

Fort Bend Christian Academy

Becoming Orthodox

An Exploration of Universalism Within the Realms of Classical Eschatology

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The Story

Commencement

In the beginning was the sea. Naught but chaos existed, that is, apart from YHWH himself. Hovering above the clamorous waves, he saw in them potential. There was potential for order. There was potential for life. There was potential to house a kingdom, a kingdom over which God would reign, and a kingdom that he would incorporate into his own absolute majesty. And so, he created.

In YHWH's expression of might, light entered into the universe, the seas were tamed, and the newly organized Earth was made habitable. Now that a functional home had been created, the residents moved in. The two great lights were placed on their kingly thrones to rule the day and the night, and birds and fish were likewise given authority over the sky and over the sea, and the land animals over the dry ground. And finally came the pinnacle of God's creative work, the being through which he would integrate his new creation into his divine kingdom, through which he would assimilate the ordered world into his profound glory—humankind.

These vice-regents had their work cut out for them, though the most difficult task had been completed. Upon their creation, humans were given a special status that came with a special task. With the bestowment of the Image of God upon them, they were to act as a reminder that the universe was God's kingdom, to act as a symbol of his reign while also completing the creative work that God had begun, because even though God had ordered the chaos, pockets of disorder existed everywhere. The sea stood at the edge of the known world, because to tread into the heart of that chaos was to pronounce a death wish. Death pervaded the earth, but was given a temporary solution, an antidote, in the Tree of Life, that was intended to last until humanity, with

God on their side, could finally defeat death itself. And it was the task of the human race to tame this chaos once and for all in order to be an active player in the establishment of a kingdom, and thus to be fully integrated within its grand community.

To communicate this task to humanity, God named Adam high priest, and called Eve to be his helper and wife. Operating in a garden outside the temple of YHWH (that is, Eden), the pair carried out priestly functions in a world that had yet to experience the absolute fullness of the Father's love. They watched over and kept the temple while relaying God's commandments to the outside world.

Expulsion

But the chaos was not to be forgotten, and it reared its monstrous head when it entered into the garden in the form of a serpent, an advocate of disorder in the ordered world. Such a chaos monster was a lone ranger, a free agent, a creature that was itself untamed by the order that came in creation. And so the serpent found its victim in the Garden of Eden, and he brought to surface Eve's hunger for knowledge, for wisdom. And so she reached for that forbidden fruit, and she ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

But such a step was out of turn. The fruit was reserved for the day that humans were prepared to take their position as God's fully functioning vice-regents in his fully developed kingdom. And so, by consuming the fruit, Adam and Eve stole a gift that only YHWH could give, establishing themselves as the center of order and, naturally, throwing the universe out of balance. The two were cast from the garden, denied access to the tree of life, and condemned to a life in which they would fully realize their mortality. Chaos had regained its foothold in creation, and thus ensued a downward spiral of sin and death, unconquerable by humanity alone.

But with this condemnation came a promise that one day one would come who would defeat chaos, who would finally access the solution to sin and death. Until that time, humanity was to fulfill its call to the best of its ability, and so Adam and Eve reproduced, creating a lineage in hopes of fulfilling the call of YHWH. However, out of spite and jealousy, their son Cain killed his brother Abel. But even as Abel's blood cried out to YHWH from the dust of which he was formed and to which he demised, YHWH extended a protecting hand over the vicious murderer. Cain continued in life, building a city and thus promoting God's desired goal of order in the ever more disordered world.

Their Greatest Fear

Then came the flood. The sea, the embodiment of chaos, was released upon mankind. The rain poured, the land flooded, the waves roared. To the ancients, this was punishment for their wrongdoing, the wrath of the gods upon them because of their evil practices—to be attacked with chaos itself, their greatest fear, which no human being could survive. And so it was that all fell victim to the waters—all but one family.

After the waters subsided, Noah and his wife and his children stepped out of his ark, greeted with a rainbow, a symbol of a divine covenant that stated that humanity would never be treated in such a manner for the rest of time. YHWH was on the side of man.

The annihilation of evil, however, did not follow this disaster. Soon after, in the midst of celebration, one of Noah's sons revealed to the camp Noah's drunken, naked body. Sin was not eradicated. Chaos was not ordered. Death was not defeated. And so, humanity continued to swim in the midst of the sea.

Generations passed. Those who sought God began to lose hope and began to take it upon themselves to reach him. Again arose humanity's natural tendency to chase divinity, a desire to become gods. The tower rose higher and higher. It was an age of motivation and ingenuity, and they were only steps away from the heavens. But it was also an age of pride, pride that would not be tolerated in the worship of the Holy One. It ended quickly. Construction ceased in an instant when each word spoken became a meaningless grunt in the ears of listeners. In the confusion, the builders scattered, forming communities across their known world, settling in new lands, following new herds, creating new families, and establishing new nations.

And again, more time passed. Humanity again awaited the reinstatement of YHWH's plan for kingdom establishment. But there was only silence from the heavens, and without communication, worship of the creator dwindled. However, after a time, he spoke again to man. A covenant was formed in the land of Haran with a man named Abram.

The Divine Covenant

In establishing this covenant, YHWH focused in on one man, and by extent one nation. By granting a blessing to Abram, YHWH would eventually, through Abram, bless *all* nations. In this way, he would bring creation to its fulfillment, foreseeing a time in which men would peacefully coexist as YHWH's vice-regents. Abram, in response to this promise, followed the call to a new land that was promised to him and his descendants. In obedience and worship, Abram left his home and followed the paved path through the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, eventually sojourning in Egypt, and, after a brief run-in with the Pharaoh, leaving safely.

Abram and his company then settled in Canaan, but all was not well. Strife arose between him and Lot and their respective employees, and they settled to part ways, Lot taking the Jordan

River Valley near Sodom and Abram remaining in Canaan. YHWH once again promised to Abram the land in which he dwelled, stating that his offspring will be uncountable as the dust of the earth and that the land of Canaan would be delivered into their hands. Again, Abram's response was to worship the Almighty who gave him hope in these events that would come to pass.

Following the division of Abram's house, war erupted between the kings of the region, and Lot was caught in the zone of combat. He and his household were taken by the enemy, leaving Abram to gather his men and enter battle himself. He rescued his nephew and defeated the rival kings, incurring gratitude from the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, and most importantly from Melchizedek, the king of Salem who also carried out the duties of priest. The priest blessed Abram, granting him a new type of priesthood, one that was then more accepted by the surrounding nations. In this manner came about the beginnings of Israel's blessing to the nations—through Abram, YHWH had demonstrated his power and thus revealed this aspect of himself to the surrounding people groups. Through Abram, they had seen the might and the glory of his god.

What followed was yet another iteration of the promise, that through the physical descent of Abram, a nation would rise. So, Abram made a sacrifice, cutting the animals in half in preparation to fully establish a covenant between the two parties. Ultimately, it was YHWH himself who passed between the carcasses, not Abram. The unconditionality of the covenant between the two thus bound YHWH to his promise, stating that he would not break his oath to bless the world through this new people. He renamed Abram "Abraham" to serve as a constant reminder of the promise. To show the world that Abraham and his offspring were, in fact,

YHWH's people, the future nation was commanded to circumcise its children. This was a sign of the covenant, an outward symbol that they belonged to their god. This was the brand of YHWH on his people.

Time and time again, YHWH continued to stay true to the promise and espouse his steadfast loyalty to Abraham. When he told Abraham of the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he was swayed by the pleas of his priest. Though the cities did indeed fall, his desire for the well being of his people caused hesitation, and thus his faithfulness to Abraham overcame the judgment. Traveling through Gerar and having another rather unpleasant encounter with another king, this king's fear of YHWH allowed Abraham to emerge from Gerar with multitudes of wealth. YHWH never left his side, and finally the Abraham's own covenant story climaxed with the birth of his son, Isaac.

Years after this joyous birth came an episode of sorrow and despair. Fear welled in the eyes of the promised son as he lay bound, helpless against his assailant, his own father. But YHWH had commanded it. Abraham could not disobey after all YHWH had done for him. However, YHWH stayed his hand before it fell, and Abraham, having proven his faith, walked down from the mountain with his son unharmed.

And so the promised son began his own family, his wife Rebekah giving birth to twin brothers, Esau and Jacob. The two were often at odds, and after stealing Esau's birthright and blessing from Isaac and after wrestling with YHWH himself, this god of Jacob's ancestors blessed him, and he was called "Israel." Because of YHWH's overwhelming faithfulness to his people, he formed a nation from Jacob through his twelve sons.

Joseph, Israel's favorite child from the womb of his most beloved wife, was hated by his brothers, and they sold him to traveling Midianites. He was taken to Egypt and sold as a slave. But YHWH's faithfulness remained unshaken, and through Joseph's slavery and imprisonment, he was raised to a position of authority over all of Egypt, next to, of course, the Pharaoh himself. Through this, YHWH protected Israel and his children when famine struck. When the family traveled to Egypt for grain, Joseph provided his betrayers with food, and thus with life, and his unconditional forgiveness of his brothers dropped them to their knees in thanksgiving.

A Nation Enslaved

And thus the nation of Israel grew in Egypt, becoming prosperous and abundant—perhaps too abundant. A new Pharaoh, fearing an uprising from the numerous Israelites, brought to their backs a whip in place of clothing. YHWH's people, once free, were forced to tirelessly labor for the Egyptians. Their feet were chained, their children drowned, and their shortcomings punished.

But one day, while bathing, the Pharaoh's daughter discovered a child hidden in the reeds of the Nile. Raised as royalty, the child Moses remained unnoticeable as an Israelite, disguised in the palace as one of the Pharaoh's own. Hidden, that is, until he murdered an Egyptian taskmaster for beating a fellow Hebrew. When the word of this deed escaped into the palace, Moses fled, settling in Midian, taking a wife, and raising a child.

Meanwhile, the cries of Israel reached out to YHWH, begging his intervention in their cruel treatment, pleading that he deliver them from their oppressors.

YHWH spoke to an unsuspecting Moses on Mount Horeb through a burning bush. Calling Moses back to Egypt, he began a movement for the deliverance of his covenant people, one that Moses himself was to lead.

A People Restored

Moses met solid stone in the palace. A resounding “No” echoed through the Pharaoh’s halls. He refused to relinquish the people. What logic was there in releasing the Israelites? After all, they were a consistent force of labor; the economy was practically built on the backs of the Jewish slaves.

But Israel could not withstand the cruelty, and they continued to cry out to YHWH for deliverance. But his promise was still true; his covenant was not dead. So he gave Moses and his brother Aaron a charge to lead an exodus from Egypt and back to Canaan.

Meeting more stubbornness in the palace, it was time to show Egypt what true power was. So the two brothers stood at the bank of the Nile, waiting for the Pharaoh to arrive and drink. And when they saw him, Moses lifted his staff and struck the flowing waters of the river. And then all was red. A stench filled the air and the fish died as the Nile River ran red with blood. Egypt’s source of life was rendered powerless. And still Pharaoh ignored them.

Then came the frogs. Coming up out of the river, they covered the land, and they invaded homes, even coming to rest in the palace. Pharaoh begged Moses to remove them, promising to release Israel if the frogs were taken away. So, YHWH did. The frogs all died, and the foul stench of death again permeated the land of Egypt.

But the Pharaoh broke his promise. And so began this cycle of judgment on Egypt. Nine plagues rained from the heavens onto the land, attacking the lives and prosperity of the

Egyptians, and nine times the Pharaoh refused to release the people of Israel. Then came the tenth.

Darkness had fallen over Egypt. A glance down one street could testify to the nationwide silence of that night. This was not so strange, in light of recent events. It was darkly peculiar, however, to see the red liquid dripping from the doorframes of the Jewish homes. A symbol of protection, perhaps, that a lamb had given its life to save a home.

And then cries pierced the blackness. The dawn saw countless corpses, those of the firstborn children of the unprotected homes. Stricken with grief, the Pharaoh forced the Jews out of his domain. And so began the long journey to the Promised Land, the people of Israel marching behind a cloud by day, and behind billowing flames by night. Their god was by their side.

But Pharaoh quickly realized his mistake. Gathering his horses, his chariots, and his men, he set out after the Israelites and reached them at the edge of the Red Sea. As the Israelites fled to the shore, their hope in a new life was lost. There was no escape now. They should have stayed. It would have been better to live as a slave than to die on a beach. But just when their despair had reached its height, the ground began to shake and the waves began to churn. Before their very eyes, the sea itself was splitting in half. Joy, mixed with confusion and urgency, filled the camp. With an army at their heels, they fled across dry ground. And when they reached the other side, victorious Israel turned and stood, watching, as the mountainous waves fell once again on their pursuers. They were finally delivered from their oppressors, saved by the faithfulness of YHWH.

