

10

Life After Death

A traditional theological approach to the subject of life after death has been to assume a model, collect theoretical Biblical texts which indicate that there is life after death and which can be interpreted as compatible with that model, and then stop with the assumption that one is correct. A scientific approach recognizes that there are actually competing models, and looks for empirical as well as theoretical evidence.

First we should note that there are three areas where empirical evidence of life after death have been claimed. First, there is the kind of evidence cited by Raymond Moody in *Life After Life*.¹ According to Dr. Moody, many people have reported all or part of the following experience: A loud ringing or buzzing, a dark tunnel, a floating experience with mind-body dissociation, seeing spirits of dead people, a bright light which is perceived as a benign being, the life passing before the eyes, and being sent back to the world for a purpose (presumably if this being had accepted

¹Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1976.

them, they would have died). Second, there are the reports of dead friends and relatives visiting people through spiritualist mediums (and sometimes without their aid). Finally there are scattered reports of resurrections, the most prominent one being that of Jesus.

Before we evaluate these claims, we should be clear on our definition of death. A very old definition, current in Biblical times, was that death occurred when someone stopped breathing. Later, the definition was switched to when the heart stopped beating. This was doubtless reinforced by a substantial number of near-drowning² resuscitations, where simply breathing for the subject caused the return of spontaneous respirations. And today nobody would use the absence of respirations as the sole criterion for death in the presence of a heartbeat and pulse.

Today there is an additional criterion for death: The permanent absence of all brain activity. One can have a heartbeat and all body functions except respiration, which is supported by a ventilator (and can be supported indefinitely), without being a live human in any important sense, if the brain is dead. This concept is nearly universally recognized, and is the basis for many organ donations.

What is not always realized is that a person who is not brain dead is not dead. With advances in medicine we have been able to keep people alive and conscious with someone else's heart, with a baboon's heart, or even with a mechanical heart. In fact, the latter has become commonplace; most people who receive coronary bypass operations have had their hearts stopped for minutes to hours while a machine performed the functions of both heart and lungs. And there was the case of Barney Clark, who had an artificial heart for over 3 months. Of interest, the personalities change negligibly. Furthermore, if someone had cardiac arrest in my emergency department, I could not defend a lack of action, or even an improper choice of action, on the basis that "the patient was already dead and I have no duty to treat a dead person."

Nor is a heartbeat (even a mechanical one) necessary for consciousness. I had a patient once in a small emergency room who had suffered a myocardial infarction (heart attack). I was writing on his chart just around the corner. The nurse left the room for a few seconds. Suddenly we heard a loud "Hey!" from the pa-

²Note the term "near-drowning", instead of the older term "drowning". It is a little difficult to claim someone drowned when he or she is still alive.

tient. We both went charging around the corner to find him unconscious with ventricular fibrillation showing on his monitor. He was pulseless but breathing. While the nurse got the paddles, I started cardiac compressions. He never did need anyone to breathe for him. Within perhaps 45 seconds he was defibrillated and responded with a normal heartbeat and rapidly regained consciousness. He later told us what happened. "I was lying here watching the monitor when it kinda went crazy. I thought something was wrong, so I yelled." This patient was conscious enough to decipher a change in the pattern of his cardiac monitor, decide something was wrong, and do something about it, all with no heartbeat.

All this is not to say that there is no relation between the heart, lungs, and brain. One does not stay conscious forever without some kind of blood circulation to the brain, which almost always means a heartbeat, or without oxygen in the blood, which almost always means breathing. But it does mean that the brain is the only organ that is absolutely required for consciousness, not the heart or the lungs. If one accepts the idea that brain death is adequate to prove death, then it follows that *death is brain death*. One cannot be alive without a brain, and one cannot die without brain death.

This undercuts the claim that people who have had the experiences described by Moody were experiencing "life after life". None of them were brain dead. These experiences should be reclassified as "near-death experiences" (Moody's terminology). They do **not** prove consciousness beyond death.

Might these experiences still represent some kind of "soul passage" to another world? Yes, without further information they could. However, I am troubled by three problems which present themselves when I try to build a theology around these experiences. First, the sensations described, or something like them, happen in other settings. It is common for one who nearly faints (or faints) to have darkness close in from the sides of the visual fields, producing a tunnel. I have had that happen myself. It is not unusual when one is under sudden stress to have one's life pass before one's eyes. A feeling of peace, and a floating sensation with the illusion of mind-body dissociation, can be part of a drug experience, for example. The brain of someone who is having a near-death experience has to be profoundly metabolically deranged at some point. Some other evidence is needed before we can be confident that such experiences represent actual interfaces with a life beyond ours.

Second, not everyone has these experiences when the heart stops. Even Moody recognized that in his sample that a number of his subjects had not had a near-death experience (I have yet to meet someone who has had one and was willing to admit it to me). In fact, Moody himself states (p. 23) that he has not met anyone with more than 4/5 of the elements of his "typical" experience. The presence or content of such an experience does not seem to be related to religious commitment or general goodness, even in a general way. Only the theological belief influences belief in the identity of the bright being, which means we cannot even use the experiences to tell which religion is closest to the truth. I suspect, although I have no data to prove, that near-death experiences are more common if one is awake to begin with. This would fit the metabolic theory more than the other world theory. The fact that some people have the experience and some don't suggests that if it is an interface with another world, some will not make it to that world, so that an afterlife is not for everybody. This is a surprising result in view of almost all theories of the afterlife, and raises questions about the validity of the evidence.

Of interest is that Moody mentions one group that has bad experiences. This group is those who attempt suicide (p. 136-138). This is fortunate for Moody, as otherwise he would be encouraging people to kill themselves so that they could go to this non-judgmental being who would accept them no matter what they did, and be reunited with their dead loved ones. But somehow I have difficulty believing that suicide (or perhaps killing another) is the only sin worthy of punishment. Would anyone believe that a person who habitually swindled, polluted the environment, and caused human suffering without actually physically killing anyone is worthy of less punishment than someone who became depressed under abuse and finally killed herself? What about someone who committed suicide in order not to reveal what he knew of the underground to the Nazis under torture?

Third, I have trouble with the reliability of the witnesses. I do not mean that they are deliberately lying, but that their memory may be poor. Perhaps an experience I had will illustrate the problem. As a house officer I once directed the resuscitation of a lady who had asystole because of renal failure with hyperkalemia (K+ of 9.7 meq/l!). She arrested in front of us. She was rapidly resuscitated and regained consciousness shortly. After her potassium level was mostly corrected, I asked her whether she had had a near-death experience, starting with neutral questions and then asking more leading ones, trying to get some kind of description. But she denied any such experience. She seemed to

be open.

Six months later, talking to her daughter, I mentioned that I had talked to the patient who had denied having such an experience. The daughter immediately said, “Oh, but she told me all about it”, and proceeded to tell me about the tunnel and the light and the whole bit. I did not get a chance to confirm this from the patient, and she is now dead. She was a little confused and not bright enough at the time to have deliberately lied to the daughter. Nor do I think that the daughter was lying. But the two stories do not match, and this leads me to wonder whether memories of these incidents in general might not be confused, or at least influenced by factors other than the actual experience.

So I cannot give much weight to near-death experiences. If they fit a theology, they might be used as minor evidence, but I do not think one should use them as a cornerstone of the theology of the afterlife.

We next come to spiritualistic experiences. These experiences definitely are mostly from people who are dead³. So we have to explain the phenomenon.

One way is the way of Houdini. He believed that all of spiritualism was trickery, magic of the kind he did. It is true that some fraud has taken place. Most of the current activity could perhaps be explained by purely materialist magic. But I am not totally comfortable with that as a complete explanation.

One could accept spiritualistic experiences at face value. They do purport to be communications with the dead, and one should always give the simplest viable explanation priority.

However, one has only to read the Old Testament to realize a profound disapproval of attempts to contact the dead. For example, Isaiah 8:20 says, “. . . should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?” The implied answer to the latter question is “no.” This attitude is con-

³ There have, I understand, been a few times where still living people are supposed to have communicated through mediums who believed that they were dead, but this is rare, and does not eliminate the possibility of real communication.

Suppose that 99.9% of spiritualistic phenomena were explainable with naturalistic assumptions and 0.1% were not (at present, anyway). If scientific materialism or some other naturalistic philosophy were the only reality, it would be reasonable to assume that we just did not know enough about the other 0.1%. But since our best evidence indicates that naturalistic assumptions cannot completely describe reality (see chapter 2), not only can we not fairly assume that the other 0.1% are naturalistic, but we should actually be prepared for them to tell us something important about the universe.

sistent with the rest of the Old Testament.⁴ The New Testament attitude is similar.⁵ So if one gives credence to the Bible (and we have good reason to do so), one is reluctant to consider spiritualistic experiences benign.

The Bible does record one seance. First Samuel 28 records the story of Saul going to see a dead prophet (Samuel) for advice when God would not answer him. The prediction he was given was true, but entirely unhelpful; in fact it was probably damaging. Saul never actually saw Samuel himself. And the theology taught by a straightforward reading of the words of Samuel, although consistent with the theology of the day, is inconsistent with any present theology I know. Note that Samuel was brought up (vs. 8,11,12,15), and was described as “a god coming up out of the earth” (v. 13). This was where Sheol, the realm of the dead, was located, not heaven, where most people would assume Samuel should have gone (at least to “Abraham’s bosom” as in Luke 16:22 KJV). Lest there be any question, Samuel said to Saul, whose course of action and attitude seem to be that of someone who is lost, “tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me”. The theology appears to be that the dead rest together unless they are called up.

So the Biblical data does not allow one to accept spiritualistic experiences naïvely. There are hints that some of these experiences may be Satanic; Revelation 16:13-4 does speak of “demonic spirits, performing signs.” But no specific statement of the source of spiritualistic phenomena is made in scripture. So for now we must leave these phenomena without drawing firm conclusions.

We thus come to resurrection phenomena. The validity of some of them could be questioned. The experiences of Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:18-37) could be explained by artificial respiration. The stories of Elisha’s bones (2 Kings 13:20-1), Peter (Acts 9:36-42), Paul (Acts 20:9-12), and some of Jesus’ miracles (Matt 9:18-26 = Mark 5:21-43 = Luke 8:40-56, Luke 17:11-19) could be explained by mistaken diagnosis, although quite frankly both of these explanations are strained.⁶ But two

⁴ See Lev 19:31;20:6; Deut 18:9-14; 2 Kings 21:6;23:24; Ps 106:28; 1 Sam 15:23; 2 Sam 28:3.

⁵ See Gal 5:19-21; Rev 9:21;21:8;22:15.

⁶ The people who were raised not only appeared to be dead, in some cases for hours, but also were originally sick enough that death was expected, and yet did not just recover slowly but appeared to regain health essentially instantly. These events were evidently miracles even if they were only healings, and it seems easier to believe that most if not all of them were also miracles of raising the dead.

resurrections cannot be so explained. Lazarus (John 11) had been dead four days, and had started to decay. And Jesus had been executed, and then had a spear wound in His chest, and lay in the tomb for over 24 hours (whether about 30 or 72 hours does not matter for our purposes). There were also those who were raised at Jesus' death (Matt 27:52-3) and Moses (who was seen on the Mount of Transfiguration).

Thus there is solid evidence for life after death, and this life happens by resurrection. This matches scattered hints in the Old Testament (Dan 12:2,13; Eze 37:1-14, esp. vs. 12,13; 1 Sam 2:6; Isa 26:19; Hos 13:14; Job 19:25-6). This emphasis is strongly reinforced in the New Testament, especially by Jesus (for example, Matt 22:23-33 = Mark 12:18-27 = Luke 20:27-38; John 5:28-9). Several major passages link a final resurrection to the second coming of Jesus (for example, 1 Cor 15; 1 Thess 4:13-18; Rev 19:11-20:6). This was also the understanding of the early church. The Apostles' Creed, which is still recited in both the Catholic and Anglican churches, speaks of the resurrection of the dead, and the life to come (not the life to come and the resurrection of the dead, as would be expected from later models).

What is the Biblical picture of the state between death and the resurrection? It is overwhelmingly that of sleep.⁷ At this point some will protest that they are not comfortable with the idea of sleep, or unconsciousness, between death and the second coming. They had always felt somehow warmed to know that Mother was in heaven. And what about Mary the mother of Jesus, and all the saints? They are not unconscious too, are they?

Well, first we need to remind ourselves that we are on a search for truth, not for comfort. We have no business believing something because it makes us feel good. Rather, we should believe it because it is accurate. In fact, we cannot really believe things we know aren't true without becoming mentally ill. So the feeling that one is being deprived of comfort is not an adequate reason to reject the truth if one is committed to integrity

Second, it isn't really quite that bad. For if Mother is resting without pain, she cannot be said to suffer (she may even suffer less than a conscious mother watching her children going astray and helpless to do anything about it). And from an experiential standpoint, she meets Jesus immediately upon death. The inter-

⁷ See for example Matt 9:24 = Mark 5:39 = Luke 8:52-3; John 11:11-14; Acts 7:60-8:1; 1 Cor 15:51; 1 Thess 4:13-17. See also Rev 14:13.

vening years, or centuries, are not experienced. And while we may lose the ability to pray to saints, we still have Jesus (and for that matter God) to pray to. Perhaps it will take some getting used to, but we will not be left comfortless.

There are more substantial objections. What about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)? This parable can be explained from the point of view of soul sleep. It is a parable. Some of Jesus' parables happened many times, for example the parable of the sower. Some probably happened once, like the parable of the good Samaritan. But some in all probability never happened, like the parable of the prodigal son. There is nothing to prevent the parable of the rich man and Lazarus from falling into the third category and much to indicate that it should. For example, the name Lazarus is generally conceded (by those who believe the literal accuracy of the account) to have been chosen as a deliberate reference to the Lazarus of John 11 (by Jesus, not necessarily by Luke). This Lazarus was apparently not a beggar, and more importantly he did come back to life, contrary to the ending of the parable. If the parable is not literal, there is no need to assume that any details other than the punch line (v. 31) are necessarily accurate.⁸

Then there is the oft-repeated text which states that "whilst we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord." (2 Cor 5:6 KJV) Further, Paul and his hearers are "willing rather to be

⁸ We do the same thing today. I have heard, and told, the following story: A man was taken to visit hell. In the first room he saw a long table with many pots of delicious-smelling stew, and people seated around the table, moaning in despair. Their forearms had been elongated so that their hands, which were transformed into dippers, could not reach their mouths, and the mouths of the pots were too small for the people's heads to reach the stew. The people were starving in the midst of plenty. He then visited heaven. In the first room there were again people with spoons for hands and long forearms seated around a table with pots of stew, but here they were all happily feeding each other.

I hope no one draws conclusions about my theology of death based on that story. It should be obvious by now that such conclusions would be wildly erroneous. That does not mean that the story has no point, or that the point is not a valid one.

And the story of the rich man and Lazarus cannot be taken over without modification. We do not expect to be in Abraham's bosom. It wouldn't be big enough for all of us. Besides, if there were someone enfolding us it would be more likely to be Jesus. The great gulf fixed where Abraham can talk with the rich man but no one can go over is highly likely to be a literary device. There is no reason why the parable itself could not have been largely a literary device (or originally an oral teaching device).

absent from the body and present with the Lord.” (v. 8 KJV). A common interpretation of this is that when one is present in the body one is absent from the Lord, and when one is absent from the body one is present with the Lord.

But that is not exactly what the passage teaches. The passage actually starts in v. 1, and continues to v. 10.⁹ Note that the text speaks of being “naked” (v.3) or “unclothed” (v. 4), which seems to be undesirable. This seems to correspond well to the period of “sleep” between death and the resurrection. It fits less well with a conscious soul which goes straight to heaven or hell. An intermediate state is not mentioned in vs. 6-9, but if the judgment is at the last day then v. 10 would seem to imply an intermediate state, and it would not be unreasonable to assume it in vs. 6-9 as well. They specifically do not exclude it.¹⁰ Incidentally vs. 1-5 imply that the glorified state is if anything “further clothed” by a body than our present state. This passage does not prove the absence of “soul sleep”, and in fact v. 4 seems to imply it.

There is story of the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14:4-20 of wakefulness in the grave. This story is highly symbolic, and just like the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, not too much weight can be given to it in developing a theology of the grave. Again, the picture is that of sleeping “shades” who are roused and “stirred up” (v. 9), which does not fit any modern theology.

There is the passage in 1 Peter 3:18-20 which speaks of “spirits in prison”.¹¹ Catholics use this text to prove that there is a

⁹ “¹For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ²Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. ⁴For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

⁶So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.”

¹⁰ The text does not say “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” The possibility remains that one can be absent from the body and “naked”, and therefore not present with the Lord. If being “unclothed” is the same as sleeping, and we are “naked”, we cannot do anything, and therefore cannot make it our aim to please God, so there is no reason for mentioning the “naked” state in v. 9.

purgatory, a place where sinners (those who did not listen to Noah obviously made the wrong choice) are preached to. Note that this interpretation will not fit into a Protestant theology where the reward is determined at death. These “spirits” cannot be those of the saved who are just learning about Christ after He died.

But this interpretation does not really fit well into a Catholic theology either. For one would have expected these “spirits” to be in hell, not purgatory. There would be no point to having Christ preach to spirits in hell.

There is another passage in 1 Peter where “in the flesh [*sarki*]” is contrasted with “in the spirit [*pneumati*]”. In 4:5-6 we read of the judgment of “the living and the dead”, which God (Jesus?) “is ready” to do, and so has not done yet. Presumably this will happen at the last day (compare 2 Pet 3:7,10). Here again “the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God.” Was it preached after they died, or before they died? Some of them were saved, and that is the reason why the gospel was preached to them. It would appear that either hell is not final, which is not in accord with traditional Protestant teaching (or traditional Catholic teaching either—hell and purgatory are usually separated), or the preaching in 4:6 was done when they were alive (note that the gospel “was”, not “is”, preached. The Greek is aorist passive).

If the gospel was preached to those in 4:6 while they were alive, then could those in 3:19 have been preached to while they were still alive? Not if the gospel has to be the good news about Jesus. These people lived long before Him. But perhaps we have too narrow a concept of the gospel. That there has always been a gospel is implied in Rev 14:6, where we read of an “eternal gospel”. In 1 Peter 4:6 one suspects that at least some of those to whom “the gospel was preached” were living before the time of Jesus, and therefore the gospel may not necessarily have to contain all the details of His life. In that case, the gospel may have been preached to the “spirits in prison” “when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, . . .”

Why call them “spirits in prison”? It could be because they

¹¹ ¹⁸ For Christ also died [some mss. read “suffered”] for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, ¹⁹being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.”

were unable (or unwilling) to break out of Satan's prison house. Or it could be because they are being kept for the judgment, somewhat like the angels of 2 Pet 2:4.

What about the phrase "made alive in the spirit" or "live in the spirit"? Does this denote an existence after death? Yes, it does. But the example that is given is that of Christ, who was made alive in the spirit when He was resurrected. The experience of the righteous dead in 1 Pet 4:6 may be expected to parallel His.

There is the story about the thief on the cross, who was promised by Jesus Himself, according to most translations, "Truly I say to you, Today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43) This would imply that the thief went straight to heaven when he died.

However, this interpretation is strained. For if insisted upon literally it would require Jesus to go to heaven when He died, whereas the Biblical picture has Him doing that at His ascension (see also the Apostles' Creed!), and specifically excludes His going to the Father at death (John 20:17). Instead, He was in Hades (in this context a direct translation of *Sheol*), according to Acts 2:27-31 (from which we get the Catholic doctrine of the Descent into Hell). Thus the above interpretation appears to be strained.

There are two more ways to understand the text. First, it may have been an experientially accurate description. For if the thief died that day which is probable, then when he awakens, which for his experience will be the same day, he will be with Christ. Second, the punctuation, which was not in the original, may have been inserted in the wrong place, so that the text should read, "Truly I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise."

But perhaps the major objection to the picture of soul sleep comes from the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. One might say that the Biblical picture is that the soul that sins will die (Eze 18:4,20) and that only God has immortality (1 Tim 6:16). But there is perhaps a more fruitful line of inquiry. There are three models of the afterlife we shall consider, that of soul annihilation, soul sleep, and soul immortality. The first two are actually indistinguishable in their predicted effects. For if one cannot receive information from one's environment, and cannot transmit information to one's environment, then as far as the environment is concerned, one might as well not exist (souls may even need bodies to interact with the environment). Therefore, unless someone can show where the unconscious souls are sleeping, scientific theology would not recognize any essential difference between the two theories.

However, soul immortality is compatible with soul sleep, as

long as we do not insist on **conscious** immortality. The predictions are phenomenologically precisely the same. Thus if one wants to insist on an immortality of the soul, it only has the traditional meaning if one insists on the **conscious** immortality of the soul. And this belief can be experimentally falsified, and in fact is falsified by most of us every night. For every time we go into sleep, and sleep without dreams, we falsify the doctrine of the (conscious) immortality of the soul. In this case, philosophy should bow to experience. Let me emphasize the point one more time. *The soul is not immortally conscious.* We know that from experience.

This point has one other consequence which I wish to explore. We are not bound by philosophical considerations to believe that the wicked are tortured forever in Hell. So we should see what other evidence there is for the duration of their punishment. Jesus did not say anything which proves that **conscious** punishment is eternal.¹² He does refer to “eternal fire” (Matt 18:8;25:41; as well as eternal punishment in 25:46). But one must use these texts cautiously, as in Jude 7 Sodom and Gomorrah are referred to as suffering “eternal fire”¹³ (compare 2 Pet 2:6 where they were turned to “ashes”). On the other hand, John (quoting Jesus?) refers to the wicked as perishing (3:16), as contrasted to having eternal life, suggesting that at some point they cease to be.¹⁴ There is a third picture of the wicked as being cast in “outer darkness” where they “weep and gnash their teeth” (Matt 8:12;22:13;25:30). This picture gets a little clouded when it is noted that in one instance (Matt 13:42) fire is part of it. I have difficulty visualizing dark fire (two references, Matt 24:51 and Luke 13:28, do not mention either darkness or fire).

So although there are trends, the words of Jesus do not settle the question. There are only a few other texts in the New Testa-

¹² He did say in Mark 9:48 that in Hell (Greek *Geenna*, or *Gehenna*) “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” (quoting Isa 66:24) But the picture here is of rotting flesh in a garbage dump, not conscious souls in agony. It is even reasonable to suggest that the bodies are dead before they are substantially burned. Certainly this is the case in the passage in Isaiah.

¹³ If you are following along in the KJV, it may help to know that the Greek words are the same.

¹⁴ The same Greek word is used in Heb 1:11 to refer to the earth and the heavens, in Matt 9:17 = Luke 5:37 to describe wine bottles, in Matt 8:25 = Mark 4:38 = Luke 8:24 to describe the threatened fate of the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, in Luke 13:3,5 to describe the fate of people who were killed by the Romans or natural disaster, and also sinners, in Luke 21:18 to describe the fate of (head) hairs, and in 2 Pet 3:6 to describe the antediluvian world.

ment outside of Revelation which refer to punishment with apparent reference to its duration. Heb 6:2 refers to “eternal judgment”. Of course, that does not require eternal consciousness, any more than “eternal fire” does. Nor does the “eternal destruction” of 2 Thess 1:9, which might actually imply final destruction. Jesus’ “outer darkness” is mirrored in Jude 13, where the “gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever” for certain evil men (the parallel in 2 Pet 2:17 does not have “for ever”). This experience is apparently parallel to Jude 6, where the wicked angels have been kept in “eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of the great day; . . .” (again the parallel in 2 Pet 2:4 is missing the word “eternal”).

This brings us to Revelation. There are 3 texts which associate the punishment of the wicked with the words “forever and ever”. In Rev 14:11, speaking of those who worship the beast and his image, we are told that “the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever [*eis aiōnas aiōnōn*]; . . .” In Rev 19:2-3 we read of “the smoke” from “the great harlot” which “goes up for ever and ever [*eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*]”. And in Rev. 20:10 the devil, the beast, and the false prophet “will be tormented day and night for ever and ever [*eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*].” These texts, particularly the last one, seem to indicate eternal punishment.

But we can find the same phrase used in the Old Testament (the Septuagint is sometimes even stronger than Revelation) to describe actions or entities which do not last forever in our modern use of the term. In Ps 52:8 David states, “I trust in the steadfast love of God for ever and ever.”¹⁵ Again, “I will keep thy law continually for ever and ever” (Ps 119:44).¹⁶ See also Ps 145:1,2.¹⁷ David obviously died. According to the Psalms, he cannot be praising God now (for “The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any that go down into silence. . . .”, according to Ps 115:17. Compare Ps 88:10). He certainly cannot if he sleeps in death. Thus his “forever and ever” appears to have lasted only unto death. In fact, in the Massoretic text (followed by the KJV) of Ps 48:14, “for ever and ever” is parallel with, and presumably equivalent to, “unto death”.¹⁸

¹⁵ LXX ((51:10) *eis ton aiōna kai eis ton aiōna tou aiōnas*; MT (52:10) ^cwlm w^cd. The LXX would usually be translated “forever and forever and ever”.

¹⁶ LXX (118:44) *eis ton aiōna kai eis ton aiōna ton aiōnas*; MT ^cwlm w^cd.

¹⁷ LXX (144:1,2) *eis ton aiōna kai eis ton aiōna tou aiōnas*; MT ^cwlm w^cd. Also Ps 21:4 (LXX [20:5] *eis aiōna aiōnos*; MT [21:5] ^cwlm w^cd) could be Messianic, but it more probably originally referred to David who was given “length of days for ever and ever.” Nehemiah 9:5 is probably more properly translated as in the RSV than as in the KJV (“for ever and ever”).

Furthermore, the passages of Revelation obviously allude to Isa 34:9-10 where “the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into brimstone; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up for ever [Massoretic text $I^c wlm$; Septuagint *eis ton aiōna chronon*]. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever.”¹⁹ But even though the smoke goes up “forever”, various animals will live there (vs. 11-17). The smoke going up “for ever” simply does not mean that the burning never stops. We may not agree with the wisdom of this use of language. But we cannot honestly say that the Bible writers had to mean something when they wrote these texts because that is what we would have meant. Understanding them on their own terms, they simply did not intend to imply endless duration when they used the term commonly translated “for ever and ever”.²⁰

There is another picture we should notice, which starts in the OT and works its way to Revelation. In Isa 66:24 the “dead bodies” of those who rebel against God have a “fire” that “shall not be quenched” consuming them. Note that the bodies are dead. In Mal 4:1-3 the wicked “will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up,” so that “they will be ashes under the soles of your feet.” In Matt 10:28 we are told to “fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” In Matt 25:46 “eternal punishment” is contrasted with “eternal life”. We have noted John 3:16 above.

¹⁸ The MT has $I^c wlm w^c d$ and $I^c mwt$. The original may have been $I^c mw t$, which is ambiguous, or $I^c wlm w t$, which is usually translated “forever”. However, this is an unusual form; the standard form (for example, v 9 MT) is $I^c wlm$ (or more precisely $I^c d- I^c wlm$). In any case the writers of the MT seemed to be able to equate “forever and ever” with “until death”. The LXX (47:15) translates the two phrases “*eis ton aiōna kai eis ton aiōna tou aiōnas*” and “*eis tous aiōnas*”.

The MT uses $I^c wlm w^c d$ in Ps. 104:5, and the meaning “forever” is difficult to maintain here. It is true that the psalmist may have meant “forever”. But other Biblical material indicates that the foundations of the earth can be shaken (Isa 24:18).

¹⁹ The MT of the final “for ever and ever” is *lnsh nshym*, which can be translated “constantly” or “perpetually”. The LXX is *eis chronon polun*, which can be translated “for a long time”. Incidentally, the LXX also has the “forever” transposed so that the fire will not be quenched forever, rather than having the smoke ascend forever. Presumably Revelation is following the reading found in the MT rather than the Septuagint.

²⁰ This is not to say that the term is used in a totally capricious way. The Biblical writers could probably have given a definition to the term. They probably meant something like “as long as the object referred to is in existence.”

Rom 6:21-23 has a similar contrast. Verse 23 states that “the wages of sin is death [not ‘eternal torment’], but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” John 5:29 speaks of “the resurrection of life,” which contrasts with “the resurrection of judgment.” There is “the lawless one” of 2 Thess 2:8 who will be slain, and destroyed, at the second coming of Jesus. Heb 10:27 mentions a “fury of fire which will consume the adversaries.” 2 Pet 3:7 speaks of “fire” which results in the “destruction of ungodly men.” And Rev 20:6 speaks of the “second death”, which, if it is parallel with the first death, should result in unconsciousness. This happened in vision when “fire came down from heaven and **consumed** them, . . .” These texts all seem to indicate that there will be an end to the consciousness of the wicked. One can evade their force, but it puts a certain strain in one’s model.

The model of eternal torment has another problem. It makes God appear to be worse than Hitler or Pol Pot. At least their victims eventually died. One may object that we should not use our reasoning to limit God, and this objection has some weight. But Jesus sometimes used the same basic kind of reasoning. He implied that our sense of fairness and compassion is not completely corrupted when He said, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt 7:11. See also Luke 18:1-8) So although it may not decide the question, the consideration of God’s character must be given some weight.

Finally, we do have empiric evidence which bears on how God treats lost people, and it is inconsistent with any kind of vindictiveness. The evidence comes from John 13:21-30. There are two accounts of this story, the other one being Matt 26:20-5. Matthew has Jesus pointing out Judas in an unmistakable way. In hindsight the disciples recognized that He had done so, and so Matthew’s account is not totally wrong. But it is probably a summary (as Matt 9:18-26 is of Mark 5:21-43 — see Luke 8:40-56) with its attendant compression and distortion.²¹ The Johannine account has Jesus saying that He would be betrayed. Then He is asked who it is. He does not answer directly. Rather, He says, “It is he to whom I give this morsel when I have dipped it.” The disciples could easily have taken that answer at the time to mean

²¹ Ellen White followed Matthew in *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View CA: Pacific Press Publishing Company [now Association], 1898). I do not think that she is definitive for this question, for the reason given in Chapter 3.

that it was one who was eating at the table with Him. Perhaps there was a pause, or a change of subject. In any case Jesus' giving the morsel to Judas afterwards was sufficiently unobtrusive that no one else immediately caught on.

At this point Judas made his final choice, and "Satan entered into him." (v. 27). Jesus could have exposed Judas, and gotten a few points with the disciples, without making any difference in Judas' eternal salvation or lack thereof. But instead, He said, "What you are going to do, do quickly." He thus gave Judas a chance to escape without facing the ire of the other disciples. The rest of the disciples were confused (v. 28). "Some thought that . . . Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the feast'; or, that he should give something for the poor." (v. 29)

By being kind to Judas, Jesus could not "save his soul". The only gain was the partial happiness of a totally lost man. Yet Jesus still felt it worthwhile. This means that we may also feel it worthwhile. But even more importantly remember that Jesus is God, and gives us a picture of the Father's attitude. This means that God is also unwilling for anyone to suffer more than absolutely necessary to preserve freedom of choice. So if all have made their choices, there is no point in keeping them suffering endlessly except that they cannot die, and we have seen that they could be put to sleep instead. In fact, it may be worthwhile to explore models where the punishment of the wicked is the natural outgrowth of their own choices, rather than something arbitrarily imposed by God. It is even possible that some who never had the opportunity to choose, for example, the severely mentally retarded or very young children, will not be resurrected, but will simply be allowed to continue sleeping. In any case, with the data at our disposal, one does not have to swallow the doctrine of eternal torment in order to be a true Christian.