HELL – TORMENT OR ANNIHILATION?
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Few teachings have troubled the human conscience over the centuries more than the traditional view of hell as the place where the lost suffer conscious punishment in body and soul for all eternity. The prospect that one day a vast number of people will be consigned to the everlasting torment of hell is most disturbing and distressing to sensitive Christians. After all, almost everyone has friends or family members who have died without making a commitment to Christ. The prospect of one day seeing them agonizing in hell for all eternity can easily lead thinking Christians to say to God: "No thank you God. I am not interested in Your kind of paradise!"

It is not surprising that the traditional view of hell as a place of eternal torment has been a stumbling block for believers and an effective weapon used by skeptics to challenge the credibility of the Christian message. For example, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), a British philosopher and social reformer, faulted Christ for allegedly teaching the doctrine of hellfire and for the untold cruelty such a doctrine has caused in Christian history.

Russell wrote: "There is one serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ certainly as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching, an attitude which is common with preachers, but which does somewhat detract from superlative excellence. . . . I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindliness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world. . . . I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hellfire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that."1

Russell’s charge that Christ is "partly responsible" for the doctrine of everlasting punishment which "gave the world generations of cruel torture" cannot be dismissed lightly as the fruit of an agnostic mind. If Christ really taught that the saved will enjoy eternal bliss while the unsaved will suffer eternal torment in hellfire, then we would have reason to question the moral integrity of His character. It is hard to imagine that the God whom Jesus Christ revealed as the merciful "Abba? Father" would wreak vengeance on His disobedient children by torturing them for all eternity!

It is not surprising that today we seldom hear sermons on hellfire even from fundamentalist preachers, who theoretically are still committed to such a belief. John Walvoord, himself a fundamentalist, suggests that the reluctance to preach on hellfire is due primarily to the fear of proclaiming an unpopular doctrine.2 In my view, the problem is not merely the reluctance of
preachers today to tell the truth about hell, but primarily the awareness that the traditional view of hellfire is morally intolerable and Biblically questionable.

Clark Pinnock keenly observes: "Their reticence [to preach on hellfire] is not so much due to a lack of integrity in proclaiming the truth as to not having the stomach for preaching a doctrine that amounts to sadism raised to new levels of finesse. Something inside tells them, perhaps on an instinctual level, that the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not the kind of deity who tortures people (even the worst of sinners) in this way. I take the silence of the fundamentalist preachers to be testimony to their longing for a revised doctrine of the nature of hell."3 It is such a longing, I believe, that is encouraging theologians today to revise the traditional view of hell and to propose alternative interpretations of the scriptural data.

**Objectives of This Chapter**

The issue addressed in this chapter is not the fact of hell as the final punishment of the lost, but the nature of hell. The fundamental question is: Do impenitent sinners suffer conscious punishment in body and soul for all eternity, or are they annihilated by God in the second death after suffering a temporary punishment? To put it differently: Does hellfire torment the lost eternally or consume them permanently?

This fundamental question is examined first by analyzing the traditional view and then by presenting the annihilation view, to which I subscribe. The first part of the chapter analyzes the major Biblical texts and arguments used to support the literal view of hell as the place of a literal everlasting punishment of the wicked.

The second part of this chapter considers briefly two alternative interpretations of hell. The first is the metaphorical view, which regards hell as a place where the suffering is more mental than physical. The fire is not literal but metaphorical, and the pain is caused more by the sense of separation from God than by physical torments.4 The second is the universalist view of hell, which turns hell into a purging, refining fire that ultimately makes it possible for every person to make it into heaven.

The third part of this chapter presents the annihilation view of hell as a place of the ultimate dissolution and annihilation of the unsaved. Some call this view conditional immortality, because our study of the Biblical wholistic view of human nature shows that immortality is not an innate human possession; it is a divine gift granted to believers on condition of their faith response. God will not resurrect the wicked to immortal life in order to inflict upon them a punishment of eternal pain. Rather, the wicked will be resurrected mortal in order to receive their punishment which will result in their ultimate annihilation.

Some may question our use of "annihilation" for the destiny of the wicked, because the first law of thermodynamics says that nothing is destroyed but changed into something else. When corpses are burned, their smoke and ashes remain. This is true, but what remains is no longer human life. From a Biblical perspective, the fire that consumes the wicked annihilates them as human beings.
THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF HELL

With few exceptions, the traditional view of hell has dominated Christian thinking from the time of Augustine to the nineteenth century. Simply stated, the traditional view affirms that immediately after death the disembodied souls of impenitent sinners descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of a literal eternal fire. At the resurrection, the body is reunited with the soul, thus intensifying the pain of hell for the lost and the pleasure of heaven for the saved.

Graphic Views of Hell

Not satisfied with the image of fire and smoke of the New Testament, some of the more creative medieval minds have pictured hell as a bizarre horror chamber where punishment is based on a measure-for-measure principle. This means that whatever member of the body sinned, that member would be punished in hell more than any other member.

"In Christian literature," writes William Crockett, "we find blasphemers hanging by their tongues. Adulterous women who plaied their hair to entice men dangle over boiling mire by their neck or hair. Slanderers chew their tongues, hot irons burn their eyes. Other evildoers suffer in equally picturesque ways. Murderers are cast into pits filled with venomous reptiles, and worms fill their bodies. Women who had abortions sit neck deep in the excretions of the damned. Those who chatted idly during church stand in a pool of burning sulphur and pitch. Idolaters are driven up cliffs by demons where they plunge to the rocks below, only to be driven up again. Those who turned their back on God are turned and baked slowly in the fires of hell."5

These early images of hell were refined and immortalized by the famous fourteenth-century Italian poet, Dante Alighieri. In his Divina Commedia (Divine Comedy), Dante portrays hell as a place of absolute terror, where the damned writhe and scream while the saints bask in the glory of paradise. In Dante’s hell, some sinners wail loudly in boiling blood, while others endure burning smoke that chars their nostrils, still others run naked from hordes of biting snakes.

The more cautious approach of Luther and Calvin did not deter later prominent preachers and theologians from portraying hell as a sea of fire, in which the wicked burn throughout eternity. Renowned eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards pictured hell as a raging furnace of liquid fire that fills both the body and the soul of the wicked: "The body will be full of torment as full as it can hold, and every part of it shall be full of torment. They shall be in extreme pain, every joint of them, every nerve shall be full of inexpressible torment. They shall be tormented even to their fingers’ ends. The whole body shall be full of the wrath of God. Their hearts and bowels and their heads, their eyes and their tongues, their hands and their feet will be filled with the fierceness of God’s wrath. This is taught us in many Scriptures. . . ."6

A similar description of the fate of the wicked was given by the famous nineteenth-century British preacher Charles Spurgeon: "In fire exactly like that which we have on earth thy body will lie, asbestos-like, forever unconsumed, all thy veins roads for the feet of Pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the Devil shall for ever play his diabolical tune of hell’s
unutterable lament."7 It is hard to comprehend how the Devil can torment evildoers in the place of his own punishment.

Today, those who believe in a literal eternal hellfire are more circumspect in their description of the suffering experienced by the wicked. For example, Robert A. Peterson concludes his book Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment, saying: "The Judge and Ruler over hell is God himself. He is present in hell, not in blessing, but in wrath. Hell entails eternal punishment, utter loss, rejection by God, terrible suffering, and unspeakable sorrow and pain. The duration of hell is endless. Although there are degrees of punishment, hell is terrible for all the damned. Its occupants are the Devil, evil angels, and unsaved human beings."8

In making his case for hell as a place of eternal punishment, Peterson marshals the following witnesses: the Old Testament, Christ, the Apostles, and Church History (early church, Reformation, and the modern period). He devotes chapters to each of these witnesses. A similar approach is used by other scholars who support the traditional view of hellfire.9 A comprehensive response to all the alleged witnesses of eternal punishment of the wicked would take us beyond the scope of this study. Interested readers can find such a comprehensive response in The Fire that Consumes (1982) by Edward Fudge. The book, with a foreword by F. F. Bruce, is praised by many scholars for its balanced and fair treatment of the Biblical and historical data. Our response is limited to a few basic observations, some of which will be expanded in the second part of this chapter.

THE WITNESS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The witness of the Old Testament for eternal punishment rests largely on the use of sheol and two main passages, Isaiah 66:22-24 and Daniel 12:1-2. Regarding sheol, John F. Walvoord says: "Sheol was a place of punishment and retribution. In Isaiah [14:9-10] the Babylonians killed in divine judgment are pictured as being greeted in sheol by those who had died earlier."10

Regarding sheol, our study of the word in chapter 5 shows that none of the texts supports the view of sheol as the place of punishment for the ungodly. The word denotes the realm of the dead where there is unconsciousness, inactivity, and sleep. Similarly, Isaiah’s taunting ode against the King of Babylon is a parable, in which the characters, personified trees, and fallen monarchs are fictitious. They serve not to reveal the punishment of the wicked in sheol, but to forecast in graphic pictorial language God’s judgment upon Israel’s oppressor and his final ignominious destiny in a dusty grave, where he is eaten by worms. To interpret this parable as a literal description of hell means to ignore the highly figurative, parabolic nature of the passage, which is simply designed to depict the doom of a self-exalted tyrant.

Isaiah 66:24: The Fate of the Wicked. The description of the fate of the wicked found in Isaiah 66:24 is regarded by some traditionalists as the clearest witness to eternal punishment in the Old Testament. The setting of the text is the contrast between God’s judgment upon the wicked and His blessings upon the righteous. The latter will enjoy prosperity and peace, and will worship
God regularly from Sabbath to Sabbath (Is 66:12-14, 23). But the wicked will be punished by "fire" (Is 66:15) and meet their "end together" (Is 66:17). This is the setting of the crucial verse 24, which says: "And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that 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."

R. N. Whybray sees in this text "an early description of eternal punishment: though dead, the rebels will continue forever."10 In a similar vein, Peterson interprets the phrase "their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched" as meaning that "the punishment and shame of the wicked have no end; their fate is eternal. It is no wonder that they will be loathsome to all mankind."11

Isaiah’s description of the fate of the wicked was possibly inspired by the Lord’s slaying of 185,000 men of the Assyrian army during the reign of Hezekiah. We are told that "when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies" (Is 37:36). This historical event may have served to foreshadow the fate of the wicked. Note that the righteous look upon "dead bodies" (Hebrew: pegerim), not living people. What they see is destruction and not eternal torment.

The "worms" are mentioned in connection with the dead bodies, because they hasten the decomposition and represent the ignominy of corpses deprived of burial (Jer. 25:33; Is 14:11; Job 7:5; 17:14; Acts 12:23). The figure of the fire that is not quenched is used frequently in Scripture to signify a fire that consumes (Ezek 20:47-48) and reduces to nothing (Am 5:5-6; Matt 3:12). Edward Fudge rightly explains that "both worms and fire speak of a total and final destruction. Both terms also make this a ‘loathsome’ scene."12 To understand the meaning of the phrase "the fire shall not be quenched," it is important to remember that keeping a fire alive, to burn corpses required considerable effort in Palestine. Corpses do not readily burn and the firewood needed to consume them was scarce. In my travels in the Middle East and Africa, I often have seen carcasses partially burned because the fire died out before consuming the remains of a beast.

The image of an unquenchable fire is simply designed to convey the thought of being completely burned up or consumed. It has nothing to do with the everlasting punishment of immortal souls. The passage speaks clearly of "dead bodies" which are consumed and not of immortal souls which are tormented eternally. It is unfortunate that traditionalists interpret this passage, and similar statements of Jesus in the light of their conception of the final punishment rather than on the basis of what the figure of speech really means.

Daniel 12:2: "Everlasting Contempt." The second major Old Testament text used by traditionalists to support everlasting punishment is Daniel 12:2, which speaks of the resurrection of both good and evil: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Peterson concludes his analysis of this text, by saying: "Daniel teaches that whereas the godly will be raised to never-ending life, the wicked will be raised to never-ending disgrace (Dan 12:2)."13
To sum up, the alleged Old Testament witness for the everlasting punishment of the wicked is negligible, if not non-existent. On the contrary, the evidence for utter destruction of the wicked at the eschatological Day of the Lord is resoundingly clear. The wicked will "perish" like the chaff (Ps 1:4, 6), will be dashed to pieces like pottery (Ps 2:9, 12), will be slain by the Lord’s breath (Is 11:4), will be burnt in the fire "like thorns cut down" (Is 33:12), and "will die like gnats" (Is 51:6).

