Annihilation versus Eternal Torment:

A Theological and Contextual Examination of the Final Destiny of the Unrighteous

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the theological debate between *annihilationism* and *eternal torment* concerning the final destiny of the unrighteous. While closely related to *conditional immortality*—the view that only the redeemed are granted everlasting life—annihilationism specifically asserts that the wicked will ultimately cease to exist following final judgment. Drawing on the principles of *prima scriptura* and *tota scriptura*, this study evaluates key Old and New Testament passages within their Ancient Near Eastern and Second Temple Jewish contexts to assess whether Scripture teaches final destruction or unending conscious punishment.

The paper engages biblical exegesis, patristic perspectives, and philosophical considerations related to divine justice, human freedom, and the nature of God. It concludes by proposing a unified theological model that seeks to preserve scriptural fidelity and doctrinal coherence, emphasizing the convergence of divine love and justice in the eschatological outcome.

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of the final destiny of the unrighteous—whether annihilation or eternal torment—remains one of the most contentious issues in Christian eschatology. Conditional immortality, which undergirds annihilationism, holds that the unrighteous are not inherently immortal and will ultimately perish following divine judgment, receiving the "*second death*" as their final penalty (*Revelation 20:14*). In contrast, the traditional doctrine of eternal torment asserts that the unrighteous will endure conscious, unending punishment in hell, eternally separated from the presence of God (*Matthew 25:46*). This debate engages several core theological themes, including the justice and mercy of God, the nature of human immortality, and the moral implications of eternal consequence.

This paper leans toward annihilationism, grounded in a contextual reading of Scripture shaped by the principles of *prima scriptura* and *tota scriptura*.[1] In the biblical witness, eternal life is consistently portrayed as a gift—not a default state—granted only to the redeemed (John 3:16), while the unrighteous are warned of destruction rather than unending preservation in torment (*Matthew 10:28; Romans 6:23*). This aligns with the framework of conditional immortality, which asserts that only those in Christ are granted immortality as a result of divine grace.

Salvation is a free gift of grace through Christ's atoning work (*Romans 5:8–9*), and eternal life is portrayed in Scripture as a gift granted only to the righteous (*John 3:16*). The unrighteous, by contrast, face destruction, not eternal preservation in torment.

[1] D. Gene Williams Jr., *Contextual Reading vs. Plain Reading: An Apologetic Framework Rooted in Ancient Contexts and Prima Scriptura*, accessed June 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

Still, the historical dominance of eternal torment—along with its exegetical support—demands fair and critical evaluation. This study explores both views by examining Old and New Testament passages, Ancient Near Eastern cultural backgrounds, Second Temple Jewish thought, early Christian interpretations, and philosophical implications. It seeks to construct a biblically faithful model that upholds the justice and love of God while honoring the theological integrity of Scripture.

The Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) worldview offers critical insight into biblical portrayals of death and the afterlife, shaping Israel's theological imagination.[2] In both Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures, the afterlife was understood as a conscious, shadowy existence in a netherworld, typically involving judgment and degrees of reward or punishment.[3] While Israel's beliefs diverged significantly, they were not formed in isolation. This shared cultural backdrop influenced certain expressions in the Hebrew Bible, especially references to Sheol and related burial customs.

Sheol in the Old Testament

Sheol, the Old Testament term for the realm of the dead, is portrayed as a place of conscious awareness (*Isaiah 14:9–11*), where the deceased retain some ability to perceive and interact.[4] However, unlike the elaborate hierarchies of ANE afterlife myths, Sheol is typically described as a neutral, temporary state—a waiting place preceding the resurrection (*Daniel 12:2*). The Hebrew Scriptures consistently emphasize the return to

[2] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 92-96.

[3] Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000-323 BC* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 187-190.

[4] John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 326-328.

dust (*Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 12:7*), reinforcing the idea that human life is not intrinsically immortal, but sustained solely by God's creative power.[5] This anthropology aligns closely with annihilationism, which asserts that immortality is a gift granted to the righteous, not an inherent human trait.

