

FORT BEND CHRISTIAN ACADEMY  
DEPARTMENT OF WORLDVIEWS AND APOLOGETICS

ANNIHILATIONISM:  
A BIBLICAL DEFENSE OF TERMINAL PUNISHMENT

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS OF FORT BEND  
CHRISTIAN ACADEMY'S ADVANCED APOLOGETICS CLASS

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SUGAR LAND, TEXAS

DECEMBER 2019

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## **Introduction**

The doctrine of hell is an inescapable reality of Christian theology. Denying hell's existence is arguably the same as closing one's eyes to the Bible itself, however, this is exactly what multitudes of Christians within the modern Church have done. Hell, for so long a necessary staple of the faith, has been thrown out by mainline Christians as "an embarrassing artifact from an ancient age - a reminder of Christianity's rejected worldview."<sup>1</sup> The harsh picture of God's wrath that hell paints is not one that the majority of Christians find themselves able to reconcile with their much-preferred image of God as the embodiment of love.

The "traditional," or "orthodox," view of hell, from this point forward referred to as unending conscious torment, is one of the leading factors in repelling potential Christians. Although some Christians were doubtless converted in years past due to the impassioned fire-and-brimstone rhetoric of preachers like Jonathan Edwards, many more in this day and age "have been and continue to be driven away from the faith because they cannot conceive of nor accept a God who would do what preachers have described."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, determining once and for all exactly what Scripture means when it refers to hell is vital to proving how the doctrine itself is neither paradoxical nor barbaric when compared to anything else that the Bible teaches. One need only open the Bible to see that hell is very much a real place. But determining what the nature of this place actually is is much more difficult, and is consequently of much greater importance to Christians' understanding of their faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Mohler Jr., *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, 16.

<sup>2</sup> McRay, *A Consuming Passion: Essays on Hell and Immortality in Honor of Edward Fudge*, 51.

The goal of this thesis is to prove that annihilationism, the belief that God will eventually obliterate the wicked from existence and leave only the righteous to live on in immortality, has more support from the biblical text than the commonly-held view of hell as a metaphysical location of unending conscious torment. “Annihilationism” is the term that will be used throughout this thesis, rather than the labels suggested by Le Roy Froom and John Stackhouse Jr: “conditional immortality” and “terminal punishment.” This is because the former, while representing a belief that works well with annihilationism, does not necessarily require belief in the ultimate ending of the wicked’s existence - one could accept that immortality is not an inherent part of human nature while still believing that God nonetheless grants it to the wicked for the purpose of experiencing never-ending punishment. The latter expression, “terminal punishment,” is too politically correct, as it was coined by Stackhouse with the express purpose of satisfying adherents of the traditional view who believe that “annihilation” seems to be too merciful of an end for the wicked.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stackhouse Jr., *Four Views on Hell*, 61.

## **Ancient Near Eastern Beliefs in Death and the Underworld**

Understanding the cultural environment that ancient Israel resided in is crucial to determining exactly how the Hebrew conception of punishment after death developed. Of the many ancient peoples that the Israelites came into contact with, this thesis will choose to focus on the three that likely had the greatest influence on their theological evolution: Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia. But before we begin, it is important to understand that ancient Near Eastern religions had no “systematic theologies” as are standard in modern religions.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that certain mythological motifs were not widespread throughout belief systems. For example, the concept of a three-tiered universe was commonplace in the majority of ancient Near Eastern mythologies, with the heavens being the residence of the great gods, the earth of humans, and the underworld of the dead and the chthonic deities.<sup>5</sup> It does mean, however, that to claim that an entire civilization adhered to any sort of uniform understanding on a concept as vague as life after death would be absurd. This thesis will therefore only deal generally with the information modern scholarship possesses regarding the beliefs of these ancient cultures, striving to avoid treating any belief as if it were held by all members of a religious community.

### **Egypt**

Of the three civilizations mentioned above, Egypt had the smallest level of influence on ancient Israel. Part of this can be attributed to language. Ancient Hebrew is a semitic language and is therefore “much more closely related to Syrian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite dialects than to Egyptian ones.” It would stand to reason, then, that “this closer relationship applies not only to language but also to mythology and culture as well.”<sup>6</sup> However, Egypt is important to

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<sup>4</sup> Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in the Iron Age II and Its Rhetorical Uses in Proto-Isaiah*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament*, 70.

<sup>6</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 70.

this discussion for two reasons. Firstly, according to the Exodus account, the Hebrews' sojourn in Egypt lasted approximately four hundred and thirty years - surely a time as long as this would result in some meaningful amount of cultural diffusion. Secondly, the ancient Egyptians are well-known for the complexity of their afterlife beliefs, thus providing a useful contrast when comparing them to the ancient Hebrews, who, as shall be seen in the succeeding section, placed little to no importance in speculation about the realm of the dead.

As in almost all ancient Near Eastern cultures, the Egyptians believed that showing the deceased's body the proper respect was integral to ensuring that they would have the opportunity to enter into a happy afterlife. The dead's state in the life to come was directly correlated to "the sanctity of the tomb, the wholeness of the body, and the adequacy of the provisions."<sup>7</sup>

The Egyptians divided man into a multitude of different parts, two of which, the *ba* and the *ka* (representing the intellect and life force respectively), depended upon the preservation of the physical body if they were to survive to live on after death. Mummification, then, was viewed as much more than just a decorative or preservative art; rather, it was the process by which the dead could be granted the opportunity to be judged by the guardians of the underworld.<sup>8</sup> This idea of a judgement after death had existed in Egypt since the Old Kingdom, but it was not until the advent of the Middle Kingdom that a clearly-defined mythological tradition appeared.<sup>9</sup> It was believed that the god Osiris would oversee the weighing of the deceased's heart against a feather belonging to the goddess of truth and order, Maat, in order to determine its righteousness. If the heart weighed less than the feather, the soul of the deceased would be ushered into the ethereal paradise of the Field of Reeds. However, if it was found to

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<sup>7</sup> Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in the Iron Age II and its Rhetorical Uses in Proto-Isaiah*, 73.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 85.

weigh more, it would be devoured by the demon Ammut, the result of which would be the complete annihilation of its owner's soul.

### Canaan

The nation of Canaan undoubtedly had the greatest impact on Israelite beliefs in the afterlife, at least during pre-exilic times. This cultural diffusion constitutes what Alan Segal calls “the great identity crisis of Israelite religion. Prophetically opposed to Canaanite religion, it nevertheless was suffused with Canaanite cultural forms and motifs and could hardly avoid them.”<sup>10</sup> Upon finally entering the promised land, God commands the Israelites to devote to “complete destruction” all the inhabitants of the region, including the Canaanites (Deut. 20:17). However, later texts criticize these previous generations for failing “to destroy the peoples, as the Lord commanded them,” and instead mixing with the nations and adopting their idolatrous practices (Ps. 106:34-35). It seems rather plausible, then, that Israelite thought would be greatly affected by these close neighbors. In fact, most of Israel's pre-exilic knowledge of wider traditions across the Near East came directly from Canaanite culture, which was itself an amalgamation of earlier Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Mycenaean beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

Modern knowledge of Canaanite mythology almost entirely stems from the writings found preserved in the library at Ugarit. Of these writings, the most pertinent to the current topic are those which have become referred to as the Baal Cycle, so named because they center upon the exploits of the titular storm and fertility god. In the final part of the story, Baal sends two of his messengers to the capital city of the god Mot to demand that he acknowledge Baal's sovereignty. As he sends them away, Baal gives his messengers a grim warning:

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<sup>10</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 108.



*“...go down into the ‘underworld’ of the earth.  
 You will be numbered among those  
 who have descended into the earth.  
 Then, indeed, turn your face to his city Hmry!  
 Decay is the throne on which he sits;  
 Loathsomeness is the land of his possession.  
 But be watchful, you servants of the gods,  
 Do not draw near to Mut, the son of El,  
 So that he does not swallow you up in his mouth like a sheep,  
 Snatch you in his jaws like a lamb.”*<sup>12</sup>

Mot (also known as Mut, phonetically similar to the name of the Egyptian demon Ammut), serves as a personification of death, whose “foremost characteristic in the text is his prodigious appetite and huge, devouring maw.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Baal himself is defeated by Mot and swallowed whole only lines later when the god of the underworld is incited to anger by his arrogant boasting. The common references within the Hebrew Bible to a personified death possessing a cavernous mouth with which it uses to swallow the living likely arose as allusions to this popular story.<sup>14</sup>

Mot’s capital city within the underworld goes by three different names within the Baal cycle: *hmry*, *mk*, and *hh*. Christopher Hays believes that these three terms “seem to reflect three aspects of the underworld: ‘cesspool/muddy pit,’ ‘sinking down/collapsing,’ and ‘mire/hole.’”<sup>15</sup> These titles reveal that the ancient Canaanites thought of the netherworld as dirty and located down below - essentially supplying an image of the grave itself.

The Canaanites also believed that humans were composed of a “vital element” known as a *nps* (similar to the Hebrew conception of the *nefesh*). However, the texts at Ugarit speak of the

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<sup>12</sup> Beyerlin, *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 213.

<sup>13</sup> Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in the Iron Age II and its Rhetorical Uses in Proto-Isaiah*, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Examples include Isaiah 5:14, Habakkuk 2:5, and Proverbs 27:20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

going out of the *rh*, translated as ‘wind’ or ‘breath’ at death (more closely aligned with the alternative Hebrew conception of the *ruah*).<sup>16</sup> Although the Canaanites did not share the Egyptian belief that the survival of these immaterial aspects after death depended upon the preservation of the body, they did still hold the opinion that the bodies of the deceased deserved the utmost respect. Sarcophagi found in the tombs at Ugarit included inscribed warnings promising curses of vengeance upon those who disturbed the interred within.

### Mesopotamia

Although its influence was already experienced to some degree through the culture of the Canaanites, Mesopotamian civilization did not come into direct contact with Israel until “the monarchic and exilic periods, when both direct political intervention and elite emulation forged closer cultural connections.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike the Canaanites, however, a much more varied degree of Mesopotamian mythology still exists today. Of this literature, two Sumerian epics, “The Descent of Inanna” and “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” provide the best summation of Mesopotamian thought regarding the underworld and life after death.

The former of these two epics, “The Descent of Inanna,” dates from the first half of the second millennium BC.<sup>18</sup> It tells the story of the goddess Inanna, Queen of Heaven, who travels to the underworld in order to visit her sister, Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld. When Ereshkigal learns that her sister is demanding to be let in, she orders her servant Neti to bolt the seven gates of the Underworld, only opening one at a time, but only after Inanna has removed one article of clothing. During her journey, the poem describes the underworld as dark and dusty:

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<sup>16</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in the Iron Age II and its Rhetorical Uses in Proto-Isaiah*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Referring to the epic’s original Sumerian text - composite versions written in Akkadian do not begin to appear in the historical record until after the end of the second millenium BC.

*“Do not let your bright silver  
Be covered with the dust of the underworld”<sup>19</sup>*

And as a place from which there is no escape:

*“Inanna craved the Great Below.  
She who receives the me of the underworld does not return.  
She who goes to the Dark City stays there”<sup>20</sup>*

By the time Inanna has reached her sister’s throne, she is completely naked and therefore powerless to stop Ereshkigal and the seven judges of the underworld from declaring her guilty and striking her dead. Although Inanna is eventually rescued by her father, Anu, and brought back to life, the preceding descriptions of the underworld as a gloomy, grimy place from which there is no escape much more accurately reflect the dominant opinion of the Mesopotamians on the subject.

Although the entirety of “The Descent of Inanna” is set within the underworld, “The Epic of Gilgamesh” reveals a much more vivid picture of what life is like for the souls who inhabit its depths. Almost all of the present copies of “Gilgamesh” are seventh-century reproductions found in the library of King Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, however, the original text can probably be dated to the turn of the second millennium BC, with oral transmission of certain episodes from the epic likely being even older.<sup>21</sup> The story it tells is of Gilgamesh, king of the city of Uruk, and of his “heroic struggle against death - first for immortal renown through glorious deeds, then for eternal life itself.”<sup>22</sup> This search for eternal life begins when Gilgamesh’s companion, Enkidu, is struck down by the gods as divine retribution for his killing of the Bull of Heaven. He suffers in

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<sup>19</sup> Wolkstein, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, 54.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East: Sumer-Akkadian Religious Texts and Ugaritic Epics*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation*, xiii.

sickness for days, telling Gilgamesh of a dream he had in which he was dragged to the underworld upon his death:

*“Looking at me, he leads me to the House of Darkness, the abode of Irkalla, to the house which none leave who have entered it, on the road from which there is no way back, to the house wherein the dwellers are bereft of light, where dust is their fare and clay their food. They are clothed like birds, with wings for garments, and see no light, residing in darkness. In the House of Dust, which I entered, I looked at [rulers], their crowns put away; [I saw princes], those (born to) the crown, who had ruled the land from the days of yore.”*<sup>23</sup>

From this passage, it is apparent that the image of the underworld found within “The Descent of Inanna” was a popular one - it lacks light and is covered in dust. However, the epic also describes this dust as being the sustenance for the dead contained therein, along with other details. For example, Enkidu describes the dead as “clothed like birds.” Alan Segal explains that this reflects the Mesopotamian understanding of the dead as “etemmu,” or ghosts.<sup>24</sup> The underworld appears here as the great equalizer as well, as Enkidu sees even the past members of royalty residing in the gloom alongside the other dead, “their crowns put away.”