So, the nation continued in its journey to Canaan, hitting many bumps along the way, but their god always rescued them. When they began to starve, YHWH gave them food. When they

grew parched, YHWH gave them water from a rock. When threatened by enemy nations, YHWH protected them.

Eventually, they arrived at the foot of a mountain. It was made clear that this was a holy place, so after the proper purification processes, the nation gathered around the base of Mount Sinai. Darkness descended as a dense cloud covered the peak of the mountain, and deafening thunder and blinding lightning shook the camp. Down from heaven came ten specific commandments for the Israelites that would form the basis of their laws. This, then, was the means of fulfillment. This new covenant, an addition to the previous, required obedience from Israel in order for its task to be accomplished.

But they were too afraid to listen to their god directly, so Moses hiked up the mountain to represent Israel to YHWH and to receive the law. After receiving these tablets, Moses was instructed to go back down and to face corruption of the camp. As he was returning, he began to hear shouts. Was this the noise of war? Was this a nationwide lamentation? No—the camp was singing.

After all that YHWH had done for them, Moses arrived at the camp to a celebration around a golden idol—a calf. In fury, Moses shattered the tablets of the law and unleashed his wrath on the camp. That day saw the blood of three thousand men spilled at Moses' command.

Time passed. This cycle of rebellion, judgment, and restoration continued until finally they arrived at the borders of Canaan. They had arrived at the Promised Land. Twelve spies, one from each of the twelve tribes, went into the land and brought back a report to the council. Ten of them, it seemed, had forgotten YHWH's faithfulness. Bringing back reports of the impossibility

of such a conquest, these ten spies advised the council to continue traveling and abandon the prospect.

This lack of faith, after everything he had carried them through, was as if Israel had spit on the ground at YHWH's feet. This was an insult to the steadfast covenantal love that he had consistently shown to Israel since the life of Abraham. And so he condemned them to forty years in the wilderness. Moses himself, in an act of frustrated disobedience, angered YHWH to the point at which even he was barred from entering the land. The forty years passed slowly, and as they drew to a close, Moses traveled to the top of Mount Nebo in Moab. As he glanced over the green, rolling hills of Canaan, Moses took his final breath and was buried there by YHWH himself.

Conquest

Upon hearing of Moses' death, the council instated Joshua as Israel's new leader. At the end of the forty years, Joshua assumed control of the Israelite military and marched across the Jordan River. Arriving at the walls of Jericho, the army took the ark and followed seven priests in a seven-day march around the heavily fortified city. On the seventh day, after marching around it seven times, a shout rang out from the people of Israel, and the walls tumbled down, opening up the city to its invaders.

And then all was blood. Streets and streams ran with it. The land of Canaan now belonged to Israel. The promise had been fulfilled—or so it seemed.

The Time of the Judges

The call still fell upon Israel to be a light to the nations. However, prosperity infected their minds. The Israelites became arrogant, focusing on themselves as the chosen ones and

simply relishing in this thought. They put their feet up and relaxed in this blessing. Thus, as a result of their continuous spurning of their task, their rest and stability in Canaan would not last long.

The surrounding nations began to rise in power, amassing armies beyond Israel's comprehension. In swift judgment, these nations one by one conquered Israel and her land by the sword, bringing YHWH's chosen each time to a still lower level of despair. Each time, Israel would cry out for aid. Each time, YHWH would raise up one who would judge their oppressors and overthrow them, taking back the land for Israel. And, each time, Israel would return to its pompous state, thus initiating a cycle of judgment and redemption that would last for centuries.

Of Kingdoms and Kings

In the midst of these trials came calls for stability of the nation. To them, YHWH's kingship was not enough. They wanted a human figurehead in order to be better suited to deal with the surrounding nations. After all he had done to protect, the theocracy did not satisfy the people of Israel. So God answered them. He gave them what they wanted.

Saul, chosen by the prophet Samuel, was given the kingship. But as Saul was incapable when it came to protecting the nation. The Philistines gathered their troops for war, camped in Judah, and sent out their champion to the battlefield. Goliath called to the Israelite camp to send out a fighter to defeat him, but no warrior would face the challenge. Saul's army cowered in fear. It seemed as if there was no hope of victory.

But it so happened that a young Israelite named David came to meet his brothers in the camp and heard about Goliath's challenge. He, like his ancestors, trusted in the faithfulness of his

god, and he took upon the challenge. The boy killed Goliath, the Philistines fled, and Israel, for the time being, was at peace.

But with this accomplishment came David's fame throughout the entire kingdom. Because of this, the people of Israel held David in higher esteem than they did Saul, viewing this victory as a symbol of David's might and deserved kingship. Likewise, the nation lost respect for Saul as their ruler. The young shepherd has subverted the authority of the king, sending the former running for his life. Saul pursued David throughout the plains of Judah, but was constantly evaded. The king went to his grave without succeeding in this murderous plot.

It was David himself, then, who received the throne, not by lineage, but by divine choosing. He became the nation's symbol of military might. Under his rule, Israel regained status in the region as a force to be reckoned with. The era of King David saw the arrival to Israel that which they had always wanted—power, wealth, and respect. With this came a promise from YHWH that this prosperity would one day be established with permanency. This was the ultimate goal that would come with the fulfillment of the covenant. But for the time being, all that was missing was a temple.

But the bloodied hands of King David were not fit to build this house of God. Thus, in the age of the peace that followed David's death, his son Solomon ignited the temple project. After the ritual process of temple inauguration, YHWH arrived, dwelling in his fullness in the temple designed for him. Though there was a king, YHWH was still the god of Israel and was the true commander of the kingdom.

Broken Promises

But Israel raced a downward spiral after the death of Solomon. Factions formed, kingdoms warred, and the nation divided. Kings turned to other gods and adopted the practices of other nations. Israel's actions were detestable in the sight of its god. But they hadn't a clue. The glare of the flames from their pagan rituals and the blood of their human sacrifices blinded them to their priestly calling. They were distracted by their inward strife, by their constantly brandished swords. The clatter of immorality diverted their attention, until one day, Israel slowly raised its head to glance at the outside world. But the outsiders were no longer outside. An army stood at the gates of Jerusalem.

As their eyes scanned the horizon, thousands upon thousands of armor-clad men streamed into the city from the surrounding hills. Rivers of blood ran through the streets. Strangers forced themselves into homes and killed the residents. Swords and arrows cut the air, finding targets in the Israelite men. Women were ravaged and children were captured. Flames danced through the city, destroying all that they touched. As they consumed the temple, the masterpiece of Solomon, Israel saw in the fleeing sparks and smoke the departing spirit of YHWH.

Hopelessness. Despair. The monarchy, the kingdom, the covenant—all were realized to be at an abrupt end as the surviving Jews were dragged in chains to a new city. Their god had abandoned them to these shackles. The task was moot. The promise had been broken. Israel was utterly destroyed. The heap of rubbish that was once Jerusalem now belonged to a new master—Babylon.

So, Israel, lost in the depths of their sin, called out to the god of their ancestors, that unwaveringly faithful protector, for rescue. For centuries, they prayed. And for centuries, there was no answer.

Return

But all empires must fall. The Babylonians were eventually reduced to the standing of the Israelites in comparison to a new world power. They fell victim to the mighty Persians, whose empire spanned an even greater area than their predecessors. At first unbeknownst to Israel, this was a stroke of luck for the nation as a whole. This was the answer, at least partially, to their prayers.

After pleading with the new king, Cyrus, an Israelite named Zerubbabel was given permission to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the destroyed temple of YHWH. And so began a new mass exodus, the return of Israel to Zion. This was a return, not simply back to a geographical home, but to their standing as YHWH's chosen. This was seen as a reestablishment of the kingdom of Israel and a reinstatement of its priesthood.

The rocks and ashes crunched under their feet as they stepped back into their long lost home. This was a foreign sight to all who returned; these Israelites had never seen their ruined city. But indeed, they were home. No, they were not home to rest, but they had returned to rebuild their kingdom and to recreate a masterpiece from the ashes of the fallen temple. They returned so that they might bring YHWH back to Israel, and his power and glory with him.

Call to Revolution

But even the people of Israel could tell that their exile was not yet over. They were home, but they were not free. The temple had been rebuilt, but the land on which it stood was not their own. Centuries dragged by. Empire conquered empire, leaving Israel with new ruler after new ruler. Some of the Israelites began to grow impatient. A group dubbed "the Zealots" began to call

for military action against the Roman Empire, their oppressors. Many revolutionaries did, in fact, take up arms against the government, only to be quickly subdued by the vast armies of Rome.

This would not do. Israel had waited too long for their promised king, but YHWH seemed to be silent on the matter. Those who sought to reestablish the monarchy and took action in that direction were slain. And still they waited. They waited for the day on which their god would return to Israel. They waited for the day on which their exile would finally end. They waited for the day when their god would become their king and Israel would be recompensed. They waited for the day that their enemies would be destroyed.

Preparation

Amidst the tumult of violent uprisings in Palestine, a new movement began. A new prophet entered the scene, pronouncing the establishment of the kingdom of YHWH. He wasn't the first, of course, but crowds flocked to hear his messages and to be baptized in the Jordan. Israel was ready for the culmination of its history, ready to take back its home and finally put an end to its exile. But John the Baptist was not the Christ, but he was, by his own words, paving the way for another, one who was greater than he who would baptize, not with water, but with the cleansing fire of the Holy Spirit.

Then a man came from Nazareth, traveling into the wilderness to join John's crowds on the banks of the Jordan. He waded toward John, ignoring his protests and insisting, for the sake of prophecy, that John baptize him. So John did as he was commanded, and as he raised him up out of the water, the heavens were ripped open and the Holy Spirit, descended on the Nazarene. The Spirit was accompanied by a voice proclaiming the man to be the blessed Son of God.

So, with the strength of YHWH in him, the man traveled further into the desert to face temptation. Satan, the grand accuser, met him there, invoking him to use this divine strength to his advantage to transfigure a rock into a loaf of bread to tame his hunger. He refused, countering with scripture stating that God is the only sustenance needed. Recognizing the man's knowledge of the Torah, Satan took him to the top of the temple and told him to prove himself by jumping, saying that if he was the Son of God, he would be rescued by a legion of angels. The Nazarene refused to test his god, so Satan gave him an opportunity to rule the world, quite literally, should he simply bow down at Satan's feet. Receiving yet another rebuke, Satan left the man's side. And, after a total of forty days in the wilderness, the Nazarene returned to civilization. Igniting a new ministry, he called for widespread repentance among the people of Israel. This was his purpose, the reason for his arrival to Galilee. The kingdom of God was indeed at hand, coming about through a revolution led by none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

The Messianic Ministry

So, Jesus traveled throughout the Jordan River Valley, preaching to vast crowds in the streets and synagogues. Casting out demons and healing the sick, he showed the world YHWH's love for his people and his power over the dark powers of chaos and the curse of sin. And in the midst of the crowds circulated rumors that this man was the Messiah sent from YHWH himself to save his people. These claims were quickly silenced by none other than Jesus himself. He was not ready for the world to see him as a revolutionary. To meet a rebel's cross would be to leave words unspoken, people unreached, and, thus, a ministry incomplete. The fight had just begun.

To expand this ministry, then, Jesus called twelve disciples who followed him throughout Galilee as he spoke to the crowds. And as the company continued to tame the forces of chaos by

healing lepers, rebuking sickness, and exorcising demons, the people of Israel recognized an authority unlike any they had seen before. Something was different about this man that set him apart from the militant revolutionaries who had come before. Word spread, and the crowds multiplied by the day as people flocked from all over Judah to hear him speak.

Surrounded by the masses, Jesus went onto a mountain, delivering perhaps the most famous speech of his ministry. Pronouncing blessings on the meek, the peaceful, and the merciful, he laid out the qualities required of those who chose to follow him. Among these are commandments to be a light to the world, a picture of YHWH to the rest of mankind, just as Israel was always supposed to be. Accompanied by warnings about anger, lust, and retaliation was a command to the people in the crowds to love their enemies. Throughout the sermon, Jesus heavily emphasized the requirement to love others by giving to the needy and feeding the hungry. At the end of it all came more astonishment from the crowds and more recognition of the authority with which he spoke.

The movement was spreading like wildfire, and Jesus sent more disciples into the field to battle against the raging darkness. As he drew nearer and nearer to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, teaching all along the way, questions arose of who exactly this man was. Some said Jesus was Elijah. Some said John the Baptist, or another of the prophets of old. But when questioned by Jesus, Simon Peter spoke up, calling him the Messiah. Again, Jesus hastily commanded the disciples to remain silent on the matter. The time for his foretold death had not yet come. The fight had just begun.

