

Annihilation and Biblical Inspiration: Do Words Mean What They Say?¹

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“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”
“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”
—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Evangelicals have long prided themselves on basing their beliefs on Scripture alone. In fact, however, we may argue *sola scriptura* when disproving the unbiblical beliefs of other denominations, yet when it comes to our own dearly held views, we are not above ignoring biblical evidence that contradicts us. Should Evangelicals ever argue from tradition rather than Scripture, though? Should Evangelicals base their teachings on ambiguous texts viewed by the light of traditional understandings, while ignoring clear texts that point to the opposite conclusion? Who among us would say yes?

It seems to me that like Humpty Dumpty, those arguing for the eternal torment of the wicked often assign arbitrary and contradictory meanings to words already perfectly clear in English, Hebrew, and Greek—words like “destroy,” “consume,” “dead,” and “devoured.”² It is true that these words, as used in Scripture, may refer to several areas of experience, and it is also true that they are often used metaphorically. However, *when metaphors are used, they always allude to the established meanings of words, not to their opposites.*

¹ This is, essentially, the text of the overhead transparencies used in a talk I gave on this topic at the 2001 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, held in Colorado Springs. I’ve left it in this form because my space is limited to six pages at the end of this issue of *JATS*.

² Rather than give instances that cause embarrassment to scholars, I will leave it to readers to consider what they’ve read and remember such instances. There have been many.

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What follows is not a formal paper, but a collection of texts with a few words of commentary. My hope is that they will spark thought, discussion, and study.

What Does “Eternal” Mean?

Eternal Judgment (*krímatos aiōníou*): **Heb 6:2** “of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of **eternal judgment**.” [The period of **judging** or **judgment** is limited in duration, but the **verdict** will never be reversed, so the **judgment** is **eternal**.]

Eternal Redemption (*aiōnían lútrōsin*): **Heb 9:12** “Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all having obtained **eternal redemption**.” [Jesus redeemed us “once for all,” but the **effect** of that redemption is **eternal**.]

Eternal Salvation (*sōtērias aiōníou*): **Heb 5:9** “And having been perfected, He became the author of **eternal salvation** to all who obey Him.” [Jesus **saved** us by a “once for all” act, called salvation, but the **effect** of that salvation is **eternal**.]

Eternal Sin (*aiōníou hamartēmatos*): **Mark 3:29** “but He who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an **eternal sin**.” [The **sin** occurs during a finite lifetime, but its **effect** is **eternal**.]

Eternal Destruction (*ólethron aiōnion*): **2 Thes 1:9** “These shall be punished with **everlasting destruction** from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” [**Destroyed** once, but the **effect** of that destruction is **eternal**.]

Eternal Punishment (*kólasin aiōnion / zōèn aiōnion*): **Matt 25:46** “And these will go away into **everlasting punishment**, but the righteous into **everlasting life**.” [**Resurrection** to life happens “in a twinkling of an eye,” but the **effect** is **eternal**. **Execution** is an event completed only by **death**, and it has **not** occurred unless death **results**, but it is an **eternal punishment** because it is **irreversible**.]

Eternal Fire (*puròs aiōníou*): **Jude 7** “as **Sodom and Gomorrah**, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as **an example** [*deigma*, a specimen], **suffering the vengeance of eternal fire**.” [The clear statement here is that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by “eternal fire,” yet that fire is not still burning. The **effect** of the fire is permanent, but the fire burned until the fuel was consumed, then went out. Genesis 19:24–29 tells us the cities were “destroyed,” and 2 Pet 2:6 tells us they were turned to “ashes.” We may think we know what Jesus means by “eternal fire” in Matt 18:8 and 25:41, but the Bible provides its own answer.]³

³ The word most frequently used with “eternal” is of course “life.” It begins at the resurrection (1 Cor 15:42–43). The resurrection to life is a single event with eternal effects the Bible calls “eter-

What Do the “Worms and Unquenchable Fire” Verses Mean?

Mark 9:44, 46, 48 “Their **worm** does not **die**, and the **fire is not quenched**.” Jesus is quoting **Isa 66:24** “And they shall go forth and look upon the **corpses** [*peger*; corpse/carcass] of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their **worm** does not die, and their **fire is not quenched**. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.” [The correct understanding of Jesus’ meaning must take into account the following points: 1) One is not a **corpse** until one is **dead**; 2) Maggots eat **only dead flesh**, but **fire kills maggots**; 3) Thus, this is a **mixed metaphor**, and **literal fulfillment is impossible**; 4) But, the metaphors point to an **irreversible process of destruction following death**.]

