

DOES SCRIPTURE TEACH THE ANNIHILATION OF THE UNSAVED?

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One increasingly encounters Christians who are persuaded Scripture teaches that the unsaved will at some point after the final judgment be annihilated, go out of existence, rather than endure conscious suffering for eternity.¹ There is debate as to when this belief first appeared in the church. Many point to the writings of the fourth-century apologist Arnobius of Sicca as the earliest secure indication of the belief,² but others insist there were predecessors.³ It is not disputed, however, that the view that hell involves eternal conscious suffering was the accepted understanding of the church through the ages.

According to church historian Gregg Allison, "From its inception, the church has believed that . . . following their judgment of condemnation, unbelievers will experience eternal conscious punishment in hell. Only a few Christians deviated from this understanding of the last judgment and eternal punishment."⁴ Richard Bauckham states, "Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated."⁵ Allen Clayton states, "The overwhelming majority of Christian writers held that the wicked were to be eternally punished. This group includes Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Minucius Felix, Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, and Augustine."⁶ Gary Shogren states, "If the extant literature is any indication, then an overwhelming majority within the ancient church were persuaded that damnation leads to everlasting, conscious suffering."⁷ Even Clark Pinnock, a proponent of annihilationism, acknowledges that "the interpretation of the nature of hell as everlasting conscious punishment is the view of all the historic churches and their great theologians and represents the classic, mainstream, traditional, and evangelical opinion on the subject."⁸

¹ I am not here concerned with the different classifications of those who deny that hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment. See, e.g., Kendall S. Harmon, "The Case Against Conditionalism" in Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed., *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 196-199. If Scripture teaches the unsaved will endure conscious suffering for eternity, all claims to the contrary, whatever their underlying anthropology, are false.

² E.g., Christopher W. Morgan, "Annihilationism: Will the Unsaved Be Punished Forever?" in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 197; F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 393; Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 103-104.

³ E.g., Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 184-185.

⁴ Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 702.

⁵ Richard Bauckham, "Universalism: A Historical Survey," *Themelios* 4.2 (September 1978), 47.

⁶ Allen L. Clayton, "Hell" in Everett Ferguson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 517.

⁷ Gary S. Shogren, "Hell, Abyss, Eternal Punishment" in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 461.

⁸ Clark H. Pinnock, "Annihilationism" in Jerry L. Walls, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 463.

The occasional attempt to neutralize this historical fact by blaming it on an early mistaken acceptance of the unbiblical Greek (Platonic) notion of the inherent immortality of the soul is unconvincing. After discussing a number of early Christian writers, Robert Yarbrough states:

But while it is inevitable that Greek thought suffuses their writings – many wrote in Greek, and some were converted out of Hellenistic paganism – their appeal to Scripture and Bible-based doctrinal warrants should be taken seriously. They were definitely not brainwashed by Plato, as is evidenced by common patristic convictions backed by Scripture but hardly sanctioned by Platonism: [He proceeds to list ten such convictions.]⁹

He concludes:

The question we are seeking to answer in this section is whether the doctrine of eternal conscious punishment in hell is primarily the result of early church acquiescence to Plato's teaching on the immortality of the soul. . . . We have shown that the source of patristic teaching is far more likely to be the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels and in passages such as Isaiah 66. . . . [T]he frequent first move of discrediting the historical view by accusing it of early and direct Platonic origin lacks credible basis. The move deserves to be abandoned until compelling evidence for the claim is forthcoming.¹⁰

I am convinced the historical view is the correct understanding of Scripture. This paper is a brief explanation of what leads me to that conclusion. Much more can and perhaps needs to be said, as indicated by the many books and articles written on the subject, but I hope there is some value in isolating what are for me the major sticking points with annihilationism, the Scriptures that I think most clearly teach the historical position. In the process, I address some common claims and counterarguments of annihilationists. I doubt there is anything new here for those who have already plowed this ground.

⁹ Robert W. Yarbrough, "Jesus on Hell" in *Hell Under Fire*, 85; see also, D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 535. Alan W. Gomes states in "Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell, Part One," *Christian Research Journal* (Spring 1991), 17:

The conditionalists do not understand the orthodox teaching on the immortality of the soul. Even a cursory study of historic orthodoxy on this subject will bear this out. The orthodox point out that the immortality of the soul is not an absolute but a contingent immortality. The soul, as a created substance, depends on God's continuing providential support — just as all other created entities do. In the words of the seventeenth-century Reformed theologian Johannes Wollebius, "The human soul is immortal not ... because it cannot be reduced to nothing by God; but by God's ordinance and so far as it is indestructible by second causes." In other words, while the "immortal" soul is impervious to destruction from both external secondary causes (e.g., people), and internal secondary causes (e.g., diseases, such as can afflict the body), the soul could be annihilated by its primary cause, God.

The orthodox doctrine of the soul's immortality can therefore hardly be, as Pinnock states, the teaching that "drives the traditional doctrine of hell." In order for Pinnock to be correct, the orthodox would have to teach the soul's absolute indestructibility. Yet, as we have seen, the orthodox explicitly deny such a notion.

¹⁰ Yarbrough, 87.