In a later addition to the epic, Gilgamesh speaks to the ghost of Enkidu and asks him about what he had seen during his time in the underworld:

*“‘Him whose corpse was cast upon the steppe hast thou seen?’  
I have seen:  
His spirit finds no rest in the nether world.’”*<sup>25</sup>

Enkidu’s reply reflects Mesopotamian burial practice, which, as in almost all other Near Eastern cultures, emphasized the sanctity of the tomb and the remains which it contained. Mortuary care was directly correlated to the happiness of the deceased in the afterlife.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the

<sup>23</sup> Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East: Sumer-Akkadian Religious Texts and Ugaritic Epics*, 85.

<sup>24</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 85.

<sup>25</sup> Mendelsohn, *Religions of the Ancient Near East: Sumer-Akkadian Religious Texts and Ugaritic Epics*, 115.

<sup>26</sup> Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in the Iron Age II and its Rhetorical Uses in Proto-Isaiah*, 41.

violation of a corpse was seen as the passing of a curse upon the house of its family. This concern for proper burial “is found in the repeated Neo-Assyrian accounts of ‘anti-burial.’ Sargonid kings frequently claimed in their inscriptions to have violated the tombs of enemy dynasties, disinterring cadavers and strewing the bones of royal ancestors.”<sup>27</sup> This desecration was believed to cause harm to the various parts of the person that lived on after death. To the Mesopotamians, the *napistu*, the breath of life (once again phonetically similar to the Hebrew *nefesh*), was believed to be the animating force that, upon departure, resulted in the *pagru* - the emptied cadaver.<sup>28</sup> Although no longer inhabiting the body, the *napistu* was still intrinsically tied to that which it had left behind and would continue to be affected by the present state of the body even after taking up residence in the underworld.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>28</sup> Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in the Iron Age II and its Rhetorical Uses in Proto-Isaiah*, 43.

## **Ancient Hebrew Beliefs in Death & the Underworld**

### *Death & Associated Burial Practices*

One of the most distinct forms of behavior humans possess is intentional burial. It first appeared in the Middle East approximately 100,000 years ago, and since that time this veritable cradle of civilization has produced a multitude of cultures that seem to an outside perspective to have been almost excessively fascinated with death. The vast pyramid tombs of the Egyptians and the sprawling necropolises of the Canaanites and Mesopotamians are lasting testament to this reality. The ancient Hebrews, then, appear to be an odd outlier within this cultural landscape. They did share a number of simple burial practices with their neighbors, however, such as the cutting of their clothes and the wearing of sackcloth as symbols of grief, the use of elaborate lamentations during funeral processions for the deceased, and the occasional interring of the dead with accompanying grave goods.<sup>29</sup> They also shared some beliefs regarding the dignity of the dead, maintaining that “exposure, exhumation, and cremation of corpses were all abhorrent practices,” however, this is where the similarities to other contiguous ancient societies end.<sup>30</sup>

Although the Hebrews did believe in the granting of the necessary respect to the deceased, the Mosaic law explicitly branded the dead as subjects of uncleanness that were to be avoided. Any person coming into contact with a human corpse was made ritually unclean for seven days (Num. 19:11-16; 31:19), while any person who touched a dead lizard was also considered impure, just for a shorter length of time (Lev. 11:31). Priests were held to higher standards of holiness and were thus only able to handle the dead bodies of close relatives (Lev.

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<sup>29</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 65. This threat of exposure would become a persistent theme within the prophetic literature, specifically in Isaiah and Jeremiah.

21:1-2), with the high priest not being allowed to have any contact with the dead at all (Lev. 21:10-11). It is possible that this emphasis upon the defilement of the living by the dead was meant to discourage traditional practices of ancestor veneration that had survived from the time prior to the sojourn in Egypt.

The burial practices of the Hebrews correspond with some of their beliefs regarding the nature of the afterlife. While the “common people” were buried in ordinary graves, wealthier Israelites were laid to rest in family tombs that were similar in style to those used by the Canaanites - so similar, in fact, that archaeologists often have difficulty distinguishing between the two when they are found in close proximity to each other.<sup>31</sup> But regardless of the status of the occupants, tradition ensured that these graves were routinely reused, the older bones “being pushed aside or alternatively collected in pits where they were gathered for final disposition.”<sup>32</sup> This practice likely originated in the earliest period of Israel’s history, when “the central social organism was the family clan.”<sup>33</sup> Because of the importance ascribed to this familial relationship, members of the tribe were buried in family tombs. This practice of the “gathering” of the bones of the deceased into generational ossuaries is likely what was meant by the recurrent biblical idiom, “to be gathered to one’s people” (Gen. 25:8; 1 Kings 2:10). To the Hebrews, “death meant entering the ancestral realm of the family tomb.”<sup>34</sup> This image would later be falsely assumed to literally refer to the state of the dead in the afterlife.

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<sup>31</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 142.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>33</sup> Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

*The Underworld as Afterlife*

The word repeatedly used within the Hebrew Bible as the name of the underworld is ‘Sheol.’ Although it occurs with great frequency, the actual etymology of the word is disputed. Philip S. Johnston writes that the term may have originated in Akkadian as another name for the Mesopotamian goddess of the underworld, Erishkigal, or some other minor underworld deity.<sup>35</sup> However, even if ‘Sheol’ is a loan-word from Akkadian, the Israelites excised any divine connotations the word may have previously possessed. Johnston believes that this usage of a name for the underworld that was virtually unique “allowed the Israelites and their writers to invest the term with their own religious outlook, without the conceptual baggage that other shared terms might carry.”<sup>36</sup> However, while the word itself is unique, the type of underworld it describes is not, as the previous section has shown. The Hebrews believed in an afterlife that was essentially identical to that presented within Canaanite and Mesopotamian mythology - it was a subterranean realm, dusty and devoid of light, in which the activity of terrestrial life was reproduced, albeit in a shallower sense. It is a place in which “there is no remembrance” of God (Ps. 6:5), as the dead can no longer “hope for [His] faithfulness” or praise His name (Is. 38:18). Upon death, all people, regardless of earthly status, descended to Sheol - any of “the negative, punitive aspects that later characterized [it] were almost completely lacking in its original conception.”<sup>37</sup> Although God’s divine judgement upon sinners often takes the form of premature death, the underworld itself never served any punitive purpose until much later in Judaistic history. The translators of the King James Bible, first published in 1611, are largely to blame for this common misconception. Of the sixty five occurrences of the Hebrew word *Sheol*, thirty four

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<sup>35</sup> Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>37</sup> Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 53.



were translated to mean “the grave” or “the pit” while thirty one others were translated as the English word “hell.” Unable to reconcile their understanding of the doctrine of hell with that which was present in the Hebrew Bible, they translated *Sheol* as “grave/pit” when it was to be the resting place for good people, but rendered the same word as “hell” when referring to a bad person. In actuality, the majority of the biblical passages which describe the destiny of the wicked (Ps. 49:14) as being “snatched away” (Job 24:19) and “put to shame” (Ps. 31:17) by Sheol as they “return” to it (Ps. 9:17) are to be found within the poetic books of the Hebrew Bible. The claims that the wicked go to Sheol as recompense for their evil deeds are not assertions, they are simply calls to God for the divine justice that the authors wished to see in their broken world.

Other than the information already provided, the Hebrew conception of the underworld is extraordinarily vague. Alan Segal believes that this lack of a definite narrative regarding the afterlife, as was so common in other cultures of the time, must “not be just accidental or deficient; it must be part of the Biblical polemic against its environment.”<sup>38</sup> Although there is a great deal of similarity between Sheol and the other underworlds found within the mythologies of ancient Near East cultures, at least to a basic degree, the Hebrews differed greatly from their neighbors in the level of importance they placed upon this belief in an afterlife. That they borrowed the mythological language of other cultures to describe it does not necessarily mean that they also used the original pagan meanings.<sup>39</sup> As mentioned previously, this resulted in the complete stripping away of the underworld’s divine connotations. It existed merely as an “indefinable third party between Jahweh and his creation,” a subject not worthy of any real

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<sup>38</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 121.

<sup>39</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 46.

interest to the faith.<sup>40</sup> Israelite religion was primarily founded upon the relationship between the people and their God within this life.<sup>41</sup> This shift in focus from the mythological hereafter to the historical present is, in Gerhard von Rad's opinion, what constitutes the starkest difference between the religion of Israel and that of the Canaanites (and by extension that of the Mesopotamians as well).<sup>42</sup>

Whether or not the Hebrews actually believed in a literal continued existence in Sheol after death is debatable, but if they did, they viewed it as "such a pale and pitiful reflexion of human existence that it no longer [had] any reality," leading some scholars, such as Robert Martin-Achard, to believe that it served only as "a metaphorical expression of non-being."<sup>43</sup> Matthew J. Suriano takes this assertion further by ascribing the biblical presentation of Sheol as "a shadowy abode of lifeless bodies" to mean that those held within the underworld are literally kept underground, without life.<sup>44</sup> In his view, Sheol would then best be translated not as a name for some metaphysical underworld, but as the grave itself. The word the Hebrews used to describe the state of the dead within Sheol was *rephaim*, a word traditionally believed to have been "derived from the Semitic root *rph*, 'sink down, be weak,'" however, more modern theorization has suggested that it instead originates from the root *rph*, meaning "to heal."<sup>45</sup> If the latter theory is to be accepted, it lends credence to the hypothesis that the Israelites practiced some form of ancestor veneration, at least early in their history, as they would have viewed the

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<sup>40</sup> von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Vol. 2: The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, 350.

<sup>41</sup> Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 70.

<sup>42</sup> von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life: a Study Of the Development Of the Doctrine Of the Resurrection in the Old Testament*, 17. Simcha Paull Raphael is one advocate for the other side of the debate, believing that the Israelites did not conceive of death as a complete termination of existence, but rather as a diminution of the *nefesh*, or life force. William C. Placher's views, as expressed in *A History of Christian Theology*, strike a middle ground between the two opinions.

<sup>44</sup> Suriano, *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in the Iron Age II and its Rhetorical Uses in Proto-Isaiah*, 107.

*rephaim* as supernatural helpers of the living who could be called upon in times of need. The Law's banning of necromancy, coupled with dozens of references to this practice throughout the biblical text, must mean that the Israelites practiced ancestor worship to some extent as part of an ancient cultural tradition.<sup>46</sup> A transformation began to occur at the advent of the monarchic period, however, as Israel began to move towards a completely monotheistic faith, abandoning first the concept of other gods and later that of ancestor worship. Yahweh replaced all other divinities and their respective roles within Israelite religion and belief. Thus, even the formidable Sheol was brought within God's grasp. God became sovereign above all, not because He was the most powerful god as He had been thought of previously, but because He was the only one in existence.<sup>47</sup> As a result of this sovereignty, the Israelites thought of "the actual event of dying as something directly caused by God himself (Deut. 22.39, I Sam. 2.6, Ps. 138.7)."<sup>48</sup> The dead were no longer cut off from God in Sheol, as even His presence extended down into its depths (Ps. 139:7-8). This amplification of God's power over death would begin to manifest itself as the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead in the centuries to come.

### *The Soul & the Identity of the Self*

Any discussion of the Hebrews' notion of Sheol is inseparable from their beliefs regarding the anthropological make-up of man. Of the many various terms used to describe the life of humankind within the Hebrew Bible, those that appear with the greatest frequency are without question *nefesh* (soul-life) and *ruach* (spirit-breath). The latter, *ruach*, is generally accepted to refer to God's life-giving breath which issued forth upon His creation of the first man, Adam. The Psalms present the picture of man as "a purely terrestrial creature who exists

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<sup>46</sup> Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, 137.

<sup>47</sup> Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 24.

<sup>48</sup> von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Vol. 2: The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, 349.

only at the pleasure of the deity.”<sup>49</sup> When God takes away their breath, they “die and return to their dust” (Ps. 104:29).

The *nefesh*, on the other hand, suffers from much more muddled interpretations. Its many “meanings range from ‘neck,’ ‘life,’ ‘self,’ and ‘person,’ to what seems the opposite of life, ‘corpse.’”<sup>50</sup> These definitions all find common ground, however, in their focus upon the respiration of the body, or lack thereof, which is representative of the life of the individual. The Hebrew concept of a “soul,” then, was “man himself viewed as a living creature.”<sup>51</sup> This is confusing for one who takes the soul, as in the modern sense, to be more closely aligned with a definition that describes the immaterial personality, conscience, or intelligent mind of man, which is distinct from the body and separates from it naturally upon death. This concept does not originate from within Israelite religion, however, but rather stems from Greek Platonic philosophy, which posits that the *psyche*, or “soul,” is the vaguely-defined essence of human identity.<sup>52</sup> Plato described it as both immaterial and immortal (in terms of not possessing a beginning or end), existing even after death while still possessing sentience. After death, the soul continued to be reborn into subsequent physical bodies, the kind of body being dependent upon the soul’s behavior in its past life. The corporeal body and the incorporeal body were also placed within an antagonistic dichotomy, the soul being naturally perfect and good (as it was of the world of the higher forms), and the body being naturally corruptible and evil as it was of the material world (which was itself only comprised of weak imitations of the world of the higher

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<sup>49</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 146.

