

Have You Ever Heard of the Metaphorical View of Eternal Punishment?

BLOGCAST

J.K. McKee

Too many are not aware that the majority view of theologians, since the Protestant Reformation, has been that the unrepentant wicked suffer eternally—but not by writhing in an endless lake or pool of magma, molten lead, and sulfur. Instead, the metaphorical view of the wicked suffering everlasting exile from God the Creator, has been what has been affirmed.

While a significant amount of attention over the issue of death, the intermediate state, and the resurrection is necessarily given to the destiny of the redeemed—the unredeemed too will die, experience their own intermediate penalization, and then be resurrected. Daniel 12:2 informs us that there will be those resurrected “to disgrace *and* everlasting contempt” (NASU). Revelation 20:5, 6 explains, “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed...Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power...” (NASU). Those who participate in the second resurrection are those who will have to stand trial before Yeshua the Messiah, and be judged according to the level of their deeds or works they committed (Revelation 20:12-14). It is worth being reminded of how all created beings will have to acknowledge Yeshua the Messiah as LORD:

“[A]t the name of Yeshua EVERY KNEE WILL BOW [Isaiah 45:23], of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Yeshua the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11, NASU).

There will be those who obviously acknowledge Yeshua as Lord (YHWH), because they have recognized Him as the Messiah of Israel and their Personal Savior. They have recognized Him as the Source of eternal redemption, and have been saved from their sins, washed clean by His atoning sacrifice. *There will be others*, though, who rejected the Messiah, who rejected His salvation, **but will nonetheless be forced to recognize Him as the Supreme Deity**. Yeshua Himself says in John 5:29 that there will be “those who committed the evil *deeds* [brought] to a resurrection of judgment” (NASU). Just as the redeemed who participate in the first resurrection will be able to spend eternity in a fully embodied, immortal state—what is to be said about the unredeemed who are similarly given immortal bodies at the second resurrection?

Those, who advocate a traditionalist model of eternal punishment, are of the position that the resurrection of the condemned, the second resurrection, gives the unrighteous the nature or form of being that is needed to experience a never-ending form of punishment. While the righteous are to experience everlasting life, fellowship, and communion with God—the unrighteous are to experience an everlasting death of exile and banishment from Him.

The annihilationist, however, only views concepts like “life” and “death” in an entirely medical sense. In his typical scenario, the unrighteous die, they fall into unconsciousness, they are resurrected, they face final judgment, and then they suffer individual extinction and nothingness. The annihilationist will argue stridently against any model of eternal punishment as somehow being “eternal life in hell-fire.” But if eventual termination is what is to be anticipated by the unredeemed, though, what would be the actual point of a second resurrection? In the annihilationist’s schema, would it not just be best for the unrighteous to die, decompose into nothingness, and that should be it?

Messianic annihilationists commonly argue that the Torah only permits capital punishment for those who sin against God. Yet, it is often not that recognized how capital punishment is a human-enacted penalty issued upon other humans. Surely, the final sentencing of those who have rejected the Creator God is to be *more severe* than a terrestrial-based capital punishment (cf. Hebrews 10:28-29).

There is no question that almost all annihilationists, in expressing their position, have to attack the most hard-pressed, (overly-)literal view of eternal punishment as possible, in order to make their case. They protest the Hell model of torture in writhing flames—with men, women, and children all breathing in toxic fumes, being sprayed with poisonous acid,

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and having to eat hot coals and drink molten lead. Yet, there are many interpreters and theologians, holding to a never-ending eternal punishment for the condemned, who would actually take issue with this interpretation of Hell.

The growth of annihilationism in evangelical circles, at least, has been directly caused by a widescale failure of preachers and teachers, to adequately explain and address *all aspects* of how the condemnation of the unrighteous is presented to us in the Bible. There are populist views of eternal punishment that need to be put off to the side—the views that annihilationists are able to exaggerate for themselves, and use emotional pleas to get people to reject. The Bible does not exclusively portray eternal punishment in terms of fire and smoke, but also in terms of darkness and a removal from God's presence. While the condemned will surely suffer on some demonstrable level, how much of the punishment actually occurs in terms of what we might consider physical torment can be disputed.

The word of Revelation 20:12-13 is that the unrighteous will be judged "according to their deeds," indicating that the judgment that the Lord will issue upon them will surely fit their crimes. Not all condemned sinners receive the same degree of punishment, as some will receive less, and some will receive more, than others. Advocates of a never-ending eternal punishment are right to conclude that the unrighteous will receive various levels of torment—even if it is ultimately a psychological recognition on behalf of a sinner that he or she quantitatively rejected the Creator, and is to face the consequences of outstanding exclusion from His Kingdom.

