



The End of the Wicked

{An extract from Chapter 7, from A Biblical Anthropology by Michael Bieleski.}



Scripture seems to emphasise the mortal nature of human beings, who totally depend on God to raise them from the dead if they are to live after dying. As previously stated, the resurrection from the dead is the mechanism by which this immortality is made available, when the perishable put on the imperishable.

While the lost or wicked will also be raised, what happens to them in this resurrection must differ greatly from the resurrection that leads to life. This is what Scripture suggests as in John 5:29, which described this as the resurrection of condemnation.¹ Romans 2:7-8 says that eternal life comes to those, who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour, and immortality; but those who are self-seeking, and do not obey the truth, they will receive indignation and wrath.²

The nature of this judgment or condemnation has caused considerable debate. Our understanding of immortality, whether it be conditional or natural, will influence our understanding on what happens to the wicked in this judgment. If man is naturally immortal and he is immune from death, then it follows that when he 'dies' he will continue to exist, albeit in another form. In these circumstances, the unjust or the wicked must also continue to exist forever. In this case, we should expect a judgment that reflects the status of their existence.

However, because immortality is immunity from death in new incorruptible bodies, Scripture suggests that the resurrection of the unjust is actually for the process of judgment leading to destruction (a second death). For example, Paul

said that the wicked would be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord.³

The idea of destruction for the unbeliever was also stated in John 3:16, where the word perish could be translated die. Therefore, death and destruction are equivalent terms used to describe the end of the wicked. This agrees with the judgment of man in Genesis, that his death would result in his destruction and that he would return to dust.

There are many other references in Scripture that described the end of the wicked in terms of destruction. In Psalm 9:5, it says that God had destroyed the wicked and blotted their name out forever. Psalm 21:9-10 says, "You shall make them as a fiery oven in the time of Your anger; The Lord shall swallow them up in His wrath, And the fire shall devour them. Their offspring You shall destroy from the earth, And their descendants from among the sons of men."⁴ "The messianic character of this Psalm is evident in that although the victory was completely David's, nevertheless ultimate victory comes only to the 'seed of David'.⁵ Therefore, at least one commentary can note that this passage describes the doom of Christ's enemies at his return.⁶

David himself seemed to think of death as the end of man. In verse 1 of Psalm 28, he asked the Lord not to be silent lest he be like those who go down to the pit (sheol/grave), and then in verse 3, he asked the Lord not to take him away with the wicked, and then in verse 5 he says that the Lord will destroy the wicked. Therefore, David viewed the pit, the destination of the wicked, and their destruction in synonymous fashion. He did not want to become like those who go down to the pit, because David knew that the Lord would destroy them and not build them up.

In Psalm 59:13 it says, "Destroy them in your anger; destroy them completely!"⁷ This Psalm of David under attack from his enemies might be understood as a temporal event. However, the nature of the language and the description of the fate of the wicked, without reference to any future existence, seems to support the idea that this destruction is the end of their existence.

This theme of destruction for the wicked also finds its expression in various Hebrew words, which provide the nuance of meaning to the English word destroy. For example, the word Shamad always expressed complete 'destruction' or 'annihilation.'⁸ Therefore, the Psalmist could say, "Wicked people grow like the grass. Evil people seem to do well, but they will be destroyed (shamad) forever."⁹

This verse could also be translated exterminated forever, imagery which strongly suggests no possibility of any kind of future existence. This idea is reinforced by other passages such as Isaiah 26, which says, “They are dead, they will not live; They are deceased, they will not rise. Therefore You have punished and destroyed (shamad) them, And made all their memory to perish.”¹⁰

Another word used to describe this destruction was kalah, which means that something ceases to be, perishes, or is completed. “Those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed (kalah).”¹¹ This word is translated die in the New Century Version, which in context described the outcome of that which is being consumed. When the word was used negatively, it could mean, “to make vanish” or “go away.” Kalah was used in this sense in Deuteronomy 32:23, when God says, “I will use (Kalah) my arrows on them.”¹² In other words, all his arrows were gone – used up – vanished from his possession. Another example of this nuance is found in Job 7:9, which talks about the cloud that is consumed and vanishes away. Another negative nuance was to “destroy” something or someone as in “the famine shall consume the land.”¹³