I do not believe those who disagree with me on this question are for that reason lost. I agree with Roger Olson that annihilationism is not heretical and does not demand withdrawal of Christian fellowship. As he states, "It is simply a minority view of the nature of hell, not a denial of hell."¹¹ That does not mean, of course, that misrepresenting God about the matter is trivial or insignificant. As people committed to serving God faithfully and honoring him in all things, we must strive to speak accurately on his behalf. It means only that, in my judgment, sincere misunderstandings on this point will be forgiven in God's grace.

First up is the Lord's teaching in Mat. 25:41, 46. In Mat. 25:31-46 Jesus speaks of the final judgment to take place at his return to consummate the kingdom he inaugurated at his first coming. All the nations, meaning all the people of all the nations, will be separated into two groups: the sheep and the goats. As David Turner notes, "This passage . . . evidently assumes, rather than mentions, a resurrection (cf. Acts 17:31; Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 15:51-57; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15)."¹²

The one group, the sheep on the right, is told in v. 34 that they are blessed by the Father in that they now take their inheritance, the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. The other group, the goats on the left, is told in v. 41 that they are cursed and is dispatched into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Jesus explains in v. 46, "And these [the unsaved] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

All the standard English versions render the adjective αἰώνιος in v. 46 (and v. 41) as "eternal" (ASV, ERV, RSV, JB, NEB, NAS, NIV'84, NJB, REB, NRSV, NASU, NET, TNIV, CSB, NAB, NIV'11, ESV) or "everlasting" (KJV, NKJV), indicating not simply a long time but an endless or unlimited length of time. This is in keeping with the meaning given in the standard Greek lexicons,¹³ with Matthew's consistent usage of the word,¹⁴ and with the immediate context where the word appears twice in parallel and the second occurrence (eternal life) unquestionably

¹¹ Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 320.

¹² David Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 608-609.

¹³ For example, Walter Bauer and others, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 33 (hereafter BDAG) includes the definition "pert. to a period of unending duration, *without end*." Scot McKnight states in "Eternal Consequences or Eternal Consciousness?" in William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, eds., *Through No Fault of Their Own* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 152, "The standard Greek lexicons divide the meaning of *aiōnios* into two major categories: (1) lasting for a long but definite period (aeonial), an age or lifetime, and (2) perpetual, immeasurable time (eternal), forever, or a temporally unlimited period." He then cites many lexicons and theological dictionaries in his footnote 17. "The fact is that αἰώνιος is the most common and natural way to express the notion that something continues forever." Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 2:718.

¹⁴ McKnight states (p. 153), "Matthew never uses the adjective *aiōnios* ('eternal') in the sense of 'belonging to this temporally limited age.' Such a sense, for Matthew, is reserved for the noun *aiōn*, as the evidence discussed above shows. This suggests, then, that in Matthew the adjective *aiōnios* refers to something eternal and temporally unlimited." Carson likewise states (p. 528), "Matthew can use αἰών both in a temporal sense and in an eternal sense, even within one verse (12:32). The adjective αἰώνιος, however, Matthew uses only for what is eternal."

refers to time of unlimited duration.¹⁵ So according to Jesus, the unsaved are sent into an unending fire (v. 41) which is entrance into unending punishment (v. 46).

For these reasons, annihilationists generally accept that the punishment spoken of by Jesus is without end, but they argue annihilation qualifies as eternal punishment because it is irreversible and thus the unsaved person's nonexistence continues forever. In other words, though it is a one-time act, they claim annihilation is "eternal punishment" because it is eternal in its consequence or outcome.

But this does not do justice to the text because what is said to be eternal for the unsaved is their *punishment* (κόλασις). The issue is not whether a punctiliar action can have eternal consequences (e.g., Heb. 9:12) but whether in this context the consequence of annihilation can fairly be labeled punishment. Annihilating the damned, taking them from hopeless torment to nonexistence, is not punishment; it is cessation of their punishment, relief from their suffering. It is an extinction for which all in hell would long,¹⁶ so labeling it punishment perverts the concept. Because annihilating the damned in their torment does not qualify as punishment of them, the state of nonexistence resulting from their annihilation cannot qualify as eternal punishment. The consequence or outcome of that act, the thing said to be eternal, is release not punishment.

From another angle, it is verbal sleight of hand to agree that God punishes human beings eternally but to claim he can do so morally only if they cease to exist after an initial period of conscious suffering. Punishment implies existence, an ability to experience negative things, so to label eternal nonexistence as eternal punishment is to strain the meaning of punishment beyond the breaking point. Indeed, the reason annihilation is alleged to get God off the "moral hook" for inflicting eternal punishment for the sins of finite beings is that extinction prevents the punishment from being eternal. As Alan Gomes explains:

Someone cannot be punished eternally unless that someone is there to receive the punishment. One can exist and not be punished, but one cannot be punished and not exist. Nonentities cannot receive punishment. Now, it is possible that one could receive punishment for a time and then be annihilated. In that case, we would have a finite time of punishment followed by a finite process of annihilating (i.e., the actual time it takes to accomplish the annihilation), followed by an unending result of the annihilating process. But the Bible uses the adjective

¹⁵ McKnight rightly observes (p. 154), "Because *aiōnios* ("eternal") modifies both punishment and life in Matthew 25:46, it stands to reason that the same quality and temporal connotations are in view. That is to say, however long the life extends is how long the punishment lasts; the durations are identical. It is grammatically unsuitable to drive a wedge between the two uses of the term *eternal* in Matthew 25:46, suggesting that the one refers to endlessness (eternal) and the other to temporal limitation (aeonial)."

