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Does Revelation 14:11 Teach Eternal Torment? Examining a Proof-text on Hell

Emotions run high on the question of the nature of hell, but whichever view is supported, theologians must base their conclusions on a reasoned exegesis of Scripture. Dr Bowles, Rector of St Stephen's Church, Brisbane, attempts a fresh examination of a key text in this regard.

Key words: Bible; theology; Revelation; Hell; judgement

The belief that God's final judgement of the unsaved will lead to a state of eternal, conscious, tormenting punishment is firmly entrenched in the doctrinal traditions of the Christian church, and is regarded widely as one of the defining pillars of conservative evangelical orthodoxy. While it is seldom explicitly enunciated from pulpits, or even in written gospel presentations, it is still held by most evangelicals as a essential element of faithful Biblical belief. It is a doctrine which is believed usually out of duty, not affection, due to a conviction that it is Scriptural. Charles Hodge called it 'a doctrine which the natural heart revolts from and struggles against, and to which it submits only under stress of authority'.¹

Evangelicals have been accustomed to attacks on this doctrine from liberal critics, who propose an alternative universalism of salvation. In recent years, however, the doctrine of eternal torment has come under questioning again from within the evangelical camp. An alternative, long-held interpretation of the texts, called 'Conditional Immortality', has been put forward as a better expression of the Biblical teaching.² The Conditional Immortality view teaches that God will finally and fully bring his enemies to judgement. This will involve the penalty of his wrath against sin and the absolute destruc-

1 C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London, 1874), Vol. III, 870.

2 For example: J. R. W. Stott, in Stott and D. L. Edwards, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 312-331; J. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Eagle, 1994), 68-92; E. W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Leicester, Paternoster, 1994); P. E. Hughes, *The True Image* (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 398-407; C. H. Pinnock, in W. Crockett (ed.), *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 135-178.

tion and removal of his enemies — the extinction of evil.³ The re-emergence of Conditionalism in our day has raised the alarm of some evangelical theologians, who detect an attempt to ‘gag’ God’s Word and dilute the truth.⁴ (It is also worth noting that the Conditionalist doctrine is not always correctly understood; it is often confused with Annihilationism — the belief that God simply ends the existence of the unsaved without any particular judgement. For example, B. Milne’s textbook on Christian doctrine misunderstands the Conditionalist position in this way.)⁵

Here is the crucial statement:

And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name (Rev. 14:11 RSV).

This text is regarded by both Traditionalist and Conditionalist interpreters as one of the strongest texts in support of ‘eternal torment’. In almost all presentations of the eternal torment theory of ‘hell’, Revelation 14:11 is cited in the manner of a proof-text, for its apparently clear statement of the endless, conscious torment of the enemies of God.⁶ P. Barnett observes that the third angel ‘proclaimed that the wine of God’s fury, the cup of his wrath, and everlasting torment awaits those who worship the beast and its image.’⁷ R.H. Mounce asserts that those who worship the beast and bear his mark ‘are to drink the wrath of God and endure eternal torment in fire and brimstone.’⁸ D. Carson cites it as the first of three passages ‘that are peculiarly difficult for annihilationists’.⁹ Even the late John Wenham, who held the Conditionalist view, acknowledged that

3 For convenience, this article will refer to ‘traditionalist’ to mean those who hold the eternal torment interpretation of final punishment, and ‘Conditionalist’ to refer to those who hold the position of the judgement and final, absolute destruction of the wicked.

4 D. Carson, *The Gaggling of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), chapter 13; J. I. Packer, ‘The Problem of Eternal Punishment’ (*Leon Morris Lecture 1990*), Evangelical Alliance, Victoria, Australia.

5 B. Milne, *Know The Truth: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1982), 274.

6 For example, see B. Milne, *Know the Truth*, 276, where he claims that Rev. 14:11 clearly contradicts ‘annihilationism’.

7 P. Barnett, *Apocalypse Then and Now. Reading Revelation Today*, (Sydney: Anglican Information Office, 1989), 118.

8 R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1974). 274.

9 D. Carson, *The Gaggling of God*, 525. The term ‘annihilationist’ may be misleading if it conveys the impression that Conditionalists merely believe in cessation of existence. In fact, they hold to God’s penal judgement of sin and the final penalty of destruction in the full, strongest sense of the word.

