

TABLE OF CONTENTS

“HENCEFORTH...” MEETS AFTERLIFE 1
by Rev. Jefferson Vann

SLEEP OF DEATH / THE DEATH STATE 3
by Rev. Warren Prestige

ASLEEP IN CHRIST / THE DEATH STATE 8
by Rev. Warren Prestige

HISTORY OF HELL / HELL BEFORE AUGUSTINE 19
Dr. Glenn Andrew Peoples

**THE MORTAL GOD: WOULD JESUS HAVE DIED
ANYWAY? WAS JESUS MORTAL? 35**
Dr. Glenn Andrew Peoples

A CHRISTIAN’S APOLOGY TO ATHEISTS 42
by Mr. Doug Smith

TRACING THE ROAD TO GEHENNA 44
by Mr. Armand Newrick

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOPE 53
by Rev. David Burge

AFTERLIFE: AFTER OR BEYOND? 54
by Rev. Jefferson Vann

PROLEGOMENA: IS IT GREEK TO YOU? 61
Looking Ahead to Volume XXXIX, number 2, Fall 2013

“HENCEFORTH ... ” MEETS AFTERLIFE

This issue of “Henceforth...” journal features articles previously published in Afterlife website and “From Death to Life” magazine. These are publications of the Conditional Immortality Association of New Zealand (CIANZ). They focus primarily on the doctrinal topics of conditionalism: the exclusive immortality of God, conditional immortality, the unconscious intermediate state, the resurrection at Christ’s return, and the ultimate destruction (annihilation) of the lost. I first came across these publications while teaching at Oro Bible College in the Philippines. Like “Henceforth ... ” I found them helpful as resources for training my Advent Christian students in ministry.

The CIANZ includes leaders of our Advent Christian Conference of New Zealand, and have been long term supporters of Advent Christian missions. My friendship with David Burge, past editor of Afterlife, solidified during his visits with short-term mission trips and our reunions at ACGC conventions. In 2009, when David discovered that he had Leukemia, he asked my wife, Penny, and me to join the pastoral staff of his church in Auckland. It was our honor to help David and the Takanini church through that transition. We were sent as missionaries with ACGC in February, 2010. David also asked me to take over his role as editor for CIANZ, and I was thrilled to do so. I have continued serving in that capacity since returning to the United States in 2011.

Over the years, these CIANZ publications have given us many significant resources that contribute to the conditionalist cause. We, at “Henceforth ... ” want to introduce these publications and promote them, particularly among our North American readers. “Henceforth ... ” began in the 1970s as a “journal for Advent Christian thought.” Our hope is that this issue will show our readers what Advent Christians are thinking on other parts of the planet.

Today's technologies allow us to share our thoughts more quickly and comprehensively. In the interest of doing that, we are introducing the Henceforth blog. The blog will feature each issue's introduction, a list of current articles and snippets from the articles (spread out over time), and an outline of the theme for the next issue. It is a new means of advertising, which, we hope will lead to more contributors and more readers of the full printed edition. By syndicating the blog on various social networks, we can ensure maximum exposure of the journal's content.

"Henceforth ..." is a tool that can help Advent Christians as they do theology, ministry and leader development. Our hope is that more and more preachers, teachers and churches will discover the value of this tool.

"As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend" (Proverbs 27:17 NLT).

Jefferson Vann
apad@acgc.us

SLEEP OF DEATH / THE DEATH STATE

According to the Bible, the dead, whether Christian or non-Christian, good or evil, saved or lost, are neither suffering in “hell,” nor laboring in “purgatory,” nor rejoicing in “heaven.” Rather, they have entirely ceased to function. Without consciousness, they await the resurrection of the dead at the return of the Christ, that is, Jesus, in the glory of God. To use a common biblical metaphor, they “sleep the sleep of death” (Psalm 13:3).

The Sleep of Death

In the Old Testament, dying is frequently referred to as, lying down in sleep, and the dead are said to be asleep. Three different Hebrew words are used to this effect. First, *shachabh*. Examples: Deuteronomy 31:16, 1 Kings 2:10 (“David slept with his ancestors, and was buried ... ” compare Acts 13:36) and more than 30 similar instances. Second, *yashen*. Examples: Job 3:13; Psalm 13:3; Daniel 12:2 (the dead “sleep in the dust of the earth”). Third, *shenah*. For instance, Job 14:12 (the dead “will not awake or be roused out of their sleep”: see below).

The “sleep” of death affects all humans the same way:

There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest.¹

It is “a perpetual sleep”² No “dreaming” is hinted at! Rather, the metaphor signifies utter inactivity, unconsciousness and, in effect, non-existence.

But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they?

As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep.³

Job 7:21: “For now I shall lie (*shachabh*, KJV “sleep”) in the earth; you (God) will seek me, but I shall not be.”

There is no hope of further existence for us, unless God “remembers” and “awakens” us (Job 14:13–15). The astonishing thing is that, despite all the odds, this is exactly what he will do, at the day of resurrection, when “many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake” (Daniel 12:2). In fact the book of Job itself asserts the hope of ultimate resurrection. However, this assertion is based, not on any supposed immortal part of human nature, but on faith in God’s ultimate justice:

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God ... ⁴

Again, it is precisely because the Bible’s approach to death is so uncompromisingly realistic, that the faith in resurrection which ultimately emerges is so compelling.

Just a few passages do appear to suggest that there is more to the death-state than “sleep.” The first is 1 Samuel 28:3–25, where King Saul consults the “witch of Endor” and the dead Samuel is said to appear and speak. Note four points. (1) The Bible absolutely condemns and ridicules the practice of consulting the dead, even in the immediate context (1 Samuel 28:9),⁵ since “... there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol...”⁶ (2) Nevertheless, Samuel’s message to Saul at Endor is that of a genuine prophet of God. (3) The medium herself is forestalled in her arts and startled by Samuel’s appearing (verse 12). As W. A. Beuken observes, “Samuel beats the woman to it.”⁷ (4) Samuel is referred to here, not as a “spirit of the dead,” for which the normal Hebrew word is *’obh*, but as *’elohim*, a “divine being.” This word, in the medium’s language, “expresses well on whose authority and with whose message Samuel comes.”⁸

Our conclusion, with W. A. Beuken, is that Samuel’s appearing is presented as a “one-off” work of God, confounding both the “witch” and Saul, re-affirming God’s truth and power where Saul had hoped for a more comforting alternative. Samuel “does not come as a dead ghost ... but ... as a prophet of the ... living

God.”⁹ Similarly, after careful analysis, Bill T. Arnold concludes that it is “unlikely that a disembodied ‘soul’ of Samuel could be involved,” but rather “the concept of physical resuscitation is suggestive.”¹⁰ In fact, the account gives no credence to spiritism, nor does it teach anything at all about the death-state except this one all-important truth: that even there God is in control.

Two other passages may be taken together: Isaiah 14:3–20 and Ezekiel 32:17–32. Both depict people dead in “Sheol” as speaking and experiencing emotion. But then, they depict trees doing the same (Isaiah 14:8, Ezekiel 31:16)! These expressions “are obviously poetic symbolism.”¹¹ Mythological pictures of the death-state are being used for rhetorical effect, not as elements of doctrine. Similarly, in Job 26:5 “the shades (*repha'im*) below” are said to “tremble” before God.¹² This is poetry, utilizing features of common popular lore. Once again, all that is conclusively affirmed about the death-state is, that it is “the land of forgetfulness” (Psalm 88:12), but that even the dead are not safe from God or beyond his power.

Now, to assert that the one God is in full control, even in relation to the dead, is a tremendous affirmation of monotheism. Pagan thought envisaged a multiplicity of gods, personifying a multiplicity of natural forces, often in mutual conflict, none of whom was in ultimate control at all. According to this way of thinking, the realm of the dead was the province of a different god from the realm of the living. For example, in Graeco-Roman thought, Hades/Pluto ruled the dead and Zeus/Jupiter the living. In Egyptian thought, it was Osiris as against Amun-Re'. The thoroughly pagan notion that hell is a realm ruled by the devil is a vestige of the same way of thinking. The biblical revelation of the one God, who rules living and dead alike, amounts to a radical revolution, a giant leap in human understanding.¹³ It is vital to our theme. But it adds no support to the idea of the immortality of the human soul or spirit.

What, then, of this word “*Sheol*,” which we have already encountered a couple of times? The Hebrew word *sheol* occurs some 65 times in the Old Testament, with reference to the place

or state of the dead. The New Testament equivalent is hades (e.g. Acts 2:24–28). Although often misleadingly translated “hell,” *Sheol* is never once depicted in the Old Testament as a place or state of suffering. In fact, of the wicked it can be said, “in peace they go down to Sheol” (Job 21:13). The true import of the word is clearly conveyed by various equivalents given in the same context. Equivalents are: “the Pit” (*shachath*: Job 17:13–14; Psalm 16:10; Isaiah 38:17; or *bor*: Psalm 30:3, 9; Isaiah 14:15; Ezekiel 32:18); “destruction” (*abhaddon*: Job 26:5, 28:22; Proverbs 15:11, 27:20); “silence” (*dumah*: Psalm 94:17, 115:17); “corruption” (*diaphthora*: Acts 2:31); “the grave” (*qever*: Psalm 49:14, 88:5); “the dust” (*aphar*: Job 17:16; Psalm 30:9); “death” (*maweth*: Psalm 6:5; Isaiah 38:18; Hosea 13:14; or *thanatos*: Revelation 1:18, 20:13–14).

E. E. Ellis explains:

Sheolis “in the dust” (Job 17:13ff.) and is probably best understood generically as “the grave” ... It is a state of sleep, rest, darkness, silence, without thought or memory (Job 3:16–17, 17:13ff; Psalm 6:5; Ecclesiastes. 9:5, 10) ... ¹⁴

The analysis of Helmut Thielicke, based on Ludwig Koehler’s research, is even more conclusive:

Sheol ... is a nonland, a sphere that does not exist, and it is to this that the dead come.¹⁵

References

¹ Job 3:17; see 21:26.

² Jeremiah 51:39, 57.

³ Job 14:10–12.

⁴ Job 19:25–26. Although there is much debate about this passage, it seems quite clear that Job anticipates seeing God both after death and in an embodied state; that is, by resurrection. For convincing discussions, see: Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job*, London: S.C.M. Press, 1985, pp. 307–309; Francis I. Andersen, *Job*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977, pp. 193–194.

- ⁵ See Leviticus 19:31, 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:10–11; Isaiah 8:19–20.
- ⁶ Ecclesiastes 9:10.
- ⁷ W. A. M. Beuken, “1 Samuel 28: The Prophet as ‘Hammer of Witches,’” in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Sheffield University, Vol.1, 6, 1978, pp. 3–17; p. 8.
- ⁸ W. A. M. Beuken, p. 10.
- ⁹ W. A. M. Beuken, p. 10.
- ¹⁰ Bill T. Arnold, “Soul-Searching Questions About 1 Samuel 28,” in Joel B. Green (Ed.), *What About the Soul?*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004, p. 81.
- ¹¹ E. E. Ellis, “Life,” in *The New Bible Dictionary*, p. 736.
- ¹² See also Psalm 88:10–12.
- ¹³ For example, it paved the way for modern scientific faith in the uniformity of nature.
- ¹⁴ E. E. Ellis, “Life,” in *The New Bible Dictionary*, p. 736.
- ¹⁵ H. Thielicke, *Living with Death*, p. 113.