Perhaps the clearest description of the total destruction of the wicked is found on the last page of the Old Testament in the English (not Hebrew) Bible: "For behold, the day comes burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch" (Mal 4:1). Here the imagery of the all-consuming fire which leaves "neither root nor branch" suggests utter consumption and destruction, not perpetual torment. The same truth is expressed by God’s next prophet, John the Baptist, who cried in the wilderness summoning people to repentance in view of the approaching fire of God’s judgment (Matt 3:7-12).

THE WITNESS OF INTERTESTAMENTAL LITERATURE

The literature produced during the 400 years between Malachi and Matthew is far from being unanimous on the fate of the wicked. Some texts describe the unending conscious torments of the lost, while others reflect the Old Testament view that the wicked cease to exist. What accounts for these contrasting views most likely is the Hellenistic cultural pressure the Jews experienced at that time as they were widely dispersed throughout the ancient Near East.

Unfortunately, most people are not aware of the different views because traditionalists generally argue for a uniform Jewish view of the final punishment as eternal torment. Since Jesus and the apostles did not denounce such a view, it is assumed that they endorsed it. This assumption is based on fantasy rather than facts.

**Eternal Torment**

The Second Book of Esdras, an apocryphal book accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholic Church, asks if the soul of the lost will be tortured immediately at death or after the renewal of creation (2 Esd 7:15). God answers: "As the spirit leaves the body . . . if it is one of those who have shown scorn and have not kept the way of the Most High . . . such spirit shall . . . wander about in torment, ever grieving and sad . . . they will consider the torment laid up for themselves in the last days" (2 Esd 7:78-82).16
The same view is expressed in Judith (150-125 B.C.), also an apocryphal book included in the Roman Catholic Bible. In closing her song of victory, the heroine Judith warns: "Woe to the nations that rise up against my race; the Lord Almighty will take vengeance of them in the day of judgment, to put fire and worms in their flesh; And they shall weep and feel pain for ever" (Judith 16:17). The reference to the fire and worms probably comes from Isaiah 66:24, but while Isaiah saw the dead bodies consumed by fire and worms, Judith speaks of "fire and worms" as causing internal, unending agonies inside the flesh. Here we have an unmistakable description of the traditional view of hell.

A similar description of the fate of the wicked is found in 4 Maccabees, written by a Jew with Stoic leanings. The author describes the righteous ascending to conscious bliss at death (10:15; 13:17; 17:18; 18:23) and the wicked descending to conscious torment (9:8, 32; 10:11, 15; 12:19; 13:15; 18:5, 22). In chapter 9, he tells the story of the faithful mother and her seven sons who were all martyred under the tyranny of Antiochus Epiphanes (see 2 Macc. 7:1-42). The seven sons repeatedly warn their wicked torturer of the eternal torment that awaits him: "Divine vengeance is reserved for you, eternal fire and torments, which shall cling to you for all time" (4 Macc 12:12; cf. 9:9; 10:12, 15). "The danger of eternal torment is laid up for those who transgress the commandments of God" (4 Macc 13:15).

Total Annihilation
In other apocryphal books, however, sinners are consumed as in the Old Testament. Tobit (about 200 B.C.), for example, describes the end time, saying: "All the children of Israel that are delivered in those days, remembering God in truth, shall be gathered together and come to Jerusalem and they shall dwell in the land of Abraham with security . . . and they that do sin and unrighteousness shall cease from all earth" (Tob. 14:6-8). The same view is expressed in Sirach, called also Ecclesiasticus (about 195-171 B.C.) which speaks of "the glowing fire" in which the wicked will "be devoured" and "find destruction" (Eccl 36:7-10).

The Sibylline Oracles, a composite work, the core of which comes from a Jewish author of perhaps the second century B.C., describes how God will carry out the total destruction of the wicked: "And He shall burn the whole earth, and consume the whole race of men . . . and there shall be sooty dust" (Sib. Or. 4:76). The Psalms of Solomon, most likely composed by Hasidic Jews in the middle of the first century B.C., anticipates a time when the wicked will vanish from the earth, never to be remembered: "The destruction of the sinner is forever, and he shall not be remembered, when the righteous is visited. This is the portion of sinners for ever" (Ps. Sol. 3:11-12).

Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls
Traditionalists often cite Josephus' description of the Essene belief about the immortality of the soul and the eternal punishment of the wicked to support their contention that such a belief was widely accepted in New Testament times. Let us look at the text closely before making any comment. Josephus tells us that the Essenes adopted from the Greeks not only the notion that "the souls are immortal, and continue for ever," but also the belief that "the good souls have their habitations beyond the ocean," in a region where the weather is perfect, while "bad souls [are cast in] a dark and tempestuous den, full of never-ceasing punishments."17 Josephus continues explaining that such a belief derives from Greek "fables" and is built "on the supposition that the
souls are immortal" and that "bad men . . . suffer immortal punishment after death." He calls such beliefs "an unavoidable bait for such as have once had a taste for their [Greek] philosophy."19

It is significant that Josephus attributes the belief in the immortality of the soul and in unending punishment not to the teachings of the Old Testament, but to Greek "fables," which sectarian Jews, like the Essenes, found irresistible. Such a comment presupposes that not all the Jews had accepted these beliefs. In fact, indications are that even among the Essenes were those who did not share such beliefs. For example, the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are generally associated with the Essene community, speak clearly of the total annihilation of sinners.

The Damascus Document, an important Dead Sea Scroll, describes the end of sinners by comparing their fate to that of the antediluvians who perished in the Flood and of the unfaithful Israelites who fell in the wilderness. God’s punishment of sinners leaves "no remnant remaining of them or survivor (CD 2, 6, 7). They will be "as though they had not been" (CD 2, 20). The same view is expressed in another scroll, the Manual of Discipline which speaks of the "extermination" of the men of Belial (Satan) by means of "eternal fire" (1QS 2, 4-8).20

It is noteworthy that the Manual of Discipline describes the punishment of those who follow the Spirit of Perversity instead of the Spirit of Truth in an apparent contradictory way, namely, as unending punishment which results in total destruction. The text states: "And as for the Visitation of all who walk in this [Spirit of Perversity], it consists of an abundance of blows administered by all the Angels of destruction in the everlasting Pit by the furious wrath of the God of vengeance, of unending dread and shame without end, and of disgrace of destruction by fire of the region of darkness. And all their time from age to age are in most sorrowful chagrin and bitterest misfortune, in calamities of darkness till they are destroyed with none of them surviving or escaping" (1QS 4.11-14).21

The fact that the "unending dread and shame without end" is not unending but lasts only "till they are destroyed" goes to show that in New Testament times, people used such terms as "unending," "without end," or "eternal," with a different meaning than we do today. For us, "unending" punishment means "without end," and not until the wicked are destroyed. The recognition of this fact is essential for interpreting later the sayings of Jesus about eternal fire and for resolving the apparent contradiction we find in the New Testament between "everlasting punishment" (Matt 25:46) and "everlasting destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9). When it comes to the punishment of the wicked, "unending" simply means "until they are destroyed."

The above sampling of testimonies from the intertestamental literature indicates that in this period, there was no consistent "Jewish view" of the fate of the wicked. Though most of the documents reflect the Old Testament view of the total extinction of sinners, some clearly speak of the unending torment of the wicked. This means that we cannot read the words of Jesus or the New Testament writers assuming that they reflect a uniform belief in eternal torment held by Jews at that time. We must examine the teachings of the New Testament on the basis of its own internal witness.
THE WITNESS OF JESUS

Did Jesus Teach Eternal Torment? Traditionalists believe that Jesus provides the strongest proof for their belief in the eternal punishment of the wicked. Kenneth Kantzer, one of the most respected evangelical leaders of our time, states: "Those who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord cannot escape the clear, unambiguous language with which he warns of the awful truth of eternal punishment."22

Australian theologian, Leon Morris, concurs with Kantzer and emphatically states: "Why does anyone believe in hell in these enlightened days? Because Jesus plainly taught its existence. He spoke more often about hell than he did about heaven. We cannot get around this fact. We can understand that there are those who do not like the idea of hell. I do not like it myself. But if we are serious in our understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, we must reckon with the fact that he said plainly that some people will spend eternity in hell."23

Morris clearly affirms that Jesus taught the existence of hell. In fact, Jesus uses the term gehenna (translated "hell" in our English Bibles) seven of the eight times the term occurs in the New Testament. The only other reference is found in James 3:6. But the issue is not the reality of hell as the place of the final punishment of impenitent sinners. On this point, most Christians agree. Rather, the issue is the nature of hell. Did Jesus teach that hell/gehenna is the place where sinners will suffer eternal torment or permanent destruction? To find an answer to this question, let us examine what Jesus actually said about hell.

What Is Hell Gehenna? (see also: The Visible Hell - http://www.bibleunderstanding.com/visiblehell1.htm)

Before looking at Christ’s references to hell gehenna, we may find it helpful to consider the derivation of the word itself. The Greek word gehenna is a transliteration of the Hebrew "Valley of (the sons of) Hinnon," located south of Jerusalem. In ancient times, it was linked with the practice of sacrificing children to the god Molech (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10). This earned it the name "Topheth," a place to be spit on or abhorred.26 This valley apparently became a gigantic pyre for burning the 185,000 corpses of Assyrian soldiers whom God slew in the days of Hezekiah (Is 30:31-33; 37:36).

Jeremiah predicted that the place would be called "the valley of Slaughter" because it would be filled with the corpses of the Israelites when God judged them for their sins. "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter: for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the beasts of the air, and for the beasts of the earth; and none will frighten them away" (Jer. 7:32-33).

Josephus informs us that the same valley was heaped with the dead bodies of the Jews following the A. D. 70 siege of Jerusalem.26 We have seen that Isaiah envisions the same scene following the Lord’s slaughter of sinners at the end of the world (Is 66:24). During the intertestamental period, the valley became the place of final punishment, and was called the "accursed valley" (1 Enoch 27:2,3), the "station of vengeance" and "future torment" (2 Bar 59:10, 11), the "furnace of Gehenna" and "pit of torment" (4 Esd 7:36).
Though the imagery of the gehenna is common in the Jewish literature of this period, the description of what happens there is contradictory. Edward Fudge concludes his survey of the literature, saying: "We have seen a few passages in the Pseudepigrapha which specifically anticipate everlasting torment of conscious bodies and/or souls, as well as one such verse in the Apocrypha. Many other passages within the intertestamental literature also picture the wicked being consumed by fire, but it is the consuming, unquenchable fire of the Old Testament which utterly destroys for ever, leaving only smoke as its reminder. It is fair to say that, to those who first heard the Lord, gehenna would convey a sense of total horror and disgust. Beyond that, however, one must speak with extreme caution."27

Jesus and Hell’s Fire
With this note of caution, let us look at the seven references to gehenna hell fire that we find in the Gospels. In The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states that whoever says to his brother "'you fool!' shall be liable to the hell [gehenna] of fire" (Matt 5:22; KJV). Again, He said that it is better to pluck out the eye or cut off the hand that causes a person to sin than for the "whole body go into hell [gehenna] (Matt 5:29, 30). The same thought is expressed later on: it is better to cut off a foot or a hand or pluck out an eye that causes a person to sin than to "be thrown into eternal fire . . . be thrown into the hell [gehenna] of fire" (Matt 18:8, 9). Here the fire of hell is described as "eternal." The same saying is found in Mark, where Jesus three times says that it is better to cut off the offending organ than "to go to hell [gehenna], to the unquenchable fire . . . to be thrown into hell [gehenna] of fire" (Matt 18:8, 9). Here the fire of hell is described as "eternal." The same saying is found in Mark, where Jesus three times says that it is better to cut off the offending organ than "to go to hell [gehenna], to the unquenchable fire . . . to be thrown into hell [gehenna], where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:44, 46, 47-48). Elsewhere, Jesus chides the Pharisees for traversing sea and land to make a convert and then making him "twice as much a child of hell [gehenna]" (Matt 23:15). Finally, he warns the Pharisees that they will not "escape being sentenced to hell [gehenna]" (Matt 23:33).

In reviewing Christ’s allusions to hell/gehenna, we should first note that none of them indicates that hell/gehenna is a place of unending torment. What is eternal or unquenchable is not the punishment, but the fire. We noted earlier that in the Old Testament this fire is eternal or unquenchable in the sense that it totally consumes dead bodies. This conclusion is supported by Christ’s warning that we should not fear human beings who can harm the body, but the One "who can destroy both soul and body in hell [gehenna]" (Matt 10:28). The implication is clear. Hell is the place of final punishment, which results in the total destruction of the whole being, soul and body.

