανw**).

³ Douglas Moo, “Posttribulational Rapture Position,” Ben Chapman (ed.), *The Rapture: Pre-Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 196.

⁴ R.T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1985), 348.

There is no intrinsic meaning of judgement in it at all. It can be used for angels lifting up Jesus if He were to throw Himself off a building (Mt. 4:6), of taking up one's cross (Mt. 16:24), or of Jesus lifting up His eyes (Jn. 11:41). Such lines of argument take us nowhere here.

However, more significant than the shortcomings of the semantic observation of Moo and France is the argument against this interpretation that may be made from the context of this saying of Jesus.⁵ The suggestion that *Noah's* being taken away from the scene of judgement is what Jesus has in mind finds no support here. Who was it of whom Jesus said, "as in those days before the flood, *they* were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark"? Whoever it is, it seems only reasonable to assume that this group is the same "they" in the very next verse, "*they* knew nothing until the flood came and swept (lit. *took*) *them* all away." The taking away applies to those who were eating and drinking, ignorant of the fate that was about to befall ("they knew nothing") them while Noah on the other hand entered the ark. This is certainly not Noah who was taken.

Ardent advocate of dispensationalism, John Walvoord, concedes that

Because at the rapture believers will be taken out of the world, some have confused this with the rapture of the church. Here, however, the situation is the reverse. The one who is left, is left to enter the kingdom; the one who is taken, is taken in judgement. This is in keeping with the illustration of the time of Noah when the ones taken away are the unbelievers. The word for "shall be taken" in verses 40-41 uses the same word found in John 19:16, where Christ was taken away to the judgment of the cross.⁶

⁵ This argument is made only in passing (in no more than 13 words) by Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1985), 229.

⁶ John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: They Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 193-194.

While not accepting the eschatological framework in which Walvoord presents this judgement event (he presents it as occurring after a future “rapture” and tribulation, and preceding a millennial reign of Christ on earth prior to the last great battle of good and evil – also on earth), and while his lexical analysis is open to some fairly obvious questioning,⁷ it is instructive to note that while Walvoord does believe in the “rapture” of the church, he is compelled not find it here due to the clear context of judgement. Some suggest that the nature of each of the fates (“taken” or “left”) is really not important, and that separation and watchfulness are the only things that matter here. F.W. Beare for example offers the following suggestion:

“Taken” and “left” – the two verbs mean only that the two meet different fates; it is not clear which is the better destiny – to be “taken” or to be left. In any case, the theme of an all encompassing destruction, **as in the flood**, is not sustained [emphasis added].⁸

But this is almost bewildering. The flood is used as the prototype for this very event. Luke has, “*Just as it was* in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man” (Lk. 17:26). In fact, the parallel saying of Jesus in Luke 17:26-28, 34-35 strongly confirms the interpretation being offered here.

Just as it was in the days of Noah, ***so also will it be*** in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.

⁷ Walvoord’s use of the term “taken” in reference to Christ being taken to the cross is both unnecessary and unhelpful. The same word (**paralambanw**) could also be used for example to refer to taking the baby Jesus away to *rescue* Him (Matt 2:13), to Jesus’ taking of Peter, James and John to the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2), or to the eucharistic tradition that Paul “received” from the Lord (1 Cor 11:23). The word could just as easily be used of a man who “takes” his wife out to dinner. It is no more decisive than the English term “take.” The meaning of “taken” in judgement rather than “taken” in salvation arises not from any intrinsic meaning of **paralambanw**, but rather from the context, where those who are taken are likened to the unbelieving world that was “taken” away in the flood.

It is also noteworthy that many dispensationalists are prepared to discard this popular proof text for the rapture, given that, if it *did* support the rapture, it would be the only verse in Scripture to refer to the saved being taken *while others continue to live on afterwards*. The dispensationalists might think that they can still confidently appeal to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 to defend the rapture, but this passage, like all others, makes no explicit reference at all to some being taken away *while others remain*.

⁸ Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 474-475.

It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.

It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed...

I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left.

