
Hell & the Eternal Punishment of the Wicked

An excursus extract from

*A Commentary on the
Gospel of Matthew*

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If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell. (Matt 18:8–9)

The words of Yeshua (and the parallel in Mark 9:43–48) speak of “eternal fire” (τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον) and of a “fiery hell” (τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός - “hell of fire,” ESV; “fire of hell,” NIV). This language clearly signifies that Yeshua taught that there exists a place of punishment for the wicked who die in their wickedness, a place that is characterized (in this text) as having fire and that is eternal.

Such an interpretation of Yeshua’s words has, however, not met with much acceptance in our modern times.¹ The primary issues relate to 1) whether there is a future place of torment for the wicked, 2) whether such torment is divinely ordained and punishment directly from the hand of God, and 3) whether the future divine punishment of the wicked is temporal (of a limited duration) or eternal (unending). The essential reason people question that reality of hell in the first place is a philosophical one: how could a loving God enact eternal punishment upon people created in His image? Or to put it another way, how can the love of God be reconciled with eternal punishment? Seeing no way to reconcile the dilemma, other explanations are offered for those biblical texts which appear to teach the eternal punishment of the wicked.

Primary in these explanations is the doctrine of annihilationism, which presupposes that the soul gains immortality only when endowed with eternal life. Thus, annihilationism teaches that both the body and soul of the unrighteous cease to exist at death. If there is punishment of the wicked, it is in the forfeiture of a future existence of bliss in the presence of God.

Seventh-day Adventism is most notably connected with the

1 See, for instance, David G. Moore, *The Battle for Hell: A Survey and Evaluation of Evangelicals’ Growing Attraction to the Doctrine of Annihilationism* (University Press of America, 1995); William Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell* (Zondervan, 1996).

teaching of annihilationism.² Other groups that accept this viewpoint (with some variations) are the Jehovah Witnesses, followers of Herbert Armstrong, Christadelphians, and more recently, the Church of England.³ Some notable scholars of our day have also espoused some form of annihilationism. For example, C. S. Lewis, John Stott, F. F. Bruce, and John Wenham have all either given support for annihilationism or admitted agnosticism in regard to hell and the eternal punishment of the unrighteous.⁴ Once again, what has driven the reinterpretation of the biblical teaching on hell in our times is the nagging question of how eternal punishment of the unrighteous can be held in concert with God's essential nature, that is, of His goodness and love. It is argued that such punishment is akin to "cruel and unusual punishment," being far too great in proportion to the crime.

Obviously, it is not the purpose of this excursus to explicate all of the arguments and issues that have gone into this debate. That would be well beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, we will

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- 2 For the best explanation and defense of Annihilationism from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective, see Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection? (Biblical Perspectives, 1997)*.
 - 3 The Church of England's Doctrine Commission reported in February 1995 that Hell is not eternal torment. The report, entitled "The Mystery of Salvation" states, "Christians have professed appalling theologies which made God into a sadistic monster. ... Hell is not eternal torment, but it is the final and irrevocable choosing of that which is opposed to God so completely and so absolutely that the only end is total non-being." (Church House Publishing, London, 1995), p. 199.
 - 4 Basil F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality. An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as They Are Revealed in the Scriptures* (Taunton, no date); John Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil*, (IVP, 1985); John Wenham, *Facing Hell (An autobiography 1913-1996)*, (Paternoster Press, 1998); John Stott and David L. Edwards, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, (Hodder, 1988). Stott, in his book *A Global Ministry* (IVP, 2001), quotes F. F. Bruce as saying: "annihilation is certainly an acceptable interpretation of the relevant New Testament passages ... For myself, I remain agnostic. Eternal conscious torment is incompatible with the revealed character of God" (p. 354).

survey the primary terms used in the Bible to describe “hell” as well as some of the relevant biblical texts that bear on the subject in the hopes of gaining an accurate perspective of what the Bible teaches.

לִישׁוֹן – *she'ol*

The starting point for our investigation is the Hebrew word לִישׁוֹן (*sheol*), often translated in the KJV with three different English words: “grave” (31x), “hell” (30x), and “pit” (3x). Subsequent English translations opted for simply transliterating the word (*Sheol*, ASV and RSV), while the NIV uses “grave” with a footnote “*Sheol*.”

The Lxx regularly translates לִישׁוֹן by ᾍδης (*hades*), though it also uses θάνατος (*thanatos*, “death,” 3x) and βάθρος (*bathros*, “pit,” 1x).

The etymology of the word is uncertain except to say that it is not related to the verb שָׁאַל (*sha'al*), “to ask.” It is found once outside of the Tanach, in the Jewish Elephantine papyri (#71, line 15),⁵ where the word means “grave.”

Scholars have taken various approaches to the meaning of *sheol* based in part upon their understanding of the future life as portrayed in the Tanach. Some believe that the future life is not found in the Tanach itself but became a more popular teaching in the intertestamental period.⁶ Other scholars, however, believe that life after death is well attested in the Tanach. M. Dahood, for instance, finds numerous instances in the Psalms that describe the resurrection from the dead, and a future life.⁷ We should be reminded that Yeshua Himself based His teaching on the resurrection of the dead from the Tanach (cf. Matt 22:29ff), as did His Apostles (e.g., Paul in 1Cor 15). Those scholars who fail to see substantiation for the afterlife in the Tanach do so based upon a presupposition which they bring to the text, not on the basis of the biblical text itself. This likewise colors their understanding of the word *sheol* as found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is clear that the word *sheol* has to do with the place of the