But despite this well kept messianic secret, it was slowly becoming clear to the Roman government and to the Jewish elite that Jesus' teachings had begun more than just a simple

movement to aid those in need. To the religious leaders, Jesus had turned the Law of Moses on its head, broken its rules, and subverted common Jewish belief to create a new way of thinking that defied their long-held values. To the politicians, this Jewish man was another insurrectionist igniting a revolution against the powers of the Roman Empire. In the midst of this dissention, Jesus was no longer safe. He had started a war.

The End of the Road

Greeted by waving palm leaves, Jesus entered Jerusalem in preparation for Passover. In booming cheers of “Hosanna in the highest,” the crowds celebrated at the arrival of their king. It was time, they thought, time to take back the Promised Land from the Romans and inaugurate a new age of the monarchy. Jesus’ ministry had reached a defining moment that was announcing his triumphant kingship.

A king? No, Caesar was king. The Son of God? Blasphemer. They were only rumors, but they were stirring up crowds, and the madness needed to end. But they couldn’t kill the man during Passover, could they? No, he had far too much support. To bring Jesus to trial would mean their own downfall. The crowds would turn on the priests and rally against their authority. Something, though, had to be done before this insurgent was able to supplant their leadership with his own.

The next day, Jesus exploded in anger inside the temple. Flipping tables and charging fiercely at the heels of moneychangers, he was infuriated by injustice being carried out inside. Vendors operating in the temple were up-charging visitors for animals for the Passover sacrifice, and the moneychangers were likewise swindling the foreigners. So, Jesus cleansed it forcefully, ending the temple trade for the day.

It was the last straw. It had to be. They couldn't wait around any longer—the man's life had to end before an uprising could begin. But, what of his supporters? They still walked by his side, still screamed his name. It was still a problem that needed solving. Strike him at his core, and he would fall, and the crowds would disperse from him. Dismantle his teachings, and Jesus of Nazareth would be made nothing.

Jesus returned to the temple the following day, only to be greeted by ill-intentioned scribes seeking the source of his authority. This was a trap, of course. From God himself, and he could be charged with blasphemy. From man, and his crowds would leave him. However, turning the question back against the interrogators, Jesus asked them from whom was the authority of John the Baptist, promising them his answer in return for theirs. Finding themselves at the tip of the same double-edged sword, they pled ignorance and left the temple.

Harder. Try harder. Trap him between the law and the crowd.

Some Pharisees approached him later during one of his teachings, asking if the Jewish people should pay taxes. Another trap: Yes, and his followers turn against him. No, and he is arrested by Roman authorities. Cleverly enough, Jesus answered: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”

Clearly the attempts were not working properly. Oh, he was clever, too clever, too quick on his feet to trip him over his own words. It seemed stealth and physical force were necessary to arrest the man. Yes, take him at the tip of a sword—that was the solution.

In example of Jewish hospitality, Jesus and his disciples were given a room in which to hold the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In that upper room, Jesus blessed the bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. He took a cup of wine and gave thanks, and passed it around for each

disciple to drink. This, as Jesus said, was his body and blood, the blood of the New Covenant poured out for the nations.

The time was finally upon them. It was now or never.

After the meal, Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with him.

It is time.

Jesus prayed that the burden be removed from his shoulders.

Now or never.

He prayed that he might be relieved of this task.

Now, in the dark, while the city was asleep.

His disciples were asleep. His only friends in this time of need had abandoned him.

Quickly. Quietly.

He prayed for guidance, for deliverance from his fate.

They wouldn't have wanted to wake his followers.

It couldn't be time, not yet. The fight had just begun.

Finally.

But there were the torches.

But there were the men.

The time had come.

The time had finally come.

The fight was almost done.

A Movement in Despair

As the soldiers surrounded Jesus, his disciple Judas kissed him, revealing him to the soldiers and betraying him to the officials. As Jesus peacefully yielded to the host of men, Peter attacked, cutting off a man's ear. After following Jesus for three years, Peter didn't quite understand. But Peter, shrinking in astonishment as his teacher mended his victim's head, was in disbelief. The disciples fled. Where was the fight? Surely, it would come. This was a revolution, after all.

But Jesus was peaceful in his march to the Jewish High Council, where the High Priest Caiaphas accused him of threatening to destroy the temple. He was met with nothing but silence.

And then came the question, the question all of Israel had been asking.

Are you the Christ, the Son of God?

This was the moment. It was time for Jesus to reveal his identity to the world. It was time to meet a rebel's end.

"I am."

Witnesses were no longer necessary. This was blasphemy. This was death. But the Jews could not kill him during Passover. It was against their law. They therefore delivered him to the Roman governor Pilate, who washed his hands of Jesus' blood and turned him over to his soldiers to appease the bloodthirsty crowd.

The whips left gashes on his back.

The rods left bruises on his body.

The thorns drew blood from his temples.

Hail, King of the Jews!

Jesus marched wearily up the hill, a large crowd following him, some cheering, some mocking, some weeping. But as the wood rubbed against the abrasions, and as his body began to give out, it was clear to him that his fight was almost done.

The hammers all fell and nails were driven through the hands and feet of three revolutionaries. The crosses were placed vertically into the ground. The fight was almost done.

Over time, breathing became more difficult for the three criminals. But all would be fine soon. Their fight was almost done.

As soldiers cast lots to divide the dying Jesus' clothing, he pleaded his Father for their unrequested forgiveness.

One criminal pleaded that Jesus remember him when he entered his kingdom. In response came a promise that he would find himself in Paradise.

The mockery continued. The crowd called for Jesus, in his power as the Son of God, to save himself. But he did not, for he knew that his fight was almost done.

But still Jesus hung, dying, and the fight drew near to a close. Crying out to the heavens, he was lost. Abandoned by his friends, betrayed by his followers, and forsaken by his god, Jesus of Nazareth—fisher of men, charmer of crowds, King of Jews—was utterly alone. With no one by his side but a few loyal followers in the crowd, unable to offer any assistance, Jesus' fight was almost done. And so it was in despair that he took his final breath and gave up his spirit.

And so were the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. It was another victory for Judaism and for the Roman Empire. Another revolutionary had been killed. Another rebellion had been thwarted. Another movement had been squashed. All in all, another war had been

avoided, and the iron fist of peace could once again rule the Roman Empire. The functions of daily life returned to normality. All was well.

All was well for everyone except his followers, at least. For these disciples, all was darkness, pure darkness. Treading helplessly in the river of blood and tears that flowed from the foot of that cross, the disciples fled Golgotha into hiding. They stumbled blindly through the dreary night, a night that, at that moment, looked as if it would never end. How could this have happened? Hope had been given, and it had been snatched from their hands in a matter of hours. Just as the sun seemed to be rising over the treetops, the everlasting darkness again emerged victorious.

He was supposed to be the one. He was supposed to save them. He was supposed to be the Messiah, the Son of God, their savior, their king! But their teacher, like the others before him, died a revolutionary's death. And with his followers on the run from the same executioners, stumbling over the debris of the world that crashed around them, that hope—that salvation—died, drowned in the blood from which the men fled.

But let it be remembered—the fight was almost won.

The Easter Rebellion

The doors were locked, the lights dim. An aura of anticipatory horror pervaded the room. The disciples of Jesus, who had preached to, aided, and healed so many, who had felt the mighty work of their god performed through their very own hands, had seen it with their very own eyes, cowered in terror and dismay. To step outside would be to invoke the wrath of the temple upon them. To wander the streets would mean a trial before the high priest and his council. So, in

darkness sat the children of light, unable to produce enough for themselves, much less for the world, as the man had said.

Through the locked door, though, came a figure, a man—a dead man. In the darkness, Jesus of Nazareth approached his disciples.

Astonishment, relief, and doubt all swirled uncontrollably in their minds as they ran their fingers gently over the piercings in his hands. No, not dead, and not a ghost. Jesus was alive and well, raised out of the grave, and in that moment, every step taken, every word spoken during the previous three years became clear to them. Their teacher was, indeed, the saving king and Son of God.

Finally, it seemed as if a solution had been reached, not to their exile or to their Roman oppressors, but to the central cause of this unending devastation. Sin itself was vanquished. Death itself was killed. While the disciples had been hiding, a battle had been raging. This was the war for the world, the fight to finally reclaim the kingdom of YHWH from chaos and the kingdom of darkness. This was the fight Jesus always sought to fight. Evil itself was beaten, conquered, overcome by the power of YHWH manifested through the love of his son.

Eating, drinking, and merrymaking among the brothers followed. But all feasting must eventually yield to labor until the labor is done. The ministry had to be resumed, picked up by the disciples where Jesus left off. And to give them their own power to finish the creation project, Jesus imparted his Holy Spirit upon his companions, sending them into the world with the task to make disciples out of all nations, to transform the world to his purposes, and to build his kingdom on earth.

And then the resurrected Christ rose into the gleaming sky, leaving a promise behind to accompany the daunting task. Though he would be gone, he would once again descend through the clouds to enter his realm and take up his rest on his throne. But in the meantime, the task fell to the Followers of the Way to build and prepare for the return of the king. And so it was that the king said farewell, entrusting his new church with the weapons and courage to break down the gates of hell and rebuild creation on its ruins.

The world was already saved, but not fully quite yet. The reign of death was over, but still battles raged. The war was won, but the fight was not quite done. Left with resolve in its wake was the army of a new king, a group of followers who finally, after an eternity of darkness, became the first to stare directly into the light.

Introduction

Christians divide over the conclusion of this story. Church tradition has held for centuries that Jesus' death offers humanity grace, but to refuse it is to be thrown into the fiery depths of hell. Many have deep-seated issues with this proposal, as is perhaps reasonable. How could a loving god, who died for mankind in a display of this love and mercy, condemn anyone to an eternity of conscious torment?

This question rightfully raises suspicion in Christians' minds regarding eschatology. Some have held tightly to this view, backed by centuries of church tradition. Some have speculatively begun to abandon it, but with extreme caution, as should always be exercised when straying from long-held church practice. Some, however, have abandoned the view altogether, jumping to a view of conditional immortality or even some as far as Christian universalism.

It is unfortunate that universalism has been condemned as heretical for much of church history. It is interesting, though, that universalism, despite its denunciation resulting from the church's heavy attention to scripture housing references to a future judgment, strongly embraces the themes of the redemptive story that Christians call the Bible. Universalism, being consistent with these themes, is thus not inherently unchristian. Upon close examination of these biblical themes and their cohesion with the eschatological theory of universalism, it can be seen that universalism is within the realms of orthodoxy, and perhaps is even more coherent with Christianity as a whole than are traditionalism and conditionalism.

Three Views of Eschatology

The Traditional View of the Church

For most Christians, the traditional view of hell has dominated teachings of the final judgment for their entire lives. It holds that, at the end of this present age, Christians will be absolved of their sins and offered a place in the eternal kingdom of God, while the nonbelievers will be cast into the lake of fire to suffer unending punishment for their wrongdoing. These depictions are taken from passages describing an “eternal fire” that is the punishment for actions contrary to YHWH’s purposes.¹ Thus, while the righteous enjoy the fullness of the pleasures that come with the love of YHWH, the wicked are tormented with no light at the end of the tunnel. This unending wrath of God, according to traditionalists, is the natural, rightful punishment for sin.² Though the view is widely held in the church, when questions begin to rise on account of such thematic inconsistencies, such as the example of God’s love introduced in the previous section, the church as a whole must be prepared to answer them in order to defend its long-held teachings. Thus, by continuing to explore Biblical themes and a particular view’s lack of consistency with them, Christians are left with two options. Either they should pursue the search for cohesion to its success, or, if such a success seems unlikely, they should carefully begin a new search for a new view to replace the old.

The View of Conditional Immortality

¹ Mt 25:46, Mk 9:43, Rev. 14:11, Rev. 20:10. There are several locations in the Bible that house references to something to the effect of “a fire that never ends.”

² For a greater discussion of hell and for more specific textual references, see Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson’s *Hell Under Fire*.
Morgan, Christopher W., and Robert A. Peterson. *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004)

Some, in this manner, have abandoned the traditional view as one that is thematically inconsistent with YHWH's redemptive story. These Christians are left with two other main eschatological prospects—either all are saved, or only some are saved, while the remainder simply cease to exist. Conditionalists, or annihilationists, like Edward Fudge often jump from the traditional view to their own because of the problem found in the idea that a loving god would torture individuals forever because of their lack of response to his grace.

As is typically suggested, to be “away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might”³ constitutes something greater than conscious torment. If, apart from the creator, nothing exists, then to be condemned to eternal separation from the love of YHWH is not his unending torture of the nonbelievers. To be damned to eternity away from the glory of the Christ is to be cast from his presence, and thus to simply *die*. The ultimate punishment, then, is nonexistence.