About Warren Prestidge

Warren Prestidge (M.A., B.D. Hons) is a Baptist pastor. His first degree was in English, and he has taught at Auckland University and at secondary school. Since 1981, he has pastored churches in Auckland and also lectured for the Bible College of New Zealand and Tyndale College. For two years he directed Oro Bible College in the Philippines. He authored “Life, Death and Destiny.” Warren’s wife, Jackie, is a mathematics teacher. Warren and Jackie have three adult sons.

* * * * *

ASLEEP IN CHRIST / THE DEATH STATE

Asleep in Christ

In the New Testament, the “sleep” metaphor for death is taken up some 19 times. Examples: Matthew 24, 1 Thessalonians 5:10 (Greek *katheudo*); Acts 7:60, Acts 13:36, 1 Corinthians 11:30, 15:6 and 15:18 (Greek *koimasthai*). Unfortunately, the NRSV often obscures the point by translating, simply, “died.”¹

Following Jesus’ own example (e.g. Matthew 9:24), the metaphor is used with comforting connotations in the New Testament. However, Jesus certainly did not mean to deny that death is real! As John 11:11–14 clearly shows, Jesus’ special point is that, because of him death is not final.

“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.”²

Through Jesus, there is the assured prospect of being “awakened out of sleep,” by resurrection.

“I am the resurrection and the life.”³

It is the prospect of resurrection to eternal life that “gilds the bed of death with light.”

Paul makes exactly this point in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, where, again, the metaphor of “sleep” is used for death. The question here is: What comfort does the gospel offer bereaved Christians (13, 15)? Thessalonian Christians are grieving over people in the church who have died. Paul writes: “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died [literally “are sleeping”], so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope” (13). Here is Paul, intent on dispelling ignorance concerning the dead. Here, if anywhere, Paul intends to be very explicit about the death-state. Here, if anywhere, he would undoubtedly assure us that the souls of the saved have gone to heaven, if that is what he believes. But he does not! The comfort he offers is not that “those who have fallen asleep” are already enjoying conscious fellowship with God. His

whole focus is on future resurrection at the return of Christ, who has already been raised.

Verse 14 says:

“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.”

This does not mean that the dead are already alive “with” Jesus, but rather, that “although later in time, the resurrection of the people of Christ is their participation in his resurrection.”⁴ Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 4:14 Paul writes: “...we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus.” So then, the comfort Paul offers here in 1 Thessalonians 4 is, that “the dead in Christ will rise” (1 Thessalonians 4:16), when Jesus “descends from heaven” at his return, and that thus “we shall always be with the Lord” (17). Alan Richardson concludes:

The apostolic church seems to have held that we do not receive our resurrection bodies immediately after we die, but that we ‘sleep’ in Christ until the *parousia* (second coming) ... the beautiful metaphor of sleep most adequately expresses the deepest conviction of the apostolic church concerning those of the baptized who had already died ...⁵

It is amazing how reluctant many Christians have been to accept the persistent biblical metaphor for death, “sleep,” in its plain significance. It is sometimes argued that the New Testament means to describe only dying itself as “falling asleep,” rather than the death-state as “sleep.” This is plainly not true. “The expression in the New Testament signifies ... the condition ... of the dead.”⁶ In Matthew 9:34, 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 1 Thessalonians 5:10 and 1 Corinthians 11:30, the present continuous tense is used: the dead “is” or “are sleeping.” Furthermore, references such as John 11:11, Acts 13:36 and Revelation 14:13 show that the suggested distinction is illusory: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,” says Jesus, “but I am going to awaken him” (John 11:11). “Awakening,” of course, is by resurrection (John 11:43–44, Daniel 12:2).

Jesus’ great declaration in John 11:25–26 is commonly used at funerals. Rightly so!

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

What does this mean? “... the person who believes in me, even if death overtakes him, will nevertheless be raised up in resurrection life; and ... every person who will gain resurrection life as a believer in me will never die but live forever.”⁷ The only hope of those who are “asleep” in death is resurrection, and resurrection will occur at the second coming of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:17-23, 51-54), a hope based squarely, not on speculative ideas or wishful thinking, but on the central facts of the gospel:

“If Christ has not been raised ... those also who have died [literally, fallen asleep] in Christ have perished ... But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died [fallen asleep]. For since death came through a human being,⁸ the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being;⁹

“... But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”¹⁰

Diverse Christian Traditions

It is scandalous that, despite the clear, consistent teaching of both the Hebrew and the Greek Testaments, Christian tradition has displayed great confusion over the death-state. Today it is very widely recognized that this has been due largely to the influence of ancient Greek ideas, an influence already strong in some pre-Christian Jewish circles. Paul Althaus explains: “... the original biblical concepts have been replaced by ideas from Hellenistic (Greek) Gnostic dualism. The New Testament idea of resurrection, which affects the total man, has had to give way to the immortality of the soul. The Last Day also loses its significance, for souls have received all that is decisively important long before this. Eschatological tension [i.e. the Christian hope] is no longer

directed to the day of Jesus' coming. The difference between this and the hope of the New Testament is very great."¹¹

(a) During the Middle Ages, an elaborate fourfold doctrine of the death-state was evolved in the Western Christian Church. This schema is reflected in Dante's great poem, "The Divine Comedy," and became standard for Roman Catholicism. (1) At death, "souls" of unbaptized infants and, perhaps, exceptional pagans, go to "limbo," a state of lostness but not actual suffering.¹² (2) Souls of the lost go to eternal torment in "hell." (3) Souls of most Christians go to a place of temporary suffering called "purgatory," where through suffering they are cleansed of their sins and their attachment to sin, in preparation for final bliss. (4) Souls of exceptional Christians (the "saints") go immediately to heaven ("paradise"), to be with God and Christ. Eventually, the souls of those whose time in purgatory is finished go there also.

All the sixteenth century Protestant Reformers rejected the doctrine of purgatory, for three good reasons: it is not found anywhere in the Bible; it is contrary to the fundamental of salvation by grace alone; it is open to terrible abuse, as when the Medieval Church claimed the power to relieve the suffering of those in purgatory and charged the faithful money to do so. Some added a fourth reason: there is no immortal human soul.¹³

(b) Through the Reformation, a simplified scheme emerged. According to a common Protestant view of death, the souls of the lost go immediately to punishment in "hell," while the souls of the saved go immediately to "heaven," there to enjoy full, conscious communion with Christ. Although this is widely assumed today to be the Christian view, it is neither the Roman Catholic view, as we have seen, nor the view of the Orthodox Church, nor has it been widely held by Christians at all until comparatively recently.

As a matter of fact, the idea of the soul's immediate ascent to heaven at death is of Greek (Gnostic) origin, not biblical or Christian. In my opinion, it is precisely this view that the apostle Paul is arguing against in his great "Resurrection Chapter," 1 Corinthians 15. Those he opposes there saw no need of a resurrection (verse 12), precisely because they assumed, in line

with their Greek Platonist upbringing, that the soul is immortal and held that saved souls go to heaven immediately at death. Bruce Winter explains:

It was not the resurrection of Christ that was denied, but the resurrection of the Christian's body over against the pagan doctrine of the immortality of the soul. To the first century mind, the immortality of the soul was unquestionably true for most pagans ... Paul strongly refutes this aberrant view of the Christian's continuity apart from one's body ... ¹⁴

Not surprisingly, then, this view was also roundly opposed by prominent second and third century Christian teachers, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian, who found it irreconcilable with the hope of the resurrection. "Justin Martyr told Trypho [a Jewish opponent] that if he encountered any Christians who 'dare to blaspheme God ... by asserting that there is no resurrection of the dead, but that their souls are taken up to heaven at the very moment of their death, do not consider them to be real Christians! (Dialogue With Trypho, xx)"¹⁵ And, as a matter of fact, neither Calvin nor Luther, the two greatest Reformation leaders, held this view!

(c) Calvin's view was similar to that of many early, post-biblical Christian teachers, including Augustine: that the souls of the lost and of the righteous go to a preliminary state, in which they experience, respectively, suffering or bliss, which is a mere shadow of what will happen later following the resurrection and the Last Judgment. In Calvin's view, the biblical doctrines of the return of Christ and the resurrection did receive emphasis. Yet he also insisted on the immortality of the soul, largely on Platonist grounds. "As a Platonist, Calvin ... found it easier than Luther ... to hold to a natural persistence of the soul after death."¹⁶ The result was an uneasy and unstable mixture.

(d) Martin Luther, on the other hand, is on record as having flatly denied that the soul is immortal.¹⁷ "Luther generally understands the condition between death and the resurrection as a deep and dreamless sleep without consciousness and feeling ... Luther therefore says nothing about souls without their bodies

enjoying true life and blessedness before the resurrection. They sleep ‘in the peace of Christ.’ ”¹⁸

Luther was not alone, of course. Some early Christian writers did also express the view that the death-state is total unconsciousness.¹⁹ During the Reformation, Carlstadt and the great William Tyndale, the first translator of the whole Bible from the original languages into English, held the same view.²⁰ Many of the “left wing” of the Reformation (including Italian Evangelicals, many Anabaptists,²¹ “Spirituals” and others) also held the same view. Some did so as a result of increasingly careful and independent study of that other great Greek philosopher, Aristotle, but many did so purely on biblical grounds. Zwingli, another leading Reformer, recorded that, “The Catabaptists [i.e. Anabaptists] teach that the dead sleep, both body and soul, until the day of judgment. ... ”²²

Some of these “radicals” held that, although the soul continues to exist separately from the body, it is entirely unconscious and inoperative (e.g. Conrad Grebel, Westerborg). Others held that the soul cannot exist at all without the body, but perishes at death along with it; that the human person is a strictly indivisible entity. I doubt that it is possible to be dogmatic either way, on purely biblical grounds, though I am inclined to the latter view. Either way, from the Reformation on, “mortalism” certainly became a “live” option once more!

In the 17th century, in England, the great Christian independent, activist and poet John Milton was a mortalist and the outstanding philosopher Thomas Hobbes made the following observation, which is surely irrefutable: “That the soul of man is in its own nature eternal, and a living creature independent of the body; or that any mere man is immortal, otherwise than by resurrection in the last day ... is a doctrine not apparent in Scripture.”²³

(e) Today, quite a number of Christians are attached to modified doctrines of purgatory, as a means, not merely of purifying those already saved, but also of bringing all humanity, perhaps, to eventual salvation.²⁴ The idea of universal salvation

will be discussed in Chapters Six and Nine. As for purgatory in any form, there is simply no biblical warrant for such a doctrine: “... we have no evidence that Jesus or the apostles ever taught the doctrine — even in a weak seed form. ...”²⁵

(f) An alternative approach today is to remain non-committal about the fate of the lost at death, but to hold that Christian souls or spirits become immortalized by union with the Holy Spirit of God, either when “born again” through faith in Christ (regeneration), or at death (e.g. Lucien Cerfaux, J. A. Baird). This view does fully recognize that immortality is not inherent in the natural soul, but is entirely a gift of God’s grace through Jesus Christ. However, quite contrary to Scripture, it still fails to treat the human person as an indivisible whole and also divorces the gift of immortality from the return of Christ and the resurrection. In Chapter Four, we will look closely at the sense in which eternal life is a present possession.

(g) Another recent approach is to hold that the resurrection itself actually occurs at death (e.g. Murray Harris; Emil Brunner, Karl Barth and Wolfhart Pannenberg all appear to advocate this view in some form). Again, proponents of this view do fully agree that there is no doctrine of the immortality of the human soul in Scripture. Further, they agree that immortality is entirely God’s gracious gift, through Christ. And they link this gift firmly to resurrection, retaining thereby a holistic view of the human person.

