

# Immortality or Resurrection?

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## CHAPTER I

### THE DEBATE OVER HUMAN NATURE AND DESTINY

What Christians believe about the make-up of their human nature largely determines what they believe about their ultimate destiny. Those who believe their nature is dualistic, that is, consisting of a material, mortal body and a spiritual, immortal soul, generally envision a destiny where their immortal souls will survive the death of their body and will spend eternity either in the bliss of paradise or in the torment of hell. For some, like Catholics and others, the possibility also exists that pardonable souls can be purified in purgatory before ascending to Paradise.

On the other hand, those who believe their nature is wholistic, consisting of an indivisible whole where body, soul, and spirit are only characteristics of the same person, generally envision a destiny where their total mortal person will be resurrected either to eternal life or eternal death. The two different destinies envisioned by a dualistic or wholistic view of human nature could be characterized, as suggested by the title of the book, *immortality of the soul or resurrection of the dead*.

The Biblical view of human nature and destiny has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years. Leading scholars of different religious persuasions have addressed this question in articles and books. A survey of the studies produced during the last fifty years or so, reveals that the traditional dualistic view of human nature has come under massive attack. Scholars seem to outdo one another in challenging traditional dualism and in affirming Biblical wholism. Reading the scholarly literature in this field, one almost gets the impression that Christianity is coming out of a stupor and is suddenly discovering that for too long it has held to a view of human nature derived from Platonic dualism rather than from Biblical wholism.

**Objectives of This Book.** This book builds upon the research done by numerous scholars in recent years and endeavors to show how the Biblical wholistic view of human nature determines to a large extent our understanding of ourselves, this present world, redemption, and our ultimate destiny.

The objectives of this study are twofold. The first is to establish the Biblical view of human nature. We shall learn that the Bible sees human nature as an indivisible unity. This truth has been accepted in recent years by many scholars of all persuasions. In the Bible there is no dividing of a person into body and soul, or body, soul, and spirit. All of these are components or characteristics of the same person. The dichotomy of body and soul derives from Platonism and not from Biblical revelation. The Biblical view of human nature is wholistic or monistic, not dualistic. The Platonic view of the body as the prison of the soul is foreign to the Bible and has done great harm to Christian spirituality, soteriology, and eschatology.

The second objective of this book is to examine how the Biblical view of human nature relates to our present life and ultimate destiny. There is a tendency in scholarly studies to examine in isolation either the Biblical view of human nature (Biblical anthropology) or that of human destiny (Biblical eschatology). Seldom are attempts made to study the correlation between the two. Yet, the two cannot be studied in isolation because the Biblical view of human nature determines the view of human destiny.

We have a penchant and a genius for dividing, analyzing, and isolating, but often fail to synthesize and show how the various parts contribute to the larger picture. In this study I attempt to show how the Biblical wholistic view of human nature presupposes the Biblical realistic view of human destiny in which body and soul, flesh and spirit, the material and spiritual components of our nature and of our world are all part of God's creation, redemption, and ultimate restoration.

**Procedure.** The procedure in this book is as follows: First, we study the Biblical view of human nature by examining some of the key words used for man in the Old and New Testaments. While at first glance this looks like analysis, we must keep in mind throughout our study that under each term we are viewing the whole person: person as soul, person as body, person as spirit. Thus, while we consider the various aspects of human nature, we are always looking at the person as a whole. We must keep in mind that in the Bible, as J. A. T. Robinson puts it, "Any part can stand at any moment for the whole."<sup>1</sup>

The second step of the procedure is to examine the Biblical view of human destiny in the light of its teaching about human nature. The study shows that the Biblical wholistic view of human nature, where body and soul are an indissoluble unit, presupposes also a Biblical view of human destiny, where the whole person, body and soul, is resurrected to receive either eternal life or eternal death. Moreover, those who receive eternal life will spend eternity, not in an ethereal, spiritual Paradise, but in this material planet earth, restored by God to its original perfection.

The study of human destiny requires an analysis of popular misconceptions regarding the intermediate state between death and resurrection, paradise and hell. Each of these topics is examined in a separate chapter in the light of Biblical teaching. Special attention is given to the study of hell in chapter 6, in view of the widespread rejection of the traditional view of hell as conscious torment. The ultimate goal of this study is not merely to expose the fallacies of prevailing views but primarily to affirm the Biblical wholistic and realistic view of human nature and destiny.

This introductory chapter is designed to provide an overall view of the two basic views of human nature and their impact upon Christian faith and practice. Its purpose is to help the reader understand the importance of the issues we are addressing in this book. We shall find that what Christians believe about the constitution of their human nature largely determines their understanding of themselves, this present world, redemption, and ultimate destiny.

## **1. Two Basic Views of Human Nature and Destiny**

There are two basic Christian visions of human destiny which originate from two fundamentally different views of human nature. The first is based on the belief of the immortality of the soul, and the second on the belief of the resurrection of the body. In his scholarly study *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr suggests that the fundamentally different Christian beliefs about human nature and destiny derive from two basic views: (1) the *Classical* and (2) the *Christian*.<sup>2</sup> The first derives from Greek philosophy and the second from the teaching of the Bible. The term "Christian" for the latter view may be misleading, because, as we shall learn, the vast majority of Christians throughout the centuries have been greatly influenced by the classical view of human nature which consists of a mortal body and an immortal soul. Therefore, I prefer to call the second view "Biblical," because, as this study shows, it reflects the teachings of the Bible.

**Classical Dualism.** The classical view of human nature is largely derived from the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. The emphasis of these philosophies is on the distinction between the material and spiritual components of human nature. In Platonic thought, human nature has both a material and a spiritual component. The material component is the body, which is temporary and essentially evil; and the spiritual component is the soul (*psyche*) or the mind (*nous*), which are eternal and good. The human body is transient and mortal while the human soul is permanent and immortal. At death, the soul is released from the prison house of the body where it was entombed for a time. Historically popular Christian thought has been deeply influenced by this dualistic, un-Biblical understanding of human nature. The far-reaching implications of the classical view of human nature for Christian beliefs and practices is inestimable. We reflect upon them shortly.

**Biblical Wholism.** The Biblical view of human nature is essentially wholistic or monistic. The emphasis in the Bible is on the unity of body, soul, and spirit, each being part of an indivisible organism. Since this book as a whole is intended to articulate the Biblical wholistic view of human nature, I simply refer here to two significant differences with the classical view. The first is that the wholistic view of human nature is predicated on the belief that the material creation of this world, including that of the human body, is "very good" ([Gen 1:31](#)). There is no dualism or contradiction between the material and the spiritual, the body and the soul, the flesh and the spirit, because they are all part of God's good creation. Redemption is the restoration of the whole person, body and soul, and not the salvation of the soul apart from the body.

A second contrast with the classical view is that human nature was not created innately immortal, but with the capacity of becoming immortal. Human beings do not possess a mortal body and an immortal soul; they have a wholistic mortal body and soul which can become immortal. Immortality or eternal life is God's gift to those who accept His provision of salvation. Those who reject God's plan for their salvation ultimately will experience eternal destruction, not eternal torment in an ever-burning hellfire. The reason is simple. Immortality is given as a recompense to the saved, not as a retribution to the unsaved.

Here is God's Good News. Although Adam and Eve were created mortal (with the possibility of becoming immortal by partaking of the Tree of Life) and we today are born mortal, we can receive immortality if we accept God's gift of eternal life. Immortality is a divine gift and not an innate human possession. It is *conditional* upon our willingness to accept God's gracious

provision for the salvation of our total nature, body and soul. Thus the Biblical view is also referred to as *conditional immortality*, because it is offered on God's terms and *conditions*.

**The Body-Soul Debate.** Some readers may feel that the body-soul question is a dead issue which no one cares about any more. Writing a book about this topic may be seen as a waste of time. The truth of the matter is that the body-soul question is far from being an irrelevant, dead issue. The recent mass suicide at a mansion in San Diego of 39 persons who wanted to leave behind the "container" of their body in order to reach with their souls the Hale-Bopp comet reminds us of how much alive the soul-body question is. Interest in the afterlife appears to be greater today than ever before. During the Middle Ages belief in the afterlife was promoted through literary and artistic, superstitious representations of the bliss of the saints and the torments of the sinners. Today such a belief is propagated in a more sophisticated way through mediums, psychics, "scientific" research into near-death experiences, and New Age channeling with the spirits of the past. The outcome of all of this is that the body-soul question is attracting unprecedented attention even in the scholarly community. A survey of the scholarly literature produced in recent years clearly shows that this question is being hotly debated by leading scholars of different religious persuasions.

The central issue is whether the soul can survive and function apart from the body. In other words, is human nature so constituted that at death the soul, that is, the conscious part, leaves the body and continues to exist while its "container" disintegrates? Traditionally, the vast majority of Christians have answered this question in the affirmative. They have believed that between death and the final resurrection of the body, God preserves the existence of their human disembodied souls. At the resurrection, their material bodies are reunited with their spiritual souls, thus intensifying the pleasure of paradise or the pain of hell.

This traditional and popular view has come under massive attack in recent years. An increasing number of leading evangelical scholars are abandoning the classical, dualistic view of human nature which sees the body as mortal, belonging to the lower world of nature, and the soul as immortal, belonging to the spiritual realm and surviving the death of the body. Instead, they are accepting the Biblical wholistic view of human nature in which the whole person, body and soul, experiences death and resurrection.

Several factors have contributed to the abandonment of the classical dualism on the part of many scholars. One of them is a renewed study of the Biblical view of human nature. A close examination of the basic Biblical terms used for man (*body, soul, spirit, flesh, mind, and heart*) has led many scholars to recognize that these do not indicate independent components, but the whole person seen from different view points. "Recent scholarship has recognized," writes Eldon Ladd, "that such terms as body, soul, and spirit are not different, separable faculties of man but different ways of viewing the whole man."<sup>3</sup>

Virtually any part of the body can be used in the Bible to represent the whole human being. There is no dichotomy between a mortal body and an immortal soul that survives and functions apart from the body. Both body and soul, flesh and spirit in the Bible are part of the same person and do not "come apart" at death.

**Dualism under Attack.** Numerous Biblical scholars in recent times have argued that Old and New Testament writers do not operate with a dualistic view of human nature, but with a monistic or wholistic one. Their studies are discussed in the following chapters. The outcome of these studies is that many today are questioning or even rejecting the notion that Scripture teaches the existence of souls apart from bodies after death.

Church historians support these conclusions by claiming that a dualistic view of human nature and the belief in the survival of disembodied souls were brought into the Christianity by Church Fathers who were influenced by Plato's dualistic philosophy. This explains why these beliefs became widely accepted in the Christian church even though they are foreign to the teachings of the Bible.

Philosophers and scientists also have contributed to the massive assault against the traditional dualistic view of human nature. Philosophers have attacked traditional arguments that the soul is an immortal substance that survives the death of the body. They have proposed alternative theories according to which the soul is an aspect of the human body and not a separate component.

Scientists, too, have challenged the belief in the independent existence of the soul by showing that human consciousness is dependent on and influenced by the brain. At death, the brain ceases to function and all forms of consciousness stop. To scientists the cessation of all mental functions at death suggests it is highly unlikely that the mental functions ascribed to the soul can be carried out after death.

These concerted attacks on dualism by Biblical scholars, church historians, philosophers, and scientists have led liberal and even some conservative Christians to reject the traditional dualistic view of human nature. In his book *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, John W. Cooper summarizes the outcome of this development, saying: "Liberals rejected it [dualism] as old-fashioned and no longer intellectually tenable. And some conservative Protestants argued that since we ought to follow the Scripture alone and not human traditions, if anthropological dualism is a human tradition not based on Scripture, we ought to reform our confessions and purge them of such accretions of the Greek mind. The soul-body distinction has come under attack from many directions."<sup>4</sup>

**Dualists Are Concerned.** These developments have raised serious concerns on the part of those who find their traditional dualistic understanding of human nature severely challenged and undermined. Cooper's book represents one of many attempts to reaffirm the traditional dualistic view by responding to the attacks on dualism. The reason for this response is well expressed by Cooper: "If what they [scholars] are saying is true, then two disturbing conclusions immediately follow. First, a doctrine affirmed by most of the Christian church since its beginning is false. A second consequence is more personal and existential—what millions of Christians believe will happen when they die is also a delusion."<sup>5</sup>

Cooper is deeply concerned about the cost of abandoning the traditional dualistic understanding of human nature. He writes: "The most obvious is that the beliefs virtually all ordinary Christians have about the afterlife must also be jettisoned. If souls are not the sort of thing which can be

broken loose from bodies, then we do not actually exist between death and resurrection, either with Christ or somewhere else, either consciously or unconsciously. That conclusion will cause many Christians some level of existential anxiety. A more general cost is the loss of another plank in the platform of traditional Christian belief, pried loose and tossed into the shredder of modern scholarship."<sup>6</sup>

There is no question that modern Biblical scholarship is causing great "existential anxiety" to millions of sincere Christians who believe in their disembodied souls going to heaven at death. Any challenge to traditionally cherished beliefs can be devastating. Yet, Christians who are committed to the normative authority of Scripture must be willing to reexamine traditional beliefs, and change them if proven to be unbiblical.

Strong emotional reactions are to be expected from those whose beliefs are challenged by Biblical scholarship. Oscar Cullmann, for example, found himself bitterly attacked by many who strongly objected to his book *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* He wrote: "No other publication of mine has provoked such enthusiasm or such violent hostility."<sup>7</sup> In fact, the criticism became so intense and so many took offense at his statements that he deliberately decided to keep silent for a time. I should add that Cullmann was not impressed by the attacks against his book because he claims they were based not on exegetical arguments, but on emotional, psychological, and sentimental considerations.

**Tactics of Harassment.** In some cases, the reaction has taken the form of harassment. Respected Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock mentions some of the "tactics of harassment" used to discredit those evangelical scholars who have abandoned the traditional dualistic view of human nature and its related doctrine of eternal torment in a fiery hell. One of the tactics has been to associate such scholars with liberals or sectarians like the Adventists. Pinnock writes: "It seems that a new criterion for truth has been discovered which says that if Adventists or liberals hold any view, that view must be wrong. Apparently a truth claim can be decided by its association and does not need to be tested by public criteria in open debate. Such an argument, though useless in intelligent discussion, can be effective with the ignorant who are fooled by such rhetoric."<sup>8</sup>

Despite the tactics of harassment, the Biblical wholistic view of human nature which negates the natural immortality of the soul and, consequently, the eternal torment of the unsaved in hell, is gaining ground among evangelicals. Its public endorsement by John R. W. Stott, a highly respected British theologian and popular preacher, is certainly encouraging the trend. "In a delicious piece of irony," writes Pinnock, "this is creating a measure of accreditation by association, countering the same tactics used against it. It has become all but impossible to claim that only heretics and near-heretics [like Seventh-day Adventists] hold the position, though I am sure some will dismiss Stott's orthodoxy precisely on this ground."<sup>9</sup>

Stott himself expresses anxiety over the divisive consequences of his new views in the evangelical community where he is a renowned leader. He writes: "I am hesitant to have written these things, partly because I have great respect for longstanding tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of Scripture, and do not lightly set it aside, and partly because the unity of the worldwide evangelical community has always meant much to me. But the issue is too important

to be suppressed, and I am grateful to you (David Edwards) for challenging me to declare my present mind. I do not dogmatize about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among evangelicals on the basis of Scripture."<sup>10</sup>

Stott's plea for a "frank dialogue among evangelicals on the basis of Scripture" may be very difficult if not impossible, to realize. The reason is simple. Evangelicals are conditioned by their denominational traditional teachings, just as much as the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. In theory, they appeal to *Sola Scriptura*, but in practice, Evangelicals often interpret Scripture in accordance with their traditional denominational teachings. If new Biblical research challenges traditional doctrines, in most cases, Evangelical churches will choose to stand for *tradition* rather than for *Sola Scriptura*. The real difference between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics is that the latter are at least honest about the normative authority of their ecclesiastical tradition.

To be an "Evangelical" means to uphold certain fundamental traditional doctrines without questioning. Anyone who dares to question the Biblical validity of a traditional doctrine can become suspect as a "heretic." In a major conference held in 1989 to discuss what it means to be an evangelical, serious questions were raised as to whether such persons like John Stott or Philip Hughes should be considered evangelical, since they had adopted the view of conditional immortality and the annihilation of the unsaved. The vote to exclude such theologians failed only narrowly.<sup>11</sup>

Why evangelicals are so adamant in refusing to reconsider the Biblical teachings on human nature and destiny? After all, they have taken the liberty of changing other old traditional teachings. Perhaps one reason for their insistence on holding to the dualistic view is that it impacts on so many other doctrines. We noted at the beginning of this chapter that what Christians believe about the make-up of human nature largely determines what they believe about human destiny. To abandon dualism, also entails abandoning a whole cluster of doctrines resulting from it. This may be called "the domino effect." If one doctrine falls, several others fall as well. To clarify this point, we briefly consider some of the doctrinal and practical implications of classical dualism. This should alert the reader to its complex ramifications.

## **2. Implications of Dualism**

**Doctrinal Implications.** The classical dualistic view of human nature has enormous doctrinal and practical implications. Doctrinally, a host of beliefs derive from or are largely dependent upon classical dualism. For example, the belief in the transition of the soul at the moment of death to paradise, hell, or purgatory rests on the belief that the soul is immortal by nature and survives the body at death. This means that, if inherent immortality of the soul should prove to be an unbiblical conception, then popular beliefs about paradise, purgatory, and hell have to be radically modified or even rejected.

