

The Problem of Hell

The Retribution Thesis (RT): The justification for hell is retributive in nature, hell being constituted to mete out punishment to those whose earthly lives and behaviour warrant it. (Kvanvig 1993, *The Problem of Hell*, p. 25)

Objection: hell is *unjust* for no amount of evil committed in a finite life could warrant infinite punishment.

I. Three Views of Hell

A. Eternal Conscious Torment

1. Stated: The condemned in hell will experience unending painful torment in body and soul.
2. Common Prooftexts: Daniel 12:1-2, Revelation 14:11; 20:10
3. Church Father: St. Augustine of Hippo (ca. 354-430 A.D.), *City of God*, XII.ii.

B. Conditional Immortality

1. Stated: God alone is immortal and gives the gift of eternal life conditional on accepting Jesus; the condemned in hell are subject to complete death in body and soul.
2. Common Prooftexts: 1 Timothy 6:16, John 3:16, Matthew 10:28, Ezekiel 18:4
3. Church Father: St. Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130-202 A.D.), *Against Heresies*, iii:19:1.

C. Universal Restoration

1. Stated: God will ultimately redeem all of creation back to Himself through Jesus; the fires of hell are purifying, removing the unrighteousness from the condemned.
2. Common Prooftexts: 1 Corinthians 15:22, Colossians 1:19-20, Philippians 2:10-11 + Romans 10:9
3. St. Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-365 A.D.), *On the Soul and the Resurrection*

II. Three Passages of Scripture

A. *The Red Herring and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)*

1. Wrong Genre - parables almost certainly not to be taken literally
2. Wrong Message - given context of the passage almost certainly not to be taken as didactic teaching about the afterlife¹
3. Wrong Time: even if it were taken literally, it's about the intermediate state, therefore, it is compatible with all views surveyed here.

B. *The Unquenchable Fire and Undying Worm (Isaiah 66:22-24 // Mark 9:45-48)*

1. Refers to the Valley of Hinnom (Gk. *gehenna*)
 - a) c.f. 2 Chron. 23:8, Jer. 7:31ff., Matt. 3:12 // Luke 3:17, Matt. 12:20
2. Conditionalist Interpretation: Obliteration of Life & Being

¹ cf. *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Wright 1996, pg 255): "The parable is not, as often supposed, a description of the afterlife, warning people to be sure of their ultimate destination. If that were the point, it would not be a parable"; quoting from 'The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels.' *New Testament Studies* (Bauckham 1991, pg 233, 245ff.) Wright adds "the story 'cannot claim eyewitness authority as a literal description of the fate of the dead. It has only the status of parable.' In fact, it directs attention 'away from the apocalyptic revelation of the afterlife back to the inexcusable injustice of the coexistence of rich and poor'."

- a) Dead bodies - pictorial fulfillment of Jesus's warning "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in *gehenna*". (Matt. 10:28).
 - b) Undying worm - agent of consumption, devours all flesh
 - c) Unquenchable fire - consumes all that it touches.
 - (1) c.f. God as a "consuming", "unquenchable fire", reducing to "nothing" whatever it touches (Deuteronomy 4:24, Hebrews 12:29, Ezekiel 20:47-48, Amos 5:5-6).
3. Eternal Torment Interpretation: Allegory of God's Wrath + Banishment
- a) "While Isaiah himself may not have had in mind hell as we later learn about it, it was a small and natural step for Jesus and later New Testament writers to utilize Isaiah's image for their own purposes." (*HUF*, p. 61).
 - (1) c.f. "fire and worms" that cause "pain forever" (Judith 16:17)².
 - b) G.K. Beale concedes that Isaiah 66:24 and its NT usage fits into either view (*HUF* p.120n23).
- C. *The Smoke of Torment that Rises Forever (Revelation 14:9-11; 20:10,14-15)*
- 1. Eternal Torment Interpretation: Darn Near Literal
 - a) Daniel 12:1-2 "those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."
 - b) The resurrected bodies of the condemned persist in suffering
 - 2. Conditionalist Interpretation: As Goes Babylon, So Goes Everyone (i.e. Obliteration)
 - a) "the kings of the earth...will stand far off, in fear of her *torment*, and say, "Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon...the great city...will be found no more...[her] smoke goes up from her forever and ever" (Rev. 18:9-10,21;19:3)
 - b) Similarities to judgements of Edom (Isa. 34:8ff.) and Tyre (Ezek. 26:20ff.). This phrase has roots in Isaiah's judgement of Edom: "Night and day [the fire of Edom] shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever."

III. Three Philosophical Defences

A. *Appeal to the Character of God (Status Argument)*

- 1. Stated: Sin consists of turning from the infinite, immutable good and towards a mutable finite good. In turning from the infinite good, the sinner incurs infinite guilt. (*Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae* Q87.iv "Whether sin incurs a debt of punishment infinite in quantity?")
- 2. Questionable Transfinite Arithmetic: if justice demands an actual infinite punishment, that cannot be met by successive addition. Relabeling "infinite" to "maximal" may be of some help.

² "Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment; he will send fire and worms into their flesh; they shall weep in pain forever." (Judith 16:17, NRSV)

3. Questionable Internal Logic: why think the status of the offended is more relevant than the status of the offender? Is the sin of a virtuous person more grievous than the sin of a scoundrel?
- B. *Appeal to the Perpetuity of Vice (Continuing Sin Thesis)*
1. Stated: Are we to imagine the denizens of hell as repentant, loving God and neighbour as themselves? If not, then they perpetually sin, incurring more guilt like a prisoner who commits crimes behind bars (Paraphrase of D.A. Carson)
 2. Questionable Movement: this seems *ad hoc* to preserve ECT, but actually rejects RT because the sins include earthly and postmortem sins.
 3. Questionable Warrant: there's no positive reason to suspect the condemned continue to sin in hell; Phillippians 2:9-10 might even suggest the opposite.
 4. Questionable Implications: Where there is sin, there is free will. If the free will sins are punished, would free will repentance be granted clemency? Is hell "locked from the inside"?
- C. *Appeal to Natural Consequence (Respect of Free Will Thesis)*
1. Stated: The purpose of hell not as retribution but as an issuance of God's love. The condemned wish to have nothing to do with God and acquire a nature of their own making. God, respecting their free choice, quarantines them in an existence away from himself so they may fulfill the fullness of their newly acquired nature. This is possibly what St. Paul had in mind when he wrote "these will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thessalonians 1:9).
 2. Consistent with Conditionalism; indeed, some advocates would argue that the only way to be excluded from the presence of an omnipresent God is to be obliterated.

IV. Conclusion

We have surveyed a broad range of questions related to the Problem of Hell. The exegetical question leaves open at least two viable interpretations: the Eternal Torment view, which states that God will keep the condemned in existence forever and the Conditional Immortality view which states God will give the gift of eternal life to whosoever believes and the condemned will perish by obliteration (John 3:16). Pertaining to the philosophical objection as to how finite sins can warrant infinite punishment, this presupposes that the purpose of hell is retribution. To square Eternal Torment-RT, the Status and Continuing Sin responses heavily rely on questionable transfinite arithmetic, making the Obliteration-RT pairing more *prima facie* acceptable. Most philosophers who endorse the Eternal Torment model have abandoned the RT in favor of a Respect of Free Choice Thesis (c.f. C.S. Lewis, Eleanore Stump, Jonathan Kvanvig) which seems more philosophically consistent.

Recommended Reading

1. *Hell & Divine Goodness: A Philosophical-Theological Inquiry*, James Spiegel (Cascade, 2019)
2. *The Problem of Hell*, Jonathan Kvanvig (Oxford University Press, 1993)
3. *Four Views on Hell*, ed. Preston Sprinkle (Zondervan, 2016)
4. *Hell: A Hard Look at a Hard Question*, David Powys (Paternoster, 1998)
5. *The Fire That Consumes (3rd ed.)*, Edward Fudge (Cascade, 2011)
6. *That All Shall Be Saved*, David Bentley Hart (Yale University Press, 2019)
7. *Hell Under Fire*, ed. Christopher Morgan (Zondervan, 2004)