<sup>50</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 27. The reference to a *nefesh* as a corpse occurs in Lev. 21:11 and Numbers 6:6, where it is a *nefesh met*, a “dead/extinguished life.” Raphael defines this word as referring to a “depotiated psychophysical entity” - in other words, a human or animal once possessing a life force but no longer animated by one.

<sup>51</sup> Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth*, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 345.

forms). Plato's thinking on the subject, espoused most notably within his dialogue "Phaedo," already had a massive influence on the ancient world by the advent of the first century AD, and continues to color scholarly discussions surrounding the topic to this day. It is extremely important, then, to distinguish the Hebrew view of the soul from the Greek, which would not even begin to show signs of infiltrating Jewish philosophy until the rise of Hellenistic Judaism.

As has already been shown, Israelite religion did not have much of an equivalent to the now-popularized "soul" championed by Plato. Those who believe that they did often cite the *nefesh* as their prime candidate. However, this equivocation is easily proven false. Firstly, "the *nefesh* is not inherently immortal, nor is it an incorruptible entity separate from the material body."<sup>53</sup> Secondly, the dualistic notion of the soul "imprisoned" within the body did not exist in ancient Israel. Although the Hebrews occasionally spoke of the various components of man, "there is never a suggestion that these parts war against each other," nor is there any "attempt to contrast body and spirit, identify personality with one rather than the other," or suggest that "one is immaterial" while the other is not.<sup>54</sup> The *nefesh* was instead "understood in a unitive way as the totality of being - 'man does not have *nefesh*, he is *nefesh*, he lives as *nefesh*.'"<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Suriano, *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Tyson, *A Study of Early Christianity*, 94-95.

<sup>55</sup> Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 53.

### **Development of Eschatological Theology in Judaism**

From the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 586 BC onwards, the Hebrews suffered persecution and oppression under one succeeding empire after another. Alan Segal believes that the intense focus on apocalypticism that became characteristic of the prophetic literature during this time was a direct response to “persecution, or to take a larger perspective, one possible response to colonial domination.”<sup>56</sup> His theory is supported by the findings of Brian E. Daley, who writes that the “expectation of a bodily resurrection and of the restoration of Israel in a transformed material world seems to have had little importance in the Hellenized Judaism of the Mediterranean Diaspora,” however, “it was apparently a cherished hope of a large number of Jews in Palestine, as both the Old Testament pseudepigrapha and several of the Qumran documents demonstrate.”<sup>57</sup> The Jews who never returned to their homeland after the exilic period and took up residence elsewhere blended their heritage with the customs of the cultures around them during the process of settlement and migration.<sup>58</sup> The Palestinian Jews, on the other hand, were historically much more persecuted than their Mediterranean counterparts due to the fiercely nationalistic way in which they clung to their ancestral traditions.<sup>59</sup> This made it extremely difficult for them to assimilate into any kind of foreign power’s empire, necessitating the use of force to repeatedly quell dissent. It is no surprise, then, that the apocalyptic hope of an age to come in which all wrongs of the world would be made right by God was so common in this environment.

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<sup>56</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 286.

<sup>57</sup> Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> This group was primarily composed of the descendants of the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom who were sent into exile by the Assyrians between 733 and 722 BC.

<sup>59</sup> Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period: A Guide for New Testament Students*, 76.

As was shown in the previous section, traditional Israelite belief dictated that the righteous were rewarded in this life with prosperity and longevity, while the wicked were punished by experiencing premature deaths. During the persecution of the Second Temple Period, however, “it was precisely the righteous who lost their lives. Faith in the justice of God could be maintained if the righteous could hope for a reward after death.”<sup>60</sup> When it became apparent to the Jews that divine justice was noticeably absent from their contemporary existence, they looked to a time after death when it would be enacted instead.

Since at least the time of the writing of the book of Job, Hebrew authors had begun to “indicate a feeling that the equality of the grave [was] unjust.”<sup>61</sup> Apocalyptic belief provided a solution to this problem by proclaiming a future judgement that would separate the wicked from the righteous so that they would no longer be consigned to the same fate in Sheol. This eschatological hope had its beginnings in the prophetic period shortly after the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Neo-Babylonians in 586 BC, but was not fully fleshed out in the form in which we find it in the intertestamental literature until the time of the Maccabean revolt, which occurred approximately between 167 and 160 BC.

Occurring simultaneously alongside this theological development was the increased importance being placed upon the individual’s relationship with God. Yahweh’s interactions with Israel in the past had largely appeared only in a nationalistic, tribal setting. The collective were often punished for an individual’s sins, and later generations were commonly disciplined “for the evil actions of their ancestors,” however, the prophets “emphasized personal

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<sup>60</sup> Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 206.

<sup>61</sup> Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, 172.

responsibility and individual relationship with God.”<sup>62</sup> Gerhard von Rad writes that Ezekiel, most notably, “countered the complaint that Yahweh lumped the generations together in wholesale acts of judgement by roundly asserting the contrary - each individual stands in direct relationship to God, and Yahweh has the keenest interest in the individual and the decisions which he takes, because he wants to preserve his life (Ezek. 18).”<sup>63</sup> Jeremiah, too, refutes the saying that children had to suffer because of the guilt of the fathers, utilizing what was then a “radically individualistic view” in asserting that “everyone shall die for his own iniquity” (Jer. 31:30).<sup>64</sup>

The biblical understanding of Sheol was revised during this period of theological upheaval as well. Thus, this shift in focus from the collective to the individual “paved the way for the development of an individual postmortem eschatology and a notion of personal immortality.”<sup>65</sup> The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead grew out of this changing theological climate as a reaction to the seeming injustice of the eschatological judgement only being applicable to those alive at the time, leaving those who had died previously in their undifferentiated state within Sheol. However, if “the dead could be awakened, raised, so that they might undergo divine judgement and then be separated, justice could operate retroactively.”

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This segment of the thesis will examine the evolution of this core Judaistic belief through the writings of four of the most distinguished Jewish prophets: Jeremiah, Trito-Isaiah, Ezekiel,

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<sup>62</sup> Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 24. An example of the former sort of divine punishment is found in Joshua 7, in which Achan’s sin of keeping some of the wealth of Jericho for himself in disobedience of Joshua’s command that it must all be consecrated to God results in the defeat of the Israelites during their first attempt to capture the city of Ai. Examples of God’s proclamation that He will punish the descendants of sinners for their ancestors’ behavior are to be found in Ex. 20:5-6 and Deut. 5:9.

<sup>63</sup> von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, 232.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>65</sup> Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 57.

<sup>66</sup> Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, 172.



and Daniel. Discussion on Jeremiah and Trito-Isaiah will be specifically concentrated on their teachings in regard to the impending punishment of the apostate Jews, while the assessment of Ezekiel and Daniel will look at the way in which they espouse a belief in an embryonic form of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

### Jeremiah

Despite not being the earliest active prophet that this thesis will examine (that title belonging to Isaiah, who operated approximately one hundred and forty three years before Jeremiah), the segment of the prophetic writings ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah that are pertinent to this study were likely written prior to the later segments of the book of Isaiah. The earliest parts of Jeremiah were collections of oracles, including material found in ch. 2-6, 8-10, 13, 21-23, and others. Chapter 7, the primary focus of this section, was part of an early Deuteronomistic redaction, dated by Rainer Albertz to have occurred around 550 BC, that ended the book at 25:13.<sup>67</sup>

The seventh chapter of Jeremiah records a prophecy given by the prophet just outside the gates of the temple in Jerusalem, in which he announces that the fate of the city of Shiloh is destined to soon befall Jerusalem as well. Shiloh was the location of the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant, making it the religious center of Israel for close to four hundred years. However, it was destroyed by the Philistines after the Israelite defeat at the Battle of Aphek in 1050 BC, and once more years later when the Assyrians carried the northern tribes into captivity.<sup>68</sup> In Jeremiah's day, Shiloh represented "the absence and abandonment of God along with the end of his worship."<sup>69</sup> Jeremiah's hearers would have assumed that God would never allow Jerusalem to

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<sup>67</sup> Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.*, 321.

<sup>68</sup> Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: From Sorrow to Hope*, 37.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

be destroyed because it contained His holy temple, however, the prophet's message was meant to show them that just as Shiloh had been destroyed because of the sins of its priests, Jerusalem would be destroyed because of the sins of its people.<sup>70</sup> Jeremiah describes this destruction several verses later as the pouring out of God's anger and wrath upon every living thing that inhabits the city - man, beast, tree, and fruit of the ground. He specifically stresses that this wrath will "burn and not be quenched" (Jer. 7:20), a phrase that is traditionally interpreted to mean that God's anger would not relent until its full purpose was accomplished.

Idolatry is the chief sin of which Jeremiah accuses the people of Jerusalem. During his time, this idolatry had incorporated aspects of Yahwism, and had taken the form of human sacrifices offered up to the pagan deity Moloch in the Valley of Hinnom, a region just southwest of the walls of the city. Jeremiah speaks of these idolaters erecting "high places" at some location within the valley that is identified as Topheth. Here they would "burn their sons and daughters in the fire," (Jer. 7:31) an ancient practice that is also spoken of in Leviticus 18:21 and 2 Kings 23:10. The aforementioned "high places" would have been some form of pagan altar upon which sacrifices would be offered to the deity. Philip King speculates that the word may have its origins in Aramaic, in which it would mean "hearth," "fireplace," or "roaster."<sup>71</sup>

Jeremiah anticipates a day in which God's judgement will finally be enacted upon these idolaters, proclaiming that at the time it would no longer be known as "Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth, because there is

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<sup>70</sup> These priests were Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli the high priest, who had been made the officiating priests at the sanctuary of Shiloh by their father due to his old age. They are criticized in 1 Sam. 2:12-14 and 22 for engaging in sinful behavior, such as saving the choice portions of sacrifices for themselves and having immoral sexual relations with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of assembly.

<sup>71</sup> King, *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion*, 136.

no room elsewhere” (Jer. 7:32).<sup>72</sup> However, Jeremiah goes on to speak of the way in which God’s divine wrath will not conclude its exaction of vengeance upon these individuals at the time of their death, but will continue to impose a “further postmortem penalty,” that being the exposure of the idolaters’ dead bodies, and their subsequent consumption by birds and beasts (Jer. 7:33).<sup>73</sup> Kim Papaioannou interprets this vision as the transformation of a site of pagan worship into “a place of annihilation in battle,” and surely this grisly image of slain corpses being picked apart by animals lends itself to such a comparison.<sup>74</sup> As has been mentioned previously, the exposure of a corpse to the elements was considered a sign of utmost disrespect and desecration by the Hebrews.

### *Trito-Isaiah*

The view that the book of Isaiah is comprised of three separate collections of prophecy, each written by a different author, was first developed by German theologian Bernhard Duhm at the turn of the 20th century. He believed that these three divisions, which he labeled Proto-Isaiah (chapters 1-39), Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40-55), and Trito-Isaiah (chapters 56-66), were written by the original Isaiah, an anonymous 6th-century BCE author operating during the exilic period, and a group of authors (likely followers of the original prophet) after the return from exile, respectively. Although Duhm’s opinion is not shared by all scholars, virtually none today will attribute the entire book, or even most of it, to a single person.

Isaiah speaks frequently about God’s punishment of the wicked, however, this thesis will only concentrate on the final verses of chapter 66, the final chapter of the book, which, when

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<sup>72</sup> The history of theological thought surrounding the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, also known simply as Gehinnom/Gehenna, is so important to this discussion that it will be the subject of its own section of the thesis, beginning on p. .

<sup>73</sup> Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, 172.

<sup>74</sup> Papaioannou, *The Development of Gehenna Between the Old and New Testaments*, 249.

paired with the preceding chapter presents the structure of a twofold address in “the form of a prophetic report containing a first person speech by the Lord,” directed first at the wicked and then at the righteous.<sup>75</sup> Unlike the scene depicted in Jeremiah 7, Trito-Isaiah clearly sets these chapters far into the future, immediately before and after God’s creation of a “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 66:22). The divine judgement against the wicked that is presented here is not being executed by God through the instrumentation of an earthly power as it was in Jeremiah, who specifically foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem by the Neo-Babylonians, but by God Himself.

Chapter 65 opens with God’s warnings of the destructive fury that awaits those who forsake His name and rebel against Him (v. 2-3, 11). Because these sinners have provoked God continually (v. 3), they are destined for the sword (v. 12). The divine wrath which will be raised against them at that time is likened to “a fire that burns all the day” (v. 5), and while God will put them to death (v. 15), He will bless the righteous (v. 23) and rescue them from destruction (v. 8).

Chapter 66 is formatted in a parallel manner, also beginning with God’s condemnation of sinners, however, here they are presented as those who offer up empty sacrifices to Him while still choosing to be governed by their own sinful ways (v. 3).<sup>76</sup> As punishment for their behavior, He “will choose harsh treatment for them and bring their fears upon them” (v. 4). This “harsh treatment” is revealed several verses later to be the Lord’s personal execution of judgement through sword and flame (v. 15-16), the result of which will be the slaying of “many” (v. 16). The wicked will “come to an end together” (v. 17) while the righteous will live on in the

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<sup>75</sup> Stromberg, *Isaiah After Exile: The Author of Third Isaiah as Reader and Redactor of the Book*, 42.