'Revelation 14:11 is the most difficult passage that the Conditionalist has to deal with Certainly, on the face of it, having no rest day or night with smoke of torment going up for ever and ever, sounds like everlasting torment.'¹⁰

The traditional interpretation offers what seems to be the obvious meaning of the text — a depiction of endless tormenting punishment by God. No alternative interpretations are offered by traditional commentators, probably because the surface meaning seems incontrovertible and has the support of the dominant doctrinal tradition of interpretation about 'hell'. So Revelation 14: 11 is usually cited without exegetical discussion, in the manner of a proof-text.

It is easy to see why this particular verse is invoked to support this concept. Three elements of the verse suggest the idea of a judgement involving eternal torment: (a) the worshippers of the beast and its image are 'tormented' with fire and sulphur in the presence of the angels and the Lamb; (b) this torment appears to continue for ever as the fire burns without consuming ('the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever'); and (c) after this torment is mentioned, their condition is described as one of 'no rest, day or night', suggesting that their suffering is unremitting in its eternal duration. When this verse is read through the interpretative grid of eternal torment, it strongly confirms it. This verse also provides some of the key terms and images for the traditional doctrine of hell (torment, fire burning for ever, smoke rising, no rest day or night).

The Conditionalist Interpretation of Revelation 14:11

However, an alternative interpretation of this text has been offered (or revived) recently by Conditionalist writers, challenging the view that eternal torment is intended in this text. This Conditionalist interpretation takes seriously the Biblical background and referencing symbolism for this description of judgement in Revelation 14:11. It is an attempt to unfold the meaning of the text, albeit in a way that contradicts the dominant evangelical doctrinal tradition.

On the Conditionalist view, the three elements of the text are patient of a different construction.

(a) The judgement of God by fire and sulphur is 'a cipher for total destruction at Sodom and Gomorrah and thereafter (Gn. 19:23, 28; Dt. 29:23; Job. 18:15-17; Is. 30:27-33; 34:9-11; Ezk. 38:22ff).'¹¹ The Biblical image of judgement by fire and sulphur is a picture of decis-

¹⁰ J. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil*, 87.

¹¹ E. Fudge, 'The Final End of the Wicked', *JETS* 27:3 (1985), 341.

ive destruction and obliteration — not a picture of enduring torment.

(b) ‘The smoke of their torment’ that ascends for ever is a certification and memorial of this accomplished destruction, just as the smoke that Abram saw rising from Sodom pointed to the finality of its destruction (Gn. 19:28). The background to Revelation 14:11 is to be found in this picture of Sodom’s destruction and to the oracle of Edom’s destruction in Isaiah 34:10ff. ‘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.’¹²

(c) The torment experienced in the presence of the angels and of the Lamb refers to the moment of judgement, not to the eternal state.¹³ What continues after their tormenting judgement and destruction is the sign of their extinction — the rising smoke; this is the same picture that is found in Genesis 19 and Isaiah 34. Revelation 14 is here giving us another picture of the fall of God’s enemies, similar to the depiction of Babylon’s fall in Revelation 18, whose inhabitants suffered torment in their final judgement (Rev. 18:10) and whose smoke is viewed as the sign of the city’s destruction — a past tense reality: ‘what city was like the great city?’ (Rev. 18:18).

This Conditionalist reading has been challenged recently by D. Carson. He notes the strong force of ‘for ever and ever’, and discounts the allusion to Isaiah 34:10 as having a ‘typological reference’ similar to Sodom and Gomorrah in Jude 7.¹⁴ He draws attention to the crucial statement ‘they have no rest day or night’ as invalidating the idea of completed destruction. If this is a picture of a completed destruction, ‘why then’, counters Carson, ‘does John insist that the lost ‘enjoy no rest day or night’, after the smoke of their completed destruction is said to be ascending?’¹⁵ Conditionalist writers have taken this comment (no rest, day or night) to refer to the uninterrupted suffering of the followers of the beast while it continues, without implying that it will continue for ever.¹⁶ Carson claims that this explanation is weak. He makes a strong argument at this point, one that has been felt by Conditionalist interpreters. The sequence

12 E. Fudge, ‘The Final End of the Wicked’, 340.

13 John Stott, in Stott and Edwards, *Essentials*, 318.

14 This begs the question of what kind of judgement is indeed typified by Sodom and Gomorrah in the biblical tradition. Do Jude and other writers like Isaiah 34:10 use the picture of absolute destruction to typify an ongoing conscious punishment of God’s enemies? The punishment of ‘eternal fire’ at Sodom left no enemies behind.

