

## THE FINAL END OF THE WICKED

Edward Fudge\*

Today, as a growing host of evangelical (and other) scholars bear witness, the evidence for the wicked's final total destruction (rather than the traditional view of unending conscious torture, which sprang from pagan Platonic theories of immortal, indestructible souls) is finally getting some of the attention it demands. Because nearly all of us have completely skirted the relevant material on this subject far too long, I would like to present a concise summary of the case against traditionalism's conscious unending torment and at the same time the case for the total, ultimate, everlasting extinction of the wicked. The "second death" involves an eternal graveyard around which we can no longer merrily whistle.

Jesus once said of some people: "They will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." Whoever honors him as God's Son and our Savior must receive his teachings as from God. Jesus' words will never pass away (Matt 24:35); they will judge us on the last day (John 12:48).

The question at stake is not, therefore, whether the wicked will suffer "eternal punishment." It is rather of what that punishment consists. Is it, as many Christian preachers since the third century have assumed, unending conscious torture of body and/or soul? Or is it, to use the words of Paul, "everlasting destruction"—in the most ordinary sense of those words (2 Thess 1:9)? Like most readers of *JETS* I had always assumed the former, until a year-long research project forced me to change my mind. Here I will simply summarize some of the pertinent evidence that study uncovered, which I present for the reader's consideration.

### I. THE TRADITIONAL POSITION

The traditional position of conscious unending torment is easy to summarize and is perhaps best stated in recent years by Harry Buis.<sup>1</sup> The traditional doctrine rests on three arguments: (1) that the OT is, generally speaking, silent on the subject; (2) that the doctrine of conscious unending torment developed during the intertestamental years and came, by Jesus' time, to be "the commonly-accepted Jewish view" (it is said therefore that we ought to read Jesus and the NT writers with a presumption that they and their original hearers all held to the doctrine of unending conscious torment); (3) that the NT language on the subject requires us to conclude that God will make the wicked immortal for the purpose of torturing them alive forever without end.

\*Edward Fudge is editor of *The Good Newspaper*, a national Christian biweekly, and an elder and teacher of the Bering Drive Church of Christ in Houston, Texas.

<sup>1</sup>H. Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957).

If these three points were true, the traditionalist would have a solid case indeed. The multitude of evidence available today (and presented in detail, both Biblical and historical, in *The Fire That Consumes*<sup>2</sup>) does not allow us that easy assumption. All three traditional premises prove rather to be false. The traditional doctrine turns out, upon historical investigation, to be a pollution from paganism via the apologists and their followers and not at all the clear teaching of Scripture. The following is a summary of that evidence.

## II. THE OLD TESTAMENT SPEAKS

Is the OT silent concerning the wicked's final fate? Indeed it is not. It overwhelmingly affirms their total destruction. It never affirms or even hints at anything resembling conscious unending torment. The OT uses about 50 different Hebrew verbs to describe this fate, and about 70 figures of speech. Without exception they portray destruction, extinction or extermination. Not one of the verbs or word-pictures remotely suggests the traditional doctrine.

The wicked will become like a vessel broken to pieces (Ps 2:9), ashes trodden underfoot (Mal 4:3), smoke that vanishes (Ps 37:20), chaff carried away by the wind (1:4), a slug that melts (58:8), straw that is burned (Isa 1:31), thorns and stubble in the fire (33:12), wax that melts (Ps 68:2) or a dream that vanishes (73:20). The traditionalist view has to deny that the wicked will ever become like any of those things and affirm that they will indeed be what none of those pictures portrays: an everlasting spectacle of indestructible material in an unending fire.

The Psalms repeatedly say that the wicked will go down to death, their memory will perish and they will be as though they had never been. The righteous on the other hand will be rescued by God from death and then will enjoy him forever (Ps 9; 21:4-10; 36:9-12; 49:8-20; 52:5-9; 59; 73; 92). Proverbs likewise warns that the wicked will pass away, be overthrown, be cut off, be no more, their lamp put out (Prov 2:21-22; 10:25; 12:7; 24:15-20). We certainly do not see that happen in this life.