The “eternal fire” of the traditional view is thus transformed into a fire that destroys life, as typical fire does. It is perhaps metaphorical, but it maintains the major tenant of the punishment: the end is death, not torment. Conditionalists hold many options as to how this may come about, though. Some hold to the pictures painted in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament that espouse an active destruction of the wicked on the part of YHWH, much like the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19.⁴ Some, however, hold to a view of passive destruction on YHWH's part. That is, YHWH himself does not destroy evildoers. Instead, their own sinful practices slowly ruin them, eventually to the point of death. This brings readers back to Eden, in which YHWH pronounces death to be the consequence of sin. Death, not an eternity

³ 2 Thess. 1:9

⁴ Fudge, Edward William. *The Fire That Consumes*. Third ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011)

in hell, is the natural consequence and result of sin. Thus, to refuse YHWH's grace through Jesus Christ is to refuse an opportunity for life and to continue in sinful practices that ultimately spiral into death and separation from God's love.

The View of Universal Reconciliation

But some believe that certain humans were not, in some abstract sense, "paid for," but instead that Jesus of Nazareth actually destroyed sin and defeated death once in the incarnation. Universalism is, as this thesis seeks to demonstrate, perhaps the most logical conclusion to the biblical metanarrative. Based on YHWH's unfailing love for humanity, the view states that he would not let any of his children be lost, but rather through some form of purification or training he would rescue all of mankind from its destructive habits. In order to do this, the Son of God became a man, showed mankind how to live, and, representing the entirety of humanity in judgment on the cross, he died and rose again, defeating sin and death and breaking their hold on creation. In this way, mankind has been freed from sin and no longer must fear its power and its ultimate consequences. Becoming a Christian means realizing this fact and losing this fear that has haunted the human mind for its entire existence.

Introduction to the Themes

Throughout the entire biblical narrative, readers can point out a few reoccurring themes that writers emphasize over and over again. These themes support the weight of the story on their shoulders, acting as a foundation of Israel's tradition and the character of their god. The repetitive nature of these topics establishes them as central to Israel's existence, and thus the existence of the world and YHWH's interactions within it. In this way, it is evident that in order to correctly understand the redemptive story and the traits of YHWH himself, readers must correctly understand the themes of the story, the most prominent of which are priesthood, judgment and restoration, the kingdom of YHWH, and God's love and justice.

Priesthood

Beginning in the Garden of Eden, the priesthood of YHWH's people has always been a central element of Israel's story. In the ancient Near East, priests represented the nation as a whole in the temple of a god. Priests were the mediators through whom came forgiveness of sins through whom praise traveled to the gods. In essence, a priest was a mediator of blessings.

In the same manner, YHWH instituted the nation of Israel as a nation of priests. Beginning with the promise to Abram, Israel was set up as a chosen nation, but not one who would be isolated in blessing. Through one nation, YHWH promised to bless *all* nations. It is in this way that Israel functions as a priest to the world, one through whom blessing would travel to all people and through whom these nations would be reconciled to the one true god.

Judgment and Restoration

However, when Israel strays from the path YHWH set before them, he removes his protecting hand from their homes. The surrounding armies gather strength and attack. They

virtually destroy the chosen nation, dragging its people by their ankles into exile and slavery. In these situations, it is evident that Israel has failed in its priesthood and has thus failed to show the world the face of God. Because of this, judgment comes upon them so that they may realize their iniquities against him and against the world.

And Israel does, in fact, understand their wrongdoing because of these events, and they cry out to YHWH for deliverance from the hands of their oppressors. Thus enters the theme of restoration, through which readers can see a clear picture of God's grace and his love for humanity. He does not wish them to suffer forever, so when they call, he answers. This restoration is a necessary element of this theme, as it is that which the entire plot of the bible drives toward.

The Kingdom

The fulfillment of the above themes is the theme of the kingdom, or the idea that the entire biblical narrative is the story of the kingdom of YHWH. This element of the story makes its grand entrance in Jesus' ministry as he travels throughout the Jordan River Valley announcing that "the kingdom of God is at hand." This is the climax of Israel's story in which Jesus pronounces the kingdom's arrival to earth. YHWH is finally fulfilling his covenant with Israel and establishing his kingdom as it was meant to be. The time had come for Israel's enemies to finally be defeated and for the nation to take back its land, its honor, and its position as YHWH's chosen.

Love and Justice

All of these are tied together by the seemingly contrasting themes of YHWH's love and justice. The redemptive elements of Israel's story are a testament to his love for his people, while

the judgment that comes upon them stands for the justice that must be dealt throughout the entirety of creation because of the universal element of sin. While the contrasting elements will not be dealt with heavily here, at the base of the themes stands the point that God is just *because* he loves. And thus, through the story of the priesthood, the exile, and the establishment of the kingdom, readers can begin to see his love as an element that is central to the entire metanarrative. While the other elements create bedrock for the building of the story, the overwhelming love of the Father stands as the most vital theme found in the Bible, because, as will be demonstrated in a later section, YHWH *cannot help but love*.

Tracing the Themes

A Nation of Priests

Historically, Israel has been a heavily oppressed nation, continuously falling victim to the major world powers of antiquity. The empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome are only a few of their historical conquerors, embodying the judgment of YHWH on his people. As a continuously downtrodden nation, the Hebrews longed for the day when their god would return to their side and would aid them in overthrow their persecutors. They awaited the time when the covenant of Abraham would be fulfilled and they would rise to power, and in their own turn place their enemies under their own feet, or rather under the feet of YHWH. These hopes are detailed in the writings of the prophets of the Old Testament, who foresaw the coming judgment of the surrounding nations. However, in the midst of these are found a longing for an even greater victory, a victory not only for Israel but for YHWH himself, a victory in which even the outsiders, the Gentiles, would themselves turn to Israel's god for deliverance, purification, and a special location in his kingdom.

The Priesthood of Adam

The universalist narrative begins in the Garden of Eden, an ancient Near Eastern motif for order, life, and divinity.

In the ancient world, gardens were often planted adjacent to temples “as evidence of the fertility that resulted from the presence of God.”⁵ The garden is placed in Eden, suggesting that the spirit of God is centered in Eden, with the garden placed nearby to reinforce the fact that God's presence brings life and order. Eden, therefore, in contrast to the land outside of it, is the center of order, and it is Adam's duty to carry this order to the outside world. In this respect Eden can be viewed as

⁵ Walton, *Adam and Eve*, 117

the center of sacred space, the holy of holies of the universe, next to which is placed a garden to emphasize the fact that an ordered system relies on God's presence to function.⁶

The garden, then, as a symbol of sacred space, reinforces Adam's priestly role in the space he inhabited.

Priestly language throughout the Old Testament is associated with serving in and keeping sacred space. Israel, throughout its history, has appointed priests to represent the rest of the nation by approaching God on the peoples' behalf. It is only logical, therefore, to infer that the archetypal treatment of Adam represents his appointment as a representative of humanity in relation to God in addition to the discussion of origins. To an ancient Israelite [hearing the creation story], the connection would have been made instantly between Adam and their high priest.⁷

In this way, then, Adam can be recognized as the first recorded representative of humanity, carrying out a priestly role in Eden, the dwelling place of YHWH. These tasks can likely be linked closely with that of a high priest in the nation of Israel, as Adam had been appointed by YHWH to be a mediator between him and his people. In this way, we can better understand the events of the Fall and their affect on the entirety of humankind.

As priest and representative, when Adam fell, all of mankind fell with him. He was appointed to be the man through whom YHWH could relate with rest of humanity, through whom he could spread his love. Thus, as the love of YHWH could spread through one man to the rest of them, so could corruption infect the very nature of those whom Adam represented. Upon taking one step too far in an attempt to reach divinity, Adam was expelled from YHWH's presence, and the rest of mankind with him. This can be viewed as a halting of the creation

⁶ Hellinghausen, John Erich. "Cultural Relativism and Cosmology: An Analysis of the Conflict Between Science and Religion in the Opening Chapters of Genesis." (Thesis, Fort Bend Christian Academy, 2015), 67

⁷ Hellinghausen, "Cosmology," 66

project, a bump in the road, as it were, as this new element of sin has created separation between humanity and the love of YHWH. Thus is brought about a need to jumpstart the impeded project, which he would accomplish by establishing a new line of priests.

The Priesthood of Abraham

YHWH's promise to Abraham was never intended to isolate him from the rest of the world. In this unconditional covenant were promised "descendants, land, and relationship with God."⁸ Moving from a broad to a narrow scope, YHWH zones in on Abraham and his family to accomplish his purposes. But in this promise, the writers of Genesis established a theme that carries the plot of the remainder of Genesis, tying the story back to its roots in the garden, and Israel back to its roots in Adam.

Three main elements of Abraham's call that echo the creation story are blessing, reproduction, and dominion.⁹ Below are the passages containing the blessing and call of humanity in general and Abraham specifically, found in Genesis 1 and 12.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gn. 1:28-29)

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gn. 12:1-3)

And again in chapter 22...

⁸ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 55

⁹ Ibid, 55-56

I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” (Gn. 22:17)

In these passages are found the three previously listed elements that build the theme of Genesis.

In Genesis 1, humanity is blessed and given instructions to “be fruitful and multiply” and to rule over the whole earth. This command is not, however, given with reference to rule by brute force, meaning man was never intended to unwisely exploit the resources of the world. Instead, the Dominion Mandate was given to allow humans to care for creation and to be YHWH’s vice-regents, his image-bearers, a constant reminder that YHWH is king. But mankind as a whole had lost this capability, so he turned to one man in order to create a family, a nation of priests who would once again show YHWH to the world. Thus Abraham is blessed, commanded to be fruitful, and given power, not that he might rule over the nations with an iron fist, but that through him, the nations may return to YHWH. In this way, Abraham’s descendants, those who would one day become Israel, are, in essence, another Adam, a people through whom God would relate to mankind and through whom he would be manifested to the nations.

The Priesthood of Israel

This, in light of the New Testament, is a Messianic promise foreshadowing the ultimate reform of Judaism that would bring God’s kingdom to earth and fulfill the creation that was put on hold in the garden. Abraham is, with the creation of the covenant, established as YHWH’s new representative, and Israel as his new Adam. Granted to him and his new nation is the land of Canaan, a place in which Abraham’s descendants can find rest, a place from which they can

operate in sacred space. This is YHWH's new dwelling place. This is the new Eden, a reunification with YHWH himself through the foreseen building of a new temple.

Thus, Israel was established as a nation of priests having the responsibility to mediate YHWH to the world. Their actions and the work of YHWH on their behalf were to "make his name known amongst the nations."¹⁰ For the time being, Israel's adherence to Mosaic Law and ordering of its own house "would [allow it to] function as a witness to YHWH that the nations would marvel at."¹¹ But Israel, like Adam, repeatedly failed in its mission. Like Adam, Israel disobeyed YHWH, but this in and of itself was not the cause of its downfall. By disobeying YHWH, it failed its assignment to reveal YHWH to the world in perfect clarity. Thus ensued the cycle of judgment, exile, and restoration. But the task was not nullified by their disobedience. The covenant still stood—YHWH would one day bless the nations of the earth through Israel, but only when it could correctly reveal his love and power.

And so Israel's exilic cycle testified to the greatness of their god. The distinction of YHWH from the gods of the surrounding nations, then, is precisely what the prophets foresee as one day bringing those same nations into their own covenantal relationship with YHWH, in essence incorporating them into the Abrahamic covenant so that they may receive the same blessings of God's love with which Israel was gifted at the beginning of the redemptive story.

Isaiah and Jeremiah both speak of the nation's gathering at Zion, but they strongly emphasize that this can only come to pass should Israel be obedient to her god. Through obedience, she would show the world YHWH's face, and the nations would subsequently gather

¹⁰ Ibid, 60

¹¹ Ibid, 59-60

at Zion, they would “be blessed by him and in him they will glory.”¹² These prophets are, in a sense, reminding Israel of its true purpose to bring the nations to gather to praise him, and in their writings they even “envisage a time when that will happen.”¹³ To the prophets, this universal worship of their god is the grandiose event that defines Israel’s existence. The following passage from the Isaiah 42:6-7 expresses this belief about the chosen nation.

“I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

According to Isaiah, the purpose of the covenant, despite Israel’s state of exile, is still to rescue the captives. Though exile may be another hoop for the nation to step through, the ultimate goal is still to bring the other nations out of captivity. Isaiah 45 is comprised of a multitude of promises regarding YHWH’s faithfulness to the covenant and his future deliverance of Israel from slavery. However, near the close of the chapter, Isaiah provides a vision of the reconciliation that will come after Israel itself is restored.

“Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.’”

In this declaration of YHWH’s majesty, Isaiah proclaims the nations’ worship of Israel’s god. It is a vision of a day following a judgment, a war or disaster of some sort that is likely a result of

¹² Jer 4:1-2

¹³ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 61

Israel's escape from bondage.¹⁴ The nations, then, are their enemies who were oppressing them. However, this passage describes a restoration of these oppressors, bringing them to Zion through the Abrahamic covenant in a process to establish their own covenant with YHWH.

The Priesthood of the Christ

In Romans 5, Paul traces this priesthood and the problem of sin back to the garden. Because Adam, priest of YHWH and representative of mankind, sinned, the rest of the world sinned. Thus, because all sinned, all died. In their deaths, all were separated from the love of God. In this, Paul takes a different view of sin than the conventional modern view. Today, many see sin as one of many actions that God hates, and these are actions that separate one from God. These actions can be forgiven upon justification by the faithfulness of Jesus, the Christ.

Paul, though, is buried deeply in a mindset of duty, of priesthood, and of the kingdom. That is, that Jesus came to establish the kingdom of YHWH on Earth, to pull it down from heaven to humanity, finally completing the creation of this universe, and in doing so, completing Israel's covenantal task. To Paul, Jesus' death meant the undoing of Adam's transgression. Here, he enters into a series of comparisons of Adam and Christ, emphasizing "how much more" the benefits of Christ's priesthood overflow to the masses than do the detriments of sin.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. **For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.**

¹⁴ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 58-60

Paul firmly establishes his belief that sin is universal. Not many have a problem with this assertion; the effects of sin can be seen everywhere, and scripture is very clear on this point. *All* humans are sinners. Because Adam, a priest of humanity, sinned, all humans fell into chaos. So, death reigned over the earth as its king. There was no one who could escape its rule and its effect. But then comes a shift in Paul's letter. He transitions to a discussion of Jesus' death and resurrection and their universal implications. It is clear here that the group affected by Adam's sin is the same as the group affected by YHWH's grace. While here the word "many" is used rather than "all" to refer to the object of that grace, one must recognize the parallel structure of the sentence. "Many" is used to refer to those affected by Adam's sin, though it is clearly all of humanity that is impacted. Then, as "many" receive the abounding grace of God, it must be seen that these two groups of people are the same, based on the parallel structure of the phrase. By this analysis, one can see that "many" actually refers to all of humanity.

And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.

For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who received the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

In this section, Paul begins to contrast the death of Adam and the grace of Christ. He juxtaposes the two by their results, one being condemnation and the other being justification. Because of Adam's sin, all were condemned. All were, in the moment he ate of the fruit, cut off from YHWH. The full benefits of the loving relationship one could carry with him were then impossible to obtain. But while this sin and death still ruled over humanity, Christ died and

resurrected, and through this rendered sin powerless. In a moment, he defeated death, and thus grace reigned through the resurrection and the life of Christ.

To identify the recipients of this grace, however, readers must dive into linguistics of the passage. Some claim that Paul's use of the word *lambanotes* (receive) "places limits on those who inherit salvation—only those who take it for themselves obtain it."¹⁵ However, this interpretation gives too much power to a helpless group of humans, should they be as depraved as they are often described. Plus, the wordage itself implies a passive action. One is not "taking" salvation, but is rather receiving it, according to Paul. Thus, this is a gift that YHWH gives unconditionally, and the gift is limitless.¹⁶

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Here readers find Paul's first explicit use of the word "all" in the chapter. The same condemnation discussed above is evident to be upon all people. In the apparent parallel structure of the passage, the life previously discussed is also revisited as Paul states that Jesus' act of righteousness on the cross justified *all of mankind* in life. Just as the entirety of mankind was subject to the reign of sin because of Adam's disobedience, the entirety of mankind is made righteous through Christ's obedience to the Father. This is a complete undoing of the sin of Adam. Through the actions of the representative of humanity, humanity itself is condemned in the first, and justified in the second.

¹⁵ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 80

¹⁶ Ibid, 80

Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Here, Paul initiates a contrast between the Torah and the grace of God. Under the law, sin is counted and held against each individual. Thus, sin becomes a prevalent problem in the human mind as they become aware of it and continue to break the law, and thus sin retains an even greater hold in society. But grace is unconditional, and grace is clearly more powerful than the law and more powerful than sin itself. However, in order for grace to be more powerful than sin and death, it must break the hold of sin on creation. In this way, grace commandeers the rest of the world from sin, freeing humanity from death and allowing the entire human race to experience the reign of grace through eternal life. In this way, Jesus becomes humanity's perfect priest, embodying Israel in its covenantal task, thus reversing the actions of Adam and providing abundant and overwhelming grace for YHWH's entire creation who's benefits far surpass the detriment of sin.

Judgment and Restoration

Failed Priesthood

With the covenant and the priesthood, however, came a calling higher than any other's. Israel was set apart for a purpose, and with this task to be a light to all nations came a distinct level of accountability. Failure to obey commands of YHWH meant a failure to show his character to the world. In this way, Israel often disobeyed, and in this way distorted the image of YHWH that they were to put on display for the nations. In doing this, Israel brought judgment upon itself.¹⁷ Nation after nation conquered the rebellious Israelites. However, each time they

¹⁷ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 63

turned back to their god, he raised up a “judge” to deliver Israel from its oppressors. And thus was instated the exilic cycle in the kingdom of Israel in which YHWH, in attempt to correct the straying Israel, disciplined his people that they might return to the correct path and fulfill their duties to him and to the world.

But this was a cycle, and the people simply repeated the iniquities of their fathers whenever they lost sight of the past judgment. As the severity of these iniquities increased, so did the judgment, culminating in the utter destruction of the kingdom as a whole. In 586 B.C., the Babylonian army destroyed the temple at Zion, signifying an end to the kingdom of Judah and the beginning of the exile that would define Israel’s history for the rest of time. This was a drastic turn in its history as she “who was to be a light to the blind nations became blind herself.”¹⁸ It was a moment in time when despair seemed to reign above all else; they had failed, they knew they had failed, and they knew they were now paying the heavy price for that failure.

The sins of Israel became so massive that they lost their nation completely to the merciless Babylonians. The resulting exile meant a loss of hope in the covenant and a belief that YHWH had finally abandoned him. However, some of the prophets, Isaiah in particular, were able to see that this was part of their god’s restorative plan for Israel. YHWH was still the their god, and he was remaining faithful to the covenant. Isaiah, in his prophetic language, assures Israel that they were still loved by the god of their fathers.¹⁹ Though it could not complete its

¹⁸ Ibid, 64

¹⁹ Ibid, 64

mission in its present state, they foresaw a time in which the nation as a whole would be restored; in Isaiah's writings, this restoration took place through the sufferings of a servant.²⁰

Israel's Redemption

It is not perfectly clear who exactly this servant is, though. Regardless of who Isaiah believes it to be, whether the personification of Israel itself or an individual within Israel, what matters is what the servant does on Israel's behalf. "Pierced for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities,"²¹ the servant takes upon himself the judgment of Israel as a whole. Isaiah's servant is set up in his own story within the overall story of Israel, both finales of which are redemption. In the main story, Israel is a servant through which the world may see YHWH and gather to worship him. However, the failure through Israel's own sin breaks the nation, rendering it incapable of its covenantal task. Then, in a more focused parallel narrative, a new servant depicted as an individual is called to be the light to Israel itself. The Servant receives judgment on Israel's behalf, and in this way "the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous."²² Then, becoming an intercessor on behalf of "the transgressors,"²³ the servant is acting for Israel as Israel was intended to act for the world.

Isaiah's parallel plotline thus demonstrates "the transference of Israel's mission onto an individual."²⁴ Israel could not lead itself out of darkness if she herself was blind. Thus, the servant of Isaiah was burdened to do what Israel herself could not. This was the means to Israel's

²⁰ Ibid, 64

²¹ Isa. 53:5

²² Isa. 53:11

²³ Isa. 53:12

²⁴ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 65

own restoration, and in the face of a restored Israel the nations could see the face of YHWH.

This, then, would be the fulfillment of the covenant. The Servant would usher in a new age of righteousness through this new exile.²⁵

The means of this are revealed through Isaiah's depiction of this servant's death and resurrection. In this manner, he sets the servant up as microcosm of Israel, though a person *distinct* from Israel, thus skirting the possibility of a simple and direct metaphorical comparison. The servant may *be* Israel in a respect, but all in all he is not simply Israel. He is Israel in that it is he through whom Israel regains its righteous standing as children of the covenant. He is Israel in that he receives judgment on Israel's behalf. He is Israel in that he dies, descending into a sort of exile. And he is Israel in that he rises from the dead, thus leading a new exodus, he himself escaping from death and at the same time leading Israel as a whole out of captivity.²⁶ In this manner, Israel is reinstated to its chosen standing *so that it may once again* be a light to the nations to draw them to worship at Zion.²⁷

The Nations' Redemption

The redemptive story of the outsiders follows that of Israel. Once Israel fulfills its covenantal task, the Israel's cycle repeats, but this time for all the other nations outside of its borders.

Though this was Israel's ultimate assignment, they often lost track of it in the people's focus on their own nation's prosperity. Too often did the Israelites focus on their own blessings

²⁵ Ibid, 65-66

²⁶ Evidence of this accomplished task is found in Isaiah 54, which houses a song celebrating the redemption of Israel.

²⁷ Macdonald, *Evangelical*, 65-66

from YHWH per the covenant that they lost sight of the ultimate goal, and thus they were angered at any idea that one day their enemies may be in right standing with their god. To many of them, a return from exile meant a total destruction of their oppressors for having dared to trifle with YHWH's chosen.

“Draw near, O nations, to hear, and give attention, O peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that fills it; the world, and all that comes from it. For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter. Their slain shall be cast out and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.”²⁸

Many Christians, like the exilic Israelites did, tend to leave the discussion here, arguing for a full-fledged destruction of YHWH's enemies. But according to the very words of YHWH in the Abrahamic covenant, one can see that this is not the end of the story. To discover this, one must simply continue reading the story.

Returning to Isaiah 45, which was referenced earlier, readers can see a dramatic shift in the judgment tone. In this song, YHWH calls the survivors of the nations to cast aside their idols, come to him, and worship at his feet. This picture of salvation cannot be ignored. It is clear that this redemption is a post-judgment event, and that this judgment is only a means to redemption—it is a necessary part of the redemptive process. The call to swear allegiance to him is “no forced subjection of defeated enemies,” as this oath is taken in context of the call to the nations to turn to YHWH and be saved. An oath to a god is something that his own people do, and in this salvific context, it is safe to infer that the nations are being viewed as God's people in Isaiah's

²⁸ Isa. 34:1-4

writing. Thus, this song is a celebration of the future fulfillment of the covenant, a joyous expression of the incorporation of the nations into Israel's loving relationship with YHWH.²⁹

An example of the full process is held in Isaiah 19, a prophesy about the coming destruction of Egypt. In it, YHWH pits the Egyptians against each other, creating a civil war of sorts. Drying the Nile River (v. 6) and causing the laborers to grieve (v. 9-10), Egypt in judgment descends into total chaos. Following this oracle, however, is a vision of a blessing from YHWH on both Egypt and Assyria—Israel's equivalent to the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

In that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of Destruction. In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt. When they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and deliver them. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them. In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance."³⁰

These were Israel's greatest enemies; to speak of their redemption was foreign, even profane to them. But, still, it is clear from this passage that these adversaries would themselves one day be reconciled to the god of Israel and so incorporated into his love as to receive the title of "YHWH's People."

²⁹ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 68

³⁰ Isa. 19:18-25

Strangely enough, this is the same pattern of judgment that Israel herself is administered. This process, then, must be seen, all in all, as restorative. The judgment that falls upon Israel is always seen as a consequence of sin, but it is corrective judgment. It is part of a purification process that can more perfectly bring Israel into right standing with YHWH so that it may complete its covenantal task of bearing God's image to the nations. Why, then, must the judgment of Israel's enemies be viewed differently? This judgment, as it is often depicted, is the same means to the same end as that of Israel. However, the question ensues of how exactly this restoration may come about. To determine that, one must return to Isaiah's suffering servant through whom Israel is reinstated to its full covenant glory.

Victory Through Establishment

In order to correctly approach a reading of the Gospels, one must have an understanding of the thematic implications of Jesus' ministry. The three-year itinerant ministry through Galilee was one long announcement that brought Israel's history to fulfillment. The exile was ending, and the kingdom of YHWH was coming to Earth. In this way, the Gospels act as the climax of the story of Israel and the fulfillment of the exilic theme. The Gospels, the kingdom announcement, are the final restoration, the end of the exilic cycle.