Robert Peterson argues that "Jesus is not speaking here of literal annihilation," because in the parallel passage in Luke 12:5 the verb "destroy" is not used. Instead, it says: "Fear him who, after killing the body, has power to throw you into hell" (Luke 12:5). From this Peterson concludes: "The destruction mentioned in Matthew 10:28, therefore, is equivalent to being thrown into hell,"28 that is, eternal torment. The fundamental problem with his argument is that he assumes first that "being thrown into hell" means everlasting torment. Then he uses his subjective assumption to negate the self-evident meaning of the verb "to destroy - apollumi." Peterson ignores a basic principle of Biblical interpretation which requires unclear texts to be explained on the basis of those which are clear and not vice-versa. The fact that Jesus clearly speaks of God destroying both the soul and body in hell shows that hell is the place where sinners are ultimately destroyed and not eternally tormented.
"Eternal Fire"

Traditionalists would challenge this conclusion because elsewhere Christ refers to "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment." For example, in Matthew 18:8-9 Jesus repeats what He had said earlier (Matt 5:29-30) about forfeiting a member of the body in order to escape the "eternal fire" of hell/gehenna. An even clearer reference to "eternal fire" is found in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in which Christ speaks of the separation that takes place at His coming between the saved and the unsaved. He will welcome the faithful into His kingdom, but will reject the wicked, saying: "Depart from me, you cursed, into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; . . . And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt 25:41, 46).29

Traditionalists attribute fundamental importance to the last passage because it brings together the two concepts of "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment." The combination of the two is interpreted to mean that the punishment is eternal because the hellfire that causes it is also eternal. Peterson goes so far as to say that "if Matthew 25:41 and 46 were the only two verses to describe the fate of the wicked, the Bible would clearly teach eternal condemnation, and we would be obligated to believe it and to teach it on the authority of the Son of God."30

Peterson’s interpretation of these two critical texts ignores four major considerations. First, Christ’s concern in this parable is not to define the nature of either eternal life or of eternal death, but simply to affirm that there are two destinies. The nature of each of the destinies is not discussed in this passage.

Second, as John Stott rightly points out, "The fire itself is termed ‘eternal’ and ‘unquenchable,’ but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed for ever, not tormented for ever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which ‘rises for ever and ever’ (Rev 14:11; cf. 19:3)."31

Third, the fire is "eternal - aionios," not because of its endless duration, but because of its complete consumption and annihilation of the wicked. This is indicated clearly by the fact that the lake of fire, in which the wicked are thrown, is called explicitly "the second death" (Rev 20:14; 21:8), because, it causes the final, radical, and irreversible extinction of life.

Eternal as Permanent Destruction

"Eternal" often refers to the permanence of the result rather than the continuation of a process. For example, Jude 7 says that Sodom and Gomorrah underwent "a punishment of eternal [aionios] fire." It is evident that the fire that destroyed the two cities is eternal, not because of its duration but because of its permanent results.

Similar examples can be found in Jewish intertestamental literature. Earlier we noted that in the Manual of Discipline of the Dead Sea Scrolls, God hurls "extermination" upon the wicked by means of "eternal fire" (1QS 2. 4-8). The "Angels of destruction" cause "unending dread and shame without end, and of the disgrace of destruction by the fire of the region of darkness . . . till they are destroyed with none of them surviving or escaping" (1 QS 4. 11-14). Here, the shameful and destructive fire is "unending . . . without end," yet it will last only "till they are destroyed."
To our modern critical minds, such a statement is contradictory, but not to people of Biblical times. To interpret a text correctly, it is vital to establish how it was understood by its original readers.

The examples cited suffice to show that the fire of the final punishment is "eternal" not because it lasts forever, but because, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, it causes the complete and permanent destruction of the wicked, a condition which lasts forever. In his commentary on The Gospel according to St. Matthew, R. V. G. Tasker expresses the same view: "There is no indication as to how long that punishment will last. The metaphor of 'eternal fire' wrongly rendered everlasting fire [KJV] in verse 41 is meant, we may reasonably presume, to indicate final destruction."32

Fourth, Jesus was offering a choice between destruction and life when He said: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only few find it" (Matt 7:13-14).33 Here Jesus contrasts the comfortable way which leads to destruction in hell with the narrow way of trials and persecutions which leads to eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. The contrast between destruction and life suggests that the "eternal fire" causes the eternal destruction of the lost, not their eternal torment.

"Eternal Punishment"

Christ’s solemn declaration: "They will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt 25:46) is generally regarded as the clearest proof of the conscious suffering the lost will endure for all eternity. Is this the only legitimate interpretation of the text? John Stott rightly answers: "No, that is to read into the text what is not necessarily there. What Jesus said is that both the life and the punishment would be eternal, but he did not in that passage define the nature of either. Because he elsewhere spoke of eternal life as a conscious enjoyment of God (John 17:3), it does not follow that eternal punishment must be a conscious experience of pain at the hand of God. On the contrary, although declaring both to be eternal, Jesus is contrasting the two destinies: the more unlike they are, the better."34

Traditionalists read "eternal punishment" as "eternal punishing," but this is not the meaning of the phrase. As Basil Atkinson keenly observes, "When the adjective aionios meaning ‘everlasting’ is used in Greek with nouns of action it has reference to the result of the action, not the process. Thus the phrase ‘everlasting punishment’ is comparable to ‘everlasting redemption’ and ‘everlasting salvation,’ both Scriptural phrases. No one supposes that we are being redeemed or being saved forever. We were redeemed and saved once for all by Christ with eternal results. In the same way the lost will not be passing through a process of punishment for ever but will be punished once and for all with eternal results. On the other hand the noun ‘life’ is not a noun of action, but a noun expressing a state. Thus the life itself is eternal."35

A fitting example to support this conclusion is found in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, where Paul, speaking of those who reject the Gospel, says: "They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might."36 It is evident that the destruction of the wicked cannot be eternal in its duration, because it is difficult to imagine an eternal, inconclusive process of destruction. Destruction presupposes annihilation.
The destruction of the wicked is eternal aionios, not because the process of destruction continues forever, but because the results are permanent. In the same way, the "eternal punishment" of Matthew 25:46 is eternal because its results are permanent. It is a punishment that results in their eternal destruction or annihilation.

**The Meaning of ‘Eternal’**

Some reason that "if the word ‘eternal’ means without end when applied to the future blessedness of believers, it must follow, unless clear evidence is given to the contrary, that this word also means without end when used to describe the future punishment of the lost."37 Harry Buis states this argument even more forcefully: "If aionion describes life which is endless, so must aionios describe endless punishment. Here the doctrine of heaven and the doctrine of hell stand or fall together."38

Such reasoning fails to recognize that what determines the meaning of "eternal" is the object being qualified. If the object is the life granted by God to believers (John 3:16), then the word "eternal" obviously means "unending, everlasting," because the Scripture tells us that the "mortal nature" of believers will be made "immortal" by Christ at His Coming (1 Cor. 15:53).

On the other hand, if the object being qualified is the "punishment" or "destruction" of the lost, then "eternal" can only mean "permanent, total, final," because nowhere does the Scripture teach that the wicked will be resurrected immortal to be able to suffer forever. Eternal punishment requires either the natural possession of an immortal nature or the divine bestowal of an immortal nature at the time the punishment is inflicted. Nowhere does the Scripture teach that either of these conditions exists.

**The punishment of the wicked is eternal both in quality and quantity**

It is "eternal" in quality because it belongs to the Age to Come. It is "eternal" in quantity because its results will never end. Like "eternal judgment" (Heb 6:2), "eternal redemption" (Heb 9:12), and "eternal salvation" (Heb 5:9) all of which are eternal in the results of actions once completed, so "eternal punishment" is eternal in its results: the complete and irreversible destruction of the wicked.

It is important to note that the Greek word aionios, translated "eternal" or "everlasting," literally means "last for an age." Ancient Greek papyri contain numerous examples of Roman emperors being described as aionios. What is meant is that they held their office for life. Unfortunately, the English words "eternal" or "everlasting" do not accurately render the meaning of aionios, which literally means "age-lasting." In other words, while the Greek aionios expresses perpetuity within limits, the English "eternal" or "everlasting" denotes unlimited duration.

**The Meaning of ‘Punishment’**

Note should also be taken of the word "punishment" used to translate the Greek word kolasis. A glance at Moulton and Milligan’s Vocabulary of the Greek Testament shows that the word was used at that time with the meaning of "pruning" or "cutting down" of dead wood. If this is its meaning here, it reflects the frequent Old Testament phrase "shall be cut off from his people" (Gen 17:14; Ex 30:33, 38; Lev 7:20, 21, 25, 27; Num 9:13). This would mean that the "eternal punishment" of the wicked consists in their being permanently cut off from mankind.
As a final observation, it is important to remember that the only way the punishment of the wicked could be inflicted eternally is if God resurrected them with immortal life so that they would be indestructible. But according to the Scripture, only God possesses immortality in Himself (1 Tim 1:17; 6:16). He gives immortality as the gift of the Gospel (2 Tim 1:10). In the best known text of the Bible, we are told that those who do not "believe in him" will "perish [apoletai]," instead of receiving "eternal life" (John 3:16). The ultimate fate of the lost is destruction by eternal fire and not punishment by eternal torment. The notion of the eternal torment of the wicked can only be defended by accepting the Greek view of the immortality and indestructibility of the soul, a concept which we have found to be foreign to Scripture.

**"Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth"**

Four times in the Gospel of Matthew we are told that on the day of judgment "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; KJV). Believers in literal, eternal hell fire generally assume that the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" describes the conscious agony experienced by the lost for all eternity. A look at the context of each text suggests, however, that the "weeping and grinding of teeth" occurs in the context of the separation or expulsion that occurs at the final judgment.

Both phrases derive most likely from the weeping and gnashing of teeth associated with the Day of the Lord in the Old Testament. For example, Zephaniah describes the Day of the Lord in the following words: "The day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly" (Zeph. 1:14; KJV). In a similar fashion, the Psalmist says: "The wicked shall see it, and be grieved; he shall gnash with his teeth, and melt away; the desire of the wicked shall perish" (Ps 112:10). Here the Psalmist clearly indicates that the gnashing of teeth is the outcome of the judgment of the wicked which ultimately results in their extinction.

Edward Fudge perceptively observes that "the expression ‘weeping and grinding of teeth’ seems to indicate two separate activities. The first reflects the terror of the doomed as they begin to truly realize that God has thrown them out as worthless and as they anticipate the execution of His sentence. The second seems to express the bitter rage and acrimony they feel toward God, who sentenced them, and toward the redeemed, who will forever be blessed."41

**THE WITNESS OF PAUL**

The word "hell" (gehenna) does not occur in the writings of Paul. Instead, the apostle refers a few times to God’s judgment executed upon the evildoers at the time of Christ’s coming. Traditionalists appeal to some of these passages to support their belief in the eternal punishment of the lost. Earlier we examined the important passage of 2 Thessalonians 1:9, where Paul speaks of the "punishment of eternal destruction" that the wicked will suffer at Christ’s coming. We noted that the destruction of the wicked is eternal? aionios, not because the process of destruction continues forever, but because the results are permanent.
The Day of Wrath
Another significant Pauline passage often cited in support of literal unending hellfire is his warning about "the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will render to every man according to his works: . . . to those who do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek" (Rom 2:5-9). The "wrath, fury, tribulation, distress" are seen by traditionalists as descriptive of the conscious torment of hell.42

The picture that Paul presents of "the day of wrath," when the evildoers will experience wrath, fury, tribulation and distress is most likely derived from Zephaniah, where the prophet speaks of the eschatological Day of the Lord as a "day of wrath . . . a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom" (Zeph. 1:15). Then the prophet says: "In the fire of his jealous wrath, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full, yea, sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth" (Zeph. 1:18).

We have reason to believe that Paul expresses the same truth that the Day of the Lord will bring a sudden end to evildoers. Paul never makes any allusion to the everlasting torment of the lost. Why? Simply, because for him, immortality is God’s gift given to the saved at Christ’s coming (1 Cor. 15:53-54) and not a natural endowment of every person. The Apostle borrows freely from the Old Testament’s prophetic vocabulary, but he illuminates the vision of the Day of the Lord with the bright light of the Gospel, rather than with lurid details of conscious eternal torment.

THE WITNESS OF REVELATION

The theme of the final judgment is central to the book of Revelation, because it represents God’s way of overcoming the opposition of evil to Himself and His people. Thus, it is not surprising that believers in eternal hell fire find support for their view in the dramatic imagery of Revelation’s final judgment. The visions cited to support the view of everlasting punishment in hell are: (1) the vision of God’s Wrath in Revelation 14:9-11, and (2) the vision of the lake of fire and of the second death in Revelation 20:10, 14-15. We briefly examine them now.