Second Temple Jewish Thought

By the Second Temple period, Jewish eschatology had diversified considerably. Intertestamental texts such as *1 Enoch* and *4 Ezra* reflect belief in postmortem judgment, where the wicked may experience either torment or obliteration.[6] Emerging strands of rabbinic thought later formalized distinctions between Gehenna (a place of punishment) and Gan Eden (a paradise for the righteous).[7] Some traditions even allowed for temporary suffering, after which the wicked would be annihilated rather than eternally tormented.[8]

These developments offer theological background for New Testament eschatology, where language of both destruction (*2 Thessalonians 1:9*) and eternal punishment (*Revelation 20:10*) appears. The tension between these terms will be explored in subsequent sections, with careful attention to genre, context, and consistent theological interpretation.

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[5] Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 275-280.

[6] George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 276-278.

[7] George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity*, expanded ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 19–22, 76–80; Philip S. Alexander, "The Gehenna Texts in the Targums," in *Text and Context: Studies in the Early Jewish and Christian Literature in Honour of John Dominic Crossan*, ed. David L. Balch et al. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 227–246; and Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 49–53.

[8] Philip S. Alexander, "Rabbinic Judaism and Afterlife," in *The Jewish Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 45-47.

II. OLD TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

The Old Testament consistently employs the language of destruction and judgment to describe the fate of the unrighteous, laying a substantial theological foundation for the doctrine of annihilationism.

In Genesis 3:19, God declares to Adam, "*You are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" Human life, initiated by God's breath (Genesis 2:7),[9] is not inherently immortal; it is sustained by divine power. Without this breath, human existence ceases, aligning with the annihilationist claim that immortality is conditional, not automatic.[10]

Psalm 37:20 reinforces this picture: "*The wicked will perish… they vanish like smoke.*" The imagery evokes complete dissolution, not enduring conscious torment. Similarly, Isaiah 26:14 states, "*They are dead, they will not live… you have destroyed them.*" This presents death as an irreversible finality, resonant with annihilationist understandings of divine judgment.

Perhaps most vividly, Malachi 4:1–3 describes the coming day of the Lord: "*It will burn them up,"* like stubble consumed in fire. The metaphor suggests total eradication, not eternal burning.[11] Fire, in this context, functions not as a mechanism of unending torment, but as a symbol of comprehensive judgment that leaves nothing behind.

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[9] D. Gene Williams Jr., *Adam and Eve in Christian Orthodoxy: Evaluating Theological Models and Their Boundaries*, accessed June 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

[10] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 90-92.

[11] John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 210-212.

While Sheol may indicate some form of conscious experience in the intermediate state,[12] the trajectory of biblical judgment points toward a final outcome of destruction, not preservation in suffering. These texts collectively challenge the framework of eternal torment and contribute significantly to the annihilationist model.

III. NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

The New Testament develops Old Testament motifs surrounding death, judgment, and the afterlife—offering texts that have been cited in support of both annihilationism and eternal conscious torment. A contextual reading, sensitive to lexical and theological nuance, is essential for evaluating these passages.

Support for Annihilationism

Several New Testament texts suggest the finality and cessation of the unrighteous rather than their perpetual existence in torment. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus warns, "*Fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*" The Greek term ἀπόλλυμι (*apollumi*) typically denotes destruction rather than preservation in suffering.[13] This aligns with John 3:16*,* where eternal life is offered to believers while the alternative is to "*perish*" (*apollumi*), suggesting nonexistence rather than continued conscious punishment.

Likewise, Romans 6:23 draws a stark contrast: "*The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.*" Here, death, not torment, is the stated penalty. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 reinforces this theme, stating, "*They will suffer the punishment of eternal*

[12] D. Gene Williams Jr., *The Intermediate State: Sanctification through Fire and Salvation from Judgment*, accessed June 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

[13] Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1992), 125-128.

destruction." The phrase *ὄλεθρος αἰώνιος* (*olethros aiōnios*) points not to a destruction that is endlessly occurring, but to a final, irreversible act of judgment—whose effects are everlasting.[14]

Support for Eternal Torment

Conversely, certain passages appear to support ongoing conscious punishment**.** Matthew 25:46 reads, "*These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*" The parallel construction of eternal punishment (*κολασιν αἰώνιον*) with eternal life (*ζωὴν αἰώνιον*) has been cited to argue that both states are equally enduring.[15] Mark 9:48, quoting Isaiah 66:24, speaks of "*where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched*," imagery long associated with unending torment**.**

Most explicit is Revelation 20:10, which states that Satan, the beast, and the false prophet "*will be tormented day and night forever and ever*." While this judgment is directed toward apocalyptic figures, Revelation 14:11 applies similar language to those who worship the beast—suggesting that the wicked may also suffer eternal punishment.[16]

Annihilationists respond to Revelation 20:10—often cited as the strongest textual evidence for eternal torment—by noting several important distinctions grounded in symbolic genre and apocalyptic imagery. First, the text refers specifically to Satan, the beast, and the false prophet—apocalyptic entities that function symbolically and cosmologically in Revelation's narrative. It is not self-evident that their fate applies universally to all human beings. Second, even if one takes the torment described as

[14] F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 150-152.

