

**WHY HELL MUST
BE ETERNAL**

confronting issues series

WHY HELL MUST BE ETERNAL

J.K. McKee

MESSIANIC
APOLOGETICS
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WHY HELL MUST BE ETERNAL

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abbreviation chart and special terms

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	understand what a Biblical text means on its own
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)	Ger: German
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	GNT: Greek New Testament
Ara: Aramaic	Grk: Greek
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	<i>halachah</i> : lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community
b. Babylonian Talmud (<i>Talmud Bavli</i>)	HALOT: <i>Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	Heb: Hebrew
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
BECNT: <i>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</i>	ICC: <i>International Critical Commentary</i>
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	IVPBBC: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)</i>
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	Jastrow: <i>Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Ba'ali, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature</i> (Marcus Jastrow)
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	JETS: <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	KJV: King James Version
ECB: <i>Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible</i>	Lattimore: <i>The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore</i> (1996)
EDB: <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>	LITV: <i>Literal Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)
eisegesis: "reading meaning into," or interjecting a preconceived or foreign meaning into a Biblical text	LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Liddell & Scott)
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	LXE: <i>Septuagint with Apocrypha</i> by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	
exegesis: "drawing meaning out of," or the process of trying to	

LXX: Septuagint
m. Mishnah
MT: Masoretic Text
NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*
NEB: New English Bible (1970)
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*
NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*
NIGTC: *New International Greek Testament Commentary*
NICNT: *New International Commentary on the New Testament*
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*
NIV: New International Version (1984)
NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
NT: New Testament
orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world

OT: Old Testament
PreachC: *The Preacher's Commentary*
REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
t. Tosefta
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TEV: Today's English Version (1976)
TLV: Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant (2011)
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)
TNTC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition
v(s). verse(s)
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*
Vul: Latin Vulgate
WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*
Yid: Yiddish
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

Introduction

The *Confronting Issues* series began in 2007, as a selection of small stapled booklets, comprising a rather forthright article or two produced by Outreach Israel Ministries and (now) Messianic Apologetics. Today in 2012, because of the significant wave of changes and transitions occurring within the broad Messianic community, the *Confronting Issues* series is being retooled a bit, into small books, addressing some of the major debates of the day. It would be our hope and prayer that these new releases are able to interject a well-needed perspective into the conversation regarding the different topics of importance, offering fair-minded and constructive solutions, which carefully address the Biblical text, and can sincerely help Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in their walk with Yeshua the Messiah.

While it is unfortunately very true that there is a level of controversy present in today's theological studies, over what happens to the deceased between death and resurrection¹—a much higher debate takes place regarding what occurs to unrepentant, unrighteous sinners. Do these people experience a never-ending, ongoing eternal punishment? Or, do these people experience an obliteration from existence? Strong and firm disagreements between those who affirm some sort of ongoing eternal punishment, versus those who believe in annihilationism, have been present in Christian theology for the past century. These debates have been taken up by many people within the broad, contemporary Messianic movement—with more than a few not quite knowing what to believe.

The topic of eternal punishment, or **Hell** as it is most commonly known, is not one which brings any degree of happiness or joy to the Bible teacher. *It brings a great deal of unhappiness and lamentation.* Yet, it is not a topic that can at all be legitimately ignored. It is one which requires an evaluation of the different ideologies involved, a classification of various original language terms regarding “destroy” and their nuances, the time and setting of various passages of

¹ Consult the preceding volume, *To Be Absent From the Body*.

Scripture—and above all a weighing of the value of an individual's salvation.

This volume of Messianic Apologetics' *Confronting Issues* series, *Why Hell Must Be Eternal*, necessarily takes up some of the uncomfortable discussion that has gone on in evangelical Christian theology regarding eternal punishment, and how it affects our contemporary Messianic faith community. Annihilationism is not a viable form of eternal punishment, as it constitutes the same basic belief of any atheist or agnostic, who thinks that after death he or she will enter into total nothingness. At the same time, there have undoubtedly been exaggerations and over-exaggerations of hyper-literal models of eternal punishment that exclusively focus on descriptions of it being fire and smoke, as opposed to outer darkness or banishment from God's presence. How should today's Messianic Believers approach the widespread, metaphorical view of eternal punishment, present in theological studies since the Protestant Reformation—but not often known to the normal layperson?