For Matthew's "took them all away," Luke is more explicit with "destroyed them all." He repeats the saying to describe the fate of those in Sodom. The use of "just as it was," "so it will be," "it was the same" and finally "it will be just like this" leads one to think that Luke is trying to drive a point home. Beare's brief comment that "the theme of an all encompassing destruction, as in the flood, is not sustained" is itself not sustained, and cries out for a defence that is never offered. Ellis' inference from these Texts in Matthew and Luke seems to be reasonable: "The unrepentant unbelievers on the day of judgment [*sic*], *i.e.* at the coming of the Son of Man, will be like those drowned in the flood, and those burned up at Sodom."⁹

Larry Dixon's treatment of this text is fairly representative of the defenders of eternal torment surveyed here: He does not treat it at all. Under the heading of "Ready for His Return," Dixon notes:

Matthew 24:36-51 records Jesus' teaching about being ready for His second coming. Jesus uses three images to describe the conditions of His return. First, he portrays His return as a parallel to the destructive and devastating flood of Noah's day (vv. 36-41). Secondly, he compares His coming to the rude breaking and entering of a cat burglar (vv. 42-44). Thirdly, Jesus states that His coming will be like a master who returns from a trip, greatly surprising one of his wicked, unoccupied servants.¹⁰

⁹ E. Earl Ellis, "New Testament Teaching on Hell," in K.E. Browner and M.W. Elliot (eds), *The Reader Must Understand: Eschatology in Bible and Theology* (Leicester: Apollos (InterVarsity), 1997), 213.

¹⁰ Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1992), 127. The title of this book is clearly an example of the most blatant kind of question-begging. This writer has yet to find an annihilationist who argues:

- 1.) Jesus taught eternal torment
- 2.) Eternal torment must be challenged.
- 3.) Therefore Jesus' teaching about hell is wrong and must be challenged

Dixon goes on to quote from the parable of the wicked servant, followed by the parable of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13) and the parable of the talents, all in an effort to argue that the doctrine of eternal torment can be found in them, followed by the centrepiece of traditional exegesis on this topic, the sheep and the goats of Matthew 25:31-46. But Matthew 24:36-41 has slipped under the proverbial carpet. Surely after noting the “parallel to the destructive and devastating flood of Noah’s day” Dixon must see the simple way it might lend itself to a view of final punishment that contradicts his own. If he does see it, his omission of this text from his exegesis is telling. If he does not, his exegetical objectivity is seriously impugned. The two works perhaps held in highest regard as definitive statements of Protestant traditionalism by William Shedd and Harry Buis omit the passage from their survey of New Testament teaching on final punishment altogether. In the absence of strong argument to the contrary, a *prima facie* reading of this text seems to support the interpretation offered here.

Mark 9:43-48

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

Obviously evangelical annihilationists such as Edward Fudge, John Stott and John Wenham (all of whom Dixon cites as being among those who have taken part in this “contemporary challenge”) do not seek to challenge the teaching of Jesus, they simply differ with Dixon as to what Jesus (and the Biblical writers) actually *taught* about hell.

next age.”¹¹ However, before any reasonable conclusion about its meaning can be made, the background of this saying must be fully taken into account. This is a direct quote from Isaiah chapter 66.

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).¹²

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

¹¹ William V. Crockett, “The Metaphorical View,” William V. Crockett (ed.), *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 71.

¹² R. Alan Cole, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1989, 2nd ed.), 224.

suffer eternally; their carcasses will remain indefinitely as a reminder of their rebellion against God.¹³

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,”¹⁴ 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]¹⁵

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

¹³ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Mark*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 117-118.

¹⁴ Edward W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994, 2nd ed.), 114.

¹⁵ 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.

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 indeed be bolstered by the authority of the New Testament. We would suggest that we should apply the same standard to Jesus’ use of Isaiah.

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.¹⁶ Gomes’ response elucidates 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.¹⁷

Lest it be thought that this is only the peculiarity of one defender of eternal torment, this identical argument is marshalled 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.¹⁸

¹⁶ Dixon, *The Other Side*, 80.