Therefore, the Bible expressed ideas that emphasized the end of the wicked in terms of non-existence. They will cease to be. They will be no more. “In a little while the wicked will be no more. You may look for them, but they will be gone.”¹⁴ This connection between destruction as a punishment and the loss of existence as an outcome of that punishment, strongly suggests that there could not have been any continuous form of existence in the afterlife for the wicked. For example, in Psalm 9:5 it says, “You spoke strongly against the foreign nations and destroyed (abad) the wicked; you wiped out their names forever and ever.”¹⁵ Because the word abad can mean perish, vanish, destroy, or exterminate,¹⁶ the expectation of destruction for the wicked includes the idea that this destruction leads to a loss of existence. This idea is reinforced by the parallel statement in the final part of the verse. While the psalmist may have been troubled by his enemies, he was able to foresee that the very memory of them had perished, suggesting that they themselves are no more.¹⁷

This idea is further exemplified in Isaiah 1:28, which says that the transgressors would be consumed (kalah) – they would vanish, cease to exist, perish – and then a few verses later it tells us further about the outcome of the wicked. “The strong shall be as tinder, And the work of it as a spark; Both will burn together, And no one shall quench them.”¹⁸ The use of fire was often used to describe the destruction of the wicked or enemies who would be burnt up. In Psalm 97:3 it says, “A fire goes before him and burns up his enemies all around.”¹⁹

Commentaries on this verse suggest that the Psalmist uses poetic language in an attempt to describe the final judgment of God upon the earth before He establishes His kingdom;²⁰ and that the Lord will utterly destroy His enemies in the future Day of the Lord.²¹ Malachi also described how God would arrive as a Judge and deal with the wicked who would be burnt up.²² The imagery of this Great Day of the Lord carries on into the New Testament, where John the Baptist declared, "Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."²³

The language of Scripture is constantly regular in its expectation of the fate for the wicked. "Through the wrath of the LORD of hosts the land is scorched, and the people are like fuel for the fire; no one spares another."²⁴ Fire is a vivid metaphor for destruction for it totally consumes. There was no mention of any expectation of some future existence for the wicked, because the judgments accentuate the loss of personal participation in life. Therefore, the judgments describe a punishment complete within itself. This idea is supported by Peter who made the connection between the destruction of all mankind in the flood, and a coming judgment by fire.²⁵ The comparison suggests that Peter imagined the complete end of the wicked, without thought of future existence.

These ideas are also reinforced by Isaiah, who says that not only will they die in a fire that will be unquenchable, but that their bodies will also be consumed by worms.²⁶ This verse was also quoted in the New Testament to support teaching on the judgment of gehenna, which is usually translated by the word hell.²⁷ While the worm does not die and the fires are not quenched, the bodies are dead. The wicked are corpses who are dead, and this fits the picture of a burning rubbish heap complete with maggots. It is a vivid description of judgment, but there was no suggestion at any stage that those in gehenna continued to exist.

Understanding the origins of gehenna supports the idea that it was a place of destruction. Gehenna actually referred to one of the principal valleys outside Jerusalem, named Valley of the Son of Hinnom. The 'fire of Gehenna' had developed from historical events, which in time meant that this valley came to be associated with the destiny of the wicked. For example, Jeremiah had described how the people had established a site for sacrificing children to the god Molech, which ironically would become a dump for their own corpses. The nature of this judgment as an act of destruction was made clear by Jeremiah, who stated that the dead bodies would be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.²⁸

While the possibility that Gehenna described a place of punishment in the afterlife might be suggested by some intertestamental literature shortly before 100 BC, “the place is unnamed and there is contradictory testimony as to exactly what happened there.”²⁹ So, while some traditions might suggest that Gehenna was the entrance to the underworld, Biblical exegesis suggests that the fulfilment must still be in keeping with Isaiah’s description. In other words, it must be a judgment of destruction, because the original context described dead bodies being eaten by maggots.³⁰ The emphasis was on destruction and not on any sense of some form of continuous existence. The idea that gehenna was a place of destruction is also supported by other teaching such as in Matthew 10:28, where it says that the soul and body can be destroyed.

Therefore, the Hebrew understanding of gehenna as a real place that prophetically described total rejection and loss without future hope cannot be ignored. Regardless of whether gehenna was used to describe judgment in this life or the afterlife, the outcome for those subject to gehenna was their destruction.

In other passages of the New Testament, destruction was a recurrent theme. Paul says that it was not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction, before the accused meets the accusers.³¹ In James 4:12 it says, “There is only one lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy.”³² The word destroy (apollumi), is the same word translated “perish” or “die” in John 3:16. In that case, the middle voice had a reflexive meaning, where the subject was responsible for the action described by the verb; they perished because they chose not to believe. However, James used destroy in the future active infinitive, where the subject is the agent of an action which impacts on others. In whatever form the verb was used, it means utter and complete destruction. In Luke 13, Jesus noted the deaths of two groups of people.