15 D. Carson, *The Gaggling of God*, 525

16 E. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 190.

of the statements in Revelation 14:11 (torment, smoke, restless suffering) does seem to pose a serious exegetical problem for the Conditionalist view by indicating a continuing, perpetual tormenting judgement.

Within this key text on hell, therefore, there are two elements that are patient of either interpretation. 'Tormented with fire and sulphur' may describe an eternal torment, or the painful moment of destructive judgement. 'The smoke of their torment that goes up forever' may depict the evidence of a continuing, eternal suffering in God's judgement, or it may be the sign and memorial of a completed destruction ('nothing left but the smoke', as we might say after the bushfire has gone through). It is the third element of Revelation 14:11 (no rest day or night), then, that provides the real strength of the traditional exegesis. It is held to convey the unremitting nature of the punishment that continues for ever in God's presence. This interpretation of this clause is based on its position in the sequence of elements, as Carson's comment indicates. A closer examination of this key text is needed.

The Meaning of Revelation 14:11

There are four grounds for preferring the Conditionalist interpretation of this text about final judgement: (a) the literary structure of the unit itself (Revelation 14:9-11); (b) the immediate context of Revelation 14; (c) the wider context of the Revelation to John; (d) the general teaching of Scripture about the final judgement of the wicked.

(a) *The Literary Structure of the Unit, Revelation 14:9-11*

A closer examination of this passage indicates that the traditionalist reading of this clause ('they have no rest, day or night') as indicating eternal torment may be mistaken. The clue is found in the Old Testament text that is cited allusively here (Is. 34:9, 10). Careful attention should be given to John's use of the oracle against Edom in Is. 34:8-17. R. Bauckham observes that 'Isaiah 34:8-17 is a major source for John's oracle against Babylon . . . and also supplies the imagery of the judgement of the worshippers of the beast (Rev. 14:10b-11; Isa. 34:9-10a) . . . Clearly John read Isaiah 34 as a key prophecy of the eschatological judgement of all the nation, led in their opposition to God's kingdom by Rome (Edom).'¹⁷

17 R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1993), 318.

In this Isaianic passage, the destruction of Edom in the prophet's vision has the same three elements that are found in Revelation 14:11 (judgement by fiery sulphur; a quenchless judgement 'night and day'; and a smoke that goes up for ever), but the order is slightly different. In Isaiah 34 the order is: (a) fire and sulphur; (b) ceaseless, quenchless punishment; and (c) smoke ascending forever. This is a natural order for a depiction of destruction — the judgement descends in fiery force, unremitting and quenchless while it destroys Edom, and then all that is left is the sign of the destruction — the smoke, a memorial of God's wrath executed against his enemy. There is a clear sequence in Isaiah 34:8ff that begins with judgement (34:9) and ends with utter desolation and death: 'none shall be there, and all its princes shall be nothing.' (34:12). There are no living Edomite enemies of God, left standing. 'The poetical figure of a perpetual furnace of burning pitch and ever-ascending smoke conveys the idea of perpetual desolation, but not at all of endless life in pain.'¹⁸

In Revelation 14:10-11 we encounter the same three elements found in Isa. 34:9-10, but the order of the description is different: (a) fire and sulphur; (b) smoke ascending forever; (c) no rest day or night. Why does John, in alluding to Isaiah 34:9-10, reverse the order of the second and third elements of the description? Traditionalists may say that he wants to change the Old Testament picture of annihilating divine judgement into a depiction of eternal, endless torment, but this conclusion may be premature, a case of dogmatic tradition short-circuiting exegetical enquiry.

Examination of the whole paragraph (Rev. 14:9-11) suggests another possible explanation for this unusual sequence of the description. The change in the sequence of the description in Revelation 14:11 may be due to an inverted parallelistic structure — not a doctrine of endless torment. In the New Testament, when the normal order of a description departs from a linear sequence, it may be a sign of the presence of a structure such as chiasmus (inverted parallelism) — a literary device which consists of a series of two or more elements followed by a presentation of corresponding elements in reverse order.¹⁹ D. Carson notes the presence of such complex inverted parallelisms in Scripture: 'It has often been shown that those who spoke Semitic languages com-

18 H. Constable, *The Duration and Nature of Future Punishment* (London: Hobbs, 1886), 60.

19 See R. Man, 'The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (1984). Also, N. W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: a study in the form and function of Chiasmic Structure* (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 1992).