¹⁷ Alan W. Gomes, Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell, Part Two, *Christian Research Journal* (Summer 1991), 11.

¹⁸ 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

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 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.

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.

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].¹⁹ 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,” it 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 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

¹⁹ Robert L. Thomas, “Jesus’ View of Eternal Punishment,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9:2 (1998), 164.

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.”²⁰

2 Peter 2:6

Here we read that “by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes [God] condemned them to extinction and made them an example of what is coming to the ungodly.” It is not at all difficult to see why a reasonable person might conclude that Sodom and Gomorrah are actually an example of *what is going to happen* to the ungodly, namely, condemnation to extinction. After all, this is exactly what the text says. “The word *tephrōsas*, *turning into ashes* or ‘covering with ashes,’ is unique in the Bible, but is used by Dio Cassius (lxxvi) in his account of the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 when Pompeii and Herculaneum were buried in lava.”²¹ There isn’t any disagreement as to the kind of fate being described with regard to Sodom – complete destruction. The question then becomes – What good grounds do we have for exegeting this text in a way *other* than what would appear to be a “literal” one. Granted, there are many texts of Scripture that, in the final analysis, do not say what they might appear to say at first glance. Is this such a passage? Apparently Robert Peterson believes that there is reason to think so:

Taken in isolation it is possible to understand Peter’s words as teaching annihilationism. Nevertheless, we ought not to do so. It is better to take Peter’s words as more generally predicting the downfall of the wicked than to understand them as foretelling their precise fate – reduction to ashes.²²

The frustrating aspect of responding to such a claim is that no grounds are given for it. How is this interpretation “better,” given that the annihilationist interpretation of this text

²⁰ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1991), 232.

²¹ Michael Green, *The Second General Epistle of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: The Tyndale Press, 1968), 100.

²² Robert Peterson, “The Case for Traditionalism,” in Robert Peterson and Edward Fudge, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 156.

appears, as Peterson comes close to conceding, to be the most natural one? Reflecting on Peterson's comment, Fudge says, "If Peter could hear the conversation, he would probably scratch his head and wonder how he could have possibly written more plainly."²³ The impression one gets via a survey of the literature on this verse is that the commentators, annihilationist or not, offer a treatment of this passage that strongly favours annihilationism, the annihilationist writers on final punishment gladly use it as a powerful proof text, and the defenders of eternal torment write as though it did not exist.

2 Peter 3:3-13

Here Peter is responding to those who doubt the return of Christ, because He is delaying for such a long time. Peter responds by recalling a historical example of God's intervention and judgement, and goes on to assure his readers that God will indeed do so again. The crux comes in verses 5-7.

They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the godless.

One initial difficulty is the appearance that the heavens and the earth perished in the flood, and now we have another heavens and earth. What might this mean? Surely the *kosmos*" was not destroyed in the flood, yet this is the very word translated "world" here. Kistemaker notes that "The words *heaven and earth* must be understood as a pair that is mentioned in one breath. With this expression, he tells the reader to recall the creation account in Genesis. The use of the plural *heavens* unmistakably reveals the hand of a Jew."²⁴ The Jewish mind was not so preoccupied with metaphysical exactness as the Greek. There

²³ Edward Fudge, "A Conditionalist Response to Traditionalism," in *Ibid.*, 200.

²⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Peter and Jude*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 328.

was a far greater concern with order than substance. Michael Green offers a solution to what appears to our modern eyes to be an oddity:

But *kosmos* probably means order, as opposed to primordial chaos, and Peter may mean no more than that the orderliness, the continuity of nature, was broken up by the flood. Perhaps *kosmos* simply means “the world of men”, as it does in an identical context in ii. 5. Peter would then mean that human life perished. There is nothing here to suggest that that the whole earth was destroyed by the flood, let alone the heavens as well.²⁵

The world of sinful humanity was obliterated (dare we say *annihilated*?) in the flood of Noah’s day, and Peter’s warning seems to be, “God did it once, He will do it again.”