5 A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B. C* (Oxford, 1923).

6 See the discussion in Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death* (Doubleday, 2004), pp. 121ff.

7 See M. Dahood, *Psalms*, 3 vols. in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday, 1966), 3. xli-lii.

dead, but the biblical context must determine more precisely what the place is. Because the Church early on considered *sheol* to denote “hell,” a problem became evident: both righteous and unrighteous are said to reside in *sheol*. For instance, the Genesis narrative records Jacob’s grief at the apparent death of Joseph:

Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, “Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son.” So his father wept for him. (Gen 37:35)

Yet the wicked men of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram are destroyed for their wickedness and also descend to *sheol*:

If these men die the death of all men or if they suffer the fate of all men, then Adonai has not sent me. But if Adonai brings about an entirely new thing and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that is theirs, and they descend alive into Sheol, then you will understand that these men have spurned Adonai. (Num 16:29–30)

In seeking to explain this apparent contradiction, that both the righteous and unrighteous reside in *sheol*, the Church developed a “two-compartment” theory of *sheol*, with the “Old Testament saints” residing in an upper chamber of *sheol* from which Christ delivered them at His resurrection (based upon an interpretation of 1Pet 3:19 and Eph 4:9–10), while the wicked remain in the lower part of *sheol*. The Roman Catholic doctrine of “purgatory” is derived from a similar two-compartment view of *sheol*.

But such an explanation is unnecessary once one understands that *sheol* can refer both to burial in a grave as well as to the place of the wicked in the afterlife. It is true that the second meaning is more prevalent in the later books of the Tanach, with the meaning “grave” or “burial place” dominant in the Torah. But even in the Torah *sheol* can have the meaning of “hell” as the place where God’s wrath against the wicked is unleashed. To Num 16:29–30 (quoted above) may be added Deut 32:22.

For a fire is kindled in My anger, and burns to the lowest part of Sheol, and consumes the earth with its yield, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.

Modern views of sheol often equate it with the pagan notion of the “netherworld” or “underworld” in which all who die descend to a place of dark foreboding where one’s future is uncertain.⁸ But such a notion is unfounded in light of Yeshua’s words to the thief on the cross (Lk 23:43), “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

Another view is that *sheol* does not describe the place where the soul of the deceased resides, but only the body (i.e., *sheol* refers to the “grave” or “burial place”). The place and circumstances of the soul would thus have to be known from other Scriptures. Thus, when Yeshua tells the thief that he would be with Him in Paradise, we understand this to mean that his soul would be in Paradise while his body awaited the resurrection. Likewise Paul writes that “while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord” (2Cor 5:6), indicating that at death there is a separation of the body and soul, the soul of the believer residing with the Lord while the body remains in the grave.⁹

This view of the meaning of *sheol* offers a number of advantages. It does not require the “two-compartment” theory to explain why both the righteous and unrighteous go to *sheol*, and it avoids the pagan notion of *sheol* as the netherworld. It also does not favor the unbiblical idea of soul-sleep or annihilation of the wicked, for it understands *sheol* primarily as the destination of the body and only in an extended sense as the place of the wicked following the resurrection.

While a thorough study of the word *sheol* in the Tanach is beyond the scope of this excursus, it is clear that *sheol* often refers to the grave or burial place. Two texts from the Tanach (Ps 16:10 and

8 Note the use of “netherworld” in the JPS translation at Is 57:9; Ezek 26:20; 31:14, 16, 18; 32:18, 24; Psa 88:13. The NET Bible uses “netherworld” in Amos 9:2 and Jonah 2:6. The Catholic NAB uses “netherworld” in Matt 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Rev 1:18. See the comments of Wächter, “שְׁאוֹל” in *TDOT*, 14.245ff.

9 In a previous verse of this passage (2Cor 5:4), Paul uses metaphoric language to describe life in the body (“in this tent”) and the soul separate from the body (“we do not want to be unclothed”). That he has the resurrection in mind is clear from his statement that God “gave to us the Spirit as a pledge” (v. 5).

Hosea 13:14) which utilize our word are interesting because they are both quoted in the Apostolic Scriptures (Acts 2:27; cf. 13:35 and 1Cor 15:55). In Acts 2:27, Ps 16:10 is used in reference to Yeshua's bodily resurrection from the grave. In 1Cor 15:55, Paul quotes Hosea 13:14 to prove the resurrection of all believers. In both cases, therefore, *sheol* is interpreted as the "grave" or "burial place" of the deceased.

Since *sheol* is often found in poetic texts, it may well be that *sheol* is simply a poetic synonym for קֶבֶר (*qever*, "grave") and its verb קָבַר (*qavar*, "to bury"). This seems to be the case in the poetic passages of Ezek 31–32, where those slain in war are buried in a common grave. The Hebrew word בּוֹר (*bor*, "pit") is also used to describe the *sheol* or *qever* in which the fallen soldiers are buried. Harris notes that in the excavation at Dothan a where tomb was unearthed, there were shelves dug into the walls upon which bodies were placed along with pottery and many spear heads.¹⁰ This pictures the meaning of Ezek 32:27, "down to the grave (שְׂאוֹל, *sheol*) with their weapons."

Sometimes *sheol* is used to describe a great depth. For example,

Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover
the limits of the Almighty? They are high as the heavens,
what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know?
(Job 11:7–8)¹¹

But here, once again, *Sheol* may simply be referring to graves in the Ancient Near East, for the royal tombs in Ur were dug 30 feet deep.¹² Ancient Israelites had no deep oil wells or mines to compare for depth, so it may well be that such figures of depth may well have arisen from the meaning of "tomb" as known from other cultures.