[15] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 950-952.

[16] G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1020-1025.

literal, it is grounded in the genre of apocalyptic prophecy, which routinely uses eternal imagery (e.g., smoke rising forever) to convey finality, not duration. Third, Revelation later describes the "*second death*" (20:14) as the ultimate fate of the unrighteous, a term that annihilationists interpret as cessation of existence, consistent with the destruction language of Matthew 10:28 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9. Thus, Revelation 20:10, while vivid and severe, need not be taken as normative for human eschatology.

To further illustrate how apocalyptic literature employs eternal imagery to signify irreversible judgment rather than unending process**,** consider Revelation 14:11, which speaks of smoke rising "*forever and ever*." This imagery is consistent with Old Testament language describing the finality and memorial of judgment, rather than ongoing conscious torment. For example, Isaiah 34:10 describes Edom's destruction: *"Its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste…"*—yet Edom is no longer burning. Similarly, Genesis 19:28 recounts the aftermath of Sodom: *"...the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace."* In both cases, smoke rising signifies a permanent result, not a process that continues eternally.

This symbolic use of "*eternal smoke*" appears again in *Revelation 19:3*, where Babylon's fall is described: *"The smoke from her goes up forever and ever."* Babylon is not literally burning eternally, but her destruction is irrevocable and memorialized in apocalyptic terms. The genre of Revelation draws heavily on such Old Testament motifs to communicate cosmic finality, not metaphysical duration of torment.

Thus, annihilationism can faithfully interpret the imagery in Revelation 14:11 as referring to the permanent effect of divine judgment—the irreversible ruin of the wicked—rather than as proof of unending conscious suffering.

Interpretive Challenges and Patristic Perspectives

Interpreting these texts requires close attention to both linguistic nuance and the trajectory of Christian theological development. The debate hinges, in part, on the meaning of αἰώνιος (*aiōnios*), often translated "*eternal*." This word can indicate either duration or the permanence of an effect, depending on context. In Matthew 25:46, some annihilationists argue that "*eternal punishment*" refers to the everlasting consequence—i.e., destruction—not the duration of conscious suffering.[17] Conditionalist scholars like Edward Fudge and Clark Pinnock contend that *aiōnios* modifies the result, not the process—thus 'eternal punishment' means punishment with eternal consequence (i.e., destruction), rather than ongoing torment. Likewise, fire in Scripture often symbolizes consumption rather than torment (cf. *Hebrews 12:29*), supporting the annihilationist reading.[18]

While the parallelism in Matthew 25:46 is often cited to demand symmetrical duration, several counterexamples in Scripture suggest that *aiōnios* can modify results rather than ongoing processes. Jude 7 refers to Sodom and Gomorrah suffering the punishment of "*eternal fire*" (*pyros aiōniou*), yet the fire is no longer burning—its judgment was total and irrevocable, not unending in duration. This is directly relevant to Mark 9:48, which echoes Isaiah 66:24, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched—not because the process continues forever, but because the destruction is total and cannot be reversed. Similarly, Hebrews 6:2 speaks of "*eternal judgment*," not in the

[17] Edward W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 150-160.

[18] Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 3rd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 41–47;
Clark H. Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," *Criswell Theological Review* 4, no. 2 (1990): 246–259.

sense of a never-ending court trial, but a once-for-all verdict with everlasting consequences. These examples support the view that "*eternal punishment*" in Matthew 25:46 and the imagery in Mark 9:48 both refer to the finality of annihilation, not the perpetuity of conscious experience. Thus, Mark 9:48, while rhetorically powerful, does not demand an unending conscious experience of torment, but instead evokes the irrevocability of divine judgment in the language of Isaiah.