¹⁶ As sufferers sometimes wish they had never been born (e.g., Jer. 20:14-18; Job 3:1-10) or long to be freed from their misery by death (e.g., Jer. 8:3; Job. 3:20-22; Rev. 6:16, 9:6). The fact criminals generally would prefer imprisonment for life over execution does not mean the damned would prefer the torment of hell over annihilation. (Peterson rightly declares the idea "absurd" in Fudge and Peterson, 98.) It means only that life imprisonment is not comparable to the misery of hell. The only other occurrence of κόλασις in the New Testament is 1 Jn. 4:18, which declares that "fear has to do with punishment." That those being tormented in hell would long for rather than fear their annihilation confirms that annihilation of the damned is not punishment as meant by κόλασις.

"eternal" to describe the punishment itself, not merely the result of the punishment.

But mere existence is not enough either. One cannot "punish" a rock or a tree, even though these might exist. Annihilationists (e.g., Pinnock) sometimes complain that traditionalists "smuggle" the word "conscious" into their descriptions of punishment. But really, the traditionalist need not "smuggle" anything into the description. Once we have said the word "punishment" we have also said, at least by implication, the word "conscious." Punishment, *per se*, is conscious or it is not punishment. A punishment that is not felt is not a punishment. It is an odd use of language to speak of an insensate (i.e., unfeeling), inanimate object receiving punishment. To say, "I punished my car for not starting by slowly plucking out its sparkplug wires, one by one," would evoke laughter, not serious consideration.¹⁷

That Mat. 25:46 refers to eternal conscious suffering is supported by the fact the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (v. 41), the fire into which the unsaved are cast, is described in Rev. 20:10 as a lake of fire in which the devil, the beast, and the false prophet are *tormented* (βασανίζω) day and night forever and ever. This clearly is the eternal fire of Mat. 25:41, as Rev. 20:15 states that the unsaved, those whose names were not found in the book of life, also are thrown into the lake of fire. The "eternal punishment" of Mat. 25:46 thus correlates with the eternal conscious suffering ascribed to the devil, the beast, and the false prophet in Rev. 20:10. Robert Peterson states:

Matthew 25:41 records Jesus' teaching that unsaved human beings will suffer the same fate as the devil and his angels. This text prompts the question: Does the Bible indicate what that fate will be? It does, in Revelation 20:10. There we read that "the devil" will be "thrown into the lake of burning sulfur" where he "will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." To summarize: Jesus says that the unsaved will go into "the eternal fire prepared for the devil." John says that the devil will be cast into the lake of fire and will suffer eternal conscious torment there. The conclusion is irresistible. Unsaved human beings will also suffer eternal conscious torment. This is the meaning of Jesus' words in Matthew 25:41 interpreted in the context of the New Testament.¹⁸

That is why the fire prepared for the devil and his angels, the fire into which the unsaved are cast, is described as "eternal" (v. 41; cf. Mat. 18:8; Jude 7). It is a metaphorical image depicting the fact there is no respite from the sorrow of hell; the fire that causes pain never goes

¹⁷ Alan W. Gomes, "Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell, Part Two," *Christian Research Journal* (Summer 1991), 11. See also, Robert L. Thomas, "Jesus' View of Eternal Punishment," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 9 (Fall 1998), 162 and William G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, [reprint] 1980), 92. The statement in Wis. 14:10 that the idols will be "punished" with their makers is a figurative expression. The objects are spoken of as though they were persons, beings capable of punishment, to highlight God's hatred of them as stumbling blocks to people. It certainly does not mean that existence and awareness are not requirements for punishment in a literal sense.

¹⁸ Fudge and Peterson, 107.

out.¹⁹ W. D. Davies and Dale Allison remark, "Matthew, by coupling αἰώνιος with 'fire' (18.8; 25.41; cf. 25.46), seems to show agreement with those who believed the damned would suffer for ever (cf. Dan 12.2; 1QS 2.8; *t. Sanh.* 13.3; *t. Ber.* 6.7; Isa 66.24 is ambiguous). The wicked will be ever dying, never dead."²⁰

The fact natural fires of the present age consume what they burn does not mean the imagery of hell as an eternal fire is intended to teach the annihilation of its inhabitants. In the first place, even natural fires of the present age do not annihilate what they consume, extinguish its existence. Rather, they ruin it by transforming it into ashes, something of no use or value. But more importantly, the physics of earthly fires cannot be applied to the metaphorical fire of the age to come. Indeed, in Mk. 9:47-48 Jesus describes hell as a place where their worm, probably maggots, does not die and the fire is not quenched. A natural fire of the present age would consume maggots as readily as bodies, and yet in the metaphorical image of the age to come the maggots survive forever. And by the physics of earthly fires, if the damned were annihilated the fire would not be eternal (nor the maggots) because it would have no fuel to sustain it.