The Vision of God's Wrath
In Revelation 14, John sees three angels announcing God’s final judgment in language progressively stronger. The third angel cries out with a loud voice: "If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also shall drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of his holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name" (Rev 14:9-11).

Traditionalists view this passage together with Matthew 25:46 as the two most important texts which support the traditional doctrine of hell. Peterson concludes his analysis of this passage, by
saying: "I conclude, therefore, that despite attempts to prove otherwise, Revelation 14:9-11 unequivocally teaches that hell entails eternal conscious torment for the lost. In fact, if we had only this passage, we would be obligated to teach the traditional doctrine of hell on the authority of the Word of God."43 Robert Morey states categorically the same view: "By every rule of hermeneutics and exegesis, the only legitimate interpretation of Revelation 14:10-11 is the one that clearly sees eternal, conscious torment awaiting the wicked."44

These dogmatic interpretations of Revelation 14:9-11 as proof of a literal, eternal torment reveal a lack of sensitivity to the highly metaphorical language of the passage. In his commentary on Revelation, J. P. M. Sweet, a respected British New Testament scholar, offers a most timely caution in his comment on this passage: "To ask, ‘what does Revelation teach? eternal torment or eternal destruction?’ is to use (or misuse) the book as a source of ‘doctrine,’ or of information about the future. John uses pictures, as Jesus used parables (cf. Matt 18:32-34; 25:41-46), to ram home the unimaginable disaster of rejecting God, and the unimaginable blessedness of union with God, while there is still time to do something about it."45 It is unfortunate that this warning is ignored by those who choose to interpret literally highly figurative passages like the one under consideration.

Four Elements of the Judgment

Let us now consider the four major elements in the angel’s announcement of God’s judgment upon the apostates who worship the beast: (1) The pouring and drinking of the cup of God’s wrath, (2) the torment with burning sulphur inflicted upon the ungodly in the sight of the angels and of the Lamb, (3) the smoke of their torment rising forever, and (4) their having no rest day or night.

The pouring of the cup of God’s wrath is a well-established Old Testament symbol of divine judgment (Is 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15-38; Ps 60:3; 75:8). God pours the cup "unmixed," that is, undiluted, to ensure its deadly effects. The prophets used similar language: "They shall drink and stagger, and shall be as though they had not been" (Ob 16: cf. Jer. 25:18, 27, 33). The same cup of God’s wrath is served to Babylon, the city that corrupts the people. God mixes "a double draught for her," and the result is "pestilence, mourning, famine" and destruction by fire (Rev 18:6, 8). We have reason to believe that the end of Babylon, destroyed by fire, is also the end of the apostates who drink God’s unmixed cup.

The fate of the ungodly is described through the imagery of the most terrible judgment that ever fell on this earth, the destruction by fire and sulphur of Sodom and Gomorrah. "He shall be tormented with fire and sulphur, in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb" (Rev 14:10). The imagery of fire and sulphur that destroyed the two cities frequently is used in the Bible to signify complete annihilation (Job 18:15-17; Is 30:33; Ezek 38:22).

Isaiah describes the fate of Edom in language that is strikingly similar to that of Revelation 14:10. He says: "The streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into brimstone; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched, its smoke shall go up for ever" (Is 34:9-10). As Revelation 14:10, we have here the unquenchable fire, the sulphur (brimstone), and the smoke that goes up forever, night and day. Does this mean that Edom was to burn forever? We do not have to go far to find the answer because the verse continues: "From
generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever" (Is 34:10). It is evident that the unquenchable fire and the ever-ascending smoke are metaphoric symbols of complete destruction, extermination, and annihilation. If this is the meaning of this imagery in the Old Testament, we have reason to believe that the same meaning applies to the text under consideration.

This conclusion is supported by John’s use of the imagery of the fire and smoke to describe the fate of Babylon, the city responsible for enticing God’s people into apostasy. The city "shall be burned with fire" (Rev 18:8) and "the smoke from her goes up for ever and ever" (Rev 19:3). Does this mean that Babylon will burn for all eternity? Obviously not, because the merchants and kings bewail the "torment" they see, and cry: "Alas, alas, for the great city . . . In one hour she has been laid waste. . . . and shall be found no more" (Rev 18:10, 17, 19, 21). It is evident that the smoke of the torment of Babylon that "goes up for ever and ever" represents complete destruction because the city "shall be found no more" (Rev 18:21).

The striking similarity between the fate of the apostates and the fate of Babylon, where both are characterized as tormented by fire whose smoke "goes up for ever and ever" (Rev 14:10-11; cf. 18:8; 19:3), gives us reason to believe that the destiny of Babylon is also the destiny of those who have partaken of her sins, that is, both experience the same destruction and annihilation.

"No Rest, Day or Night"
The phrase "they have no rest, day or night" (Rev 14:11) is interpreted by traditionalists as descriptive of the eternal torment of hell. The phrase, however, denotes the continuity and not the eternal duration of an action. John uses the same phrase "day and night" to describe the living creatures praising God (Rev 4:8), the martyrs serving God (Rev 7:15), Satan accusing the brethren (Rev 12:10), and the unholy trinity being tormented in the lake of fire (Rev 20:10). In each case, the thought is the same: the action continues while it lasts. Harold Guillebaud correctly explains that the phrase "they have no rest, day or night" (Rev 14:11) "certainly says that there will be no break or intermission in the suffering of the followers of the Beast, while it continues; but in itself it does not say that it will continue forever."47

Support for this conclusion is provided by the usage of the phrase "day and night" in Isaiah 34:10, where, as we have seen, Edom’s fire is not quenched "night and day" and "its smoke shall go up for ever" (Is 34:10). The imagery is designed to convey that Edom’s fire would continue until it had consumed all that there was, and then it would go out. The outcome would be permanent destruction, not everlasting burning. "From generation to generation it shall lie waste" (Is 34:10).

To sum up, the four figures present in the scene of Revelation 14:9-11 complement one another in describing the final destruction of the apostates. The "unmixed" wine of God’s fury poured out in full strength suggests a judgment resulting in extinction. The burning sulphur denotes some degree of conscious punishment that precedes the extinction. The rising smoke serves as a continuous reminder of God’s just judgment. The suffering will continue day and night until the ungodly are completely destroyed.
The Lake of Fire

The last description in the Bible of the final punishment contains two highly significant metaphorical expressions: (1) the lake of fire, and (2) the second death (Rev 19:20; 20:10, 15; 21:8). Traditionalists attribute fundamental importance to "lake of fire" because for them, as stated by John Walvoord, "the lake of fire is, and it serves as a synonym for the eternal place of torment."48

To determine the meaning of "the lake of fire," we need to examine its four occurrences in Revelation, the only book in the Bible where the phrase is found. The first reference occurs in Revelation 19:20, where we are told that the beast and the false prophet "were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur." The second reference is found in Revelation 20:10, where John describes the outcome of Satan’s last great assault against God: "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 for ever and ever." God’s throwing of the devil into the lake of fire increases its inhabitants from two to three.

The third and fourth references are found in Revelation 20:15 and 21:8, where all the wicked are also thrown into the lake of fire. It is evident that there is a crescendo as all evil powers, and people eventually experience the final punishment of the lake of fire.

The fundamental question is whether the lake of fire represents an ever-burning hell where the wicked are supposed to be tormented for all eternity or whether it symbolizes the permanent destruction of sin and sinners. Five major considerations lead us to believe that the lake of fire represents the final and complete annihilation of evil and evildoers.

First, the beast and the false prophet, who are cast alive into the lake of fire, are two symbolic personages who represent not actual people but persecuting civil governments and corrupting false religion. Political and religious systems cannot suffer conscious torment forever. Thus, for them, the lake of fire represents complete, irreversible annihilation.

Second, the imagery of the devil and his host who are devoured by fire from heaven and then cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, is largely derived from Ezekiel 38 and 39, where even the code names "Gog" and "Magog" are found, and from 2 King 1:10, which speaks of the fire that came down from heaven to consume the captain and the fifty soldiers sent against Elijah. In both instances, the fire causes the annihilation of evildoers (Ezek 38:22; 39:6, 16). The similarity of imagery suggests that the same meaning and function of fire as utter destruction applies to the fate of the devil in Revelation 20:10.

Third, it is impossible to visualize how the devil and his angels, who are spirits could "be tormented [with fire] day and night for ever and ever" (Rev 20:10). After all, fire belongs to the material, physical world, but the devil and his angels are not physical beings. Eldon Ladd rightly points out: "How a lake of literal fire can bring everlasting torture to non-physical beings is impossible to imagine. It is obvious that this is picturesque language describing a real fact in the spiritual world: the final and everlasting destruction of the forces of evil which have plagued men since the garden of Eden."49
Fourth, the fact that "Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev 20:14) shows that the meaning of the lake of fire is symbolic, because Death and Hades (the grave) are abstract realities that cannot be thrown into or consumed with fire. By the imagery of Death and Hades being thrown into the lake of fire, John simply affirms the final and complete destruction of death and the grave. By His death and resurrection, Jesus conquered the power of death, but eternal life cannot be experienced until death is symbolically destroyed in the lake of fire and banished from the universe.

"The Second Death"

The fifth and decisive consideration is the fact that the lake of fire is defined as "the second death." Before we look at the usage of the phrase "second death," it is important to note that John clearly explains that "the lake of fire is the second death" (Rev 20:14; cf. 21:8).

Some traditionalists interpret "the second death," not as the ultimate death, but as the ultimate separation of sinners from God. For example, Robert Peterson states: "When John says that Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev 20:14), he indicates that the intermediate state gives way to the final one. He also does this by revealing that the 'lake of fire is the second death' (Rev 20:14). As death means the separation of the soul from the body, so the second death denotes the ultimate separation of the ungodly from their Creator’s love.

Accordingly, God reunites the souls of the unsaved dead with their bodies to fit the lost for eternal punishment. If eternal life entails forever knowing the Father and the Son (John 17:3), its antithesis, the second death, involves being deprived of God’s fellowship for all eternity.50

It is hard to understand how Peterson can interpret "the second death" as eternal conscious separation from God when, as we noted in chapter 4, the Bible makes it abundantly clear that there is no consciousness in death. The "second death" is the antithesis of "eternal life," but the antithesis of eternal life is "eternal death" and not eternal conscious separation from God. Furthermore, the notion of the souls of the unsaved being reunited with their bodies after the intermediate state, to make them fit for eternal punishment can only be supported on the basis of a dualistic understanding of human nature. From a Biblical perspective, death is the cessation of life and not the separation of the body from the soul. The meaning of the phrase "second death" must be determined on the basis of the internal witness of the book of Revelation and of contemporary Jewish literature rather than on the basis of Greek dualism, foreign to the Bible.

Throughout the book of Revelation, John explains the meaning of a first term by the use of a second. For example, he explains that the bowls of incense are the prayers of the saints (Rev 5:8). "The fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints" (Rev 19:8). The coming to life of the saints and their reigning with Christ a thousand years "is the first resurrection" (Rev 20:5). Following the same pattern, John explicitly explains that "the lake of fire is the second death" (Rev 20:14; cf. 21:8).

Some traditionalists wish to define the second death as the lake of fire, in order to be able to argue that the second death is not the final death, but eternal torment in the lake of fire. A quick reading of Revelation 20:14 and 21:8 suffices to show that the opposite is true. John unmistakably states: "The lake of fire is the second death" and not vice versa. The meaning of the second death derives from and is dependent upon the meaning of the first death experienced
by every human being at the cessation of life. The second death differs from the first death, not in nature but in results. The first death is a temporary sleep because it is followed by the resurrection. The second death is permanent and irreversible extinction because there is no awakening.

References to the "Second Death"
Since John clearly defines the lake of fire to be the second death, it is crucial for us to understand the meaning of "the second death." This phase occurs four times in Revelation but does not appear elsewhere in the New Testament. The first reference is found in Revelation 2:11: "He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death." Here "the second death" is differentiated from the physical death that every human being experiences. The implication is that the saved receive eternal life, and will not experience eternal death.

The second reference to "the second death" occurs in Revelation 20:6, in the context of the first resurrection of the saints at the beginning of the millennium: "Over such the second death has no power." Again, the implication is that the resurrected saints will not experience the second death, that is, the punishment of eternal death, obviously because they will be raised to immortal life. The third and the fourth references are in Revelation 20:14 and 21:8, where the second death is identified with the lake of fire into which the devil, the beast, the false prophet, Death, Hades, and all evildoers are thrown. In these instances, the lake of fire is the second death in the sense that it accomplishes the eternal death and destruction of sin and sinners.