<sup>76</sup> Much of what characterizes Trito-Isaiah’s writing are reminders to the people that although they had achieved their goal of returning to their homeland, they were still expected to remain as faithful to the commands of Torah as they had been during the exile. In this chapter, improper sacrifice and indulgence in prohibited dietary ----- are the chief concern.

“glorious abundance” of the restored Jerusalem (v. 11), to which all the nations will travel to in order to proclaim God’s glory (v. 18, 23).

The final verse of this chapter is likely one of the most incorrectly interpreted passages of Scripture in church history. Speaking of the righteous remnant inhabiting Jerusalem, Trito-Isaiah says that “they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against [God]. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh” (v. 24). Jesus famously references this verse in Mark 9:48 in connection to hell, but it had already been used in a similar manner and with great frequency since at least the time of the writing of the intertestamental literature. However, interpretations of this verse that took it to teach the eternal, unending torment of the wicked as most do now were few and far between, not developing much momentum until the late second century AD. It is clear from the context of the passage that “the wicked will be punished,” but “Isaiah makes no mention of the wicked dead. Here God wreaks his vengeance on the living wicked.”<sup>77</sup> Nowhere does the text suggest “that they are alive to experience everlasting torment.”<sup>78</sup> The wicked *are* slain by God, but it is their corpses that undergo destruction by fire and worm, not their still living bodies - there is no hint that God will give the wicked ----- bodies that can somehow paradoxically be decomposed but never actually destroyed in their totality. Although the worms will “not die,” this does not mean that they are immortal, but that they will not perish until their task is accomplished. However, even if the text did actually mean that the worms literally continued to exist forever, “that would neither transform dead bodies into living people, nor redefine the

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<sup>77</sup> Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, 174.

<sup>78</sup> Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 202.

worms' mission from one of consuming to one of tormenting, nor reconstitute the corpses they had consumed.”<sup>79</sup>

The scene is extraordinarily similar to that found in the previously examined seventh chapter of Jeremiah. Both passages use the image “of a pile of corpses, victims in battle, ignominiously dumped in a heap,” to describe the destruction of God’s enemies.<sup>80</sup> The shame of their unburied corpses being exposed to the elements and consumed by animals is also a point of comparison between the two works. It is possible that both also imagine the Valley of Hinnom as the location of this destruction, as the dead bodies of the wicked in Isaiah 66:24 must have been within “the environs of Jerusalem” if the righteous were to be able to “go out and look” upon them.<sup>81</sup> But while Jeremiah envisions the end of a specific group of wicked people at a specific point in history, Trito-Isaiah foresees the end of *all* the wicked at the end of the present age. With the modern understanding that the Jeremiah passage would have been written earlier than the entirety of Trito-Isaiah, it is not too difficult to see the way in which this illustration of God’s judgement upon the wicked grew in intensity over time.

The Isaiah passage also adds the element of “unquenchable fire” to the image of slaughter and decay already furnished by Jeremiah. Just as with the worms that do not die, “unquenchable fire” does not refer to a fire that burns forever, but rather one “that cannot be resisted or put out until it has done what fire is intended to do,” and “because this fire is ‘not quenched’ or extinguished, it completely consumes what is put into it.”<sup>82</sup> This symbol of total destruction appears frequently in Scripture, referring to a forest being completely burned to ashes in Ezekiel

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<sup>79</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 76.

<sup>80</sup> Block, *The Old Testament on Hell*, 61.

<sup>81</sup> Bailey, *Gehenna: The Topography of Hell*, 188.

<sup>82</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 77.

20:47-48 and God's judgement upon the city of Bethel resulting in it being "reduced to nothing" in Amos 5:5-6.

Edward William Fudge speculates that this scene may have been inspired by the angel of the Lord's killing of the 185,000 Assyrian troops encamped outside the walls of Jerusalem as an answer to King Hezekiah's prayer during the foreign army's siege of the city.<sup>83</sup> As recorded in Isaiah 37:26, when the people awoke in the morning they were astonished by the mountains of dead surrounding the city, an awesome testament to God's almighty power. If the prophecy presented in 30:33 foretelling this event came to pass in its entirety, then the exact site of this destruction may very well have been the Topheth in the Valley of Hinnom that Jeremiah spoke of in connection to child sacrifice (Jer. 7:31).<sup>84</sup> It is important to note that "in both historical event (Isa. 37:36) and prophetic picture (Isa. 66:24), the righteous contemplate with satisfaction 'the dead bodies' of the wicked," not living people.<sup>85</sup> Although Jesus will apply Isaiah's image in several different ways in Mark 9:48, he does not alter this intrinsic meaning behind the original text.<sup>86</sup>

### Daniel

Current historical opinion places the origination of the second half of the book of Daniel (in its present form) sometime during the Maccabean revolt, which began in 167 BCE and ended

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>84</sup> It is worth noting that the English Standard Version and several other translations use the expression "burning place" instead of Topheth, however, the majority of modern translations use the actual place-name. This chapter containing the prophecy against the Assyrians is also an equally late addition to the book, likely originating only slightly earlier than that which is ascribed to Trito-Isaiah.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>86</sup> This New Testament passage and others in which Jesus uses figurative language to describe the horror of hell will be discussed more thoroughly in the second half of the thesis, specifically in the section beginning on p. 64.

in approximately 160 BCE.<sup>87</sup> The revolt was the result of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Greek king of the Seleucid Empire, moving to eradicate traditional Jewish worship and customs in Jerusalem. Because the visions that compose the second half of the book provide prophecies falsely predicting that Egypt and Syria would war against one another, and that Antiochus would die in Palestine, this segment of the book could not have been written any later than 164 BC, which is the year that Antiochus proved the prophecy wrong by dying in Persia.

Due to its late date of composition, Daniel can reasonably be expected to contain the most developed and elaborate eschatological theology of the prophetic literature. This is true, especially when it is applied to the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, which here finds its first fully realized appearance. Daniel is considered by the vast majority of scholars to contain “the earliest undoubted reference to literal resurrection in the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>88</sup> The author was apparently “aware of the previous writing on the subject” because “his language is based on the metaphors in the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel.”<sup>89</sup> Daniel 12:1-3, in fact, appropriates some of the resurrection language used in Isaiah 26:19, which announces that “the dead shall live.” But whereas Isaiah’s prophecy is left relatively ambiguous and was almost certainly meant to be interpreted metaphorically, the author of Daniel takes it “in a literal sense, saying that ‘the sleepers in the dust’ will literally arise.”<sup>90</sup>

This figurative language also occurs in Ezekiel 37 when the titular prophet has a vision in which he is commanded by God to prophesy to the dry bones strewn across the floor of a desert

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<sup>87</sup> The first half of the book is largely biographical in nature, chronicling the life of Daniel and his fellow Israelites during their captivity in Babylon. Although these stories may or may not have been written down at the same time as the second half of the book, they likely originated from much earlier legends.

<sup>88</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 265.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 263.



valley. As he does, the bones come together and are covered in flesh once again. Once the miraculous task is complete, God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the Israelites suffering alongside him in exile. He is to deliver a message of hope to them, assurance that God will raise them from their graves just as He did the bones in the valley (Ezek. 37:13). Here, as in Isaiah, the resurrection imagery serves a metaphorical purpose. Only later is it retooled by the author of Daniel to suggest a literal resurrection event.

The resurrection that is prophesied in Daniel 12 “has some innovative notions about the identity of the resurrected and the process of resurrection” that are not found in earlier writings, metaphorical or otherwise.<sup>91</sup> The most significant for the later development of intertestamental eschatology is expressed in the first three verses of chapter 12, in which it is prophesied that during a time of great trouble for Israel, God will deliver His promised people from calamity (v.1). Jewish heritage alone does not guarantee this deliverance, rather it is dependent upon each individual’s name being “written in the book” (v. 2). This concept of a divine “book” was a figurative symbol developed within the Psalms (e.g. 56:8, 69:28) that is usually understood as a metaphor derived from the ancient muster rolls used to identify the citizens of a particular city or region. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth” will take part in the subsequent resurrection. The text does not explain whether this “includes all or only some of the dead.”<sup>92</sup> If it is the latter, which is more likely, it likely reflects the early resurrection belief that only the very good and the very evil were to be raised to stand God’s judgement. By the time of the intertestamental literature, however, this view would expand to include all the dead regardless of their quality of righteousness or sin.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>92</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 80.

The passage goes on to state that those whose names are to be found in the book are then raised to “everlasting life,” while those whose names are not will experience “shame and everlasting contempt” (v. 3). The Hebrew word translated here to mean “contempt” is *dera'on*, and it only appears in one other place in the Old Testament, that being Isaiah 66:24, where it is translated to mean “abhorrence.”<sup>93</sup> As both passages concern themselves with the punishment of the wicked, and the author of Daniel has already been demonstrated to have drawn from Isaiah in composing his own work, it is not unreasonable to interpret this verse to mean the same as Isaiah 66:24 - the wicked are viewed with disgust and repulsion, whether by God or by the righteous (as in Isaiah) is unclear, but both can be presumed. With this description of two contrasting fates there “emerges a clear dualistic conception of judgement - the possibility of reward or punishment - applied for the first time specifically to the postmortem world” with an apocalyptic perspective.”<sup>94</sup> Those judged “will experience contrasting fates of equal consequence,” as is implied by the use of the Hebrew word *olam* before each of the words used to refer to the destiny of the resurrected.<sup>95</sup> *Olam* always has a time-oriented meaning, and can be utilized in reference to a remote period in either the past or the future, or simply of something lasting in perpetuity. In this instance it signifies that which ever final condition the resurrected are destined for, it will “endure everlastingly.”<sup>96</sup>

Advocates for the belief that the wicked will receive unending conscious torment in hell allege that the reference to “everlasting contempt” in this verse “assumes the continuing existence of the object of God’s hatred.”<sup>97</sup> However, as just noted, the text does not even

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<sup>93</sup> Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, 263. .

<sup>94</sup> Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 73.

<sup>95</sup> Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, 174.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>97</sup> Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: confronting the contemporary challenges to Jesus teaching on hell*, 77.

explicitly confirm whether the contempt in question is issuing from God or from the righteous remnant enjoying “everlasting life.” If the verse is to be interpreted similarly to Isaiah 66:24, it would be the latter. The Isaiah passage also serves as proof that *dera'on* can be shown to non-living subjects as well. Clearly, any attempt to read an “orthodox” position of hell into Daniel 12:3 is doomed to fail.

### **Influence of the Intertestamental Texts on First Century Judaism**

Both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism find their beginnings in the Second Temple period of Israel's history, a span of time that lasted from 586 BC to 70 AD, beginning with the destruction of Solomon's First Temple by the Neo-Babylonians and ending with the destruction of Herod's Second Temple by the Romans.<sup>98</sup> Today, it is a common tendency among Protestant Christians to refer to the majority of the Second Temple period as "the silent years," as, at least from a Protestant point of view, God appears to have become "silent" during the four centuries in between the prophecies of Malachi and the ministry of John the Baptist.<sup>99</sup> In reality, however, this period saw a veritable eruption of theological discussion due to Israel's exposure to a wide array of influences that it had previously only indirectly encountered or never encountered at all, ranging from Hellenistic to Mesopotamian. This exposure did not occur in ideal circumstances, however, as it was almost entirely the natural result of exile, persecution, and oppression. In a rapidly changing time such as this, the Jews naturally looked to their God for answers, and, receiving none, formed their own. This response manifested itself as a sizable body of literature now known as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

While these writings are not considered to be canon within the Protestant Bible, they are nonetheless incredibly useful in "illuminat[ing] the thought of the New Testament."<sup>100</sup> This usefulness becomes apparent when one realizes that the Jews of the first century must have been familiar with the hell traditions found within the intertestamental literature, as Jesus used place names and words to describe hell when speaking to them without giving explanation as to what

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<sup>98</sup> Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period: A Guide for New Testament Students*, 17.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 18.

these terms meant.<sup>101</sup> Thus, a firm understanding of these writings and the teachings they espouse is necessary contextual work that must be completed ahead of any sort of study of the New Testament and its own teachings regarding hell.

This section of the thesis will not concern itself with whether or not these non-canonical books are divinely-inspired, as it is inconsequential to the discussion. They will be treated solely as examples of Jewish thought during the Second Temple period. Of the vast array of intertestamental literature extant today, this thesis will choose to examine three, each representing one of the two opinions in regards to the duration of hell that developed during the Second Temple Period. The goal of this analysis is to prove that the conception of hell as the ultimate annihilation of the wicked was the majority view at the time of Jesus' ministry, *not* unending conscious torment as advocates for that position have asserted.

### *The First Book of Enoch*

The Book of Enoch (also known as 1 Enoch) is an apocalyptic text within the Pseudepigrapha, the collection of writings composed within two hundred years of the birth of Jesus that tradition ascribes to various biblical figures that could not have actually written them. Enoch is unique among these books as it is the text itself which claims the biblical patriarch as its author. However, as with the other pseudepigraphal writings, it could not have actually been written by Enoch, the antediluvian descendant of Adam and father of Methuselah, as modern scholarship has dated the earliest segment of the work, the Book of the Watchers, to the third century BC.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Instone-Brewer, *Eternal Punishment in First-Century Jewish Thought*, 213-14.