Fulfillment

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Echoing John the Baptist, these words are the first of Jesus' ministry. This announcement acts as a thesis statement for the remaining three years of Jesus' life in Israel, and through it Jesus conjures their exilic story in such a way that his own movement absorbs John's followers in addition to masses of Galileans. He was appealing to Israel's story, a story of exile, a

story of kings, and a story foreseen to end with YHWH's return to Israel and his defeat of their enemies. As a prophet announcing the coming of this foretold kingdom, it is not surprising to see crowds flocking to his side. As the proclaimer of this long-awaited climax, Jesus no doubt "believed that he was called to spearhead the movement of Israel's renewal and salvation."³¹

This bold claim was easily recognizable by both Israel's common and its elite. As a fitting climax to Israel's story, the implications of Jesus' announcement were clear—YHWH is becoming king. However, there are some extra elements that play into his prophetic message, as Jesus does not simply reiterate the words of the revolutionaries before him, but uses his knowledge of the story of Israel's pains and sufferings to redirect this story on a new path to the desired result. The subversive nature of Jesus' kingdom-announcement campaign confirmed that this

"was indeed coming to birth, but that it did not look like what had been imagined. The return from exile, the defeat of evil, and the return of YHWH to Zion were all coming about, but not in the way Israel had supposed... In the course of all this, he was launching the decisive battle with the real satanic enemy—a different battle, and a different enemy, from those Israel had envisaged."³²

Jesus' kingdom language, and that of the early church, cannot then be seen as referent a completely new story empty of any Jewish roots. To correctly follow his announcement historically, readers must begin as early as the Garden of Eden with the priesthood of Adam and trace this priesthood through Israel, paying attention to the clear priestly and kingdom language of the prophets.

³¹ Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996.), 200

³² Wright, *Victory of God*, 200

Tracing this language through the Old Testament, it is evident that the Jews saw the coming of the kingdom as a day on which they would be liberated from their oppressors. This would be the Day of the Lord, the great Judgment Day, and on this day YHWH would retake his domain and sit on the throne as king of Israel. Thus, to the early Christians, the kingdom was a present reality experienced on Earth, not a place to which the soul travels after death. Jesus' kingdom announcement marked the beginning of such a transition from slavery to freedom, even if it was not as expected.

The Rescue of Israel

This understanding of the fulfillment of the covenant is exactly the point that the apostle Matthew seeks to convey in his gospel. Written to the Jews, the gospel of Matthew is written to emphasize "Jesus' messianic identity, his inheritance of the Davidic kingship over Israel, and his fulfillment of the promise made to his ancestor Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations."³³ As king and messiah, Jesus takes on the role of the Son of Man, an agent of Israel from Daniel 7, thus filling the position of Israel's representative.³⁴ Even the possession of his title, the Messiah, sets him up as an intercessor, a priest, representing the entire nation in the courts of YHWH.³⁵ Throughout Matthew's gospel, this representative role is continuously emphasized by telling the story of Jesus' life in such a way that it echoes the story of Israel.

For example, Matthew takes the words "out of Egypt I called my son" from Hosea 11:1. The "son" in Hosea refers to Israel, whom YHWH brought out of Egypt in the exodus. In a new

³³ *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 1816

³⁴ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 75

³⁵ N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) chap. 3

interpretation, however, Matthew writes about the return of Jesus to Nazareth after fleeing from King Herod to Egypt. The new “son” of God is, according to Matthew, Jesus. In this way, Jesus’ well-known title, “Son of God,” does not simply refer to his membership of the divine trinity, but is rather a statement that “he is embodying the story of Israel.”³⁶ After Jesus’ baptism he travels out into the wilderness to face temptation before his ministry in Israel for forty days—just as Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years before entering into Canaan. The only difference is that Jesus succeeded in resisting temptation, while Israel had failed to remain faithful to YHWH in the desert. So, based on what is seen in Jesus’ life, he is living out Israel’s history, *but he is doing it better than Israel did and ever could have*. He is, in essence, fulfilling Israel’s history and mission, establishing himself as Isaiah’s Servant of YHWH.³⁷

Thus, by dying, Jesus acts out the climax of Israel’s story. Jesus personified Israel in its descent into exile, and “on the cross, Jesus takes the exilic curse to its terrifying climax.”³⁸ But, perfectly embodying Israel’s story, he takes Israel’s judgment upon himself, making the exile effective on only one man. Rising from the dead, Jesus destroyed the exile’s power on Israel’s behalf. It is only because he is the Messiah and Son of God who embodies Israel that “he is able to take on himself Israel’s curse and exhaust it,” thus inaugurating an age of YHWH’s kingship. This was the grand finale to the Israel’s exilic story, by which the Servant took on the sins of the nation and destroyed them. However, it is clear from the Gospels that this did not mean a

³⁶ Ibid, 75

³⁷ Ibid, 75

³⁸ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 76

physical deposition of the Roman Empire. As Jesus' followers would discover, Rome was merely a puppet of the true enemy, and this enemy enslaved not only Israel, but all of mankind.

A Greater Scale

The coming kingdom, in contrast to popular first century Jewish belief, came not to overthrow the Roman Empire, but to end Israel's exile in a new unexpected way. Through Jesus' teachings to fulfill the law through love, and thus inaugurate the kingdom through this type of nonviolent approach, Jesus identifies a different, more dangerous enemy that is not comprised of flesh and blood.³⁹ But he was not the first one. In fact, this new enemy was pinpointed as far back as the prophets in the midst of exile.

Micah is one of the first prophets to see Israel's oppression in this same light. In chapter seven of his book, one can see forceful "echoes of Exodus"⁴⁰ intended to create a new picture of YHWH and his enemies. Glancing at Exodus 15, readers can see Moses and Miriam's victory song, commonly known as The Song of the Sea, celebrating their god's victory over Israel's enemies in the Red Sea. It is a celebration, not only of their deliverance, but of YHWH's strength and might and ability to destroy those who dare infringe upon the freedom of Israel. It regards his faithfulness to the covenant, and thus his resilience against "the socio-political enemies of the people of Israel who have oppressed them in slavery and terror."⁴¹ And, in the context of Micah's prophetic career, it is exactly what Israel needed to hear.

³⁹ Wright, *Victory of God*, 201

⁴⁰ Skinner, Mike, "Echoes of Exodus in Micah 7:8-20: Micah's Critical Appropriations of the Song of the Sea." (Unpublished paper, Houston Baptist University, Houston, 2013.)

⁴¹ Skinner, "Echoes of Exodus," 17

The logical thought process of a Jewish reader in the Babylonian exile would read this passage of Micah as an assurance of YHWH's future deliverance of Israel from the hands of Babylon. Drawn into the passage by the exilic language used, readers would expect it to continue and climax in a defeat of Babylon, a metaphorical throwing of the Babylonians into the sea, just as the "Pharaoh's chariots and his host [were] cast into the sea."⁴² But Micah traverses a different interpretation, completely subverting the old beliefs and conditioning of Israel. He identifies a new enemy, altering Moses' above statement to say that YHWH "will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."⁴³ This redefinition would have shocked, perhaps even angered Israelites in the depths of exile. And this was the attitude to which Micah sought to put an end. Humans are creatures made in YHWH's image. Humans are part of this creation, the creation that was distorted by sin. And evil humans, despite the conception of Israel and of many Christians today, are *not* YHWH's enemies, but are mere victims and puppets of the corruption of sin itself.⁴⁴

The understanding of this redefinition took a while to set in among his Jewish followers. The enemies of YHWH's people had always been those who had enslaved them. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome—these were the foes of God's kingdom, and thus the foes of God. The previous Messiahs of Israel were therefore defined by their militant stance against the powers that were. But their bloodlust often brought their own execution as their revolutionary action posed a threat, however miniscule in its infancy, to the government and religious elite.

⁴² Ex. 15:4

⁴³ Mic. 7:19

⁴⁴ Skinner, "Echoes of Exodus," 17-19

Jesus' followers were thus bewildered when they saw his dead body wrapped in a shroud and carried to a tomb. He couldn't defeat Caesar if he was dead, could he? It wasn't until their teacher, alive and well, appeared to them on the third day following his crucifixion that they were finally able to grasp the implications of Jesus' kingdom announcement. The ministry was not a call to revolution against Rome as it was under Jesus' contemporaries, but a declaration of war against the kingdom of darkness, the powers of sin and death. Such a mission was not unheard of, but here took place a major redefinition of the entire covenant. Israel in the Old Testament had a vision for the future, an end in mind. The Gospels, however, hold the means to accomplish such a feat.

The establishment of YHWH's kingdom on earth was able to bring light to the darkest corners of the world, not because it offered a way to escape the dark evils of the world, but because it defeated the darkness itself. This grand event was the reordering of the chaos unleashed in the garden. It was the reinstatement of the long lost creation project, and it was redemption of this creation to achieve God's purposes for it.

To defeat the darkness, Jesus entered headfirst into the heart of it. Nailed to a wooden cross and condemned to die as an insurrectionist and a blasphemer, he jumped in front of the moving car that was headed straight for mankind. Beaten, the Son of God, representative of mankind, became Israel in its transgressions. Dying, Jesus threw himself in front of humanity, acting as a human shield across the intended target of sin itself, and said, "Do your worst." And sin did, for three days, unleashing all reservoirs of its power upon Jesus, the Son of Man, until it had no power left with which to fight. In a moment of triumph, Jesus stood up, and, rising from

the grave, defeated death itself in such a way that he had removed every last drop of power and broken every last chain it had on humanity.⁴⁵

Universal Worship of the Messiah

This victory and kingship are emphasized in Paul's letter to the Philippians, in which he references Isaiah 45 to espouse the ultimate universal praise of Jesus.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.⁴⁶

Upon close inspection, one can see the resemblance of this passage to Romans 5, which was discussed earlier. Paul's vision in Philippians strongly emphasizes the Adam-Christ contrast, even if it is not stated explicitly.

First, he says that Jesus took a step away from divinity, becoming a human and a servant, a direct undoing of Adam's discontent with his humanity that drove him to eat the fruit in order to become more like God. Second, Jesus became obedient to death. This can be traced directly back to Romans 5, in which Paul states that through Christ's obedience, all men may be offered life. And, unlike Adam, who was condemned and expelled from Eden, where God resided, Jesus was exalted to such a height that all should worship him. This is Paul's vision, that one day, all

⁴⁵ MacDonald, *Evangelical*

⁴⁶ Philippians 2:5-11

will recognize the reign of Christ that was established through his obedience to death and then his revolt against it.

So, eventually, all will bow to the Messiah. As Gregory MacDonald points out, Paul emphasizes that there are no exceptions by expanding the Old Testament text “every knee will bow” with the words “*in heaven and on earth and under the earth.*” This is going considerably further than the Isaiah text. In Isaiah only the living were in mind. All the survivors of the nations would bow, but the dead were dead. Not so here.⁴⁷

Paul clearly has in mind the participation of *all* people, the living and the dead, in worship and recognition of YHWH’s kingship. He envisions the resurrection, an expression of sheer power by which YHWH will undo the destruction caused by sin. Not many object to the universality of this claim. The question is whether or not all of these people are incorporated into the kingdom of YHWH.

There are a few interpretive options here.

1. Some are forced to bow prior to being condemned.
2. All are bowing willingly, but some choose to do so too late.
3. Paul is quoting Isaiah in a judgment context, so this passage cannot be taken as a reference to universal salvation.
4. All are bowing willingly as an expression of their willingness to join and acceptance into YHWH’s universal kingdom.

The first point has been dealt with throughout this thesis and shall be dealt with further as there are elements of universalism that remain to be explored. However, a few problems with this

⁴⁷ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 99

interpretation will be noted and dealt with here. First, Paul's usage of the word "confess" implies a willing worship of Jesus. As MacDonald notes,

the terminology Paul uses is suggestive of salvation rather than forced submission. All creatures confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Elsewhere in Paul's letters when he speaks of confessing Jesus as Lord it is always in the context of salvation. No one can say that "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). If someone confesses with their mouth and believes in the heart that Jesus is Lord, then they will be saved (Rom 10:9). There are no examples in Paul of an involuntary confession of Christ's Lordship.⁴⁸

To assume the letter to the Philippians is fundamentally different in this context is out of place.

To read this responsibly is to take context clues from the remainder of Paul's letters into this discussion, and out of it come universalist implications.