The belief that at death the souls of the saints ascend to the beatitude of Paradise has fostered the Catholic and Orthodox belief in the intercessory role of Mary and of the saints. If the souls of the saints are in heaven, it is feasible to assume that they can intercede on behalf of needy sinners on this earth. Thus, devout Christians pray to Mary and the saints to intercede on their behalf. Such

a practice runs contrary to the Biblical teaching that "there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" ([1Tim 2:5](#)). More important still, if the soul does not survive and cannot function apart from the body, then the whole teaching of the intercessory role of Mary and the saints must be rejected as an ecclesiastical fabrication. Truly, a re-examination of the Biblical view of human nature can have frightening consequences for long-cherished Christian beliefs.

Similarly, the belief that at death the souls of those who are pardonable transit to purgatory has led to the teaching that the church on earth has the jurisdiction to apply the merits of Christ and of the saints to souls suffering in purgatory. This is accomplished through the granting of indulgences, that is, the remission of the temporal punishment due to forgiven sin. Such a belief led to the scandalous sale of indulgences which sparked the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformers eliminated the doctrine of purgatory as unbiblical, but they retained the doctrine of the immediate transit after death of individual souls to a state of perfect blessedness (*heaven*) or to a state of continuous punishment (*hell*). Again, if the belief in the survival and functioning of the soul apart from the body is proven to be unbiblical, then popular beliefs about purgatory, indulgences, and transit of the souls to heaven or to hell must be rejected also as ecclesiastical fabrications.

The work that the Reformers began by eliminating purgatory now would have to be completed by redefining paradise and hell according to Scripture and not ecclesiastical traditions. It is unlikely that such a monumental task can be undertaken by any Protestant church today. Any attempt to modify or reject traditional doctrines is often interpreted as a betrayal of the faith and can cause division and fragmentation. This is a very high price that most churches are not willing to pay.

**Immortality of the Soul Weakens Second Advent.** Traditional dualism also has contributed to weakening the Advent Hope. The belief in the ascension of souls to heaven can obscure and eclipse the expectation of the Second Advent. If at death the soul of the believer *goes up* immediately to the beatitude of Paradise to be with the Lord, one hardly can have any real sense of expectation for Christ to *come down* to resurrect the sleeping saints. The primary concern of these Christians is to reach paradise immediately, albeit as a disembodied soul. This concern leaves barely any interest in the coming of the Lord and the resurrection of the body.

To believe in the immortality of the soul means one regards at least part of oneself as immortal in the sense of being incapable of passing out of existence. Such a belief encourages confidence in oneself and in the possibility of one's soul going up to the Lord. On the other hand, to believe in the resurrection of the body means that one does not believe in self or in disembodied souls going to the Lord; rather one believes in Christ who will return to raise the dead and transform the living. This means believing in the *coming down* of the Lord to this earth to meet embodied believers instead of in the *going up* of disembodied souls to heaven to meet the Lord.

In the New Testament the Parousia stresses a final consummation realized by a movement of Christ's *coming down* to mankind rather than individual souls *going up* to Him. The Advent Hope is not "a pie in the sky when you die" but a real meeting upon this earth between embodied

believers and Christ on the glorious day of His return. Out of that real meeting will come a transformation affecting humanity and nature. This great expectation is obscured and erased by the belief in individual immortality and heavenly bliss immediately after death.

Another significant implication of the individualistic hope for immediate immortality is that it overrides the Biblical corporate hope for an ultimate restoration of this creation and its creatures ([Rom 8:19-23](#); [1 Cor 15:24-28](#)). When the only future that really counts is the individual soul's survival after death, the anguish of mankind can have only a peripheral interest and the value of God's redemption for this whole world is largely ignored. The ultimate result of this belief is, as noted by Abraham Kuyper, that "by far the majority of Christians do not think much beyond their own death."<sup>12</sup>

**Misconceptions About the World to Come.** Classical dualism also has fostered wrong ideas about the world to come. The popular concept of paradise as a spiritual retreat center somewhere up in space, where glorified souls will spend eternity in everlasting contemplation and meditation, has been inspired more by Platonic dualism than by Biblical realism. For Plato, the material components of this world were evil and, consequently, not worthy of survival. The aim was to reach the spiritual realm where souls liberated from the prison-house of a material body enjoy eternal bliss.

During the course of our study, we shall see that both the Old and New Testaments reject the dualism between the material world below and the spiritual realm above. The final salvation inaugurated by the coming of the Lord is regarded in Scripture not an *escape from* but a *transformation of* this earth. The Biblical view of the world to come is not a *spiritual heavenly retreat* inhabited by glorified souls, but this *physical earthly planet* populated by resurrected saints ([Is 66:22](#); [Rev 21:1](#)).

**Practical Implications.** At a more practical level, the classical dualistic view of human nature has fostered the cultivation of the soul in detachment from the body and the suppression of physical appetites and healthy natural impulses. Contrary to the Biblical view of the goodness of God's creation, including the physical pleasures of the body, medieval spirituality promoted the mortification of the flesh as a way to achieve the divine goal of holiness. The saints were ascetic persons who devoted themselves primarily to *vita contemplativa*, detaching themselves from the *vita activa*. Since the salvation of the soul was seen as more important than the preservation of the body, the physical needs of the body often intentionally were neglected or even suppressed.

The dichotomy between body and soul, the physical and the spiritual, is still present in the thinking of many Christians today. Many still associate redemption with the human soul rather than the human body. We describe the missionary work of the church as that of "saving souls." The implication seems to be that the souls are more important than the bodies. Conrad Bergendoff rightly notes that "The Gospels give no basis for a theory of redemption which saves souls apart from the bodies to which they belong. What God has joined together, philosophers and theologians should not put apart. But they have been guilty of divorcing the bodies and souls of men which God made one at creation, and their guilt is not diminished by their plea that thus salvation would be facilitated. Until we have a theory of redemption which meets the whole need

of man we have failed to understand the purpose of Him who became incarnate that He might be able to save humanity."<sup>13</sup>

**Rise of Modern Secularism.** Some scholars maintain that classical dualism has been instrumental in the rise of modern secularism and the progressive erosion of Christian influence on society and culture.<sup>14</sup> They find a correlation between modern secularism which excludes religion from life, and the body-soul distinction of traditional Christianity. They also see a connection between secularism and the nature-grace distinction articulated especially by Thomas Aquinas. According to the latter natural reason is sufficient for living the natural life of this world, while grace is needed for living the spiritual life and attaining the goal of salvation. Thus, the scholastic body-soul distinction allowed for life to be divided into two different compartments: *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, or we might say *secular life* and *spiritual life*.

This distinction eventually led to the belief that Christianity should be concerned primarily with the salvation of the souls of people, while the state should be responsible for the care of the body. This means that the state, and not the church, should be concerned about education, science, technology, economic systems, social and political issues, or general culture and public values.

The outcome of the body-soul distinction is that Christians have surrendered vast areas of life, moral values, and knowledge to the forces of secularism and humanism. Teaching methods and textbooks, even in the nation's Christian schools, reflect more humanistic philosophies than Biblical views. The total impact of the body-soul dualism is impossible to estimate. Dividing humans into body and soul has promoted all sorts of false dichotomies in human life.

**Dualism in Liturgy.** The influence of dualism can be seen even more often in many Christian hymns, prayers, and poems. The opening sentence of the burial prayer found in *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England is starkly dualistic: "Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground."<sup>15</sup> A phrase in another prayer in the same Office betrays a clear dualistic contempt for physical existence: "With whom the souls of the faithful, after they are delivered from the burden of the flesh, are in joy and felicity."

The Platonic notion of the release of the soul from the prison-house of the body is clearly set forth in the lines of the Christian poet, John Donne: "When bodies to their grave, souls from the graves remove."<sup>16</sup> Many of our hymns are thinly disguised dualistic poems. How often we are asked to view this present life as a "weary pilgrimage" and to look for the eventual escape to heaven, "up above the sky."

Examples of hymns that manifest hostility toward this earthly life, religious escapism, and other-worldliness easily can be found in the hymnals of most Christian denominations. Some hymns portray this earth as a prison from which the believer is released to ascend to the heavenly home: "My Father's house is built on high, Far, far above the starry sky; When from this earthly prison free, That heav'nly mansion mine shall be." Other hymns describes the Christian as a stranger who can hardly wait to leave this world: "Here in this country so dark and dreary, I long have wandered forlorn and weary." "I'm but a stranger here, Heaven is my home; Earth is a desert drear, Heaven is my home." "I want to live above the world . . . on heaven's tableland."

Christians who believe the words of such hymns may be disappointed one day to discover that their eternal home is not "above the world . . . on heaven's tableland," but down here on this earth. This is the planet that God has created, redeemed, and ultimately will restore for our eternal habitation. The Biblical vision of the world to come is explored in chapter 7.

The far-reaching doctrinal and practical implications of the dualistic view of human nature that we have just considered should serve to impress the reader with the importance of the subject under consideration. What we address in this book is not a mere academic question but a fundamental Biblical teaching that impacts directly or indirectly a host of Christian beliefs and practices.

### **3. Implications of Biblical Wholism**

**Positive View of Physical and Spiritual.** Like classical dualism, Biblical wholism affects our understanding of ourselves, this present world, redemption, and our ultimate destiny. Since during the course of this study we examine at some length various doctrinal and practical implications of Biblical wholism, I only allude to some of them here.

The Biblical wholistic view of human nature, according to which our body and soul are an indissoluble unit, created and redeemed by God, challenges us to view positively both the physical and spiritual aspects of life. We honor God not only with our mind but also with our body, because our body is "a temple of the Holy Spirit" ([1 Cor 6:19](#)). Scripture admonishes us to present our "bodies as a living sacrifice" ([Rom 12:1](#)). This means that the way we treat our bodies reflects the spiritual condition of our souls. If we pollute our bodies with tobacco, drugs, or unhealthy food, we cause not only the *physical pollution* of our bodies, but also the *spiritual pollution* of our souls.

Henlee H. Barnette notes that "what people do to, for, and with others and their environment depends largely upon what they think of God, nature, themselves, and their destiny."<sup>17</sup> When Christians view themselves and the present world wholistically as the object of God's good creation and redemption, they will be both convinced and compelled to act as God's stewards of their bodies as well as of the created order.

**Concern for the Whole Person.** Biblical wholism challenges us to be concerned about the whole person. In its preaching and teaching, the church must meet not only the spiritual needs of the soul but also the physical needs of the body. This means teaching people how to maintain emotional and physical health. It means that church programs should not neglect the needs of the body. Proper diet, exercise, and outdoor activities should be encouraged as an important part of Christian living.

Accepting the Biblical wholistic view of human nature means to opt for a *wholistic* approach in our evangelistic and missionary endeavors. This approach consists not only in saving the "souls" of people but also in improving their living conditions by working in such areas as health, diet, education. The aim should be to serve the world and not to avoid it. The issues of social justice, war, racism, poverty, and economic imbalance should be of concern to those who believe that God is working to restore the whole person and the whole world.

Christian education should promote the development of the whole person. This means that the school's program should aim at the development of the mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of life. A good physical-education program should be considered as important as its academic and religious programs. Parents and teachers should be concerned about teaching good eating habits, the proper care of the body, and a regular program of physical exercise.

The Biblical concept of the whole person also has implications for medicine. Medical science recently has developed what is known as *holistic medicine*. Holistic health practitioners "emphasize the necessity for looking at the whole person, including physical condition, nutrition, emotional make up, spiritual state, life-style values, and environment."<sup>18</sup> At the 1975 graduating exercise of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Dr. Jerome D. Frank told the graduates: "Any treatment of an illness that does not also minister to the human spirit is grossly deficient."<sup>19</sup> Healing and the maintenance of physical health must always involve the total person.

**Cosmic Redemption.** The Biblical wholistic view of human nature presupposes also a cosmic view of redemption that encompasses the body and the soul, the material and the spiritual world. The separation between body and soul or spirit has often paralleled the division between the realm of creation and the realm of redemption. The latter has been associated to a large extent in both Catholicism and Protestantism with the salvation of individual souls at the expense of the *physical* and *cosmic* dimensions of redemption. The saints often are portrayed as pilgrims who live on earth but detached from the world and whose souls at death immediately leave their material bodies to ascend to an abstract place called "heaven." This view reflects classical dualism but fails, as we shall see during the course of this study, to represent the wholistic Biblical view of the human and subhuman creation.

Previously we noted that traditional dualism has produced an attitude of contempt toward the body and the natural world. This other-worldliness reflected in such hymns as "This World Is Not My Home," "I'm a stranger here, Heaven is my home; Earth is a desert drear, Heaven is my home." Such an attitude of disdain toward our planet is absent from the Psalms, the Hebrew hymnal, where the central theme is the praise of God for His magnificent works. In [Psalm 139:14](#), David says: "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth very well." Here the Psalmist praises God for his wonderful body, a fact well known to his soul (mind). This is a good example of wholistic thinking, where body and soul are part of God's marvellous creation.

In Psalm 92, the Psalmist urges one to praise God with musical instruments, because, he says, "Thou, O Lord, hast made me glad by thy work; at the work of thy hands I sing for joy. How great are thy works, O Lord!" ([Ps 92:4-5](#)). The Psalmist's rejoicing over his wonderful body and marvelous creation is based upon his wholistic conception of the created world as an integral part of the whole drama of creation and redemption.

**Biblical Realism.** The Biblical wholistic view of human nature also impacts on our view of the world to come. In chapter 7 we learn that the Bible does not envision the world to come as an ethereal paradise where glorified souls will spend eternity wearing white robes, singing, plucking harps, praying, chasing clouds, and drinking milk of ambrosia. Instead, the Bible speaks of the

resurrected saints inhabiting this planet earth, which will be purified, transformed, and perfected at and through the coming of the Lord ([2 Pet 3:11-13](#); [Rom 8:19-25](#); [Rev 21:1](#)). The "new heavens and a new earth" ([Is 65:17](#)) are not a remote and inconsequential spiritual retreat somewhere off in space; rather, they are the present heaven and earth renewed to their original perfection.

Believers enter the new earth not as disembodied souls but as resurrected bodily persons ([Rev 20:4](#); [John 5:28-29](#); [1 Thess 4:14-17](#)). Though nothing unclean shall enter the New Jerusalem, we are told that "the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, . . . they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations" ([Rev 21:24, 26](#)). These verses suggest that everything of real value in the old heaven and earth, including the achievements of man's inventive, artistic, and intellectual prowess, will find a place in the eternal order. The very image of "the city" conveys the idea of activity, vitality, creativity, and real relationships.

It is regrettable that this fundamentally concrete, earthly view of God's new world portrayed in the Scripture has largely been lost and replaced in popular piety with an ethereal, spiritualized concept of heaven. The latter has been influenced by Platonic dualism rather than by Biblical realism.

**Conclusion.** Historically, two major, radically different views of human nature have been held. One is designated as classical dualism and the other as Biblical wholism. The dualistic view maintains that human nature consists of a material, mortal body and a spiritual, immortal soul. The latter survives the death of the body and transits to heaven, or purgatory, or hell. At the resurrection, the soul is reunited with the body. This dualistic conception has had an enormous impact on Christian life and thought, affecting people's view of human life, this present world, redemption, and the world to come.

In modern times, classical dualism has come under attack from Biblical scholars, church historians, philosophers, and scientists. Biblical scholars have examined the anthropological terms and texts and have concluded that the Biblical view of human nature is not dualistic at all; it is clearly wholistic. Many voices from different directions are affirming today that dualism is out and wholism is in.

The preceding survey of the ongoing debate over the Biblical view of human nature has shown the fundamental importance of this subject for the whole structure of Christian beliefs and practices. It is imperative, therefore, for us to diligently examine what the Bible actually teaches on this vital subject. This we proceed to do by investigating in chapters 2 and 3 the Biblical view of human nature, and in chapters 4 to 7 the Biblical teaching on human destiny.

## CHAPTER II

### The Old Testament View Of Human Nature

The question posed by the Psalmist, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" ([Ps 8:4](#)), is one of the most fundamental questions that anyone could consider. It is fundamental because its answer determines the way we view ourselves, this world, redemption, and our ultimate destiny.

No age knows so much and so many things about human nature as does ours, yet no age knows less about what man really is. Having lost their awareness of God, many people today are concerned primarily with their present existence. The loss of awareness of God makes many people uncertain about the meaning of life, because it is only in reference to God and His revelation that the nature and destiny of human life can be truly understood.

The question of human nature has been a consistent concern in the history of Western thought. In chapter 1 we noted that, historically, most Christians have defined human nature dualistically, that it consists of a material, mortal body and an immaterial, immortal soul which survives the body at death. Beginning with the Enlightenment (a philosophic movement of the 18th century), attempts have been made to define man as a machine that is part of a giant cosmic machine. Human beings hopelessly are trapped within a deterministic universe and their behavior is determined by such impersonal and involuntary forces as genetic factors, chemical secretions, education, upbringing, and societal conditioning. People do not have an immaterial, immortal soul, only a mortal, material body that is conditioned by the determinism of the cosmic machine.

This depressing materialistic view that reduces human beings to the status of a machine or an animal negates the Biblical view of man created in the image of God. Instead of being "like God," human beings are reduced to being "like an animal." Perhaps as a response to this pessimistic view, various modern pseudo-pagan cults and ideologies (like the New Age) deify human beings. Man is neither "like an animal" or "like God," he *is* god. He has inner divine power and resources that await to be unleashed. This new humanistic gospel is popular today because it challenges people to seek salvation within themselves by tapping into and releasing the powers and resources that slumber within.

What we are experiencing today is a violent swing of the pendulum from an extreme materialistic view of human nature to an extreme mystic, deification view. In this context, people are confronted with two choices: Either human beings are nothing but preprogrammed machines, or they are divine with unlimited potential. The Christian response to this challenge is to be sought in the Holy Scriptures which provide the basis for defining our beliefs and practices. Our study shows that Scripture teaches we are neither preprogrammed machines nor divine beings with unlimited potential. We are creatures created in the image of God, and dependent upon Him for our existence in this world and in the world to come.