<sup>102</sup> Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 200.

Its large number of duplicate copies found as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran “suggest that the book was widely circulated and well known at the time.”<sup>103</sup>

The book is a composite text divided by scholars into four sections, the aforementioned Book of the Watchers being the first (ch. 1-36), followed by the Similitudes (ch. 37-71), the Book of Luminaries (ch. 72-82), the Book of Dreams (ch. 83-90), and the Epistles of Enoch (ch. 91-105). The book is not organized in chronological order of authorship, however, as the Similitudes were the latest addition, having possibly been “written around the time of Christ.”<sup>104</sup> Of these divisions, the Book of the Watchers is the one most concerned with hell, possessing the “most elaborate mythical geography of the early Enoch apocalypses.”<sup>105</sup> In its opening chapters, Enoch is asked to intercede before the heavenly court on behalf of the fallen angels known as the Watchers, the “sons of God” recorded in Genesis 6:1 as partaking in illicit relations with human women and fathering the race of giants referred to as the Nephilim. However, as the Watchers already stand condemned before God nothing Enoch says will change their fate, the nature of which is then revealed to him. Azazel, the Watcher responsible for teaching humans how to make jewelry and weapons of war, is to be bound “hand and foot” and cast “into the darkness” (1 En. 10:4), where he will reside upon “rough and jagged rocks” within a pit “in the desert (v. 5). His ultimate punishment, however, is to be “cast” (v. 7) into “the abyss of fire” (v. 13) alongside his sinful brethren, “confined for ever” within a prison of torment” (v. 14). Prior to this final punishment, the other Watchers are also bound “for seventy generations in the valleys of the earth” (v. 12). Suffering this same preliminary fate alongside the Watchers are those who have

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<sup>103</sup> Instone-Brewer, *Eternal Punishment in First-Century Jewish Thought*, 215. See also Grabbe, *Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period*, 42.

<sup>104</sup> Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 189.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 202. The Similitudes also speak of hell frequently, however, due to their late date of composition they will not be considered applicable to the current discussion.

been “condemned and destroyed,” however, their period of bondage only lasts “to the end of all fifteen generations” (v. 14).

In Chapters 17-19 and 20-36 Enoch is taken on two separate journeys “through the various regions of the earth, the heavens, and the underworld, with special emphasis on the dwelling places of the blessed and the places where sinners and fallen angels are punished.”<sup>106</sup> The angel Raphael shows him a large mountain containing four hollow places, explaining that they were created for “the souls of the dead” to “assemble therein” (1 En. 22:2-4) and be separated according to either their righteousness or their wickedness (v. 9-10) as they await the final judgement. This chapter is incredibly important to the development of Jewish thought, as “it shows distinctions between” the state of the righteous and the wicked after death, “in a manner not attested in earlier Jewish tradition.”<sup>107</sup> Whereas Sheol was traditionally represented as the fate of all mankind with “no differentiation between good and bad,” it is here transformed into something much more akin to the Greek Hades, which was itself also originally conceived of as a place for the dead to reside with no distinction based on earthly deeds.<sup>108</sup> However, as “time went on the Greek Hades underwent modification” through the influence of Orphic religion “and a different fate for certain men was envisaged.”<sup>109</sup> This shift in thought occurred amongst the Greeks long before it did amongst the Jews, and so it can naturally be presumed that with the growing influence of Hellenism in the Near East the one catalyzed the other. John J. Collins

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<sup>106</sup> Rost, *Judaism Outside the Hebrew Canon*, 138.

<sup>107</sup> Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 201.

<sup>108</sup> Glasson, *Greek Influence in Jewish Eschatology*, 13.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

holds this position, speculating that the Book of Enoch “can be read plausibly as an allegory for the Hellenistic age and the impact of western culture on a traditional Near Eastern society.”<sup>110</sup>

Near the end of Enoch’s travels, he observes an “accursed valley” (1 En. 27:1) located adjacent to “a holy mountain” (1 En. 26:2) which is situated in the “middle of the earth” (1 En. 26:1). He asks Uriel what the purpose of this valley is, and the angel responds by explaining that it is to be the “place of judgement” (1 En. 27:3) for “those who are accursed forever” (1 En. 27:2). Lloyd R. Bailey believes that this passage seems “to describe Jerusalem, the religious center of the known world, with the valley of Hinnom outside its walls.”<sup>111</sup> As to why the valley is not named within the text, Bailey explains that because the author was writing from the perspective of the antediluvian Enoch, who lived prior to the founding of Jerusalem, the valley had not yet received its name and so could not be referred to as such.<sup>112</sup> It is also worth noting that this particular allusion to the Valley of Hinnom specifically describes the judgment of the wicked occurring “in the presence of the righteous for ever” during “the last days” (1 En. 27:3). Edward Fudge concedes that this passage might “mean conscious pain that lasts forever, though it could also describe a judgement of everlasting destruction in the sense of irreversible extinction.”<sup>113</sup> Either way, the similarity to Isaiah 66:24 here is uncanny, and it can be presumed that the author of Enoch intended to reference this popular motif of the destruction of the wicked within his own work.

The later sections of the book do not contain as many references to hell, however, a few passages are worthy of inclusion in this section of the thesis. The Book of Dreams (ch. 83-90)

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<sup>110</sup> Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 207.

<sup>111</sup> Bailey, *The Topography of Hell*, 188.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>113</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 111.



includes the unusual allegory known as the “Animal Apocalypse of Enoch,” so named due to its presentation of the narrative of biblical history through the use of animals as representatives of Scriptural characters. The Israelites, for example are represented as sheep, whereas the Watchers appear as stars that fall from heaven. In 1 Enoch 90:24, these stars are “judged and found guilty;” their punishment is to be “cast into an abyss, full of fire and flaming” that “opens in the midst of the earth” (v. 26).<sup>114</sup> This punishment is similar to that presented in the Book of the Watchers, however, this passage goes further in its assertion that the “blinded sheep” (the representations of Jewish apostates) suffer the same punitive action. Enoch explicitly states that he observes “those sheep burning and their bones burning,” implying their death and subsequent consumption in the flames.<sup>115</sup> The Epistles of Enoch (ch. 91-105), composed after both the Book of the Watchers and the Book of Dreams, encourage the righteous to be hopeful, for they shall witness the day when both sinners and their sin will suddenly “perish in darkness for ever”, never being “seen from that day for evermore” (1 En. 92:5; 96:1).

Understandably, the Book of Enoch has been claimed by both proponents of annihilationism and unending conscious torment as evidence that Jews in the first century held to their particular view. The truth, however, is that the book appears to alternate between both viewpoints with regularity, a likely consequence of the book being compiled over a period of several centuries by a variety of authors.<sup>116</sup> Responsible for introducing the idea that the fallen angels were the origin of sin, the book is almost unanimous in its opinion that they will be “confined within a prison of torment for ever,” however, it is unclear what position it takes on

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<sup>114</sup> This reference to the abyss being located in the midst of the earth can be interpreted as a continuation of the Book of the Watchers’ equating of the place of judgement with the Valley of Hinnom.

<sup>115</sup> Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 203.

<sup>116</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 111.

the duration of the punishment of wicked human beings.<sup>117</sup> At times it seems to suggest that the wicked will “perish,” or be “condemned and destroyed,” while at others it speaks of them undergoing judgement “in the presence of the righteous forever.” While this thesis will treat 1 Enoch as adhering to a mixed position on the subject, the evidence that it supports annihilation for the wicked appears to be in higher quantity.

### *The Psalms of Solomon*

Dated by most scholars to approximately the mid-first century B.C, shortly after the end of the Hasmonean dynasty that was established in the wake of the Maccabean revolt, the Psalms of Solomon are a grouping of eighteen compositions likely penned by early Pharisees in Palestine.<sup>118</sup> They primarily highlight God’s role as judge of the wicked to an excessive degree not normally found in Psalmic literature, and so it is not surprising to learn then that they display a large amount of interest in the nature of the hell that awaits sinners at the end of the age.

The Psalmist regularly contrasts the lot of the righteous with the lot of the wicked. In chapter three, the sinner is presented as falling and rising no more and being subject to a destruction that is to last forever (Ps. Sol. 3:10). However, “they that fear the Lord will rise to life eternal” and “will come to an end no more” (v. 12). In chapter fifteen, the same lines are repeated in almost exactly the same way, except here the wicked are spoken of as perishing forever in the day of the Lord’s judgement (Ps. Sol. 15:13). This understanding is apparently so important to the Psalmist that it is repeated yet again only two verses later: “but sinners shall perish for ever” (v. 15). The instrument of this destruction is described in both this chapter and

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<sup>117</sup> This position on the fallen angels is unanimous with the possible exception of 1 Enoch 19:2, which states that the Watchers will be “judged till they are made an end of.”

<sup>118</sup> Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period: A Guide for New Testament Students*, 389-90.

chapter twelve as “flaming fire” (Ps. Sol. 12:5). The wicked will be so utterly annihilated by God’s judgement that even their memory will be “wiped out” from the earth (Ps. 2:19). This language of destruction is so harsh that it cannot possibly be interpreted in any other way. Any attempt to read unending conscious torment into the Psalms of Solomon would be futile.

### *The Book of Judith*

The apocryphal composition known as the Book of Judith is dated by the majority of scholars to around 150 BC, with some aspects of the text suggesting the use of recycled portions of an earlier story from the Persian period.<sup>119</sup> It was likely composed in Palestine by members of the religious community that would later come to be known as the Pharisees, similarly to the Psalms of Solomon.<sup>120</sup> It tells the story of the widowed Judith saving the Israelites from destruction at the hands of the Assyrian general Holofernes through her bravery and cunning. As a result of being written after the Maccabean revolt, the work is much “more interested in nationalistic fervor than theology.”<sup>121</sup> However, one verse in particular is immensely important to this discussion. It appears near the close of the book, as part of the victory song that Judith leads her people in proclaiming. In the final line, Judith declares: “Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgement; he will send fire and worms into their flesh; they shall weep in pain forever.”<sup>122</sup>

The “fire and worms” are yet another obvious allusion to the picture of the destruction of the wicked presented in Isaiah 66:24, however, they appear to be utilized here within the context

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>121</sup> Instone-Brewer, *Eternal Punishment in First-Century Jewish Thought*, 225.

<sup>122</sup> This verse is taken from the translation used within the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

of unending conscious torment.<sup>123</sup> Edward Fudge seems to think this is the case, viewing this language as unmistakably describing “the traditionalist hell” and subsequently being led to conclude that this verse marks the “first unequivocal appearance” of that theological position in Jewish thought. Although Fudge may be correct, he likely overexaggerates the verse’s importance. At the very least, other scholars certainly do not take an “unequivocal” stance on this verse as he seems to suggest. As Deborah Levine Gera writes, the Greek word translated here as ‘pain’ often refers to physical sensations, but is used elsewhere” in the Septuagint to describe “perception and knowledge.”<sup>124</sup> She believes that the verse should be understood as describing “the punished sinners” crying out “in full awareness of their sins,” rather than their experiencing of gruesome torment for eternity.<sup>125</sup> Morton S. Eslin’s commentary on Judith notes that the word “forever” is used as “a rhetorical flourish” in two earlier verses within the book (16:16 and 15:10) and does not literally mean that the subjects will last continuously.<sup>126</sup> It is reasonable, then, to apply the same meaning to the verse in question. Either way, this proves that there is still scholarly debate over whether or not even *this* seemingly-concrete verse supports unending conscious torment and not some form of annihilationism as do the rest of its apocryphal kin.

The fact that both the Book of Judith and the Psalms of Solomon present different pictures of the final punishment of the wicked whilst having been written so close to the same time and by the same religious community, especially one as strict and orderly as the Pharisees,

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<sup>123</sup> Deborah Levine Gera speculates that this language may be a reference to the scene in 2 Maccabees in which Antiochus IV has worms sent into his body as a punishment from God.

<sup>124</sup> Gera, *Judith (Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature)*, 469. The Septuagint, which she refers to, is the earliest extant Koine Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures, used by the early Christian church as the first version of the Old Testament.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>126</sup> Eslin, *The Book of Judith: Greek Text with an English Translation*, 12.

demonstrates that there was no uniform Jewish view on final punishment by the time Jesus began his ministry. Annihilation of the wicked may have been the majority view, but it was evidently not the only one present at the time. Jesus' hearers would have easily understood the imagery he used, certainly, but the idea that all of them would have assumed him to be speaking of unending conscious torment is simply not true.

### **Early Christian and Apostolic Beliefs in Eternal Punishment**

Passing over the period of history in which the New Testament is set (approximately from the beginning of the first century CE to the beginning of the second), the next area of focus for this thesis will be the time just prior to the completion of the latest book of the canonized New Testament.<sup>127</sup> The writings of this time are known among biblical scholars as the sub-apostolic literature because their authors were either taught by the apostles themselves or by those who had been taught by them, making them either second or third generation Christians.<sup>128</sup> Although it is not known with certainty whether or not the individuals these writings are attributed to actually wrote them, they still serve a valuable purpose as windows into the thinking of this early generation of believers.<sup>129</sup>

Advocates for the “orthodox” view of hell such as Stewart Salmond and Robert Peterson argue that annihilationism was not held by any prominent members of the early church until Arnobius of Sicca in the fourth century.<sup>130</sup> An analysis of this early Christian literature, then, is necessary to determine the validity of their claims. This section of the thesis will set out to do exactly that, by first examining the earliest writings that make up the sub-apostolic literature that also cover the subject of hell to a discernible degree. The three books that will be looked at - the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas - all came remarkably close to being permanently accepted within the New Testament canon, and as such were likely representative of the majority opinions of the early church at the time that they were written.