The historical books show us actual examples of God's judgments against sin. When the first world became too wicked to continue, God wiped every living creature outside the ark from the face of the earth (Gen 6:7; 7:4). This is a model, Scripture says, for the fiery judgment awaiting the lost at the *eschaton* (2 Pet 2:5; 3:3-7; Matt 24:38-39). When Sodom became too sinful to endure, God rained down fire and brimstone (burning sulfur) from heaven, obliterating the entire wicked population and even the vegetation, in a moment so terrible the rest of the Bible memorializes it as an example and prototype of divine judgments within history and also at the end of the world (Gen 19:24-29; Deut 29:23; Isa 1:9; 13:19-22; Jer 49:18; 50:40; Lam 4:6; Amos 4:11; Zeph 2:9; Luke 17:28-33; 2 Pet 2:6; Jude 7, 23).

The prophets also speak of God's wrath against sinners. Details of actual judgments against cities and nations become later symbols for the ultimate divine visitation. These prophetic scenes provide much of the later vocabulary of

<sup>2</sup>E. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment* (Providential Press, 1982).

judgment: fire and storm, tempest and darkness, wrath and corpses and worms (Zeph 1:14-18; Isa 66:16-24; Ezek 39:9-22; Dan 12:2). Some of these scenes describe the final judgment of the lost at the end of the world. There we meet utter contempt, worms and fire, taking their last toll. Nothing remains in these pictures of the wicked but ashes: The righteous tread over them with their feet (Mal 4:3) or survey their abhorrent corruption in progress (Dan 12:2; Isa 66:24). The wicked become, in short, as though they had never been (Obad 16).

No, the OT is not silent concerning the end of the wicked. It appears silent to the traditionalist only because it says nothing he expected to find. It is silent, however, about unending conscious torture. But it speaks volumes concerning that penalty first threatened in the Garden of Eden: Those who sin will "surely die" (Gen 3:3; Ezek 18:4).

### III. BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

The traditionalist is correct that his doctrine developed during the time between the Testaments, but modern research totally destroys his presupposition that unending conscious torment was "the" Jewish view held by the earliest readers and writers of the NT Scriptures. We cannot be harsh in blaming earlier interpreters for erring at this point, for it was not until our century that English readers had access to much of the pertinent literature involved.<sup>3</sup> It is inexcusable, however, for modern writers to repeat that earlier error in light of the material now handily available. In the following paragraphs I simply summarize the diversity of Jewish views that literature reveals on this subject.<sup>4</sup>

The apocryphal books of 1 Esdras, 3 Maccabees, 1 Baruch, Epistle of Jeremiah, Prayer of Manasseh and the additions to Daniel and Esther are silent on this subject. The books of Tobit, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees and the Wisdom of Solomon agree thoroughly with the OT as they anticipate the total destruction of the wicked.

The first appearance of conscious unending torment in anything resembling Biblical literature comes in the apocryphal book of Judith (16:17). There the Jewish heroine warns: "Woe to the nations that rise up against my race. The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment, to put fire and worms in their flesh. And they shall weep and feel their pain forever."

The words "fire" and "worms" here come from Isa 66:24, but Judith completely changes Isaiah's picture. The prophet has unburied corpses; Judith has consciously-tortured people. Isaiah's fire and worms destroy; Judith's simply torment. In Isaiah the fire and worms are external agents consuming their dead victims; in Judith they are internal agonies perpetually torturing from within. In Isaiah (and all the OT) the victims are destroyed; in Judith they "feel their pain forever." This is clearly the traditionalist picture of hell. But it never appears in the OT even once. And this is the first time it appears in even the Apocrypha.

The testimony of the Pseudepigrapha (a growing list of Jewish and sometimes Christian-edited works, c. 200 B.C.-A.D. 100) is even more mixed. Some of these works say the wicked will totally pass away (Sibylline Oracles, fragments of a

<sup>3</sup>See especially *APOT*; *QL*.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. further Fudge, *Fire* 119-154.

Zadokite work, Psalms of Solomon, 4 Esdras). This is also the consistent witness of QL throughout, so far as yet translated.

Other pseudepigraphal works are ambiguous on this point (Assumption of Moses, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Life of Adam and Eve). Others are inconsistent (Jubilees, 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch). And some anticipate the conscious unending pain of the traditionalist view (2 Enoch, 4 Maccabees), though some modern scholars do not even concede that much.

#### IV. AT THE TIME OF JESUS

The intertestamental literature offers us a rich variety of Jewish expectation regarding the end of sinners. There is clearly no such thing as “the” Jewish view on this topic. Everlasting conscious torment has its advocates, though statistically the evidence is far heavier on the side of ultimate extinction. This destruction is sometimes seen as accomplished by fire, and sometimes it is preceded by a period of conscious anguish and suffering before it is consummated in eternal extinction.

