

FALLACIES IN THE ANNIHILATIONISM DEBATE? A RESPONSE TO GLENN PEOPLES

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I am appreciative that Glenn Peoples regards my work on the doctrine of hell as worthy of a response.¹ Although several recent books have furthered the traditionalist-annihilationist debate, I am afraid that Peoples's article does not.² Although his arguments related to 2 Thessalonians 1 and Revelation 20 have been cogently answered in *Hell under Fire* by Douglas Moo and Gregory Beale, respectively, Peoples seems unaware of this. In this essay, I will respond to his major criticisms of my exegesis and theological method, express appreciation for a point of correction, and largely overlook his comments that reflect negatively on my character. Along the way I will also indicate why I continue to affirm the historic view of hell (traditionalism) and to oppose annihilationism (conditionalism).

I. MISREPRESENTATION

Peoples alleges that I committed "inexcusable misrepresentation" when I wrote in *Two Views of Hell* that Edward Fudge's view that Christ's death involved destruction compromises the unity of Christ's person because it implies the dissolution of his human nature.³ I am also accused of misrepresenting Fudge's exegetical presentation as a theological argument to avoid his exegesis, of misrepresenting one of Fudge's footnotes, of falsely claiming that Fudge cited Edward White, of misrepresenting White's teaching, and of attacking a straw man that I had erected.

I respectfully submit that none of these accusations is true. For example, in the first edition of *The Fire that Consumes* Fudge included the heading,

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¹ Glenn Peoples, "Fallacies in the Annihilationism Debate: A Critique of Robert Peterson and Other Traditionalist Scholarship," included in the present volume.

² A book fairly reflecting both perspectives is Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE), *The Nature of Hell* (London, ACUTE/Paternoster, 2000). A recent conditionalist volume is David J. Powys, *Hell: A Hard Look at a Hard Question: The Fate of the Unrighteous in New Testament Thought*, Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1998). The best collection of traditionalist essays is now Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). See Robert W. Yarbrough's criticism of Powys's approach in "Jesus on Hell," in *Hell under Fire* 69–70.

³ Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 176.

“Jesus’ Death Involved Total Destruction.”⁴ Therein he made the following theological argument: (1) Jesus suffered the penalty of hell in his death; (2) this penalty consisted of his destruction, not his suffering everlasting punishment; (3) therefore, annihilationism is true and traditionalism is false. I called this a theological argument, because, although Fudge appealed to Scripture, which I acknowledged, he employed the theological deduction that I have summarized here in three points. And that is plainly a theological argument.

Fudge’s footnote 47 of the first edition of *The Fire that Consumes* reads, “Edward White, *Life in Christ* . . . , pp. 243–244.” In response to Peoples’s accusations, I here quote (word for word including British punctuation and italics) Fudge’s introduction to his quotation of White and then the quotation itself. Fudge wrote:

In the beginning God gave man being instead of non-being, and He had warned then that sin would bring death in the place of life (Gen. 2:17). From the very first the wages of sin was *death*, and Jesus underwent the very same sentence pronounced in the primal Garden. Some may object that the original curse entailed death forever, dissolution with no hope of resurrection, and that this did not befall Jesus. Conditionalist author, Edward White, admitted that this would be a problem—if Jesus had been only human—but he saw in Jesus’ divinity the impossibility of such *permanent* destruction. White reasoned:

If Jesus had been the Son of David only, He could not legally have risen from the dead. . . . He must have suffered everlasting destruction. His human spirit must have passed away for ever. The humanity which had been ‘made under the law’ must abide under that law; the representative of a guilty race could have trodden the path of life no more.

But the Saviour was Divine. As man, identified with human nature, He died, and His death became a sin-offering; as God He could not die. As man He was ‘made under the law,’ as God He was above the law laid on creatures. And therefore, when the curse had taken effect upon the manhood, it was still open to the Divine Inhabitant, absorbing the Spirit into His own essence, to restore the “destroyed Temple” from its ruins; and, taking possession of it, in virtue of His Divinity (not, legally, as a man), “to raise it up on the third day.” He arose, therefore, as the Divine Conqueror of death . . . and was thus “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by *His resurrection* from the dead” (Rom. i.4). He rose, not “in the likeness of sinful flesh”; nor “under the law,” but in the character of the “Lord from Heaven,” “our Lord and our God” . . . having delivered us from wrath by the death of His humanity, to endow us with immortality through the life of His divinity.⁵

As this quotation shows, I did not misrepresent Fudge’s footnote, or citation of White, whom he quotes favorably. I also did not misrepresent White’s teaching because the words quoted here teach that if Jesus had only been a human being, then when he died, he would have ceased to exist forever. But,

⁴ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment* (Houston: Providential Press, 1982) 228.