**Objectives of the Chapter.** This chapter seeks to understand the Old Testament view of human nature by examining four prominent anthropological terms, namely, *soul*, *body*, *heart*, and *spirit*. The various meanings and usages of these terms are analyzed to determine if any of them is ever used to denote an immaterial substance which functions independently of the body.

Our study indicates that the Old Testament does not distinguish between physical and spiritual organs, because the entire range of higher human functions such as feeling, thinking, knowing, loving, keeping God's commandments, praising, and praying is attributed not only to the "spiritual" organs of the soul and spirit but also to the physical organs of the heart and, occasionally, to the kidneys and viscera. The soul (*nephesh*) and the spirit (*ruach*) are used in the Old Testament to denote, not immaterial entities capable of surviving the body at death, but a whole spectrum of physical and psychological functions.

In undertaking this investigation we must keep in mind that Bible writers were not familiar with modern physiology or psychology. They did not necessarily know, for example, that the sensation we experience when our hand touches an object is caused by nerves that transmit the information to the brain. The word "brain" does not occur in the English Bible. Bible writers knew nothing of the nervous system or respiratory system. For the most part, they defined human nature in terms of what they saw and felt.

This chapter is divided into five major parts. The first part examines what the creation story tells us about the original make-up of human nature. The subsequent four parts analyze the four fundamental terms of human nature that we find in the Old Testament, namely, *soul*, *body*, *heart*, and the *spirit*. Our investigation indicates that all these terms describe not wholly different substances each with its own distinct functions, but the interrelated and integrated capacities and functions of the same person. The fact that a person consists of various parts which are integrated, interrelated, and functionally united, leaves no room for the notion of the soul being distinct from the body and thus removing the basis for the belief in the survival of the soul at the death of the body.

## **PART I: HUMAN NATURE AT CREATION**

**Creation, Fall, and Redemption.** In seeking to understand the Biblical view of human nature, we must recognize first that the meaning of human life is defined in Scripture in terms of creation, the fall into sin, and God's plan of redemption. These three basic truths are fundamental for understanding the Biblical view of human nature and destiny. Chronologically, these are the first three truths we encounter in Genesis 1 through 3, where we find the first account of creation, the Fall, and redemption. Thematically, everything else in Scripture is a development of these three concepts. They provide the prism through which human existence, with all its problems, is viewed and defined.

When Jesus addressed the question of marriage and divorce, He approached it first in terms of what marriage was meant to be at creation. Then He looked at it from the perspective of the Fall, because sin explains why allowance was made for divorce ([Matt 19:1-8](#)). Similarly, Paul appeals to creation, the Fall, and redemption to explain the role distinctions between men and women ([1 Cor 11:3-12](#); [1 Tim 2:12-14](#)) as well as their equality in Christ ([Gal 3:28](#)).

When we view human nature from the Biblical perspective of creation, the Fall, and redemption, we immediately see that creation tells us about the original make up of human nature, the Fall about its present condition, and redemption about the restoration being accomplished in the present and consummated in the future. Thus a comprehensive Biblical definition of human nature must take into consideration what human nature was at creation, what it became after the Fall, and what it is now and will become in the future as a result of redemption.

**The Creation of Man.** The logical starting point for the study of the Biblical view of human nature is the account of the creation of man. We use here the term "man" as used in Scripture, namely, including both man and woman. The first important Biblical statement is found in [Genesis 1:26-27](#): "Then God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and

over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

This first account of man's creation tells us that human life began not as a result of fortuitous natural forces or of a chance mutation in the animal world, but as a result of a personal creative act of God. It was after the Lord had called into existence the earth with all its vegetation and animals that He announced the making of man. It is as if people were the specific focus of God's creation. The impression conveyed by the narrative is that when God came to the creation of man, He entered into something different and distinctive.

At the end of each stage of the world's creation, God stopped to contemplate what He had wrought and to pronounce it "good" ([Gen 1:4](#), [10](#), [12](#), [18](#), [21](#), [25](#)). Then God set out to create a being that could have lordship over His creation; a being with whom he could walk and talk. The adverb "*then*" at the beginning of verse 26 (RSV) suggests that the creation of man was something special. All the previous creative acts of God are presented as a continuous series linked together by the conjunction "and" ([Gen 1:3](#), [6](#), [9](#), [14](#), [20](#), [24](#)). But when the cosmic order of creation was finished and the earth was ready to sustain human life, *then* the Lord uttered His intention of making man. "*Then* God said, 'Let us make man'" ([Gen 1:26](#)). After creating man, God pronounced His whole creation "very good" ([Gen 1:31](#)).

**A Special Creation of God.** This original, divine declaration suggests two fundamental truths: First, *man is a special creation of God whose life depends upon Him*. His life derives from God and continues only because of God's mercy. This sense of continual human dependence on the Most High is basic to the Biblical understanding of human nature. God is the Creator and human beings are creatures dependent upon Him for the origin and continuance of their existence.

Second, *man is distinct from God*. Human beings have a temporal beginning, but God is eternal. The Lord is not man that He should die. Scripture emphasizes the contrast between the infinite attributes of God as Creator and the finite limitation of man as creature. This is an important consideration to keep in mind when defining the Biblical view of human nature. The whole divine revelation presents human beings as creatures dependent upon, but distinct from God ([Is 45:11](#); [57:15](#); [Job 10:8-10](#)). Yet, despite the emphasis of man's creaturely dependence upon God, he remains in a position of special relationship with the Creator. "The distinctive character of his humanness sets him apart not only *from* God's other creatures but also *to* and *for* the loving and thankful service of his Creator."<sup>1</sup>

**In the Image of God.** The distinctive characteristic of man's relation to God is expressed in the declaration of his creation in the image of God. "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" ([Gen 1:26](#); cf. [5:1-3](#); [9:6](#)). Elaborate attempts have been made to define what the "image of God" is in which man was created.<sup>2</sup> Some contend that it is a physical resemblance between God and man.<sup>3</sup> The problem with this view is that it presupposes that God has a corporeal nature similar to that of human beings. This idea is discredited by Christ's statement that "God is Spirit" ([John 4:24](#)), which suggests that He is not bound by space or matter as we are. Moreover, the Biblical terms for the physical aspect of human nature (*bashar*, *sarx*—flesh, body) are never applied to God.

Others think the image of God is the non-material aspect of human nature, namely his spiritual soul. Thus R. Laird-Harris declares: "Man alone in the world is a spiritual, moral, and rational being. He has a God-given soul and the inference is that this soul, being made in the image of God, is not subject to the limits of time and space."<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, Calvin affirms: "It cannot be doubted that the proper seat of the image is the soul," though he adds that there is "no part of man, not even his body, which is not adorned with some rays of its glory."<sup>5</sup> This view presupposes a dualism between body and soul which is not warranted by the Genesis account of creation. Man did not receive a soul from God; he was *made* a living soul. Moreover, in the creation story the animals also are spoken of as having within them a living soul, yet, they were not created in the image of God.

Some interpret the image of God in man as being the combination of human maleness and femaleness.<sup>6</sup> The basis for this interpretation is primarily the proximity of the expression "male and female he created them" to the phrase "in the image of God he created him" ([Gen 1:27](#)). Undoubtedly, there is some theological truth in the notion that the image of God is reflected in the male-female fellowship as equals. But the problem with this interpretation is that it makes too much of too little by reducing the image of God exclusively to the male-female fellowship as equals.

The interpretation of the image of God as being the combination of human maleness and femaleness has led some to make God into an androgynous Being, half male and half female. This view is foreign to the Bible since God does not need a female counterpart to complete his identity. An *action of God* is sometimes compared to that of a compassionate mother ([Is 49:15](#)), but the *person of God* is revealed, especially through Jesus Christ, as that of our Father.

**Image as Capacity to Reflect God.** In our view, the image of God is associated not with man as male and female, or with an immortal soul given to our species, but rather with humankind's capacity to be and to do on a finite level what God is and does on an infinite level. The creation account seems to be saying that while the sun rules the day, the moon the night, and the fishes the sea, mankind images God by having dominion over all these realms ([Gen 1:28-30](#)).

In the New Testament, the image of God in humanity is never associated with male-female fellowship, or physical resemblance, or a nonmaterial, spiritual soul, but rather with moral and rational capacities: "Put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator" ([Col 3:10](#); cf. [Eph 4:24](#)). Similarly, conformity to the image of Christ ([Rom 8:29](#); [1 Cor 15:49](#)) is generally understood in terms of righteousness and holiness. None of these qualities is possessed by animals. What distinguishes people from animals is the fact that human nature inherently has godlike possibilities. By virtue of being created in the image of God, human beings are capable of reflecting His character in their own life.

Being created in the image of God means that we must view ourselves as intrinsically valuable and richly invested with meaning, potential, and responsibilities. It means that we have been created to reflect God in our thinking and actions. We are to be and to do on a finite scale what God is and does on an infinite scale.

The Bible never mentions immortality in connection with the image of God in man. The tree of life represented immortality in fellowship with the Creator, but as a result of sin, Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, thus being deprived of access to the source of continuous life in His presence of God.

Why should the image be found in immortality any more than in omniscience, omnipotence, or omnipresence? None of these other divine attributes have been ascribed to man as part of the image of God, even before the Fall. Nothing in Scripture suggests that man images God by possessing divine attributes, like immortality. No valid reasons exist for singling out immortality as the one divine attribute intended by the phrase "image of God." On the contrary, much in Scripture denies it, as we shall see.

**[Genesis 2:7](#)**: "A Living Soul." The second important Biblical statement for understanding human nature is found in [Genesis 2:7](#). It is not surprising that this text forms the basis of much of the discussion regarding human nature, since it provides the only Biblical account of how God created man. The text reads: "Then God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

Historically, this text has been read through the lenses of classical dualism. It has been assumed that the breath of life God breathed into man's nostrils was simply an immaterial, immortal soul that God implanted into the material body. And just as earthly life began with the implantation of an immortal soul into a physical body, so it ends when the soul departs from the body. Thus [Genesis 2:27](#) has been historically interpreted on the basis of the traditional body-soul dualism.

What has led to this mistaken and misleading interpretation is the fact that the Hebrew word *nephesh*, translated "soul" in [Genesis 2:7](#), has been understood according to the standard Webster's definition for soul: "The immaterial essence, animating principle, or actuating cause of an individual life." Or "The spiritual principle embodied in human beings."<sup>7</sup> This standard definition reflects the Platonic view of the soul—*psyche* as being an immaterial, immortal essence that abides in the body, though it is not part of it.

This prevailing view causes people to read the Old Testament references to the soul—*nephesh* in the light of Platonic dualism rather than of Biblical wholism. As Claude Tresmontant puts it, "By applying to the Hebrew *nephesh* [soul] the characteristics of the Platonic *psyche* [soul], . . . we let the real meaning of *nephesh* [soul] escape us and furthermore, we are left with innumerable pseudo-problems."<sup>8</sup>

People who read the Old Testament references to *nephesh* (which in the King James version are translated 472 times as "soul") with a dualistic mind-set, will have great difficulty in understanding the Biblical wholistic view of human nature. According to this, the body and the soul are the same person seen from different perspectives. They will experience problems with accepting the Biblical meaning of the "soul" as the animating principle of both human and animal life. Furthermore, they will be at a loss to explain those passages that speak of a *dead person* as a *dead soul—nephesh* ([Lev 19:28](#); [21:1](#), [11](#); [22:4](#); [Num 5:2](#); [6:6,11](#); [9:6](#), [7](#), [10](#); [19:11](#), [13](#); [Hag 2:13](#)). For them it is inconceivable that an immortal soul could die with the body.

**The Meaning of "Living Soul."** The prevailing assumption that the human soul is immortal has led many to interpret the phrase "man *became* a living soul" ([Gen 2:7 KJV](#)) to mean that "man *obtained* a living soul." This interpretation has been challenged by numerous scholars who are sensitive to the confusion regarding the difference between the Greek-dualistic and the Biblical-wholistic conception of human nature.

Audrey Johnson, for example, explains that *nephesh*—soul in [Genesis 2:7](#) denotes the whole man, with an emphasis on his consciousness and vitality.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Johannes Pedersen speaking of the creation of man in his classic study *Israel*, writes: "The basis of his essence was the fragile corporeal substance, but by the breath of God it was transformed and became a *nephesh*, a soul. It is not said that man was supplied with a *nephesh*, and so the relation between body and soul is quite different from what it is to us. Such as he is, man in his total essence is a soul."<sup>10</sup>

Pedersen continues by noting that "in the Old Testament we are constantly confronted with the fact that man, as such, is a soul. Abraham started for Canaan with his property and all the souls he had gotten ([Gen 12:5](#)), and when Abraham had taken booty on his warlike expedition against the great kings, the King of Sodom exhorted him to yield the souls and keep the goods ([Gen 14:21](#)). Seventy souls of the house of Jacob came to Egypt ([Gen 46:27](#); [Ex 1:5](#)). Whenever a census is taken, the question always is: How many souls are there? In these and in numerous other places we may substitute persons for souls."<sup>11</sup>

Commenting on [Genesis 2:7](#), Hans Walter Wolff asks: "What does *nephesh* [soul] mean here? Certainly not soul [in the traditional dualistic sense]. *Nephesh* was designed to be seen together with the whole form of man, and especially with his breath; moreover man does not *have nephesh* [soul], he *is nephesh* [soul], he lives as *nephesh* [soul]."<sup>12</sup> The fact that the soul in the Bible stands for the whole living person is recognized even by Catholic scholar Dom Wulstan Mork who expresses himself in similar terms: "It is *nephesh* [soul] that gives life to the *bashar* [body], but not as a distinct substance. Adam doesn't have *nephesh* [soul]; he is *nephesh* [soul], just as he is *bashar* [body]. The body, far from being divided from its animating principle, is the visible *nephesh* [soul]."<sup>13</sup>

From a Biblical perspective, the body and the soul are not two different substances (one mortal and the other immortal) abiding together within one human being, but two characteristics of the same person. Johannes Pedersen admirably sums up this point by a statement that has become proverbial: "The body is the soul in its outward form."<sup>14</sup> The same view is expressed by H. Wheeler Robinson in an equally famous statement: "The Hebrew idea of personality is that of an animated body, not (like the Greek) that of an incarnate soul."<sup>15</sup>

Summing up, we can say that the expression "man became a living soul—*nephesh hayyah*" does not mean that at creation his body was endowed with an immortal soul, a separate entity, distinct from the body. Rather, it means that as a result of the divine inbreathing of the "breath of life" into the lifeless body, man became a living, breathing being, no more, no less. The heart began to beat, the blood to circulate, the brain to think, and all the vital signs of life were activated. Simply stated, "a living soul" means "a living being."

The practical implications of this definition are brought out in a suggestive way by Dom Wulstan Mork: "Man as *nephesh* [soul] means that it is his *nephesh* [soul] that goes to dinner, that tackles a steak and eats it. When I see another person, what I see is not merely his body, but his visible *nephesh* [soul], because, in the terms of [Genesis 2:7](#), that is what man is—a living *nephesh*. The eyes have been called 'the window of the soul.' This is actually dichotomy. The eyes, as long as they belong to the living person, are *in themselves* the revelation of the soul."<sup>16</sup>

**Animals as "Living Souls."** The meaning of "living soul" as simply "living being" is supported by the use of the same phrase "living soul–*nephesh hayyah*" for animals. In our KJV Bible, this phrase appears for the first time in [Genesis 2:7](#) when the creation of Adam is described. But we should note that this is not the first time that phrase occurs in the Hebrew Bible. We also find it in [Genesis 1:20](#), [21](#), [24](#), and [30](#). In all four of these verses "living soul–*nephesh hayyah*" refers to animals, but translators of most English versions have chosen to translate it "living creature" rather than "living soul." The same is true in several other passages after [Genesis 2:7](#), where animals are referred to as "living creatures" rather than "living souls" ([Gen 2:19](#); [9:10](#), [12](#), [15](#), [16](#); [Lev 11:46](#)).

Why do the translators of most English versions render the same Hebrew phrase *nephesh hayyah* as "living soul" when it refers to man and "living creatures" when it refers to animals? The reason is simple. They are conditioned by the belief that human beings have an immaterial, immortal soul which animals do not have. Consequently, they use the word "soul" for man and "creature" for animal to translate the same Hebrew *nephesh*. Norman Snaith finds this "most reprehensible" and says . . . "it is a grave reflection on the Revisers [translators of the Authorized version] that they retained this misleading difference in translation. . . . The Hebrew phrase should be translated exactly the same way in both cases. To do otherwise is to mislead all those who do not read Hebrew. There is no excuse and no proper defense. The tendency to read 'immortal soul' into Hebrew *nephesh* and to translate accordingly is very ancient, and can be seen in the Septuagint . . ."<sup>17</sup>

Basil Atkinson, a former Librarian at Cambridge University, offers the same explanation. "Our translators [of the Authorized Version] have concealed this fact from us, presumably because they were so bound by current theological notions of the meaning of the word 'soul,' that they dared not translate by it a Hebrew word that referred to animals, although they have used it in the margin [of the Authorized Version] at verses 20 and 30. In these verses we find 'the moving creature, even living soul' (Heb.) (ver. 20); 'every living soul (Heb. *nephesh*) that moveth' (ver. 21); 'Let the earth bring forth the living soul (Heb. *nephesh*) after his kind' (ver. 24); 'and to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is living soul' (Heb. *nephesh*) (ver. 30)."<sup>18</sup>

The use of *nephesh*-soul in these verses to refer to all sorts of animals clearly shows that *nephesh* is not an immortal soul given to man, but the animating principle of life or "the life-breath" which is present in both man and animals. Both are characterized as souls in contradistinction to the plants. The reason plants are not souls is presumably because they do not have organs that allow them to breathe, to feel pain and joy, or to move about in search of food. What distinguishes the human soul from that of animals is the fact that humans were created in God's image, that is, with godlike possibilities unavailable to animals.