In Luke 13, Jesus noted the deaths of two groups of people. One was through the actions of the authorities and the other possibly through an accident. In both cases, Jesus pointed out that repentance was required to avoid the same fate, apollumi, which was death or destruction. The question was raised whether these people deserved to die, which is something Jesus denied. Yet he used the accounts of the tragedies to indicate that death is a consequence of unrepentance for all. Jesus did not mention the fate of the wicked here in reference or thought to any future existence. His point was that unless you repent, you will end up like these people, dead or destroyed. Conversely, repentance brings life.

This is why Peter could say that the Lord was not willing that any should perish or be destroyed (apollumi), but that all should come to repentance.³³ Here, perish is in the middle voice and is a reflexive action. Man is destroyed because he is unrepentant and has brought destruction on himself.

While Scripture states that all men will be resurrected, only the righteous will receive immortality. The resurrection for those who have done good is a resurrection of zoe life.³⁴ This is the great hope in which we have confidence and follows the pattern of Christ who went before us, who died and was raised back to life.

Job who was facing death predicted the possibility of living once again when he said, “Even after my skin has been destroyed, in my flesh I will see God.”³⁵ The miracle is the intervention of God to restore the psuche life that was dead and buried in the grave back to zoe life. However, for those who have done evil it is a resurrection of condemnation,³⁶ which must have an entirely different purpose. Paul’s teaching was that the resurrection to life brings immortality and immunity from death or corruption. Therefore, the resurrection of condemnation suggests that the wicked will not receive immortality, and are not immune to further death.

If these ideas are true, then Scripture should clearly explain that the wicked would rise in the resurrection, but eventually cease to exist. Revelation 20:6 described the first resurrection as the resurrection of life for the just over which the second death had no power.³⁷ A few verses later in Revelation 20:12, it described another resurrection – the resurrection of the unjust.³⁸ This resurrection was for the rest of the dead or the dead that remained after the resurrection of the just. Their final destination was the lake of fire, which was described as the second death.³⁹

Therefore, while the first resurrection described the just as souls standing before the throne of God, the resurrection of the unjust merely stated that the dead were judged, and cast into the lake of fire. The unjust are referred to in their resurrection as the dead, whereas the just are referred to as souls. As we have seen, a soul is a self-existent being. This is useful, because these souls are receiving their reward, which is life. The dead however only face a second death.

The fact that the unjust are resurrected dead, confirms our understanding that life is only given to those who do good. Of course, these dead are presumably somehow alive or at least conscious during the judgment proceedings. However, we can only speculate on the nature of this type of intermediate period of

existence. It might be possible to argue that they are in fact dead without conscious existence, but that would seem to undermine the emphasis on the resurrection of condemnation, which is for the purposes of passing judgment.

Whatever the metaphysical state of the wicked dead in their resurrection, they are certainly not the possessors of a new imperishable body. The incorruptible nature of the resurrection body of the just means that the resurrection of the unjust has to be different. Because their final destination is the second death, it suggests that they are not immortal or incorruptible.

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In addition, the idea of the second death is contrasted by the souls in the first resurrection, who are blessed because the second death has no power over them. It has no power over them because the resurrection to life has granted immortality, which is immunity from death. However, the 'wicked dead' appear briefly for the purposes of condemnation, before disappearing into the lake of fire. The lake of fire signifies the complete and utter loss of the unjust to that point or place in time, where there is no possibility of return to existence.

These are ideas that for some may be difficult to accept, given that the consensus of the Church has been that the unjust would continue to experience some form of existence throughout eternity. While the Church has made valuable contributions to the development of theological ideas, this does not mean that every doctrine is valid. Jesus' complaint to the Jews was that they worshipped in vain, because they taught as doctrine the commands of man.⁴⁰ If the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was closer in idea to Greek philosophy than orthodox Hebrew beliefs about the nature of man and judgment, then the implications for interpretation need to be fully understood.

While sound doctrine is essential to the Christian Faith, there is always the possibility that some beliefs may not accurately reflect the Biblical emphasis. When ideas become widely accepted, it becomes very difficult to accept the possibility that those ideas may differ from the message that should have been passed on. This is why comparing scripture with scripture is so important in

defining essential beliefs. When we consider how the Church has defined certain ideas, it is important to consider the possibility that those ideas do not really agree with a scriptural emphasis.