In support of this view, it is pointed out that, biblically, the resurrection body will not necessarily be the same as our present body. Furthermore, from God’s viewpoint time is not simply what it is from ours: perhaps therefore, it is suggested, the death-and-resurrection world also operates by a different time from our own. This approach is based, in part, upon a misunderstanding of 2 Corinthians 5:1–10, which will be considered in the next chapter.

In my opinion, this view involves a very dubious piece of logic. Although it is no doubt true that God’s relation to time is different from ours, I wonder what bearing this can have on

the way time may affect humans after death. Surely it is not being suggested that at death the human soul becomes divine? Furthermore, the Bible itself does apply the normal concept of time to the interval between death and resurrection. After all, it is the persistent witness of the New Testament, that Christ himself rose “on the third day”!²⁶

There are other reasons, too, that this view is biblically and theologically impossible. First, it entails divorcing the salvation of the individual from that of the Church as a whole; whereas, as Dr. Harris himself insists, the New Testament sees resurrection as “a corporate experience of ‘those who belong to Christ.’ ” (M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, p. 233.) This is sufficiently clear from 1 Thessalonians 4:7, which envisages the dead and the living being raised and/or transformed “together” at Christ’s return; and from 1 Corinthians 15:51–52: “we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.”

Second, it also divorces the individual’s resurrection from the judgment and renewal of creation as a whole; yet, as Dr. Harris himself states, the two cannot be considered apart from one another “without seriously undermining the testimony of the New Testament. ... the ‘new heaven and new earth’ correspond to man’s new, resurrection body.”²⁷

It is also noteworthy that, as Dr. Harris correctly observes, resurrection and judgment are “inseparably associated.”²⁸ Yet, as he also concedes, it is hard to find any reference in the New Testament to a judgment of the individual at death.²⁹ Of course, this is also a further reason to reject the whole idea of saved or lost “souls” going to heaven, hell or purgatory at death. Biblically, judgment occurs at “the end of the age,” on God’s appointed “day,” not before.³⁰

Further, if the resurrection of each believer occurs at death, then either the resurrection is divorced from the second coming of Christ and the triumph of God’s kingdom, or the second coming of Christ and the triumph of God’s kingdom are themselves divorced from our time, our history and our world. This amounts to no less than a new betrayal of Christian faith

along Platonist lines. Once again God's kingdom is set in a world apart from ours, just as with the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, or indeed the Egyptian kingdom of the dead. Whereas, according to biblical faith, it is with this world, its judgment and its re-creation, that God is concerned.³¹

In contrast to the confusing diversity of Christian traditions, stands the clear and consistent teaching of Scripture. Jesus' second coming, through which God's kingdom is finally achieved, will be an event that intervenes in our time and our world, to wind up, judge and transform our history:

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness, by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.³²

When the Son of Man comes in his glory ... the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats ...³³

... the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.³⁴

This is obvious from the mere fact, that a generation will be alive on earth when it occurs and will experience "rapture" without dying (1 Corinthians 15:51, 1 Thessalonians 4:17, Matthew 24:40-41)! And the resurrection to immortality and everlasting fellowship with Christ will occur only in and through that event: Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 14:14; John 6:40, 14:3; 1 Corinthians 15:23, 51-57; Philemon 3:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18; 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.³⁵

"I will raise them up on the last day."³⁶

Thus the dead and the living will meet Christ "together,"³⁷ when he comes in triumph. Meanwhile, the dead are extinct, or at least unconscious and inactive, and utterly beyond hope, apart from the sovereign memory, promise and power of God.

References

- ¹ E.g., NRSV translates Acts 7:60 as “he died,” but the Greek says, literally, “he fell asleep,” as in KJV, RSV, NIV.
- ² John 11:11. Later, “Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead ... ’” (John 11:14).
- ³ John 11:25.
- ⁴ F. F. Bruce, *1&2 Thessalonians*, Waco: Word Books, 1982, p. 97.
- ⁵ Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, London: S.C.M., 1958, pp. 345–6.
- ⁶ O. Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*, London: Epworth Press, E.T. 1958, p. 51, note 6. Compare Prospero, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* iv.i: “... our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.”
- ⁷ M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal*, p. 212.
- ⁸ I.e. Adam, the first man.
- ⁹ I.e. Jesus Christ.
- ¹⁰ *1 Corinthians* 15:17–23 (italics mine).
- ¹¹ P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970, p. 414; italics added.
- ¹² Reports in 2006 seemed to imply that the concept of limbo is officially on the way out.
- ¹³ E.g. William Tyndale’s colleague, John Frith, in his *A Disputacyon of Purgatorye*, c1531.
- ¹⁴ B. Winter, “1 Corinthians”, in D. A. Carson et al. (Eds), *New Bible Commentary*, Leicester: I.V.P., 21st Century Edition, 1994, p. 1183.
- ¹⁵ F. Barton, *Heaven, Hell and Hades*, Charlotte: Advent Christian General Conference, 1981, p. 33.
- ¹⁶ G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, p. 582. Williams adds: “In his anthropology ... Calvin emphasized the Platonic conflict between body and spirit-soul.”
- ¹⁷ See Chapter One, note 11.
- ¹⁸ P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 414–415. Althaus also notes regretfully: “Later Lutheran Church theology did not follow Luther on this point. Rather, it once again

adopted the medieval tradition and continued it” (p.417).

- ¹⁹ E.g. Athenagoras, Tatian. See F. Barton, Heaven, Hell and Hades, pp. 31, 35.
- ²⁰ G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, pp. 104, 401.
- ²¹ That is, those who held that baptism should be reserved for responsible believers in Christ.
- ²² Appendix to Elencthus, ch.8.4a (1527), cited in G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, p. 106.
- ²³ Leviathan, XXXVIII; quoted approvingly by G. S. Hendry, “Ecclesiastes,” in D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (Eds), *The New Bible Commentary*, Leicester: I.V.P., 3rd rev. ed. 1977, p. 573.
- ²⁴ E.g. J. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*; Z. J. Hayes, “The Purgatorial View,” in W. V. Crockett (Ed.), *Four Views of Hell*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, pp. 91–118 (Hayes is not a universalist).
- ²⁵ W. V. Crockett, “Response to Zachary J. Hayes,” in *Four Views of Hell*, p. 126. See also S. Travis, *Christian Hope and the Future of Man*, Leicester: I.V.P., 1980, pp. 130–131: “... there are no reported sayings of Jesus which suggest the idea of remedial punishment or the possibility of a person’s destiny being reversed after death. ... The idea of remedial punishment or the steady transformation of persons after death is a guess which contradicts the general thrust of Scripture.” The same is true, of course, of reincarnation.
- ²⁶ E.g. 1 Corinthians 15:4.
- ²⁷ *Raised Immortal*, p. 170.
- ²⁸ *Raised Immortal*, p. 159.
- ²⁹ *Raised Immortal*, p. 261, note 4.
- ³⁰ Matthew 13:40–43; Acts 17:31; compare Matthew 25:31–33, Romans 2:16, 2 Timothy 4:8, etc. See also Chapter Four.
- ³¹ Romans 8:18–23, 2 Peter 3:11–13. See Chapter 10.
- ³² Acts 17:30–31.
- ³³ Matthew 25:31–32.
- ³⁴ Romans 8:21. See also Matthew 24:39–41, 37–44; Acts 1:11; 1 Corinthians 15:51–52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17; 2 Thessalonians 2:3–8; 2 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 9:27–28;

2 Peter 3:3–12.

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:23.

³⁶ John 6:40.

³⁷ 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

About Warren Prestidge

Warren Prestidge (M.A., B.D. Hons) is a Baptist pastor. His first degree was in English, and he has taught at Auckland University and at secondary school. Since 1981, he has pastored churches in Auckland and also lectured for the Bible College of New Zealand and Tyndale College. For two years he directed Oro Bible College in the Philippines. He authored “Life, Death and Destiny.” Warren’s wife, Jackie, is a mathematics teacher. Warren and Jackie have three adult sons.

* * * * *

HISTORY OF HELL / HELL BEFORE AUGUSTINE

History of Hell

Imagine if somebody said, “No Christian leaders taught the doctrine of eternal torment prior to Augustine.”

That sounds like a pretty bold statement, right? No teachers taught what is now the traditional view of hell back then? None? And yet, it’s no more bold or over-the-top than many of the claims some theologians make in defense of the traditional view. In the last few years I’ve heard or read a number of people making the extraordinary claim that the early church fathers “unanimously” taught the eternal torments of the damned in hell, or that this was their “consensus.”

Now I'll admit, the opening line was an intentional overstatement — mainly for the purposes of trying to show how absurd the opposite claim sounds to anyone who knows a bit about the early church fathers (by “early” here I mean prior to Augustine). The truth is that several early church fathers did teach eternal torment, and others may well have believed it without saying so. But to those with a bit of knowledge about early church history I put the question: How many can you think of in the first couple of centuries who actually taught it?

This is where we've got to be careful. No matter what side of this disagreement you find yourself on, you know that the Bible uses the terms “eternal punishment,” “unquenchable fire” and “eternal fire.” We all agree on that much. One of the things that traditionalists and annihilationists disagree about is what such biblical language means. Traditionalists maintain that the punishment awaiting the lost is some form of conscious torment or misery, so in their mind the phrase “eternal punishment” translates easily into “eternal torment.” In the annihilationist view, the punishment for sin is death in the very literal sense of final destruction, so the phrase “eternal punishment” translates naturally into Paul's phrase, “everlasting destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). In the traditionalist view, an “unquenchable fire” must burn on forever and ever, and by extension whatever is in the fire must last forever as well, so when the phrase “unquenchable fire” shows up in the New Testament in the mouth of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:12), this is taken as affirmation of a traditional view of hell (although to be honest, I think this understanding of an “unquenchable fire” is driven by a traditional theology of hell, rather than vice versa). Annihilationists, on the other hand, look at the context of Matthew 3 and see that the “unquenchable fire” here will “burn up” chaff, so even if it refers to hell at all (and it may not), it sounds a lot more like annihilation than perpetual torment, and they also note that the same language of a fire that is never quenched is used to refer to fires that consume their fuel elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. Ezekiel 20:47 describes a raging forest fire). When a traditionalist hears

the phrase “eternal fire,” they form a mental connection between this and the picture of hell as a place where fires burn forever to torment the lost. Conditionalists form a connection between different passages of Scripture that use this phrase, for example Jude, who claims (Jude 7) that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of the punishment of eternal fire. The point is that disagreements about what the early church fathers taught cannot be settled just by asking whether or not they used this terminology, for this would simply perpetuate the disagreement about what this terminology means.

This point is often not appreciated by people who defend the traditional doctrine of hell as eternal torment. Just today I read a blog post claiming that with very few exceptions, the early church fathers taught the traditional doctrine of eternal torment. And what was the evidence? Ignatius of Antioch said that those who corrupt families will “depart into unquenchable fire.” Clement of Rome said that “if we neglect his commandments, nothing will rescue us from eternal punishment.” You get the point. These quotes of biblical phrases are not evidence that the writer interpreted the phrases as referring to eternal torment.