The important point to note at this juncture is that both man and animal *are* souls. As Atkinson puts it, "They [man and animals] are not bipartite creatures consisting of a soul and a body which can separate and go on subsisting. Their soul is the whole of them and comprises their body as well as their mental powers. They are spoken of as *having* soul, that is, conscious being, to distinguish them from inanimate objects that have no life. In the same way we can say in English that a man or an animal *is* a conscious being and *has* conscious being."<sup>19</sup> The term soul-*nephesh* is used for both people and animals because both are conscious beings. They both share the same animating life-principle or "life-breath."

**Soul and Blood.** In addition to the four passages we have considered in Genesis 1, there are 19 others in the Old Testament where the word *nephesh* is applied to animals. We want to look at two of them because they help to clarify further the meaning of "living soul" in [Genesis 2:7](#). These passages are of special interest because they associate *nephesh* with blood. In [Leviticus 17:11](#), we read: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood." "Life" is a translation of the Hebrew *nephesh*, so the passage reads: "The *soul* of the flesh is in the blood."

In verse 14 of the same chapter, we read: "For the life of every creature is the blood of it; therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood." Here the word "life" is used in each instance to translate the Hebrew *nephesh*, so the passage should actually read, "For the *soul* of every creature is the blood of it; . . . for the *soul* of every creature is its blood" (See also [Deut 12:23](#)). The phrase "every creature" suggests that the references to blood apply to both man and animals. Thus, as Atkinson points out, "We have here a most important insight revealed into the essence of human nature. Soul and blood are identical."<sup>20</sup>

The reason the soul-*nephesh* is equated with blood is presumably because the vitality of life-*nephesh* resides in the blood. In the sacrificial system, blood atoned for sin because of its association with *nephesh*-life. The sacrificial killing of an animal meant that a *nephesh*-life was sacrificed to atone for the sins of another *nephesh*-life.

Tory Hoff aptly observes that "The Hebrews relation between *nephesh* [life] and blood reveals that *nephesh* [life] conveyed a 'sacred' aspect to human living. *Nephesh* [life] was a work of God ([Gen 2:7](#)), was in God's care ([Prov 24:12](#)), was in His hands ([Job 12:10](#)), and belonged to Him ([Ez 18:4, 20](#)). The Hebrews believed that they were forbidden to meddle or interfere with existence as *nephesh* [life] since it was a received existence beyond man. . . . The Hebrews were forbidden to eat meat still containing blood because the act meddled with *nephesh* [life] and therefore became offensive to God. The equation between blood and *nephesh* [life] meant consuming blood was a form of murder. One was sustaining one's own *nephesh* [life] with the sacred *nephesh* [life] of another."<sup>21</sup>

The preceding discussion of the association of *nephesh*-soul with animals and blood has served to clarify further the meaning of "living soul" ([Gen 2:7](#)) as applied to Adam. We have found that this phrase does not mean that at creation God endowed the human body with an immortal soul, but simply that man became a living being as a result of God's breathing His breath of life into the lifeless body. This conclusion is supported by the fact that *nephesh* is also used to describe animals and blood. The latter was equated with *nephesh*-soul because it was seen as the tangible

manifestation of the vitality of life. Before exploring further the meaning of *nephesh*—soul in the Old Testament, we need to look at the meaning of the "breath of life" in [Genesis 2:7](#).

**The Breath of Life.** What is the "breath [*neshamah*] of life" that God breathed into Adam's nostrils? Some assume that the "breath of life" is the immortal soul that God implanted into Adam's material body. This interpretation cannot legitimately be supported by the Biblical meaning and usage of the "breath of life," because nowhere in the Bible is "the breath of life" identified with an immortal soul.

In Scripture, the "breath [*neshamah*] of life" is the life-giving power that is associated with the breath of God. Thus we read in [Job 33:4](#): "The spirit [*ruach*] of God has made me, and the breath [*neshamah*] of the Almighty gives me life." The parallelism between the "spirit of God" and "the breath of the Almighty" suggests that the two are used interchangeably because they both refer to the gift of life imparted by God to His creatures. Another clear example is found in [Isaiah 42:5](#): "Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, . . . who gives breath [*neshamah*] to the people upon it, and spirit [*ruach*] to those who walk in it." Here, again, the parallelism shows that breath and spirit denote the same animating principle of life that God gives to His creatures.

The imagery of the "breath of life" describes in a suggestive way God's gift of life to His creatures, because breathing is a vital sign of life. A person who no longer breathes is dead. Thus, it is not surprising that in Scripture the life-giving Spirit of God is characterized as the "breath of life." After all, breathing is a tangible manifestation of life. Job says: "As long as my breath [*neshamah*] is in me, and the spirit [*ruach*] of God is in my nostrils; my lips will not speak falsehood" ([Job 27:3](#)). Here the human "breath" and the divine "spirit" are equated, because breathing is seen as a manifestation of the sustaining power of God's spirit.

Possession of the "breath of life" does not in itself confer immortality, because the Bible tells us that at death "the breath of life" returns to God. Life derives from God, is sustained by God, and returns to God. In describing death, Job says: "If he [God] should take back his spirit [*ruach*] to himself, and gather to himself his breath [*neshamah*], all flesh would perish together, and man would return to the dust" ([Job 34:14-15](#)). The same truth is expressed in [Ecclesiastes 12:7](#): "The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." Of the Flood we read: "And all flesh died that moved upon the earth . . . everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath [*neshamah*] of life died" ([Gen 7:21-22](#)).

The fact that death is characterized as the withdrawal of the breath of life shows that the "breath of life" is not an immortal spirit or soul that God confers on His creatures, but rather the gift of life which human beings possess for the duration of their earthly existence. As long as the "breath of life" or spirit remains, human beings are "living souls." But when the breath departs, they become dead souls.

The connection between the "breath of life" and "the living soul" becomes clear when we remember that, as Atkinsons points out, "man's soul is in his blood and indeed his blood is his soul. Thus he is kept in being [alive] as a living soul by the inhalation of oxygen out of the air, and medical science today knows, of course, a great deal about the connection between this

intake of oxygen and the blood."<sup>22</sup> The cessation of breathing results in the death of the soul, because the blood, which is equated with the soul, no longer receives the oxygen that is so vital for life. This explains why the Bible refers about 13 times to human death as the death of the soul ([Lev 19:28](#); [21:1](#), [11](#); [22:4](#); [Num 5:2](#); [6:6,11](#); [9:6](#), [7](#), [10](#); [19:11](#), [13](#); [Hag 2:13](#)).

In the light of the preceding discussion, we conclude that "man became a living soul" (KJV) at creation, not through the implantation of an immaterial, immortal soul into his material, mortal body, but through the animating principle of life ("breath of life") conferred on him by God Himself. In the creation account, the "living soul" denotes the life principle or power that animates the human body and reveals itself in the form of conscious life.

## PART II: HUMAN NATURE AS SOUL

So far, we have examined the Old Testament view of human nature in the light of man's creation in the image of God as a living soul. We have found that the two fundamental texts of mankind's creation, [Genesis 1:26-27](#) and [2:7](#), do not allow for a dualistic interpretation of human nature with a mortal body and an immortal soul. On the contrary, the body, the breath of life, and the soul are present in man's creation, not as separate entities, but as characteristics of the same person. Body is man as a concrete being; soul is man as a living individual; the breath of life or spirit is man as having his source in God. To test the validity of this initial conclusion, we now take a closer look at the broader Old Testament use of four key aspects of the human nature: *soul*, *body*, *heart*, and *spirit*.

Our initial study of the meaning of *nephesh*—soul in the context of creation has shown that the word is used to designate the animating principle of life as present in both human beings and animals. At this point, we wish to explore the broader use of *nephesh* in the Old Testament. Since *nephesh* occurs in the Old Testament 754 times and is rendered in 45 different ways,<sup>23</sup> our focus is on three main usages of the word that relate directly to the object of our investigation.

**Soul as a Needy Person.** In his state-of-the-art book *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, which is virtually undisputed among scholars of various theological persuasions, Hans Walter Wolff entitles the chapter on the soul as "*Nephesh*—Needy Man."<sup>24</sup> The reason for this characterization of *nephesh* as "needy man" becomes evident when one reads the many texts which picture *nephesh*—soul in dangerous situations of life and death proportions.

Since it is God who made man "a living soul" and who sustains the human soul, the Hebrews when in danger appealed to God to deliver their soul, that is, their life. David prayed: "Deliver my soul [*nephesh*] from the wicked" ([Ps 17:13, KJV](#)); "For thy righteousness sake, O Lord, bring my soul [*nephesh*] out of trouble" ([Ps. 143:11, KJV](#)). The Lord deserves to be praised, "for he has delivered the soul [*nephesh*] of the poor from the hand of the evildoers" ([Jer 20:13](#)).

People greatly feared for their souls [*nephesh*] ([Jos 9:24](#)) when others were seeking their souls [*nephesh*] ([Ex 4:19](#); [1 Sam 23:15](#)). They had to flee for their souls [*nephesh*] ([2 Kings 7:7](#)) or defend their souls [*nephesh*] ([Es 8:9](#)); if they did not, their souls [*nephesh*] would be utterly destroyed ([Jos 10:28](#), [30](#), [32](#), [35](#), [37](#), [39](#)). "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" ([Ez 18:4](#), [20](#)). Rahab asked the two Israelite spies to save her family and "deliver our souls [*nephesh*] from

death" ([Jos 2:13](#)). In these instances, it is evident that the soul was in danger and needed to be delivered was the life of the individual.

The soul experienced danger not only from enemies but also from lack of food. In lamenting the state of Jerusalem, Jeremiah says: "All her people sigh, they seek bread; they have given their pleasant things for meat to relieve the soul [*nephesh*]" ([Lam 1:11](#)). The Israelites grumbled in the wilderness because they no longer had meat as they had had in Egypt. "But now our soul [*nephesh*] is dried away: there is nothing at all, besides this manna, before our eyes" ([Num 11:6](#)).

Fasting had implications for the soul because it cut off nourishment that the soul needed. On the Day of Atonement, the Israelites were commanded to "afflict your souls" ([Lev 16:29](#)) by fasting. They abstained from food to demonstrate that their soul was dependent upon God for both physical nourishment and spiritual salvation. "Quite appropriately," writes Tory Hoff, "they [the Israelites] were asked to fast on the Day of Atonement because it was their soul that was atoned for through the shedding of blood [of an innocent soul] and it was the providential God who sustained the soul despite the sin of the soul"<sup>25</sup>

The theme of danger and deliverance associated with the soul [*nephesh*] allows us to see that the soul in the Old Testament was viewed, not as an immortal component of human nature, but as the uncertain, insecure condition of life which sometimes was threatened unto death. Those situations which involved intense danger and deliverance reminded the Israelites that they were needy souls [*nephesh*], living persons whose life depended constantly upon God for protection and deliverance.

**Soul as Seat of Emotions.** Being the animating principle of human life, the soul functioned also as the center of emotional activities. In speaking of the Shunammite, [2 Kings 4:27](#) says: "Her soul [*nephesh*] is vexed within her" (KJV). David cried to the Lord, seeking deliverance from his enemies, saying: "My soul [*nephesh*] is also sore vexed. . . . Return, O Lord, deliver my soul [*nephesh*]" ([Ps 6:3-4](#)).

While the people were waiting for God's deliverance, their soul was losing vitality. Tory Hoff notes that "because the Psalmist often wrote from within this experience [of danger], the Psalms include phrases such as 'their soul fainted in them' ([Ps 107:5](#)), 'my soul melts for sorrow' ([Ps 119:28](#)), 'my soul languishes for salvation' ([Ps 119:81](#)), 'my soul longs, yea, faints for thy courts' ([Ps 84:2](#)), and 'their soul melted away in their evil plight' ([Ps 107:26](#)). Job asked, 'How long will you torment my soul' ([Job 19:2](#)). It was also the soul that would wait for deliverance. 'For God does my soul wait in silence' ([Ps 62:1](#)). 'I wait for the Lord, my soul waits and in his word I hope' ([Ps 130:5](#)). Since the Hebrew knew all deliverance came from God, his soul would 'take refuge' in God ([Ps 57:1](#)) and 'thirst for him' ([Ps 42:2](#); [63:1](#)). Once the danger had passed and the intense, precarious nature of the situation was over, the soul would praise God for deliverance received. 'My soul makes its boast in the Lord, let the afflicted hear and be glad' ([Ps 34:2](#)). 'Then my soul shall rejoice in the Lord, exalting in his deliverance' ([Ps 35:9](#)).'"<sup>26</sup>

These passages which speak of the soul as the seat of emotion are interpreted by some dualists as supporting the notion of the soul being an immaterial entity attached to the body and responsible for the emotional and intellectual life of the individual. The problem with this interpretation is, as

Tory Hoff explains, that "the soul is *the* 'seat of emotion' no more than any other Hebrew anthropological term."<sup>27</sup> We shall see that the soul is only one center of emotions because the body, the heart, the bowels, and other parts of the body also function as emotional centers. From the Biblical wholistic view of human nature, one part of the body can often represent the whole.

Wolff rightly observes that the emotional content of the soul is equated with the self or the person and is not an independent entity. He cites, as an example, [Psalms 42:5, 11](#), and [43:5](#) in which the same song of lament and of self-exhortation is found: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him." "Here," Wolff writes, "*nephesh* [soul] is the self of the needy life, thirsting with desire."<sup>28</sup> There is nothing in these passages to suggest that the soul is an immaterial part of human nature that is equipped with personality and consciousness and is able to survive death. We shall note that the soul dies when the body dies.

**The Soul as the Seat of Personality.** The soul [*nephesh*] is seen in the Old Testament not only as the seat of emotions but also as the seat of personality. The soul is the person as a responsible individual. In [Micah 6:7](#) we read: "Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, and the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul [*nephesh*]?" The Hebrew word translated here as "body" is *beten*, which means belly or womb. The contrast here is not between body and soul. In commenting on this text, Dom Wulstan Mork writes: "The meaning is not that the soul is the human cause of sin, with the body as the soul's instrument. Rather, the *nephesh*, the whole living person, is the cause of sin. Therefore, in this verse, responsibility for sin is attributed to the *nephesh* as the person."<sup>29</sup>

We find the same idea in several texts that discuss sin and guilt. "If a soul [*nephesh*] shall sin through ignorance . . ." ([Lev 4:2, KJV](#)); "And if a soul [*nephesh*] sins . . . he shall bear his iniquity" ([Lev 5:1, KJV](#)); "But the soul [*nephesh*] that doeth ought presumptuously . . . that soul [*nephesh*] shall be cut off from among his people" ([Num 15:30, KJV](#)). "Behold all souls [*nephesh*] are mine; . . . the soul [*nephesh*] that sinneth, it shall die" ([Ez 18:4](#)). It is evident that in texts such as these, the soul is the responsible person who thinks, wills, and is answerable for his conduct.

Any physical or psychical activity was performed by the soul because such activity presumed a living, thinking, and acting person. "The Hebrew did not divide and assign human activities. Any act was the whole *nephesh* in action, hence, the whole person."<sup>30</sup> As aptly expressed by W. D. Stacey, "*Nephesh* sorrowed, hungered, and thought because each of these functions required the whole personality to perform it, and the distinction between emotional, physical, and mental was not made."<sup>31</sup>

In the Old Testament the soul and the body are two manifestations of the same person. The soul includes and presumes the body. "In fact," writes Mork, "the ancient Hebrews could not conceive of one without the other. Here was no Greek dichotomy of soul and body, of two opposing substances, but a unity, man, who is *bashar* [body] from one aspect and *nephesh* [soul] from another. *Bashar*, then, is the *concrete reality* of human existence, *nephesh* is the *personality* of human existence."<sup>32</sup>

**The Soul and Death.** The survival of the soul in the Old Testament is linked to the survival of the body, since the body is an outward manifestation of the soul. This explains why the death of a person is often described as the death of the soul. "When death occurs," writes Johannes Pedersen, "then it is the soul that is deprived of life. Death cannot strike the body or any other parts of the soul without striking the entirety of the soul. Therefore it is also said to 'kill a soul' or 'smite a soul' ([Num 31:19](#); [35:15,30](#); [Jos 20:3, 9](#)); it may also be called to 'smite one as regards the soul,' i. e. to smite one so that the soul is killed ([Gen 37:21](#); [Deut 19:6, 11](#); [Jer 40:14, 15](#)). There can be no doubt that it is the soul which dies, and all theories attempting to deny this fact are false. It is deliberately said both that the soul dies ([Judg 16:30](#); [Num 23:10](#) et al.), that it is destroyed or consumed ([Ez 22:25, 27](#)), and that it is extinguished ([Job 11:20](#))."<sup>33</sup>

Readers of the English Bible may question the validity of Pedersen's statement that the soul dies, because the word "soul" does not occur in the texts which he cites. For example, speaking of the cities of refuge, [Numbers 35:15](#) says: "Anyone who kills any person [*nephesh*] without intent may flee there." Since the word "soul–*nephesh*" does not occur in most English translations, some may argue that the text is speaking of the killing of the body and not of the soul. The truth of the matter is that *nephesh* is found in the Hebrew, but translators usually chose to render it with "person," presumably because of their belief that the soul is immortal and cannot be killed.