Yet while *sheol* most often refers to the grave or to death personified, there are hints that *sheol* is, at times, understood as denoting a destruction that exceeds mere physical death. The word's use in connection with Abaddon (אַבְדֹּון, *avadon*; אַבְדָּה, *avadoh*) in Proverbs may hint in that direction.

Sheol and Abaddon lie open before Adonai, how much
more the hearts of men! (Prov 15:11)

10 R. Laird Harris, "שְׂאוֹל" in *TWOT*, 2.892–3.

11 See also Ps 139:8; Amos 9:2.

12 Harris, *Ibid.*, p. 893.

Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied, nor are the eyes of man ever satisfied. (Prov 27:20)

While a common lexical definition for אַבְדֹּון (*avaddon*) is “underworld” (so *HALOT*), its collocation with the words בּוֹר (*bor*, “pit”), קֶבֶר (*qever*, “grave”) and מָוֶת (*mavet*, “death”), along with the root אָבַד (*avad*, “to destroy”) indicate that the definition “underworld” is mythologically derived. Rather, the word most likely is used to denote the finality of death and perhaps the future judgment that awaits all men.

We may conclude our brief overview of the word *sheol* by saying that it most often and primarily refers to the grave and therefore to physical death in general. While the future punishment of the wicked is not explicit in the use of the word *sheol* itself, it does seem clear that the Tanach envisions more in the death of the wicked than merely the end of earthly life. The righteous have hope, even in the grave, while the wicked await God’s judging wrath, for the righteous are saved from the clutches of *sheol* but the wicked remain in its grasp forever.

The wicked will return to Sheol, even all the nations who forget God. (Ps 9:17)

Let me not be put to shame, O Adonai, for I call upon You;
Let the wicked be put to shame, let them be silent in Sheol.
(Ps 31:17)

This is the way of those who are foolish, and of those after them who approve their words. Selah. As sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; and the upright shall rule over them in the morning, and their form shall be for Sheol to consume so that they have no habitation. (Ps 49:13–14)

There is therefore a call to have one’s life right before God *before* death:

For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You;
those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness. (Is 38:18)

We see, then, that while *sheol* primarily refers to the grave, in

some contexts, it takes into consideration life after death, and the resurrection of both the wicked and righteous. The wicked, though resurrected, never are freed from the pangs of death which *sheol* represents.

If this interpretation of *שְׁאוֹל* is correct, its usage does not give us a picture of the state of the dead in gloom, darkness, chaos, or silence, unremembered, unable to praise God, knowing nothing. Such a view verges on unscriptural soul sleep. Rather, this view gives us a picture of a typical Palestinian tomb, dark, dusty, with mingled bones and where “this poor lisping stammering tongue lies silent in the grave.” All the souls of men do not go to one place. But all people go to the grave. As to the destiny of the souls of men in the intermediate state, the OT says little. Actually the NT says little too, but what it says is decisive... The saved go to heaven and bliss; the wicked go to hell and torment. In the OT the hope of the righteous is life with God, the wicked have not this hope.¹³

ἄδης – *hades*¹⁴

In the Lxx, *hades* always translates the Hebrew *sheol* (all 65 occurrences). It also translates such words as *צְלָמָוֶת* (*tzalmavet*, “deep darkness”) in Jb 38:17, *דִּמְיָה* (*dumah*, “silence”) in Ps 94:17[93:17], *מָוֶת* (*mavet*, “death”) in Is 28:17, Prov 14:12; 16:25, and *בּוֹר* (*bor*, “pit”) in Is 38:18; 14:19. Like *sheol* and its companion terms, *hades* pictures death and all that accompanies it.

In the apocrypha and other Jewish literature, *hades* is used much as it is in the Lxx, of the grave or death in general. The idea that the righteous will escape the confines of *hades* (i.e., the grave) while the wicked are destined to remain in its dark world, is also represented.¹⁵

13 R. Laird Harris, “שְׁאוֹל,” *TWOT*, p. 893.

14 In the biblical literature, *hades* has lost all connection to the proper noun Ἄιδης who, in Greek mythology, was the god of the netherworld, son of Kronos and Rhea, brother of Zeus, the word itself having taken on the meaning “the world below,” “grave,” and “death.” See Liddell & Scott, *ad. loc.* “ἄδης”.

15 See J. Lunde, “Heaven and Hell” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, 1992), pp. 309–10.

The word *hades* only occurs ten times in the Apostolic Scriptures,¹⁶ and only four of these are in the Gospels. Its usage in the Apostolic writings may have been influenced by the Jewish literature which took the themes of the Tanach and developed them further. Thus, though *hades* is understood generally as the grave or as a way of speaking of death, it was also used to denote a place of punishment reserved for the wicked (Apoc. Zeph. 10:3–14). Likewise, *hades* in the Apostolic Scriptures may reference the grave (Acts 2:27, 31, of Yeshua in the tomb). But since Satan was the agent who lured Adam and Chavah into rebellion against God and thus brought death into our world, *hades* is also used to denote the forces of evil that seek the demise of God’s creation (Matt 16:18). It is used, therefore, as denoting the place of God’s wrath (Matt 11:23; Lk 10:15) and the place of punishment for the wicked (Lk 16:23). In John’s Revelation, *hades* is coupled with death (Rev 1:18; 6:8) and has power to bring destruction upon the earth. In Rev 20:13–14, those who reside in *hades* are judged in accordance with their works and then “death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.”