So the question is: Did the Early Fathers offer their own explanation of what the fate of the lost consisted of? If so, what did they say? Here I’m quite willing to concede to the traditionalists that several early church fathers did appear to teach eternal torment, by going beyond the biblical statements and adding to them the notion of universal immortality. In the late second century the trend begins. Tatian (d. 180), for example, made the incredible claim that “We who are now easily susceptible to death, will afterwards receive immortality with either enjoyment or with pain.” And so the punishment for sin is to be immortal but in pain. Contrast this with the New Testament teaching that immortality is a gift to those who are in Christ! Reinforcing the suspicion held by many that the platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul was the culprit in the rise of the doctrine of eternal torment in Christian theology, Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) said, “All souls are immortal, even those of

the wicked, for whom it were better that they were not deathless. For, punished with the endless vengeance of quenchless fire, and not dying, it is impossible for them to have a period put to their misery.” And perhaps most clearly of all, Marcus Menucius Felix wrote (at an uncertain date, perhaps as late as 270), “Nor is there either measure nor end to these torments. That clever fire burns the limbs and restores them, wears them away and yet sustains them, just as fiery thunderbolts strike bodies but do not consume them.” An interesting problem — how do bodies burn and not get burned up? It’s a “clever” fire! It burns them but somehow restores them. Later, Augustine would claim that since the salamander can live in fire, it follows that God can make physical bodies that are susceptible to the pain of fire and yet not be damaged by it. Augustine was, of course, appealing to a creature of myth that never existed at all! Several other church fathers made similar claims about the marvelous fire that burns but does not damage.

So we have to acknowledge that there were fairly early church fathers who stood out by clearly teaching that the lost will be immortal (some of them admitting outright that this is because all souls are immortal), and so will suffer forever in hell. But it would obviously be a hasty generalization to infer from this that this was the view of the early church fathers. Many of them said nothing at all about what hell is like beyond simply using the biblical language. What should we assume about them — that they agreed with those who taught eternal torment? Why make that assumption? The majority of the early church fathers cannot be claimed as supporters of the traditional view — in fact none of the “apostolic fathers” said anything to support the traditional view, instead speaking of the punishment of the lost as death or destruction, as the biblical writers before them did. Given that I think the biblical language, on its own, originated in a context where it was meant to teach the final death of the lost (namely, in the Bible!), I’m inclined to suspect that many of the early church fathers who simply reproduced the biblical language were annihilationists after all — although I realize that

our traditionalist brothers and sisters will be very resistant to that suggestion!

But the fact is, a number of early church fathers made it pretty clear that they did not accept the doctrine of eternal torment at all, and they really did teach annihilationism instead. The prominence of these particular fathers should at least make it plausible that many of the fathers who did not specifically indicate that they held to the doctrine of eternal torment may well have been annihilationists as well. I'll use four examples in chronological order.

The Apostolic Fathers

As already noted, while some early church fathers revealed that they interpreted the biblical language to refer to eternal torment, the apostolic fathers nowhere did this. However, on at least a couple of occasions the apostolic fathers gave us a glimpse into how they interpreted the teaching of Jesus and the writers of the New Testament. One good example is Ignatius of Antioch, a student of the apostle John. Ignatius wrote a letter to the Ephesians in which chapter 17, "Beware of false doctrines," reads as follows:

"For this end did the Lord allow the ointment to be poured upon His head, that He might breathe immortality into his church. Be not anointed with the bad odor of the doctrine of the prince of this world; let him not lead you away captive from the life which is set before you. And why are we not all prudent, since we have received the knowledge of God, which is Jesus Christ? Why do we foolishly perish, not recognizing the gift which the Lord has of a truth sent to us?"

Less than a century later Tatian wrote that the lost will be "immortal," and those who affirm the doctrine of eternal torment have no trouble recognizing what he was saying: That the lost would be alive forever, albeit in a terrible state. Ignatius here claimed, by contrast, that immortality is Christ's gift to

his church, and that to “perish” means to not receive the gift. If traditionalists interpret immortality to mean the same thing in both cases, they must conclude that while Tatian thought that the lost would live forever, Ignatius did not.

Ignatius confirms that this was his view in his letter to the Magnesians in chapter 10, exhorting them, “Let us not, therefore, be insensible to His kindness. For were He to reward us according to our works, we should cease to be.” It is impossible to reconcile the view that the lost will not receive immortality and the reward of sinful deeds is to cease to be on one hand with the view that the lost will be punished for their sin with eternal torment in hell on the other. Knowing that this teaching was alive and well among the apostolic fathers makes it all the more likely that the writer of the Epistle of Barnabas was making the same point in chapter 21:

“It is well, therefore, that he who has learned the judgments of the Lord, as many as have been written, should walk in them. For he who keeps these shall be glorified in the kingdom of God; but he who chooses other things shall be destroyed with his works. On this account there will be a resurrection, on this account a retribution. I beseech you who are superiors, if you will receive any counsel of my good-will, have among yourselves those to whom you may show kindness: do not forsake them. For the day is at hand on which all things shall perish with the evil [one].”

There are clear echoes here of biblical language, but the writer adds more. The strongest echo is from 1 Corinthians 3:11–15.

“For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — each one’s work will become manifest, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”

“The day,” said Barnabas, “was at hand — when people’s works would be destroyed.” Whether or not he was right about whether or not the day was at hand, he develops Paul thoughts further. Every now and then somebody who rejects conditional immortality will ask me, “What’s the point of God raising people to life again just to destroy them again,” as though this is an obviously silly thing to do. The idea did not seem silly to Barnabas, who said that the destruction of the lost with their works (and with all “evil”) was the very reason for their resurrection. In Paul’s description of works that will be “tested,” some work will be “burned up,” using language that everybody interprets to mean straight-forward, complete destruction. And yet Barnabas said that it would not simply be the works that will be destroyed, but in the case of those who “choose other things” than God’s kingdom, it is a fate that would befall the works as well as those who do them.

While the apostolic fathers, then, say almost nothing beyond simply reproducing the language of Scripture, where they do give glimpses of how they interpreted that language, annihilation, rather than eternal torment, is what we find.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus of Gaul (d. 202), perhaps the most important Christian theologian of the second century, had a slightly earlier career than Tertullian (d. 225), who wrote of the torments of hell as ghoulish entertainment for Christians as they watch their persecutors tormented in fire. Irenaeus, however, spoke of no such thing.

Like other early church fathers, Irenaeus used the biblical phrase “eternal fire,” along with biblical images like a “furnace of fire” and the “outer darkness.” He also quoted Isaiah’s depiction of the slain enemies of God, whose “worm does not die” and whose “fire is not quenched.” Because of this, a number of theologians who advocate the traditional view of hell as eternal torment have jumped to the conclusion that Irenaeus must have shared their

view. As discussed earlier, this is a mistake, since annihilationists today are well aware that Scripture uses these terms, yet they interpret them as referring to the final destruction of the lost.

Like most Christians since his time, Irenaeus believed that when our bodies die our souls live on. But unlike some of the other early church fathers, Irenaeus didn't believe that everyone lives forever. In chapter 34 of his book "Against Heresies," Irenaeus explains his view on the soul by denying that souls move on to another body after death, but that they do live on after death (a claim that he defends by using the story of the rich man and Lazarus). But just how long should a person expect to live after death? Irenaeus' answer was straightforward: For as long as God decides! He compares our own longevity to that of the heavenly bodies:

"For as the heaven which is above us, the firmament, the sun, the moon, the rest of the stars, and all their grandeur, although they had no previous existence, were called into being, and continue throughout a long course of time according to the will of God, so also anyone who thinks thus respecting souls and spirits, and, in fact, respecting all created things, will not by any means go far astray, inasmuch as all things that have been made had a beginning when they were formed, but endure as long as God wills that they should have an existence and continuance."

While we might not share Irenaeus' view that the soul lives on after the body dies (I do not), this principle seems fair enough, given a Christian view of the world. We are created, just as everything else in the universe is, so the soul is dependent on God for its existence each moment. For as long as God allows the moon (for example) to have "continuance," it continues to exist, and the same is true of us. If God did not grant continuance to us — or the moon — we, like it, would simply stop existing.

But look what comes next: "He thus speaks respecting the salvation of man: 'He asked life of Thee, and Thou gavest him length of days forever and ever'; indicating that it is the Father of all who imparts continuance forever and ever on those who

are saved. For life does not arise from us, nor from our own nature; but it is bestowed according to the grace of God.” But wait a minute. Irenaeus is talking about the fact that it is God who imparts continuance — that is, ongoing existence — to everything, whether stars, the moon or the human soul. And now he has claimed that continuance forever (and not “continuance in happiness”) is a gift, something bestowed by God’s grace to “those who are saved.” That means that those who aren’t saved won’t continue forever, doesn’t it? Irenaeus is consistent here, and his answer — as it must be, given the logic of his argument — is yes, that is what it means.

“And therefore he who shall preserve the life bestowed upon him, and give thanks to Him who imparted it, shall receive also length of days forever and ever. But he who shall reject it, and prove himself ungrateful to his Maker, inasmuch as he has been created, and has not recognized Him who bestowed [the gift upon him], deprives himself of [the privilege of] continuance forever and ever. And, for this reason, the Lord declared to those who showed themselves ungrateful towards Him: “If ye have not been faithful in that which is little, who will give you that which is great?” indicating that those who, in this brief temporal life, have shown themselves ungrateful to Him who bestowed it, shall justly not receive from Him length of days forever and ever.”

Irenaeus has argued directly from the fact that immortality is conditional on the grace of God to the conclusion that those who reject God will cease to exist. (I am grateful to “Rethinking Hell” contributor Chris Date for bringing the example of Irenaeus to my attention.)

Arnobius

Arnobius of Cicca (d. 330) is the least well-known of the fathers discussed here. Like Irenaeus, Arnobius’ thinking about human destiny is closely tied to his views about human nature.

His comments about eternal punishment are inseparable from his comments about the immortality of the soul. Arnobius wrote “Against the Heathen” to combat the beliefs of pagan Greeks. One of the convictions of his intended audience was the immortality of the soul, while one of Arnobius’s convictions was that the lost would one day be finally destroyed. In chapter 2 of “Against the Heathen” he confronts those who mock the idea of the resurrection. Immediately after this, he turns to those who reject the idea of the final destruction of the lost, pointing out that even they revere people (like Plato) who spoke of the punishment of souls after death.

“Do you dare to laugh at us when we speak of hell, and fires which cannot be quenched, into which we have learned that souls are cast by their foes and enemies? What, does not your Plato also, in the book which he wrote on the immortality of the soul, name the rivers Acheron, Styx, Cocytus, and Pyriphlegethon, and assert that in them souls are rolled along, engulfed, and burned up?” But though a man of no little wisdom and of accurate judgment and discernment, he essays a problem which cannot be solved; so that, while he says that the soul is immortal, everlasting and without bodily substance, he yet says that they are punished, and makes them suffer pain.

“But what man does not see that that which is immortal, which is simple, cannot be subject to any pain; that that, on the contrary, cannot be immortal which does suffer pain?”

The point here is a philosophical one. Many Greeks, like many Christians today, believed that the soul was a simple immaterial substance, meaning that it is not composed of parts, and also it cannot be destroyed — it is immortal. But this doesn’t make sense if we believe that souls suffer after death, says Arnobius. An immaterial, immortal being could not suffer pain. Pain tells us that we are being harmed — we are suffering damage. But a simple immaterial substance cannot be damaged without disappearing altogether. It can’t have parts broken off or destroyed without the whole being destroyed, since there are no parts of which it is made. It makes sense to think of our bodies

suffering pain, because we have all sorts of parts: skin cells, nerve receptors and neural pathways that provide sensation and so on. But you can't injure a ghost!