In some instances, translators render *nephesh*–soul with personal pronouns. Readers of English versions have no way of knowing that the pronoun stands for the soul–*nephesh*. For example, one of the texts quoted by Pedersen is [Deuteronomy 19:11](#), which in the RSV reads: "But if any man hates his neighbor, and lies in wait for him, and attacks him and wounds him [*nephesh*] mortally so that he dies. . . ." The phrase "wounds him mortally" in Hebrew reads "wounds the soul–*nephesh* mortally." Pedersen quotes the texts from the Hebrew Bible and not from English translations. Thus, his statement that "the soul dies" accurately reflects what the Hebrew text says. Furthermore, there are texts even in the English version, that clearly speak of the death of the soul. For example, [Ezekiel 18:20](#) reads: "The soul that sins shall die" (See also [Ex 18:4](#)).

Death is seen in the Old Testament as the emptying out of the soul of all its vitality and strength. "He poured out his soul unto death" ([Is 53:12](#)). "He poured out" translates the Hebrew *arah* which means "to empty, to bare, or make naked." This means that the Suffering Servant emptied himself of all the vitality and strength of the soul. In death, the soul no longer functions as the animating principle of life, but is at rest in the grave.

"The dead," writes Pedersen, "is a soul bereft of strength. Therefore the dead are called 'the weak' (*rephaim*). 'Now thou art become weak' is the greeting with which the fallen king of the Babylonians is received in the realm of the dead ([Is 14:10](#))."<sup>34</sup> The dead body is still a soul, but a soul without life. The Nazarites were not allowed to defile themselves by coming near "a dead body" ([Num 6:6](#)), or as the Hebrew text says: "the soul of one dead." In the same manner, the priests were not to defile themselves by coming near the dead souls of their relatives ([Lev 21:1, 11](#); [Num 5:2](#); [9:6, 7, 10](#)).

The fate of the soul is linked to the fate of the body. As Joshua conquered the various cities beyond the Jordan, we are told repeatedly "he utterly destroyed every soul [*nephesh*]" ([Jos 10:28, 30, 31, 34, 36, 38](#)). The destruction of the body is seen as the destruction of the soul. "In the

Bible," writes Edmund Jacobs, "*nephesh* refers only to the corpse prior to its final dissolution and while it has distinguishable features."<sup>35</sup> When the body is destroyed and consumed so that its features are no longer recognizable, then the soul no longer exists, because "the body is the soul in its outward form."<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, when the body is laid to rest in the grave with the fathers, the soul is also at rest and lies undisturbed ([Gen 15:15](#); [25:8](#); [Jud 8:32](#); [1 Chron 29:28](#)).

The Old Testament view of the soul as ceasing to function at death as the animating life-principle of the body raises some interesting questions regarding Jesus' statement: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" ([Mat 10:28](#)). This text seems to suggest that the death of the body does not necessarily entail the death of the soul. This text is examined in the next chapter dealing with the New Testament view of human nature.

**The Departure of the Soul.** In addition to those passages we have just considered in which the soul—*nephesh* is associated with death, at least two texts deserve special consideration because they speak of the departure and return of the soul. The first is [Genesis 35:8](#), which says that Rachel's soul was "departing" as she was dying, and the second is [1 Kings 17:21-22](#), which tells of the soul of the widow's son returning to him. These two texts are used to support the view that at death the soul leaves the body and returns to the body at the resurrection.

In his book *Death and the Afterlife*, Robert A. Morey appeals to these two texts to support his belief in the survival of the soul upon the death of the body. He writes: "If the authors of Scripture did not believe that the soul left the body at death and would return to the body at the resurrection, they would not have used such a phraseology [departing and returning of the soul]. Their manner of speaking reveals that they believed that man ultimately survived the death of the body."<sup>37</sup>

Can this conclusion be derived legitimately from these two texts? Let us take a closer look at each of them. In describing Rachel's hard labor, [Genesis 35:18](#) says: "And as her soul was departing (for she died), she called his name Benoni; but his father called his name Benjamin." To interpret the phrase "her soul was departing" as meaning that Rachel's immortal soul was leaving her body while she was dying, runs contrary to the consistent teaching of the Old Testament that the soul dies with the body. As Hans Walter Wolff rightly points out, "We must not fail to observe that the *nephesh* [soul] is never given the meaning of an indestructible core of being, in contradistinction to the physical life, and even capable of living when cut off from that life. When there is a mention of the 'departing' ([Gen 35:18](#)) of the *nephesh* from a man, or of its 'return' ([Lam 1:11](#)), the basic idea is the concrete notion of the ceasing and restoration of breathing."<sup>38</sup>

The phrase "her soul was departing" most likely means that "her breathing was stopping," or we might say, she was taking her last sigh. It is important to note that the noun "soul—*nephesh*" derives from the verb by the same root which means "to breathe," "to respire," "to draw breath." The inbreathing of the breath of life resulted in man becoming a living soul, a breathing organism. The departing of the breath of life results in a person becoming a dead soul ("for she died"). Thus, as Edmund Jacob explains, "The departure of *nephesh* is a metaphor for death; a dead man is one who has ceased to breathe."<sup>39</sup>

Tory Hoff offers a similar comment: "Through the concrete image of the departure of breath, the text communicates that Rachel was in the process of dying while she named her newborn son. She was not yet dead in the modern sense of the word, but was ebbing closer to death by the moment. She was losing the *nephesh* vitality that *ruah* [breath] sustained to the degree that she would soon depart from *nephesh* existence."<sup>40</sup> We conclude that the departure of the soul is a metaphor for death, most likely associated with the interruption of the breathing process. This conclusion is supported by the second text, [1 Kings 17:21-22](#), which we now examine.

**The Return of the Soul.** In relating the story of the raising to life of the widow's son at Zarephath by Elijah the prophet, [1 Kings 17:20-22](#) says: "Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, let this child's soul come into him again.' And the Lord hearkened to the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived." It must be granted that, taken in isolation, this text could be taken to mean that the soul leaves the body at death and in this instance was recalled by Elijah's prayer. This conclusion obviously would support the belief that the soul is immortal and survives the death of the body.

Three major reasons cause us to reject this interpretation. First, neither in this passage nor anywhere else in the Bible is there any indication that the human soul is immortal. On the contrary, we have found that the soul is the animating principle of life manifested in the body as long as the body is alive.

Second, in verse 17, the death of the boy is described as the cessation of breathing: "There was no breath left in him." This suggests that as the cessation of breathing caused the departure of the soul—*nephesh*, so the revival of breathing caused the return of the soul. As Edmund Jacob puts it: "In [1 Kings 17:17](#) lack of *neshamah* [breath] causes the departure of *nephesh*, which returns when the prophet gives the child breath again, for *nephesh* alone is what makes a living creature into a living organism."<sup>41</sup> Since breathing is the outward manifestation of the soul, the cessation or restoration of breathing causes the departure or return of the soul.

Third, in Hebrew, verse 21 literally reads: "Let this child's soul come into his inward parts again." This reading, which is found in the margin of the AV, puts a different construction on the passage. What returns to the inward parts is breathing. The soul as such is never connected with some "inward" organs of the body. The return of breathing in the inner parts results in the revival of the body, or, we might say, in the body becoming again a living soul.

Basil Atkinson perceptively observes that "the writer did not think of the soul as being the real child or carrying his personality. The child was lying dead on the bed and the *soul* came back to the child. Elijah did not think or say such words as are sometimes heard at modern funerals, 'I can't think of him as *here* any longer.'<sup>42</sup>

In the light of the above considerations, we would conclude that the statement "the soul of the child came into him again" simply means that the child came to life again or the child began breathing again. This is the way the translators of the NIV understood the phrase by rendering it as "the boy's life returned to him." This is a perfectly intelligible way of understanding the text and is consistent with the rest of the Old Testament teaching.

**Conclusion.** Our study of the meaning of *nephesh*—soul in the Old Testament has shown that never once is the word used to convey the idea of an immaterial, immortal entity capable of existing apart from the body. On the contrary, we have found that the soul—*nephesh* is the animating principle of life, the life-breath, which is present in both human beings and animals. The soul is identified with blood because the latter is seen as the tangible manifestation of the vitality of life. At death, the soul ceases to function as the animating life-principle of the body. The fate of the soul is connected inextricably with the fate of the body because the body is the outward manifestation of the soul.

### **PART III: HUMAN NATURE AS BODY AND FLESH**

Our study of the Old Testament view of the soul has already established that body and soul are an indivisible unity, namely, man as seen from two different perspectives. The body is the *physical reality* of human existence, the soul is the *vitality* and *personality* of human existence.

It is unfortunate that during much of Christian history the physical aspect of human nature has been depreciated and even vilified as undesirable and evil. The word "flesh" has been associated with immorality. The "sins of the flesh" invariably means sinful indulgences. The reason for this negative view is that "flesh" is a synonym for the body, and the body, according to classical dualism, which has enormously influenced Christian life and thought throughout the centuries, is bad, or at least suspect.

It is true that in the Bible "the flesh" does not represent the highest and noblest aspect of human nature. Paul especially speaks of the enmity that exists between the flesh and the spirit. But this does not mean that Paul or the rest of the Bible condemns the flesh or the body as ethically evil per se. Rather, the flesh is used metaphorically to represent the whole unregenerated person acting according to his natural sinful desires and propensities.

Historically, much of Christian spirituality and piety has been influenced by a negative view of the body as the seat of sin. The mortification of the flesh by depriving the body of food, warm clothing, or even the physical pleasure of a warm bath has been seen as indispensable for cultivating the spiritual life.<sup>43</sup> Thus, to straighten our Christian spirituality, it is imperative to recover the Biblical wholistic view of human nature, especially the positive view of the physical aspect of our existence.

**Body Created by God.** The creation story provides the logical starting point for the study of the Biblical attitude toward the physical aspect of human nature. The story tells us that matter, including the human body, was created by God. Matter is not an eternal principle of evil antagonistic to God, as in Plato's *Timaeus*, but part of God's good creation to accomplish His eternal purpose. The whole physical order, including the human body, has been created by God according to His eternal purpose.

Repeatedly, throughout the creation story we are told that God looked at what He had created and "saw that it was good" ([Gen 1:10](#), [12](#), [18](#), [21](#), [25](#)). After He created man in His own image God, admired everything He had created and declared it "very good" ([Gen 1:31](#)). On the basis of

the Biblical account of creation, we can assert that this material world is God's good creation and it has a fitting place in His eternal purpose.

It is important to note also that God created man not of some divine spiritual substance, but "of dust from the ground" ([Gen 2:7](#)) and "in the image of God" ([Gen 1:27](#)). "There is no part of man that is of divine origin and that comes down to take up temporary residence in the alien 'body.' Man in no way participates in the divine nature. He is made of the dust of the ground, and his relationship to God is not that of a spark to the fire or a drop of water to the ocean but rather that of an image to the original. Thus there is nothing in man that establishes an identity or even a continuity between him and God, as the rational 'soul' does in the 'religious [dualistic]' view. Instead of identity, there is merely likeness; instead of continuity, there is radical discontinuity, as between creature and Creator."<sup>44</sup>

**Physical Body Is Not Evil.** The fact that the human body was created out of the material substance of the earth does not mean that matter is the source of evil in human life. In Platonic dualism, matter is the source and origin of evil. Evil is identified with matter, which is an eternal principle independent of and antagonistic to the good God. The identification of evil with matter has led to a pessimistic view of the body and of physical existence. It is unfortunate that this pessimistic view of the body has greatly influenced Christian thought and practice.

In the creation account of Adam and Eve, there is not the slightest hint that the physical body is to be blamed for their disobedience and fall. One popular Christian tradition interprets the original sin as consisting of an illicit act of sexual intercourse. Such an interpretation is totally devoid of Biblical support. The temptation to which Adam and Eve yielded was not the desire to have sex but to act as though they were God. Sex is God's good creation in the same way as all the other physiological functions of the human body.

The temptation was, "You will be like God" ([Gen 3:5](#)). The origin of sin in human life has nothing to do with sexual intercourse or any other physical act of the body. Rather, it is to be found in the fact that man succumbed to the temptation to be like God, instead of being a reflector of God's image. This has been the fundamental manifestation of sin, namely, to place oneself, rather than God, at the center of everything.

In the Bible, the origin of sin is found not in some defect in the physical constitution of the human body, but in the wrong, self-centered choice made by free human beings. Humanity today is in a sinful condition because people live self-centered lives rather than a God-centered existence. Because of this self-centeredness, the tremendous possibilities inherent in our human nature created in the image of God have been realized in a disastrously wrong way. "What are godlike possibilities become demonic actualities."<sup>45</sup>

The Biblical account of the creation and Fall of mankind locates the origin of sin not in the body, but in the mind, namely, in the desire to act and to think of oneself as being God. Sin is volitional, an act of the will, and not a biological condition of the body. The Bible has a healthy view of the body as the object of God's creation and redemption. This point becomes clearer as we examine the Old Testament meaning and usage of "*flesh-bashar*."

**The Flesh as the Substance of the Body.** The precise Hebrew term for the *whole* body is *geviyyah*, which is rare. It is used a dozen times to refer to a living or dead body ([Gen 47:18](#); 1 King 31:10,12, [Ez 1:11, 23](#); [1 Sam 31:10, 12](#); [Dan 10:6](#)). The common term used in the Hebrew Bible to designate the body is *bashar*, which technically means "flesh." *Bashar* occurs 266 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Its most common meaning is the "flesh" that constitutes the body. An example of this usage is [Genesis 2:21-24](#): "So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon man, and while he slept he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh [*bashar*]; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh [*bashar*].'"

Another example is found in [Psalm 79:2](#) where the Psalmist laments: "They have given the bodies of thy servants to the birds of the air for food, the flesh [*bashar*] of the saints to the beasts of the earth." The parallelism indicates that flesh [*bashar*] is used as a synonym for the body. *Bashar* denotes the fleshly substance that human beings have in common with animals. Both man and animals are flesh. The account of the flood bears this out: "For behold, I will bring a flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh [*bashar*] in which is the breath of life from under heaven" ([Gen 6:17](#); cf. [6:19](#); ; 9:17). "Bring forth with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh [*bashar*]—birds and animals, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" ([Gen 8:17](#)).

The above examples indicate that "flesh–*bashar*" stood for the substance of the body which man has in common with the lower orders of animals. The flesh is created by God who can destroy as well as heal and restore it.

**The Flesh as the Whole Man.** There are texts in which the flesh–*bashar* stands for the whole person, not only as a fleshly substance, but as a rational and emotional being. "O God, thou art my God, I seek thee; my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh [*bashar*] faints for thee" ([Ps 63:1](#)). "My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh [*bashar*] sing for joy to the living God" ([Ps 84:2](#)). Job says of him who lies on his sickbed: " His flesh [*bashar*] upon him shall have pain, and his soul within him shall mourn" ([Job 14:22, KJV](#)).

The parallelism in these texts between soul and flesh indicates that the flesh, like the soul, can function as the seat of emotions. Flesh and soul are not two different forms of existence, but two manifestations of the same person. The Biblical wholistic view makes it possible to use flesh and soul interchangeably because they are part of the same organism.

Flesh is also used to denote the kinship that binds people together as blood relatives or as members of the human family. Thus Judah counsels his brothers not to kill Joseph, "for he is our brother, our own flesh [*bashar*]" ([Gen 37:27](#)). A frequent formula to express blood relationship is "my bone and my flesh" ([Gen 29:14](#); [Jud 9:2](#); [2 Sam 5:1](#); [19:12](#)). In the Flood story, "all flesh" ([Gen 6:17, 19](#)) denotes the larger bond of the human family.

**The Flesh as Human Nature in his Weakness.** Flesh–*bashar* is also used in the Bible to characterize the weakness and frailty of human nature. Hans Walter Wolff entitled the chapter on "Flesh–*Bashar*" as "Man in His Infirmary."<sup>46</sup> The title reflects the frequent use of "flesh" in the Old Testament to denote human "nothingness" in the eyes of God. We read in [Job 34:14-15](#): "If

he [God] should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh [*bashar*] would perish together, and man would return to dust." Because human beings are flesh (weak and frail), God remembers them: "He [God], being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, . . . He remembered that they were but flesh [*bashar*], a wind that passes and comes not again" ([Ps 78:38-39](#)).

In relationship to God, man is flesh, a creature dependent upon Him for continued existence. "All flesh [*bashar*] is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field" ([Is 40:6](#)). Because human beings are flesh, they are powerless before God. "In God I trust without fear. What can flesh [*bashar*] do to me?" ([Ps 56:4](#); cf. [Is 31:3](#)). Consequently, it is imperative for human beings to trust in God and not in their "flesh" (human resources). "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh [*bashar*] his arm" ([Jer 17:5](#)). In this text, "flesh-*bashar*" denotes human opposition to God. The flesh is not intrinsically ethically evil. It may be weak, but not inherently sinful per se. When a "heart of stone" is turned into a "heart of flesh," it becomes a heart that obeys God ([Ez 11:19](#)). Because of its natural endowments, the flesh can become proud, self-deceptive, and, consequently antagonistic to God. The latter meaning carries over in the New Testament where Paul develops it more than the others.

**Conclusion.** Our study of the meaning and use of "flesh-*bashar*" in the Old Testament shows that the word generally is used to describe the *concrete reality* of human existence from the perspective of its frailty and feebleness. Contrary to classical dualism, the flesh and the soul never are seen as two different forms of existence. Rather, they are manifestations of the same person and, consequently, they often are used interchangeably. A good example is [Psalm 84:2](#), where the soul, the heart, and flesh all express the same longing for God: "My soul longs, yea, faints for the court of the Lord; my heart and flesh [*bashar*] sing for joy to the living God." In the Old Testament view of human nature there is *nothing* that is merely physical. Any physical part of the human body can express psychological functions as well.

The wholistic view of human nature made it possible for the Bible writers to see the body and the soul as expressions of the same organism. Pedersen rightly notes that "the proposition that the soul is flesh, is indissolubly connected with the converse, i. e., that the flesh is soul."<sup>47</sup> The two are indissolubly connected because the body is the outward form of the soul and the soul the inward life of the body.