This volume should hopefully stimulate some critical thinking and evaluation, regarding the uncomfortable subject of eternal punishment—and above all motivate each and every one of us to see that none of our fellow human beings has to experience it!

J.K. McKee
Editor, Messianic Apologetics

Why Hell Must Be Eternal

The topic of eternal punishment is one of the most unpleasant and least desirable that any Bible teacher will ever have to discuss. I myself get no sense of enthusiasm, excitement, anticipation—and certainly *no joy*—out of the requirement that any discussion on death, the afterlife, and human destiny **requires an analysis** of what happens to the unredeemed. This is something that simply has to be addressed, and one which the author of Hebrews actually considers to be elementary to people of faith (Hebrews 6:2). To only address the positive side of human destiny, and not the negative side, would be a dereliction of a responsible teacher's duty to the Biblical message and story.

Regardless of which position an individual, or a Biblical interpreter, takes, contemplating the issue of eternal punishment is not something "fun." While it is difficult for one to ideologically justify a doctrine of psychopannychy for Believers (the idea that those who have died in faith are unconscious in their graves until the resurrection), many people who espouse a doctrine of psychopannychy do so not necessarily because they find the idea of going to Heaven into the presence of the Lord revolting. On the contrary, they reject the premise of an intermediate afterlife because if the righteous are in the presence of the Lord in some kind of paradise, then the unrighteous are likely in some kind of penalized state. Such a penalized state is likely a foretaste for them of the final judgment.¹

Generally speaking, most of those who adhere to psychopannychy also believe in a concept known as **annihilationism**, and those who adhere to a conscious intermediate afterlife hold to some kind of never-ending eternal punishment. (There are some who believe in a conscious intermediate afterlife before the resurrection, who do espouse annihilationism, and vice versa, although this is rare.) What is annihilationism? The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* notes how this label is from the "Lat. *annihilare*, 'to reduce to nothing,'"

¹ Before reading this article, it is highly recommended that you have read the author's preceding piece, *To Be Absent From the Body*.

detailing it as “The belief that those not believing in Jesus Christ will be directly obliterated by God because of their sin.”² Annihilationism is, in no uncertain terms, a belief that the unredeemed will experience total oblivion from existence as their punishment for rejecting the salvation of the Creator God.

Quite contrary to annihilationism, traditional models of eternal punishment throughout Christian history have advocated various degrees of conscious, ongoing, and never-ending condemnation to be meted out upon the unredeemed. Many people, who enter into the discussion and debate over eternal punishment, are actually not aware of the fact that not all traditional models have advocated some kind of never-ending fire and brimstone “bath,” but have focused more on themes of never-ending exile and removal from the presence of the Creator.

Entering into the discussion of eternal punishment is also seriously complicated because of many popular—and even some mythological—ideas about Hell, Satan, demons, and the Lake of Fire that need to be overcome. Many think about eternal condemnation in somewhat comedic terms like going to Pitchfork City, with its mayor being a bearded/goateed half-man half-goat dressed in a red suit, where regular orgies are held between condemned sinners and demons—group sex and drugs all included as some kind of hippie party. We have to overcome the different cultural stereotypes we have encountered in popular media, such as an angel sitting on one person’s shoulder, and a devil sitting on the other, reminding us of what is good or evil. We have to get over things like the Dallas series finale Conundrum, where oil baron J.R. Ewing is tempted to commit suicide by one of the Devil’s top agents calling himself “Adam”—dressed in a red tuxedo no less!

Make no mistake about it: eternal punishment is a very serious issue that is to drive people to tears and lamentation, as they are to consider their own very serious mortal and sinful limitations in view of a perfect Creator God. Those who do not respond to the message of the good news of salvation in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ), by receiving Him into their hearts, will be severely penalized for it.

Many of today’s evangelical Christian pastors and teachers admittedly choose to not delve into the topic of eternal punishment that frequently, or in any detail. While being familiar with debates over

² Donald S. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 12.

For a useful summary, see also Roger Nicole, “annihilationism,” in Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), pp 43-44.

annihilationism versus a never-ending eternal punishment, they often choose to be agnostic about it. It is often said, "I don't care what eternal punishment is. Whatever it is, I don't want to be a part of it." While I would agree with this basic sentiment, the fact that Bible-believing people do ask the question about what eternal punishment is, and more importantly *what human beings need salvation from*, makes it imperative that a proper evaluation of the subject be provided. While some theologians and Bible teachers might think that the debate over what eternal punishment is, is just some philosophical exercise; it really is not. When any one of us looks out across the globe and considers the fact that every man and woman needs eternal redemption in Yeshua, **what are such people to be redeemed from?**

Many people, both inside and outside of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, do not like the idea of an ongoing, never-ending, conscious eternal punishment. They, in fact, find any model of such punishment to be a reprehensible doctrine that is nothing short of being unloving and vengeful. When entering into the discussion of eternal punishment, there is no shortage of emotionally-laden remarks to be found from interpreters and readers, who accuse those who believe that God will punish people forever, as being some kind of sadistic monsters. Yet, while those who believe in an ongoing and never-ending eternal punishment actually disagree among themselves whether it occurs *in fire* or *involving* fire (the literal versus the metaphorical views), annihilationists often overlook that the Bible does implore God's people, in one way or another, to actually celebrate the element of judgment as a part of His salvation (Psalm 96:11-13).³

There are undeniably difficult things that must be carefully worked through when evaluating whether or not the condemned will be annihilated from existence as their punishment, or be given some form of ongoing, conscious punishment away from God's presence. Readers have to not only work through the nature and purpose of such punishment, but they also have to consider its time and place. There are also, admittedly, some speculative aspects to the issue of eternal punishment, especially as readers consider Scripture passages speaking of the future. We have to weigh into our deliberations the different dimensions of Earth, Heaven, the New Heavens, the New Earth, and the New Creation. These factors can make the topic of eternal

³ "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all it contains; let the field exult, and all that is in it. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy before the LORD, for He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His faithfulness" (Psalm 96:11-13).

punishment more difficult to sift through than simply acknowledging that in the intermediate state between death and the resurrection, a disembodied human consciousness is held in an inter-dimensional place of refreshment or confinement. On several notable levels, *we are dealing with eschatology*.

The subject of eternal punishment is also one in which readers encounter ancient people using the limited Hebrew or Greek vocabulary they possessed, to describe terrible realities. Twentieth and Twenty-First Century people know many more things about the greater universe, where descriptions like “Lake of Fire” might be found to be a bit under-encompassing.

Most concerning to us above all, though, is that we do not often see enough people who believe in an ongoing, eternal punishment for the condemned—to speak about it with a great deal of remorse or concern for those who will have to experience it. It is a sad fact, but there are some (supposed) Believers who view eternal punishment as a kind of backdoor way to hate people who have done them wrong. While they cannot exercise any kind of vengeance against those who have committed various offenses against them in this world, their view is that God will rightly damn them to a torturous existence, by frying them forever in a molten sea of fire and brimstone, and make them drink lead and eat burning dog feces for eternity. Eternal punishment is frequently over-exaggerated by those who *actually wish* to see God’s wrath dispensed upon those who have hurt them. This is not only an unhealthy way of approaching the topic of eternal punishment, **but is also most reprehensible!**

It should not be surprising that when many people have encountered an insensitive approach to eternal punishment—over-exaggerated forms of “hell-fire and damnation”—that they have responded in kind. With the growth of annihilationism in various sectors of Christian theology in the past half-to-three-quarters century, it is not difficult to see rhetoric like: “It is insanity to believe in eternal punishment! It is a lie and it is not true!” But is responding to one extreme with another extreme really appropriate? While it is absolutely true that there have been many abuses from those who believe in eternal punishment—from people who ultimately may be found to have little genuine concern for the salvation of those who have offended them in life—it is inappropriate to reject all models of an ongoing, never-ending eternal punishment out of our personal anger or disgust. **We have to be very careful not to interject our own human values of justice and punishment onto the justice decreed by an Eternal God.**

The collective responsibility of Bible readers, to be sure, is to go to the Scriptural text and dissect and exegete it carefully and accurately. With this, it is most ill-advised for those of any side, either that of annihilationism or an ongoing eternal punishment, to claim that their view is the “most Biblical,” but then fail to back it up with some level of Biblical engagement. We have to evaluate as many of the depictions of future condemnation on the wicked as we can, and not make the decision of pitting one set against the other. With this in mind, one will find that one set of Biblical portrayals of eternal punishment, that of fire and smoke, has been over-emphasized in various traditional models—with scenes such as blackness, outer darkness, and separation frequently under-emphasized. Likewise, when contending with various arguments presented in favor of annihilationism, it is also to be noted that the language of “destruction” is frequently not kept in view of the diversity of usages witnessed in both Hebrew and Greek, and how “destruction” frequently does not mean “no longer existing.”

Throughout the course of my service as a Bible teacher, I have never hidden the fact that I have been a staunch critic of annihilationism. While I understand the intention of many annihilationists, and I would not consider such a view to be theological heresy, I do not believe that an annihilationist model of eternal punishment appropriately evaluates the relevant Scripture passages to this conversation. I agree with Robert A. Peterson, “The fact that many passages could be interpreted as teaching annihilationism does not prove that doctrine. In order to be true, annihilationism has to account for all of the passages. And at this point it fails.”⁴

While I do admit that some traditional models of eternal punishment, and various teachings on the subject have gone overboard—various abuses and insensitive attitudes do not warrant a complete jettison of the unredeemed experiencing a never-ending punishment away from God’s presence. Ultimately, the issue over eternal punishment is determined by what unredeemed sinners must be redeemed from, and there are many theologians and leaders who have advocated a conscious, never-ending punishment for the unredeemed with sobriety and great remorse, *urgently urging* all people to get themselves right with their Creator. Hopefully in this article, you will see that my perspective is in accord with these voices, and not with those who would somehow wish to “play God” and condemn to eternal

⁴ Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 166.

torment those people who they do not like. *Repentance before the Lord of one's sins should be sought in view of His bar of justice.*

While the debate, between annihilationists and those advocating traditional models of eternal punishment, is something witnessed in much of contemporary Christianity today,⁵ and we will be engaging with various Christian voices from both sides of the issue—what should concern us more is what this discussion means for today's Messianic Believers. The broad Messianic movement is a relatively unestablished faith community in many matters of theology. When surveying Messianic Judaism or the One Law and Two-House sub-movements, one will encounter people who believe in traditional models of never-ending eternal punishment, as well as people who believe in annihilationism. There are also people who do not know what to believe, and there are people who are quite confused, but who are eagerly seeking fair-minded answers.

Is annihilationism something we need to be considering as a legitimate Biblical option? Have we even been informed that outside of some kind of never-ending lava bath in the Lake of Fire, that there are other traditional models like the metaphorical view? How might this change our approach to the issue of eternal punishment? How much have we not included, or known to include, within our *Messianic* deliberations on the topic of Hell?

Why "Hell" Has Lost Its Significance and Sorting Through the Difficult Words

What is the current status of a traditional, never-ending, conscious eternal punishment in contemporary theology and religious philosophy? While many conservative, evangelical Christian Believers continue to adhere to such a position, it is also easily detected that many others do not. While fifty to sixty years ago, it may have been more common to hear that annihilationism was adhered to by members of various cults or heterodox groups, belief in annihilationism—or at least a preference toward annihilationism—can now be found among many

⁵ For a general overview of the points of this debate, consult "The Hell Debate," in Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp 254-264; and William V. Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

Also consider the main points of agreement that evangelical annihilationists and traditionalists have on eternal punishment, in Bruce Milne, *The Message of Heaven & Hell* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), pp 154-155.

(professing) evangelicals. And, this same sentiment can also be definitely found in various sectors of the Messianic community.

Why has there been a decline in those adhering to ongoing and never-ending models of eternal punishment? Part of this, without any doubt, can certainly be credited to a steady liberal influence on various parts of evangelical thought. Concurrent with this, many of today's Christians, when pushed hard enough, think that a doctrine of eternal punishment and ongoing Hell is just outdated. Robert W. Yarbrough summarizes some of the main sociological factors present, which have helped to see annihilationism gain a widescale following:

"Perhaps the words of 'Jesus' about hell are actually later church teaching projected back into well-meaning but largely allegorical accounts of his life. Perhaps they are ultimately relative in meaning and therefore open to thoroughgoing reinterpretation, since they refer to things that lie beyond the space-time world as we know it. Or maybe Christianity, contrary to age-old convention, is now quite simply free to rethink what used to be nonnegotiable teachings. What harm can there be in jettisoning a presumably lower-order, difficult doctrine like eternal hell if doing so helps gain a more positive regard for the central core of the Christian message?"⁶

Is the issue of retribution against sinners just adiaphora? Does it really matter?

A common claim issued against traditional models, of eternal punishment, is that significant damage to the credibility of Biblical faith has been inflicted with a doctrine of never-ending Hell. "If only Hell can be defined as eternal non-existence," the annihilationist thinks, "might people wish to reconsider the Biblical message and story." Perhaps, in the annihilationist's estimation, the generations of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries can finally see a doctrine of never-ending Hell being replaced with belief in eternal non-existence.

There is no doubting how throughout the past two centuries, critics of organized religion have eschewed the Biblical message because of a doctrine of never-ending punishment. One of the most famous evaluations of eternal punishment is witnessed in Bertrand Russell's essay "Why I Am Not a Christian." He states on the subject of Hell, "I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for

⁶ Robert W. Yarbrough, "Jesus on Hell," in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp 70-71.

sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture.”⁷

Russell’s problem with a doctrine of eternal punishment, while perhaps noting how some of it had negatively affected various generations, is, however, not stated to be as much with various theologians, ministers, and religious officials. Russell’s problem with an eternal, never-ending punishment for sinners **is with the Messiah Himself**. The short quote just issued appears within a larger litany of statements criticizing the teachings of Yeshua in the Gospels:

“There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ certainly as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching...I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world...**I must say that I think that all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture;** and the Christ of the Gospels, if you take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that.”⁸

It is not at all surprising to see various secular philosophers and critics of religion issue their evaluation about the condemnation the unrighteous will experience, as witnessed in the Holy Scriptures. Bible Believers generally have a problem when the teachings of our Lord are criticized in the manner witnessed above, with the Messiah actually accused of being cruel and merciless.

Given the many abuses throughout history, almost always caused by over-exaggerated messages and sermons on eternal punishment, the annihilationist thinks that he can step in with his message of external extinction. *Can he?* To what extent is the annihilationist judging the intentions of God (cf. James 4:11), not too dissimilar from the atheist or agnostic who fails to recognize Him?

Traditional models of eternal punishment have lost support in theological studies because human beings have considered themselves

⁷ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian, and other essays on religion and related subjects* (New York: Touchstone, 1957), 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 17, 18.

appropriate arbiters as to what justice actually is, taking this position away from God Himself. A conscious eternity separated from Him in some kind of unpleasant place, is believed, at the very least, to be entirely unacceptable to the modern mind. *Perhaps it is*, even if “Hell” were discovered to just be a square room painted in the fire colors of red, orange, and yellow, with a condemned sinner having to sit in a center chair for eternity.

So, if limited mortals feel free to judge and evaluate future actions of God in history, deeming them unacceptable, what about past actions? Should not Bible readers feel free, if they decide that the condemned are *not* eternally punished in a never-ending state—because *we* are instinctively repelled by it—to similarly review other actions of judgment depicted in Scripture? What about the severity of the plagues issued by God upon Ancient Egypt in the Book of Exodus? Was not the Lord’s anger *utterly unleashed* upon the Egyptians because of their keeping the Israelites in slavery? Psalm 78:49-50 does not hold back any words in expressing, “He inflicted His burning anger upon them, wrath, indignation, trouble, a band of deadly messengers. He cleared a path for His anger; He did not stop short of slaying them, but gave them over to pestilence” (NJPS).

The same person who finds a never-ending model of condemnation for the unrighteous personally appalling, needs to consider the humiliation of Ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh, and the great ecological catastrophes that God unleashed to see His people freed.⁹ Derek Tidball’s observations are well taken, as he informs us of how “our image of God does not permit us easily to think in terms of his anger. Tolerance is now considered to be the outstanding virtue, so a picture of a God of wrath provokes disbelief or embarrassment rather than fear or wonder...But the holy exactness of God’s judgment is a matter altogether different from a humanly devised bombing campaign.”¹⁰ In a similar vein, we must each be very careful as we consider the much more difficult topic of eternal punishment. *Did God ask for our opinion of it?*

In the Twentieth Century, a considerable number of liberal theologians came out against all doctrines of eternal punishment, embracing either universalism (the belief that all will be saved) or annihilationism. It can be easily detected how annihilationism has grown steadily in Left-leaning sectors of evangelical Christianity in the

⁹ Consult the author’s article “The Message of Exodus.”

¹⁰ Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 58.

last two decades of the Twentieth Century, continuing into the Twenty-First Century. A number of publications have been released to address this subject matter, from the rather general *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) to Robert Peterson's *Hell on Trial* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995) to the compilation book *Hell Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

In terms of our own Messianic community, annihilationism has grown considerably over the past two decades, among all of its sectors. Yet while the broad Messianic movement has its annihilationists, the same as various parts of evangelical Christianity, there are certainly Messianic Believers who hold to a traditional model of eternal punishment. Commenting on Matthew 5:22¹¹ in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, David H. Stern asserts how annihilationism is an unsustainable view:

"Since the idea of eternal punishment is at the very least offputting, some seek to soften it by proposing that the final judgment is total annihilation, in which nothing is experienced, either good or bad. Nevertheless, what the Bible teaches about both *sh'ol* (*adès*) and Gey-Hinnom is that there is a state of eternal sorrowful existence to be consciously experienced by those who come under God's ultimate condemnation...Changing the Biblical concept of hell to non-existence is, unfortunately, wishful-thinking theology."¹²

Remarking on Romans 8:13¹³ in his Romans commentary, Tim Hegg also seems to favor a traditional model of eternal, never-ending punishment for the condemned. He states, "the person characterized by the deeds of the flesh will die in the sense of eternal separation from HaShem. That Paul, along with Yeshua, understood the punishment of the wicked to be both conscious and eternal seems apparent (Mt 10:28; 13:42; Mk 9:48; Rom 2:6ff; 2Thess 1:5-10)."¹⁴

There are those Messianics who are not quite so sure what to believe about eternal punishment, perhaps favoring a traditional view but being quite open minded to annihilationism. In his book *The World*

¹¹ "But I tell you that anyone who nurses anger against his brother will be subject to judgment; that whoever calls his brother, 'You good-for-nothing!' will be brought before the *Sanhedrin*; that whoever says, 'Fool!' incurs the penalty of burning in the fire of Gei-Hinnom!" (Matthew 5:22, CJB).

¹² David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 28.

¹³ "[F]or if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:13).

¹⁴ Tim Hegg, *Paul's Epistle to the Romans: Chapters 1-8* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2005), 214.