20 D. A. Carson, 'Approaching the Bible', in D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer and G. J. Wenham (ed.), *New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 13.

monly framed chiasms as part of their speech patterns. . . .²⁰ An inverted parallelistic structure can be found in Revelation 16:6,7.

To see how John has structured this description of judgement against the worshippers of the Beast, it is necessary to examine the whole unit, Revelation 14:9-11. It can be set out in its inversion as follows:

- (A) If anyone worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, (9)
- (B) he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, (10a)
- (C) he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. (10b)
- (Ci) And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever, (11a)
- (Bi) and they have no rest, day or night, (11b)
- (Ai) these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name. (11c).

This pattern conforms to the recognised structure of introverted parallelisms in the Bible. This structure has been described thus: 'There are stanzas so constructed that, whatever be the number of lines, the first line shall be parallel with the last; the second with the penultimate; and so throughout, in an order that looks inward, or to borrow a military phrase, from flanks to centre.'²¹ Using the marks of this figure listed by K. Bailey, it is possible to trace the structure of Revelation 14:9-11. The climax of the unit is found in the centre (the tormenting destructive judgement by God's fire). There is a turning point in the passage, with a significant shift or movement in the second half (the tormenting judgement moves to completion). The beginning and the end of the unit are usually distinctly identified by identical verbal inclusion (the worshippers of the beast etc).²²

It is the literary structure of Revelation 14:9-11 that provides the explanation of the meaning of the judgement and its elements. The crucial key to understanding phrases or sentences is found by matching them with their corresponding items in the whole structure.²³ The introverted parallelism of Revelation 14:9-11 shows us that the *final* element in the depiction of judgement is the smoke rising after the judgement has been completed, as is the case in Isaiah 34:9,10.

21 J. Jebb, *Sacred Literature* (London: n.p., 1820), cited in K. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant & Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 45.

22 K. Bailey, *op. cit.*, 74.

23 K. Bailey, *op. cit.*, 74-75.

The *climactic* element is in the central position in this structure — the tormenting judgement that destroys utterly. The other two elements in the inversion refer to the intense experience of the judgement as it happens; its a full strength outpouring of God's wrath that leaves no rest or break while it is unfolding. We can see that the phrase 'no rest, day or night' is logically prior to the rising smoke. The meaning can be seen by observing the corresponding member of the inverted parallelism. 'No rest day or night' is another way of saying that God's wrath is poured out in full strength when the judgement is operating; it is quenchless, unremitting and overwhelming. In modern warfare terms, it is the equivalent of intense, day and night, bombing; there is no break until it obliterates the enemy. The meaning of Revelation 14:11 is in harmony with the passage in Isaiah 34 that lies behind it.

(b) The Immediate Context of Revelation 14

It is a mark of illegitimate proof-texting to fix a meaning on a verse without regard for its context. The traditionalist interpretation usually overlooks the context of Revelation 14:11. On closer examination, there is a strong disconfirmation of the 'eternal torment' theory lying nearby in this section of the Revelation to John.

The traditional reading of Revelation 14:11 ignores the crucial fact that this verse is part of a warning of the coming judgement on God's enemies, which is then followed by a description of the actual judgement in Revelation 14:14-20. In 14:6-13 the impending final judgement of God is announced, and when the three angels complete their warnings of the great judgement to come (including 14:9-11), there follows in Revelation 14:14-20 a description of this final harvest judgement. There are verbal and imagery links in this depiction of the judgement, with the warning proclamation of Revelation 14:9-11. In the divine judgement, the vines of the earth (the wicked) are thrown into the 'the great winepress of the wrath of God.' This echoes the words of Revelation 14:10: 'he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God.' The actual description of this final judgement is a vivid, gruesome picture of utter death and dissolution, not of endless torment: 'the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress as high as a horse's bridle, for one thousand six hundred stadia' (Rev. 14:20). We look in vain in the description of the final judgement to find a picture of eternal, conscious torment. There is torment certainly, and great distress in the awesome judgement of God, but it ends in the decisive dissolution and obliteration of the enemies of God. The Conditionalist interpretation of Revelation 14:11 fits the immediate context much better than the eternal torment reading. There is no tension between

the terms of the proclamation of final judgement in Revelation 14:9-11 and the description of final judgement in Revelation 14:14-20. The traditionalist reading has a tension between the eternal torment supposedly predicted in Revelation 14:11 and the picture of final annihilating destruction that follows in Revelation 14:14-20.