However, Plato was partly right, says Arnobius, even if Plato did not believe everything we do (like the resurrection of the dead). There is indeed a punishment after death.

And yet his opinion is not very far from the truth. "For although the gentle and kindly disposed man thought it inhuman cruelty to condemn souls to death, he yet not unreasonably supposed that they are cast into rivers blazing with masses of flame, and loathsome from their foul abysses. For they are cast in, and being annihilated, pass away vainly in everlasting destruction. For theirs is an intermediate state, as has been learned from Christ's teaching; and they are such that they may on the one hand perish if they have not known God, and on the other be delivered from death if they have given heed to His threats and proffered favors. And to make manifest what is unknown, this is man's real death, this which leaves nothing behind. For that which is seen by the eyes is only a separation of soul from body, not the last end — annihilation: this, I say, is man's real death, when souls which know not God shall be consumed in long-protracted torment with raging fire, into which certain fiercely cruel beings shall cast them, who were unknown before Christ, and brought to light only by His wisdom."

"Certain fiercely cruel beings" here are demons, as it was often said (by Origen in the third century, for example) that demons would throw people into hell and torment them there. But that is not the final state. "Man's real death," as Arnobius put it, is final. It leaves nothing behind. It is annihilation.

A number of traditionalists have made the claim that Arnobius was the first well-known Christian to defend the doctrine of annihilationism. This admission is often made while pointing out that he really wasn't a very well-known father, and besides, he held some strange ideas (as did many of the fathers, I'd want to remind us all!). As we've seen, however, this is not the case at all. Arnobius was teaching what others had taught before him.

Athanasius

The lives of Athanasius (d. 373) and Augustine (b. 354) overlapped, but Augustine was not baptized as a Christian convert until after Athanasius' death. On this subject, the transition from Athanasius to Augustine marked a permanent change in Catholic thinking about hell. On other issues, and in particular the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus, Athanasius is probably the most influential of all the church fathers (himself having a huge impact on Augustine's writing on these subjects), held out as a shining example of orthodoxy. This fact makes his comments on humanity, sin and mortality all the more striking.

In Athanasius' work "On the Incarnation of the Word," he starts out by explaining why God came to us in Christ, first by describing the state of humanity prior to sin. "Man," Athanasius wrote, was "created above the rest, but incapable of independent perseverance" (from the heading of chapter 3). In the same chapter, Athanasius explains that God gave mankind a gift, creating him in God's image and "giving them a portion even of the power of His own Word; so that having as it were a kind of reflection of the Word, and being made rational, they might be able to abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise." Human beings were made to reflect the perfection of the Word — Jesus. But what would happen if they did not reflect the Word, but instead rebelled? Athanasius' answer was that death and corruption would follow:

"He brought them into His own garden, and gave them a law: so that, if they kept the grace and remained good, they might still keep the life in paradise without sorrow or pain or care besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven; but that if they transgressed and turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption in death which was theirs by nature: no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth to die and to abide in death and in corruption."

Of course, proponents of the doctrine of eternal torment are familiar with the language of “death,” both in Scripture and in the church fathers, and believe that it refers to a state of wretchedness, rather than literal death and dissolution. But the more Athanasius elaborates on what he means, the more he makes it clear that this is not at all what he meant. In chapter four things start to come askew for those who would count him as a traditionalist:

“For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, so that just as they have had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into nothing in the course of time. For if, out of a former normal state of non-existence, they were called into being by the Presence and loving-kindness of the Word, it followed naturally that when men were bereft of the knowledge of God and were turned back to what was not (for what is evil is not, but what is good is), they should, since they derive their being from God who IS, be everlastingly bereft even of being; in other words, that they should be disintegrated and abide in death and corruption.”

Turning back into the nothing that they were before they were created? Bereft of being? Disintegrated? This is the end of the human race if God does not save it? Could Athanasius really have meant this? As it turns out — yes! He repeats this several times in the book, again in chapter 6:

“The human race then was wasting, God’s image was being effaced, and His work ruined. Either, then, God must forego His spoken word by which man had incurred ruin; or that which had shared in the being of the Word must sink back again into destruction, in which case God’s design would be defeated. What then? Was God’s goodness to suffer this? But if so, why had man been made? It would have been weakness, not goodness on God’s part.”

This is what would have happened, and this is why God came to us in Christ — humanity would sink “back again into destruction,” that state that existed before we were created. Here Athanasius expresses the very idea that today traditionalists

reject outright — that without salvation from their plight, those who rebel against God will one day cease to exist.

The only escape that we now have from this fate, taught Athanasius in chapter eight, is for people to put on incorruption through the resurrection, and the only reason that is possible is that Christ, the Word made flesh, took our place in death.

“And thus taking from our bodies one of like nature, because all were under penalty of the corruption of death He gave it over to death in the stead of all, and offered it to the Father — doing this, moreover, of His loving-kindness, to the end that, firstly, all being held to have died in Him, the law involving the ruin of men might be undone (inasmuch as its power was fully spent in the Lord’s body, and had no longer holding-ground against men, his peers), and that, secondly, whereas men had turned toward corruption, He might turn them again toward incorruption, and quicken them from death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of the Resurrection, banishing death from them like straw from the fire.”

Although some have found this a little hard to swallow, maintaining that Athanasius thought that Jesus’ death made all people immortal whether righteous or wicked — so that some could live forever with him, and some could live forever in hell, Athanasius nowhere suggests this. The resurrection to immortality here is called “grace.” If this grace is given to all, then, to use Athanasius’s own words, the law involving the ruin of men would be undone for all, contradicting the traditionalist view that hell is eternal “ruin.” Elsewhere (Discourse 3 Against the Arians, chapter 29), Athanasius limits the reception of immortality to those who receive Christ (notice the interesting view here that Jesus, unlike other human beings, could become separate from his body, being God):

“For man dies, not by his own power, but by necessity of nature and against his will; but the Lord, being Himself immortal, but having a mortal flesh, had power, as God, to become separate from the body and to take it again, when He would. Concerning this too speaks David in the Psalm, ‘Thou shalt not leave My

soul in hades, neither shalt Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption.’ For it beseemed that the flesh, corruptible as it was, should no longer after its own nature remain mortal, but because of the Word who had put it on, should abide incorruptible. For as He, having come in our body, was conformed to our condition, so we, receiving Him, partake of the immortality that is from Him.”

There are snags in Athanasius’ thought. In other works he affirms that the soul outlives the body and is immortal (especially in “Against the Heathen”). But if this were the case, then Athanasius was wrong to say that humans, through death, were returning to the nonexistence that prevailed prior to their creation. Athanasius famously rejected the idea that the human soul existed prior to our existence on earth, so he knew that the existence of the disembodied soul was not the state we were in prior to creation (and he could not have thought of a living, immortal soul as “non-being”). Perhaps if anything this shows us a man who held to two beliefs in tension, as many do. When speaking on human nature, he was heavily influenced by his philosophical pedigree (and it is well established that he had an education deeply rooted in Plato). But on the question of the redemption of sinners through Christ, Athanasius, as the saying goes, had a “goodly heritage” in Christian thought, traceable back to the apostolic fathers and, I think we can safely say, to Scripture.

Augustine

Augustine gets a bad rap for a lot of things (and here I am contributing to that), but any fair assessment acknowledges that he was a brilliant man. His contribution to Christian thought was immense, writing 93 books on theology, philosophy, Scripture and ethics, and on virtually every subject that he wrote about, he has become hugely influential.

The subject of hell is no different. In chapter 21 of the “City of God” (written soon after the year 410), Augustine became the first Christian theologian to write a biblical defense of the view

that the lost will suffer forever in hell, and he offered responses to a number of objections. Some of those objections, as it turns out, were objections used by previous church fathers to argue that the lost will finally be destroyed! First he considers the objection that fire hurts people because it is destroying them and not for any other reason, so if people were really immortal in hell after the resurrection, why would they suffer pain? This was actually one of Arnobius' arguments: That which can suffer pain is not immortal. How does Augustine answer it? Several ways. First, he says — the demons might suffer in their bodies (he appears to assume that they have bodies), so the objection fails. Apparently it did not occur to Augustine that his opponents could simply reply that demons, too, will die! He also argues that his opponents are overlooking one crucial thing: “there is something which is greater than the body,” namely the soul. This is his key response: “For the spirit, whose presence animates and rules the body, can both suffer pain and cannot die. Here then is something which, though it can feel pain, is immortal.” Contrary to the protests of some traditionalists, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was crucial to Augustine's case for eternal torment. He then adds the mistaken claim that even the salamander can live in flames but is not killed by them, and throws in an anecdote about peacock meat lasting for a very long time after being cooked! In the chapters that follow, Augustine declares that as for the bodies of the lost, God will miraculously preserve them alive so that they can suffer endlessly in the flames of hell. He argues that the physical flames of hell will torment immaterial evil spirits. He argues that the punishment will not be temporary because the Scripture calls the punishment “eternal.” It is here in Augustine's “City of God” that the now familiar list of proof texts for the doctrine of eternal torment was first amassed. Read chapters 20 and 21 for yourself. If you're familiar with the way that previous church fathers — even those who believed in eternal torment — wrote, you'll recognize that this is something new. This was almost a systematic case for eternal torment, and due to its length (compared with anything that had come before) and Augustine's

major influence, it became the standard. It took some time for dissenters to again be heard with any significant volume against this backdrop.

But prior to Augustine this was not the case. Yes, a number of Christians believed what is now the traditional doctrine of hell (although most modern believers would take issue with their literalness when it came to the fires). Many did not make their thoughts clearly known one way or the other. And a number of them did not believe this view, teaching instead that immortality is to be found in Christ alone, and that those who reject Christ will one day be no more. It would be a mistake to think that these were isolated views. These teachings date from the earliest times, and the people noted here were teachers in the church, with the apostolic fathers being read alongside Scripture by Christians everywhere, and teachers like Irenaeus and Athanasius holding considerable sway. If this is what the leaders were teaching, we can be sure that many in the Christian communities taught by them also believed. With the rise in the number of Christians today who affirm these teachings, we may well be seeing a resurgence of early Christian theology.

About Dr. Glenn Andrew Peoples

Dr. Glenn Peoples runs Say Hello to my Little Friend, a popular blog and podcast on philosophy, theology and social issues.

THE MORTAL GOD: WOULD JESUS HAVE DIED ANY- WAY? WAS JESUS MORTAL?

Was Jesus mortal? Jesus died to save people from their sin. That has always been at the heart of the gospel. But was Jesus mortal, like us?

This is a question I've seen posed a number of times. On the

face of it, the question seems a bit strange. Jesus had arteries. He had a brain. He had lungs and internal organs. Things can go wrong with these things; cut them, hit them too hard, inhale the wrong things or fall from too great a height, and you'll die, guaranteed. But to die in these ways is not just to die. Jesus didn't just die. He was killed — crucified, as the Creed recalls, "crucified, died and was buried." Obviously he was killed. The question is about what would have happened if nobody had killed Jesus. What would have happened then? Maybe he was immortal in the way that the elves of Tolkien's Middle-Earth were immortal. They can be killed, but if they're not killed, they won't die. Was Jesus like this? If he had not been crucified, would he still be walking around among us today? Could he ever have gotten sick — perhaps even terminally ill? Would he have gotten grey hair or tooth decay?