This day of judgment [*sic*] (2:9) or day of the Lord (3:10) not only transforms the present form of God’s creation. It also cleanses the earth of the wicked people who inhabit this planet. God exercises patience, but when his forbearance has come to an end, he pronounces divine judgment [*sic*] upon the scoffers. Their time for destruction has arrived and consequently they receive their due reward.²⁶

The term used to tell us that those in the flood were “destroyed” is **apōlumi**, the same Greek word used elsewhere to speak of final punishment (e.g. Matthew 10:28, where we read that God is able to “destroy body and soul in Gehenna”). The word translated “destruction” in verse 7 to refer to the destruction of the ungodly when Christ returns is **apōleia**, which is simply a noun derived from **apōlumi** (just as the English word “destruction” derives from “destroy”). Given that these terms are set side by side, the *destruction* of those who died in the flood, and the *destruction* of the godless when Jesus returns, it is hard to see how we can ascribe a radically different meaning to each of these terms.

Carson 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

²⁵ Michael Green, *The Second General Epistle of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude*, 131.

²⁶ Kistemaker, *Peter and Jude*, 330-331.

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.”²⁷ But ultimately Carson rejects such arguments, calling them “too hasty.”²⁸ “The **apwleia** 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 **apwleia** as referring to ruin or loss, and not complete destruction.²⁹

Carson has undermined himself here, committing what he elsewhere categorises 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.”³⁰ 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 **apwleia** 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 word **apwleia** 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

²⁷ Don Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 519.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 522.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Don Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 62.

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 read the word with its fullest semantic range in mind so that we can select something like “ruin” or “loss” instead. The presence of the Scriptural precedent for destruction is the factor that tips the scales against this possibility. For this reason it might be suggested that the reason traditional interpreters have not seen that this passage points to the final destruction of the unsaved is that they have not allowed the New Testament’s use of the earlier Scripture to be heard above the background noise of their own systematic theology.

Jude 7

In Jude vv. 5-16, Jude writes concerning certain false teachers in the church. In verses 5-7 he reminds his readers of the fact that the God who saved them is also the God who punishes the wicked. He recalls three examples from history where God has done just that. He destroyed in the wilderness those Israelites who did not believe. He imprisoned the angels who did not keep their “proper dwelling” and has reserved them for the day of judgement, and He punished the perverse and immoral men of Sodom and Gomorrah. The way this third example is worded is curious at first sight. “Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, *serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.*”

When reflecting on how the doctrine of final punishment is taught and preached, the phrase “eternal fire” is a familiar one. It appears only three times in Scripture; in Matthew 18:8, 25:41 and here in Jude 7. Shedd’s treatment of Jude 7 is not unusual: He lists it

along with many other texts supposed to teach endless conscious suffering (e.g. Matt 25:46; Mark 9:45; 2 Thess 1:8; Rev 20:10) and does not comment on this specific text.³¹ The phrase “eternal fire” is there, and when put in a theological context of the doctrine of eternal torment, its meaning will be obvious: A fire that burns throughout all eternity, never ceasing. Dixon lists it along with a host of other proof texts (e.g. Dan 12:2, which does not actually mention fire at all; 2 Thess 1:9, which does not call the fire eternal; Matt 18:8 and Matt 25:41) to establish the proposition that “[hell’s] fire is eternal.”³²

Over and against such treatments of this passage, it needs to be noted that Jude 7 is not a description of *final punishment* at all. The text tells us that Sodom and Gomorrah serve as an example by undergoing the vengeance of eternal fire. If we want an example of what eternal fire is, we may look to Sodom. It is illegitimate to import a doctrine of hell into this text. It looks as though some have equated the saying “eternal fire” with the concept of the eternal torments of hell. But to do this and thus find the doctrine of eternal torment here would be to commit a formal logical fallacy – even if the doctrine of eternal torment is *true*.

It seems to go something like this:

- 1.) Hell is eternal fire
- 2.) Jude 7 refers to “eternal fire”
- 3.) Therefore Jude 7 refers to hell³³

To the traditionalist the fallacy might not be immediately obvious, but let us use another example of the same kind of reasoning:

³¹ Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, 76-77.

³² Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News*, 86.

³³ A valid way to express the relationship between hell, eternal fire and Jude might go like this:

- 1.) Hell is eternal fire
- 2.) Jude refers to hell
- 3.) Therefore Jude is referring to eternal fire

Although valid (i.e. the conclusion follows deductively from the premises), this argument would not be sound (i.e. the premises and conclusion are true). Obviously Jude does not refer to “hell,” he refers to “eternal fire,” and whether or not eternal fire in this context means “hell” in the familiar theological sense is one of the very things in dispute.

- 1.) Squares have four sides
- 2.) This shape has four sides
- 3.) Therefore this shape is a square

Not necessarily, the shape could be a diamond. Or for a Christian audience, consider the following:

- 1.) Jesus Christ is a man
- 2.) I am a man
- 3.) Therefore I am Jesus Christ

This clearly does not follow. It is the formal fallacy of *affirming the consequent*.³⁴ Just because a particular phrase can be predicated of hell does not mean that wherever that phrase appears it *is* referring to hell. If we followed this kind of flawed reasoning, the traditionalist would be permitted to find eternal torment in any text that referred to “punishment,” since she accepts the proposition that “hell is punishment.” Basically, what it amounts to doing is finding *your* beliefs in any text that uses the same terms *you* use to express that belief.³⁵

It is, however, quite relevant to the issue of final punishment that the phrase “eternal fire” appears here. While this verse does not refer to final punishment, this phrase *is* used to refer to final punishment elsewhere. And where it is so used elsewhere, it is said to demonstrate that hell consists of endless suffering. A good example would be Matthew 18:8 where Jesus warns that it is better to enter “life” maimed than to enter the “eternal fire” with all our bodily members.³⁶ If, however, the phrase “eternal fire” can be applied to

³⁴ Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic* (New York: MacMillan, 1978, 5th ed.), 251.

³⁵ While on the surface of it this might sound almost reasonable, it would in fact entail quite absurd hermeneutics if we applied it consistently. We might conclude (as some in history have), for example, that the disciples had a formula of Church-State relations in mind when they said, “here are two swords” (Lk 22:38). Or we might conclude that whenever a person is said to be in the presence of God (e.g. Ex 18:12; Deut 12:7; Ac 10:33) they have temporarily died and gone to heaven.

³⁶ While a full exegesis of this text would be beyond the scope of this work, two things can be noted:

the historical destruction of Sodom, then clearly it is not *necessary* to see the phrase as a reference to a fire that endures forever and ever. Some, however, have disagreed. Lenski tells us that according to Jude 7, Sodom and Gommorah “are an indication or sign (not ‘example,’ – our versions), that **point** like a finger to ‘eternal fire’ ” [emphasis added].³⁷ The fire that destroyed Sodom, says Lenski, was *not* an eternal fire, but a shadow or symbol of eternal fire. Bietenhard, in an attempt to argue that the eternal fire in this verse does refer to the everlasting fires of hell and not the fire that destroyed Sodom appeals to a contemporary Jewish idea that the people of Sodom were presently undergoing fiery torture in hell.³⁸ Thus, we are expected to conclude, the “example” that they serve is an example of people *going to hell*, the “eternal fire.” Both of these arguments look like attempts to avoid the natural force of what Jude says. In the case of Lenski’s argument, whether we translate *deigma* as “example” or “sign” (although there is good reason to read “example”), the point is that served as this “sign” or “example” **by** “undergoing the vengeance of eternal fire.”³⁹ This strengthens the view that *deigma* should read “example,” as the eternal fire is something *seen* in the historical destruction of Sodom. In addition, the word is used in non-biblical Greek to refer to “samples of corn and produce,” clearly meant as a visible demonstration.⁴⁰ Furthermore, while this form of the word appears only once in the NT, other forms of it are used in many places, where the fairly consistent meaning is

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- 1.) This saying in Matthew is a parallel of the text Mark 9 treated earlier in this paper, which suggests final death rather than eternal torment
 - 2.) Going into the “eternal fire” in this text is set in contrast to entering “life” which could easily be taken to affirm the annihilationist view that going into the eternal fire signifies the second and eternal “death.”