Before moving on to the next objection, a few more problems and questions must be addressed. Is it even necessary to force someone to bow to the one who has just raised him or her from the dead? Would not everyone, upon demonstration of proof of the existence of the god of the Hebrews, upon being told his redemptive story, and upon being shown the depths of his love for mankind, bow at his feet?

The second point is without scriptural support. The moment people assign the grace of YHWH an expiration date, it is safe to claim that the gospel has been severely misunderstood. One must understand that the love and grace of God are amazing and unending. From the moment Jesus was raised, they began to overflow beyond the grave. Many, on the contrary, designate death as the point of no return, the moment after which grace is unreachable. However, in a religion that places so much emphasis on life after death, the moment of death seems like a rather arbitrary one to call the point of no return.

⁴⁸ MacDonald, *Evangelical*, 99-100

Many arrive at the third method of interpretation by failing to read Romans 14:10-12 in context of the first half of the chapter.⁴⁹ It must be remembered that Paul is writing to the church in Rome about specific Roman issues. In this chapter, he addresses a problem that is dividing the church—the Torah. Some of the early Christians believed that it was necessary to keep elements of Mosaic Law (food restrictions, the Sabbath, etc.) in order to be considered a member of the church. Some were beginning to abandon the old ways. The first group judged the others as non-Christian, while the second group condemned the first because they were unwilling to relinquish the outdated ways of life. To overcome the growing schism, Paul warns the church against judging each other. Therefore, by quoting Isaiah, Paul reminds the Romans that “Christians are accountable to God (their master) for their own behavior in this matter, and they must not usurp his role by standing in judgment over each other.”⁵⁰ The reference also reminds the Jewish Christians that they and the Gentiles are on a level playing field—they are all equal in their worship of YHWH.⁵¹

And so, readers are left with the fourth interpretation, which states that Paul is *actually* saying what he appears to be saying—that one day, all will fall at the feet of Christ as members of his fulfilled kingdom. In writing Philippians 2, Paul is drawing from the prophetic text of Isaiah that describes a future return of all nations to YHWH. Isaiah, however, is only concerned with the living. Paul makes an astonishing expansion of Isaiah’s vision “to include not just the

⁴⁹ Ibid, 99

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

living but the dead, and not just humans but angelic creatures as well.”⁵² This is a universal return to the temple, a reconciliation of everyone that has ever and will ever live to YHWH, the true king of the universe. This is YHWH’s ultimate victory and his ultimate defeat of sin and death. By doing so, he is made king, and the world will recognize it and will praise him as such.

The Justice of God’s Love

God is Love

The phrase seems to be ground into the very cells of Christian brains. Many instantly accept “love” as a quality of God without giving it a second thought, but what exactly is “love”? What does it mean to say that God *is* this thing? Does God simply possess this characteristic, or is the meaning deeper than that? Is it simply a metaphor, or are the two interchangeable?

The problem with seeking YHWH through the lens of love is that when doing so, one attempts to define an abstract being with an abstract quality. After all, what are emotions other than chemical and mechanical impulses in the brain? And what is language other than the sounds that human beings assign these impulses in order to express them to others? To define a tangible or visual element is one thing, but to describe the abstract is another. For example, one can easily assign a certain sound to a certain color. All it takes is pointing to the color and pronouncing the sound, “red.” But to define emotions, one must read body language, facial expressions, even actions. The difficulty of this understanding explains why biblical authors often used action in their writings to define these abstract emotions. For example, when Job loses his entire family, instead of writing that he was devastated, the author wrote that he “tore his robe.”⁵³ In addition to

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Job 1:20

writing that the Jews were furious with Stephen because of his words to the high priest, Luke provides an additional example, saying that they “ground their teeth at him.”⁵⁴

The same problem is encountered when attempting to define “love,” and many are disgruntled upon realizing that *love cannot be defined*.⁵⁵ The bible offers no definition, and the human brain cannot put into words an abstract item or idea without reaching farther into the metaphysical. However, humans *can* recognize and define actions. Smiles are related to happiness. Tears are associated with sadness. Clenched fists are linked to anger. Admittedly, there are exceptions (i.e. tears of joy or sarcastic smiles), but the message rings true. Abstract ideas, like emotions, are best accessed through observance of actions. Thus, when we seek a clue as to what love actually is, we see a father playing with his son, the entranced eyes of a woman toward her partner, or even a man taking a bullet for his friend.

So, in order to assign meaning to the statement that “God is love,” found twice in 1 John 4, one must study YHWH’s actions. Here, “love” is used as an identity marker categorizing YHWH into a certain type of nature, which correspondingly explains his actions. “God is love” makes explicit that which is strongly implied in his Gospel, as well as the Old Testament’s repeated refrain of YHWH’s nature being steadfast covenantal love. So, to truly discover the meaning of the declaration, one must understand this triune god and his interactions within himself and with humankind. One must envision, as John did, the ultimate declaration of love—this triune god manifested in human flesh.

⁵⁴ Acts 7:54

⁵⁵ Oord, Thomas Jay. *The Nature of Love: A Theology*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2010.

In order to understand the love of the Father, one must begin at a basic human understanding of love. The purpose of the Bible is to express attributes of YHWH in such a manner that readers can understand them and respond accordingly. To fully and perfectly express them, the Son of God became united with a human nature and ministered to a small nation in Greco-Roman Palestine so that the rest of the world may hear of him and act like him. This god in human flesh, then, defined love for the entirety of humanity.

The life of Jesus gives readers an actionable definition of “love” that one can incorporate into John’s statements in 1 John 4. It is evidently his belief that the incarnation is the means by which God expressed his love to humanity. Christians tend to focus on solely the cross as the means of forgiveness of man. The Gospel is often reduced to the idea that if one believes that Jesus was crucified for the sins of man, then he or she will be saved. By doing this, the life of Jesus is rendered moot to the Gospel as a whole. Instead, the main element of focus should be the incarnation itself and the time that this God-Human inhabited Earth.

In the Sermon on the Mount, he instructs his audience to love their enemies, as opposed to previous instruction to love neighbors and hate enemies. This is a call to his followers to be radically different from the world around them, to pray for persecutors and to be accepting of the unrighteous. This call, then, goes hand in hand with the remainder of the sermon, as he pronounces blessings on the merciful and the peacemakers, commands nonviolent resistance against evildoers, instructs to give to the poor, and condemns judgment upon others. These reveal Jesus’ meaning of love—his love is giving, his love is peaceful, and his love is merciful.⁵⁶ All in all, during his ministry,

⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of the nonviolent nature of YHWH, see Ryan Money’s thesis.

“Jesus healed the sick, preached the good news, ate with sinners, ministered to the poor, wept over the dead, encouraged the downhearted, and showed compassion. In him were light and life and love. The person and work of Christ express divine love. Jesus’ witness stands as the fullest revelation of God’s loving nature and activity.”⁵⁷

Only after all of this did Jesus die, and it is only because of the significance of the incarnation that Jesus’ death meant something. The cross, then, is merely one element of the incarnation that in and of itself embodied YHWH’s love for humanity. Yes, this self-sacrificial act is loving, but only within the context of Jesus’ ministry. It merely adds another layer to the human understanding of God’s love that it expressed most beautifully in the interactions within the Trinity itself, one of which is the incarnation.

According to John, it is the incarnation itself that brings life to mankind.⁵⁸ Becoming man, yet remaining fully divine, the Son was able to be man’s representative in judgment, entering a head-on battle with sin in order to destroy it so that humans would not remain enslaved to its power. This, then, is the story of the kingdom of God established through a humble, yet triumphant act, and because of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, humanity is able to join his kingdom and receive life.

God is Just

Out of the discussion of love then comes talk of justice, as the appeals to God’s love are met with “Yes, God is love, but he is also just.” And again, readers and listeners arrive at the question, “What exactly does it mean to say that God is just?” Some deduce that YHWH must be the ultimate distributor of divine retribution upon the wrongdoers. Some believe that God’s wrath

⁵⁷ Oord, *Nature of Love*, 117-118

⁵⁸ 1 Jn. 4:9

is espoused in his refusal to intervene in human events, to, in essence, turn humanity over to their sinful desires.⁵⁹ However, one must not view the wrath of God as a quality distinct from his love. To avoid creating a god with multiple personalities, all statements concerning YHWH's wrath and justice must be understood as aspects of God's love.

Because God is love *by nature*, all of his actions must be loving. The love that is evidenced in the persons of the Trinity and most clearly in the person of Christ must dominate the forefront of discussions regarding YHWH's action. With this in mind, the connection between love and wrath is no longer a stretch or something that must diminish the significance of either, but wrath becomes a product of the very love that was espoused through the actions of God himself.

Take a parent, for example. There are different types of loving actions that a parent could perform toward their children, but not all can be grouped into the same category. For example, a parent may work every day to ensure their child's economic stability, a practical form of love. A parent may also hug their child, a more affectionate form of love. But a parent may discipline the child when he or she runs out into a busy street. The discipline may, in fact, be painful, but that does not make it anything apart from love. Hopefully, following the punishment, the child will realize that playing in the street is not wise, as it could possibly get them hurt.

Now envision a second parent from a different family. They come home, not to love their child, but to use him or her as an outlet for anger and frustration. This may be painful for the child, similar to the first. However, the beatings in this scenario are not corrective as those of the first scenario were. The pain, then, is meaningless. This action is not a loving one.

⁵⁹ Romans 1:24-28

This is the difference between restorative and retributive justice. A wrathful action that is also loving has a purpose behind it. It does not inflict pain simply out of frustration, but instead is corrective, allowing the victim of a punishment to see their wrongdoing and reenter the world with that knowledge so that they may avoid doing that same thing. These actions they are to avoid are destructive ones that become habits or are simply dangerous situations. This, then, is sin, and the wrath of God, should it be loving, is intended to allow humans to see the error of their ways so that they may fix it on the next try, not so they can eternally regret their sin.

Then comes the discussion of degrees of punishment. This is one of the major problems one finds in the Traditional View of hell. If God's wrath must be loving, because God is love, then how can the administration of his justice be manifested in eternal conscious torment? According to law codes of civilizations throughout history, and even the law codes passed down from YHWH to Moses to Israel, punishment must fit the crime; because of this long-held truth, varying degrees of punishment have been administered for various degrees of crime. Punishments designated under Levitical laws held this to be true. In fact, they set restrictions so that one could not overstep the boundaries for punishment. For example, "an eye for an eye" justice did not only allow someone to execute justice, but it restricted someone in that execution. The justice-seeker could not go any farther than equal retribution on the criminal. If someone poked a man's eye out, he could not go any farther on the criminal than to poke *his* eye out.

This belief, however, is eventually subverted by Jesus himself in his ministry. In the Sermon on the Mount, he calls his followers to not only limit justice to equal retribution, but to fight evil with love by turning the other cheek. According to Jesus, the most effective way to end

a cycle of evil and violence is not to seek retribution, but to resist nonviolently in a loving manner.

So, the question is, would a god who is so concerned with limiting retribution among his own people be inclined to infinitely punish a human being for his or her sin, regardless of the degree?

God's justice, then, is not focused on retribution, but instead focuses on righting wrongs. This thesis must visit the other side of justice, the side that does not only punish wrongdoing, but corrects it. One must understand that justice goes both ways. For example, if Bob steals ten dollars from Chris, Bob must not only receive some sort of punishment, but Chris, more importantly, needs his ten dollars back. This is the other side of justice—the victim is compensated. Richard Beck, in a statement against annihilationism, provides another example of the need for this kind of justice in eschatology.

“Think of those Jews looking up at the showerheads in Auschwitz. Maybe they don't get *tortured* for eternity in the next life. Maybe, Fudge suggested, they just *die*, right there or maybe later. Regardless, the last act in the drama of their life is breathing in the gas as they scream and cling to their friends, family and children. Too bad they didn't accept Jesus in this life! Too bad they didn't attend that nice, welcoming German Bible study down the street!

In short...annihilationism...didn't allow me to answer the questions I really needed to answer: Is God loving? Is God just?”⁶⁰

Justice, then, does not seem to be fully satisfied unless the victims are provided recompense, unless the victims of history's tragedies are given back that which was so brutally taken from them by sin, death, and their human puppets of evil—their lives.

⁶⁰ <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2011/03/musings-about-universalism-part-4-why-i.html>

Revisiting Eschatology

Returning to the three eschatological views that were introduced previously, here will begin a thematic analysis of each based on the four biblical themes that have been explored throughout this thesis. The congruency of each view with the four themes will be rated on a scale of 0-3. The ratings are achieved as such:

- A rating of 0 describes an utter failure to uphold said biblical theme. The theme is irrelevant in discussion of the discussed view, and vice-versa.
- A rating of 1 does not deny a biblical theme, but it does not express it well.
- A rating of 2 describes a view's strong capabilities of upholding a theme, though known versions of it do not fulfill it perfectly. Perhaps the theory only needs minor tweaking in this area to perfectly fit the theme.
- A rating of three denotes a view as perfectly suited to a particular biblical theme. It flawlessly promotes said theme in bringing about its logical conclusion..