Because of this unquestionable range of Jewish opinion, we cannot continue to presume a single attitude among first-century Jews on this subject. We cannot go on reading Jesus’ words, or those of the NT writers, with presuppositions based on a supposed “uniform Jewish view.” We must categorically deny the common notion (which traditionalist authors constantly repeat) that Jesus’ hearers all held to conscious unending torment and would have heard his cryptic sayings with that sole presupposition. We must do what traditionalist authors have never yet done—study the NT language at face value, determining its meaning according to the ordinary accepted methods and disciplines of proper Biblical exegesis.

#### V. THE NT LANGUAGE ON THE SUBJECT

Does the teaching of Jesus and the NT writers require us to expect the conscious unending torment of the wicked? Not unless we ignore the entire OT background to the NT vocabulary involved, then proceed to give to the NT language later definitions imported from pagan Platonic philosophy during the centuries following.

This was one of the most exasperating parts of my year of research. Over and over again I was amazed to see how traditionalist writers took NT words and phrases out of their setting—as if they had no OT background at all—and then forced on them a meaning found nowhere in Scripture. This habit of eisegesis began in the late second century and has generally continued unchallenged until today. A few examples will have to suffice.

1. *Unquenchable fire.* Traditionalists assume that “unquenchable fire” means “unending conscious torment.” They do not acknowledge that this expression comes from the OT, where it has the frequent and regular sense of “destruction that cannot be resisted.” “Quench” means to “extinguish” or “put out” a fire. The psalmist, for instance, says he will quench his enemies’ fire (Ps 118:12), and Heb 11:34 mentions heroes of faith who were able to “quench the violence of fire.” But God’s fire of punishment cannot be quenched or put out, and so he

warns cities and nations in many places (Isa 1:31; 34:10-11; Jer 4:4; 7:20; 17:27; 21:12; Ezek 20:47-48; Amos 5:5-6).

Jesus warns the same in Mark 9:43, 48 when he speaks of the horrible place of punishment where “the fire is not quenched.” And what does fire do to its victims if it is not extinguished? It burns them up—exactly as John the Baptist announced concerning sinners’ doom in his word about Jesus’ eschatological wrath: “He will clear his threshing floor . . . burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:12).

2. *Undying worms.* What of “the worm that does not die” (Mark 9:48)? For centuries, traditionalist interpreters have ignored the Biblical background of this phrase and have made it mean everything from a tormenting conscience to an everlasting parasite. The Bible itself, however, provides ample definition. Our Lord’s expression comes directly from Isa 66:24, which may be the most ignored Biblical passage on final punishment even though its language might be used most often.

The language of Isaiah 66 is figurative, prophetic symbolism. God executes judgment “with fire and with his sword” (v 16). When the visitation is ended, “many will be those slain by the Lord” (v 16b). The wicked “will meet their end together” (v 17). The righteous, on the other hand, “endure” (v 22). “All mankind” comes to worship God—the wicked are no more (v 23). This is the setting of the crucial v 24: “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.” Note that the righteous “go out and look” at the dead bodies of the wicked. This symbolic picture of the future may well reflect an actual incident Isaiah witnessed, when God defeated the army of Assyria in answer to Hezekiah’s prayer (2 Kgs 18:17-19:36; Isa 36-37). That night, Isaiah himself reports, “the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies!” (Isa 37:36).

Now Isaiah says the same scene will be reproduced on a vaster scale at the end of time. In the historical event of the prophet’s day (37:36) and in the prophetic picture of the future (66:24), the righteous view with satisfaction “dead bodies” or “corpses” of the wicked. These are dead bodies (Hebrew *pēgārīm*), not living people or imperishable zombies. The righteous view their destruction, not their misery. The prototype to this viewing of enemies who have perished came at the Red Sea (Exod 14:30), and similar scenes are pictured throughout the OT (Ps 58:10; 91:8; Ezek 39:9-22; Mal 4:1-3). Both the maggots (Greek *skōkēx*) and the fire speak of total extinction. Both terms make this picture repulsive or loathsome—they describe disgust, not pity. The picture is one of shame, not pain (the same Hebrew word for “loathsome” in Isa 66:24 appears also in Dan 12:2, where the *NIV* has “contempt”).