#### **PART IV: HUMAN NATURE AS HEART**

In the Biblical view of human nature, the heart is the central and unifying organ of personal life. The Hebrew words translated "heart" are *leb* and *lebab*, which are found together 858 times.<sup>48</sup> This makes the heart the most common of all the terms used to describe human nature. Walther Eichrodt notes that "there is hardly a spiritual process which could not be brought into some connection with the heart. It is made the organ equally of feeling, intellectual activities, and the working of the will."<sup>49</sup>

The heart in Biblical thought is the spring of individual life, the ultimate source of the physical, intellectual, emotional, and volitional energies, and, consequently, the part of the person that normally has contact with God. In the recesses of the heart are the thoughts, the attitudes, the

fears, and the hopes which determine the personality or character of the individual. Many of the functions of the heart correspond to the functions of the soul. This is because in the Biblical view of human nature, no radical distinction exists among the various aspects of the individual.

**The Heart as the Seat of Emotions.** All the emotions of which a person is capable are attributed to the heart. "The heart can be glad ([Prov 27:11](#); [Acts 14:17](#)), sad ([Neh 2:2](#)), troubled ([2 Kings 6:11, KJV](#)), courageous ([2 Sam 17:10](#)), discouraged ([Num 32:7](#)), fearful ([Is 35:4](#)), envious ([Prov 23:17](#)), trustful ([Prov 31:11](#)), generous ([2 Chron 29:31](#)), moved by hatred ([Lev 19:17](#)) or love ([Deut 13:3](#))."<sup>50</sup>

The emotions of the heart are portrayed vividly and concretely. The heart is said to fail ([Gen 42:28](#)), to faint ([Gen 45:26](#)), to throb ([Ps 38:10](#)), to tremble ([1 Sam 28:5](#)), to be stirred up ([Prov 23:17](#); [Deut 19:6](#)), to be sick ([Prov 13:12](#)). The state of the heart dominates every manifestation of life. "A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken" ([Prov 15:13](#)). Even health is affected by the condition of the heart. "A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones" ([Prov 17:22](#)).

**The Inner Parts as the Seat of Emotions.** For the sake of clarity, we must add that the seat of emotions is found not only in the heart but also in the inner parts of the human body, referred to in Hebrew by the term *qereb*, "bowels." What is striking is that the Old Testament views some of the inner parts of the body as the location or source of the higher human capacities. As Hans Walter Wolff observes, "The inner parts of the body and its organs are at the same time the bearer of man's spiritual and ethical impulses."<sup>51</sup>

A few examples will serve to illustrate this point. Jeremiah asks the people of Jerusalem: "How long shall your evil thoughts lodge within you [*qereb*—bowels]?" ([Jer 4:14](#)). Here the "bowels" are the location of evil thoughts. [Proverbs 23:16](#) pledges: "My reins [*kelayot*—kidneys] shall rejoice, when thy lips speak right things." The Psalmist thanks God for counseling him and because "my reins [*kelayot*—kidneys] also instruct me in the night seasons" ([Ps 15:7](#)).

Elsewhere, the Psalmist associates the kidneys with the heart as the most sensitive organs: "Then my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins [*kelayot*—kidneys]" ([Ps 73:21](#)). Here the kidneys function as the conscience of the individual. The liver, too, can serve to express deep grief. Jeremiah laments: "My eyes do fail with tears, my bowels are troubled, my liver [*kabed*] is poured upon the earth, for the destruction of the daughter of my people" ([Lam 2:11](#)). This brief digression into the inner parts of the body was intended to show that these can sometimes function as the seat of emotions, in the same way as the heart. This is possible because in Biblical wholistic thought a part of the person can sometimes represent the whole organism.

**The Heart as the Seat of the Intellect.** In the greatest number of cases, the heart in the Bible denotes the center of intellectual life, precisely what we ascribe to the head or the brain. Contrary to our Western culture where the heart is associated primarily with emotions and feelings, in the Bible the heart is the reasoning center of the person that determines what the person is: "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he" ([Prov 23:7, KJV](#)).

[Proverbs 15:14](#) describes the essential function of the heart in the Biblical sense: "The heart of him that hath understanding seeketh knowledge" (KJV). The heart seeks knowledge not merely for the sake of knowledge but to enable the individual to make moral, responsible decisions. It is highly significant that the term "heart-*leb*" occurs by far the most frequently in the wisdom literature (99 times in Proverbs alone, 42 times in Ecclesiastes, and 51 times in the strongly didactic book of Deuteronomy).<sup>52</sup>

Solomon's great wisdom consisted in the fact that he asked not for long life or riches, but for an understanding heart: "Give thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?" (1 King 3:9). The understanding heart Solomon asked for is what we would call a discerning mind. Because of its concrete character, the Hebrew language can hardly express the idea "to think," except by the phrase "to say in the heart" ([Gen 27:41](#); [Ps 10:6](#)). It is with the heart that a person plans ([Prov 16:9, KJV](#)), seeks knowledge, understands ([Eccl 8:16](#)), and meditates on the deep things of life ([Ps 4:4](#)).

Being the center of reason, the heart is also the center of the will and hence of the moral life. The heart can plan wicked things ([Prov 6:18](#)) and become perverted ([Prov 11:20](#)). It may be lifted up with pride ([Deut 8:14](#)), become hardened ([Zech 7:12](#)), be stubborn ([Jer 3:17](#)), or turned away from God ([1 Kings 11:2](#)). On the other hand, the good heart is perfect ([1 Kings 8:61](#)), or blameless ([Ps 119:80](#)), clean ([Ps 51:10](#)), and upright ([Ps 32:11](#)). The heart can be cleansed ([Ps 73:13](#)) or renewed ([Ez 18:31](#)). A new heart makes it possible to internalize the will of God as revealed in His law ([Ez 11:19](#); [36:26](#)).

**The Heart Communicates with God.** As the reasoning center of the human personality, the heart is capable of communicating with God. The heart speaks to God ([Ps 27:8](#)), receives His word ([Deut 30:14](#)), and trusts in Him ([Ps 28:7](#)). God can give man an understanding heart ([1 Kings 3:9](#)) or take all understanding away ([Job 12:24](#)). For His mysterious purposes, God can harden the heart ([Ex 4:21](#)) or can soften it ([Ezra 6:22](#)).

Since as a result of the Fall, the heart is inclined to evil, the transformation of the heart occurs by divine grace. God promises to write His law in human hearts ([Jer 31:33](#)) and to create a new heart in human beings ([Ps 51:10](#)). He will take away the hardened heart and replace it with a receptive heart ([Ez 36:26](#)). In the New Testament we are told that God has poured out His love in human hearts ([Rom 5:5](#)). Christ dwells in the human heart ([Eph 3:17](#)) and His peace reigns there ([Col 3:15](#)).

**Conclusion.** This brief survey of the functions of the heart in the Old Testament shows that the heart is the center and source of all religious, intellectual, and moral activities. More than any other Old Testament term, the heart stands for the deepest center of human existence, for what a person really is in the depth of his being. As stated in [1 Samuel 16:7](#): "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

In many ways, the heart is the unifying center of the whole person, body and soul. Some of the functions of the heart overlap with those of the soul, but this is not surprising because from the Biblical wholistic perspective, there is no radical distinction between the soul and the heart. Jesus

said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" ([Mat 22:37](#)).

"The heart," writes Pedersen, "is the totality of the soul as a character and operating power . . . *nephesh* is the soul in the sum of its totality, such as it appears; the heart is the soul in its inner value."<sup>53</sup> What is said about the soul often can be applied to the heart. The functional unity we have found among body, soul, and heart negates the dualistic view of human nature, which detaches the soul from the body. The fact that the spiritual and moral functions of human nature, which dualists view as a prerogative of the soul, are most often attributed to the heart, shows that in the Bible the soul does not exist and function as a distinct, immaterial essence apart from the body.

## **PART V: HUMAN NATURE AS SPIRIT**

So far, we have seen that the Old Testament defines human nature as a unity, man, who is *soul* (living being) from one aspect, *flesh* (physical being) from another aspect, and *heart* (rational being) from yet another aspect. There is one more important aspect to be considered, namely, man as spirit. The term "spirit" translates the Hebrew *ruach* and its New Testament equivalent *pneuma*. We study the latter in chapter 3 where we examine the New Testament view of human nature.

The study of the presence of God's Spirit in human beings is important because dualists often identify God's Spirit in a person with the soul given by God to each individual and returning to Him at death. Thus, our concern is to establish, first, the nature of God's Spirit in a person. Second, whether the spirit in human beings is a distinct and separate component of human nature or an indivisible aspect of it.

A mere glance at the statistical use of the term "spirit-*ruach*" in the Old Testament shows that there are at least two unique things about this term that occurs a total of 389 times. First, no less than 113 times *ruach*-spirit denotes the natural power of the wind. Thus, it is a term associated with the manifestation of power. Second, 35 per cent of the times (136 times) *ruach*-Spirit refers to God. Only 33 per cent of the times (129) does it refer to men, animals, and false gods. This is surprising in view of the fact that "flesh-*bashar*" is never applied to God, and "soul-*nephesh*" only is applied to God in 3 per cent of the cases (21 times).<sup>54</sup>

On the basis of this statistical data, Hans Walter Wolff rightly concludes that "*ruach* [spirit] must from the very beginning properly be called a theo-anthropological term,"<sup>55</sup> that is to say, a term with divine-human connotations. The Bible applies *ruach*-spirit to both God and man. It speaks of the Spirit of God and the spirit of man. To understand the Biblical concept of man's spirit, it is important to understand the Biblical meaning of God's Spirit. We shall endeavor to do this by examining especially how God's Spirit works within human nature.

**The Meaning of "Spirit-*Ruach*."** The Hebrew term generally translated "spirit" is *ruach*, which literally means "air in motion, wind." Thus in [Genesis 1:2](#), the Spirit-*ruach* of God moves over the waters and in [Isaiah 7:2](#), "the trees of the forest shake before the wind [*ruach*]." Wolff points out that *ruach* does not mean static air but "moving air"<sup>56</sup> that generates considerable

power. It is not surprising that the formidable power of the wind [*ruach*] is often seen as a manifestation of the power of God. The east wind [*ruach*] brings locusts ([Ex 10:13](#)). A powerful wind [*ruach*] dries up the Red Sea ([Ex 14:21](#)). A strong wind [*ruach*] blows over the earth and causes the flood waters to subside ([Gen 8:1](#)).

The power manifested by the wind is associated in Scripture with the breath of God, which is His creative and sustaining power. We encounter this usage for the first time in [Genesis 2:7](#): "Then the Lord formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath [*neshamah*] of life, and man became a living soul."

Earlier we examined this great text to ascertain the connection between "breath of life" and "living soul." Now we seek to understand more fully what "the breath of life" is that caused man to become a living soul. The Hebrew word used for breath here is not *ruach*-spirit but the rarely used *neshamah*-breath. The meaning of the two terms is similar, as indicated by the fact that they appear in parallel in five passages ([Is 42:5](#); [Job 27:3](#); [32:8](#); [33:4](#); [34:14,15](#)). [Job 33:4](#) says: "The spirit [*ruach*] of God has made me, and the breath [*neshamah*] of the Almighty gives me life." Again, "If he should take back his spirit [*ruach*] to himself, and gather to himself his breath [*neshamah*], all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust" ([Job 34:14-15](#)).

In these verses, *neshamah* and *ruach* are used as synonyms, yet there appears to be a slight difference between the two terms. *Neshamah* denotes calm, peaceful, physical breathing, while *ruach* describes a more active and dynamic form of breathing. *Ruach* appears also to be the agent that makes breathing possible. "As long as my breath [*neshamah*] is in me, and the spirit [*ruach*] of God is in my nostrils . . ." ([Job 27:3](#)). Here the breath-*neshamah* is in the person, while the spirit-*ruach* is in the breathing through the nostrils. "Thus says God, the Lord, . . . who gives breath [*neshamah*] to the people upon it, and spirit [*ruach*] to those who walk in it." ([Is 42:5](#)). Here spirit-*ruach* means more than breathing because it is given only to "those who walk in it." It would seem that the breath-*neshamah* is one of the manifestations of God's Spirit-*ruach*. The latter has broader meanings and functions. One of the functions of God's Spirit is to give and sustain life through the breathing process. "Man's vital breath is God's gift; he breathes by courtesy of God's Spirit."<sup>57</sup>

It is interesting to note that the marginal reading of [Genesis 7:22](#) in the Authorized Version translates "the breath of life" as "the breath of the spirit of life." This literal translation of the Hebrew conveys the idea that the breath of life [*neshamah*] derives from the Spirit [*ruach*] which gives life. Commenting on this text, Basil Atkinson writes: "The *neshamah* [breath] seems to be a property or portion of the *ruach* [Spirit] and to be concerned with what we today would call the physical life. The *ruach* which is also a principle of life is much wider. It produces and sustains the inner as well as the outer life of man, his intellect, abstract thoughts, emotions and desires as well as covering the whole action of the *neshamah* on the physical life."<sup>58</sup>

**The Spirit as Life Principle.** The parallel use of *neshamah*-breath of life and *ruach*-Spirit in the cited texts shows that the "breath of life" is the life-giving Spirit of God manifested in the creation of human life and of the universe as a whole. "O Lord how manifold are thy works! . . . the earth is full of thy creatures. . . . When thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed; when thou takest away their breath [*ruach*], they die and return to their dust. When thou sendest forth thy

Spirit [*ruach*], they are created, and thou renewest the face of the ground" ([Ps 104:24, 29-30](#)). "Breath" and "Spirit" here translate *ruach*, thus indicating that the "breath of life" is equated with the life-giving Spirit of God who creates and renews "the face of the ground."

There are numerous texts in the Old Testament in which the spirit–*ruach* refers to the life principle present in human beings. In [Isaiah 38:16](#), we find Hezekiah saying, "In all these things [that is, in the mercies of God] is the life of my spirit [*ruach*]." The phrase "the life of my spirit" most likely refers to Hezekiah's recovery of his health, since the text continues, saying: "Oh, restore me to health and make me live!" ([Is 38:16](#)). Here the spirit–*ruach* is clearly identified with life. There is no suggestion that the spirit in man is an independent and immortal component of human nature. Rather, it is the animating principle of life visible through the breathing.

Idols which have no life are described as without "breath-*ruach*." "Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols; for his images are false, and there is no breath [*ruach*] in them" ([Jer 10:14](#)). "Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath [*ruach*] at all in it" ([Hab 2:19](#)). In both texts, *ruach* is translated "breath" because breathing is a manifestation of God's Spirit in human nature. It is evident that idols are lifeless because they are without *ruach*, the animating principle of life that enables a person to breathe.

In describing the fate of King Zedekiah at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, Jeremiah uses an interesting and intelligible figure of speech: "The breath [*ruach*] of our nostrils, the Lord's anointed, was taken in their [Babylonian] pits" ([Lam 4:20](#)). Here Zedekiah is thought of as the very life–*ruach* of the nation that was taken away when the king was led into captivity. We have here a clear example of *ruach* denoting the principle of life.

Speaking of Samson, [Judges 15:19](#) says: "When he had drunk, his spirit [*ruach*] returned, and he revived" ([Jud 15:19](#)). This revival is not from death but from exhaustion. We find exactly the same use in [1 Samuel 30:12](#) and [Daniel 10:17](#). In all these instances, the spirit-*ruach* denotes the physical renewal of life. Being the life-giving agent, the spirit-*ruach* fittingly can represent also the physical renewal of life. The connection between spirit–*ruach* and life is evident.

In his famous vision of the valley of dry bones, Ezekiel provides a most vivid example of the vivifying power of God's Spirit–*ruach*: "Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath [*ruach*] to enter you, and you shall live . . . and you shall know that I am the Lord . . . 'Come from the four winds, O breath [*ruach*], and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath [*ruach*] came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet" ([Ezek 37:5, 6, 9-10](#)). Here the breath of God is His life-giving Spirit, as in the creation of man. The life-giving Spirit is identified with God's breath because its manifestation caused dead bodies to come alive and breathe again. Breathing is a tangible manifestation of life and thus it provides a fitting metaphor for the animating life principle of the spirit.

**The Spirit as God's Word.** In [Psalm 33:6](#) we find an interesting parallelism between God's breath and His Word: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath [*ruach*] of his mouth." Here God's breath–*ruach* acts as a synonym for God's Word,

because both proceed from His mouth. The parallelism suggests that God's breath is more than moving air. It is the creative *power of life* manifested through the spoken word of God.

Another example in which God's word is associated with *ruach*–spirit is found in [Psalm 147:18](#): "He sends forth his word, and melts them [the frozen waters]; he makes his wind [*ruach*] blow, and the waters flow." Here God's word is associated with *ruach*–breath or wind, presumably because speech is produced by breathing and proceeds from the mouth. God is described analogically in accordance with the human process of speaking through breathing.

We must never forget that the Hebrews described things as they saw them, concretely and not abstractly. They saw that speech was caused by breathing, so it was natural for them to associate God's breath with His word. Thus, God's breath should be understood not as moving air, but as the life-giving power manifested through His spoken word. When God speaks, things happen, because His word is not empty speech, but life-giving power.