Carson highlights the kind of trouble that ensues when one forces onto the imagery of hell concepts of present-age physics:

And if one draws the inferences Stott draws about being totally consumed, must we not also infer that fire consumes everyone at more or less the same rate, and that death (i.e., cessation of existence) would be almost instantaneous? Where then is there place for degrees of punishment before annihilation, as usually accepted by those who espouse annihilationism or conditional immortality? It appears that interpretation of these passages is going off track precisely because illegitimate and arbitrary inferences are being drawn from the language, against the more natural readings, in order to support a theory that is being imposed on the text.²¹

As the maggots in the imagery survive eternally in the fire of hell, so too the resurrected damned (Jn. 5:28-29; Acts 24:15) on which they feed. Note that the maggots are bound up eternally with the damned; it is *their* worm. All the imagery combines to say that hell is the ultimate nightmare, "conjuring torture from within (the worm that devours one's insides) with torment from without (fire)," and lasts forever.²² Against the claim this imagery points to annihilation, Robert Gundry states, "But these expressions seem more likely to mean that the

¹⁹ Most scholars accept that the imagery is metaphorical, as indicated by the fact conflicting language is used in the New Testament to describe hell. William Crockett states in "The Metaphorical View" in William Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 59, "How could hell be literal fire when it is also described as darkness (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Peter 2:17; Jude 14)? Those who raise the question have a good point. Fire and darkness are mutually exclusive terms, but as we have seen, they are often juxtaposed in Jewish writings (Qumran, 1QS 2:8; 4:13; 1 Enoch 103:7; 2 Enoch 10:2; Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 6:1, 49d)."

²⁰ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 1:515.

²¹ Carson, 525.

²² Quote is from Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 698.

worm and the fire feed forever on the body of the damned. The conjunction of fire and worms with weeping in pain forever in Jdt 16:17 supports this opinion (cf. Sir 7:17)."²³

Given that eternal conscious punishment of the damned was part of the theological landscape of first-century Judaism,²⁴ certainly Jesus' words in Mat. 25:41, 46 would have been understood in that vein. If he meant something else, he was begging to be misunderstood, which is hard to square with his being a master teacher and communicator.

Another key text is Rev. 14:9-11. Here we are told that those who express greater devotion to the beast than to Christ will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb and that the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest, day or night. As Carson notes, "The Greek expression rendered 'for ever and ever' (εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας or εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων) is consistently the most emphatic way of saying 'forever' in the New Testament."²⁵ That these poor souls endure suffering for eternity seems hard to miss, but annihilationists insist that is a misunderstanding.

They argue that the smoke that rises forever (v. 11) is a symbolic memorial of God's outpouring of wrath, his tormenting of the damned (v. 10) that culminates in and includes their everlasting annihilation. But neither the verb "torment" (βασανίζω) nor its noun cognate (βασανισμός) is used in Revelation or in any other biblical literature in the sense of annihilation of one's existence. Without exception, in Revelation the words refer to conscious suffering on the part of people.²⁶ So there is no basis for claiming they involve annihilation in 14:10-11.

In addition, the text describes the smoke as the smoke *of their torment*,²⁷ which most naturally means it is the product of their being tormented with fire and sulfur.²⁸ It rises forever and ever because they are tormented in this smoke-producing fashion forever and ever. That is why it says they have no rest, day or night. That declaration follows the statement that the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever, so it is after the alleged reference to their annihilation, and yet it says they "have" (present tense) no rest not that they "had" no rest.

It makes no sense to say that the annihilated have no rest, day or night. On the contrary, their annihilation would constitute rest from their suffering. The attempt to avoid this problem by claiming 14:11 means only that they have no rest *as long as their temporary suffering continues* introduces a limitation that has no textual or contextual warrant and results in an inane statement of the obvious.

²³ Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 526,

²⁴ E.g., 1 Enoch 22:11; Judith 16:17; Jubilees 36:9-10; 1QS 2:8; 2 Enoch 10:1-3, 40:12-13, 41:1; 4 Macc. 9:9, 10:11, 10:15, 12:12.

²⁵ Carson, 525. The phrase in Rev. 14:11 is anarthrous (εἰς αἰῶνας αἰώνων), but it is translated "forever and ever" in all standard English versions: KJV, ASV, ERV, RSV, JB, NEB, NAS, NIV'84, NJB, REB, NKJV, NRSV, NASU, NET, TNIV, CSB, NAB, NIV'11, ESV. BDAG (p. 32) notes that αἰών is used formulaically in 14:11 for "eternal."

²⁶ See Gregory K. Beale, "The Revelation on Hell" in *Hell Under Fire*, 116. The verb βασανίζω is used in Rev. 9:5, 11:10, 12:2, 14:10, and 20:10; the noun βασανισμός is used in Rev. 9:5, 14:11, 18:7, 18:10, and 18:15. The former is defined as "to subject to severe distress, *torment, harass*," and the latter is defined as "the severe pain experienced through torture, *torment*" (BDAG, 168).