If we consider the beliefs of the early Church, there is evidence to suggest the possibility that a shift of emphasis occurred at some stages in the development of theological ideas. For example, in the 2nd Century, the apostolic Fathers seemed content with biblical words and phrases. "They did not elaborate on them – or eliminate them."⁴¹ We could suggest that there did not seem to be any need for them to go beyond the obvious meanings – although some might debate what those were. However, by the beginning of the third century, there seems to have been a change. Tertullian had embraced everlasting torment and Origen looked to universal restoration. Tertullian and Origen based "their views on the philosophical doctrine that all souls are immortal, though both concede that God created them and could (but will not) destroy them as well."⁴² In this case, we would have to consider how Greek philosophy might have influenced the development of theological ideas.

These ideas then raise questions about Hell, which has often been described as a place of eternal torment and punishment in eternal fire, for those that do not accept salvation through Jesus Christ. This eternal torment is a never-ending punishment, where the unbeliever is cast into hell to burn forever, suffering continuously in anguish as they gnash their teeth. This view of Hell has generally been the traditional view, and the view that has been held by most, but not all Christians.

In addition, some hold strongly to this traditional view because it is believed that Jesus spoke extensively about Hell and about those who would be tormented. However, Hell is an English word that was assigned to various Greek and Hebrew words by some English translations. Understanding this issue is very important, because certain connotations that have been generated by general usage are likely to have controverted the writers intended purpose. This confusion is likely to become more significant as the mythology of hell continues to become popularised, and retold to the masses through the medium of film and television.

The words affected in this way were gehenna, hades and sheol. Sheol and hades were the Hebrew and Greek equivalent for the grave, and gehenna referred to a valley outside Jerusalem with strong historical and symbolic connotations. Each of these words had different meanings, best understood

within the relevant textual and historical contexts, while taking into account the way they were used by Jesus and the New Testament writers.

References:

- 1 John 5:28-29
- 2 Romans 2:7-8 (NKJV)
- 3 2 Thessalonians 1:9 (NKJV)
- 4 Psalm 21:9-10 (NKJV)
- 5 KJV Bible commentary. 1997, c1994 (1006). Thomas Nelson: Nashville
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- 7 Psalm 59:13 (NCV)
- 8 Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, W. 1996.
- 9 Psalm 92:7 (NCV)
- 10 Isaiah 26:14 (NKJV)
- 11 Isaiah 1:28 (NKJV)
- 12 Deut. 32:23 (NASB)
- 13 Gen. 41:30 (NKJV)
- 14 Psalm 37:10 (NCV)
- 15 Psalm 9:5 (NCV)
- 16 Strong, J. (1996)
- 17 Psalm 9:6 (NCV)
- 18 Isaiah 1:31 (NKJV)
- 19 Psalm 97:3 (NCV) [
- 20 Radmacher, E. D., Allen, R. B., & House, H. W. 1997. The Nelson study Bible : New King James Version. Includes index. (Ps 97:3). T. Nelson Publishers: Nashville
- 21 MacArthur, J. J. 1997, c1997. The MacArthur Study Bible (electronic ed.) (Ps 97:3). Word Pub.: Nashville

22 Malachi 4:1

23 Matthew 3:10 (NCV)

24 Isaiah 9:19 (ESV)

25 2 Peter 3:5-7

26 Isaiah 66:24

27 Mark 9:48 quoted from Isaiah 66:24

28 Jeremiah 7:33

29 Fudge, The Fire That Consumes 161

30 While there might be some disagreement over traditional views as to whether a rubbish dump existed in Gehenna, historical acts of Judgment described by Jeremiah, where bodies were left to rot suggest that it was possible.

31 Acts 25:15

32 James 4:12 (NASB)

33 2 Peter 3:9 (NKJV)

34 John 5:28-29

35 Job 19:25-26 (NCV)

36 John 5:29

37 While the first resurrection appears to be for the martyrs and those who did not worship the beast, it cannot be an exclusive event as suggested by verse 6, which states that those who have part in the first resurrection are blessed.

38 The word resurrection is not actually used in this verse, but it is reasonable to assume that this is the Resurrection of Condemnation referred to in John 5:29, and therefore must be the second resurrection, as implied by the description of the first resurrection in Revelation 20:6

39 It is important to note that there is no mention of eternal torment or punishment. This idea will be discussed further on.

40 Matthew 15:9

41 Fudge, The Fire that Consumes, 361

42 Fudge, The Fire that Consumes, 361