The meaning of the phrase "second death" is clarified by its usage in the Targum, which is the Aramaic translation and interpretation of the Old Testament. In the Targum, the phrase is used several times to refer to the final and irreversible death of the wicked. According to Strack and Billerbeck, the Targum on Jeremiah 51:39, 57 contains an oracle against Babylon, which says: "They shall die the second death and not live in the world to come." Here the second death is clearly the death resulting from the final judgment which prevents evildoers from living in the world to come.

In his study The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch, M. McNamara cites the Targums of Deuteronomy 33:6, Isaiah 22:14 and 65:6, 15 where the phrase "second death" is used to describe the ultimate, irreversible death. The Targum on Deuteronomy 33:6 reads: "Let Reuben live in this world and die not in the second death in which death the wicked die in the world to come." In the Targum on Isaiah 22:14, the prophet says: "This sin shall not be forgiven you till you die the second death, says the Lord of Host." In both instances, "the second death" is the ultimate destruction experienced by the wicked at the final judgment.

The Targum on Isaiah 65:6 is very close to Revelation 20:14 and 21:8. It reads: "Their punishment shall be in Gehenna where the fire burns all the day. Behold, it is written before me: ‘I will not give them respite during (their) life but will render them the punishment of their transgressions and will deliver their bodies to the second death." Again, the Targum on Isaiah 65:15 reads: "And you shall leave your name for a curse to my chosen and the Lord God will slay you with the second death but his servants, the righteous, he shall call by a different name." Here, the second death is explicitly equated with the slaying of the wicked by the Lord, a clear image of final destruction and not of eternal torment.
In the light of the preceding considerations, we conclude that the phrase the "second death" is used by John to define the nature of the punishment in the lake of fire, namely, a punishment that ultimately results in eternal, irreversible death. As Robert Mounce points out, "The lake of fire indicates not only the stern punishment awaiting the enemies of righteousness but also their full and final defeat. It is the second death, that is, the destiny of those whose temporary resurrection results only in a return to death and its punishment."56 The same view is expressed eloquently by Henry Alford who writes: "As there is a second and higher life, so there is also a second and deeper death. And as after that life there is no more death (Rev 21:4), so after that death there is no more life."57 This is a sensible definition of the "second death," as the final, irreversible death. To interpret the phrase otherwise, as eternal conscious torment or separation from God means to negate the Biblical meaning of "death" as cessation of life.

Conclusion
In closing this examination of the traditional view of hell as the place of a literal, everlasting punishment of the wicked, three major observations can be made. First, the traditional view of hell largely depends upon a dualistic view of human nature, which requires the eternal survival of the soul either in heavenly bliss or in hellish torment. We have found such a belief to be foreign to the wholistic Biblical view of human nature, where death denotes the cessation of life for the whole person.

Second, the traditionalist view rests largely on a literal interpretation of such symbolic images as gehennah, the lake of fire, and the second death. Such images do not lend themselves to a literal interpretation because, as we have seen, they are metaphorical descriptions of the permanent destruction of evil and evildoers. Incidentally, lakes are filled with water and not with fire.

Third, the traditional view fails to provide a rational explanation for the justice of God in inflicting endless divine retribution for sins committed during the space of a short life. The doctrine of eternal conscious torment is incompatible with the Biblical revelation of divine love and justice. This point is considered later in conjunction with the moral implications of eternal torment.

In conclusion, the traditional view of hell was more likely to be accepted during the Middle Ages, when most people lived under autocratic regimes of despotic rulers, who could and did torture and destroy human beings with impunity. Under such social conditions, theologians with a good conscience could attribute to God an unappeasable vindictiveness and insatiable cruelty, which today would be regarded as demonic. Today, theological ideas are subject to an ethical and rational criticism that forbids the moral perversity attributed to God in the past. Our sense of justice requires that the penalty inflicted must be commensurate with the evil done. This important truth is ignored by the traditional view that requires eternal punishment for the sins of even a short lifetime.

PART II: ALTERNATIVE VIEWS OF HELL

The serious problems posed by the traditional view of hell has led some scholars to seek for alternative interpretations. Brief consideration is given here to two fresh attempts to understand the Biblical data, and to redefine the nature of hell.
The Metaphorical View of Hell
The most modest revision of the traditional view of hell involves interpreting metaphorically the nature of the unending torment of hell. According to this view, hell is still understood as everlasting punishment, but it is less literally hellish, because the physical fire no longer tortures or burns the flesh of the wicked, but represents the pain of being separated from God. Billy Graham expresses a metaphorical view of hellfire when he says: "I have often wondered if hell is a terrible burning within our hearts for God, to fellowship with God, a fire that we can never quench."58 Graham’s interpretation of hellfire as "a terrible burning within our hearts for God" is most ingenious. Unfortunately, it ignores that the "burning" takes place not within the heart, but without where the wicked are consumed. If the wicked had a burning within their hearts for God, they would not experience the suffering of the final punishment.

Figurative Imagery
In his compelling presentation of the metaphorical view of hell, William Crockett argues that Christians should not have to face the embarrassment of believing that "a portion of creation find ease in heaven, while the rest burn in hell."59 His solution is to recognize that "hellfire and brimstone are not literal depictions of hell’s furnishing, but figurative expressions warning the wicked of impending doom."60 Crockett cites Calvin, Luther, and a host of contemporary scholars, all of whom "interpret hell’s fire metaphorically, or at least allow for the possibility that hell might be something other than literal fire."61

Crockett maintains that "the strongest reason for taking them [the images of hell] as metaphors is the conflicting language used in the New Testament to describe hell. How could hell be literal fire when it is also described as darkness (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Pet 2:17; Jude 13)?"62 He continues, asking a pertinent question: "Did the New Testament writers intend their words to be taken literally? Certainly, Jude did not. He describes hell as ‘eternal fire’ in verse 7, and then further depicts it as the ‘blackest darkness’ in verse 13. . . . Fire and darkness, of course, are not the only images we have of hell in the New Testament. The wicked are said to weep and gnash their teeth (Matt 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 12:47). No one thinks hell will involve actual beatings or is a place where the maggots of the dead achieve immortality. Equally, no one thinks that gnashing teeth is anything other than an image of hell’s grim reality. In the past, some have wondered about people who enter hell toothless. How will they grind their teeth?"63 The answer that some have given to the last question is that "dentures will be provided in the next world so that the damned might be able to weep and gnash their teeth."64

On the basis of his metaphorical interpretation of hellfire, Crockett concludes: "Hell, then, should not be pictured as an inferno belching fire like Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace. The most we can say is that the rebellious will be cast from the presence of God, without any hope of restoration. Like Adam and Eve they will be driven away, but this time into ‘eternal night,’ where joy and hope are forever lost."65
Evaluation of the Metaphorical View
Credit must be given to the proponents of the metaphorical view of hell for pointing out that the images used in the Bible to describe hell, such as fire, darkness, voracious maggots, sulphur, and gnashing of teeth are metaphors and not actual descriptions of fact. When interpreting a text, it is important to distinguish between the medium and the message. Metaphors are designed to communicate a particular message, but they are not the message itself. This means that when interpreting the highly symbolic images of hell, we must seek to understand the message being conveyed instead of taking the images as a literal descriptions of the reality.

Proponents of the metaphorical view are correct in pointing out that the fundamental problem with the traditional view of hell is that it is based on a literalism that ignores the highly symbolic nature of the language used. But the problem with the metaphorical view of hell is that it merely wants to replace the physical torment with a more endurable mental torment. But, by the lowering the pain quotient in a non-literal hell, they do not substantially change the nature of hell since it still remains a place of unending torment.

Some may even question the notion that eternal mental torment is more humane than physical torment. Mental anguish can be as painful as physical pain. By making hell more humane, the metaphorical view has not gained much because it is still burdened with the same problems of the traditionalist view. People are still asked to believe that God tortures evildoers endlessly, though presumably less severely. In my view, the solution is to be found not in humanizing or sanitizing hell so that it may ultimately prove to be a more tolerable place for the wicked to spend eternity, but in understanding the nature of the final punishment which, as we shall see, is permanent annihilation and not eternal torment.

The Universalist View of Hell
A second and more radical revision of hell has been attempted by universalists, who have reduced hell to a temporary condition of graded punishments which ultimately leads to heaven. Universalists believe that ultimately God will succeed in bringing every human being to salvation and eternal life so that no one, in fact, will be condemned in the final judgment to either eternal torment or annihilation. This belief was first suggested by Origen in the third century, and it has gained steady support in modern times, especially through the writing of such men as Friedrich Schleiermacher, C. F. D. Moule, J. A. T. Robinson, Michael Paternoster, Michael Perry, and John Hick. The arguments presented by these and other writers in support of universalism are both theological and philosophical.

Theological and Philosophical Arguments
Theologically, appeal is made to "universalist passages" (1 Tim 2:4; 4:10; Col 1:20; Rom 5:18; 11:32; Eph 1:10; 1 Cor. 15:22), which seem to offer hope of universal salvation. On the basis of these texts, universalists argue that if all human beings are not ultimately saved, then God’s will for "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4) would be
frustrated and defeated. Only through the salvation of all human beings can God demonstrate the triumph of His infinitely patient love.

Philosophically, universalists find it intolerable that a loving God would allow millions of persons to suffer everlasting torment for sins committed within a span of a few years. Jacques Ellul articulates this view admirably, asking the following probing questions: "Have we not seen the impossibility of considering that the New Creation, that admirable symphony of love, could exist beside the world of wrath? Is God still double-faced: a visage of love turned toward his celestial Jerusalem and a visage of wrath turned toward this 'hell'? Are then the peace and joy of God complete, since he continues as a God of wrath and of fulmination? Could Paradise be what Romain Gary has so marvelously described in Tulipe, when he said that the trouble is not the concentration camp but 'the very peaceable, very happy little village beside the camp'—the little village alongside, where people were undisturbed while millions died atrociously in the camp."  

Purgatorial Process

Universalists argue that it is unthinkable that in the final judgment God would condemn to eternal torment the countless millions of non-Christians who have not responded to Christ because they have never heard the Christian message. The solution proposed by some universalists is that God will save all the unfaithful by enabling them to be gradually transformed through a "purgatorial" process after death.

This view represents a revision of the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, which limits this remedial process only to the souls of the faithful. The universalists extend this privilege also to the souls of the unfaithful. Thus, beyond death, God continues to draw all the unsaved to Himself, until ultimately all will respond to His love and rejoice in His presence for all eternity.

An Appealing but Unbiblical View

No one can deny that the theological and philosophical arguments of universalism appeal to the Christian conscience. Any person who has deeply sensed God's love longs to see Him saving every person and hates to think that He would be so vindictive as to punish millions of persons—especially those who have lived in ignorance—with eternal torments. Yet, our appreciation for the universalists' concern to uphold the triumph of God's love and to justly refute the unbiblical concept of eternal suffering must not blind us to the fact that this doctrine is a serious distortion of Biblical teaching.

First of all, the "universalist passages" declare the scope of God’s universal saving purpose, but not the fact of universal salvation for every human being. For example, in Colossians 1:19-23, God’s plan "to reconcile to himself all things" is said to include the Colossian believers, "provided that you continue in the faith."

Similarly, in 1 Timothy 2:4, God’s desire for "all men to be saved" is expressed together with the fact of a final judgment that will bring "ruin and destruction" to the unfaithful (1 Tim 6:9-10; cf.
5:24; 4:8). God extends to all the provision of salvation, but He respects the freedom of those who reject His offer even though it causes Him utmost anguish.

Second, the argument that God ultimately will save all because the doctrine of everlasting torment for the unsaved is impossible to accept, inasmuch as it negates any sense of divine justice as well as the very peace and joy of paradise, is a valid argument. However, such an argument, as we have shown, rests upon an erroneous interpretation of the Biblical teaching about the nature of the final punishment of the wicked. Universal salvation cannot be right just because eternal suffering is wrong.

Third, the notion of a remedial punishment, or of gradual transformation after death, is totally foreign to the Scripture. The destiny of each person is firmly fixed at death. This principle is explicitly expressed by Christ in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-21). In Hebrews 9:27, also, it is clearly stated that "it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment." For the impenitent sinners, "the prospect of judgment" is a "fearful" one, because they will experience not universal salvation but "a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries" (Heb 10:26-27).