²⁷ The smoke that goes up forever and ever from the destruction of Babylon in Rev. 19:3 (or Edom in Isa. 34:10) is not smoke *of their torment*.

²⁸ Smoke is associated with fire and sulfur in Rev. 9:17-18.

That 14:10-11 are referring to eternal torment is confirmed by the parallel of Rev. 20:10. There the devil, the beast, and the false prophet are tormented (βασανίζω) in the lake of fire and sulfur, just like the damned of 14:10, and it is specified that they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Certainly the phrase "the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever" in 14:11 expresses that same fact.

The next key text is Rev. 20:10-15, which has already been mentioned. It is specified in v. 10 that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will be *tormented* (not annihilated) forever and ever in the lake of fire and sulfur. Verse 15 states that the unsaved also are cast into the lake of fire (the fiery lake of burning sulfur – 21:8) indicating they share the same fate as the devil, the beast, and the false prophet. That the fate they share includes the conscious suffering specified in v. 10 is reinforced by the fact the followers of the beast are said in 14:9-11 to be tormented forever and ever, as explained above. So the devil, the beast, the false prophet, and the followers of the beast are punished with fire and sulfur and clearly experience eternal torment. And yet one is asked to believe that the unsaved of 20:15 who are cast into the fire do not experience eternal torment but rather are annihilated. That strikes me as special pleading, and in any event, it does not empty hell of all of its inhabitants.

It does not help the annihilationist position to suggest that the beast and the false prophet "are not individual people but symbols of the world in its varied hostility to God."²⁹ That claim is dubious,³⁰ but even if it were not, it does not address the eternal suffering of the devil, the followers of the beast (14:9-11), and all the unsaved (20:15). Regarding the eternal torment of the devil, Carson writes:

Even if Stott were right in his reading of the beast and the false prophet, the devil is cast into the lake of fire with them, and the torment day and night for ever and ever is *his* experience. Stott does not side with those who depersonalize the devil. Thus Satan (cf. Rev. 12:9) constitutes at least one sentient being who is clearly pictured as suffering conscious torment forever. We may not feel as much sympathy for him as for fellow human beings, and we may cheerfully insist that he is more evil than any human being, but even so, it is hard to see how the arguments deployed against the notion of eternal conscious suffering of sinful human beings would be any less cogent against the devil. Conversely, if this text demonstrates that there cannot be a sound argument in principle against the eternal suffering of a sentient being, it is difficult to see why humans should be a special case.³¹

²⁹ Quote from John Stott as given in Carson, 527.

³⁰ With the majority of ancient and modern interpreters, I believe the beast represents a personal Antichrist, the one referred to by Paul as the man of lawlessness. See Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 13:709. The false prophet brings humanity to worship the beast. Carson states (p. 527), "In my view the beast and the false prophet are best thought of as *recurring* individuals, culminating in supreme manifestations of their type, rather than mere symbols that cannot experience pain." And as Beale points out (p. 127), "Institutions are composed of people, so that if the institution is said to suffer something, so will the people composing the institution."

³¹ Carson, 527.

The claim that Death and Hades are annihilated when they are cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14) and that the lake of fire therefore must also annihilate the unsaved is unwarranted. As *personified enemies* of mankind (e.g., Rev. 6:8), Death and Hades are pictured as suffering eternal torment along with the devil, the beast, the false prophet, and all the unsaved. That is the implication of their being cast into the lake of fire that was just described (20:10) as a place of eternal suffering. As such, their power over mankind is forever ended. They need not be annihilated for that to be so, any more than Satan must be annihilated to be rendered powerless and irrelevant for humanity. Those suffering eternal torment in the lake of fire cannot escape their absolute exclusion and confinement.³²

Moreover, even if the message of the symbolism was that Death and Hades were annihilated rather than permanently confined in suffering, it would not require that the same be true for the literal beings, as opposed to personifications of abstractions, that were cast into that metaphorical fire. Indeed, that conclusion is contradicted by the teaching of Revelation and other New Testament texts, as explained throughout this paper.

The fact the punishment of the lake of fire is labeled the "second death" (Rev. 20:14, 21:8) does not mean it refers to annihilation. There is the first death, which is dying physically, a separation of body and spirit/soul.³³ For the saints, that first death is followed by a new kind of spiritual life with God, so it is a figurative resurrection, a move from death to that life.³⁴ This figurative resurrection that is limited to the saints is called the *first* resurrection because it will be followed by a second, literal resurrection, a bodily resurrection, in which all the dead will join. For the lost, this second resurrection is followed by being cast into the lake of fire, an eternal punishment. This is the second death, in which the bodily resurrected saints will have no part because they are not condemned (Rev. 2:11, 20:6). Their eternal destiny is the glorious life with God in the new heaven and new earth. In summary:

First death – death in a literal sense (separation of body and spirit) – saved and lost

First resurrection – resurrection in a figurative sense (uniting of spirit with God) – saved alone

Second resurrection – resurrection in a literal sense (uniting of body and spirit) – saved and lost

Second death – death in a figurative sense (separation of whole person from God) – lost alone

The charge that Death cannot participate in the second death as so defined because it makes no sense to say "separation will be separated" misses the fact Death (and Hades) is being

³² See Beale (p. 130) for other possible non-annihilation interpretations, including that Death and Hades are a metonymy for the unbelievers they contained. In that interpretation, their being cast into the lake of fire represents passage of the unbelievers from the temporary bonds of Death and Hades to the permanent bonds of the lake of fire. This seems to be Aune's view. David Edward Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1103.