(c) *The Wider Context of the Revelation to John*

What does this book indicate will be the nature of the divine judgement on the wicked? D. Powys has noted that Revelation 'has very little that touches on the subject of the fate of the unrighteous.'²⁴ The Revelation to John seems to make use of recapitulation in its series of visions about divine judgement.²⁵ There appear to be a number of parallel descriptions of the final judgement of God upon his enemies (Rev. 6:12-17; 11:15-18; 14:6-20; 16:17-21; 17:1-19:5; 19:6-20:21). There are connections between this passage in Revelation 14 and other descriptions of judgement. The angel of Revelation 14 proclaims the coming judgement on Babylon (14:8), and this judgement is described at length in Revelation 18:1-19:3. The judgement proclaimed on God's enemies by the angel in Revelation 14:9-11 is revisited again in an extended treatment in Revelation 19:17-20:10. The blessedness of the dead who die in the Lord announced in Revelation 14:12-13, is recounted in expanded form in Revelation 20:11-21:8. The Revelation to John has many descriptions of divine judgement, including a number of accounts of the final judgement.

Judgement is pictured repeatedly in the language of final, decisive destruction, not ongoing torment. There are other references in Revelation to this judgement announced in Revelation 14:11. The same image and expression ('the smoke rises up for ever and ever') is used in Revelation 18:18 and 19:3. This description is parallel and equivalent in topic and language to the picture in Revelation 14:11. The fate of Babylon there shows us that the rising smoke does not indicate a continual burning, since it is expressly stated that 'Babylon' is obliterated. Babylon is destroyed but her smoke continues to rise, a perpetual reminder of her destruction in the judgement of God's wrath. There is no suggestion that Babylon is defeated while her inhabitants are imprisoned and suffering. If the picture in Revelation 18 and 19 is of a completed destruction, then surely the same is on view in the earlier depiction of the final judgement in Revelation 14:6-11.

24 D. Powys, *'Hell': A Hard Look at a Hard Question: the Fate of the Unrighteous in New Testament Thought* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), 364.

25 S. H. T. Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 218.

When God's judgement falls, it is intense and terrible in its effect. Another parallel description of the judgement of Revelation 14:9-11 is found in Revelation 6:12-17. Revelation 14:9-11 depicts the pouring out of God's wrath of judgement day, in a similar portrayal to that found in Revelation 6:12-17. While in Revelation 6:12-17 we do not find a completed description of final judgement, we do have a vivid depiction of God's enemies suffering the intense wrath of God in full strength: 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of his wrath has come and who can stand before it?' (Rev. 6:16-17).²⁶ The clause 'they have no rest day or night' is a description of the moment or process of divine judgement, one among the many found in the Revelation to John; it is not a description of the eternal state of the judged.

What other passages in this book suggest an eternally conscious tormenting judgement for the enemies of God? For a book that is filled with depictions of the final judgement of God over his enemies, Revelation is strangely lacking in detail about any ongoing, endless conscious punishment. There are, in fact, only two verses that can be cited in support of this theory (Rev. 20:10 and Rev.14:11). Strange as it may sound to those accustomed to think of the eternal torment interpretation as indubitable Biblical truth, there is no definite picture or statement of ongoing, eternal conscious punishment of the unsaved in either of these texts. Revelation 14:11 is under challenge in this article as not applicable, and in Revelation 20:10 it is the destiny of the supernatural enemies of God that is on view. The exegesis of Revelation 20:10 calls for serious examination. As W.J. Dumbrell observes on Revelation 20:11-15: 'Note that John does not reveal the nature of the judgement of the unsaved.'²⁷ The fate of the devil, the Beast and the false prophet in Revelation 20:10 should be considered in the light of background text such as Dn. 7:11-12 in which the destruction of the anti-God beast is depicted. Allowance should be made for the use of hyperbole in Revelation 20:10. The traditional interpretation of 20:10 imposes a literal meaning on this verse, in a context (20:1-10) that abounds in symbolic elements. Apart from this text, there is no indication of eternal torment, and much evidence of final destruction.

(d) The General Biblical Teaching of Scripture on the Destiny of the Unsaved

26 W. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 35-36.

27 W. J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 343.

A final test of any exegetical interpretation is the analogy of faith — how it fits with the general teaching of Scripture on this subject. A full consideration of the wider Scriptural teaching on the fate of the unsaved is beyond the scope of this article. A few comments about how this interpretation relates to the wider Biblical tradition may be offered.