Traditionalists have ignored Isaiah’s picture, then interpreted Jesus as though his language had no Biblical precedent. Free from the Scriptural definitions, the “fire” and “worms” have (as with Judith in the Apocrypha) become something never found in the Bible. The Scriptural picture of total destruction has been replaced in traditional explanation with the pagan notion of unending conscious torture.

3. *Gnashing of teeth.* The phrase “grinding of teeth” appears many times in the OT (see Job 16:9; Ps 35:16; 37:12; Lam 2:16), and it always pictures someone so angry at another that he grinds his teeth in rage, like a mad animal straining at the leash. We see the same usage in the NT, where Stephen’s enemies “gnashed their teeth at him” (Acts 7:54).

Traditionalist interpretation has ignored the Biblical usage of this phrase and has homiletized instead on souls grinding their teeth eternally in excruciating pain. In the Bible, however, the teeth grind in rage, not particularly in pain—though there may well be time for that along the way. Ps 112:10 is instructive concerning the wicked’s end in this regard. The verses just before it describe the final glory of God’s people. Verse 10 then says: “The wicked man will see and be vexed, he will gnash his teeth and waste away; the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.” Gnash his teeth as he may, the wicked man’s rage does him no good in the end. Even as he grinds his teeth, he comes to nothing (the *KJV* has “melt away”). Traditionalists make “gnashing of teeth” into conscious unending torment. The Bible pictures it as horrible rage—rage that is frustrated by the wicked’s own inexorable destruction.

4. *Smoke that ascends.* The “smoke” that “rises for ever and ever” (Rev 14:11) also deserves defining by prior Biblical usage. This picture comes from the destruction of Sodom. The Lord “rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah” (Gen 19:24) until not even vegetation survived. The next morning Abraham looked down on the site “and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace” (19:28).

It is much the same as our image of the mushroom-shaped cloud after an atomic blast. The visible smoke is a certification of accomplished destruction. There are no more cries in Sodom when Abraham views the ascending smoke. All is quiet. The sinners are all destroyed. The rising smoke testifies to their complete extinction.

The same figure reappears in Isa 34:10 of Edom’s destruction. God comes against the land with “burning sulfur” and “blazing pitch” (v 9). The fire “will not be quenched night and day” (v 10)—it is irresistible and therefore destroys completely (see the same figure in Rev 14:11). Isaiah says “its smoke will rise forever,” telling us that Edom’s destruction is not only certain (not quenched) and complete (smoke rising) but also irreversible. The desolation will be unending. The verses following describe a land empty of people, the haunt of desert creatures. Conscious pain has ended there, but “its smoke will rise forever”—the extinction is perpetual.

We find the same symbol in Revelation 18-19 concerning the destruction of “Babylon.” The city is “fallen” (Rev 18:2), “consumed by fire” (18:8), and those observing “see the smoke” (18:9). Like Sodom of old, “Babylon” is utterly destroyed. The rising smoke testifies to that destruction. Like Edom of old, her destruction will never be reversed or undone, for “the smoke from her goes up for ever and ever” (19:3).

5. *No rest day or night.* Rev 14:1-5 presents John with a glorious vision of the Lamb and 144,000 of his people, the earth’s redeemed firstfruits. Three angels announce judgment in increasingly stronger language. The third angel cries with

a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will . . . be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb . . . There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image" (14:9-11). We have already seen the Biblical meaning of fire and brimstone (burning sulfur) as a cipher for total destruction at Sodom and Gomorrah and thereafter (Gen 19:23, 28; Deut 29:23; Job 18:15-17; Isa 30:27-33; 34:9-11; Ezek 38:22 ff.). Here the destruction occurs without respite or relief for its victims until it is finished. They have "no rest day or night" until it is over. The victims can anticipate no respite by day or by night. Their suffering is not exclusively a "daytime" activity, nor is it exclusively a "nighttime" activity. There is no intermission in the suffering while it continues. But the other three figures in this scene all suggest that it will finally cease, when the destruction is completed and nothing is left. Then only rising smoke will testify to the everlasting penalty that has been exacted.