³⁷ R., Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Peter, St John and St Jude* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1945), 625, cited in Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 179.

³⁸ H. Bietenhard, “Fire,” in C. Brown (ed.), *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1975), vol. 1, 657, cited in Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 180.

³⁹ This literal wording is considerably obscured by the NIV, which inserts “of those who,” reading “They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.” This addition can give the misleading impression that the Sodomites *themselves* did not undergo such a fire at the time.

⁴⁰ J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder, 1963), 173.

“example,” whether good or bad.⁴¹ With regard to Bietenhard’s observation, the same rebuttal applies. Sodom’s serving as an *example* by undergoing the vengeance of eternal fire would scarcely be served by their present sufferings in hell, since whether or not they now suffering is quite beyond our powers of observation. If that is an example, it is the most hidden “example” in history!

The question might now be asked – *why* does Jude use the term “eternal fire”? The historical example of eternal fire (the fire that destroyed Sodom) is clearly not a fire that burns forever. What then does the term mean, given that in this context it cannot mean and *endless* fire? Edward Fudge (and he is not alone), after considering the various ways that **aipnio** (eternal/everlasting) is used, concludes that while the word does have a quantitative element (i.e. it does often refer to *duration*), it also has a strong *qualitative* element. “It suggests something that partakes of the transcendent realm of divine activity.”⁴² Baird comments, in reference to the “eternal fire” of Matthew 25:31-46, that “The fire and the punishment partake of the nature of the *aion* [age],” that is, the age to come.⁴³ This appears to be true in Jude 7 also, where the fire that annihilated Sodom and Gomorrah is explicitly said to be an “example,” a foretaste of the fire of the age to come. Their death as an example of the fire that will consume the enemies of God in the coming *aion*.

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

⁴¹ For some examples, see Col, 2:15; Matt 1:19; Heb 4:11, 9:9; John 13:15; James 5:10; 1 Pet 2:6. This fact is pointed out by Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 180.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴³ J. Arthur Baird, *The Justice of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, New Testament Library (London: SCM, 1963), 233.

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.”⁴⁴ Like many, his conclusion is that “Revelation 14:9-11 teaches that hell entails eternal conscious torment for the lost.”⁴⁵ Millard Erickson reflects on this vision, saying, “What would produce smoke, unless something was burning?”⁴⁶ 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.”⁴⁷ In fact, while unlike most NT books this one never *cites* the Scriptures, it 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].⁴⁸ This fact should alert us to be extra sensitive to the scriptural background of the imagery that is employed in this book. The

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁶ Millard J. Erickson, “Is Hell Forever?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:607 (1995), 271.

⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁸ 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.

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.⁴⁹

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."⁵⁰ 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."⁵¹ 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."

⁴⁹ John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987), 12.

⁵⁰ Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, trans. R.A. Wilson, Old Testament Library (London: SCM, 1974), 358.

⁵¹ 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.”⁵²

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.”⁵³

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

⁵² Edward Fudge, “The Case for Conditionalism,” in Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, 75.

⁵³ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 929.

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 18:4.⁵⁴

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

⁵⁴ 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.

Gomorrah have: “they [Sodom and Gomorrah] serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7).⁵⁵

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:

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

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 that 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

⁵⁵ Don Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 526.

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.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ His later comments on the verses he has cited focus on proving that the Greek term for "forever" really means "forever."⁵⁸ 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 or 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 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.⁵⁹

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

⁵⁶ Peterson, "The Case for Traditionalism," 159-164.

⁵⁷ Harry Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957), 46-47.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁹ Sam Hamstra, "An Idealist View of Revelation," in Marvin C. Pate (ed.), *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 97.

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.”⁶⁰ 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!⁶¹ 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

⁶⁰ Ralph Bowles, “Does Revelation 14:11 teach Eternal Torment? Examining a Proof-text on Hell,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 73:1 (2001) 28.