Ezek 20:47–48 “And say to the forest of the South, ‘Hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree and every dry tree in you; **the blazing flame shall not be quenched**, and all faces from the south to the north shall be scorched by it. All flesh shall see that I, the LORD, have kindled it; **it shall not be quenched**.”’” [This metaphorical language refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah, using the image of “unquenchable fire” not to suggest an eternal process, but a process unstoppable until its end is reached.]

What Does It Mean to “Die”?

Gen. 7:21–23 And all flesh **died** [*apéthane*] that moved on the earth: . . .”

John 11:26 ““And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never **die** [*apothánē*]. Do you believe this?” [Logically, thus, those who **do not believe will die** at some time, becoming like those who died in the Flood. If they die, they are dead, and if they are dead, they are not alive, and if they are not alive, they cannot experience eternal torment. Death does not mean life.]

What Does “Devoured” Mean?

2 Kings 1:12 “And fire of God came down from heaven and consumed [*wattōkal*⁴/ *katéphagen*] him and his fifty.” [καὶ κατέβη πῦρ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ κατέφαγεν αὐτὸν]

Rev 20:9 “They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured [*katéphagen*] them.” [καὶ κατέβη πῦρ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρα-

nal life.” Similarly, “eternal destruction” is a single event with eternal effects the Bible calls “death” (Rom 6:23). “Eternal life” is lived in the presence of the “eternal glory” of the “eternal God” and the “eternal Spirit” because of God’s “eternal purpose.” It is interesting that when it refers to God, “eternal” has no implied beginning or end, but “eternal life” begins when we begin sharing in God’s own eternity, so for us it is eternal in only one direction. Similarly, the “eternal covenant” was not always in place. Sometimes an “eternal” event has a clear beginning and end, with only the effect being eternal.

⁴ From *wākal*, to “eat up” or “consume.”

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νοῦ καὶ κατέφαγεν αὐτούς.] [If in Elijah’s day God literally **kills the wicked with fire from heaven**, and if John then **quotes** this phrase **exactly** to indicate what he has seen in vision about the fate of the wicked, how can we say they will **not** be **devoured** to death?]

Isa 24:6 “Therefore the curse has **devoured** [*édetai*, eaten] the earth, and those who dwell in it are desolate. Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are **burned**, and few men are left.”

Isa 26:11 “. . . Yes, the **fire** of Your **enemies** [*hupenantíous*] shall **devour** [*édetai*, eat] **them**.”

Heb 10:27 “. . . but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and **fiery** indignation which will **devour** [*esthíein*, eat up]the **adversaries** [*hupenantíous*].” [What has been **devoured** or **eaten up** exists no longer. What has been **devoured by fire** can no longer be **alive**. *Esthiō* and *edō* usually refer to eating food, and they are often used metaphorically, but **they are not metaphors of something never eaten but remaining eternally uneaten, though eternally chewed.**]

What Does “Perish” or “Destroyed” Mean?

Matt 22:7 ““But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, **destroyed** [*apōlesen*] those murderers, and **burned up their city**.” [Jesus is not revealing that the murderers were tortured forever, but that they were killed. This is the primary meaning of the word.]

Matt 26:52 “But Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will **perish** [*apolountai*] by the sword.’” [“**Perish**” here means **death**, not some never-ending flaying with a sword throughout eternity.]

Luke 11:51 ““from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who **perished** [*apoloménu*] between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.” [Was Zechariah still **perishing** in Jesus’ day, or had he completed the process implied by the word and **perished**, as the text says?]

Luke 13:3, 5 ““I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise **perish** [*apoléisthe*].” [If the process of **perishing** cannot be **completed**, then Jesus is **wrong** about this.]

John 3:16 ““For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not **perish** [*apólētai*] but have everlasting life.” [If those who believe **do not perish**, then those who do not believe logically must **perish**. But if the wicked suffer everlasting torment in Hell, then they **don’t perish**, and **they also receive everlasting life**. Thus, **both** the righteous and the wicked receive everlasting life—the difference is only in the nature of that life. If this were so, then Jesus would be wrong here.]

2 Pet 3:6 “by which the world that then existed **perished** [*apōleto*], being flooded with water.” [That world **died**, along with the people in it, except for Noah and family.]

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2 Pet 3:9 “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should **perish** [*apolésthai*] but that all should come to repentance.” [Those do not repent **perish**. If they cannot **die**, they cannot **perish**.]