The Traditional View of the Church

Thematic Congruency

- **Priesthood (2):** The traditional view of hell, for the most part, upholds the theme of priesthood. At least, it does not discount it. If Israel's role is priesthood to the world, and through Jesus, Israel began that process, then Traditionalism upholds a motivation for Christians today to continue in their own priesthood. By actively participating in missions today, the church can see more members tomorrow. An immediate effect of this is a then less humans who will one day suffer in hell. Traditionalism, for some, is a motivation to be better evangelists, better priests, to the world around them. However, the view slightly

diminishes the theme. A priest's purpose was to represent an entire nation in a temple, thus incurring a god's blessing on the nation as a whole. This was an individual's action to represent an entire community. To extend the metaphor, then, to the nation of Israel as a single priest, the logic expands the recipients of the blessings of their god to a global spectrum. This is only a minor fallback of Traditionalism though, and this alone does not render the view unsatisfactory to Christianity.

- **Judgment and Restoration (1)**- Following the exilic cycle is difficult for Traditionalists. For Christians, they agreeably say, the cycle is real and complete. As sinners, they were subject to a certain inborn separation from the fullness of the love of God. Then, believing in the death and resurrection of Christ, one is restored, born again, and saved from the future punishment of hell. But for the nonbelievers, the exile never ends. They are, in the biblical story, Israel's enemies who, by enslaving Israel, incur the wrath of Israel's god upon them. The problem with the traditional view of hell and its place in the exilic cycle is that Jesus did not come to save Israel from Rome. In the Gospel narrative, sin and death are the enemies of mankind, and it is sin and death that incur the judgment on themselves for enslaving humanity as a whole. So, a judgment of Israel's enemies means the destruction of sin and death. The battle, as Paul states, is not against flesh and blood, and the ultimate act of victory for YHWH is thus unlikely to be eternal torture of wayward souls.
- **The Kingdom (1)**- As was just previously stated, God's fight is not with man, but with sin, with evil itself. Should Jesus' agenda have been against Israel's oppressors, he would have taken up a sword, walked into battle with large masses behind him, and overthrown

the Caesar. Jesus, however, made it clear that those were not his intentions. Instead, Jesus died on a rebel's cross, and he rose from the dead three days later, thus completing a battle with sin and death, designating them the true enemies of YHWH. If the enemy is sin, the logic does not follow to the unending conscious torment of those who reject God. With sin comes grief and pain, both of which are maintained in the age to come in the traditional view. Eternally burning in a pit of fire sounds like a painful punishment. In a world where pain is supposed to disappear with sin, unending torture in hell for the nonbelievers is an unfitting end to biblical story. As for those who sit in paradise while their loved ones suffer endlessly, where is the joy that promised to them in their previous life of heartache? Must people, knowing the fate of their mother, their brother, their children, or their friends, mourn in the coming kingdom? Jesus' ministry was aimed at destroying the dark toll of sin and all things that are not intended to exist and that are ultimately seen as a detriment to humanity. Being touched by the death of a friend and moved by the grief of his family, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, making a statement to witnesses that grief is a thing of the past, and that one day a mass resurrection would turn these effects of sin over on its head. Joy, a promised element of the new world, cannot be fully present among believers while those they loved burn, and thus, a full victory of the kingdom of God is not achieved in a traditionalist future.

- **Love and Justice (1)**- However, Christians must understand that YHWH rules through love. An understanding of his loving character discounts traditionalism as incompatible with the biblical theme of love. Based on his interaction with humanity throughout history, God's love for man can be seen as a preserving love, one that seeks to better the

life of mankind by bringing them into community with him. This same love is self-sacrificial, given that the Son of God himself died so that this may indeed be accomplished. As most will agree, this kind of love is incapable of torture. Here enters the common rebuttal, “love, but also just.” Traditionalism, however, surpasses justice, landing in the area of sadistic torture. First, one must picture eternity, not of bliss, but constituted of searing pain, solidarity, and complete separation from the love of God. Even from the perspective of a primitive justice system, this system of eschatology seems barbaric. Can even a lifetime of sinning amass enough demerit for an eternity of sin? Of course, the answer is no—it is humanly impossible to reach infinity. Thus, as a biblical system of justice is based on punishments that fit the crimes, infinite punishment cannot reasonably be a response to finite sin.

Overall Congruency

As seen above, the traditional doctrine of eschatology in which souls of the damned are tortured for eternity does not quite fit with the biblical metanarrative. The theory has backing from biblical text and church tradition, but this evidence falls prey to individuals such as Edward Fudge, a conditionalist author who devotes most of his writing to dismantling traditionalism.⁶¹

Thus, as a result of the positions inconsistency with the biblical story and the slew of attacks against its heaviest evidence in a few locations of biblical text, perhaps it is time to not necessarily abandon the long-held tradition, but to explore other options, and perhaps, by doing so, Christians can find a new view to grasp and teach. All that is necessary is to move forward with a mind that is open to new possibilities.

⁶¹ Such evidence and counters thereof will not be discussed in this thesis. For an in depth discussion, see Fudge, Edward William (*The Fire That Consumes*. Third ed. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011)

The View of Conditional Immortality

Thematic Congruency

- **Priesthood (2)**- Annihilationism upholds the priesthood theme in the same ways traditionalism does, and it has the same downfalls. Regarding the positives, it is still the task of Christians, and formerly of Israel, to bring the whole world into a relationship with YHWH. However, being impossible to actually bring everyone into this type of covenant, some humans are lost. Thus, annihilationism holds the same motivation to evangelize as traditionalism. However, it diminishes the covenantal vision that all nations would receive blessing through Israel.
- **Judgment and Restoration (2)**: This view bodes better than does traditionalism when it comes to judgment. Annihilationism recognizes that the punishment for sin was always death, ever since original sin in the Garden of Eden. Thus to refuse the grace of YHWH would be to simply succumb to the curse of sin, to forfeit existence. However, this, like traditionalism, views judgment as an element of divine retribution, simply existing for its own sake. It fails to recognize judgment as a corrective process through which human beings are restored to righteousness.
- **The Kingdom (2)**- The establishment of the kingdom is upheld as a battle between light and darkness. Dying and rising, Jesus defeats sin and death, offering life to those who follow him. Those who choose, however, to exempt themselves from the universal kingdom have no place in the world. The result is then cessation of existence, being dragged into the abyss with the kingdom of darkness that Jesus himself defeated.

However, herein lies a small problem—it seems, if darkness could claim a victim, the light had not fully won.

- **Love and Justice (3)**—Finally, annihilationism, or certain versions of it at least, upholds the element of YHWH’s love. Many scholars on this topic suggest that essential kenosis (God’s necessary love) prohibits his interference with the thoughts and free will of mankind. By this logic, “love wins”⁶² whether one chooses or rejects him. If they choose him, love wins because they are incorporated into YHWH’s kingdom. If they reject him, love wins because YHWH is letting them make their own decision to walk away, even if it means forfeiting existence.

Overall Congruency

Many of the judgment texts found in both the Old and New Testaments align themselves well with annihilationism. They depict scenes of utter destruction of nations or others that are the object of metaphors. The view uses these judgment texts to fight against traditionalism, arguing that the scenes of fire and destruction in no way imply eternal conscious torment in a lake of fire and sulfur. They simply describe a person or nation’s total destruction, the wiping of a being or entity from the face of the earth, with no promise or implications of an afterlife in hell.

This thesis does not seek to deny the evidence of judgment espoused in the biblical text, but only to perhaps offer another lens through which to read it. At the very least, this thesis is intended to raise questions about eschatological beliefs. To refute annihilationism is not the goal here—the goal is to open up the reader to a new idea, one that has long been condemned and

⁶² Bell, Rob. *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011)

ignored, but one that is perhaps a more suiting and beautiful ending to YHWH's redemptive story.

The View of Universal Reconciliation

Thematic Congruency

- **Priesthood (3)**- Universalism promotes the idea of priesthood in that it is the ultimate fulfillment of the theme. It upholds both a need for evangelism and the vision of the reconciliation of all the nations. It takes seriously that this was the intent of the covenant with Israel; it was always the plan that *all the nations would be blessed*. However, this has no place for apathetic priests. Christians are called to love, and by loving to be a light to the world, to bring creation out of darkness and to allow them to see the light that is already reigning through Jesus.
- **Judgment and Restoration (2)**- The judgment upon Israel does not necessarily foreshadow one final judgment in which the damned will be cast from YHWH's presence. Many forms of Universalism view these judgments, along with the Old and New Testament's statements on judgment (like those of John the Baptist), to be largely historical. Thus, these judgments are not a vision of an epic finale that stains the earth with blood, but they are indicative of a process, a path to restoration. Just as the judgment on Israel was corrective so that they might return to following their laws in order to show their god to the world, so are these prophecies of future judgment. Additionally, some forms of Universalism hold that Jesus himself was the embodiment of that historical judgment. This judgment and restoration of Jesus on humanity's behalf, then, allowed

humans to live in the light of YHWH and to be his witness to the darkest corners of the earth.

- **The Kingdom (3)**- Thus, when Jesus was resurrected from the dead, he inaugurated a new age of his universal kingship. This kingdom meant an abolishing of darkness and chaos from the face of the earth. Death's power was destroyed, its grip on humanity relinquished. To say this is true is to then say that, in the end, the entire curse of sin is undone. *This* will be the grand finale; a resurrection of *all* the dead and their incorporation into this kingdom will be the conclusion to the biblical story and the introduction to a new story in a new kingdom. This is not an ending that litters the streets with bodies of YHWH's enemies, but an ending that gives them a position in his kingdom, the kingdom that has overthrown the true enemy.
- **Love and Justice (3)**- Universalism's greatest push lies with the love of the Trinity. In love, God became man. In love, he showed mankind how to live. In love, he died and rose again. In love, he ushered in a new age of divine kingship, in the fulfillment of which humanity could at last experience the fullness of this love that exists within God himself. Wrongs would be made right. His divine justice has and will continue to transform the world and everyone in it into a new order and a new mindset. This is redemption. This is incorporation. This is love.

Overall Congruency

As has been discussed throughout this thesis, the doctrine of Universalism finds its share of evidence throughout the prophets and the Pauline epistles. To clarify once again, the purpose of this thesis is not to disprove annihilationism. The purpose of this thesis is to suggest that there

may be a new way to read the judgment texts that are often used as evidence for the traditional and conditional views. Universalism, while it does not lay its focus on scriptures regarding judgment, is able to deal with them as was discussed previously in this section. Perhaps opponents are grounded in claims that Universalists do not take the judgment text seriously enough. However, it is also true that these same opponents have not taken universalist scripture seriously either, in addition to the general themes of the biblical metanarrative.

The four themes identified in this paper, if traced correctly, create a new lens through which to read the Bible and its text that is often difficult to deal with, like judgment text. The combination of these themes traced to their logical conclusion finds an end at universalism. This is not to say that this is *the* option, but simply that it is *an* option. By recognizing Universalism as a viable option for Christian eschatology, Christians are able to focus less on Christianity as a get-out-of-hell-free card, and to focus more on a kingdom-centered ministry, that the kingdom of YHWH is coming to earth and to join now is to experience life like man has never before known.

Conclusion

Based on the biblical themes as identified and explored throughout this thesis, Christian universalism is not an absurd theory. Eschatology, in general, is a shaky subject. Biblical text can only go so far in telling scholars about the return of Christ and the details surrounding it. The subject as a whole is largely speculative.

Thus, eschatological theories with that appear to be and are demonstrated to be consistent with biblical themes should be taken seriously. Christian universalism, condemned as heretical for much of church history, occupies this category of scorned eschatology. However, as has been demonstrated, it is not inherently unchristian; some would say it most perfectly embodies a Christian desire for the world. Based on the discussion of this thesis, it takes very seriously major thematic elements of scripture and traces them to a possible, or even (dare it be said) *likely* conclusion to the biblical story.

Thus, a condemned theory such as this one, which embraces the character of YHWH and the recurring themes of his interaction with history, deserves to be revisited. The purpose of this thesis is not to convince anyone that universalism is *the* correct eschatological theory. Instead, it is to demonstrate the positives of universalism and its consistency with Christianity. The question should no longer be “hell or annihilation.” Daily discussion of the topic should contain this third party theory in which the entirety of God’s creation will one day return to him through the everlasting power of his grace, his overflowing reservoirs of mercy, and his overwhelmingly perfect love.

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