**The Spirit as Moral Renewal.** The renewal or re-creation accomplished by God's Spirit is not only physical but also moral. David prayed: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit [*ruach*] within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit [*ruach*] from me" ([Ps 51:10-11](#)). The "new and right spirit [*ruach*]" is a person's right disposition toward God which is made possible by God's "holy Spirit–[*ruach*]." Thus the spirit–*ruach* is both God's Spirit and man's spirit. God gives the Spirit to create and sustain life. Man receives the Spirit to live in accordance with God's will. Friedrich Baumgartel writes: "The Spirit of God is a creative, transforming power, and its purpose is to create a sphere of religion and morals."<sup>59</sup>

In Ezekiel we find the spirit–*ruach* used three times for the new regenerate principle of life that God places within the believer when he is converted ([Ez 11:19](#); [18:31](#); [36:26](#)). "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit [*ruach*] I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" ([Ez 36:26](#)). Here the "new spirit–*ruach*" is associated with "a new heart," because we have found that the heart is the mind, or reasoning center of the individual. The "new spirit–*ruach*" is an attitude of willing obedience to God's commandments that comes from a renewal of the mind ([Rom 12:2](#)). This meaning is clarified by the very next verse: "And I will put my spirit [*ruach*] within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" ([Ez 36:27](#)). It is through the enabling power of God's Spirit that our mind is renewed, so that we can live in accordance with the moral principles God has revealed for our well-being.

**The Spirit as God's Enabling Power.** The Spirit of God is manifested not only in creating and sustaining life, but also in equipping individuals for specific tasks. When God commissioned Gideon to deliver the Israelites from the tyranny of Midian, "The Spirit [*ruach*] of the Lord took possession of Gideon. . . ." ([Jud 6:34](#)) and enabled him to lead the Israelites to victory. It was the Spirit of the Lord that equipped Gideon for the task, because he questioned his own qualifications: "Pray, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family" ([Jud 6:15](#)).

The same thing happened to Jephthah: "The Spirit [*ruach*] of the Lord came upon Jephthah. . . . Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight them, and the Lord gave them into his hand" ([Jud 11:29, 32](#)). In such instances God's Spirit enabled certain Israelite leaders to perform superhuman deeds at critical moments.

God's Spirit was also given to national leaders to carry out God's plan for Israel. When the "Spirit of the Lord" came upon Saul, he was "turned into another man" ([1 Sam 10:6](#)). Similarly, when Samuel anointed David to succeed Saul as king, "the Spirit [*ruach*] of the Lord came upon David from that day forward" ([1 Sam 16:13](#)). Note that when David was anointed king, "the Spirit [*ruach*] of the Lord departed from Saul" ([1 Sam 16:14](#)). The Spirit that departed from Saul could hardly have been his soul that went up to God, since he was still alive. The withdrawal of the Spirit disqualified Saul as king of Israel, while the giving of God's Spirit to David qualified him to rule over the people.

It is evident that the Spirit God gave to Gideon and Jephthah to judge and to David to rule, is not the same the same "breath of life" that is present in every human being. The latter is the principle of life that animates every human being, while the former is God's Spirit given to chosen individuals to equip them for a special mission. In the case of Bezazel, for example, God's Spirit equipped him with special skills for the building of the sanctuary. "I have filled him with the Spirit [*ruach*] of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for the work of every craft" ([Ex 31:3-4](#)).

God's Spirit commissioned prophets to communicate special messages to the people. Ezekiel says: "When he spoke to me, the Spirit [*ruach*] entered into me and set me upon my feet; and I heard him speaking to me" ([Ez 2:2](#)). Repeatedly, the prophets say that the Spirit of the Lord came upon them. Zechariah speaks of "the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit [*ruach*] through the former prophets" ([Zech 7:12](#)).

The giving of God's Spirit is seen as an official divine commissioning. In Isaiah 61, the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah, is anointed by the Spirit for His mission: "The Spirit [*ruach*] of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound" ([Is 61:1](#)). Joel prophesied of the messianic time when God's Spirit would be poured out on every believer: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit [*ruach*] on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions" ([Joel 2:28](#)). In these instances, God's Spirit functions not as the animating principle of physical life, but as the Agent that equips believers for service.

**The Spirit as the Disposition of an Individual.** The idea of power manifested by the spirit-*ruach* is carried over into what we would call the disposition or dominant impulse of an individual. A living person has drives or impulses that dominate him, or at least try to, and which he must overcome. This is often expressed in the Old Testament by the term spirit-*ruach*, and characterizes the human spirit often antagonistic to God. Hosea complains that "a spirit [*ruach*] of harlotry" has led the priests astray ([Hos 4:12](#)). Ezekiel denounced "the foolish prophets who

follow their own spirit [*ruach*] and have seen nothing" ([Ez 13:3](#)). [Psalm 78:8](#) speaks of the wilderness generation "whose spirit [*ruach*] was not faithful to God." [Proverbs 25:28](#) compares a man who cannot "rule over his own spirit [*ruach*]" to a city without walls. Ecclesiastes says that "the patient in spirit [*ruach*] is better than the proud in spirit [*ruach*]." In all these instances, the spirit denotes an attitude of obedience or disobedience to God. Thus, it is not to be confused with the life-giving function of God's Spirit.

Sometimes the spirit-*ruach* is the seat of grief, generally referred to in Hebrew as "bitterness of spirit." We are told that the people of Israel "did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit [*ruach*] and their cruel bondage" ([Ex 6:9](#)). Hannah told the priest, "I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit [*ruach*]: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before God" ([1 Sam 1:15, KJV](#)). Here the sorrowful spirit is compared to the emptying of the soul before God.

The spirit and the soul are mentioned together because both represent the vitality of life affected by sorrow. In [Proverbs 15:13](#), we read that "by sorrow of the heart the spirit [*ruach*] is broken." Here we find that the heart is the seat of sorrow, but the sorrow breaks the spirit or the inner life of a person. The interaction between spirit and soul, or heart and spirit, reminds us of the Biblical wholistic view of human nature, its various aspects all being part of the one, indivisible human being.

There are instances in which spirit-*ruach* is the seat of emotions. [Proverbs 16:32](#) says: "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit [*ruach*] than he who takes a city." To rule one's spirit means to control one's temper or anger. In several instances, *ruach* is translated as "anger" ([Jud 8:3](#); [Ez 3:14](#); [Prov 14:29](#); [16:32](#); [Ecc 7:9](#); [10:4](#)). In other texts, *ruach* denotes courage: "And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage [*ruach*] left in any man, because of you [the people of Israel]" ([Jos 2:11](#)).

There are also passages in which spirit-*ruach* is used with the meaning of sadness: "For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit [*ruach*]" ([Is 54:6](#)). "The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit [*ruach*]" ([Ps 34:18](#)).<sup>60</sup> Spirit-*ruach* can also denote contrition and humility. Thus, we have the beautiful passage in [Isaiah 57:15](#): "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit [*ruach*], to revive the spirit [*ruach*] of the humble." Again in [Isaiah 66:2](#): "But this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit [*ruach*]."

This brief survey of the various usages of spirit-*ruach* in the Old Testament has shown that the spirit is a life principle deriving from God and maintaining human life. In a figurative way, the spirit-*ruach* is used to refer to the inner moral renewal, good and evil dispositions, dominant impulses, grief, courage, sadness, contrition, and humility. None of the usages we have studied suggests that the spirit retains consciousness or personality when it leaves a person at death. The function of the spirit as a life-giving and sustaining principle ceases when the person dies.

**The Departure of the Spirit at Death.** Eleven passages in the Old Testament speak of the departure or removal of the spirit at death.<sup>61</sup> Of these, four deserve special attention because they

are often used to support the belief that at death the spirit goes to God, bearing with it the personality and consciousness of the individual who passed away.

In foreshadowing the Lord's death on the Cross, [Psalm 31:5](#) says: "Into thy hand I commit my spirit [*ruach*]." The "spirit" that Christ committed into the hands of His Father was nothing else than His human life which He was leaving in the hands of His Father to await its resurrection. As the animating principle of His life left Him, the Lord died and sank into unconsciousness.

Speaking of marine creatures, the Psalmist says: "When thou takest away their breath [*ruach*] they die and return to their dust" ([Ps 104:29](#)). No one will argue that the spirit—*ruach* that God takes away from the fish at death carries consciousness and personality. We have reason to believe that the same is true for human beings, because the same expression is used for both. In fact, in the following verse, the creation of animals is described by means of God's life-giving Spirit, as is the creation of man: "When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created" ([Ps 104:30](#)).

As the creation of life is metaphorically represented by the sending forth of God's Spirit, so the termination of life, death, is described as the withdrawal or removal of God's breath. The latter is clearly expressed in [Job 34:14-15](#): "If he should take back his spirit [*ruach*] to himself, and gather to himself his breath [*neshamah*], all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust." Again, the same thought is expressed in the well-known passage of [Ecclesiastes 12:7](#): "The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit [*ruach*] returns to God who gave it."

These last two texts are very important, because they are commonly quoted to support the belief that the "spirit—*ruach*" that returns to God is the soul that leaves the body at death carrying consciousness and personality. This interpretation lacks Biblical support for four major reasons. First, nowhere in the Bible is God's breath or Spirit identified with the human soul. The existence of the soul depends upon the presence of God's life-giving breath [*neshamah*] or spirit [*ruach*]. And when the life-giving spirit is withdrawn, a person ceases to be a living soul and becomes a dead soul. Thus the Psalmist says, "His breath [*ruach*] goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that day his thoughts perish" ([Ps 146:4, KJV](#)).

Second, nowhere does the Bible suggest that the life-giving spirit that returns to God continues to exist as the immaterial soul of the body that has died. On the contrary, the Bible teaches that when God withdraws his breath of life or spirit of life, the outcome is not the survival of the soul, but the death of the total person. "His thoughts perish" ([Ps 146:4](#)), because there is no more consciousness. Death applies to both the body and the soul, because, as we have seen, the two are inseparable. The body is the outward form of the soul and the soul is the inner form of the body.

Third, the spirit that returns to God refers to all men ("all flesh"), not only to the godly. Those who argue that the spirit of all people, saved and unsaved, go to God for judgment ignore that Scriptures clearly teach that the judgment takes place not at death, but at the coming of the Lord at the end of the world.

Fourth, the Bible never suggests that the breath of life makes its possessor deathless or immortal. In not one of the 389 instances of the use of *ruach*—spirit in the Old Testament is there any suggestion that *ruach*—spirit is the intelligent entity of human nature capable of existence apart from a physical body. On the contrary, the Bible speaks of the death of those who possess the breath of life: "For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath [*ruach*] of life; everything that is on the earth shall die [*gava*—cease to breathe]" ([Gen 6:17](#)). "And all flesh died that moved upon the earth . . . everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath [*ruach*] of life died [*gava*—cease to breathe]" ([Gen 7:21-22](#)).

It is evident from texts such as these that to possess the breath or the spirit of life does not mean to have an immortal soul. The breath of life is simply the gift of life given to human beings and animals for the duration of their earthly existence. The spirit or the breath of life that returns to God at death is simply the life principle imparted by God to both human beings and animals. This point is clearly made in [Ecclesiastes 3:19](#): "For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath [*ruach*], and man has no advantage over the beasts." Those who argue that the animals do not have the spirit (*ruach*) of life but only the breath (*neshamah*) of life, ignore the point that both [Ecclesiastes 3:21](#) and [Genesis 7:15, 22](#) plainly state that animals possess the same spirit—*ruach* of life given to human beings.

There is no indication in the Bible that the spirit of life given to man at creation was a conscious entity before it was given. This gives us reason to believe that the spirit of life has no conscious personality when it returns to God. The spirit that returns to God is simply the animating life principle imparted by God to both human beings and animals for the duration of their earthly existence.

**Conclusion.** We have come to the end of our survey of four prominent terms used in the Old Testament to describe human nature, namely, *soul*, *body*, *heart*, and *spirit*. We have found that these terms represent not different entities, each with its own set of functions, but rather different functions that are interrelated and integrated within the same organism. The Old Testament views human nature as a unity, not a dichotomy. There is no contrast between the body and the soul, such as these terms may suggest to us.

The soul is not an immaterial, immortal part of human nature standing over against the body, but designates the vitality or life principle in human nature. The latter is composed of a form consisting of dust and a vital principle, called occasionally breath (*neshamah*) and usually spirit (*ruach*), breathed into him by God. The body and the divine breath together make the vital, active soul—*nephesh*. The seat of the soul is the blood, because it is seen as the tangible manifestation of the vitality of life.

From the principle of life the term "soul—*nephesh*" is extended to include the feeling, passions, will, and the personality of an individual. It then came to be used as a synonym for man himself. People are numbered as souls ([Gen 12:5](#); [46:27](#)). Death affects the soul—*nephesh* ([Num 23:10](#)) as well as the body.

The spirit–*ruach*, which literally means "air in motion, wind," is often used of God. God's spirit–*ruach* is His breath, that is, His power manifested in creating and sustaining life ([Ps 33:6](#); [104:29-30](#)). The human breath–*ruach* comes from God's breath–*ruach* ([Is 42:5](#); [Job 27:3](#)). In a figurative sense, the spirit–*ruach* is expanded to refer to the inner moral renewal, good and evil dispositions, emotional and volitional life, thus overlapping somewhat with the soul–*nephesh*. The difference between the soul–*nephesh* and spirit–*ruach* is that the former designates mostly a living person in relationship to other human beings, while the latter refers to a person in relationship to God. However, we have found that neither the soul nor the spirit is considered as a part of human nature capable of surviving the death of the body.

The Old Testament references to the flesh or the body never suggest that bodily functions are purely biological and independent of the psychological functions of the soul. There is no distinction in the Old Testament between physical and spiritual organs, because the entire roster of higher human functions such as feeling, thinking, knowing, loving, keeping God's commandments, praising, and praying are equally attributed to the "spiritual" organs of the soul (or spirit) and to the "physical" organ of the heart and, occasionally, to the kidneys and viscera.

Bodily organs perform psychical functions. Thus the heart thinks, the kidneys rejoice, the liver grieves, and the bowels feel sympathy. This is possible because of the wholistic view of human nature where a part of the person can sometimes represent the whole organism.

The references to the departure ([Gen 35:18](#)) and return (1 King 17:21-22) of the soul cannot be legitimately used to support the view that at death the soul leaves the body and returns to it at the resurrection. We have found that the departure of soul is a metaphor for death, indicating that the person has ceased to breathe. Similarly, the return of the soul is a metaphor for the restoration of life, indicating that the person has started breathing again. What is true of the soul is also true of the breath of life or spirit that returns to God at death. What returns to God is not an immortal soul, but simply the animating principle of life imparted by God to both human beings and animals for the duration of this earthly existence.

Ralph Walter Doermann essentially comes to the same conclusion in his doctoral dissertation "Sheol in the Old Testament," presented in 1961 at Duke University. He wrote: "It is evident from the Hebrew view of the psychosomatic unity of man that there is little room for a belief in the 'immortality of the soul.' Either the whole person lived or the whole person went down to death, the weakest form of life. There was no independent existence for the *ruach* [spirit] or the *nephesh* [soul] apart from the body. With the death of the body, the impersonal *ruach* [spirit] 'returned to God who gave it' ([Eccl 12:7](#)) and the *nephesh* was destroyed, though it was present in a very weak sense in the bones and the blood. When these were buried or covered over, the little vitality that remained was nullified."<sup>63</sup>

Summing up our conclusion, we can say that the Old Testament wholistic view of human nature rules out the distinction between body and soul as two completely different realms of reality. Furthermore, it removes the basis for the belief in the survival of the soul at the death of the body. Our next step is to establish whether the New Testament supports or modifies the Old Testament wholistic view of human nature. This question is addressed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF DEATH

Throughout human history, people have refused to accept the finality that death brings to life. Death brings an unacceptable, sudden interruption to one's work, plans, and relationships. Though the inscription on many tomb stones often reads Rest in Peace, the truth of the matter is that most people do not welcome the peaceful rest of the grave. They would rather be alive and productive. Thus, it is not surprising that the subject of death and afterlife always has been a matter of intense concern and speculation. After all, the death rate is still one per person. Each of us at the appointed time will face the grim reality of death.

Today we live in a death-denying culture. People live as if death did not exist. Doctors and hospital personnel generally think that death is something that should not happen. Regardless of how miserable people may feel, they usually respond to How are you? with an artificial smile, saying: Just fine. When we can no longer maintain the facade, we begin to wonder, What is going to happen to me now?

Even at the end of life, we tend to deny the reality of death by embalming the dead and using cosmetics to restore the corpse to a natural, healthy look. We dress the dead in suits and gowns as if they were going to a party instead of returning to dust. A special mourning color that has been prevalent in most countries, such as white or black, is gradually disappearing, because people do not want to believe that death is an intrusion that terminates their life.

In recent years, courses on death and dying have been introduced in many colleges and high schools. Some colleges and universities also offer courses on the occult and other phenomena such as near-death experiences which allegedly offer scientific evidence for life beyond death. All of these trends suggest there is a renewed interest today to unravel the mystery of death and to gain reassurance about some form of life after death.

**Objectives of This Chapter.** This chapter pursues two major objectives. First, we briefly review the history of the belief in the survival of the soul, focusing especially on recent developments that have revived the notion of conscious existence after death. We shall see that spiritualism, the study of near-death experiences, and the channeling (promoted by the New Age Movement, especially through the influence of actress Shirley Maclaine) have all contributed to promoting the view that death is not the cessation of life, but a transition to a different form of existence.

Second, we examine the Biblical understanding of the nature of death. Does the Bible teach that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body? Or, does the Bible teach that death is the termination of life for the whole person, body and soul? In other words, is death according to the Bible the cessation of life for the whole person or the transition to a new form of life for the immortal component of our being?

To find answers to these questions, we will search the Scriptures examining all the pertinent passages. We have followed this procedure in the previous chapters when studying the Biblical view of human nature. Scripture must always be allowed to interpret the Scripture. Passages

which pose some problems must be interpreted in the light of those that are clear. By following this principle known as the analogy of faith, we can resolve the apparent contradictions we find in the Bible.