³³ We read in Scripture that Rachel's soul departed at her death (Gen. 35:18), that the spirit of Jairus's daughter returned to her body when she was restored to life (Lk. 8:55), and that Jesus gave up his spirit at the time of his death (Mat. 27:50). See also, Gen. 2:7 with 3:19, Eccles. 12:7, Acts 7:59, and 2 Pet. 1:13-14. The Lord's brother James says plainly that "the body without the spirit is dead"; that separation of body and spirit is the definition of death. Consciousness of the spirit after death is indicated by Isa. 14:9-10; Ezek. 32:21, 31; Lk. 16:19-31, 23:43; and Rev. 6:9-11.

³⁴ Even N. T. Wright, who thinks such a figurative use of resurrection is unlikely, acknowledges that it is "possible with the kind of imagery we find in Revelation." N. T. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 474.

personified. This enemy is portrayed as a being that comes under God's eternal judgment and is thus excluded from the new heaven and new earth, the sphere of God's eternal blessing. Death will have no part in the experience of the redeemed, the fact of which is symbolically portrayed in v. 14 by its sharing in the judgment of the devil, the beast, the false prophet, and all the unsaved.³⁵

The fourth key text is 2 Thess. 1:9. The context is clear that Paul is speaking of the final judgment to be meted out at Christ's return, when he "on that day" (v. 10) will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire (v. 7). He will inflict vengeance on "all those who have not responded to God's grace in the gospel of his Son" (v. 8).³⁶ The nature of the judgment is specified in v. 9: These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

Annihilationists assert that the word "destruction" (ὄλεθρος) in the specified penalty means annihilation, but that is a gratuitous assumption. It is clear from other contexts that ὄλεθρος need not imply annihilation. For example, it refers to land that has lost its fruitfulness in Ezek. 6:14 and 14:16, to cities and vineyards that will be destroyed militarily in Jer. 48:8, 32 (LXX 31:8, 32), to separation of the soul from God and bringing it near to idols in *Testament of Reuben* 4:6, to the injury done to another by one's mouth or tongue in Philo's *De mutatione nominum* 1:240, to the loss of money through extravagance in Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* 18:147, and to the destruction of Jerusalem in Josephus's *Wars of the Jews* 4:104 and 7:112.

The only other time in biblically related Jewish literature that ὄλεθρος is modified by αἰώνιος is in 4 Maccabees 10:15.³⁷ There the phrase refers to the "everlasting torture by fire" (9:9) and the "unceasing tortures" (10:11) to be inflicted on the tyrant who persecuted God's people. It is declared that there is in store "a fire more fierce and everlasting and tortures, which for all time will not release [him]" (12:12). Beale states:

In short, 4 Maccabees is the most relevant (and contemporary) parallel for 2 Thessalonians because (1) the afterlife is the focus; (2) the same phrase is used; and (3) those being punished have also persecuted saints. The parallel points toward Paul's use of the same phrase to indicate an everlasting punishment, not a literal annihilation of a person's existence that lasts forever.³⁸

³⁵ Of course, "death" is an abstract noun not an actual entity that literally can go out of existence. One could symbolize the transition from a state in which people die to one in which they do not with personified death being extinguished, being rendered powerless under judgment, or both. Here the context favors the second. The statement in Rev. 21:4 that death shall be no more is ambiguous. It clearly means that death will no more be part of the experience of the redeemed, but how that absence relates to the imagery of 20:14 is not indicated.

³⁶ The quote is Douglas Moo's apt summary of the clause τοῖς μὴ εἰδόσιν θεὸν καὶ τοῖς μὴ ὑπακούουσιν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ, citing Abraham Malherbe's commentary. Douglas J. Moo, "Paul on Hell" in *Hell Under Fire*, 104.

³⁷ G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 188.

³⁸ Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 188. Furnish states, "As in 4 Macc 10:15, the adjective (*aiōnios*) suggests that this 'destruction' (*olethros*; cf. 1 Thess 5:3) is to be understood as endless punishment and devastation, not summary annihilation." Victor Paul Furnish, *1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 148-149.

Annihilationists use this same tactic with other destruction-related words. That is, they force onto them the restricted and contested meaning of annihilation and then assume that meaning for the verses employing those words. This is argument by definitional fiat, a question-begging technique. Douglas Moo is worth quoting at length on this point:

Two Greek words or word groups are involved: *olethros* (used here [2 Thess. 1:9] and in 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Thess. 5:3; 1 Tim. 6:9 – these are the only occurrences in the New Testament), and *apollymi/apōleia* (see Rom. 2:12; 9:22; 14:15, 20; 1 Cor. 1:18; 15:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3; Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thess. 2:3, 10; 1 Tim. 6:9; cf. also *phthora* in Gal. 6:8). Definitive conclusions about the meaning of these words in each case are not easy to attain. But this much can be said: The words need not mean "destruction" in the sense of "extinction." In fact, leaving aside for the moment judgment texts, none of the key terms usually has this meaning in the Old and New Testaments. Rather, they usually refer to the situation of a person or object that has lost the essence of its nature or function.