גֵּי בְּנֵי-הַנְּחֹם (gey ben hinnom, “valley of Ben Hinnom) / γέεννα (geenna), “Gehenna”

More common in the Apostolic Scriptures than *hades* is the designation “Gehenna,” a shortened form of “the valley of (Ben) Hinnom” following the Aramaic גְּיְהִינָם, *geihinnam*. It refers to

a valley located on the south slope of Jerusalem (Josh 15:8; 18:16), literally, the “Valley of (the son of) Hinnom.” It gained its infamous notoriety during the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, both of whom burned sacrifices there to Molech, even to the point of sacrificing their own sons in the fire (cf. 2 Chron 28:3; 33:6; 2 Kings 16:3). This elicited prophetic condemnations on the valley, identifying it as the scene of future carnage and desolation resulting from God’s judgment (Jer 7:30-33; 19:1-13; 32:34-35; cf. also Is 31:9; 66:24; 2 Kings 23:10; Lev 18:21).¹⁷

16 Matt 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Rev 1:18; 6:8; 20:13–14.

17 J. Lunde, “Heaven and Hell” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, 1992), p. 310.

In the Apostolic Scriptures *γέεννα* (*geenna*) is found 12 times,¹⁸ all in the Gospels except for James 3:6. The majority of its occurrences are in Matthew (7x). Five times *geenna* is associated with fire (Matt 5:22; 18:9; Mark 9:43; James 3:6), which matches the physical descriptions of the valley, for owing to its infamy, it was used as a dump for all manner of filth and rubbish.¹⁹ Some traditions suggest that fires were often burned there to consume the garbage.

The rabbinic literature often uses גֵּיהִנָּם (*geihinnam*) to describe a “place of punishment of the wicked in the hereafter, hell”²⁰ and as the opposite of עֲדֵן גַּן, *gan ‘eden*, “the garden of Eden.” Yet it is difficult to know what the earliest rabbis believed and taught about life in the hereafter, for the earliest strata of rabbinic materials is difficult to isolate from the later, emerging rabbinic Judaism.²¹ Most often, the early rabbis speak of the עוֹלָם הַבָּא (*‘olam haba’*, “world to come”) in reference to Israel’s restoration and the rewards given by God to His chosen people. Thus, m.*Sanhedrin* 10.1 states that “all Israel have a portion in the world to come” based upon Is 60:21, “All of Your people are righteous.” Then follows a list of those who do not have a place in the world to come, which includes those who deny the resurrection, those who deny that the Torah is divinely given, an Epicurean (i.e., a pagan), those who read heretical books, those who practice magic, and anyone who profanes the Name by pronouncing it according to its letters.²² The *mishnah* goes on to list specific groups of people who have a portion in the world to come and those who do not. After mentioning that the people of Sodom will not have a portion in the world to come, the statement is made: “But they will stand in judgment” (m.*Sanhedrin* 10.3). A debate ensues:

18 Matt 5:22, 29–30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43–47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6

19 Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Fortress, 1969), p. 17.

20 Jastrow, “גֵּיהִנָּם”.

21 See the comments of Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death* (Doubleday, 2004), pp. 597–99.

22 This *mishnah* appears to be layered with earlier and later additions. See Israel J. Yuval, “All Israel Have a Portion in the World to Come” in Fabian E. Udoh, ed., *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities* (Univ of Notre Dame, 2008), pp. 114–38.

The men of Sodom have no portion in the world to come, since it is said, Now the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners against the Lord exceedingly (Gen. 13:13)—Wicked—in this world, and sinners—in the world to come. But they will stand in judgment. R. Nehemiah says, “Both these and those will not stand in judgment, for it is said, Therefore the wicked shall not stand in judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous (Ps. 1:5)—Therefore the wicked shall not stand in judgment”—this refers to the generation of the flood. “Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous”—this refers to the men of Sodom.” They said to him, “They will not stand in the congregation of the righteous, but they will stand in the congregation of the sinners.”

R. Nehemiah is most likely the Nehemiah who was the disciple of R. Akiva,²³ which puts this saying in the late 1st or early 2nd Century CE. Yet there is nothing to indicate what R. Nehemiah thought might constitute punishment for the wicked in the hereafter.

We find in *m. Avot* 3.11 another saying detailing categories of people who will not have a portion in the world to come:

R. Eleazar the Modite²⁴ says, “He who treats Holy Things as secular, and he who defiles the appointed times, he who humiliates his fellow in public, he who removes the signs of the covenant of Abraham, our father, (may he rest in peace), and he who exposes aspects of the Torah not in accord with the law, even though he has in hand learning in Torah and good deeds, will have no share in the world to come.

Once again, there is no discussion of what happens to the unrighteous who forfeit their place in the world to come through their evil deeds, nor is there specific information on what might constitute punishment for the wicked.

Another saying in *Avot* does speak to the punishment of the wicked:

What is the difference between the disciples of Abraham

23 See Gershom Bader, *The Encyclopedia of Talmudic Sages* (Aronson, 1993), pp. 367–68.

24 R. Eleazar of Modi'in lived in the late 1st and early 2nd Centuries CE.

our father and the disciples of Balaam the wicked? The disciples of Abraham our father enjoy the benefit [of their learning] in this world and yet inherit the world to come, as it is said, That I may cause those who love me to inherit substance, and so that I may fill their treasures (Prov. 8:21). The disciples of Balaam, the wicked, inherit Gehenna and go down to the Pit of Destruction, as it is said, But you, O God, shall bring them down into the pit of destruction (לְבִאָר שַׁחַת); bloodthirsty and deceitful shall not live out half their days (Ps. 55:24).²⁵

This anonymous saying does not detail the character of Gehenna nor the parallel “pit of destruction.” The Hebrew word שַׁחַת (*shachat*) can mean “destruction,” “ruin,” “destroy,” “annihilate,” “damage” and combinations of all these. It therefore gives us no clear specification on exactly what the punishment constitutes. But this rabbinic saying does indicate a belief in the resurrection of the wicked and that when resurrected they would receive punishment commensurate with their wickedness.