The Conditionalist interpretation of final judgement has a strong amount of Biblical connections to commend it. It is worth noting how the Conditionalist reading demonstrates a considerable harmony with the Scriptural linkages of background passages such as Genesis 19 and Isaiah 34. We have already drawn attention to the background of this passage in Isaiah 34. It is recognised that Isaiah 34:1-17 is a picture of the universal judgement of God. Edom symbolizes in Isaiah what Babylon does in Revelation — the ungodly, persecuting world, the adversaries of the people of God. Edom typifies ‘the Lord’s eschatological foe’.²⁸ Isaiah 34 depicts the day of the Lord’s vengeance (Is. 34:8), after which his enemies are obliterated, leaving a wasteland without human inhabitant. (It is worth noting that this oracle against Edom is introduced as an instance of the ‘ban’ of destruction (Is. 34:1-2), for the ‘ban’ is also term of utter destruction and annihilation.)

There may be another level of harmony between Isaiah 34 and Revelation 14 — a harmony of literary device and style. There is a case for detecting in Isaiah 34 an inverted parallelistic structure similar to that of Revelation 14:9-11, in which Isaiah 34:8 is the central statement. The frame sections are exhortations to hearers to listen and note the plan of God (Is. 34:1; 6-17). The second and penultimate sections both describe the utter destruction by God of his enemies (Is. 34:2-3; 11-15). The third and fifth sections describe this supernatural judgement on Edom in two alternative images: a sacrificial sword from heaven (34:4-7), and a judgement of fire and sulphur raining from heaven in a quenchless destruction, until nothing remains (Is. 34:11-15). To read Isaiah 34 sequentially is to posit a description of two judgements on Edom. It seems better to view it as a double, inverted parallel description of the same eschatological judgement by God. The Conditionalist reading of Revelation 14:9-11 brings it into harmony with its Old Testament connections.

The interpretation of the Biblical images of judgement is another area of interest. Traditional eternal torment proponents argue that the New Testament writers employ such Old Testament background and imagery in a new, metaphorical, typological way. All the Biblical

28 J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 268.

motifs of destruction are thus construed in the New Testament's theology to be metaphors of continued existence in ruin. This point should be challenged, since it involves a direct reversal of the imagery in meaning. Henry Constable made this point a century ago: 'Every one of its (Scripture's) images points not to the preservation of being in any state, whether good or evil, but to the utter blotting, out of existence and being, and identity.'²⁹ The Conditionalist reading of Revelation 14:9-11 does not require that this imagery and symbolism of final judgement be totally reversed in sense. Destruction means destruction. If the Old Testament judgements are to be read typologically, then at least the antitype should not contradict the type. It is a strange fulfilment of the type of a destructive, annihilating judgement in the Old Testament, to become read as a metaphor for ongoing existence in ruin.

Another issue is what the New Testament teaches about the final judgement of the unsaved. As F.F. Bruce observed: 'The New Testament answer to this question is much less explicit than is frequently supposed.'³⁰ There certainly is a definite lack of clear didactic exposition of the eternal torment doctrine in the New Testament. It is an interesting exercise to search for clear systematic exposition of this doctrine in the apostolic writings; it is very hard to find. If we want to take these Biblical pictures of judgement and destruction and interpret them to teach judgement and ongoing torment, we need to be able to point to clear didactic passages in the New Testament to support such a reading.

Individual Biblical Texts and our Doctrinal Grids

Despite J.I. Packer's claim that Conditionalist interpreters attempt to evade the natural meaning of 'some dozens of relevant passages', (which he sees as a prime case of 'avalanche-dodging'), the number of key texts is quite few.³¹ H. Guillebaud believed that '... apart from four or five passages, there is not even an appearance of teaching everlasting torment in the Bible.'³² The doctrine of eternal torment actually rests on just four 'core' texts which appear to teach it plainly or strongly (Mt. 18:34,35; Mk. 9:43-48; Rev.14:10,11; Rev. 20:10). For each of these core texts, there are cogent and consistent

29 H. Constable, *The Duration and Nature of Future Punishment*, 71.

30 F. F. Bruce, in E. W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, x.

31 J. I. Packer, 'The Problem of Eternal Punishment', 12.

32 H. Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge* (Taunton: Phoenix, 1964), 12.

Conditionalist exegetical interpretations. Other passages appear to support it only by the way they are linked and construed.³³ Most of the texts about judgement and destruction can be read consistently with the Conditionalist interpretation.