What kind of a judgment meted out upon the unrighteous can actually take place, if they are to be snuffed out of existence? Whether one has robbed a candy store and taken only a few dollars in sweets, or has overseen a ponzi scheme and taken away billions of dollars in collective savings—annihilation is the same penalty for everyone who commits robbery. The male who rapes and murders only a single female, receives the same penalty as the brutal dictator who sends thousands or hundreds of thousands of people to work and die in labor camps. The *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* points out how,

"Annihilation would not be a punishment but a release from all punishment. Job can suffer something worse than annihilation in this life. The punishment of evil men in the afterlife would have to be conscious. If not, then God is not just, since he would have given less punishment to some wicked than to some righteous people. For not all wicked people suffer as much as some righteous people do in this life."¹

Indeed, any interpreter is on good grounds to conclude that the everlasting punishment, that the unrighteous experience, *has to be* more severe than some of the Earthly suffering experienced by the righteous.

While none of us likes the topic of suffering—whether it is contemplating people burning for all eternity *or* being separate from God for all eternity—there are indeed interpreters who have viewed the descriptions of eternal punishment more along the lines of the latter than the former. *Why has this been so important?* Because annihilationists do not typically respond, or even respect, **the metaphorical position** on eternal punishment. Most annihilationist literature responds to **the literal view** of people really burning in a never-ending crematory.² If you have never even heard of the metaphorical view on eternal punishment, you are not alone. One evangelical pastor, conducting a study at his church on the subject of death and the afterlife, had this to say about it:

"I was surprised to learn in my studies on this subject that the metaphorical view of hell is by far the most popular among evangelicals today, and indeed, has a long and distinguished pedigree."³

If many of today's evangelicals are totally shocked and surprised to ever hear of the metaphorical view of eternal punishment—which focuses the attention of Believers upon descriptions of everlasting banishment and exile from God—**how many of today's Messianics have never heard of it?**

From my family's own Protestant background, John Wesley commented on Revelation 20:3, "How far these expressions are to be taken literally, how far figuratively, who can tell?"⁴ Given the tenor of his Sermon #73, "Of Hell," there is no question that he believed eternal punishment was an everlasting condition of total loss, saying,

"All the pleasures of the imagination are at an end. There is no grandeur in the infernal regions; there is nothing beautiful in those dark abodes; no light but that of livid flames. And nothing new, but one unvaried scene of horror upon horror! There is no music but that of groans and shrieks; of weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth; of curses and blasphemies against God, or cutting reproaches of one another. Nor is there anything to gratify the sense of honour: No; they are the heirs of shame and everlasting contempt."⁵

Many of the other mainline Protestant traditions can find similar statements made by their founders, in terms of Hell being an awful place of suffering, with sinners removed from the care and concern of God. While there are figures who held to a much more literal Hell than a metaphorical one, the metaphorical view of everlasting exile has had a noticeable impact on theologians' thoughts over the past few centuries.

But why has the metaphorical view of Hell been an option? Is it because some interpreters do not like the idea of the condemned having to suffer in literal fire and brimstone? Is it somehow a position of compromise between annihilationism and having to "burn" or "fry"—taking "the Hell out of Hell"? Actually, we find that the metaphorical view of eternal

¹ "annihilationism," in Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 24.

² As is represented by John F. Walvoord, "The Literal View," in William V. Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp 11-35.

³ Gary Gilley (n.d.). *The Afterlife - Part 4, Southern View Chapel*. Retrieved 03 June, 2011 from <<http://www.svchapel.org/>>.

⁴ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, reprint (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2000), pp 1037-1038.

⁵ John Wesley (n.d.). *Of Hell-Sermon #73, Global Ministries: The United Methodist Church*. Retrieved 03 June, 2011 from <<http://gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/>>.

Cf. Joel B. Green, ed., *The Wesley Study Bible*, NRSV (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 1556.

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punishment is most concerned with being fair to *all of the descriptions* of Hell, carefully balancing them together. Noting the Lake of Fire in Revelation 20:10, and the description of darkness in Matthew 25:30, Bruce Milne issues “a reminder that we are dealing here with metaphors,”⁶ as fire and darkness are largely contradictory. Considering these ghastly elements to largely be symbols, most theologians today prefer instead to focus on the length of time that eternal punishment actually lasts, with the process of eternal punishment considered secondary. Leon Morris observes,

“It must be borne in mind that Scripture uses symbolic terms of necessity to refer to realities beyond the grave. We must not press statements about ‘fire,’ ‘death,’ and the like. But neither must we yield to a sentimental demand that they be watered down. That there is a dread reality Scripture leaves us in no doubt.”⁷

Those who adhere to a **metaphorical view** of eternal punishment, definitely consider it as taking place and being ongoing for eternity. Descriptions like fire, smoke, brimstone, and darkness are to be principally taken as literary images of its severity. Too many might be overly influenced thinking of Divine punishment as being locked up in a castle dungeon from the Middle Ages, whereas what eternal punishment really involves is the unredeemed losing their right to rule beside God as His viceroy (Psalm 8; Hebrews 2:5-8). William V. Crockett, as a proponent of the metaphorical view of eternal punishment, summarizes some of the descriptions that are seen in the Bible:

“Fire and darkness, of course, are not the only images we have of hell in the New Testament. The wicked are said to weep and gnash their teeth (Matt. 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:15; 25:30; Luke 13:28), their worm never dies (Mark 9:48), and they are beaten with many blows (Luke 12:47). No one thinks hell will involve actual beatings or is a place where the maggots of the dead achieve immortality. Equally, no one thinks that gnashing teeth is anything other than an image of hell’s grim reality....When we take into account the various images that describe hell and couple them with what seems unequivocally to be metaphorical language used for heaven, we see that God has not given us a complete picture of the afterlife. As always, God communicates to people in ways they can understand.”⁸

The metaphorical view of eternal punishment is definitely a traditional model witnessed throughout a great deal of Christian history. In the debate over whether annihilationism is Biblically valid—it often does not receive the hearing that it surely deserves. Those who move away from holding a position of a never-ending eternal punishment, often move from the literal view directly to annihilationism. *They have usually not even heard about the metaphorical view*, which focuses the attention of Bible readers upon eternal punishment as everlasting exile. Most of today’s Messianic Believers I have personally encountered have never even heard of the metaphorical view.

For my own self, I am sad to say that I had never even heard of **the metaphorical view** until I started my post-graduate seminary studies in 2005. Up until that time, I thought that we were only given two choices: a literal eternal fiery torture *or* an utter annihilation from existence. Believing that annihilationism was a problematic doctrine, I chose the only other option that I thought I had. Like many, I had to deal with the contours of popular preaching, much of which views Hell as an eternal, ongoing crematory. And like many, when I discovered that a metaphorical view of Hell—which focuses largely upon Hell as a condition of everlasting separation from God—has probably been *the majority view* among theologians since the Reformation, I was understandably surprised!

If we can all concede that some poetic language or literary license is used in Genesis ch. 1 to describe the Creation of the universe, and that there is even some poetic language or prose used in Revelation chs. 21-22 to describe the New Creation—then we should not be surprised to see some symbolic language used to describe the punishment of the condemned. Recognizing that some descriptions have to be held in concert with others, should move an intelligent Bible reader beyond the rhetoric of various fundamentalists who light themselves on fire to prove the literal view, and the annihilationist who whines and complains that the God who would force sinners to burn for eternity is an utter sadist. For as J.A. Motyer carefully details, “fire” has various components to it throughout the Scriptures:

“Fire is used in the Bible to symbolize both the holiness of God and the unsatisfied desire of man. In Ezekiel it is the fire of God’s holiness that destroys the doomed city (Ezekiel 10:2); Paul speaks of the ‘burning’ of unfulfilled desire (1 Corinthians 7:9). When the Bible, therefore, speaks of eternal loss as ‘fire’ it is pictorializing a double reality: a conscious realisation both of alienation from God and of burning, personal desires eternally deprived of satisfaction.”⁹

A metaphorical view of Hell, with descriptions of eternal punishment involving some poetic or artistic language, should not disturb us too much. A metaphorical view of sinners having to “burn” or have God’s anger “kindled” against them, sees it in terms more of punishment being “issued,” “dispensed,” or “delivered” upon them—albeit most seriously and severely. If we can concede that the New Jerusalem can only be humanly conceived in terms of it being a “city”—the most comprehensible description of eternity for the redeemed—then we should be able to concede some less-than-literal descriptions present in Scripture regarding Hell.

What advocates, of both the literal and metaphorical views of eternal punishment, are agreed upon, is that the level of punishment for the unrighteous is given to them on an evaluation of their works. *Each sinner is punished differently*. Annihilationism, however, knows no such degrees. Annihilation or a personal obliteration from existence is the same across the board, whether a sinner is a pickpocket, a serial murderer, a pathological liar, or a perverse sexaholic.

⁶ Bruce Milne, *The Message of Heaven & Hell* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 126.

⁷ Leon Morris, “Eternal Punishment,” in Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), pp 196-197.

⁸ William V. Crockett, “The Metaphorical View,” in *Four Views on Hell*, pp 60, 61.

⁹ J.A. Motyer, *After Death: What Happens When You Die?* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 1996), 58.

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Advocates of annihilationism are not totally ignorant of the metaphorical view of eternal punishment, and how it attempts to deal fairly with all of the images of the destiny of the unrighteous. But, annihilationists do not typically address the metaphorical position, because if eternal punishment in Scripture is ultimately everlasting exile from God, they cannot easily make their emotional case against it, as they do with the literal view. Still, even when descriptions of eternal punishment are taken more in a symbolic way, one finds that the annihilationist thinks that sinners suffering, in *any* manner, is something to be considered cruel. Samuele Bacchiocchi thinks, "Mental anguish can be as painful as physical pain."¹⁰ True, but no one said that the metaphorical view was devoid of any kind of torment, agony, or unpleasantness.

Annihilationists believe that a conscious eternity separated from God, in some kind of unpleasant place, is to be entirely unacceptable to the modern mind. Even if eternal punishment, "Hell," were to be likened unto the cosmic equivalent of a never-ending high school detention, they would still consider it to be cruel and unusual. Any alternative to non-existence, even one that focuses less on the scenery of eternal punishment and more on sinners having to consider their rejection of the Creator, is simply unacceptable to annihilationists.

¹⁰ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1998), 220.