Yet, the vivid language of Revelation remains a stronghold for the eternal torment position. While some argue that its symbolism is apocalyptic and not meant to be literal, others contend that the text clearly depicts unending judgment. Even so, whether these descriptions extend to all of humanity—or just to specific eschatological enemies—is the subject of ongoing debate.[19]

Early Christian eschatology before Augustine (5th century AD) displayed notable diversity, with several Church Fathers articulating views that align more closely with annihilationism or conditional immortality. While later Western theology—especially under Augustine's influence—solidified the doctrine of eternal conscious torment, many pre-Augustinian thinkers held that the wicked would ultimately cease to exist. For example, Justin Martyr spoke of the soul's mortality apart from divine grace;[20] Irenaeus taught that the unrighteous would be deprived of the gift of continued existence; [21] and Theophilus of Antioch distinguished between natural and granted immortality.[22] These

[19] David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1080-1085.

[20] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, trans. Leslie W. Barnard (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 52.

[21] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 5.27.2.

[22] Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus* 2.27, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 105–106.

views suggest a trajectory in which immortality was not considered intrinsic to the soul, but a gift granted exclusively to the righteous.[23]

In contrast, Tertullian (2nd–3rd century AD) became a vocal advocate for eternal torment, emphasizing the soul's inherent immortality and its capacity for unending punishment. Augustine (4th–5th century AD) further solidified this doctrine in the West, arguing that divine justice necessitates eternal conscious separation for those who reject God's grace.[24]

In the East, however, the Eastern Orthodox tradition—rooted in early patristic theology—developed a more nuanced triad of eschatological perspectives, all considered theologically acceptable within its framework, with a fourth view ultimately condemned as heresy.[25]

The first, eternal torment, aligns with figures like *Tertullian*,[26] *Augustine*,[27] and *John Chrysostom*,[28] portraying hell as conscious suffering in separation from God. This

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Theophilus writes, "For God made man neither mortal nor immortal, but capable of both, so that if he should incline to the things of immortality, keeping the commandment of God, he should receive as reward from Him immortality, and should become God; but if, on the other hand, he should turn to the things of death, disobeying God, he should himself be the cause of his own death.

[23] David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 114.

[24] Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 525-530.

[25] Craig Truglia, "Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Soteriology Compared," *Orthodox Christian Theology*, February 2017, https://orthodoxchristiantheology.com/2017/02/09/orthodox-catholic-and-protestant-soteriology-comparedand-contrasted/.

[26] Tertullian, *Apology*, trans. T. R. Glover, Loeb Classical Library 250 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), ch. 48.

[27] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 21.17–21.23.

[28] John Chrysostom, *Homily on 2 Thessalonians 1*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, Vol. 13, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 393–394.

view was often reinforced by a literal reading of Christ's parable in Luke 16:19–31,[29] though many scholars interpret that scene as a metaphor for a reversal of fortune in the intermediate state rather than a depiction of final judgment.

The second, annihilationism, finds resonance with *Justin Martyr*,[30] *Irenaeus of Lyons*,[31] and later *Athanasius*,[32] who emphasized the gift-nature of immortality. This view is supported by texts like Matthew 10:28, which speak of both body and soul being destroyed in Gehenna.

The third, sometimes called the "absence of God" view, was nuanced by thinkers such as *Gregory of Nyssa*[33] and *Maximus the Confessor*.[34] It interprets hell not as external punishment, but as internal anguish experienced by those who, in rejecting divine love, encounter God's presence as torment (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:9).[35] This existential framing preserves human freedom while affirming a relational ontology of salvation, akin to the doctrine of *theosis*.

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[29] Williams, *The Intermediate State: Sanctification through Fire and Salvation from Judgment*.

[30] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), ch. 5.

[31] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.34.3–4, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1.

[32] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), ch. 5–6. Athanasius argues that immortality is a gift granted by union with Christ, not an intrinsic possession.

[33] Absence of God" view (Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, 2 Thess 1:9)
[8] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, Vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 439–445.

[34] Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, in *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 63–64.

[35] Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 262-265.

A fourth view, universalism (*apokatastasis*), was historically championed by *Origen of Alexandria*,[36] who believed that all rational beings—including the devil—would eventually be restored to God. However, this was formally condemned as heresy at the *Fifth Ecumenical Council* (AD 553),[37] and it remains outside the bounds of Orthodox dogma. Its rejection underscores the tradition's commitment to the scriptural and patristic warnings concerning the irrevocable nature of the final judgment (Revelation 20:11–15).