One of the earliest of the midrashim is Midrash Rabbah *Genesis*. Here we find an interesting midrash on Gen 18:1, where Abraham is sitting in the doorway of his tent at the heat of the day:

R. Levi said: In the Hereafter Abraham will sit at the entrance to Gehenna, and permit no circumcised Israelite to descend therein. What then will he do to those who have sinned very much? He will remove the foreskin from babes who died before circumcision and set it upon them [the sinners], and then let them descend into Gehenna; hence it is written, “He has sent forth his hands to those that were whole; he has profaned his covenant” (Ps 55:20). IN THE HEAT OF THE DAY: [this is an allusion to the time] when that day will come of which it is written, For, behold, the day comes, it burns as a furnace (Mal 3:19).²⁶

Like *m.Sanhedrin* 10.1, the circumcised (=Jewish) who stand before Abraham are not permitted to descend to Gehenna, meaning “all Israel have a place in the world to come.” The wicked must therefore be those of Jewish lineage who broke the covenant by refusing circumcision. But even these (it appears) are given the status of cir-

25 *m.Avot* 5.19.

26 *Mid. Rab. Genesis* 48.8.

cumcised, and thus descend to Gehenna only for a time.

This accords with the statement of R. Chanina:²⁷

For R. Chanina said: All descend into Gehenna, excepting three. 'All' — can you really think so! But say thus: All who descend into Gehenna [subsequently] reascend, excepting three, who descend but do not reascend, viz., He who commits adultery with a married woman, publicly shames his neighbour, or fastens an evil epithet [nickname] upon his neighbour. 'Fastens an epithet' — but that is putting to shame! — [It means], Even when he is accused to the name. (b.*Bava Metzia* 58b)

Here we understand that while Gehenna remains, all but three kinds of people who are in Gehenna reascend to the world to come. This saying was given, no doubt, as a deterrent to the sins named, that is, adultery, public shaming, and character assassination.

The later midrashim also give us an insight into the view of rabbinic Judaism, that Gehenna is a place of punishment, but that God's mercy extends even to those undergoing such punishment. Commenting on Ex 6:13:

Therefore does it here say: UNTO THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, AND UNTO PHARAOH, for just as God's praise ascends from the mouths of the righteous in Paradise, so does it ascend from Hell (אֵלֵינוּ) from the mouths of the wicked, as it says: Passing through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs (Ps 84:7). What does this mean? They make their tears to flow like fountains till the very fires of hell become cool with their tears. Even from there praise goes up, as it says: Yea, he [the wicked] heapeth blessings upon the Teacher (ib.). What do they say? R. Johanan said: Thou hast spoken well, judged well, rightly declared this clean and that unclean, condemned well, rightly taught and rightly instructed. The Garden of Eden will one day shout and say: 'Give me the righteous: I will have nothing to do with the wicked,' as it says: I hate them that regard lying vanities (Ps 20:7). Whom do I seek? Those who trusted in Thy Name, as it says: But I trust in the Lord (ib.). Gehennom will also shout: 'I have nothing to do with righteous

²⁷ R. Chanina was deputy to the High Priest prior to the destruction in 70 CE. He apparently survived the destruction but was executed in the late 1st or early 2nd Century CE.

people; I seek the wicked who regard and do lying vanities.' God will then say: 'Give the righteous to this one and the wicked to the other,' as it says: the horse-leech hath two daughters (Prov 30:15).²⁸

Here, the tears of the wicked in Gehinnom are counted as a sign of true repentance, and thus they cool the fires, meaning that by repentance the punishment of Gehinnom is assuaged.

The idea that punishment of the wicked in Gehinnom is temporary is stated in a later midrash:

We have learned that the judgment upon the wicked in hell lasts twelve months. R. Eliezer asked R. Joshua, "What should a man do to escape the judgment of hell?" He replied, "Let him occupy himself with good deeds." R. Eliezer said, "If that be so, then the nations can do good and pious deeds, and so escape the judgment of hell." R. Joshua said, "My son, the Torah speaks to the living and not to the dead."²⁹

The veiled answer by R. Joshua is that, indeed, the nations can escape the punishment of hell if they do deeds of goodness and charity.

We see, then, that in the post-destruction emerging rabbinic Judaism, there was a clear opposition taken to the more commonly held view of the Christian Church, that eternal punishment awaited the wicked. The later rabbis taught that there was a punishment for the wicked in the hereafter, but that even at that time, the wicked could be rescued.

In the medieval times, the debate continued among the rabbis regarding the punishment of the wicked.³⁰ Nachmanides and Maimonides are the only ones to treat the subject of retribution extensively and systematically. Though they differed in their treatments, they essentially arrived at the same conclusion. There awaits divine retribution for the wicked in the hereafter, but such punishment is not everlasting. Sinners atone for their sins through their own suf-

28 Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 7.4.

29 Midrash *Proverbs* 17, 1, 42b, quoted from Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (Schoken, 1974), p. 589.

30 See Ephraim Rottenberg, "Reward and Punishment" in Cohen and Mendes-Flohr, eds., *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (Free Press, 1987), pp. 827–32.

fering, but the worst of sinners, whose suffering could never suffice for such atonement, are “cut off,” meaning they experience a complete annihilation and extinction of the soul.