6. *The cup of God's wrath.* This symbol, in the scene at Rev 14:9-11, is a common figure for God's punishment in both OT and NT (see Job 21:20; Ps 60:3; 75:8; Isa 51:17, 22; Jer 25:27-28; Obad 16; Matt 26:39). Since God prepares the drink, he also determines its potency. For some, it might represent a stroke that sends them reeling but from which they recover (Ps 60:3; Isa 51:22). For others, it may mean total and irreversible extinction. The prophets use language like this: "They will drink and drink and be as if they had never been" (Obad 16); they "drink, get drunk and vomit, and fall to rise no more" (Jer 25:27). The figures combine in this passage for the strongest possible picture of punishment. The destruction is total (flaming sulfur), without respite until accomplished (no rest day or night), accomplished (smoke rising) with no hope of recovery (smoke rising forever). Not all commentators understand this passage to refer to the final end of sinners, of course, and we will not argue that point either way. Whatever the case, the symbols are clear in the light of previous Biblical usage. None of them refers to unending conscious torment in regular usage, and there is no reason to think any refers to it here. They all, on the other hand, have regular prophetic significance in many passages of Scripture, and the meanings of them all converge on this description of a complete, irreversible destruction and extinction forever accomplished.

7. *The lake of fire.* The lake of fire is the Bible's last description of final punishment, and it is mentioned four times (Rev 19:20; 20:10, 15; 21:8). It is the fiery lake of burning sulfur, the lake of fire and brimstone. The exact expression "lake of fire (and brimstone/burning sulfur)" does not appear anywhere else in Scripture. Most seem agreed, however, that it stands for the same ultimate destiny that we commonly call "hell," which in turn stands for the word "Gehenna," taking its name from the literal "Valley of Hinnom" (Hebrew *gê' hinnôm*) outside Jerusalem. It is not always noted that "Gehenna" is used for the destiny of the wicked by name only in the Gospels in the NT, since it would be unfamiliar to Gentile or non-Palestinian readers who had not visited or heard of the actual site and its significance throughout history.

The nearest OT parallel to the lake of fire comes in Daniel's dream of four beasts (Dan 7:9-12). There the Ancient of Days (whose appearance is partially

attributed to Jesus in Revelation 1) takes his seat on a throne aflame with fire (v 9). A “river of fire” comes out from his presence (v 10). The terrible fourth beast is “slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire” (v 11). This is in specific contrast to the other beasts, who are stripped of authority but are allowed to live for a period of time (v 12).

Unless this vision sheds light on the lake of fire in Revelation, no OT light is to be had. If the passage in Daniel is in the background here, that light reveals a fiery destruction that is expressly not a stripping of authority with the survival of life.

The four occurrences of the lake of fire in Revelation are also instructive. The beast and the false prophet are first to go there. Some interpreters see these as representative of actual persons yet to come. Others regard them as symbolic of persecuting civil government and false religion. In the latter case, the lake of fire clearly stands for their total, utter, absolute annihilation. In the former case, the question is still to be decided on some other basis.

Rev 20:7-10 builds on the imagery of Ezekiel 38-39, as Satan’s hordes surround the camp of God’s people but, as in Elijah’s day (2 Kings 1), are destroyed by fire from heaven. Satan, however, is “thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” Again, if the beast and false prophet are personifications of civil and religious powers opposing Christ, a literal interpretation of conscious unending pain would be impossible. If one’s prophetic schema sees these as actual persons yet to come, we only note that the text says nothing about human beings “tormented day and night for ever and ever.” This is the single most problematic text in the whole Bible for the extinction of all evil, even though it does not specify human beings. In view of the overwhelming mass of material otherwise found throughout Scripture, however, one ought to remember the general hermeneutical rule that calls for interpreting the uncommon in light of the common and the obscure in light of the more clearly revealed.

As the vision continues, however, “death and Hades” are “thrown into the lake of fire” (v 14). More than 700 years before, Isaiah had foretold a time when God would “destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations,” when he “will swallow up death forever” (Isa 25:7-8). Paul had written: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor 15:26) and had spoken of the time when the saying will come true that “death has been swallowed up in victory” (v 54). This is the consummation of God’s victory over his final foe. Death and Hades are certainly abstractions, not persons, and the lake of fire here means their annihilation. Death will be no more—forever.

Only now do we find sinners included in this dreadful fate. “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (v 15). The “book of life” is a symbol based on the ancient city’s register of living citizens. Whoever is not listed among the living is instead “in the lake of fire.” John makes the identification clear: “The lake of fire is the second death” (v 14).