Some of the examples may seem to trivialize the important question, but they don't — they draw attention to the sort of question we're asking. The question is asking us whether or not Jesus, when he lived his earthly life in Judea, suffered all the limitations and afflictions, including death itself, that the rest of us are lumbered with. The question, I think, represents the worry that if Jesus could have died of old age (or gotten sick, or perhaps any number of "human" things), then somehow his uniqueness is undercut. If he could have done any of those things, then he's not really the divine son of God, he's "just" a man. This way of thinking about Jesus, in my view, reaches its absurd heights in the Christmas carol: *Away in a Manger*. I'm sure many of you have sung: "The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." Are you kidding me?

An ancient error

This isn't just a modern sentimental error. It's a view of Jesus that the orthodox Christians condemned in the early church, a view called docetism. This view was closely associated with the

broader point of view called gnosticism. In this view, Jesus wasn't really one of us. He wasn't human, because a really divine being just can't be human. The physical world was a nasty, inherently corrupt thing, and the idea that a divine being could become a person who inhabited this place — or even worse, who was part of it — was unthinkable (this is the wider Gnostic view). Docetism comes from the Greek term *δόκησις* (*dokēsis*) meaning “apparition” or phantom, something that only seems to be there but isn't really. That's exactly what Christ did, in the docetic view; he seemed to be human, but he wasn't really human. Popular versions of docetism can be seen in, for example, the Ebionite movement. Here, Jesus was seen as a normal human man in every way, until his baptism. At his baptism, the spirit of Christ descended upon Jesus, empowering him for his incredible ministry. But since gods do not die, the Ebionite view taught that as Jesus hung on the cross, the spirit of Christ departed, leaving the mere man Jesus to die.

As soon as the early Church started to wrestle with the question of God in Christ, living and dying among us, it rejected docetism. Jesus was really a man. And yet, it's often the case that we verbally reject things that we know we should reject, while being influenced by them all the same. This is true in terms of sin — we condemn materialism, lust and pride, but we still know full well that these things affect us. The same is true of ideas. Yes, Christianity condemned docetism, and yet at the same time there has always been a reluctance to make Jesus “too low,” or too human.

Jürgen Moltmann described the tension like this:

“The Christology of the early church had to come to grips with ... objections derived from the concept of God assumed in antiquity. The more it emphasized the divinity of Christ, making use of this concept of God, the more difficult it became to demonstrate that the Son of God who was of one substance with God was Jesus of Nazareth, crucified under Pontius Pilate. Consequently, a mild docetism runs through the Christology of the ancient church. Anyone who began with the question about

what was ‘above’ in terms of the question of God and salvation, as posed in antiquity, found it hard in any real sense to find an answer ‘below,’ in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, and even harder to find an answer in the abandonment by God of the crucified Jesus.”¹

In other words, the more strongly people emphasized the idea of a God who is changeless, aloof and entirely “other,” the more difficult it was to think of God coming to us in the form of this man in sandals who wandered around the Israeli landscape and who was nailed to a cross.

For the biblical writers, the death of Jesus, the son of God, was horrible, perhaps even terrifying and mysterious, but a fact of history. The “sun’s light,” says Luke, “failed,” signifying that something truly unthinkable had occurred. Before his death, Jesus saw it coming and agonized in Gethsemane. The Apostles were adamant that the savior they proclaimed, the truly divine Son of God, had really died. It is there in Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, the first public proclamation of the risen Lord: The one who was crucified and had been dead is the same one who was raised up and given the name above all others. Docetism is off the table as real option for believers in Jesus. Jesus didn’t just appear to be a mortal man, he really was.

The emptying of Christ

The human condition isn’t simply the fact that others can kill us. It’s a loss of harmony; with God, with each other, with creation. After God drove Adam and Eve from Eden in the story of creation and the fall, the climax of the curse that God pronounced was that they would return to the dust from which they were taken, for “dust you are, and to dust you will return.” The penalty was separation from God and therefore from life, resulting in death.

This is (partly) why it is important to see that Christ’s humiliation, his act of lowering himself is not just about the fact that he gave up his life. Of course that’s the thing we all remember for

obvious reasons, but when Paul called on Christians to follow Jesus' example in serving others, he didn't go straight to the crucifixion. Here is how he described that example, in Philippians 2:

“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Yes, Jesus' humility included his obedience all the way up to the point of death, but it started before then. The very fact that Jesus became human at all was the big step here. He lowered himself, or as the Greek term used in verse 7 (*ἐκένωσεν, ekenosen*) indicates, he emptied himself (a concept referred to in theology as *kenosis*). He took on a status that was lower than what was his by right — and not just a status, but he took the very form of a servant. This was no mere illusion. The New Testament writers made it clear that Jesus didn't commit any sin (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5:21 or 1 Peter 2:22), but in order to save us, he had to truly become one of us and be treated as though he had sinned (or as Paul told the Corinthians in the passage just cited, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us”). It would have done no good for Jesus to identify with an immortal, glorious, invincible version of us — people like that hardly need redeeming. In becoming one of the people he came to save, Jesus came, as it were, “all the way down” to where we are.

Jesus identifies with those he came to save

One thing I say every time I talk about the incarnation is that in it, Jesus identified with us, embracing the very thing he would raise up and glorify, namely broken, finite, frail, mortal humanity. The writer of Hebrews (whoever he or she was) opens the

book by talking about Jesus the great high priest. In making a point that might seem a bit strange to our ears, the writer stresses that in Christ, God wasn't setting out to save angels, but human beings (specifically, the children of Abraham, as mentioned in 2:16). But in order to become a priest for us, we are told, "he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." In every respect! The same writer stresses, perhaps more than any other New Testament author, the way in which Jesus truly identified with us as one of us. In chapter 5 it is explained that Jesus was like a high priest, who acts "on behalf of men in relation to God" (v. 1), and who "can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness" (v. 2). Most likely referring to Jesus' prayers in Gethsemane just prior to his execution, the writer went on to say in verse 7:

"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence."

Part and parcel of Jesus emptying himself and becoming one of us — and showing us what "us" should look like in the process — was the example that he set for us in being entirely dependent on his Father. The writer of Hebrews is not alone in saying that even for his very life, Jesus looked to the Father to provide and sustain. Jesus' dependence on his Father is seen in his trusting his spirit to him in death (Luke 23:46), relying on him to receive it back again in resurrection, just as we, too, as followers of Christ can face death in the hope of resurrection. This is what Stephen did as he was being stoned to death, praying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit (Acts 7:59)." Similarly, Paul reassured the church in Rome in Romans 8:11 with these words:

"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."

The purpose of these words was clearly to give the reader hope in the face of death, not to offer a detailed explanation of

Christology, but Paul lets slip what appears to have been taken for granted by the Christian community: Jesus was a mortal dependant on the Father, who raised him back to life just as he will also do for us. In fact, Paul's entire theology of the resurrection of believers is informed by his understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15, the most lengthy discussion of the resurrection of the saints in the New Testament, Paul describes Jesus as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep," a term illustrating the way that Paul saw what happened to Jesus as a sample of what will happen to those who belong to him — the rest of those who have fallen asleep but who, unlike Jesus, are still asleep. And what will happen to those people, Paul went on to say, is that "this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality." Jesus was — just as we will be — transformed from corruptible and mortal to incorruptible and immortal. What these passages of Scripture show us about Jesus is that he stood in our place in receiving conditional immortality. By making himself absolutely subject to the sustaining power of God, not relying on being inherently but instead depending on the one who could raise him from the dead, Jesus not only becomes like one of us, but in doing so he shows us precisely what we are.

So the answer is yes. Jesus certainly was mortal, and the fact that God the Son became a mortal human being, subject to all of our weaknesses and limitations, and raised and glorified that human life through the resurrection, is precisely what assures us that our own mortal, frail selves will be raised and glorified with him. Our God really became one of us in all of our frailness and brokenness in every way except sin, so that he could raise us up and restore us.

References

- ¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 89.

About Dr. Glenn Andrew Peoples

Dr. Glenn Peoples runs Right Reason, a popular blog featuring the Say hello to my Little Friend podcast on theology, philosophy and social issues.

* * * * *

A CHRISTIAN'S APOLOGY TO ATHEISTS

Republished with permission from Doug Smith at EndlessHellEnded.com. Copyright 2011, all rights reserved. Please visit EndlessHellEnded.com for more information or to request a free copy of the e-book "Endless Hell Ended."

Dear Unbelieving Friend,

I'm writing to apologize to you. My fellow Christians and I have misrepresented the Bible to you and shared a false message. In so doing, we have kept you from knowing the God who made you.

Our most serious failure is our traditional doctrine that after death, people who don't follow Christ will suffer endless conscious torment in hell. Our message has been: "God loves you and sent his Son to die for your sins so you can live with him forever. However, if you don't accept his gift, you will burn in hell for an endless eternity." The endless hell part is not actually the Bible's message. Our tradition has blinded us to the true message of the Bible. In many ways we have held our orthodoxy as more important than the God of the Scriptures himself. Rightly, you have rejected this message. Unfortunately, but understandably, you've thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

Years ago, I was among those who held tightly to the church's teaching on the subject of an endless hell. Even though it was unfathomable to me, I was a new believer so I just accepted the

traditional view. I think most of my brothers and sisters in Christ are like I was.

After a few years as a Christian, I began an intense study of the Scriptures for myself and found that the Bible doesn't actually teach that hell will last for an endless eternity. It teaches that God is loving and just, and his justice is measured, merciful and fits the crime. Those who reject him will be punished for their sins, then will cease to exist in literal, endless death.

I also very much regret that I have kept silent for so long on the truth from the Bible. I have been cowardly, afraid to displease fellow believers who sometimes question the faith of those who question traditional doctrines like this one. My sincere hope is that you would forgive us and reconsider your own views. If your foundation for rejecting Christ's message is that his followers have condemned you to an eternal hell for rejecting him, then you no longer have that excuse.

The God who made you really does love you. He really did send his Son to die for your sins and mine, and raised him from a literal death to credibly offer a real, eternal life to everyone who would follow him. This gift is available to everyone.

Now that you have read this, please give God and the Bible another chance. Study it for yourself and see what it really says. Don't be like I was, clinging to your unbelieving tradition so intensely that you don't think for yourself anymore. What's the risk in requesting our free e-book and learning to read the Bible for what it actually says?

I would love to have a dialog with anyone who is interested in finding out more, whether privately, through email or in person.

Written by Doug Smith at EndlessHellEnded.com. Copyright 2011, all rights reserved. Please visit EndlessHellEnded.com for more information or to request a free copy of the e-book "Endless Hell Ended."

* * * * *

TRACING THE ROAD TO GEHENNA

Gehenna (Conditional Immortality Association Conference address May 5, 2012)

Introduction

Our task for this article is to trace the steps from Genesis through to the development of the NT concept of Gehenna — translated as “hell” in our English Bibles.

Many of us will be familiar with the fact that there are also other words that have been translated as “hell” in our English Bibles.

Sheol = The Hebrew word in the OT used for the place of the dead. Its meaning moves between the ideas of the grave, underworld and the state of the dead. It is used more than 60 times and most frequently in the Psalms.

Hades = The unseen place of the departed — the lower regions — the grave. It is the Greek word substituted for Sheol by the translators of the Septuagint LXX (200 BC). It is used in the NT 10 times. Only in Luke 16:23 are people spoken of as being conscious there — yet in a parable!

Tartarus = The deepest abyss for the incarceration of disobedient “angels.” The term is used only once in 2 Peter 2:4 but shows up in the Jewish writings that pre-date the NT.