This is the case even when the words are applied to physical death (as in, e.g., 1 Cor. 10:9, 10 [*apollymi*]; Judith 11:15 [*olethros*]). What is "destroyed" is "life as we know it in this world"; whether this implies extinction is not at all clear and can be decided only after the broader teaching about life after death has been decided. But note that most evangelical annihilationists posit that unbelievers exist for some time after death – so clearly they cannot argue that the language of destruction when applied to physical death must mean extinction. The key words for "destroy" and "destruction" can also refer to land that has lost its fruitfulness (*olethros* in Ezek. 6:14; 14:16); to ointment that is poured out wastefully and to no apparent purpose (*apōleia* in Matt. 26:8; Mark 14:4); to wineskins that can no longer function because they have holes in them (*apollymi* in Matt. 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37); to a coin that is useless because it is "lost" (*apollymi* in Luke 15:9); or to the entire world that "perishes," as an inhabited world, in the Flood (2 Pet. 3:6). In none of these cases do the objects cease to exist; they cease to be useful or to exist in their original, intended state. In other words, these key terms appear to be used in a general [sense] much like we use the word "destroy" in the sentence, "The tornado destroyed my house." The component parts of the house did not cease to exist, but the entity "house," a structure that provides shelter for human beings, ceased to exist.³⁹

That Paul does not intend "eternal destruction" in 2 Thess. 1:9 to refer to annihilation is evident from the fact he "elaborates the meaning of 'eternal destruction' with the idea of being separated from the presence of God."⁴⁰ As Michael Holmes explains:

³⁹ Moo, 104-105. Annihilationist Harold Guillebaud concedes that if Scripture taught the eternal conscious punishment of the damned, "it would be quite possible to understand 'death', 'destruction' and the like, as meaning a wretched and ruined existence." Quoted in Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 166.

⁴⁰ Moo, 108. Most commentators understand the preposition (*ἀπὸ*) to denote separation (e.g., Best, Bruce, Wanamaker, Morris, Holmes, Malherbe, Beale, Witherington, Furnish, Fee, Shogren, and Weima), which is in keeping with its most common usage in the New Testament. This sense is confirmed by Paul's almost certain dependence here on Isa. 2:10-21. Many English versions make this connotation express: RSV, JB, NEB, NAS, NIV'84, NJB, REB, NRSV, NASU, NET, TNIV, NAB, NIV'11, ESV.

The second part of the sentence defines what he means by the first part: "everlasting destruction," that is, separation from the Lord's presence (for this phrase cf. Isa. 2:10, 19, 21, a judgment passage) and glory. In other words, Paul's definition of "destruction" (cf. 1 Thess. 5:3) here is precisely the opposite of his definition elsewhere of salvation as being with the Lord always (1 Thess. 4:17) and sharing in God's glory (Rom. 8:17-18), 30; 2 Cor. 4:7; Phil. 3:21).⁴¹

The fact "eternal destruction" is described as eternal deprivation of the Lord's favoring presence implies the eternal existence of those who are so deprived. Moo rightly notes, "It makes little sense to describe people who have been annihilated as being separate from the presence of God."⁴² McKnight comments:

Eternal separation from God is the essence of God's punishment on the wicked, as eternal fellowship with God is the essence of God's final deliverance of the faithful. But separation from God's presence must be defined as nonfellowship, not annihilation. In other words, it could be argued that since God is omnipresent, then banishment from his presence means extinction. It is more likely, however, that Paul has in mind an irreversible verdict of nonfellowship with God. A person exists but remains excluded from God's good presence.⁴³

Other texts could be cited in support of the historical view,⁴⁴ but in my judgment, these four are sufficient to render the annihilationist view untenable. It cannot be salvaged by the claim the reference to God in Heb. 12:29 as a "consuming fire" proves that the fires of hell annihilate those who are subject to them. As I noted earlier, even natural fires of the present age do not annihilate what they consume but rather ruin it by transforming it into ashes, something of no use or value. In Lev. 6:10 (LXX) the priest is instructed to remove what remains of the sacrifice *after* it has been "consumed" (καταναλίσκω, same word in Heb. 12:29) by the fire. In the letter of King Artaxerxes reported in Esther 8:12 (LXX), he declares (NETS), "Every city and country, without exception, that does not do according to this by spear and fire shall be consumed [καταναλίσκω] with wrath." He then indicates the effect of that consumption, making clear it is not annihilation: "It shall be made not only impassable for people, but also most hostile to wild animals and birds for all time." Similarly, in Zech. 9:4 (LXX) the city of Tyre is promised to be "consumed" by fire, which means it will be ruined, rendered useless or uninhabitable. Sirach

⁴¹ Michael W. Holmes, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 214. Weima states, "The second part of the fuller explanation of the just judgment of God for those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel shows more precisely what this 'eternal destruction' entails: a separation 'from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.'" Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 475. Fee states, "To be cut off from this possibility [of being with Christ], is what Paul sees as 'everlasting destruction.'" Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 260. Beale observes that in the view expressed in 2 Thess. 1:9 the punishment of the lost "fits the crime." That is, "those who refuse to know God (1:8) and want to be separate from him in this life will be punished by being separated from God in the next life." Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 189.