Together, these views reflect the theological diversity of the early Church and foreground the importance of theological anthropology in eschatology. The nature of the resurrected body—whether glorified or not—deepens the debate and shapes how we interpret the final destiny of the unrighteous.

By the medieval period, the doctrine of eternal torment came to dominate Western theology, aided by literary and theological forces such as Dante's *Inferno* and the rise of scholasticism. Yet in modern times, theologians like Edward Fudge and John Stott have revived annihilationism, arguing for its greater biblical, ethical, and philosophical coherence.[38]

As I argued in my prior study on spiritual matter, Paul's reference to the "*spiritual body*" (*σῶμα πνευματικόν*) in 1 Corinthians 15:44 should not be interpreted as immaterial. Rather, it describes a glorified, incorruptible body—animated and sustained by the Holy Spirit. This understanding aligns with early church views that saw "*spirit*"

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[36] Origen, *De Principiis* 1.6.1–3, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

[37] Fifth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople II), *Anathemas Against Origen*, AD 553; see Richard Price, *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 553* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 1:102–104.

[38] John R. W. Stott, *Evangelical Essentials* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 315-320.

not as vaporous or abstract, but as refined substance. Tertullian taught that the soul had a definite form and material structure, while Josephus, writing in the first century, described it as composed of "*the finest ether*."[39] Such views reflect the Greco-Roman belief that gods and spirits possessed real, though non-ordinary, bodies.

This theological anthropology has profound implications: if the righteous are raised in glorified bodies suited to eternal life, and the unrighteous are raised in non-glorified bodies, it is reasonable to infer that such bodies—though real—are not equipped to endure eternal existence in the unmediated presence of God. In this framework, annihilation is not only an expression of divine justice but a reflection of ontological incompatibility between unredeemed humanity and God's holiness (*Hebrews 12:29*).

IV. THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

The debate between annihilationism and eternal torment does not merely concern scriptural exegesis, but also engages deeply with theological anthropology, divine attributes, and the moral logic of judgment.

Proponents of annihilationism argue that divine justice, as reflected in both biblical law and Ancient Near Eastern legal principles, supports the idea of proportional punishment. The "*eye for an eye*" ethic (*Exodus 21:24*) implies that penalties must correspond to offenses. From this perspective, subjecting finite creatures to infinite conscious torment appears morally disproportionate.[40] Furthermore, annihilationists appeal to the nature of God as revealed in 1 John 4:8: a God who is love may justly judge

[39] Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 2.8.11, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, in *Josephus: The Jewish War, Books I–III*, Loeb Classical Library 203 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 387.

[40] Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen But Free* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 120-125.

sin, but would prefer to end existence rather than perpetuate unending suffering, especially when that suffering has no redemptive purpose.

This view is also supported by the conditionalist understanding of human immortality. Scripture frequently speaks of immortality as something bestowed only upon the righteous (*1 Corinthians 15:53–54*), rather than being a natural trait of the soul.[41] In this view, the unrighteous simply do not inherit eternal life—not because they are tortured forever, but because they are ultimately destroyed.

On the other side, advocates of eternal torment highlight God's infinite holiness and the gravity of sin. From this perspective, sin is not merely a moral error, but a cosmic offense against an infinite being, thus warranting Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 200-210. (*Habakkuk 1:13*).[42] Eternal torment is also defended on the grounds of human free will: if individuals choose to reject God, then that decision is honored into eternity, preserving the dignity and permanence of the soul's self-determination.

Still, critics of eternal torment argue that this view poses significant moral and theological challenges. It risks depicting God as vindictive, punishing finite beings with infinite conscious suffering—a notion difficult to reconcile with the biblical emphasis on God's mercy and compassion.[43] Conversely, defenders of the traditional view often argue that annihilationism trivializes sin and underestimates the eternal seriousness of human rebellion against God.[44]

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[41] Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 200-210.

[42] D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 82-85.

[43] Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 243-259.

[44] J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 189-192.

This theological tension continues to animate the broader discussion and reveals why a unified view must wrestle with both Scripture's justice themes and its portrait of divine love.

V. A SCRIPTURALLY AND PHILOSOPHICALLY ROBUST MODEL

Drawing from the principles of *prima scriptura* and *tota scriptura*, the model proposed here integrates the biblical and philosophical strengths of annihilationism while acknowledging the historical and theological weight behind the doctrine of eternal torment.