⁵ *Ibid.* 230–31.

since Jesus was the God-Man, his humanity did not remain out of existence, but was restored by virtue of its being absorbed into Christ's divine essence, and in this way "the destroyed Temple" was restored "from its ruins."

There can be no doubt that Fudge quotes White favorably. The truth of this claim can be seen, not only in the words with which Fudge leads into his citation of White, but also in the words he chooses to follow the quotation: "We naturally recoil from such a thought, that the Son of God could truly have perished—even for a moment. Yet is this not the same difficulty we face in accepting Jesus' true *kenosis* and humiliation in becoming a *man*? (Phil. 2:5–10)."⁶ Throughout his book, Fudge consistently uses "perish" to speak of the cessation of existence of the damned—and here of Christ who suffered their fate on the cross.

Clearly, then, in my discussion of Fudge's work, I did not erect a straw man, but drew my conclusions from Fudge's own words and from his approving quotation of White. As for the issue of fairness, as I indicated in *Two Views of Hell*, I twice asked Fudge in private conversation to affirm or deny that Jesus' death entailed the destruction of his whole person, instead of merely his humanity.⁷ Fudge refused to affirm or deny, and so I included both options in my critique of his theological argument from the cross of Christ. I wrote then and still think that this argument does not work but has disastrous implications for Christology. Such an argument should lead annihilationists to rethink their understanding of the nature and duration of hell.

II. MISSED POINTS

Peoples claims that I misinterpreted John's words in this text: "And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev 20:10 ESV). My supposed mistake was to miss the annihilationists' argument that the beast is a corporate or impersonal entity and thus not capable of conscious suffering, let alone the conscious suffering of everlasting torment. To "be tormented day and night forever and ever," therefore, must have a metaphorical meaning, perhaps annihilation. Since the false prophet, devil, and human beings (in vv. 14–15) are said to suffer the same fate as the beast, it follows in this line of thinking that their punishment in hell also could not be everlasting torment. Rather, John's words indicate their destruction, that is, their annihilation.

In fairness, I concede that previously I did not understand the full import of this annihilationist argument. However, I still do not think that it is a good argument for four reasons. First, I would submit that John's beast from the sea (Rev 13:1–10) represents both the devil's kingdom and individuals who comprise it. Gregory Beale agrees: "Probably, as throughout history, so at the end the individual tyrant is not to be distinguished from the kingdom

⁶ Ibid. 231; italics original.

⁷ *Two Views of Hell* 176.

or institution that he represents (as in Dan 7:17, 23).⁸ This means that while in some texts the corporate or institutional nature of the beast comes to the fore, in others the beast signifies the final great enemy of God—an antichrist figure. This latter is the case in Rev 20:10, where the beast is consigned to eternal torment along with two other individuals—the false prophet and the devil.

Second, correlations between the themes of Rev 20:10 and other verses in Revelation confirm the conclusion that there the beast is to be understood as an individual. Correlations with Rev 14:10–11 and 20:15 show that “unbelieving individuals also suffer the eternal torment of fire. In fact, 20:15 and 21:8 affirm explicitly that all unbelieving people will suffer the punishment of ‘the lake of fire,’ the very same ‘lake of fire,’ into which the devil, the false prophet, and the beast will be thrown.”⁹ Revelation 14:10–11 corroborates that “fire and brimstone” means “the eternal, ongoing punishment of personal beings.”¹⁰

Third, Jesus’ words in Matt 25:41 affirm the same thing: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

Fourth, even if “the beast” signified an institution and not an individual in Rev 20:10—a point that I do not concede—that would still not invalidate the traditional exegesis because, “Institutions are composed of people, so what an institution suffers, that also the people composing the institution will suffer.”¹¹

III. EXEGESIS

Peoples asserts that, in cases where Scripture describes the fate of the unsaved as their destruction, my attempts at exegesis were faulty. Two examples are cited: 2 Thess 1:9 and 2 Pet 2:6.