⁴² Moo, 108.

⁴³ McKnight, 155-156.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Denny Burk's treatment of Isa. 66:22-24, Dan. 12:2-3, Mat. 18:6-9, Mk. 9:42-48, Jude 7, and Jude 13 in Preston Sprinkle, ed., *Four Views on Hell*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 17-43 and Robert Peterson's treatment of the same in Fudge and Peterson, 129-169.

27:29 (LXX) says that sorrow will "consume" those who rejoice at the fall of pious persons, meaning it will ruin the quality of their lives (see also Dan. 11:26 LXX).

Nor can the annihilationist view be salvaged by appeal to Mat. 10:28, where Jesus instructs the disciples not to fear those who kill (ἀποκτείνω) the body but cannot kill (ἀποκτείνω) the soul but rather to fear him who can destroy (ἀπόλλυμι) both soul and body in hell. The point is that succumbing to the pressure of persecutors who threaten death is a foolish choice because their power is limited to killing the body, separating the soul from it, whereas God is able to destroy both soul and body in hell, meaning he is able to punish in hell forever the resurrected person in whom soul and body have been reunited.⁴⁵ It makes no sense to choose to avoid an earthly death at the price of enduring an eternal hell. As explained above, "destroy" (ἀπόλλυμι) can have a general sense of bring to ruin, which certainly fits the misery of hell, the forfeiture of all that is worthwhile in human existence. Indeed, Yarbrough points out that "unclean spirits who ask whether Jesus will 'destroy' them (*apollymi*; Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34) understand that destruction in terms of unending torment (*basanizō*; Matt. 8:29; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28)."⁴⁶

Annihilationists often insist that the Old Testament establishes their doctrine of annihilation, and then they make that conviction a procrustean bed into which they force the New Testament texts. But the Old Testament texts they claim demonstrate the truth of their view are analyzed through their partisan definitions and rarely deal with the final fate of the wicked. Rather, they refer to God ending a wicked person's earthly life. That person perishes, vanishes, is cut off, etc. from the earth, but he is not annihilated because he awaits the resurrection and final judgment.⁴⁷ The texts that do address the final end of the unsaved, Isa. 66:24 and Dan. 12:2, are misinterpreted as supporting annihilation.⁴⁸ Those texts provide a general image of the eternal state, which is given greater clarity and detail in the New Testament depictions.⁴⁹

The charge of many annihilationists that eternal conscious punishment of the unsaved is unjust and thus immoral underestimates the glory of God and thus the horror of rebellion against him. Morgan states

Sin is inherently against God, who is infinite in all his perfections. Thus, sin is an infinite evil and merits endless punishment. So it is better to view hell not as a horror in God's universe but as a demonstration of final and decisive justice in a universe once marred by sin.

⁴⁵ Luke 12:5 confirms that the destruction mentioned equates to being thrown into hell.

⁴⁶ Yarbrough, 81.

⁴⁷ See Peterson's discussion in Fudge and Peterson, 90-92, where he uses Psalm 34 and 37 as examples. Block states, "the general tenor of the Old Testament seems to reflect a conviction that people continue to live even after they die. Logic would suggest that any belief in the resurrection would be based on this supposition." Daniel L. Block, "The Old Testament on Hell," *Hell Under Fire*, 58.

⁴⁸ See Burk, 21-26, Fudge and Peterson, 130-137, and Block, 59-64. Block states (p. 65), "Although it is obvious that the physical body decomposed after death, the deceased continued to exist as 'living corpses' in Sheol. Although rhetorically persons could refer to death as the end of existence, any tendency toward contemporary theories of annihilationism, either for the wicked or the righteous, would have been rejected."

⁴⁹ Daniel 12:2 unambiguously speaks of the resurrection of both the righteous and wicked and distinguishes their destinies. The former receives "everlasting life," whereas the latter receives "disgrace and everlasting contempt."

. . . God is not only different from human beings in degree; he is also different in being. If in a robbery, the gunman shoots and kills the owner of the house, he should receive a greater punishment than if he killed the family cat (as much as this writer loves cats!). Thus because sin is against God, and God is infinitely worthy of obedience, sin merits an infinite punishment.

This God-centered view of divine justice and human sin stands in stark contrast to that of the contemporary conditionalists. They seem to measure the appropriate punishment for sin as it relates to humanity rather than evaluating it in light of God's holiness.⁵⁰

As for the claim that an eternal hell will mar the joy of the new heaven and new earth, J. I. Packer explains:

[I]t is said that the joy of heaven will be marred by knowledge that some continue under merited retribution. But this cannot be said of God, as if the expressing of his holiness in retribution hurts him more than it hurts the offenders; and since in heaven Christians will be like God in character, loving what he loves and taking joy in all his self-manifestation, including his justice, there is no reason to think that their joy will be impaired in this way.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Morgan, 210.

⁵¹ Quoted in Carson, 535.