Gehenna = Used 11 times in the NT. Ten of those times by the Lord Jesus himself in the gospel accounts and once in James 3:6. The Hebrew term Gehenna is derived from the Hebrew *gehinnom*, the Valley of Hinnom, which lay just outside ancient Jerusalem.

Was Gehenna a Perpetual Burning Rubbish Dump in the 1st Century?

It has been popularly said that the Lord Jesus borrowed the imagery of Gehenna from a perpetually lit rubbish dump outside

Jerusalem that was used for consuming the cities rubbish and even to destroy the godless. It is understood that such graphic imagery would have helped Jesus to convey what the end-time judgment will be like. Apparently this idea was first written about in a commentary by a Rabbi by the name of David Kimhi who lived around A.D. 1200.

However, this notion of Gehenna as a perpetual rubbish dump has been contested by some notable scholars. Herman Strack and Paul Billerbeck, scholars of Judaism and its related writings, state that there is neither archaeological nor literary evidence to support this claim in either the early intertestamental literature or later rabbinic sources. In 1986 Lloyd R. Bailey in his book “The Topography of Hell” came to the same conclusion.

There is evidence, however, that part of the valley was used for a cemetery over many centuries due to a number of burial chambers that have been found there by archaeologists (6th cent. BC – 1st cent. AD). Also the Romans apparently performed cremations there in the first century. Perhaps these facts may have influenced Rabbi Kahli’s speculation that the valley was a perpetual rubbish dump in Christ’s day.

So if the Lord Jesus did not draw his imagery from the popular concept of the “rubbish dump” where did he draw the concept from?

To answer this question we now turn to the OT account of Genesis to see if we can find any reference to its origin there.

The Genesis Account — Judgment & Death

At the outset we notice that the “Valley of Hinnom,” from which developed the concept of Gehenna, was nowhere near the Garden of Eden that we read about in Genesis chapters 1–3. It was geographically located just outside the city of Jerusalem in the New World following the Flood. However, what we do find at the outset of the OT is the all important general theme of “judgment” which we could liken to an umbrella under which all later concepts, such as Gehenna, need to be considered.

We are told that this “judgement” for sin, in Genesis, entails nothing more than the ultimate price of death — “from dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19). When God confronted Adam and Eve with their act of disobedience, in taking from the fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they were to pay with their lives. It was only by a remarkable act of grace that God took the lives of animals, as a substitute, to extend the lives of the first human beings in order to perpetuate the human race — “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21).

This would be the model, or pattern followed in the OT sacrificial system, upon which we would be redeemed by our Lord and Savior’s atoning death as our substitute. Therefore, the judgment of God, upon sin, was death.

As Paul so succinctly writes in Romans —
“The wages of sin is death!” (Romans 6:23).

Israel’s Introduction to the Valley of Hinnom

So thus far, from the very outset, there is no mention of the “Valley of Hinnom,” from which developed the concept of Gehenna, until we read of it for the very first time in Joshua (near the end of the 15th century B.C.). We are introduced to it after the Israelites had entered into the Promised Land of Canaan when the land was being described for allotment to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

“Then it ran up the Valley of Ben Hinnom along the slope of the Jebusite city (that is Jerusalem). From there it climbed up to the top of the hill west of the Hinnom Valley at the northern end of the Valley of Rephaim (Joshua 15:8).

“The boundary went down to the foot of the hill facing the Valley of Ben Hinnom, north of the Valley of Rephaim. It continued down the Hinnom Valley along the southern slope of the Jebusite city and so to En Rogel” (Joshua 18:16).

So, thus far, the Valley of Ben Hinnom is described as nothing more than a geographical location.

The Horrors of Canaanite Practices in the Valley of Hinnom

We now pause to consider what took place in this valley.

But before we do, I want to draw attention to the fact that many people believe that God is cruel and unfair because in the book of Joshua, from which we have just read about the Valley of Ben Hinnom, God instructed the Israelites to destroy all the human life in the land that God had told them to take possession of.

Why? Well for one reason the existing inhabitants of Canaan, whom the Israelites were told to dispossess through annihilation, had been sacrificing their children to a god by the name of Molech for centuries. This practice was a detestable way of treating human life in the eyes of the Sovereign God who made heaven and earth.

We read in Leviticus 18, after listing all the sexual sins that characterized the Canaanite inhabitants — “Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 18:21).

In other words, do not follow the evil practices of the Canaanites, whom God used the Israelites to remove from the land, after the land becomes yours.

Who was Molech and Where or What was Topheth?

Who was Molech and how were the Canaanite’s children sacrificed to him? In the Valley of Ben Hinnom there was what was termed a high place called Topheth. The etymology of the word Topheth might suggest a fire place and also shame. It was here that the Canaanites burnt their children to death in the fires lit for sacrifice. This was appalling, detestable and inconceivable. No wonder these people had to be destroyed.

The Israelites Followed Suit

It is difficult to imagine any culture on earth becoming so depraved. However consider this: King Ahaz of Judah (732 –

715BC), seven centuries after the Israelites entered the Promised Land, along with making cast idols for worshipping the Baals, sacrificed his sons in the Valley of Ben Hinnom.

He burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his sons in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites” (2 Chronicles 28:3).

This is shocking!

However, if that is not enough, King Manasseh of Judah (696 – 686 BC) continued the practice into the next generation.

“In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his sons in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger” (2 Chronicles 33:5–6).

The grandson of this evil King Manasseh, Josiah, who came to the throne at only 8 years old (640 – 609 BC), attempted to reform Judah in the hope of averting God’s judgment upon the nation for these practices.

“He desecrated Topheth, which was in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, so no one could use it to sacrifice his son or daughter in the fire to Molech” (2 Kings 23:10).

How could the Jews, of all people, stoop so low?

These practices certainly put color into the geography of Ben Hinnom now don’t they? We note that our contemporary traditions around the NT Gehenna (as a place for disembodied eternal conscious torment) is not remotely related to what we have looked at so far.

Anyway, what was God to do with his chosen people?

The Valley of Ben Hinnom in the Writings of the Prophets

We now turn to consider the writings of the OT prophets, in regards to the geographical location of Ben Hinnom, in search of further illumination to the development of the NT concept of Gehenna that the Lord Jesus used.

Jeremiah is the only prophet to take up the imagery of the Valley of Ben Hinnom in his writings. He does so in order to use the graphic horror of fiery sacrifice in order to confront Judah's sin. Although Jeremiah is the only prophet to draw on the place name Ben Hinnom, in the prophet Isaiah we do have one reference to Topheth, which was the high place in the Valley of Ben Hinnom for these child sacrifices.

"Topheth has long been prepared; it has been made ready for the king. Its fire pit has been made deep and wide, with an abundance of fire and wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of burning sulphur, sets it ablaze" (Isaiah 30:33).

We see here, in Isaiah, that Topheth has been conceptually modified into a place prepared for a future judgment upon Israel's enemies. The "king," to whom the prophecy is referring to, is the king of Assyria (see Isaiah 30:31). It is interesting to note how familiar the language of the breath of the Lord is in the way it sets its wood on fire and a stream of burning sulphur sets it ablaze. (Compare Revelation 14:10; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8).

The Valley of Hinnom Becomes an Image of Judgment for Jerusalem's Sin

However, Jeremiah's conceptual modification of Ben Hinnom, is of the greatest interest to us as we pursue this subject; particularly in light of his message being delivered in relation to the imminent judgment upon Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

We read —

"The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes declares the Lord. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it. They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire — something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming declares the Lord, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. Then the carcasses of the people will become food for

the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away” (Jeremiah 7:30–33).

Now, for the first time, the Valley of Ben Hinnom has become a scene of future judgment upon those of Jerusalem. It is a judgment that bears strong similarity to how the earlier Kings Ahaz and Manasseh sacrificed their children to the god Molech. The cup that they filled up is now the cup that the prophet has them drinking from. Notice the familiar end-time language of the birds of the air and the beasts of the field feeding on the slain (compare Revelation 19:21) — but more importantly note that it is the Jews who are in view here!

Let’s read some further on in Jeremiah chapter 19 of this use of Ben Hinnom as a place of judgment against Jerusalem.

“This is what the Lord says, ‘Go and buy a clay jar from the potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests and go out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. There proclaim the words I tell you, and say, “Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Listen! I am going to bring disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears them tingle. For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fires as offerings to Baal — something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. In this place I will ruin the plans of Judah and Jerusalem. I will make them fall by the sword before their enemies, at the hands of those who seek their lives, and I will give their carcasses as food to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth” ’ ” (Jeremiah 19:1–7).

Ben Hinnom is referred to once again in Jeremiah 32:30–41. However, in that chapter, we are told that even though they

sacrificed their children in Ben Hinnom, God will still show mercy on them and gather them back to Jerusalem following the imminent Babylonian invasion. So from the writings of Jeremiah Ben-Hinnom appears to have been used as a Jewish prophetic metaphor for temporal historical judgments upon the Jews. These prophecies on Judah and Jerusalem should be factored in to our considerations of the concept of Gehenna, under the general umbrella of God's judgment, when we read of it in the NT.

Jesus Christ's teaching on Gehenna

So what do we now find in our 10 usages of the concept of Gehenna off the Lord Jesus' own lips? (Matthew 5:22, 29–30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5).

First, in the very Jewish book of Matthew, note that it is used six times. Yet in the very Gentile book of Luke it is used only once.

Only in the one reference in Mark (9:48) does Jesus combine the term Gehenna with the imagery of the “unquenchable fire and worm that dieth not” that we find in Isaiah 66:24. In Isaiah those who are subjected to the unquenchable fire and non-perishing worm perish! It is only the righteous in verse 22 who are said to endure before God. This is not an ethereal image but an image rooted in this physical world. The wider context of the chapter, in which we find this “fire and worm” verse, tells us clearly that the ungodly are slain (Isaiah 66:16).

Further, the other well known imagery of the “weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth,” which has its origins in Psalm 112:10, is never connected to the technical term Gehenna (compare Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30 and note that all the references are in Matthew). It is, however, used to convey that the Jews, who thought that they were guaranteed heirs of the kingdom, will react this way when they are shut out and others, whom they naturally excluded, are invited in. From the original source in Psalm 112:10 these, gnashing their teeth, are said to waste away and all their hopes perish along with them.

We find that that this term Gehenna is being used, in its original setting, to address Jews who presumably would have known of Jeremiah's development of the concept into a future judgment reserved for Jerusalem's sin.

So, was the concept of Gehenna, as developed in the writings of Jeremiah, intended for a specific audience's ears? Was Jesus drawing on the scriptural associations that his original Jewish audience would have been familiar with?

Why Such an Absence of Gehenna in the Rest of the NT?

The reason that I ask this question is because the term Gehenna is never used in Acts, in Paul's writings, Peter's writings, John's writings and even in the Book of Revelation with all its graphic apocalyptic imagery.

The only other use of the word is found in James 3:6 where we read —

“The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6).

James does not give us many clues as to how the fire of Gehenna can light the tongue. Perhaps James is drawing associations with the level of depraved evil, practiced in historical Ben Hinnom, as a similar evil that can motivate the misuse of the human tongue. Certainly he is writing very creatively.

Conclusion

If the Lord Jesus' teaching on Gehenna was aimed at a particular Jewish audience, for which the concept of Gehenna was a prophetic judgment upon Jerusalem, as we have seen in the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, is it appropriate that we use it today? None of the NT writers used it but for James. Or should we treat the technical concept of Gehenna as a concept synonymous with the future judgment of fire?

There are many references in the NT to fire being the agent used in the final judgment to purge the world of sin (e.g.

1 Corinthians 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:7; Hebrews 10:27; 2 Peter 3:7). Perhaps using the term “fire” is a much less loaded word than using the prophetic Jewish concept of Gehenna? Perhaps the technical term Gehenna simply didn’t hold currency in the Gentile world. So what do we all think?

About Armand Newrick

Armand Newrick has had a keen interest in theology since his teenage conversion and came to the conditionalist position about eight years into his walk with the Lord. He is married to Suzanne, and they have two children, Daniel and Emma.

* * * * *

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOPE

In order for anyone to live life to the full it is essential to have hope. For the Christian, hope is seizing the promise of life and salvation. We wait for the blessed hope of the appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). Our hope is secure as no other hope can be! There are three things to remember about the Christian hope:

1. Our hope is not in ourselves. We do not trust in riches (Job 31:24) or our own personal righteousness (Ezekiel 33:13). Jeremiah 17:5 says, “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for strength.” Job 11:20 says, “But the eyes of the wicked will fail, and escape will elude them; their hope will become a dying gasp.” Even to the very core of our being we are “nothing but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27). There is nothing within us — no inner light, no immortal soul — to trust for our salvation. Trusting in ourselves is no hope at all (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

2. Our hope is in Christ. Our hope rests not on an idea, but on the person of Jesus Christ who is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). He alone can guarantee us an inheritance that is imperishable (1 Peter 1:3, 4). He was dead but now is alive forever and ever! (Revelation 1:18). His resurrection laid the foundation for our hope of eternal life and delivered us from false hopes that are for this life only (1 Corinthians 15:19). I was he who brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10). It is Christ in us which is the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27).
3. Our hope empowers us to live in the present. Because we await the realization of our hope in the return of our Lord, our time of hope is also a time of watching (Mark 13:33–37). At the same time our hope should cause us to labor and strive in this world. And more than anything else we should strive for the salvation of others (1 Timothy 4:10). If we really have Christ, the hope of glory, within us, shouldn't we share him, because he is the world's only hope, with those who are "without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12)?

About David Burge

David Burge was the editor of "From Death to Life" for six years and the chairperson of the Conditional Immortality Association of New Zealand from 1993 until his death in 2010 from Leukemia. He pastored the Takanini Church in Auckland, New Zealand for 12 years and he had cerebral palsy. He was the father of eight and dearly beloved husband of Tarnya.

* * * * *

AFTERLIFE: AFTER OR BEYOND?

Afterlife: After or Beyond? Apologist Dinesh D'Souza spent

years studying how the various cultures of the world viewed the afterlife. Among his conclusions was that there was remarkable similarity among the three “Abrahamic” religions. He said “ ... in all three cases (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) there is an official teaching and an unofficial teaching. ... The official teaching is bodily resurrection. ... The alternative, unofficial, view is the immortality of the soul. In this view the body perishes but the soul lives on. Oddly enough, this idea is first articulated not in biblical or Quranic sources, but rather in Greek philosophy.”¹

He attributes the view’s popularity to Plato. He states that “Life after death is not exclusively a religious belief but is also one that is shared by Western philosophy going back to Plato.”² He credits Augustine for making it standard doctrine within Christianity. It was a slight twist of emphasis in theological anthropology. According to D’Souza, “Christianity since Augustine does not espouse life ‘after’ death, but rather life ‘beyond’ death.”³

D’souza was ready to concede that this evolved view is more appropriate for Christianity, and set out to prove it by means of science, philosophy and practical reason. His arguments only prove what we conditionalists have championed all along: the doctrine of innate immortality is not proven by Scripture, because Scripture teaches something else. It makes a great deal of difference whether one believes in life after death (all conditionalists do), or life beyond death.

Theology proper

To suggest that all human beings continue to live beyond their apparent deaths is to say that all human beings are immortal. The Bible clearly claims that only God has the attribute of immortality.⁴ The only way the proponents of traditionalism have of responding to this fact is by borrowing another idea from Plato — the concept of dualism. Dualism teaches that human beings are made up of two parts, the body and the soul. Plato taught that the body dies, but that the soul lives on, and always will. Traditionalists imagine that when Paul asserted

that only God has immortality, he must have referred to the fact God never experiences bodily death, the way his creatures do. However, conditionalists see Paul making a more fundamental statement. Plato's claims had been taught for four centuries. The readers of 1 Timothy knew about his claims. Paul's claims about life after death had to either agree with Plato's or reject them. Paul rejected the concept of life beyond death. God's attribute of immortality was exclusive to him alone.

Anthropology

The notion of life continuing beyond death instead of being revived by resurrection after death suggests that human beings are endowed by their Creator with not only a right to life, but also with the inability to actually die. The Bible teaches the opposite — that human beings are mortal.

“Then the LORD said, “My Spirit will not put up with humans for such a long time, for they are only mortal flesh.”⁵

“Take note of my brief lifespan! Why do you make all people so mortal?”⁶

“Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an image resembling mortal human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.”⁷

The Resurrection

The only biblical teaching that suggests a possibility of changing our destiny of death is the hope of the resurrection. Paul taught the Corinthians that our resurrection day will be our day of victory.

“For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’”⁸

The proponents of the life beyond death philosophy would have us believe that the real victory has already happened. As they would have it, we do not have to wait for the resurrection to swallow up death, because death is merely an illusion. Our victory over it is found in the fact that we were created to survive it. Yet, that is not what the apostle said. Paul said that the victory will happen if and when the resurrection occurs.

Translators, seeking to justify their own view of life beyond death, simply insert the word “body” or “bodies” in the text of 1 Corinthians 15:53.⁹ The word is not in the original Greek text, nor is it implied. Paul was not talking about a partial victory. The whole person (not just his body) will become imperishable and immortal at the resurrection, because the whole person is perishable and mortal before the resurrection.

It is for that very reason that Paul claims his purpose in life is not to survive death, but to be raised to life after death.

“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith — that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”¹⁰

The Wages of Sin

The Bible teaches that the wages of sin is death,¹¹ but if people are found to survive it, and have an automatic eternal life beyond it, then death is not real. The wages are paid with bogus, fake, Monopoly money. If people just “cross the Jordan” and are found on the other side of “the great divide” — then death turns out to be a blessing, not a punishment. Yet, the Bible is clear that death

came upon all people as a consequence of our ancestors' sins. The Bible says "in Adam all die."¹² The tactic that many people take in evangelization is to immediately deny that fact. The first thing they tell the unbeliever is that they will never die, no matter what. No wonder that so many people reject their "good news." They immediately deny the "bad news."

The truth is, we all die. Those cemeteries are full of people, not just bones. Those tombs will one day be opened at the sound of Christ's second coming, and the people within them will come out. Jesus said, "Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment."¹³ They are bound to those graves until then. They are imprisoned in a dark, silent place, which the Hebrews called Sheol. The Greeks called it Hades. We call it the grave.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus has the keys to that place. He can set people free from their imprisonment. He proclaimed, "I have the keys of Death and Hades."¹⁴ To suggest that death is really not a prison in which people are confined before the resurrection is to — again — reject the Bible's good news for some other good news. It is to say to Jesus, "You can keep your keys, death and Hades are not so bad." To relish in life beyond death is to reject God's plan to rescue us by Jesus. It is to swallow the original lie of Satan in the garden, that we will not surely die.¹⁵ It is to presume that we are all born without the need of rescue. It does not do justice to what God actually says about death. Death is not a friend, giving us entrance into the Father's presence. It is an enemy, (1 Corinthians 15:26.) keeping us from our eternal destiny with him.

Final Punishment

Insisting that everyone continues to live beyond death also circumvents the great warning that reverberates throughout Scripture. People are constantly challenged to repent of their

sins and turn to God because he will ultimately and permanently judge and destroy all those who do not. The wages of our ancestors' sin is the first death, but the wages of our personal sins is the second death.¹⁶ The difference between the two deaths is made clear: from the first death everyone will be raised,¹⁷ but the second death is in a lake of fire. The fire cannot be put out until it has destroyed all within it. From that death there will be no resurrection. Those who are found in that fire will suffer the "punishment of eternal destruction."¹⁸

Life After Death

The good news that the Bible proclaims is that through Jesus Christ those who believe in him can have resurrection life after their deaths, not a continuation of disembodied life beyond death. One advantage of holding to this good news rather than accepting the counterfeit good news is that it is what D'Souza calls the "official teaching" of the Bible, rather than the popular "alternative, unofficial view." We conditionalists need never resort to having to prove our view by practical reason and science alone. We have God's word on it.

Another advantage of proclaiming life after death through the resurrection is that it is actually what people are really after. As much as a traditionalist might boast about his desire for going to heaven, he will spend his entire fortune to delay the trip. What people really want is to be alive — fully and functionally alive, and to enjoy God and the universe that he created for us. His plan for us is a new heaven and a new earth, restored to its holiness and spiritual vitality. That is our destiny, and it is a certainty for all who are in Christ. But that great event will not happen when we die. It will happen when death dies. It will happen after our Savior returns. Come, Lord Jesus.

References

¹ Dinesh D'Souza, *Life After Death: The Evidence*. (Washington: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2009), 42.

- ² D’Souza, 35–36.
- ³ D’Souza, 48.
- ⁴ 1 Timothy 6:16–17.
- ⁵ Genesis 6:3 (NLT)
- ⁶ Psalm 89:47 (NET)
- ⁷ Romans 1:22–23 (NET)
- ⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:53–54 (NASB).
- ⁹ See ESV, NET, NLT, NRSV.
- ¹⁰ Philippians 3:8–11 (ESV).
- ¹¹ Romans 6:23.
- ¹² 1 Corinthians 15:22.
- ¹³ John 5:28–29 (ESV).
- ¹⁴ Revelation 1:18.
- ¹⁵ Genesis 3:4.
- ¹⁶ Revelation 20:14; 21:8.
- ¹⁷ John 5:28–29.
- ¹⁸ 2 Thessalonians 1:9.

About Jefferson Vann

Jefferson Vann is a missionary with Advent Christian General Conference and elder at McAlpin Advent Christian Church in Florida and Relevant Church in Virginia. He and his wife, Penny, serve as Asia Pacific Area Directors and Global Training Coordinators for ACGC Department of World Outreach.

* * * * *

PROLEGOMENA: IS IT GREEK TO YOU?

Looking Ahead to Volume XXXIX, Number 2, Fall 2013.

The next issue of “Henceforth ... ” begins a series of issues, each highlighting a major focus of systematic theology. This is a call for articles for Volume XXXIX, number 2, covering the topics and questions associated with prolegomena: introducing the purpose, role and methods of doing theology. The following bullets might suggest a possible article to contribute for this issue:

- What is theology?
- Is theology important for the normal Christian?
- Debate: Biblical Theology is better than systematic theology (Pro/Con).
- What is the theme of the entire Bible?
- The content of the gospel: Is it best explained by doctrines, symbols or experiences?
- History: What authors and theological works most shaped Advent Christian thought?
- How does theology fit into the disciple making process?

The deadline for article submission is November 1, 2013. Submit your articles by email to me at the address below. Identify yourself with a short biographical section, and format all references as footnotes. Other formatting will be done by ACGC Department of Communication.

Other possible features of this issue:

- reviews of new books authored by Advent Christians.
- lists of resources and training materials recommended for Advent Christian churches.
- letters to the editor, responding to articles in previous issues.

Jefferson Vann
apad@acgc.us