Fourth, regarding the challenge of those who had no opportunity to learn and to respond to the message of Christ, it is not necessary either to surrender the belief in salvation solely through Jesus Christ or to consign all the non-Christians to everlasting torment. The less privileged may find salvation on the basis of their trusting response to what they have known of God. Paul mentions that the Gentiles who do not know the law will be judged according to the law which is "written in their hearts" (Rom 2:14-16).

Universalism, though attractive at first sight, is erroneous because it fails to recognize that God’s love for mankind is manifested not by glossing over sins, nor by limiting human freedom, but rather by providing salvation and freedom to accept it. This truth is aptly expressed in the best-known text about God’s love and the danger involved in rejecting it: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Conclusion
Both the metaphorical and universalistic views of hell represent worthy attempts "to take the hell out of hell." Unfortunately, they fail to do justice to the Biblical data and thus they ultimately misrepresent the Biblical doctrine of the final punishment of the unsaved. The sensible solution to the problems of the traditionalist view is to be found, not by lowering or eliminating the pain quotient of a literal hell but, by accepting hell for what it is, the final punishment and permanent annihilation of the wicked. As the Bible says: "The wicked will be no more" (Ps 37:10) because "their end is destruction" (Phil 3:19).

THE ANNIHILATION VIEW OF HELL

"Sectarian Belief." The annihilation view of hell has been associated mostly with "sects" like the
Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and smaller Sabbatarian churches (Church of God Seventh-day, Worldwide Church of God, United Church of God, Global Church of God, International Church of God). This fact has led many evangelicals and Catholics to reject annihilationism a priori, simply because it is a "sectarian" belief and not a traditional Protestant or Catholic belief. Such a belief is regarded as an "absurdity"67 and the product of secular sentimentality.68

To a large extent, all of us are children of tradition. The faith we received was mediated to us by Christian tradition in the form of sermons, books, Christian education at home, school, and church. We read our Bible in the light of what we have already learned from these various sources. Thus, it is hard to realize how profoundly tradition has molded our interpretation of Scripture. But as Christians, we cannot afford to become enslaved to human tradition, whether it be "Catholic" tradition, "Evangelical" tradition, or even our own "denominational" tradition. We can never assume the absolute rightness of our beliefs simply because they have been hallowed by tradition. We must retain the right and duty of testing our beliefs and reforming them in the light of Scripture when necessary.

Tactics of Harassment
The strategy of rejecting a doctrine a priori because of its association with "sectarian" churches is reflected in the tactics of harassment adopted against those evangelical scholars who in recent times have rejected the traditional view of hell as eternal conscious torment, and adopted instead the annihilation view of hell. The tactics, as already noted in chapter I, consist in defaming such scholars by associating them with liberals or with sectarians, like the Adventists. Respected Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock writes: "It seems that a new criterion for truth has been discovered which says that if Adventists or liberals hold any view, that view must be wrong. Apparently a truth claim can be decided by its association and does not need to be tested by public criteria in open debate. Such an argument, though useless in intelligent discussion, can be effective with the ignorant who are fooled by such rhetoric."69

Despite the tactics of harassment, the annihilation view of hell is gaining ground among evangelicals. The public endorsement of this view by John R. W. Stott, a highly respected British theologian and popular preacher, is certainly encouraging this trend. "In a delicious piece of irony," writes Pinnock, "this is creating a measure of accreditation by association, countering the same tactics used against it. It has become all but impossible to claim that only heretics and near-heretics [like Seventh-day Adventists] hold the position, though I am sure some will dismiss Stott’s orthodoxy precisely on this ground."70

John Stott expresses anxiety over the divisive consequences of his new views in the evangelical community, where he is a renowned leader. He writes: "I am hesitant to have written these things, partly because I have great respect for long-standing tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of Scripture, and do not lightly set it aside, and partly because the unity of the worldwide evangelical community has always meant much to me. But the issue is too important to be suppressed, and I am grateful to you [David Edwards] for challenging me to declare my present mind. I do not dogmatize about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among evangelicals on the basis of Scripture."71
Emotional and Biblical reasons have caused John Stott to abandon the traditional view of hell and adopt the annihilation view. Stott writes: "Emotionally, I find the concept [of eternal torment] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed Evangelical, my question must be and is not what my heart tells me, but what does God’s word say? And in order to answer this question, we need to survey the Biblical material afresh and to open our minds (not just our hearts) to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilationism, and that ‘eternal conscious torment’ is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture."72

In response to Stott’s plea to take a fresh look at the Biblical teaching on the final punishment, we briefly examine the witness of the Old and the New Testament by considering the following points: (1) death as the punishment of sin, (2) the language of destruction, (3) the moral implications of eternal torment, (4) the judicial implications of eternal torment, and (5) the cosmological implications of eternal torment.

DEATH AS THE PUNISHMENT OF SIN

"The Wages of Sin Is Death." A logical starting point for our investigation is the fundamental principle laid down in both Testaments: "The soul that sins shall die" (Ezek 18:4, 20);"The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). The punishment of sin, of course, comprises not only the first death which all experience as a result of Adam’s sin, but also what the Bible calls the second death (Rev 20:14; 21:8), which, as we have seen, is the final, irreversible death experienced by impenitent sinners. This basic principle sets the stage for studying the nature of the final punishment because it tells us at the outset that the ultimate wages of sin is not eternal torment, but permanent death.

Death in the Bible, as noted in chapter 4, is the cessation of life not the separation of the soul from the body. Thus, the punishment of sin is the cessation of life. Death, as we know it, would indeed be the cessation of our existence were it not for the fact of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:18). It is the resurrection that turns death into a sleep, from being the final end of life into being a temporary sleep. But there is no resurrection from the second death. It is the final cessation of life.

This fundamental truth was taught in the Old Testament, especially through the sacrificial system. The penalty for the gravest sin was always and only the death of the substitute victim and never a prolonged torture or imprisonment of the victim. James Dunn perceptively observes that "The manner in which the sin offering dealt with sin was by its death. The sacrificial animal, identified with the offerer in his sin, had to be destroyed in order to destroy the sin which it embodied. The sprinkling, smearing and pouring away of the sacrificial blood in the sight of God indicated that the life was wholly destroyed, and with it the sin and the sinner."73 To put it
differently, the consummation of the sin offering typified in a dramatic way the ultimate destruction of sin and sinners.

The final disposition of sin and the destruction of sinners was revealed especially through the ritual of the Day of Atonement, which typified the execution of God’s final judgment upon believers and unbelievers. The genuine believers were those Israelites who, throughout the year, repented of their sins, bringing appropriate sin offerings to the sanctuary, and who on the Day of Atonement rested, fasted, prayed, repented, and humbled their hearts before God. At the completion of the purification rites, these persons were pronounced "clean before the Lord" (Lev 16:30).

The false believers were those Israelites who, during the year, chose to sin defiantly against God (cf. Lev 20:1-6) and did not repent, thus failing to bring atoning sacrifices to the sanctuary. On the Day of Atonement, they did not desist from their toil nor did they engage in fasting, prayer, and soul searching (cf. Num 19:20). Because of their defiant attitude on the Day of Atonement, these persons were "cut off" from God’s people. "For whoever is not afflicted on this same day shall be cut off from his people. And whoever does any work on this same day, that person I will destroy from among his people" (Lev 23:29-30).74

The separation that occurred on the Day of Atonement between genuine and false Israelites typifies the separation that will occur at the Second Advent. Jesus compared this separation to the one that takes place at harvest time between the wheat and the tares. Since the tares were sown among the good wheat, which represents "the sons of the kingdom" (Matt 13:38), it is evident that Jesus had His church in mind. Wheat and tares, genuine and false believers, will coexist in the church until His coming. At that time, the drastic separation typified by the Day of Atonement will occur. Evildoers will be thrown "into the furnace of fire," and the "righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt 13:42-43).

Jesus’ parables and the ritual of the Day of Atonement teach the same important truth: False and genuine Christians will coexist until His coming. But at the Advent judgment, typified by the Day of Atonement, a permanent separation occurs when sin and sinners will be eradicated forever and a new world will be established. As in the typical service of the Day of Atonement impenitent sinners were "cut off" and “destroyed,” so in the antitypical fulfillment, at the final judgment, sinners "shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9).

Jesus’ Death and the Punishment of Sinners. In many ways, the death of Jesus on the Cross reveals how God ultimately will deal with sin and sinners. Christ’s death on the Cross is a supreme visible manifestation of the wrath of God against all human ungodliness and unrighteousness (Rom 1:18; cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; Mark 15:34). What Jesus, our sinless Savior, experienced on the Cross was not just the physical death common to humanity, but the death that sinners will experience at the final judgment. This is why He was "greatly distressed, troubled . . . very sorrowful, even to death" (Mark 14:33-34).

Leon Morris reminds us that "It was not death as such that He feared. It was the particular death that He was to die, that death which is ‘the wages of sin’ as Paul puts it (Rom 6:23), the death in which He was at one with sinners, sharing their lot, bearing their sins, dying their death."75 It is
no wonder that Jesus felt forsaken by the Father, because He experienced the death that awaits sinners at the final judgment. At the time of His passion, Jesus went through a period of increasingly excruciating agony culminating in death. The suffering lasted several hours.

"There is no reason why we should not take this [Christ’s death] as the model and example of the final punishment of sin. We are not likely to go far wrong if we conclude that His suffering was the most extreme that will be inflicted on the most defiant and responsible sinner (?Judas Iscariot) and comprised therefore in itself, and covered, all lower degrees of desert. When the Lord Jesus at last died, full satisfaction was made for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2), God’s holy law was vindicated and all sins potentially or actually atoned for. If He bore the punishment of our sins, that punishment cannot under any circumstances be eternal conscious suffering or misery, for He never suffered this and it is impossible that He could have. Thus the facts of the suffering and death of Christ Jesus prove conclusively that the punishment of sin is death in its natural sense of the deprivation of life."76

Some argue that Christ’s death cannot be equated with the final punishment of sinners in hell because He was an infinite Person who could absorb infinite punishment in a single moment. By contrast, sinners must suffer eternal torment because they are finite. This artificial distinction between "finite" and "infinite" punishment and victims does not derive from Scripture but from medieval speculations based on feudalistic concepts of honor and justice.77 It also consists of adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing infinities, which mathematically speaking is nonsense.

There are no indications in the Bible that God changed the nature of the punishment for sin in the case of our Lord from everlasting torment to literal death. Edward White correctly states: "If it be asserted that it was the presence of the Godhead within which dispensed with the infliction of endless pains, through the substitution of an Infinite Majesty for the infinitely extended misery of a finite being, we reply, that this is an ‘afterthought of theology’ which finds no place in the authoritative record."78

The Cross reveals the nature of hell as the manifestation of God’s wrath that results in death. If Jesus had not been raised, He like those who have fallen asleep in Him would simply have perished (1 Cor. 15:18), and not experienced unending torment in hell. His resurrection reassures us that believers need not fear eternal death, because Christ’s death marked the death of Death (2 Tim 1:10; Heb 2:14; Rev 20:14).

THE LANGUAGE OF DESTRUCTION IN THE BIBLE

The Language of Destruction in the Old Testament. The most compelling reason for believing in the annihilation of the lost at the final judgment is the rich vocabulary and imagery of "destruction" often used in the Old and New Testaments to describe the fate of the wicked. The writers of the Old Testament seem to have exhausted the resources of the Hebrew language at their command to affirm the complete destruction of impenitent sinners.
According to Basil Atkinson 28 Hebrew nouns and 23 verbs are generally translated "destruction" or "to destroy" in our English Bible. Approximately half of these words are used to describe the final destruction of the wicked. A detailed listing of all the occurrences would take us beyond the limited scope of this chapter, beside proving to be repetitious to most readers. Interested readers can find an extensive analysis of such texts in the studies by Basil Atkinson and Edward Fudge. Only a sampling of significant texts are considered here.

Several Psalms describe the final destruction of the wicked with dramatic imagery (Ps 1:3-6; 2:9-12; 11:1-7; 34:8-22; 58:6-10; 69:22-28; 145:17, 20). In Psalm 37, for example, we read that the wicked "will soon fade like grass" (v. 2), "they shall be cut off . . . and will be no more" (vv. 9-10), they will "perish . . . like smoke they vanish away" (v. 20), "transgressors shall be altogether destroyed" (v. 38). Psalm 1, loved and memorized by many, contrasts the way of the righteous with that of the wicked. Of the latter it says that "the wicked shall not stand in the judgment" (v. 5). They will be "like chaff which the wind drives away" (v. 4). "The way of the wicked will perish" (v. 6). Again, in Psalm 145, David affirms: "The Lord preserves all who love him; but all the wicked he will destroy" (v. 20). This sampling of references, on the final destruction of the wicked is in complete harmony with the teaching of the rest of Scripture.