It should concern all Bible students to note how few proof-texts can be cited in support of eternal torment, how much weight is placed on two texts from the Revelation to John (14:11; 20:10); and how other core texts come mainly from parables of Jesus. We are usually wary of interpreters who base their doctrines on proof-texts drawn from the Revelation, or from the parables of Jesus, without the control of didactic passages. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the theory of eternal torment stands on a very narrow exegetical base, and that the texts that control the interpretative grid are few, and come from the most symbolic of Biblical books.

The debate on 'hell' will be assisted if all contributors focus their thoughts on the few 'core' texts upon which the two views rest. Both interpretations have texts that are difficult to reconcile and both have texts that seem to give strongest support.³⁴ In this debate about a doctrine of immense seriousness, evangelicals should seek to anchor all their beliefs in sound exegetical work on specific texts.³⁵

It is not easy for Bible readers to assess the general Biblical teaching on this subject, because the eternal torment interpretation has been a controlling doctrinal grid. Each text, once it is locked into a grid, serves to govern our perception of other texts, acting like a filter to alternative exegetical indicators. Carson reminds us that 'the

33 This is true of Mt. 25:41,46, which does not teach eternal torment clearly at all, despite repeated claims of traditionalist interpreters. The nature of the eternal punishment is not described, and it is set in contrast to eternal life as an opposite, not a parallel, destiny — the opposite of life. The 'eternal fire' mentioned in Mt. 25:41 is described elsewhere in Matthew as a consuming fire, not a tormenting one (Mt. 3:12). There is no evidence in Matthew's Gospel of a tormenting fire of endless divine punishment.

34 The eternal torment interpretation faces a contradictory text with the most famous, classic 'hell' text: Isaiah 66:24. In this verse, cited by Jesus in Mk. 9:43-48, the final destiny of God's enemies is depicted as death. The undying worm and ever-burning fire do not torment live enemies, but consume the bodies of slain enemies. B. Webb comments: 'As it stand, it seems to depict annihilation rather than eternal torment. The bodies are dead . . . (B. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 251. There is no clear, deeper extension of meaning in the New Testament citation of Isaiah 66:24.

35 The eternal torment interpretation is lacking in clear biblical textual exposition. D. Carson puts forward the concept of the eternal impenitence and ongoing sin of the unsaved, but is unable to cite one relevant text to support this rationale for endless torment. The only verse he cites is, on his own admission, inapplicable (D. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 533).

interpreter's theological grasp, his or her "systematic theology" . . . may be faulty at many points, but it may be very difficult to spot the faults. The reason is that this synthesis, this systematic theology, itself becomes a controlling grid by which to interpret Scripture, under the guise of serving as the analogy of the faith.³⁶ In this case, the doctrine of eternal torment, applied as a interpretative grid, compels a particular, metaphorical view of all the texts that deal with 'death' and 'destruction' as the ultimate penalty for sin. It is hard for those texts that do indeed speak of 'destruction' to be heard over the noise of this doctrinal grid.

All doctrines will have some texts that appear to be contradictory. Some will be seen as confirming the interpretation. Many texts can be seen to be consistent. But some texts function as core passages to the interpretation. These core texts are those small number of passages on which the argument is truly resting. The 'avalanche' of eternal torment texts is an illusion created by linking texts that do not strongly support the idea into an eternal torment interpretative grid.³⁷

Most texts can be fitted into either doctrinal grid as consistent texts. This may be illustrated in the doctrine of final judgement by considering those texts that present the pain and distress that accompany God's judgement. Both interpretations of 'hell': (a) relate these texts to the final destiny of the unsaved; (b) teach that God's judgement will involve a painful penalty; (c) recognise that there will be a resurrection to judgement; but (d) differ on how these texts are related to other passages in their sequence and logic.

How can we approach the canonical checking of our interpretations, if it is hard to spot the faults of our grid? The first step is to ascertain upon which particular texts our doctrine actually rests; in the case of eternal torment, it may be a smaller number than we realise. Then these texts need to be closely examined, apart from the strait-jacket of a dogmatic grid. The traffic between our doctrinal grid and the specific exegesis needs to be two-way; the exegesis must be allowed to correct the grid.