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<sup>127</sup> This being 2 Peter, written sometime in between 100 and 150 CE. For the purposes of this section of the thesis, the earliest proposed date of composition will be accepted, making the sub-apostolic age begin at the turn of the second century and end halfway through it.

<sup>128</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 253.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>130</sup> Salmond, *The Christian Doctrine of Immortality*, 473; Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*, 98.

Next will be the examination of the writings of the three apostolic fathers that speak the most on hell: Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and the first apologist, Justin Martyr.

### The Didache

The text known as the Didache is one of the earliest pieces of Christian writing still extant today, with the bulk of the material in the oldest portions dating as far back as “the time of the writing of the gospels themselves.”<sup>131</sup> This includes chapters one through six, as well as the sixteenth and final chapter. Even conservative estimates place these segments no later than the early second century, with the final composition of the book being completed around 150 CE.<sup>132</sup> It was likely written in Syria by a Jewish Christian community, and it shares so many similarities with the gospel of Matthew that some have even suggested that the two come from “a shared background” of early Christian traditions.<sup>133</sup> The Didache may be one of the most important pieces of sub-apostolic literature to this study, as it was treated with a great degree of reverence in the early church, so much so that it was almost canonized - clearly its teachings were considered to be authoritative.<sup>134</sup>

The book largely acts as a treatise of Christian ethics, adapted by the Jewish converts for use by the Gentiles to which they ministered. This is where the book derives its full name, “The Lord’s Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles” - *Didache* is simply the Greek word for “teaching”. Its first six chapters “contain a teaching known as the ‘two ways,’” an ancient tradition that finds its roots in the Old Testament.<sup>135</sup> These two ways are that of the

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<sup>131</sup> Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, 38.

<sup>132</sup> Tyson, *A Study of Early Christianity*, 246.

<sup>133</sup> Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*, 213.

<sup>134</sup> Tyson, *A Study of Early Christianity*, 246.

<sup>135</sup> Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, 56. The tradition of the two ways first appears in Deuteronomy 30 and later makes a notable appearance in Psalm 1.

righteous, which leads to life, and that of the wicked, which leads to death. Matthew 7:13 speaks in a similar fashion, describing the narrow gate that leads to life and the wide and easy way that leads to destruction. As the two works have already been demonstrated to come from a similar source, it is not unreasonable to equate the “destruction” found in Matthew with the “death” found in the Didache.<sup>136</sup> Proponents of unending conscious torment often try to skirt their way around this kind of biblical language by asserting that the “destruction” which serves as the punishment of the damned in hell is to be equated with a continued, albeit ruined, state of existence in torment. However, as has just been seen, the Didache exposes this sort of faulty reasoning.

The final chapter of the book represents a stark divergence from the subjects of the chapters that preceded it, containing “a collection of images” run through with an “apocalyptic emphasis,” the purpose of which was probably to serve as a warning to those tempted to disregard the teachings already expressed in the earlier chapters.<sup>137</sup> In verse five, it speaks of the end of the present age, saying that “then shall all created men come to the fire of judgement, and many will be scandalized and perish; but those who persevere in their faith will be saved from the curse itself.” This offers further proof that the “death” presented as one of the two ways is equated by the Didachist with the punishment of the wicked in hell.

### *The Epistle of Barnabas*

Sharing many similarities with the Didache is the Epistle of Barnabas, an anonymous document likely written in Alexandria around 130 CE.<sup>138</sup> Its name is derived from its attribution “to the apostle Barnabas, friend and companion of the apostle Paul,” by several later church

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<sup>136</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 256.

<sup>137</sup> Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*, 51.

<sup>138</sup> Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*, 218.



fathers, however, “virtually no scholar” still believes this to be the case.<sup>139</sup> Chapters 18 through 20 contrast the way of light with the way of darkness in a similar fashion to the two ways teaching found in the Didache, however, here the way of death is intensified and turned into “the way of eternal death with punishment,” characterized by “the things that destroy the soul” (Barn. 20:1). In contrast, those who believe in Christ “shall live forever” (Barn. 8:5). “Eternal death with punishment,” represented as *meta timorias* in Greek, can easily refer to the final extinction of the wicked as long as it is accepted they experience some degree of recompense involving suffering beforehand.<sup>140</sup> The author of Barnabas also warns his readers near the end of his work that “he who has learned the judgements of the Lord should walk in them,” as “he who chooses other things shall be destroyed with his works” (Barn. 21:1), for a time is coming when “all things shall perish with the evil one” (v. 3).

### *The Shepherd of Hermas*

The Shepherd (or Pastor) of Hermas is a “collection of allegorical instructions” made up of “five so-called visions, twelve commandments, and ten similitudes, or parables.”<sup>141</sup> It was written in Rome and composed over a lengthy period of time, beginning near “the end of the first century and concluding toward the middle of the second.”<sup>142</sup> Written in 170 CE, the Muratorian fragment, the oldest known list of most of the books of the New Testament, describes the Shepherd as having been written “very recently in our times,” lending credence to a dating of the final composition occurring sometime in the mid-second century. Apparently it was “the most

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<sup>139</sup> Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 788.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 782.

<sup>141</sup> Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 785.

<sup>142</sup> Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction*, 139.

popular noncanonical writing” of the early church, being “read in public worship” and “in many places even enjoy[ing] canonical recognition” up until the third century.<sup>143</sup>

The author represents himself as Hermas, a former slave to a Roman woman named Rhoda. After many years of service she grants him his freedom, and he goes on to form a family and remain in Rome with them, becoming Christian in the process. The Muratorian fragment identifies this Hermas as the brother of the Roman bishop Pius, who led the church at Rome during the 140s and 150s CE. The apostle Paul also mentions a Hermas in Romans 16:4, however, it is unlikely that this would have been the same Hermas who wrote the Shepherd as it would mean that he would have written his work around the age of one hundred and ten at the very youngest.

The book opens with Hermas receiving a vision of Rhoda while traveling. She informs him that she is his accuser in heaven, on account of a sexually immoral thought that he once had of her when he witnessed her bathing. She goes on to describe to him the end of “those who think wickedly in their hearts” as “death and captivity,” and if Hermas is to avoid such a fate he must pray for forgiveness for both himself and all the members of his household, who he has permitted to act sinfully (Vis. 1.1).

This vision is followed by several others, sometimes characterized by the appearance of the Church itself in the form of a haggard old woman, reduced to her present state because of the sins of the believers that comprise her body. She too orders Hermas to do penance for his own sins, explaining that the righteous who “wax strong against every form of wickedness” will “abide until eternal life” and “never be destroyed,” in contrast to the unrepentant wicked (Vis.

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<sup>143</sup> Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, 40; Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 785.

2.3). In later visions, Hermas is visited by an angel of repentance in the form of a shepherd, the same from which the title of the book derives. He delivers books of laws and mandates to Hermas, and these form the bulk of the book's midsection. Of these commandments, the twelfth instructs that Christians "must refrain from evil desires, that by refraining [they] may live to God. However, "many are mastered by them, and do not resist them" - these people "will perish at last, for these desires are fatal" (Man. 12.2). The mandates also provide yet another example of the two ways motif found in both the Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas, "the traditional lists of virtues and vices" more closely reflecting the former, while the imagery "is more closely linked with the angelology" of the latter.<sup>144</sup> Here, the rulers of the two ways are represented as the angel of righteousness and the angel of wickedness, whereas in Barnabas 18 they were the angel of light and the angel of darkness.

The final third of the book is made up of similitudes, or parables, in the form of visions, which Hermas receives and then asks his angelic companion the meaning of. In the fourth, Hermas is shown "many trees, some budding, and others withered" (Sim. 4.1). When asked, the angel explains that the budding trees represent the righteous, whereas the withered ones represent "the heathen and sinners," who will be found to be "unfruitful" in the age to come (v. 2). Because they do not produce anything of value, they "shall be burnt as wood" and "consumed because they sinned and did not repent" (v. 4). The eighth similitude reiterates the point made throughout the whole book, asserting "that repentance involves life to sinners" (Sim. 8.6), but those who "do not repent at all, but abide in their deeds, shall utterly perish" (Sim. 8.7). This,

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<sup>144</sup> Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*, 91.

alongside death, destruction, burning, and consumption, makes up the language the book uses to describe the fate of the wicked.

### *Clement of Rome*

The earliest apostolic father whose writings are still extant today is thought to be Clement, although aside from his name, which is attested to by many ancient sources, his actual identity is largely unknown.<sup>145</sup> The text itself “strongly suggests the collective voice of many persons” through its “consistent use of ‘we,’” however, it was still likely “expressed through the hand of a single individual.”<sup>146</sup> Just who this individual was remains a mystery, with suggestions ranging from an apostle, to a bishop of Rome, to a church administrator.<sup>147</sup> Two epistles have been attributed to this Clement, however, only the first, addressed to the church at Corinth, is considered by scholars to actually have been written by him. It has been dated to sometime during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, likely between 95 and 97 CE, however, some scholars prefer an even earlier date, closer to the middle of the first century.<sup>148</sup> As with the three writings discussed above, the First Epistle of Clement “was held in very great esteem by the early church,” and was treated “as being almost on a level with the canonical writings.”<sup>149</sup>

The purpose of the letter was to settle a church feud at Corinth that resulted in the expulsion of several faithful presbyters. Clement seeks to bring about their restoration and to heal the dissension within the church, and he does so by quoting Old Testament examples regarding the evils of envy, which he explains “leads to death” (1 Clem. 9:1). Two chapters later

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<sup>145</sup> Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, 47; Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*, 18. These “ancient sources” include both Eusebius and Origen.

<sup>146</sup> Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*, 17.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>148</sup> Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*, 152.

<sup>149</sup> ANF, 35.

Clement once again draws from the Old Testament to support his message, using the story of God's deliverance of Lot from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to illustrate the way in which God "does not forsake those who hope in Him, but gives up such as depart from Him to punishment and torture" (1 Clem. 11:1). Although this may seem to support a view of hell as unending conscious torment, Clement's statement being used in connection to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah's total destruction through "means of fire and brimstone" (v. 1) seems to suggest otherwise.

Conditionalism, the belief that the human soul is naturally mortal and that immortality is therefore only granted by God as a gift, is also a recurrent theme in Clement's epistle. In chapter 21, he speaks of God's sovereignty over life: "His breath is in us; and when He pleases, He will take it away" (1 Clem. 21:9). In chapter 35, he explicitly calls "life in immortality" one of "the gifts of God" (1 Clem. 35:1-2). Those "who do anything beyond that which is agreeable to [God's] will" do not receive the gift of immortality, and "are punished with death" (1 Clem. 41:3). Clearly Clement saw death as the natural lot of a sinful and unsaved humanity.

### Ignatius of Antioch

Arrested by Roman authorities during the reign of Emperor Trajan sometime in between the years 107 and 109 CE, Ignatius was the second (or perhaps the third), bishop of Syrian Antioch.<sup>150</sup> After his arrest he was forced to march west to the capital to stand trial, accompanied by ten Roman soldiers. During this journey he was permitted to write a handful of letters to the Christian churches. A multitude of epistles attributed to Ignatius exist today, many having been attributed to the bishop during the fifth century. However, only the middle recension of the

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<sup>150</sup> Skarsuane, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*, 155; Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*, 9,12.

bishop's supposed correspondence is widely endorsed as actually having been penned by his hand: these include the letters to Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, Smyrna, and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, one of the other apostolic fathers with which Ignatius was well-acquainted.<sup>151</sup>

The Ignatian epistle with the earliest date given to it by modern scholars is that which was written to the Ephesians. In its seventeenth chapter, Ignatius explains the purpose of Christ's incarnation was so "that He might breathe immortality into His church" (Ig. Eph. 17:1). He goes on to say that humanity still "foolishly perishes, not recognizing the gift" given to them by God" as a result of the temptations "of the prince of this world," who leads them "away captive from the life which [was] set before [them]" (v. 2). Those who succumb to these temptations, as well as those who corrupt "by wicked doctrine the faith of God," are destined to "go away into everlasting fire" (Ig. Eph. 16:2). Ignatius' words are reflective of those found in the sub-apostolic literature previously covered. Clearly it was common practice amongst the members of the early church to equate death with the punishment of the wicked in hell. The strongest piece of evidence from the writings of Ignatius that supports this conclusion is found in the second chapter of the Epistle to the Trallians, where the bishop explains that the goal of Christ's death was so that "by believing in His death, [we] may escape from death." The "death" that is the natural lot of the unsaved is here directly correlated with the "death" that Jesus died on the cross. To say that the punishment of the wicked is not to die but to exist forever in a state of depravity is then to deny the humanity of Christ and slip into the heretical waters of Gnosticism.