**The Destruction of the Day of the Lord**

The prophets frequently announce the ultimate destruction of the wicked in conjunction with the eschatological Day of the Lord. In his opening chapter, Isaiah proclaims that "rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed" (Is 1:28). The picture here is one of total destruction, a picture that is further developed by the imagery of people burning like tinder with no one to quench the fire: "The strong shall become tow, and his work a spark, and both shall burn together, with none to quench them" (Is 1:31).

Zephaniah stacks up imagery upon imagery to portray the destructiveness of the day of the Lord. "The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; . . . A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry . . . In the fire of his jealous wrath, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full, yea, sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth" (Zeph. 1:14, 15, 18). Here the prophet describes the destruction of the Day of the Lord in the context of the historical judgment against Jerusalem. By means of the prophetic perspective, the prophets often see the final punishment through the transparency of imminent historical events.

Hosea, like Zephaniah, uses a variety of images to describe the final end of sinners. "They shall be like the morning mist or like the dew that goes early away, like the chaff that swirls from the threshing floor or like smoke from a window" (Hos. 13:3). The comparison of the fate of the wicked with the morning mist, the early dew, the chaff, and the smoke hardly suggests that sinners will suffer forever. On the contrary, such imagery suggests that sinners will finally disappear from God’s creation in the same way as the mist, dew, chaff, and smoke dissipate from the face of the earth.

On the last page of the Old Testament English Bible (not the Hebrew Bible), we find a most colorful description of the contrast between the final destiny of believers and unbelievers. For the
believers who fear the Lord, "the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings" (Mal 4:2). But for unbelievers the Day of the Lord "comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of host, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch" (Mal 4:1). The Day of the final punishment of the lost will also be a day of vindication of God’s people, for they "shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of [their] feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts" (Mal 4:3).

We need not interpret this prophecy literally, because we are dealing with representative symbols. But the message conveyed by these symbolic images is clear. While the righteous rejoice in God’s salvation, the wicked are consumed like" stubble," so that no "root or branch" is left. This is clearly a picture of total consumption by destroying fire, and not one of eternal torment. This is the Old Testament picture of the fate of the wicked, total and permanent destruction and not eternal torment.

**Jesus and the Language of Destruction**

The New Testament follows closely the Old Testament in describing the fate of the wicked with words and pictures denoting destruction. The most common Greek words are the verb apollumi (to destroy) and the noun apoleia (destruction). In addition, numerous graphic illustrations from both inanimate and animate life are used to portray the final destruction of the wicked.

Jesus also used several figures from inanimate life to portray the utter destruction of the wicked. He compared it to the following: weeds that are bound in bundles to be burned (Matt 13:30, 40), bad fish that is thrown away (Matt 13:48), harmful plants that are rooted up (Matt 15:13), fruitless trees that are cut down (Luke 13:7), and withered branches that are burned (John 15:6).

Jesus also used illustrations from human life to portray the doom of the wicked. He compared it to: unfaithful tenants who are destroyed (Luke 20:16), an evil servant who will be cut in pieces (Matt 24:51), the Galileans who perished (Luke 13:2-3), the eighteen persons crushed by Siloam’s tower (Luke 13:4-5), the antediluvians destroyed by the flood (Luke 17:27), the people of Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed by fire (Luke 17:29), and the rebellious servants who were slain at the return of their master (Luke 19:14, 27).

All of these figures denote capital punishment, either individually or collectively. They signify violent death, preceded by greater or lesser suffering. The illustrations employed by the Savior very graphically depict the ultimate destruction or dissolution of the wicked. Jesus asked: "When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?" (Matt 21:40). And the people responded: "He will miserably destroy [apollumi] those wicked men" (Matt 21:41).

Jesus taught the final destruction of the wicked not only through illustrations, but also through explicit pronouncements. For example, He said: "Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him [God] who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28). John Stott rightly remarks: "If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being."80 In our study
of this text in chapter 3 we noted that Christ did not consider hell a the place of eternal torment, but of permanent destruction of the whole being, soul and body.

Often Jesus contrasted eternal life with death or destruction. "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish" (John 10:28). "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matt 7:13-14). Here we have a simple contrast between life and death. There is no ground in Scripture for twisting the word "perish" or "destruction" to mean everlasting torment.

Earlier we noted that seven times Christ used the imagery of gehenna to describe the destruction of the wicked in hell. In reviewing Christ’s allusions to hell, gehenna, we found that none of them indicates that hell is a place of unending torment. What is eternal or unquenchable is not the punishment but the fire which, as the case of Sodom and Gomorra, causes the complete and permanent destruction of the wicked, a condition that lasts forever. The fire is unquenchable because it cannot be quenched until it has consumed all the combustible material.

Paul and the Language of Destruction

The language of destruction is used frequently also by the New Testament writers to describe the doom of the wicked. Speaking of the "enemies of the cross," Paul says that "their end is destruction [apoleia]" (Phil 3:19). Concluding his letter to the Galatians, Paul warns that "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction [phthora]; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from that Spirit will reap eternal life" (Gal 6:8, NIV). The Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, "like a thief in the night, . . . then sudden destruction [olethros] will come upon them [the wicked]" (1 Thess. 5:2-3). At Christ’s coming, the wicked "shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction [olethron]" (2 Thess. 1:9). We noted earlier that the destruction of the wicked cannot be eternal in its duration because it is difficult to imagine an eternal inconclusive process of destruction. Destruction presupposes annihilation.

John Stott perceptively remarks: "It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and, . . . it is ‘difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing.’ It cannot, I think, be replied that it is impossible to destroy human beings because they are immortal, for the immortality and therefore indestructibility of the soul is a Greek and not a Biblical concept. According to Scripture only God possesses immortality in himself (1 Tim 1:17; 6:16); he reveals and gives it to us through the gospel (2 Tim 1:10)."81

In Romans 2:6-12, Paul provides one of the clearest descriptions of the final destiny of believers and unbelievers. He begins by stating the principle that God "will render to every man according to his works" (Rom 2:6). Then he explains that "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek" (Rom 2:7-9).

Note that "immortality" is God’s gift to the faithful, awarded at the resurrection, and not an inherent human quality. The wicked do not receive immortality, but "wrath and fury," two words
associated with the final judgment (1 Thess. 1:10; Rev 14:10; 16:19; 19:15). Paul largely repeats
the words and phrases found in Zephaniah’s classic description of the great day of the Lord, as "a
day of wrath . . . distress and anguish" (Zeph. 1:15). God will "consume" the whole world with
"the fire of his jealous wrath" and He "will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth"
(Zeph. 1:18).

This is most likely the picture Paul had in mind when he spoke of the manifestation of God’s
"wrath and fury" upon the wicked. This is indicated by the following verse where he says: "All
who have sinned without the law will also perish [apolountai] without the law" (Rom 2:12). Paul
draws a contrast between those who "perish" and those who receive "immortality." In this whole
passage, there is no allusion to eternal torment. Immortality is God’s gift to the saved, while
corruption, destruction, death, and perishing is the wages of sin and sinners.

In view of the final destiny awaiting believers and unbelievers, Paul often speaks of the former
as "those who are being saved [hoi sozomenoi] and of the latter as "those who are perishing [hoi
apollumenoi]" (1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3; 2 Thess. 2:10). This common characterization is
indicative of Paul’s understanding of the destiny of unbelievers as ultimate destruction and not
eternal torment.

Peter and the Language of Destruction
Peter, like Paul, uses the language of destruction to portray the fate of the unsaved. He speaks of
false teachers who secretly bring in heresies and who bring upon themselves "swift destruction"
(2 Pet 2:1). Peter compares their destruction to that of the ancient world by the Flood and the
cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which were burned to ashes (2 Pet 2:5-6). God "condemned them
to extinction and made them an example to them who were to be ungodly" (2 Pet 2:6). Here
Peter states unequivocally that the extinction by fire of Sodom and Gomorrah serves as an
example of the fate of the lost.

Peter again uses the example of the destruction of the world by the Flood, in dealing with
scoffers who mocked at Christ’s promised coming (2 Pet 3:3-7). He reminds his readers that as
the world "was deluged with water and perished" at God’s command by the same word the
heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of
judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (2 Pet 3:7).

The picture here is that the fire that will melt the elements will also accomplish the destruction of
the ungodly. This reminds us of the tares of Christ’s parable that will be burnt up in the field
where they grew. Peter alludes again to the fate of the lost when he says that God is "forbearing
toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet 3:9).
Peter’s alternatives between repentance or perishing remind us of Christ’s warning: "unless you
repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). The latter will occur at the coming of the Lord
when "the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will
be burned up" (2 Pet 3:10). Such a graphic description of the destruction of the earth and
evildoers by fire hardly allows for the unending torment of hell.

Other Allusions to the Final Destruction of the Wicked
Several other allusions in the New Testament imply the final destruction of the lost. We briefly
refer to some of them here. The author of Hebrews warns repeatedly against apostasy or unbelief. Anyone who deliberately keeps on sinning "after receiving the knowledge of the truth," faces "a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries" (Heb 10:27). The author explicitly states that those who persist in sinning against God ultimately experience the judgment of a raging fire that will "consume" them. Note that the function of the fire is to consume sinners, not to torment them for all eternity. This truth is reiterated consistently throughout the Bible.

Throughout his epistle, James admonishes those who do not practice the faith that they profess. He warns believers not to allow sinful desires to take root in the heart, because "sin when it is full-grown brings forth death" (James 1:15). Like Paul, James explains that the ultimate wages of sin is death, cessation of life, and not eternal torment. James speaks also of God "who is able to save and to destroy" (James 4:12). The contrast is between salvation and destruction. James closes his letter encouraging believers to watch for the welfare of one another, because "whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:20). Again, salvation is from death and not from eternal torment. James consistently refers to the outcome of sin as "death" or "destruction." Incidentally, James speaks of saving the "soul from death," implying that the soul can die because it is part of the whole person.

Jude is strikingly similar to 2 Peter in his description of the fate of unbelievers. Like Peter, Jude points to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah "as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 7, NIV). We noted earlier that the fire that destroyed the two cities is eternal, not because of its duration, but because of its permanent results. Jude closes, by urging his readers to build themselves up in the faith, caring for one another. "Convince some, who doubt; save some, by snatching them out of the fire" (Jude 23). The fire to which Jude refers is obviously the same kind of fire that consumed Sodom and Gomorrah. It is the fire that causes the permanent destruction of the wicked, as envisioned by Jesus, Paul, Peter, James, Hebrews, and the entire Old Testament.

The language of destruction is present, especially in the book of Revelation, because it represents God’s way of overcoming the opposition of evil to Himself and His people. We noted earlier how John describes, with vivid imagery, the consignment of the devil, the beast, the false prophet, death, Hades, and all the wicked into the lake of fire, which he defines as "the second death." We found that the phrase "second death" was commonly used to describe the final, irreversible death.

A text not mentioned earlier is Revelation 11:18, where at the sounding of the seventh trumpet John hears the 24 elders saying: "The time has come for judging the dead . . . and for destroying those who destroy the earth." Here, again, the outcome of the final judgment is not condemnation to eternal torment in hell, but destruction and annihilation. God is severe but just. He does not delight in the death of the wicked, let alone in torturing them for all eternity. Ultimately, He will punish all evildoer, but the punishment will result in eternal extinction, not eternal torment.

This is the fundamental difference between the Biblical view of final punishment as utter extinction and the traditional view of hell as unending torment and torture, a view shared by
many cruel pagan systems. The language of destruction and the imagery of fire that we have found throughout the Bible clearly suggests that the final punishment of the wicked is permanent extinction and not unending torment in hell. In the light of this compelling Biblical witness, I join Clark Pinnock in stating: "I sincerely hope that traditionalists will stop saying that there is no Biblical basis for this view [annihilation] when there is such a strong basis for it."82

The Language of Destruction Is Metaphorical
Traditionalists object to our interpretation of the language of destruction which we have just surveyed, because they maintain that words like "perish," destroy," "consume," "death," "burned up," "lake of fire," "ascending smoke," and "second death" are often used with a metaphorical meaning. This is true, but their figurative meanings derive from their literal, primary meanings. It is an accepted principle of Biblical interpretation that words occurring in non-allegorical prose are to be interpreted according to their primary meaning, unless there is some reason to attribute to them a different meaning.