The interpretation outlined in this article seeks to show that the actual teaching of this scripture (Rev. 14:11) does not clearly and unambiguously endorse the traditional grid of eternal torment through which it is usually read. Instead, the text is patient of other plausible interpretations. This study of one verse demonstrates the importance of checking the doctrinal grid that we bring to particular

36 D. Carson, 'Approaching the Bible', in the *New Bible Dictionary, 21st Century Edition*, 15.

37 D. Carson has shown how most doctrines are constructed by linking texts into an interpretative grid; D. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker: 1984).

texts such as Revelation 14:11. The Conditionalist treatment shows what a different result is produced when a familiar ‘hell’ proof-text is approached without the eternal torment doctrinal grid.

Conclusion

Revelation 14:11 has been for centuries a core proof-text for the eternal torment doctrine of hell. This paper suggests that this text does not support this theory of an eternally enduring conscious tormenting punishment of his enemies by God. Rather, it describes in graphic terms, along with comparable passages, the awesome moment or process of penal judgement by God that issues in their complete, eternal extinction from his new creation.

This crucial text, then, does not describe some kind of eternal torment in the fires of hell, but rather a different picture of ‘hell’, awesome and sombre in its own way. It is a frightening reminder that those who find themselves in the camp of God’s enemies will face finally his full wrath in a devastating, painful and judicial judgement that will destroy them utterly and completely. This interpretation in no way removes from the New Testament, nor from this passage, the concept of God’s wrath against sin and evil-doers. The Conditionalist interpretation does not in any way reduce or remove the doctrine of ‘hell’ as God’s final judgement of the unrighteous.

The traditional interpretation of hell as eternal torment is a doctrine that is unpleasant even for many of its proponents. It is seldom taught and probably seldom given much critical re-examination. It is not a doctrine that we like to talk about. When it is challenged, ‘orthodoxy’ springs up to protect it, like an anti-bandit shield at a bank. The Conditionalist interpretation will serve exegetes well by showing that there is another paradigm for viewing this issue. Let us open up some two-way traffic between our doctrinal grid and actual texts. Let us allow these texts to speak for themselves.

This issue should not be avoided or neglected. Unlike some other exegetical and theological issues, the question of ‘hell’ concerns central issues of our gospel message. Christians offer people a hope of salvation, and it is surely supremely important to convey to them clearly and unambiguously what lies ahead for them if they decline the offer of forgiveness through the work of Christ. To speak to people about matters of such consequence demands of all Bible students a serious attention to what the Word of God actually teaches — apart from revered and old interpretations. It may be that the Lord does indeed threaten the unsaved with a judgement of eternal torment, but this fact is not taught — certainly not clearly and incontrovertibly

taught — in Revelation 14:11.

Abstract

This article examines a text (Rev. 14:11) that is usually cited to support the doctrine of hell as eternal torment. A new exegetical interpretation of Revelation 14:11 is proposed, suggesting that the traditional reading of the elements of this verse misses the inverted parallelistic structure of the unit Revelation 14:9-11. When the chiasm is discerned, the meaning of the text is seen to give no confirmation to 'eternal torment'. Rather, this text fits well into the Conditional Immortality interpretation. This view holds that God will finally and fully bring his enemies to judgement, with absolute destruction and extinction as the result. This text is also discussed in the context of the Revelation to John, and the general teaching of the New Testament on the destiny of the unsaved. Some concluding comments of the function of interpretative doctrinal grids are offered.

The Nature of Hell

A report by the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity & Truth Among Evangelicals (ACUTE)

These days, popular notions of hell tend either to consign it to the realms of fantasy, or to reserve it for the very worst of villains. The biblical picture is quite different, but even very conservative Christians disagree on certain aspects of that picture.

Evangelicals have traditionally held that unbelievers will be condemned without exception to eternal conscious punishment. However, increasing numbers of evangelical thinkers are declaring sympathy for conditional immortality, a position which emphasises that God's final punishment for sin is death rather than everlasting torment, and that God's promise of a re-created universe cannot be squared with the classical understanding of hell. This is a form of the more general doctrine of annihilationism, which sees hell as a realm of destruction rather than endless retribution. For some, this shift represents a dangerous dilution of evangelical faith. For others, it offers a much-needed corrective to a harsh misunderstanding of God's purposes.

These and related issues are tackled in this report by a special Working Group of the Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE). The report aims to be biblical and pastoral, and to be accessible to interested lay people as well as to theological specialists.

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