Maimonides did not believe in a physical resurrection of the body, either for the righteous or the wicked.³¹ He states this explicitly in his *Mishneh Torah*:

In the world to come, there is no body or physical form, only the souls of the righteous alone, without a body, like the ministering angels. Since there is no physical form, there is neither eating, drinking, or any of the other bodily functions of this world like sitting, standing, sleeping, death, sadness, laughter, and the like.

Thus, the Sages of the previous ages declared: “In the world to come, there is neither eating, drinking, or sexual relations. Rather, the righteous will sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence.”

From that statement, it is clear that there is no body, for there is no eating or drinking. [Consequently,] the statement, “the righteous sit,” must be interpreted metaphorically, i.e., the righteous exist there without work or labor....What is meant by the expression “delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence”? That they will comprehend the truth of Godliness which they cannot grasp while in a dark and humble body.³²

Not all of Rambam’s contemporaries were happy with his teaching on this subject. R. Abraham ben David wrote strong words against this teaching, though Rambam never answered his objections.³³

Interestingly, Rambam also taught that the retribution which

31 See Lea Naomi Goldfeld, *Moses Maimonides’ Treatise on Resurrection* (KTAV, 1986), pp. 13–14. Note that the conclusion of this book is that the *Treatise on Resurrection*, which is attributed to Rambam, was actually not written by him. This treatise contradicts his teaching in *Mishneh Torah* and *Guide to the Perplexed*, and was probably attributed to Rambam by those who wished to save his reputation, tarnished by his teaching that no physical resurrection would occur in the last days.

32 *Hilchot Teshuvah*, 8.2.

33 Goldfeld, *Op. cit.*, pp. 14ff.

awaited the worst of sinners was annihilation of the soul:

The retribution beyond which there is no greater retribution is that the soul will be cut off and not merit this life as Num 15:31 states: "This soul shall be cut off. His sin shall remain upon him."

This refers to the obliteration of the soul which was referred to by the prophets with the following metaphoric terms: "the pit of destruction [Ps 55:24]," "obliteration [Ps 88:12]," "the bonfire [Is 30:33]," "the leech [Prov 30:15]." All the synonyms for nullification and destruction are used to refer to it for it is the [ultimate] nullification after which there is no renewal and the [ultimate] loss which can never be recovered.³⁴

While there continued to be debates over future retribution for the wicked, in great measure, the view of modern Judaism is that there is no eternal punishment that awaits the unrighteous. The Soncino Talmud notes to b.*Sanhedrin* 105a alert the reader to this fact:

It may be observed that it is not taught here that they [the wicked] actually have a portion in the world to come as a right, but that they will nevertheless enter therein, God bearing their iniquities to make this possible. This is in accordance with the general attitude of Judaism that punishment is not everlasting. Cf. M. Joseph. *Judaism as Creed and Life*, pp. 146-147.

We see, then, that while in the earliest rabbinic literature the rabbis taught a future divine retribution for the wicked, in the emerging rabbinic Judaism of the post-destruction era and its evolution into medieval and contemporary rabbinic Judaism, the idea of divine retribution was increasingly diminished and eventually removed altogether.

Current Theologies & the Teaching of Scripture

D. A. Carson notes the rising trend among self-confessed evangelicals who publicly espouse some form of annihilationism.³⁵ In

34 *Hilchot Teshuvah*, 8.5.

35 D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Zondervan, 1996), p. 515.

some ways, the challenges to the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment for the wicked have perhaps marked the fragmentation of evangelicals in very clear terms. While there are small nuanced differences in the way annihilationism is defined among those who hold this doctrine, the central question is obvious: "Do the Scriptures teach eternal punishment of the wicked or are the wicked punished in a once-for-all manner and then cease to exist?"

In point of fact, those who hold to what has been commonly called "Annihilationism," do not favor this term. They would rather opt for something like "Conditional Immortality," since "Annihilationism" takes as a given that the soul is *de facto* immortal, something they deny. In essence, the many expressions of "Conditional Immortality" may be summed up under two general headings: 1) Those who believe that the wicked cease to exist, both body and soul, when they die a physical death, and therefore only the righteous are resurrected in the final day, and 2) those who believe that both the righteous and the unrighteous are resurrected, the righteous given immortality (eternal life) and the unrighteous punished an eternal death (extinction).

As noted at the beginning of this excursus, the primary impetus for interpreting the Scriptures to teach "Conditional Immortality" is that eternal punishment of the wicked seems irreconcilable with the goodness and justice of God. From this presupposition, verses and texts are sought to support the idea that the body and soul of the wicked are together banished and therefore cease to exist, making eternal punishment an impossibility. Such banishment or final execution is thus defined as the punishment deserved by the wicked.

While the scope of this excursus does not allow an investigation into the many texts that are marshaled in support of "Conditional Immortality," we will look at several that most often form the crux of the argument.

Matthew 10:28

This verse is brought forward to prove that the soul, like the body, of the wicked is destroyed in hell, and cannot therefore be eternally punished.

Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both

soul and body in hell.

The argument usually rests upon the verb “to destroy” (ἀπόλλυμι, *apolummi*) and its corresponding noun, “destruction” (ἀπώλεια, *apōleia*). It is true that the *apolummi* word group often refers to that which ceases to exist. It is used of killing someone (as when Herod wanted to “destroy” the baby Yeshua, Matt 2:13). Similarly, when one perishes physically, one’s physical existence ceases (Lk 15:7; 1Cor 10:9). The same word group is used to describe the “perishing” of those who are not saved by faith in Yeshua (Jn 3:16; Rom 2:12; 1Cor 15:18; 2Pet 3:9). In Matt 7:13, “perishing” is the opposite of living.