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<sup>151</sup> Jefford, *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*, 10.

Traditions that appeared during the fourth century identify Ignatius as a disciple to the apostle John, later being ordained by Paul. At the very least, Ignatius' writings show that he was very familiar with both "Johannine themes" and "Pauline thought and imagery."<sup>152</sup> However, the gospel of Matthew was apparently "his preferred text," as many of the arguments he makes in his epistles are dependent on it - this should come as no surprise, as "Matthew was the most widely preferred gospel text throughout the early Christian world."<sup>153</sup> The two ways tradition that is so prevalent in both Matthew and the sub-apostolic literature of the time appears in the writings of Ignatius as well, specifically in his Epistle to the Magnesians.<sup>154</sup> He writes that "all things have an end," and that there are only two varieties "set before us - death and life; and every one shall go unto his own place" (Ig. Mag. 5:1).

### Justin Martyr

Beginning near the midpoint of the second century, a large number of Christians addressed defenses of the faith to the emperor to the educated public with the goal of proving that their faith should not be persecuted. At the time, most educated members of Greek and Roman society thought of Christianity as nothing more than a mere "lower-class superstition from an obscure frontier province."<sup>155</sup> In defending the faith against these sorts of critics, "the apologists had to make it seem intellectually respectable, and that usually meant relating it to philosophy."<sup>156</sup> While their intent was surely benevolent, the apologists inadvertently did great

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 12, 166.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>154</sup> Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, 30.

<sup>155</sup> Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 59.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 59.

harm to the Christian religion through their introduction of Platonic concepts into the minds of the faithful.

Chief among these new inclusions was the Platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul, which is believed by Edward Fudge to be the “womb from which the traditional Christian teaching of unending conscious torment was born.”<sup>157</sup> A belief that souls could not be destroyed and naturally existed forever seemed to lend itself easily to an understanding of hell as a place of eternal punishing. This Greek concept had already begun infiltrating Christian and Jewish thought the Septuagint’s use of the Greek *psyche* in place of the Hebrew *nefesh*, bringing all the philosophical baggage the word implied with it.<sup>158</sup> As the early church first began to conceive of the Parousia as occurring far into the future, rather than as an immediately imminent event as it had before, “the doctrine of the immortality of the soul came in to replace that of the resurrection.”<sup>159</sup>

Prior to the advent of the apologists, the Apostolic Fathers and other early Christian writers simply used biblical language to explain the concepts of the gospel, never venturing far from the actual word choice of Jesus or Paul. Thus, the final punishment of the wicked continued to be described by Christians as “everlasting fire” and “eternal destruction” for the remainder of the 1st century with little exception. But by accidentally introducing Greek ideas into the gospel, the apologists drastically changed the popular understanding of Hell.

Justin Martyr may be considered the first of these apologists, although he was not Greek but rather Samaritan in birth. He is an unusual figure in church history, as he can be easily

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<sup>157</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 19.

<sup>158</sup> Brenner, -----.

<sup>159</sup> Darby, *The Hopes of the Church of God: The Geneva Lectures*, 39.



grouped within both the Apostolic and the Greek Fathers. The writings that can be authentically attributed to him (the *First* and *Second Apologies*, as well as the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*) were all composed near the midpoint of the second century, the time just before the end of the apostolic age.

Justin is also incredibly important to a study such as this that aims to genuinely trace the origins of the hell doctrine in church history, as it is with Justin that, for better or for worse as has already been seen, “classical scholarship and Platonic philosophy” were brought “face to face with Christian theology.”<sup>160</sup> He was a self-proclaimed student of Platonic thought for much of his young life after his initial search for spiritual fulfillment amongst the other philosophies had turned up empty. Eventually, a chance encounter he had with an elderly Christian man convinced him that Christianity was in fact the one true philosophy. From then on he began to preach the gospel, while still retaining his philosopher’s garb. His writings also place a great deal of “stress on the Christian expectation of coming judgement and reward,” to a much higher degree than is found in any of the earlier sub-apostolic literature.<sup>161</sup>

Justin’s writings have been claimed and quoted by proponents on both sides of the hell argument, as in many places he appears inconsistent and contradictory.<sup>162</sup> A brief overview of his references to hell and the punishment of the wicked is necessary to demonstrate why this is not the case.

By far the term used most frequently to describe hell by Justin was “everlasting punishment in eternal fire,” although occasionally he would attach “everlasting” to “fire” and “eternal” to “punishment,” demonstrating that the qualifying adjectives shared the same

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<sup>160</sup> Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 810.

<sup>161</sup> Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Theology*, 21.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 811.

meaning.<sup>163</sup> In the beginning of the *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin says that the souls “which have appeared worthy of God never die; but others are punished so long as God wills them to exist and be punished” (Dial. 5.2.93). While the second half of Justin’s remark could be construed to refer to unending conscious torment, as it does not specify how long God *will* choose to keep the wicked in existence, the first half demonstrates that however long this period of punishment is, it will not last forever - only the righteous escape death.

Within the next chapter Justin asserts that the soul is only a mere “partaker of life,” for “to live is not its attribute, as it is God’s.” The soul lives only because “God wills it to live,” and when he no longer does so it dies (Dial. 6.2.95). Clearly this kind of teaching is in line with a conditionalist perspective. Later, what is possibly Justin’s most explicit statement in support of annihilationism occurs in the seventh chapter of his *Second Apology*, wherein he says: “God delays causing the confusion and destruction of the whole world, by which the wicked angels and demons and men shall cease to exist” (II Apol. 7:1). Speaking of these devils as well as the men who serve them, Justin asserts that they will be “shut up in eternal fire” in order to “suffer their just judgement and penalty” (II Apol. 7:4).

Two passages are commonly cited by those who believe Justin supported the conception of hell as unending conscious torment. The first, found in chapter seven of the Second Apology says:

*“And Plato, in like manner, used to say that Rhadamanthus and Minos would punish the wicked who came before them; and we say that the same thing will be done, but at the hand of Christ, and upon the wicked in the same bodies united again to their spirits which are now to undergo everlasting punishment; and not only, as Plato said, for a period of a thousand years.”*

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<sup>163</sup> In just the First Apology alone this phrase occurs in some form a multitude of times, see chapters 8, 12, 17, 18, 19, and 21. For word studies on the meaning of “everlasting” and “eternal” in Scripture, see the section beginning on p. \_\_\_\_.

It is easy to interpret this passage as Justin disagreeing with Plato's teaching on the duration of the punishment of the wicked: Plato believed that it was only "a period of a thousand years" while Justin presents it as "everlasting." However, this is to misunderstand the error Justin is refuting, as part of the Platonic belief Justin refers to was the teaching that "there would be a thousand-year punishment followed by transmigration of the soul to a fresh cycle of life in a new body."<sup>164</sup> Justin is simply denying that those being punished will ever have the opportunity to begin life anew, as the consequence of their everlasting punishment, that being their annihilation, will make this impossible.

The second passage of Justin's often taken as referring to unending conscious torment is found in chapter eighteen. A similar statement is also echoed two chapters later, also within the *Second Apology*. Here, Justin reflects upon how if death resulted in nothing beyond insensibility, rather than judgement, it "would be a godsend to all the wicked." However, he goes on to say that this is not the case, and "sensation remains to all who have ever lived" just as "eternal punishment is laid up" for the wicked (II Apol. 18:1). But Justin is not referring to unending conscious torment, he is simply explaining that "the first death is not the end of the wicked - they will once again be given sensibility" before experiencing God's judgement in the form of the second death, which likely involves some degree of conscious pain (or else there would be no point in granting the wicked sensibility).<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 263.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

## **Greek and Hebrew Word Studies**

Up until this point this thesis has presented the case for annihilationism solely based off of its long-standing tradition within both the Scriptures and the early church. Here, however, is where the other arguments formulated outside the history of

### *“Aionios” & “Olam” - Duration vs. Quality*

This thesis is not debating whether or not hell lasts forever (in terms of its consequences), as Scripture unanimously teaches that it does, but whether or not the punishment it entails continues to afflict the wicked for an endless duration. To answer this question, an understanding of the Greek and Hebrew adjectives in Scripture commonly translated as “eternal” and “everlasting” in connection to hell, is needed. Whereas modern English speakers today understand the words “eternal” and “everlasting” to mean “having continual existence,” this is not always how the authors of the Bible used the equivalent terms in their own languages.<sup>166</sup> For example, in the Old Testament, where the word used is “olam,” rituals, instructions, and ordinances provided for within the Mosaic law are described as being “eternal” despite the fact that “they clearly do not last forever.”<sup>167</sup> In 1 Kings 8:12-13, Solomon proclaims that the newly-constructed temple he has dedicated to God will be “a place for [Him] to dwell in forever.” Of course, being granted divine wisdom by God, Solomon would have known that no building made with human hands could last forever.<sup>168</sup> Another example is found in Deuteronomy 15:17, which describes a slave choosing to remain in servitude after having been granted his freedom as serving his master “forever.” Almost every single “ordinance, rite, or

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<sup>166</sup> Stackhouse Jr., *Four Views on Hell*, 66.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 67.

institution of the Old Testament system” is referred to in the same hyperbolic language.<sup>169</sup> With these precedents in mind, Le Roy Froom and Edward Fudge thus define “eternal,” as it is used in the Scriptures, to mean “unlimited time within the limits determined by the thing it modifies.”<sup>170</sup>

However, the New Testament’s use of the word *aionios* seems to indicate that the Biblical authors also utilized “eternal” in a qualitative sense, as a way of referring to a specific age or era, most often the age that is to come.<sup>171</sup> This is reflective of a “common Jewish attitude” toward history, which saw it as being “divided into two ages - the present age (*ha-olam hazeh*) and the age to come (*ha-olam ha-ba*).”<sup>172</sup> There are a multitude of biblical passages in which this meaning seems applicable, many concerning hell.

In Romans 12:2, for instance, the Greek word *aionios* is translated as “world” or “age” in place of “eternity,” as the latter interpretation would not make sense. In the passage, Paul urges the faithful to “not be conformed to this *aionios*,” but “to be transformed by the renewing of [their minds].” A reading of this verse that replaced “this *aionios*” with “this eternity” would be illogical, as it implies that there exists more than one eternity, which, by the definition of the word itself, is impossible.

Other instances within the New Testament where this substitution of *aionios* for “world” or “age” occurs include Matthew 13:22 and 1 Corinthians 2:8. They cause one to wonder why the Greek is unanimously understood within these verses to have a qualitative, rather than

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<sup>169</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 35. Examples include Ex. 12:24-25, Lev. 3:17, and Josh. 14:9.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>171</sup> Packer, *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, 183. Even J.I. Packer, a fervent supporter of the unending conscious torment position, concedes this point.

<sup>172</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 36.

quantitative, meaning, while in those referring to hell it is not. The issue, then, seems to primarily be one of translators reading their own preconceived notions into the text.

Of course, the most common rebuttal of the points made above is the deduction that if *aionios* does not mean “eternal,” then *zoe aionios* (translated as “eternal life”) cannot mean “endless life.” However, the simplest explanation keeping in line with the argument already presented is that the expression *zoe aionios* never actually meant “endless life” to begin with, but is instead descriptive of a life in the age to come after the Parousia, or second coming of Christ. This does not mean that this promised life will not last forever as well, however, as other verses lacking *aionios* (such as Luke 20:35-36) state as much.

Edward Fudge and John Stackhouse Jr. both ascribe this qualitative meaning of the word “eternal” to its pairings with redemption, salvation, judgement, punishment, and destruction.<sup>173</sup> As Stackhouse says, it would be odd indeed if “eternal salvation,” to use one example, was taken to mean Christ’s continuous offering up of his blood to the Father as propitiation for humanity’s sins.<sup>174</sup>

#### “Apollumi” & “Orethros” - Ruin vs. Annihilation

Scripture is much clearer when it refers to things as being “destroyed” than it is on their being “eternal.” From the Old Testament to the New, the wicked are described as dying, perishing, burning up, and being wiped out, consumed, and destroyed as a result of the final judgement of God.<sup>175</sup> In fact, ascertaining the meaning of this kind of language seems to be an extremely cut-and-dry task. As John Stott puts it, “It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed” and are instead in “a perpetually

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 39-41.

<sup>174</sup> Stackhouse Jr., *Four Views on Hell*, 68.

<sup>175</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 60-71.

inconclusive process of perishing.”<sup>176</sup> However, pushback does exist in the form of rebuttals asserting that the “destruction” of the wicked actually refers to their continual existence in a ruined or corrupted state outside of the good standing of God.<sup>177</sup>

Of the many words translated as “destruction” in the Bible, only one, “appolumi,” can actually be rendered as “ruin.” In most places, however, it simply means “the disappearance and disintegration of the thing in question,” especially “when it is linked with ‘fire.’”<sup>178</sup> Stackhouse makes the important connection between the ruining of an object and its subsequent loss of value and discardment, proving that even when appolumi does mean “ruin,” it can still be interpreted in line with the rest of the “vocabulary of destruction” that appears in Scripture.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Edwards and Stott, 316.

<sup>177</sup> Morgan, *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, 203.