⁶¹ 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.

description of final judgement in Revelation 14:14-20. The traditionalist reading has a tension between the eternal torment supposedly predicted in Revelation 14:11 and the picture of final annihilating destruction that follows in Revelation 14:14-20.⁶²

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.”⁶³ 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

⁶² Ralph Bowles, “Does Revelation 14:11 Teach Eternal Torment?” 29.

⁶³ Jürgen Roloff, *Revelation*, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 229.

John observes in a clarifying postscript, eternal destruction – the lake of fire is the “second” (i.e., eternal and final) death.⁶⁴

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 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.”⁶⁵

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

⁶⁴ Ibid., 232.

⁶⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 367.

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.⁶⁶ Dispensationalist/futurist John Walvoord sees it as the revived Roman Empire in the last days.⁶⁷ Idealist Sam Hamstra sees the beast representing "the spirit and empires of the world."⁶⁸ 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

⁶⁶ Gentry devotes an entire work to establishing this thesis, *The Beast of Revelation* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

⁶⁷ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody press, 1966), 199.

⁶⁸ Sam Hamstra, "An Idealist View of Revelation," 118.

institution will be perpetuated forever, ***nor could they suffer conscious, sensible pain***"

[emphasis added].⁶⁹ 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?⁷⁰

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," since this was the whole point of Fudge's observation – this fact demands an annihilationist interpretation rather than the traditionalist one.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Fudge, "The Case for Conditionalism," 78.

⁷⁰ Peterson Peterson, "A Traditionalist Response to Conditionalism," in Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views*, 111.

⁷¹ 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.

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?⁷² 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

⁷² This question was suggested to me by Dr Christopher Marshall, who supervised this work.

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 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."⁷³ 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."⁷⁴

Summary and Conclusion

There are other texts that theologians use to bolster the doctrine of eternal torment, but a survey of the texts examined here reveals that most of the significant texts used by

⁷³ 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.

⁷⁴ Clark Pinnock, "The Conditional View," in *Four Views on Hell*, 157.

traditionalists have been covered.⁷⁵ There are many different kinds of argument involved in the debate on final punishment. Such arguments would include the dispute as to whether or not God's infinite holiness might demand that His enemies suffer infinite pain, whether sins committed in a finite lifetime might warrant a punishment that is never completed throughout all of eternity, or whether the somewhat dualistic vision of an eternal heaven *and* an eternal hell might clash with the biblical vision of eternity where creation is brought into harmony under Christ. These arguments are, doubtless, worth exploring (although one might be forgiving for believing that at times some such arguments might be verging on territory where angels fear to tread), but they are not what we have been concerned with here. We have been concerned with biblical texts that meet three criteria: 1.) They are in the New Testament 2.) They draw on earlier Scripture and 3.) They have implications for the doctrine of final punishment. It may be possible to ferret out still more texts that meet these criteria, but given the available space, we have treated the most important such texts.

We think that two conclusions have been justified. Firstly, these texts, although they concern final punishment, do not teach eternal torment. If we were to treat them as definitive on final punishment, then they teach that the unsaved will finally be destroyed. This message is presented in various ways: The slain enemies of the Lord will be consumed with worms and fire. They will be suddenly taken in destruction like those who perished in the flood. They will be annihilated like the wicked men of Sodom, whose fate was an example of what would happen to the unsaved. They will come to nothing like Edom. They, like the kingdoms of this world that are set up against the kingdom of God, will be overthrown and brought to an end, as the eschatological reality of God's Kingdom swallows all of creation.

⁷⁵ The list of significant proof texts for eternal torment surveyed here only really lacks two: Matthew 25:41-46 and Luke 16:19-31.

Secondly, traditional readings of these New Testament passages seem to have treated them apart from the context that the writers *gave* them by linking them to earlier Scripture. It appears (to this writer at least) that the only way to conclude that any of these passages clearly teach that the unsaved will suffer for eternity is to (consciously or not) maintain that whatever connections they might have with earlier Scripture must not be allowed to significantly contribute to their meaning.

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