But the *apolummi* word group does not always suggest cessation of existence. In Luke 15 and the parables given there, the sheep is “lost” (*apolummi*), the coin is “lost” (*apolummi*), and the son is “lost” (*apolummi*). In Matt 9:17, the wineskin that has lost its ability to expand bursts when filled with new wine and is “ruined” (*apolummi*) but does not cease to exist. Likewise, the ointment poured out upon Yeshua (Matt 26:8) is “wasted” (*apolummi*) but does not cease to exist.

Given this range of meanings for the *apolummi* word group, Matt 10:28 need not be interpreted to mean that the body and soul “cease to exist” in hell. The picture is rather one of “ruin” in the sense of forever incapable of fulfilling the role for which body and soul were created, namely, to glorify God through willing submission to Him and enjoyment of His infinite greatness. This “ruin” is presented as conscious and ongoing for those who are perishing.

Matthew 25:46

This verse seems conclusive in proving both the eternal life granted to those who are saved, and eternal damnation to those who are not.

These will go away into eternal punishment (κόλασιν αἰ-
ώνιον), but the righteous into eternal life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον).

Some of those who hold to “Conditional Immortality” seek to interpret the word “eternal” (αἰώνιος, *aiōnios*) to mean “an age” or a

“long period of time” rather than accepting the meaning “eternal.”³⁶ It is true that the word can have this meaning (cf. 2Tim 1:9; Tit 1:2), but its primary sense is that of “unending time” or “a period without beginning or end.”³⁷

A closer look at this text within its context gives decisive evidence that the word *aiōnios* should bear the meaning “eternal.” First, note v. 41:

Then He will also say to those on His left, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels;”

It is possible that John has this saying of Yeshua in mind when he wrote Rev 20:10 –

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever (αἰῶνας τῶν αἰῶνων).

The double use of *aiōnios* in this text can mean nothing less than eternal, time without end. If John is correct, that the Devil, beast, and false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire where they remain forever, then Yeshua’s words in Matt 12:41 must be likewise interpreted, for the wicked are cast into the same eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

But even more obvious is the fact that in Matt 25:46, the two clauses are obviously parallel. If the eternal punishment is interpreted to be temporal, then the corresponding eternal life must also be temporal. That, of course, is quite clearly not what Yeshua intends. In light of this strong parallelism, those who argue against eternal punishment suggest that the wicked are punished by extinction, but that this extinction is eternal. But that will not work either since vv. 41 and 46 are likewise parallel, and v. 41 speaks of the wicked being cast into the eternal fire prepared for the devil

36 The weakness of this argument is heightened by the fact that even some who espouse “Conditional Immortality” admit that the *aiōnios* word group most often means “eternal” and cannot be interpreted as “long period of time” by those who want to dismiss the idea of eternal punishment. See John W. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Zondervan, 1985), pp. 34–41.

37 BDAG, “αἰώνιος”.

and his angels, which John makes clear is a punishment which has no end.

Some have suggested that since the *aiōnios* word group is used to describe our salvation in Yeshua (Heb 5:9) and the “eternal life” that salvation brings (e.g., Jn 3:36), it refers *only* to the once-for-all work of Messiah and its results. Their argument is that a believer is not constantly being saved even when in the world to come, so that “eternal life” should be understood as something that happens once but has lasting results. This is then applied to the punishment of the wicked, who are punished once (extinction), the results of which last forever. But this is a naive view of salvation. Those who are saved are constantly *being* saved by the power and faithfulness of God. And this could be said even of those who enjoy the bliss of the world to come. It is by God’s strength and faithfulness, on the merits of Yeshua’s eternal and infinite work, that those who are His will enjoy eternity with Him.

Revelation 14:9–11

John has more to say about eternal punishment in the Apocalypse:

Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”

Once again, John uses the most emphatic expression possible to make his readers aware that the torment of which he speaks is eternal, using the repeated *aiōnios*.³⁸ The most obvious and clear meaning of John’s graphic picture is a fire that continues to burn as seen by its smoke. And the addition of “day and night” is a good

³⁸ Though there are a number of variants in v. 10, all of the variants have the two *aiōnios*.

Semitism for “continually.”³⁹

It is likewise gratuitous to suggest that those who are tormented are done so to extinction and then the smoke remains as a memorial of their demise. The grammar will not allow such an interpretation, for the smoke is not a memorial of their extinction but of their torment: ὁ καπνὸς τοῦ βασανισμοῦ αὐτῶν, “the smoke of their torment” is the decisive phrase, where “smoke” (καπνός, *kapnos*) is bound to the genitive τοῦ βασανισμοῦ (*tu basanismou*), which functions as a genitive of source. It is their torment that produces the smoke.⁴⁰ If the smoke is a memorial, it is a constant reminder of the torment which produces it.

Revelation 20:10–15

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Once again, John draws the picture of the “lake of fire.” And as in chapter 14, so here, the picture is one of constant (“day and

39 E.g., Ps 1:2, “in His Torah he meditates day and night,” meaning “continually.”

40 Cp. Jude 6–7, “And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day, just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.”

night”) and eternal (“forever and ever”) torment. As noted above, the devil, beast, and false prophet are consciously tormented as divine punishment. But not only are these three beings cast into the lake of fire, but also anyone whose “name was not found written in the book of life.” This reality is noted as the “second death,” for it is a final and eternal separation from God. The first death (physical death) entails a separation of the body and soul, while the second death is marked by a separation from God’s presence, that is, access to Him as the source of grace and mercy.