<sup>178</sup> Stackhouse Jr., *Four Views on Hell*, 69.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

## New Testament Textual Citations

It is commonly asserted amongst evangelical circles that because Jesus himself spoke more frequently about hell than he did heaven, modern Christians should not shy away from the topic when seeking to share the gospel. Now, although this claim is blatantly false, the number of times Jesus taught about hell, and the variety of images with which he expressed his teachings, are sizable enough to stand out in a distinct way from the remaining body of Scripture. This section of the thesis will seek to examine the meanings behind each of the names and illustrations Jesus utilized when describing hell to his first century audience.

### Gehenna

By the time of the birth of Jesus, *Gehenna*, the Aramaic name for the valley southwest of Jerusalem mentioned in Jeremiah, had become synonymous in Jewish beliefs of the Second Temple period with “the fiery pit in which the godless [would] face divine justice” at the end of the age.<sup>180</sup> The word “hell” itself is actually entirely absent from the original Scriptures, being a derivation from the Old English *hel*, or *helle*, first appearing in 725 CE during the Anglo-Saxon pagan period.<sup>181</sup> In its place in the New Testament are various pictorial depictions, as well as three specific place-names. This section of the thesis will only concentrate on one of these three, Gehenna, and as it appears more times than the other two it surely deserves the additional attention.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 117.

<sup>181</sup> Barnhart, *The Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology*, 348.

<sup>182</sup> The King James Version of the Bible has more verses including the word “hell” than any other English translation because it interprets three different place-names (“Gehenna,” “Hades,” and “Tartaros”) as referring to the same location. Today, most modern Bibles simply transliterate “Hades” the ten times that it appears, leaving only the one occurrence of “Tartaros” in 2 Peter 2:4 and the twelve mentions of “Gehenna” to actually be translated as “hell.”



Tracing Gehenna's history from the Old Testament to the New is necessary to understand exactly why Jesus and the intertestamental authors used it so frequently as a comprehensive term to describe the nature of God's final punishment. As it is commonly utilized without any elaboration on its meaning, one can naturally assume that the first century audience of both Jesus and the intertestamental literature already understood the way in which it was being used.<sup>183</sup> A firm grasp of context is key to any sort of biblical exegesis, and nowhere is this more applicable than in this discussion.

The first reference to Gehenna in the Hebrew Bible is found in Joshua 15:8 and 18:16, where it is listed as part of the defining border of the lands allotted to "the tribe of the people of Judah" (Jos. 15:1). Both verses describe its location as the southern shoulder, or slope, of Jerusalem. It is not yet known by its Aramiac name, instead being called "the Valley of the Son of Hinnom." In its next chronological appearance the valley is identified as the location at which King Ahaz "burned his sons as an offering" to the pagan deities of the Canaanites (2 Chron. 28:3), most likely the god Molech in particular. Specifically, the text describes these sacrifices as occurring upon "the high places" within the valley, another name for pagan altars (as seen in 28:25) which the prophet Jeremiah calls "Topheth" (Jer. 7:31). Ahaz's successor, Hezekiah, would demolish these high places (2 Chron. 33:3), however, Hezekiah's own son, Manasseh, rebuilt them and practiced the same child sacrifice in the valley as his grandfather before him (v. 6). Manasseh's grandson, Josiah, would in turn abolish this idolatrous practice during his own reign as part of his series of religious reforms. In 2 Kings 23:10 he is recorded as having "defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom," so "that no one might burn his son or his

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<sup>183</sup> Instone-Brewer, *Eternal Punishment in First-Century Jewish Thought*, 213-14.

daughter as an offering to Molech.” However, by this point the valley had already cemented its reputation as a reprehensible place of “depravity and evil.”<sup>184</sup> The final reference to Gehenna to be found within the Old Testament is in Nehemiah 11:30, which describes the exiles returned from Babylon camping in the area between the city of Beersheba and “the Valley of Hinnom,” which in Hebrew is *Gei Hinnom*, hence the Aramaic spelling of *Gehenna*.<sup>185</sup> It was not until “sometime between the third and second centuries BCE” that the word “came to be associated with the realm of punishment for the dead.”<sup>186</sup> It is important to note that Gehenna and Hades, which Jesus also speaks of, were understood by the Jews of Jesus’ day as “two very different places” - whereas Gehenna is “the place of eternal punishment after the resurrection,” Hades is “the intermediate place where souls await the resurrection.”<sup>187</sup>

There is also a common tendency amongst even well-respected biblical scholars to reiterate the unfounded claim that the Valley of Hinnom was “used in Jesus’ day as a place to burn garbage,” where “fires burned day and night” and “crawling maggots” covered every exposed surface.<sup>188</sup> This notion is “not attested to any historical source,” possessing “no further basis than a statement” made “by the Jewish scholar Kimchi about AD 1200.”<sup>189</sup> However, it has nonetheless firmly embedded itself within popular literature concerning hell. If true, it would be extraordinarily beneficial to the annihilationist camp, even so, its disproving does not hurt it either - even if the valley was not used as a fiery rubbish dump during the first century, the

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<sup>184</sup> Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 89.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>187</sup> Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers*, 297.

<sup>188</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 119.

<sup>189</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 376.

“references to it in the Old Testament alone” still would have conjured up repugnant images in the minds of the Jews who heard Jesus speak.<sup>190</sup>

### Unquenchable Fire

Similar to the adjective *aionios* being wrongly interpreted as meaning “eternal,” the phrase “unquenchable fire” has for a long time been falsely equated with a fire that “never goes out.” However, this view is incorrect, as every time this phrase appears in the Bible it is always with the intended meaning of an intense fire that cannot be extinguished, resulting in the complete burning up of whatever is put into it - once this fuel has been consumed, the fire naturally goes out.<sup>191</sup> At no point is it quenched, or extinguished, before it has served its purpose.

A perfect example of the phrase “unquenchable fire” clearly being used with this meaning is found in Jeremiah 17:27, in which the prophet delivers God’s warning to the people of Jerusalem, saying that the city will be “devoured” by a fire that God will “kindle in its gates,” and this fire “shall not be quenched.” In 2 Chronicles 36:19-21 Jeremiah’s prophecy is recorded as having come to pass when the Babylonians “burned the house of God” and “all its palaces with fire.” The result of this destruction was Jerusalem being “left desolate” for seventy years. Obviously Jerusalem is not still burning to this day, meaning that the “unquenchable fire” first referred to by Jeremiah in his prophecy could not have possibly been intended to be interpreted as a “fire that never goes out.”

Isaiah 47:14 says of the wicked, “Behold, they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them; *they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame*: there shall not be a coal to warm at, nor fire to sit before it.”<sup>192</sup> The prophet portrays a fire that will not be deliberately put

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<sup>190</sup> Yarbrough, *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, 74.

<sup>191</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 130.

<sup>192</sup> Emphasis in italics added.

out, and if those suffering from it would attempt to do so, they would fail, being utterly consumed by the flame. By the time the fire has finished its work, “there shall not be a coal to warm at” - it does not go out until it has fulfilled its purpose.

### *Weeping & Gnashing of Teeth*

Yet another misinterpreted phrase used by Jesus regarding hell is the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” that he describes as the state of the wicked as they undergo sentencing during the final judgement. Supporters of unending conscious torment draw upon the seven verses which feature this expression (Matt. 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30, and Luke 13:28) to substantiate their claim that the wicked experience continuous anguish and suffering in hell. However, “gnashing of teeth” is never used in Scripture to indicate pain, instead serving as a symbolic expression of intense rage, often characterized as futile when directed against God (Ps. 112).<sup>193</sup> For example, in the book of Acts the Sanhedrin are described as “gnashing their teeth” in fury at Stephen prior to stoning him to death, a reaction to his blasphemous claims regarding the divinity of Christ (Acts 7:54).

Every time that the expression appears in connection to a passage about hell, it is paired with some form of description regarding the wicked being “thrown out” (Lk. 13:28) of God’s kingdom (Matt. 13:41) and separated from the righteous (Matt. 13:49-50). Two of the seven passages listed above portray “those excluded” as being “‘thrown into the fiery furnace,’ a fact not necessary for ‘weeping and grinding of teeth,’ as shown by the other five occurrences” that lack this added embellishment.<sup>194</sup> So, with all this in mind, Edward Fudge’s explanation of this phrase seems to be the most reasonable: “Weeping indicates sorrow, as the doomed begin to

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 158.

recognize the immanence of their own upcoming permanent demise” while the gnashing of teeth indicates defiant rage, “here toward God who sentenced them, and toward the redeemed who will be forever blessed.”<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 158.

## **Refuting Extra-Biblical Arguments**

The final section of this thesis concerns itself with the refutation of the three most popular extra-biblical arguments that advocates for unending conscious torment use to defend their position on the grounds of philosophy and morality. Everything that has preceded this section has proven that these arguments are the only thing left for them to fall back on, as the Bible makes its endorsement of annihilationism quite clear.

### **The Status Principle**

The baseline for most philosophical arguments in support of an unending conscious torment perspective is what has become known as the status principle. It “appeals to the notion that in assessing the justice of a punishment one must take into account, among other things, the moral and metaphysical status of the person offended.”<sup>196</sup> As God possesses the highest status of any being in existence, sins against him require the most severe form of punishment possible, hence the existence of an eternal hell.

The problems with this argument are surface-level. For example, it operates under the assumption that human beings are even capable of offending God’s honor or holiness. For this to be possible, humanity would have to be equal to him in terms of power. This kind of flawed logic is a direct result of the caste-conscious feudal society that the argument’s first supporters, Thomas Aquinas and Anselm of Canterbury, lived in, rather than any sort of inherently biblical teaching.<sup>197</sup>

It also operates both at its best and its worst when used alongside an analogy - for example, it would generally be agreed upon that someone who murders another human being

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<sup>196</sup> Spiegel, *Making the Philosophical Case for Conditionalism*, 82.

<sup>197</sup> Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 191-92; Stackhouse Jr., *Four Views on Hell*, 79.

deserves greater punishment than someone who kills a dog. It seems as if the value of the creature being killed determines the intensity of the punishment. However, most would also agree that someone who tortures a dog for days deserves greater punishment than someone who curses at another person, meaning that the nature of the crime is also an important factor in determining the degree of punishment.

*The Infinite Seriousness Thesis*

Often combined with the status principle, this argument is best summarized by traditionalist Denny Burk in a single statement: “to sin against an infinitely glorious being is an infinitely heinous offense that is worthy of an infinitely heinous punishment.”<sup>198</sup> The logic seems reasonable enough at first glance, however, a closer examination reveals its flaws. Firstly, unending conscious torment can never possibly “satisfy the demand of infinite punishment, since the damned can never suffer infinitely.”<sup>199</sup> Humans are finite creatures who are thus unable to experience an infinite intensity of suffering. Even if the “infinitely heinous punishment” referred to by Burk is instead understood as the “infinite *duration* of punishment for the damned,” which is likely his intention, the argument still cannot stand, as once again the damned are incapable of experiencing punishment of an infinite variety. At any given moment that they exist in hell, the wicked “will have only suffered for a finite duration,” never reaching true infinity and thus always retaining at least some degree of unpunished sin.<sup>200</sup> Not only is the Infinite Seriousness Thesis logically impossible, it also results in God’s gross mishandling of justice because the torture of the damned in hell “is insufficient as a punishment.”<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Burk, *Four Views on Hell*, 20.

<sup>199</sup> Spiegel, *Making the Philosophical Case for Conditionalism*, 84.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 88.

*The Continuing Sin Thesis*

Only marginally better than the Infinite Seriousness Thesis is the view which posits that “those who are judged and sentenced to hell might have a sentence” which only “initially merits an infinite punishment. But their unchecked sinful desires continue to lead them to sin” even while in hell, and this results in the continual mounting of penalties which can never be satisfied.”<sup>202</sup> This argument, known as the Continuing Sin Thesis, also possesses its own major weakness in that it denies free will to the wicked. If one can know with absolute certainty that the damned will continue to sin forever, “this implies that they are really no longer free in hell.” Without the freedom to choose “there can be no sin.”<sup>203</sup> This view also presents God as unjust, as “it is to force the damned to keep sinning.”<sup>204</sup> James S. Piegel, the theologian whose refutations of these arguments comprise the majority of this section of the thesis, ends his philosophical analysis with the bold statement that anyone still adhering to unending conscious torment “who rejects IST and CST essentially guts the Christian moral conception of God.”<sup>205</sup> The evidence does not prove him wrong.

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<sup>202</sup> Murray, *Heaven and Hell*, 293.

<sup>203</sup> Spiegel, *Making the Philosophical Case for Conditionalism*, 87.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.



## **Conclusion**

In summary, the case for annihilationism appears to be overwhelmingly stronger than that for the “traditional” Christian view of unending conscious torment. An analysis of Old Testament, intertestamental, New Testament, and sub-apostolic theology all shows that it was the majority position held to by believers for a large part of biblical history.

John Piper, one of the most popular Christian authors and theologians alive today, said this in an online article posted on his website: “Annihilation is what the unrepentant want, not what they dread. It would be a reward, not a punishment. Non-consciousness knows no loss.” He, as with so many other great minds unfortunately deceived into adhering to this position, falsely assumes that annihilation is not as severe a punishment for the wicked as would be unending conscious torment. However, ultimate separation from God with no chance of resurrection, in full awareness of the eternal bliss lost, is as horrible a fate as anyone could ever receive.

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