Scriptural Synthesis

This model holds that the intermediate state—between death and final judgment—involves conscious awareness for the unrighteous in Sheol/Hades, as depicted in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus (*Luke 16:19–31*).[45] However, at the Great White Throne Judgment (*Revelation 20:11–15*), the wicked face the "*second death*" (*Revelation 20:14*), interpreted through passages like Matthew 10:28 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9 as final destruction rather than endless torment.[46]

Importantly, the Great White Throne Judgment is not exclusively a scene of condemnation. Revelation 20:15 states, "*If anyone's name was not found written in the Book of Life, he was thrown into the lake of fire*," implying that some names *are* found written. This accords with the unique eschatological case of *millennial believers*—those

[45] D. Gene Williams Jr., *Awake in Sheol: How the Ancient Near Eastern Worldview and Jewish Tradition Shaped New Testament Perspectives on Soul Sleep*, accessed June 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html; Williams, *The Intermediate State: Sanctification through Fire and Salvation from Judgment*.

[46] Beale, *Revelation*, 1050-1060.

who come to faith during Christ's millennial reign (cf. *Rev 20:5*). As argued in *Awake in Sheol*, they do not participate in the first resurrection but are raised at the final judgment, where their deeds are assessed and their names found in the Book of Life.[47] For them, the Great White Throne becomes a moment of vindication and glorification.

This judgment should not be conflated with the Bema Seat Judgment (*2 Corinthians 5:10*), which pertains to pre-millennial believers. As developed in *Sanctification Through Fire*, the Bema Seat is a refining judgment for the saved—testing works, not salvation.[48] By contrast, the Great White Throne functions as both the confirmation of life for some and condemnation for others, thus integrating both divine mercy and justice within the eschatological framework.

The phrase "*eternal punishment*" in Matthew 25:46 is best understood in this model as referring not to unending conscious experience, but to the permanent consequence of annihilation. This aligns with the contextual flexibility of the Greek term *aiōnios*, which can denote either duration or permanence of effect.[49]

Philosophical Coherence

This integrated model reflects philosophical and theological coherence by holding divine justice and mercy in tension. God's justice demands accountability—punishment proportionate to sin—while His mercy does not delight in eternal suffering (*Psalm*

[47] Williams, *Awake in Sheol: How the Ancient Near Eastern Worldview and Jewish Tradition Shaped New Testament Perspectives on Soul Sleep*.

[48] Williams, *The Intermediate State: Sanctification through Fire and Salvation from Judgment*.

[49] Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 160-170.

89:14).[50] Annihilation preserves this balance by affirming real consequences for sin without undermining the moral character of a God who "*desires that none should perish*" (*2 Peter 3:9*).

In terms of human freedom, this model maintains that individuals retain the liberty to reject God. However, such rejection results not in eternal preservation in rebellion, but in forfeiture of existence—a final and irrevocable outcome.[51] Additionally, from the perspective of the B-Theory of Time, God's judgment is a singular, eternal act. The destruction of the wicked, though not prolonged in temporal terms, is eternally real in God's *eternal now*.[52]

This model also aligns well with the eschatological vision of new creation in Revelation 21:1–5. By removing sin and death completely, annihilation ensures that evil does not linger eternally, preserving the integrity of God's promise to make "*all things new*."[53]

Orthodox Perspectives and Theological Synthesis

Within Eastern Orthodoxy, three eschatological views are broadly recognized: eternal torment, annihilation, and the absence of God perspective. While eternal torment draws from passages such as Revelation 20:10, annihilationism finds support in texts like Matthew 10:28 and in the logic of conditional immortality. The absence of God

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[50] D. Gene Williams Jr., *Perseverance and Apostasy: Examining the Balance Between Eternal Security and Free Will in Salvation Theology*, accessed June 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

[51] Ibid.

[52] D. Gene Williams Jr., *B-Theory of Time: A Defense of God's Eternal Now in Christian Theology*, accessed June 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

[53] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 200-205.

perspective, based on 2 Thessalonians 1:9, portrays hell not as external torture but as the internal agony of estrangement from divine love, experienced by those who reject communion with God.[54]

In contrast, universalism, though historically defended by Origen, was formally condemned at the Fifth Ecumenical Council (AD 553) for undermining the finality of divine judgment.[55] Thus, while Orthodoxy embraces a range of mystery in eschatology, it maintains fidelity to scriptural warnings concerning the irrevocable nature of the final judgment.