Scripture never indicates that these words should not be interpreted according to their ordinary meaning when applied to the fate of the wicked. Our study of the usage of these words in Scripture and extra-Biblical literature has shown that they describe a literal, permanent destruction of the wicked. For example, John’s vision of the "smoke ascending forever" (Rev 14:11) occurs in the Old Testament to portray the silent testimony of complete destruction (Is 34:10) and not of eternal torment. Similarly, the "lake of fire" is clearly defined as the "second death," a phrase used by the Jews to denote final, irreversible death. Incidentally, if the "lake of fire" annihilates Death and Hades, we have reason to believe that it hardly can preserve the lost in conscious torment for all eternity. We sincerely hope that traditionalists will find the courage to take a long, hard look at the Biblical data which envision hell as the permanent destruction of the lost.

THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF ETERNAL TORMENT

The traditional view of hell is being challenged today not only on the basis of the language of destruction and the imagery of the consuming fire we find the Bible but also for moral, judicial, and cosmological considerations. To these we must now turn our attention. Let us consider, first, the moral implications of the traditional view of hell which depicts God as a cruel torturer who torments the wicked throughout all eternity.

Does God Have Two Faces?
How can the view of hell that turns God into a cruel, sadistic torturer for all eternity be legitimately reconciled with the nature of God revealed in and through Jesus Christ? Does God have two faces? He is boundlessly merciful on one side and insatiably cruel on the other? Can God love sinners so much as He sent His beloved Son to save them, and yet hate impenitent sinners so much that He subjects them to unending cruel torment? Can we legitimately praise God for His goodness, if He torments sinners throughout the ages of eternity?
Of course, it is not our business to criticize God, but God has given us a conscience to enable us to formulate moral judgments. Can the moral intuition God has implanted within our consciences justify the insatiable cruelty of a deity who subjects sinners to unending torment? Clark Pinnock answers this question in a most eloquent way: "There is a powerful moral revulsion against the traditional doctrine of the nature of hell. Everlasting torture is intolerable from a moral point of view because it pictures God acting like a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for His enemies whom He does not even allow to die. How can one love a God like that? I suppose one might be afraid of Him, but could we love and respect Him? Would we want to strive to be like Him in this mercilessness? Surely the idea of everlasting, conscious torment raises the problem of evil to impossible heights. Antony Flew was right to object that if Christians really believe that God created people with the full intention of torturing some of them in hell forever, they might as well give up the effort to defend Christianity."83

Pinnock rightly asks: "How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon His creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself."84

John Hick expresses himself in a similar fashion: "The idea of bodies burning for ever and continuously suffering the intense pain of third-degree burns without either being consumed or losing consciousness is as scientifically fantastic as it is morally revolting. . . . The thought of such a torment being deliberately inflicted by divine decree is totally incompatible with the idea of God as infinite love."85

**Hell and the Inquisition**

One wonders if the belief in hell as a place where God will eternally burn sinners with fire and sulphur may not have inspired the Inquisition to imprison, torture, and eventually burn at the stake so-called "heretics" who refused to accept the traditional teachings of the church. Church history books generally do not establish a connection between the two, evidently because inquisitors did not justify their action on the basis of their belief in hellfire for the wicked.

But, one wonders, what inspired popes, bishops, church councils, Dominican and Franciscan monks, Christian kings and princes to torture and exterminate dissident Christians like the Albigenses, Waldenses, and Huguenots? What influenced, for example, Calvin and his Geneva City Council to burn Servetus at the stake for persisting in his anti-Trinitarian beliefs?

A reading of the condemnation of Servetus issued on October 26, 1553, by the Geneva City Council suggests to me that those Calvinistic zealots believed, like the Catholic inquisitors, that they had the right to burn heretics in the same way God will burn them later in hell. The sentence reads: "We condemn thee, Michael Servetus, to be bound, and led to the place of Champel, there to be fastened to a stake and burnt alive, together with thy book, . . . even till thy body be reduced to ashes; and thus shalt thou finish thy days to furnish an example to others who might wish to commit the like."86

On the following day, after Servetus refused to confess to be guilty of heresy, "the executioner fastens him by iron chains to the stake amidst fagots, puts a crown of leaves covered with
sulphur on his head, and binds his book by his side. The sight of the flaming torch extorts from him a piercing shriek of ‘misericordia’ [mercy] in his native tongue. The spectators fall back with a shudder. The flames soon reach him and consume his mortal frame in the forty-fourth year of his fitful life.87

Philip Schaff, a renowned church historian, concludes this account of the execution of Servetus, by saying: "The conscience and piety of that age approved of the execution, and left little room for the emotions of compassion."88 It is hard to believe that not only Catholics, but even devout Calvinists would approve and watch emotionlessly the burning of a Spanish physician who had made significant contributions to medical science simply because he could not accept the divinity of Christ.

The best explanation I can find for the cauterization of the Christian moral conscience of the time is the gruesome pictures and accounts of hellfire to which Christians constantly were exposed. Such a vision of hell provided the moral justification to imitate God by burning heretics with temporal fire in view of the eternal fire that awaited them at the hands of God. It is impossible to estimate the far-reaching impact that the doctrine of unending hellfire has had throughout the centuries in justifying religious intolerance, torture, and the burning of "heretics." The rationale is simple: If God is going to burn heretics in hell for all eternity, why shouldn’t the church burn them to death now? The practical implications and applications of the doctrine of literal eternal hellfire are frightening. Traditionalists must ponder these sobering facts. After all, Jesus said: "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt 7:20, KJV). And the fruits of the doctrine of hellfire are far from good.

A colleague who read this manuscript questioned my attempt to establish a causal connection between the belief in eternal torment in hell and the policy of the Inquisition to torture and burn "heretics" who refused to recant their beliefs. His argument is that the final annihilation of the wicked by fire is no less cruel that their punishment by unending hell-fire. The problem with this reasoning is the failure to recognize that a capital punishment that results in death does not harden or cauterize the Christian conscience like a capital punishment that causes unending atrocious suffering. The difference between the two can be compared to watching the instantaneous execution of a criminal on the electric chair versus watching the unending execution of the same criminal on an electric chair that shock his ever conscious body for all eternity. It is evident that witnessing the latter over an indefinite period of time will either drive a person to insanity or cauterize the moral conscience. On a similar fashion the constant exposure of medieval people to artistic and literary portrayal of hell as a place of absolute terror and eternal torment, could only predispose people to accept the torturing of "heretics" by religious authorities who claimed to act as God’s representatives on this earth.

Attempts to Make Hell More Tolerable
It is not surprising that during the course of history there have been various attempts to make hell less hellish. Augustine invented purgatory to reduce the population of hell. More recently, Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield have also attempted to lower the population of hell by developing a post-millennial eschatology and by allowing for the automatic salvation of babies who die in infancy. The reasoning appears to be that if the total number of those who are going to be tormented is relatively small, there is no reason to be unduly concerned. Such reasoning
hardly resolves the problem of the morality of God’s character. Whether God inflicted unending torments on one million or on ten billion sinners, the fact would remain that God tormented people everlastingly.

Others have tried to take the hell out of hell by replacing the physical torment of hell with a more endurable mental torment. But, as we noted above, by lowering the pain quotient in a non-literal hell, the metaphorical view of hell does not substantially change its nature, since it still remains a place of unending torment.

Ultimately, any doctrine of hell must pass the moral test of the human conscience, and the doctrine of literal unending torment cannot pass such a test. Annihilationism, on the other hand, can pass the test for two reasons. First, it does not view hell as everlasting torture but permanent extinction of the wicked. Second, it recognizes that God respects the freedom of those who choose not to be saved. God morally is justified in destroying the wicked because He respects their choice. God desires the salvation of all people (2 Pet 3:9), but respects the freedom of those who refuse His gracious provision of salvation. God’s final punishment of the wicked is not vindictive, requiring everlasting torment, but rational, resulting in their permanent annihilation.

Our age desperately needs to learn the fear of God, and this is one reason for preaching on the final judgment and punishment. We need to warn people that those who reject Christ’s principles of life and the provision of salvation ultimately will experience a fearful judgment and "suffer the punishment of eternal destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9). A recovery of the Biblical view of the final punishment will loosen the preachers’ tongues, since they can proclaim the great alternative between eternal life and permanent destruction without fear of portraying God as a monster.

**THE COSMOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ETERNAL TORMENT**

A final objection to the traditional view of hell is that eternal torment presupposes an eternal existence of a cosmic dualism. Heaven and hell, happiness and pain, good and evil would continue to exist forever alongside each other. It is impossible to reconcile this view with the prophetic vision of the new world in which there shall be no more "mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4). How could crying and pain be forgotten if the agony and anguish of the lost were at sight distance, as in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)?

The presence of countless millions forever suffering excruciating torment, even if it were in the camp of the unsaved, could only serve to destroy the peace and happiness of the new world. The new creation would turn out to be flawed from day one, since sinners would remain an eternal reality in God’s universe and God would never be "everything to every one" (1 Cor. 15:28). John Stott asks, "How can God in any meaningful sense be called ‘everything to everybody’ while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against Him and under His judgment. It would be easier to hold together the awful reality of hell and the universal reign of God if hell means destruction and the impenitent are no more."95
The purpose of the plan of salvation is ultimately to eradicate the presence of sin and sinners from this world. It is only if sinners, Satan, and the devils ultimately are consumed in the lake of fire and experience the extinction of the second death that we truly can say that Christ’s redemptive mission has been an unqualified victory. "Victory means that evil is removed, and nothing remains but light and love. The traditional theory of everlasting torment means that the shadow of darkness hangs over the new creation forever."96

To sum up, we can say that from a cosmological perspective the traditional view of hell perpetrates a cosmic dualism that contradicts the prophetic vision of the new world where the presence of sin and sinners is forever passed away (Rev 21:4).

CONCLUSION

In concluding this study of the various views of hell, it is important to remind ourselves that the doctrine of the final punishment is not the Gospel but the outcome of the rejection of the Gospel. It is by no means the most important doctrine of Scripture, but it certainly affects the way we understand what the Bible teaches in other vital areas such as human nature, death, salvation, God’s character, human destiny, and the world to come.

The traditional view of hell as eternal torment is either Biblical or unbiblical. We have sought the answer in God’s Word and have found no Biblical support for it. What we found is that traditionalists have tried to interpret the rich language and imageries of destruction of the wicked in the light of the Hellenistic view of human nature and of ecclesiastical dogma rather than on the basis of accepted methods of Biblical interpretation.

Today the traditional view of hell is being challenged and abandoned by respected scholars of different religious persuasions, on the basis of Biblical, moral, judicial, and cosmological considerations. Biblically, eternal torment negates the fundamental principle that the ultimate wages of sin is death, cessation of life, and not eternal torment. Furthermore, the rich imagery and language of destruction used throughout the Bible to portray the fate of the wicked clearly indicate that their final punishment results in annihilation and not eternal, conscious torment.

Morally, the doctrine of eternal conscious torment is incompatible with the Biblical revelation of divine love and justice. The moral intuition God has implanted within our consciences cannot justify the insatiable cruelty of a God who subjects sinners to unending torments. Such a God is like a bloodthirsty monster and not like the loving Father revealed to us by Jesus Christ.

Judicially, the doctrine of eternal torment is inconsistent with the Biblical vision of justice, which requires the penalty inflicted to be commensurate with the evil done. The notion of unlimited retaliation is unknown to the Bible. Justice could never demand a penalty of eternal pain for sins committed during a mere human lifetime, especially since such punishment accomplishes no reformatory purpose.
Cosmologically, the doctrine of eternal torment perpetuates a cosmic dualism that contradicts the prophetic vision of the new world, from which sin and sinners have forever passed away. If agonizing sinners were to remain an eternal reality in God’s new universe, then it hardly could be said that there shall be no more "mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4).

The traditional view of hell as conscious torment is in trouble today. The objections to such a view are so strong and the support so weak that more and more people are abandoning it, adopting instead the notion of universal salvation in order to avoid the sadistic horror of hell. To salvage the important Biblical doctrine of the final judgment and punishment of the wicked, it is important for Biblically-minded Christians to reexamine what the Bible really teaches about the fate of the lost.

Our careful investigation of the relevant Biblical data has shown that the wicked will be resurrected for the purpose of divine judgment. This will involve a permanent expulsion from God’s presence into a place where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. After a period of conscious suffering as individually required by divine justice, the wicked will be consumed with no hope of restoration or recovery. The ultimate restoration of believers and the extinction of sinners from this world will prove that Christ’s redemptive mission has been an unqualified victory. Christ’s victory means that "the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4), and only light, love, peace, and harmony will prevail throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity.