

2. WILL GOD SAVE MY UNCLE?

FRAMING THE FLAMING QUESTION

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In our previous article we posed the question:- Will all who have been brought back to life in the second resurrection be forever lost as they are **thrown into the Lake of Fire which is the second death (Rev. 20:14)**? Let's explore this further.

THREE POSSIBILITIES

The Bible's teaching about the final destiny of every human being who will be raised in that **second resurrection** inevitably comes down to three possible answers: They will ---

1. **Burn On**
2. **Burn Through, or**
3. **Burn Up!**

Simply stated, the first --- and it must be said --- very common option is that every sinner who dies unrepentant and outside of Christ will live in everlasting conscious torment in the flames of hell.

This doomed and pathetic class of humanity will continue to **burn on** in unremitting regret and anguish, subjects of God's relentless holy wrath without reprieve. Those who subscribe to this interpretation are sometimes dubbed "infernalists".

To set the scene --- **frame the flaming question** --- let's read **the Legend of Abba Macarius** as recounted in the *Apophthegmata Patrum (Sayings of the Fathers)*⁽¹⁾ ⁽²⁾;

The holy man **Abba Macarius** (c.300-391) was walking alone in the desert one day when he came upon a human skull lying beside the path and, as he casually moved it aside with his staff, it all at once began to utter words.

Astonished, **Macarius** asked it to identify itself, and it obliged. It told him that in life it had been a pagan high priest who had tended the idols and performed the rites of the people that had once dwelled in those climes. It said also that it recognized **Macarius**, and knew him to be a bearer of the Spirit, one whose prayers actually had the power temporarily to ease the sufferings of the damned.

Hearing this, **Macarius** asked the skull to describe those sufferings. It replied that he and his fellow pagans were forced to stand crowded together, day and night, wrapped from

¹ As recounted by **David Bentley Hart** in *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*, Yale Uni Press, USA, 2019, pp9

² Various ancient Christian collations of anecdotes about the Egyptian "desert fathers" of the Fourth Century.

head to foot in flames, suspended above an abyss of fire stretching as far below their feet as the sky had stretched above their heads when they had lived upon the earth.

Moreover, it added, they were prevented from even looking one another in the face; their eyes had been eternally fixed each upon his neighbour's back. And yet, added the skull, whenever **Macarius** prayed for those poor lost souls, they found themselves momentarily able to glimpse the faces of their fellows after all, for which they were profoundly grateful; for this was the only respite they could ever hope to enjoy amid their unrelenting torments.

On hearing these things **Macarius** began to weep, and declared that it would have been better had the unfortunate priest never been born at all. He then asked whether there were others in hell enduring even greater tortures than these, and the skull told him that indeed there were.

In fact, it said, the suffering visited on him and his fellow pagans was comparatively mild, since they had never known the true God and so had never really had the choice of serving him; immeasurably more terrible were the penalties endured by those plunged deep down in the abyss of fire below, it said, for they *had* known God and had rejected him nevertheless.

In dread, **Macarius** buried the skull and hastened on his way.

To most of us this legend rings about as true as a ghost story such as kids might tell around a campfire for spook value! And yet, throughout history --- certainly from early Middle Ages onwards, and spiced with liberal doses of chilli-hot pagan images --- the belief of “the lost” **burning on** in hellfire *ad infinitum* has been, and still is, staunchly defended as a non-negotiable Gospel-truth for much, if not most, of “orthodox Christianity”.

I myself once treated this **burn on** interpretation as unexamined Bible truth. I preached it with compassion, certainly. And I did appeal earnestly to my listeners to repent and to believe in Christ so as to escape this dreadful and unending fate. If I couldn't bring them to salvation in Christ by pointing to God's love for them, then it was my loving duty to frighten them into it!

It never dawned on me that **Abba Macarius** was more merciful than the god he --- and I --- worshipped! However, I now echo **David Hart's** sentiments that it is exceedingly hard;

Not to notice how viciously vindictive the creator of such a hell would have had to be to have devised so exquisitely malicious a form of torture and to have made it eternal, and how unjust in condemning men and women to undening torment for the “sin” of not knowing him even though he had never revealed himself to them, or for some formally imputed guilt supposedly attaching to them on account of some distant ancestor's transgression.

For me the tale's ultimate lesson would be the one that **Macarius** himself had uttered: “Alas that such a man was ever born!” After all ... if God knows all things, and so knew from everlasting that the final fate of the high priest would be to suffer everlasting torment, then the very choice to create him had been an act of limitless cruelty. (³)

³ Ibid, p11-12

BUT DIDN'T JESUS HIMSELF TALK ABOUT THE FIRES AND TORMENTS OF HELL?

The Bible and its Jesus depicts God's end-time judgments under various headings.

There are parables of rejection and exclusion; like virgin girls being locked out of the marriage feast, or the wedding guest being bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness, or the slothful servant being flogged and cut into pieces.

There are descriptions of torments; like worms gnawing away non-stop, and thirsty souls pleading for a merciful drop of water to cool the tongue, and the smoke of torments forever ascending.

There are pictures of total loss and destruction; annihilation such as chaff being burned up in the oven, and most memorably, those from **the Second Resurrection** who are thrown into the Lake of Fire.

Indeed, the compassionate Jesus himself spoke more about the tragic rejection of those deemed unworthy to enter the Kingdom of God under all these linguistic features than any other single Bible preacher.

But are these graphic images of "hell" literal or figurative? Are they metaphor (figure of speech for comparison) or simile (direct comparison of two things)?

CONFUSING TRANSLATION

The etymology of the word 'hell' comes from Old English *hel* or *helle*, meaning to cover in a concealed place ... a farmer would therefore plant his potatoes in hell! Confusingly though, our English word "hell" translates a variety of Bible terms;

- 1). "Hell" can stand for **Sheol/Hades** which more correctly means the grave. And in that world of the unseen dead, the OT is quite clear: There is no consciousness in the pit for either man or animal for, **both alike return to the dust (Ecc. 3: 19-20)**.
- 2). "Hell" can also translate **Gehenna** which was a real and very physical place in Jesus' day. It was a smoldering rubbish tip in a ravine just outside the city of Jerusalem where all the refuse was tipped and burned. Jesus adopted this familiar smoking and rancid landmark and applied it to the ultimate fate of the Devil and his angels and all who belong to the Kingdom of darkness (**Mat. 25:41**).
- 3). The third case is where "hell" refers to **Tartarus**, a unique prison-house for a particular class of abominable demonic spirits awaiting God's final judgment (**2 Pet. 2:4**). This Greek word occurs only here in the entire New Testament (NT)..

Clearly, the only Greek word that approximates anywhere near to most folks' conceptions of hell is option two. However, many readers of the Bible are not aware that NT images of the fires and anguish of **Gehenna** have already appeared in their OT Scriptures, if not the actual word itself. So, if we are going to correctly interpret what Jesus meant when talking of "hell" we must be faithful to those Old Testament (OT) foundations.

When Jesus warns, for instance, that in “hell” **their worm does not die nor is their fire quenched**, most Bible readers are unaware that he has lifted those images --- the exact words in fact --- straight from the pages of his Hebrew Scriptures! We read;

And they shall ... look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh (Isaiah 66:24).

The context is that the prophet Isaiah is looking over the bodies of those who have been **slain by the LORD (vs. 16, 24)**. Observe that the **fire** and the **worm** are demolishing corpses --- not attacking immortal souls in hell. Note: *It is the worm that never dies. It is the fire that is never put out*. Which is to say, God’s judgment in this case is irreversible. Nothing here about never-ending suffering in a post-mortem **Gehenna!**

The same idea holds true for the phrase, **the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest day and night (Rev. 14:11)**. It is **not** their torment which ascends forever, but rather the smoke. Again the idea is that God’s judgment has achieved its purpose. Of course there will be torment when it dawns upon those who hear of their terrible sentence, but it is only temporal anguish. The picture is one of God’s complete and inescapable judgment! (⁴) (⁵)

APPEALING TO SODOM & GOMORRAH

Both Old and New Testaments cite the historical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as examples of this kind of God’s judgment upon incorrigible sinners. In fact, they are held up as a kind of template as to what the future judgment upon the unrepentant wicked will look like (Lk 17:28-30; 2 Pet. 2: 6; Jude 7);

Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which ... indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire (Jude 7).