Quite clearly, throughout John’s Revelation, he is using apocalyptic metaphor. But it will not do to suggest that these metaphors have no meaning. John used them in order to convey a very real meaning, and the most clear and obvious meaning is that the torment of the wicked, including both the wicked within the spirit realm as well as from among mankind, suffer the eternal punishment intended by God.

Many more Scriptures could be listed and studied in relation to this topic, but these may suffice to show that the teaching of the annihilationists or those who hold to a “Conditional Immortality” simply cannot be sustained by a careful search of the Bible itself.

Is Eternal Punishment Contrary to God’s Love and Justice?

The philosophical argument most often heard by those who propound the doctrine of annihilationism or “Conditional Immortality” is that eternal punishment of the wicked simply does not comport with the goodness and justice of God. One line of this argument is that the suffering which Yeshua Himself underwent to procure the eternal salvation of the elect was not itself an eternal suffering. The argument is that if Yeshua suffered temporal physical death as payment for the sins of the elect, then it is inconsistent to think that God would require eternal punishment of those who reject God and His offer of salvation in the Messiah.

But this argument is shortsighted because it fails to recognize the true extent of Yeshua’s suffering. Most certainly He suffered physically, and in that sense, temporally, for He is not eternally subjected to the agony of the cross. But we must remember that Yeshua’s suffering (as impossible as it is to explain or to fathom) was both physical and spiritual, and that He suffered not only as the incarnate Lord but also as the eternal Creator. Even as our sin, when compared to God’s infinite holiness, constitutes an infinite trans-

gression against God, so Yeshua's death, when viewed in light of His eternal nature, was an infinite or eternal death. God exists outside of the realm of time and as such, His willful punishment of Yeshua as the sin-bearer of His people was also, in one sense, outside of time's limitation. In the time of His suffering, our Messiah underwent the eternal and infinite wrath of God on our behalf. It was, in one sense, temporal, in that His suffering occurred within the scope of human history. But in an ultimate sense, it was a suffering that transcended time, so much so that the Paul could write that grace was "granted us in Messiah Yeshua from all eternity" (2Tim 1:9, cp. 1Pet 1:20). The only way that God could grant us grace "from all eternity" is if the death and resurrection of Yeshua, indeed, His very incarnation, was reckoned by the Father as completed and accomplished.

We will never know fully what the suffering of our Savior encompassed because we will never be able to comprehend fully the mystery of the incarnation itself. His poverty (2Cor 8:9) was infinite when compared to His eternal riches; His turmoil on this earth unmatched when compared with the shalom He had with the Father (Jn 17:5); His sorrow upon this earth unparalleled when considered in light of His infinite joy before His coming as a babe in Bethlehem. And the humility He experienced by setting his feet upon this broken world is beyond calculation when compared to the glory He shared with the Father throughout eternity. To suggest, therefore, that Yeshua suffered only temporally in order to win the salvation of His people is to overlook the very essence of what His suffering was and what it meant. Indeed, one could well argue that the eternal punishment of the wicked still falls very much short of measuring up to the suffering our Savior underwent to redeem us.

Some Concluding Thoughts

The topic of this excursus is not a pleasant one, at least in the sense that it causes us to consider with much concern and remorse those who will inevitably reject the message of the Gospel and therefore will be subjected to the eternal wrath of God. It also is a topic that is far bigger than any one of us could encompass. But it is a topic of immense importance, for it brings into focus our utter need of a Savior as well as our responsibility to be His witnesses to those who are perishing. In contemplating that which awaits those who have not believed, we are likewise cast afresh upon the sover-

eign mercies of God. We dare not lapse into the humanistic thinking that somehow the eternal destiny of others lies in our hands. We must rather affirm all the more the sovereign purposes of God to save a host of people no one can number of every tribe, kindred and tongue, and be joyful to know that He is pleased to use us to accomplish this purpose.

Moreover, when viewed in the light of the consistent message of the Scriptures regarding the punishment of the wicked, we are all the more enabled to appreciate the greatness of our own salvation, vouched safe in Yeshua. And this realization drives us all the more to fervent prayer for those we know and love who have yet to repent and believe, laying hold of the unspeakable gift of God's grace in Messiah.

It is the very difficult nature of this topic which has, undoubtedly, made it increasingly unpopular in our pluralistic world. To highlight God's justice and wrath in a world that wants only to have a "divine being" who accepts everyone and everything, is to uphold a message that, apart from His sovereign working, will be utterly rejected. But it is not our duty to create the message. That, God has already done in the Scriptures and in His Son. As faithful servants to Him, we must therefore allow the Scripture to speak even when the message is decidedly unpopular.

Carson's words are a fitting conclusion to our short study:

Despite the sincerity of their motives, one wonders more than a little to what extent the growing popularity of various forms of annihilationism and conditional immortality are a reflection of this age of pluralism. It is getting harder and harder to be faithful to the "hard" lines of Scripture. And in this way, evangelicalism itself may contribute to the gagging of God by silencing the severity of his warnings and by minimizing the awfulness of the punishment that justly awaits those untouched by his redeeming grace. Newbigin is right: "It is one of the weaknesses of a great deal of contemporary Christianity that we do not speak of the last judgment and of the possibility of being finally lost."⁴¹

41 D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, Op. cit., p. 536, quoting Lesslie Newbigin, "Confessing Christ in a Multi-Religion Society," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12 (1994): 130-31.