VI. PRACTICAL AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Eschatological models shape not only theological systems but also Christian life and witness. The doctrine of annihilationism may soften the tone of evangelism, emphasizing God's mercy over fear. Yet it also risks reducing the urgency traditionally associated with gospel proclamation.[56] In contrast, the view of eternal torment often inspires evangelistic fervor but may alienate modern hearers and raise moral objections.

In the realm of Christian living, both views affirm moral accountability. Annihilationism encourages perseverance unto eternal life (*Matthew 10:22*), while eternal torment underscores the seriousness of rejecting God's offer of salvation.

Finally, the character of God is at stake. Annihilationism portrays God as just and merciful—one who judges sin but does not sustain unending suffering. This resonates

[54] Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 262-265; Truglia, "Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Soteriology Compared."

[55] Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 220-225.

[56] Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 320-325.

with modern ethical sensibilities and preserves the tension between holiness and love. Eternal torment, while defending God's inviolable holiness, often prompts questions about the compatibility of infinite punishment with divine love.[57]

VII. CONCLUSION

The debate between annihilationism and eternal torment hinges on scriptural interpretation, theological coherence, and philosophical alignment with the character of God. Through a contextual hermeneutic rooted in *prima scriptura* and *tota scriptura*, annihilationism emerges as the more biblically faithful model—emphasizing that the wages of sin is destruction (*Romans 6:23*) and that eternal life is a conditional gift granted only to the redeemed (*John 3:16*).

While the historical dominance of eternal torment in Western theology—and its vivid apocalyptic imagery—cannot be ignored, the model proposed here offers a theologically and morally coherent synthesis: conscious awareness in the intermediate state, followed by final annihilation at the Great White Throne Judgment. This view preserves divine justice, expresses divine mercy, and affirms genuine human freedom within the framework of God's Eternal Now.[58]

Moreover, it upholds the biblical teaching of proportional justice—that punishment will vary in intensity and duration according to each person's deeds and degree of rejection of divine truth (*Luke 12:47–48*),[59] yet all such punishment culminates

[57] Pinnock, "Destruction," 250-255.

[58] Williams, *B-Theory of Time: A Defense of God's Eternal Now in Christian Theology*.

[59] The idea of proportional justice—that punishment corresponds to the degree of sin—is rooted in Scripture (e.g., Luke 12:47–48) and affirmed by many Christian theologians. John Stott, for instance,

in the second death. The biblical principle of *lex talionis* ("*measure for measure*"), reflected in laws like Exodus 21:24, affirms that divine justice is not arbitrary or excessive, but proportionate and righteous. While the U.S. Constitution does not explicitly codify *lex talionis*, the biblical principle of proportional justice—ensuring that punishment fits the offense—resonates through American legal ideals such as due process and protection against excessive punishment. This concern for measured justice reflects a broader moral vision inherited, in part, from biblical jurisprudence.

Thus, the skeptical young adult, the sincere but unbelieving grandmother, and a figure like Hitler would each receive judgment in proportion to their lives—but none are eternally preserved in torment. Instead, this model harmonizes Scripture's warnings with the testimony of God's goodness, final holiness, and ultimate victory over evil.

Such a vision renews eschatological hope. It calls believers to live faithfully—not out of fear of endless torment, but in joyful reverence of the God who is just, merciful, and victorious.

This view also reflects the heart of a Father who does not over-punish, but who grieves over those who persistently reject Him. Like a parent who dies inside watching their child reject all that is good, going down a path of self-destruction and shattering every hope the parent held for them, God honors human freedom even when it leads to ruin. He does not coerce love, nor does He eternally torment the soul that wants no part in His goodness. Rather, His justice is precise, His mercy real, and His final act toward the

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endorsed annihilationism partly because he found eternal torment ethically troubling and out of proportion with the nature of finite human sin. See Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 319–20. Clark Pinnock similarly argues for a model of divine justice that is morally credible and proportionate in "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," 243–259. The Eastern Orthodox emphasis on theosis and relational estrangement also implies a justice that varies according to the soul's disposition toward God's love (cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*).

unrepentant is not cruelty but closure—an end that upholds His holiness while refusing to perpetuate suffering without purpose.

In the end, the annihilationist framework not only makes better sense of Scripture, but better reflects the God revealed in Jesus Christ: a God whose justice is holy, whose mercy is deep, and whose love never forces but always invites.

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