Rom 6:23 “For the wages of sin is **death** [*thanatos*], but the free gift of God is **eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**.” [The wages are not **eternal suffering**, but **death**. If we are not Humpty Dumpty, then **death** means **death**, not **life**.]

Luke 17:29 “but **on the day** that Lot went out of Sodom it rained **fire and brimstone from heaven** and **destroyed** [*apōlesen*] them all.”

Matt 10:29 “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to **destroy** [*apolésai*] **both soul and body in hell**.” [If they live on in eternal torment, they have not been **destroyed**.]

How Long Does “Stubble” Burn?

Exod 15:7 [Against Egypt] “You sent forth Your **wrath**; It **consumed them like stubble**.”

Obadiah 16, 18 [Against Edom] “And **they shall be as though they had never been**. . . The house of Jacob shall be a **fire**, and the house of Joseph a **flame**; but the house of Esau shall be **stubble**; **they** [Jacob and Joseph] **shall kindle them and devour them**, and **no survivor** shall remain of the house of Esau,’ for the LORD has spoken.” [This is metaphorical, but it points to a process leading to swift and certain death. It points not to a never-ending process, but to a process that will reach a completion.]

Isa 47:14 [Against Babylon] “Behold, they shall be as **stubble**, the **fire shall burn them**.” [Experience shows us that stubble does not burn forever, but once burned, it cannot be restored, so the effect is permanent. The usage here is metaphorical.]

Nahum 1:9–10 [Day of the Lord] “**Affliction will not rise up a second time**. For while tangled like thorns, and while drunken like drunkards, **they shall be devoured like stubble fully dried**.” [Whether metaphorical or literal, the fire burns quickly. Note that the Old Testament prophets do not distinguish, in their “Day of the Lord” language, between the death of the wicked at Christ’s coming, as seen in Revelation, and the punishment of the wicked in Rev 20. They know only the latter, and they see the burning as swift, with the effect permanent.]

What Are “Ashes”?

Mal 4:1, 3 [Day of the Lord] “For behold, the day is coming, Burning like an oven, And all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be **stubble**. And the day which is coming shall **burn them up**,” Says the LORD of hosts, “That will leave them neither root nor branch. . . . You shall trample the wicked, for **they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this**,” Says the

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LORD of hosts.” [If the wicked burn in eternal conscious torment for all time, they cannot be ashes under the soles of the feet of the righteous at any time, much less “on the day” their burning begins. Even if the language is metaphorical, the metaphor points to death, not to eternal life apart from God.]

Ezek. 28:18–19 “By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries. Therefore **I have brought fire from the midst of you**; it has **consumed** you, and **I have turned you to ashes on the earth** in the eyes of all who see you. All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have become terrified and **you will cease to be forever.**” [Some think this is speaking covertly of Satan. Whoever it may be speaking of, to “cease to be forever” cannot mean to **be** forever, even metaphorically. One cannot be “ashes” until one has “ceased to be.” Ashes, formed during combustion, are what is left after something has been burned up.]

What Does “Slay” Mean?

Isa 65:15 [Day of the Lord] “For the Lord GOD will **slay** you.”

Isa 66:15–16 [Day of the Lord] “For behold, the LORD will come with **fire** and with His chariots, like a whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with **flames of fire**. For **by fire and by His sword** the LORD will judge all flesh; and the **slain** of the LORD shall be many.”

Isa 66:24 “And they shall go forth and look upon the **corpses** of the men who have transgressed against Me. For **their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched**. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.” [One is not **slain** until one is **no longer alive**. If the wicked have been **slain** by the fire of God, they cannot still be **alive**. They are **corpses**. To say that “slain” here does not really mean “slain” but “not slain” is again to imitate Humpty Dumpty.]

What Does “End” Mean?

Zeph 1:18 [Day of the Lord] “Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD’s **wrath**; but the whole land shall be **devoured by the fire** of His jealousy, for **He will make speedy riddance** [NIV, “**a sudden end**”] of all those who dwell in the land.”

Matt 13:40 “As the **weeds** are pulled up and **burned in the fire**, so it will be at the end of the age.” [There can be no “sudden end” of people who suffer eternal conscious torment for all eternity. Either the doctrine is wrong, or the Bible is wrong.]

Any fair discussion of the fate of the wicked should include these verses. Base beliefs on the entire biblical witness, not a few proof texts. Establish the meaning of seemingly clear words by seeing how they are used elsewhere in Scripture. Do not twist the meanings of words so they fit beliefs. Let what is clear explain what is ambiguous. These are basic rules of sound interpretation, but they have been ignored too often in discussions of this topic.