The next chapter repeats the fact with elaboration. Overcomers will inherit the new heavens and new earth, but all classes of sinners “will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur,” which again, John adds, “is the second death” (21:8). There is no good reason for not taking John’s explanation exactly as it stands, or for importing foreign Platonic definitions of “death” as “separation” into the dis-

cussion here. The natural sense is to be preferred, and here it could hardly be made plainer than it is. The final options are “life” or “death.” Everything else we have found throughout Scripture accords with this as well.

8. *Paul’s favorite phrases.* Besides all the language we have surveyed so far, Paul’s most common phrases on the subject all picture the total extinction of sinners at the end. The wicked, he warns, will die (Rom 6:21, 23), perish (2:12), be destroyed (Gal 6:8; 1 Cor 3:17; 2 Thess 1:9; Phil 1:28; 3:19; see also Jude 10). Nor will they ever come back, for this destruction is to be “everlasting” (2 Thess 1:9).

If we ignore the Bible’s own usage of its language, we can make these terms mean whatever we please. But if we let the Bible interpret itself, we have far less choice. For all of Scripture’s language on this subject leads us time and time again to the same conclusion: The wicked will finally perish completely and forever in hell. None of the Bible’s language suggests unending conscious torment for human beings.

## VI. BUT IS THIS PUNISHMENT “ETERNAL”?

But can such irreversible extinction properly be called “eternal punishment,” such as Jesus speaks of in Matt 25:46? The question is legitimate and the answer is easy to find. Of the 70 occurrences of the adjective “eternal” in the NT, six times the word qualifies nouns signifying acts or processes rather than persons or things. The six “eternal” acts or events are salvation (Heb 5:9), judgment (6:2), redemption (9:12), sin (Mark 3:29), punishment (Matt 25:46) and destruction (2 Thess 1:9).

In four of the six, “eternal” refers to the results or outcome of the action and not the action itself. “Eternal judgment” does not mean that the judging will last forever, but that its outcome will. “Eternal redemption” does not mean that the process goes on without end—for the redemptive work was done once and for all—but that its issue will have no end forever. “Eternal salvation” is the result; we do not look for an eternal act of “saving.” And the “eternal” sin is called that because its guilt will never be forgiven, not because the sinning continues throughout eternity.

Given this regular usage of “eternal” to describe the results of an action or process, we suggest that it is perfectly proper to understand the two disputed usages in this same ordinary way. The “everlasting destruction” (2 Thess 1:9) of the wicked does not mean that Christ will be forever in the process of destroying them but that their destruction, once accomplished, will be forever. The wicked will never reappear. Paul’s phrase “eternal destruction” is in fact a clearer picture of Jesus’ generic term “eternal punishment” in Matt 25:46. This destruction is not accidental, nor is it self-inflicted. It is the penal outcome of God’s judgment. It is punishment, in this instance capital punishment. And, unlike even the capital punishment man may inflict, it is irreversible capital punishment. It is, truly, “everlasting” or “eternal” punishment, “everlasting destruction,” the second death from which there is no resurrection or return forever. It is the very fate we have met time and time again throughout the Bible. The wicked’s destruction will be just as long-lasting as the life of the saved. We give the dualism

full weight, in keeping with the regular usage of the word “eternal” with nouns of action and in light of Jesus’ clear statement in Matt 25:46 placing “eternal life” and “eternal punishment” side by side. Never, ever after, in all eternity, will the wicked be.

## VII. CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with the final paragraphs of *The Fire That Consumes*, which aptly bring this summary to a close as they do also the detailed discussion contained in the book:

Eternal conscious torment is either true or it is not. God’s Word gives the only authoritative answer. We wish to humbly receive whatever it says—on this or any subject—then faithfully proclaim it as befits God’s stewards . . . We were reared on the traditionalist view—we accepted it because it was said to rest on the Bible. A more careful study has shown that we were mistaken in that assumption. Both the OT and NT instead clearly teach a resurrection of the wicked for divine judgment, the fearful anticipation of a consuming fire, irrevocable expulsion from God’s presence into a place where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth, such conscious suffering as the divine justice individually requires—and finally, the total, everlasting extinction of the wicked with no hope of resurrection, restoration or recovery. Now we stand on that, on the authority of the Word of God.

We have changed once and do not mind changing again, but we were evidently wrong once through lack of careful study and do not wish to repeat the same mistake. Mere assertions and denunciations will not refute the evidence presented . . . nor will a mere recital of ecclesiastical tradition.

This case rests finally on Scripture. Only Scripture can prove it wrong.