1. *2 Thessalonians 1:9*. Peoples claims that I misinterpret this text because I fail to realize that the words “away from the presence of the Lord” are not in the Greek text. Allegedly, this oversight misleads me to teach that “the lost will be placed into a state of ruin . . . , and then, as a distinct act, God will shut them out of his presence.” Contrary to this assertion, I do not hold and never have held that Paul is in this text (or elsewhere) describing two separate acts of God’s punishing the wicked. Rather, I have always held that God’s banishing the conscious lost from his gracious and joyous presence forever *is* their ruin.

Let us now turn to the matter concerning the Greek text. My three favorite translations render 2 Thess 1:9 as follows:

⁸ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 691. In the quotation above, Beale helpfully points to Dan 7:17, 23. There too the fourth beast of Daniel represents a kingdom, ten kings, and an individual king (Dan 7:23, 24). See also G. K. Beale “The Revelation on Hell,” in *Hell under Fire* 91–109.

⁹ *Ibid.* 1029.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction *away from the presence of the Lord* and from the glory of his might (ESV; italics supplied). [The margin gives as an alternative “destruction that comes from.”]

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and *shut out from the presence of the Lord* and from the majesty of his power (NIV; italics supplied).

These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, *away from the presence of the Lord* and from the glory of His power (NASB; italics supplied).

Did the translation committees of each of these versions of the Bible fail to see that the italicized words were not in the original Greek? Are all three translations therefore unreliable at this point? The answers to these questions are negative as Douglas Moo shows when commenting on 2 Thess 1:9 in his brilliant essay “Paul on Hell,” in *Hell under Fire*.

A second reason for thinking that “destruction” refers to the end of any prospect of a meaningful relationship with God is that Paul expands the concept of “destruction” with just this idea: People are “shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess. 1:9b). This TNIV translation, it must be pointed out, reflects a key decision about the meaning of the Greek preposition *apo* that occurs at the beginning of the phrase. The TNIV translators, following most commentators, take the preposition to denote separation and thus translate as “shut out from.” To be sure, other options are possible; it could denote source (“destruction that comes from the presence of the Lord”), cause (“destruction because of, or through, the presence of the Lord”), or even time (“destruction when the Lord comes”). But *apo* is most often used in the New Testament in the sense of separation. Confirming this meaning is the almost certain dependence of Paul on Isaiah 2:10–11. . . . Three times in this passage, the wicked are said to hide “from the dread of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty.” The wording of the LXX is almost identical in each case to 2 Thessalonians 1:9 (the only difference is that Paul drops *phobos*, translated “dread” in the NIV). The point, then, is this: Paul elaborates the meaning of “eternal destruction” with the idea of being separated from the presence of God. Not only does this suggest that our interpretation of “destruction” is on the right track; it also implies that the people who are the objects of destruction continue to exist in some form. It makes little sense to describe people who have been annihilated as being separate from the presence of God.¹²

Doug Moo’s conclusions regarding this passage are the same as mine;¹³ in fact, he even credits me in a footnote.¹⁴ I am indebted to Moo for arguing the case more cogently and stating the matter more clearly than I (or anyone else as far as I know).

2. 2 Peter 2:6. “If by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly” (ESV). I am said by Peoples to have avoided this

¹² Douglas J. Moo, “Paul on Hell,” in *Hell under Fire* 106–8.

¹³ Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1995) 80–81; *Two Views of Hell* 150–53.

¹⁴ Moo, “Paul on Hell” 108 n. 45.

text's clear teaching of annihilationism by mere assertion. I wrote: "Taken in isolation it is possible to understand Peter's words as teaching annihilationism. Nevertheless, we ought not to do so. It is better to take Peter's words as more generally predicting the downfall of the wicked than to understand them as foretelling their precise fate—reduction to ashes."¹⁵ I am taken to task for giving no grounds for this conclusion. On the contrary, Peoples's quotation stopped too soon—my grounds are given in the very next words. I continued:

In fact, when we examine this passage alongside Jude 13 and the other nine passages that we have studied or will study, I am certain that Fudge overreaches by insisting on a literalistic interpretation of the words of Jude 7 and 2 Peter 2:6. Instead, we should allow the message of all ten passages to inform our view of the fate of the wicked. When we do, we conclude that as God brought cataclysmic judgment of fire upon the ancient cities, so will he terribly punish the wicked on the Last Day. Their fate is not annihilation but rather "the punishment of eternal fire," that is, never-ending torment in hell.¹⁶

Here I appeal to the systematic principle, the notion that because all Scripture is inspired by God its message is coherent and does not contradict itself. All theologians, and in fact all exegetes, at times appeal to this principle. That is because the Bible is a big book of many writings penned by many writers over a long period of time for various purposes addressing various contexts etc. I do not know of a single doctrine that has no "problem passages" associated with it.

2 Peter 2:6 is such a problem passage for traditionalism. I do not believe in the historic view of hell because of 2 Pet 2:6. I believe in it because of the message of ten biblical passages that I exegeted in *Two Views of Hell*: Isa 66:22–24; Dan 12:1–2; Matt 18:6–9; 25:31–46; Mark 9:42–48; 2 Thess 1:5–10; Jude 7, 13; Rev 14:9–11; 20:10, 14–15.¹⁷

IV. MISCELLANEOUS FALLACIES

1. *Arguments from silence.* Here I am criticized for misunderstanding the argument from silence, for falsely accusing Fudge of using that argument, and for using the same type of arguments myself. I must admit that these criticisms are just. I am grateful for Peoples's pointing them out and will try not to repeat such errors.

In point of fact, I *did* misunderstand the argument from silence, invoking it when annihilationist writers, while claiming that a passage teaches annihilationism, point out that it "says nothing about eternal torment" or the like. I stand corrected that "an argument from silence is committed where a person infers *something* from *nothing*." But Peoples is wrong to judge my motives in doing this and to conclude that my intention was to "avoid dealing with the exegetical arguments rising from these texts." To the contrary, when

¹⁵ *Two Views of Hell* 156.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 129–69.

I explain the ten biblical passages (including some cited by Fudge) that I believe teach traditionalism, I include Fudge's treatment of each passage in the sections titled, "annihilationist interpretation."¹⁸

I do regard the type of "arguing from silence" that Fudge used as valid, and therefore fair game for Fudge or anyone else to use, because I have used it myself. But I take exception to Peoples's labeling my charge of argument from silence as "disingenuous." Here again, he wrongly judges my motives. I was not being disingenuous; rather, I made an honest mistake.

2. *Emotionally charged arguments.* Because I wrote that I fear annihilationism will lead sinners to underestimate their fate and that it may hinder the Christian mission, I am accused of falsehood, of arguing in an *ad hominem* fashion, and of using emotionally driven and irrelevant arguments.

First of all, note that, in the article cited, I do not *argue* for traditionalism when I communicate my fears concerning the effects of annihilationist teaching. I specifically precede my discussion of these matters by saying: "Some important *implications* follow."¹⁹

Concerning the charge of falsehood, I continue to hold that some sinners may well think that ceasing to exist is not so bad and that holding to annihilationist beliefs may hinder them from coming to Christ. How do I know that suffering eternal pain is worse than cessation of existence? I regard it as intuitive and a matter of common sense. To suffer eternal conscious torment is far worse than to be exterminated so that one no longer feels pain or anything else. To exist in agony is worse than not existing. I simply assert this because it is obviously true.

Concerning the charge of arguing in an *ad hominem* manner, I repeat that I did not express my concerns as *arguments* but as possible *implications*. I guarded myself against such an accusation by crediting such annihilationists as John Stott and Michael Green with evangelistic zeal. I do not imply that they or any other annihilationists do not care about evangelism. But I continue to be concerned about the possible detrimental effects of annihilationism on missions—and I am not alone in my concern.²⁰

Regarding the charge of using emotionally driven and irrelevant arguments, I repeat again that I carefully labelled my concerns not "arguments" but "implications." I respect the right of annihilationists to teach what they believe is biblical and to express their concerns about the possible detrimental effects of traditionalism. I would simply ask them to grant traditionalists the same right.

¹⁸ *Two Views of Hell* 130–68.

¹⁹ Robert A. Peterson, "Does the Bible Teach Annihilationism?" *BSac* 156 (1999) 26.

²⁰ See, for instance, D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 536.