The **fire and sulphur** which destroyed those sinners and consumed the cities to a heap of ashes is described as **eternal fire**. There is no thought here that the people from Sodom & Gomorrah are still suffering and **burning on** in consciousness in the **eternal fire**. They are now just a heap of ashes. Thus, the fire is not eternal because the flames are still literally burning. It is **eternal fire** because the judgment achieved its purpose in this present world.

ETERNAL DOES NOT MEAN FOREVER AND EVER WITHOUT END!

So, we must understand that when the Bible speaks of something as “eternal” that it relates to a period of time, whether extremely long or quite short. It is in fact, an ambiguous word of indeterminate duration, and the context in each use will determine the span of time. (⁶)

⁴ Other similar expressions from the OT such as the wicked being **thrown into the outer darkness** and **weeping and crying out in anguish with gnashing teeth**, etc. are found in passages such as Zeph. 1: 14; Amos 5: 16-20; 8: 9-10; Mal. 4:1-3.

⁵ The phrase, **and they have no rest day nor night**, should not be taken any more literally than the picture of beheaded martyrs under a piece of furniture (the altar) who are crying out to God for redress (Rev. 6: 9-11). Great caution must be exercised when building doctrines from the *genre* of apocalyptic literature which is full of symbolism.

⁶ **Eternal life** is more literally, **the life of the age to come**, and does not of itself mean “forever”. “Eternal life” is **the new age of Messiah** --- and it has an end point. It is alternately called **The Millennium (The Thousand Years)** and culminates when

For example, when the equivalent Hebrew word *'olam* is translated in the Greek LXX it reads that an indentured servant shall serve his master **for ever (aion)** (Deut. 15: 17). Here, *for ever extends only for as long as the master shall live --- the lifespan of a single person!*

In the case of the sinners of Sodom & Gomorrah the description “eternal” is limited to the punishment meted out in that past stage of history. After all, Jesus has predicted that the sinners of Sodom & Gomorrah will yet arise in the end-time judgments and condemn his generation for their failure to acknowledge his mighty works (Matt. 10: 15; 112:24).

Horrific as these images of judgment are, nowhere in all of the entire Bible is there a description of a kingdom of perpetual cruelty presided over by the Devil and his demonic minions. We can thank post-Biblical Greek Platonism and paganism for that idea.

WHY HAS THE DOCTRINE OF EVERLASTING HELLFIRE BEEN SO PREDOMINANT?

Since the Bible does not say that “the lost” will consciously **burn on** forever and ever in hellfire, how is it that such a diabolical slur on the great God of heaven has taken such a firm hold in much of Chrsitendom?

The short answer is that the further Christianity left it's Hebrew Scriptures and dabbled into Greek philosophical concepts (such as Plato's “immortal soulism” and Christ's putative “consubstantial” and “hypostatic union of two natures” within the Godhead's one “essence” --- whatever that means!?) the more the church lost her apostolic power. As **David Hart** puts it so succinctly;

The infernalist view was fated to prevail simply as an institutional imperative (or, at any rate, an institutional convenience). The more the church took shape as an administrative hierarchy, and especially as it became an organ of and support for imperial unity and power, the more naturally it tended to command submission from the faithful by whatever permissible methods of persuasion lay near at hand. (7)

Hart then acknowledges that this doctrine may not necessarily have been deliberately conspired by some nefarious scheme by the bishops and priests to prop up the church and state politically in order to subdue an ignorant and fractious laity. But there is historical evidence that “orthodoxy” used every fair and foul structural, ideological, ethical and emotional means at hand to fortify their position of power and stability. **Fear**, as **Hart** so exquisitely suggests, *is a majestically potent instrument. (8)*

In asking my question, **Will God Save My Uncle?** I am pleased to say that so far, whilst **Framing the Flaming Question**, we may say definitively that, the Bible knows nothing of sinners **burning on and on** in cruel and never-ending conscious torment.

With huge relief we must also bury that talking skull which **Abba Macarius** found so upsetting. May it rest in peace “forever” under the desert sands! (To be continued ...)

the Son hands over his kingdom to the Father (Rev. 20: 4; I Cor. 15: 24f). It is the added information that in the **First Resurrection** the “saved” are given immortal bodies which informs us as to duration: They will never again perish, age after succeeding age, for they enjoy the life of God..

⁷ *Op Cit*, p 206

⁸ *Ibid*, p 206