## **Part 1: A Historical Glimpse Of The**

### **Belief In The Survival Of The Soul**

**You Will Not Die.** To set the stage for the study of the Biblical view of death in this chapter and of the state of the dead in the following chapter, it may be helpful to look briefly at the history of the belief in the survival of the soul after death. The serpent's lie, You will not die ([Gen 3:4](#)) has lived on throughout human history to our time. The belief in some form of life after death has been held in practically every society. The need for reassurance and certainty in the light of the challenge that death poses to human life has led people in every culture to formulate beliefs in some form of afterlife.

In the history of Christianity, death has been defined generally as the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body. This belief in the survival of the soul at the death of the body has been expressed in various ways and given rise to such corollary doctrines as prayer for the dead, indulgences, purgatory, intercession of the saints, the eternal torment of hell, etc. Since the time of Augustine (A. D. 354-430), Christians have been taught that between death and resurrection—a period known as the intermediate state—the souls of the dead either enjoy the beatitude of Paradise or suffer the affliction of Purgatory or Hell. The disembodied condition of the soul is supposed to continue until the resurrection of the body which will bring completion to the salvation of the saints and to the damnation of the wicked.

During the Middle Ages, the fear of death and speculation about what happens to the soul after death gripped the imagination of people and inspired literary and theological works. Dante's *Divina Commedia* is only a small fragment of the immense literary and artistic works which graphically depict the torments of the sinners' soul in Purgatory or Hell, and the blessedness of the saints' soul in Paradise.

The belief in the survival of the soul contributed to the development of the doctrine of Purgatory, a place where the souls of the dead are purified by suffering the temporal punishment of their sins before ascending to Paradise. This widely believed doctrine burdened the living with emotional and financial stress. As Ray Anderson puts it, Not only did one have to earn enough to live, but also to pay off the 'spiritual mortgage' for the dead as well.<sup>1</sup>

**Reformers' Rejection of Purgatory.** The Protestant Reformation started largely as a reaction against the medieval superstitious beliefs about the afterlife in Purgatory. The Reformers rejected as unbiblical and unreasonable the practice of buying and selling indulgences to reduce the stay of the souls of departed relatives in Purgatory. However, they continued to believe in the conscious existence of souls either in Paradise or Hell during the intermediate state. Calvin expressed this belief far more aggressively than Luther.<sup>2</sup> In his treatise *Psychopannychia*,<sup>3</sup> which he wrote against the Anabaptists who taught that souls simply sleep between death and resurrection, Calvin argues that during the intermediate state the souls of the believers enjoy the

bliss of heaven; those of the unbelievers suffer the torments of hell. At the resurrection, the body is reunited with the soul, thus intensifying the pleasure of paradise or the pain of hell. Since that time, this doctrine of the intermediate state has been accepted by most Protestant churches and is reflected in various Confessions.<sup>4</sup>

The Westminster Confession (1646), regarded as the definitive statement of Presbyterian beliefs in the English-speaking world, states: The body of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received unto the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies: and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved to the Judgment of the great day.<sup>5</sup> The confession continues declaring as unbiblical the belief in purgatory.

By rejecting as unbiblical the popular superstitions regarding the suffering of souls in purgatory, the Reformers paved the way for a reexamination of human nature by the rationalistic philosophers of the Enlightenment. These philosophers did not immediately abandon the notion of the immortality of the soul. The first significant attack on the belief in the survival of life after death came from David Hume (A. D. 1711-1776), an English philosopher and historian. He questioned the immortality of the soul, because he believed that all knowledge comes from the sensory perceptions of the body.<sup>6</sup> Since the death of the body marks the end of all sensory perception, it is impossible for the soul to have conscious existence after the death of the body.

The decline in the belief in an afterlife reached its climax by the mid-eighteenth century as atheism, skepticism, and rationalism spread in France, England, and America. The publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) inflicted another blow on supernaturalism and especially on the immortality of the soul. If human life is the product of spontaneous generation, then human beings have no divine spirit or immortal soul in them. Darwin's theories challenged people to seek scientific evidence for supernatural phenomena, such as the survival of the soul.

**Spiritualism and the Revival of Interest in the Soul.** Public interest in the life of the soul after death was soon revived with the publication of *The Coming Race* (1860) by Bulmer-Lytton. This book influenced a host of writers who contributed to making occult practices fashionable in British society. In America, the public interest in communicating with the souls of the dead was ignited by the séances held by the Fox sisters who lived in Hydesdale, New York. On March 31, 1848, they conducted a séance in which the alleged spirit of a murdered man, who called himself William Duesler, informed them that if they dug in the basement, they would find his corpse. This proved to be true; a body was found.

Since the spirits of the dead at the Fox house communicated by a rapping sound on the table, table rapping séances became fashionable all across America and England as a way of communicating with the spirit of the dead. This phenomenon attracted the attention of numerous learned persons, who in 1882 organized the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Henry Sedgwick, a noted philosopher at Cambridge, became instrumental in gathering into the society some of the most influential people of the day, including William Gladstone (former British prime minister) and Arthur Balfour (future prime minister).

An important outcome of the SPR movement is represented by the work of Joseph Banks Rhine, who in 1930 began researching conscious life after death. Rhine was trained as a biologist at the University of Chicago and later became involved with the SPR while teaching at Harvard University. He redefined and relabeled the subjects that the SPR had researched for years by coining such terms as extrasensory perception (ESP), para-normal psychology, or parapsychology. This was designed to give scientific credibility to the study of the afterlife. Later Rhine, together with William McDougal who served as president for both the British and American SPR groups, set up a Department for Psychic Studies at Duke University. The Russians conducted their own psychic experiments. Their findings were published in a popularized form in *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* by Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder (1970).

In the late 1960s, the late Episcopal bishop James A. Pike gave new and widespread attention to the idea of communicating with the spirits of the dead by communicating on a regular basis with his deceased son. Today our society is flooded with mediums and psychics who advertise their services nationwide through TV, magazines, radio, and newspapers. In their book *At the Hour of Death*, K. Osis and E. Haraldson write: Spontaneous experiences of contact with the dead are surprisingly widespread. In a national opinion poll . . . 27 per cent of the American population said they had encounters with dead relatives, . . . widows and widowers . . . reported encounters with their dead spouses twice as often—51 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Communication with the spirits of the dead is not just an American phenomenon. Surveys conducted in other countries reveal a similar high percentage of people who engage the services of mediums to communicate with the spirit of their deceased loved ones.<sup>8</sup>

In their book *Immortality or Extinction?* Paul and Linda Badham, both professors at St. David University in Wales, devote a chapter to The Evidence from Psychical Research to support their belief in conscious life after death. They wrote: Some people believe that direct contact with the dead can be achieved through mediums who allegedly have the ability, while in a state of trance, to transmit messages between the dead and the living. Belief in the reality of such communications is the lifeblood of the Spiritualist Churches, and mourners who consult mediums are often impressed by the convincing descriptions of departed loved-ones which the mediums give. On occasion a medium may also show knowledge of the deceased's former life.<sup>9</sup>

The Badhams acknowledge that in many cases mediums are charlatans who base their communications on acute observation and intelligent guesswork.<sup>10</sup> Yet, they believe that there is genuine evidence for the human personality's survival of bodily death.<sup>11</sup> They support their belief by reporting the cases of several members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), who after their death began sending messages to living members of the SPR to prove that they had survived death.<sup>12</sup>

It is not our intent to dispute the ability of some mediums to receive and transmit messages from spirits. The question is whether such messages are from the spirits of the dead or from the spirits of Satan. We address this question later in this chapter, in conjunction with our study of King Saul's consultation of the medium of Endor ([1 Sam. 28:7-25](#)). At this juncture, it suffices to note that spiritualism still plays a major role today in fostering the belief in the survival of the soul

after death. People who through mediums have been able to communicate with the alleged spirits of their deceased loved ones have reason to believe in the immortality of the soul.

**Near-Death Experiences.** Another significant development of our time, which has contributed to promote belief in the survival of the soul, is the study of near-death experiences. Such studies are based on reports from people who have been resuscitated from a close encounter with death, and from doctors and nurses who have recorded the deathbed experiences of some of their patients.

The experiences reported by persons who have had a close encounter with death often parallel what many believe to be the life of the soul in Paradise. Though no two reports are the same, some of the common characteristics are: the impression of peacefulness, the sensation of being pulled very rapidly through a dark space of some kind, floating in a weightless, spiritual body, the awareness of being in the presence of a spiritual being, an encounter with a bright light, often identified with Jesus Christ or an angel, and a vision of a city of light.<sup>13</sup> Such experiences are interpreted as proof that at death the soul leaves the body and lives in a disembodied condition.

Reports of near-death experiences are not new. They can be found in Classical literature, such as the *History of the English Church and People* by the Venerable Bede, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Primitive Culture* by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, and the *Republic* by Plato.<sup>14</sup> In the *Republic*, Plato gives a remarkable account of a near-death experience, which he uses to substantiate the belief in the immortality of the soul.

He wrote: Er, the son of Armenius, by race a Pamphylian. He once upon a time was slain in battle, and when the corpses were taken up on the tenth day already decayed, was found intact, and having been brought home, at the moment of his funeral, on the twelfth day as he lay upon the pyre, revived, and after coming to life related what, he said, he had seen in the world beyond. He said that when his soul went forth from his body he journeyed with a great company and that they came to a mysterious region where there were two openings side by side in the earth, and above and over against them in the heaven two others, and that Judges were sitting between these, and that after every Judgment they bade the righteous journey to the right and upward through the heaven with tokens attached to them in front of the Judgment passed upon them, and the unjust to take the road to the left and downward, they too wearing behind signs of all that had befallen them, and that when he himself drew near they told him that he must be the messenger to mankind to tell them of that other world, and they charged him to give ear and to observe everything in the place. . . . Yet how and in what way he returned to the body he said he did not know, but suddenly recovering his sight he saw himself at dawn lying on the funeral pyre.<sup>15</sup>

Plato concludes his story with this revealing comment: So the tale was saved. . . . And it will save us if we believe it . . . that the soul is immortal and capable of enduring all the extremes of good and evil.<sup>16</sup> One wonders what kind of salvation the belief in the immortality of the soul can offer to a person. Survival as a disembodied soul or spirit in an ethereal world hardly compares with the Biblical hope of the resurrection of the whole person to a real life on this planet earth renewed to its original perfection. To this question we return in the final chapter which examines the Biblical vision of the world to come.

**Studies of Near-Death Experiences.** In our time, the study of near-death experiences was largely pioneered by American psychiatrist Raymond A. Moody. His two seminal books, *Life after Life* (1975) and *Reflections on Life after Life* (1977) have generated a multitude of books, articles, and debates that address out-of-body experiences.<sup>17</sup> More recently, a bibliography of books and articles relevant to near-death experiences has been published, listing two and a half thousand titles.<sup>18</sup>

Moody studied 150 persons who had near-death experiences and, in some cases, who clinically were dead. The question is how the data should be interpreted. Moody's publisher asserts that the reports are actual case histories that reveal there is life after death.<sup>19</sup> Moody himself, however, is far more cautious. He explicitly denies that he tried to construct a proof of survival of bodily death, even though he regards the data as highly significant for such a belief.<sup>20</sup> He leaves open the possibility of conceiving of near-death experiences as intimations of immortality or merely as the result of terminal physiological events.

It is not our intent to examine the alleged probative value of near-death experiences for the belief in the survival of the soul. Our normative authority for defining human nature is not the subjective near-death experiences of people, but the objective revelation God has provided us in His Word ([2 Pet. 1:19](#)). Thus, only three basic observations about near-death experiences are considered here.

First, there is the problem of defining death. The Editor of *Lancet*, a journal dedicated to medical research, points out that only a deliberate use of obsolete definitions of death can enable one to claim that anybody has, under clinical conditions, returned to tell us what lies beyond death, for by working definition, periodically updated, death is just beyond the point from which anybody can return to tell us anything.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Professor Paul Kurts comments, We have no hard evidence that the subjects had in fact died. Such a proof is not impossible to obtain: rigor mortis is one sign and brain death is another. What the accounts actually describe is 'dying process or near-death experience, *not* death itself.'<sup>22</sup>

Second, we need to remember, as Paul and Linda Badham observe, that any person hovering between life and death must be suffering profound physical and psychological stress. A brain starved of oxygen, drugged by hallucinatory painkillers, or excited by fever is hardly likely to function properly and who knows what visions could be accounted for by its disturbed conditions?<sup>23</sup> Some research has shown the similarity that exists between near-death experiences and the effects caused by psychedelic drugs. Modern consciousness-research has shown that these similarities can be reproduced by drugs in psychedelic sessions. These experiences, thus, tend to belong to the continuum of psychic experiences, which have proved, not life after death, but that the relation between the conscious self and the embodied self is more complex than previously thought.<sup>24</sup>

Lastly, how can it be established that near-death experiences are real experiences, rather than the product of the patients' own mind? And why is it that nearly all the reports of near-death experiences concern happiness and heavenly fulfillment, but no glimpses of the fiery torments of hell? It is evident that when people are dying they prefer to dream about the bliss of heaven

rather than the suffering of hell. But even the vision of heaven depends largely upon one's religious background.

Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson evaluated the reports of more than 1,000 deathbed experiences in the USA and India. They found that the vision of the Hindu patients was typically Indian, while that of the American was Western and Christian. For example, one college-educated Hindu woman had the experience of being brought to heaven on a cow, while an American patient who had prayed to St. Joseph encountered her patron saint in the experience.<sup>25</sup> Such reports about afterlife experiences reflect the personal beliefs of the patients. What they experienced in the process of dying was most likely conditioned by their personal beliefs.

We should always remember that deathbed or near-death experiences are experiences of people who are still alive or whose mind have regained consciousness. Whatever they experience under such circumstances is still part of their present life and not of life after death. The Bible does report the cases of seven of people who were raised from the dead ([1 Kings 17:17-24](#), [2 Kings 4:25-37](#), [Luke 7:11-15](#), [8:41-56](#), [Acts 9:36-41](#), [20:9-11](#)), but none of them had an afterlife experience to share.

Lazarus was brought back to life after being clinically dead for four days did not report any exciting out-of-the-body experiences. The reason is simple. Death according to the Bible is the cessation of life of the whole person, body and soul. There is no form of conscious existence between death and resurrection. The dead rest unconsciously in their tombs until Christ will call them forth on the glorious day of His coming.

**New Age Movement.** The belief in conscious life after death is popularized today especially by the New Age Movement.<sup>26</sup> Defining this popular movement is not easy, because it represents a network of organizations and individuals who share common values and a common vision. These values are derived from Eastern/occult mysticism and a pantheistic world view according to which all share in the One who is God. They envision a coming new age of peace and mass enlightenment, known as the Age of Aquarius.

New Agers may differ on when and how the New Age begins, but they all agree that they can hasten the new order by becoming involved in the political, economic, social, and spiritual life. According to some social analysts, the New Age Movement has become a major cultural trend of our time. Elliot Miller defines it as a *third major social force* vying with traditional Judeo-Christian religion and secular humanism for cultural dominance.<sup>27</sup>

For the New Agers, the ultimate reality is a pantheistic God manifested as an impersonal, infinite consciousness, and force. Human beings are part of the divine consciousness and are separated from God only in their own consciousness. By means of specific techniques, like meditation, chanting, ecstatic dancing, and sensory deprivations, New Agers seek to experience oneness with God. Thus, salvation for the New Ager is equated with self-realization through special spiritual techniques.

**The Channeling Craze.** An important aspect of the New Age Movement is the alleged communication with departed human and extra-human intelligences. This phenomenon is known

as channeling, but it has been rightly called Spiritism New Age Style.<sup>28</sup> Miller rightly notes that spiritism has played a part historically in virtually all forms of paganism. Those who have allowed spirits to use their bodies in this way have been called a variety of names, including 'shaman,' 'witch doctor,' 'medicine man,' 'oracle,' 'fortune-teller,' and 'seer.' In our culture, the common term has been 'medium,' but in recent years it has been largely abandoned in favor of 'channel' or 'channeler,' reflecting, in part, a desire to break free from negative stereotypes that have come to be associated with mediums over the years.<sup>29</sup>

A channeler is essentially a person who claims to be the recipient of teachings and wisdom from the great spirits of the past. The channeling business is booming in all the major American cities. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, in a decade the number of known professional channelers in Los Angeles has increased from two to over one thousand in a decade.<sup>30</sup> This is compelling channelers to employ Madison Avenue psychology to sell their services.

An advertisement by Taryn Krive, a popular channeler, gives a good idea of the services they provide: Through Taryn, a number of Spirit Guides bring forth their teachings and messages. They will answer your questions regarding this life and other lives. They will help you identify your life lessons and unblock your highest potential for living and loving. . . . Meet your Spirit Guides. Learn to recall your past lives and release their influences from the present. Develop your channeling abilities (conscious channeling, automatic writing, trance channeling).<sup>31</sup>

The person who has played a leading role in promoting the New Age Movement, especially channeling, is the famous actress Shirley Maclaine. Her books have sold over five million copies. The *Out on a Limb* mini-series sparked an unprecedented interest in channeling. MacLaine takes seriously her role as the chief evangelist of the New Age. Following her TV mini-series, she held two-day, nationwide seminars called Connecting with the Higher Self. Later she used the proceeds from the seminars to establish a 300 acre spiritual center near Pueblo, Colorado. The purpose of the center is to provide a trusted place where people can communicate with higher Spirits.<sup>32</sup>

An important factor which has contributed to the success of the New Age is its claim to connect people not only with their deceased loved ones, but also with the Great Spirits of the past. As parapsychologist and channel Alan Vaughan points out: The thrill, the immediacy of that contact with another consciousness, may be the driving force behind the phenomenal growth of the practice of channeling.<sup>33</sup>

**Death as Transition to Higher Existence.** Communicating with the spirits of the dead is based on the belief that death is not the end of life, but merely a transition to a higher plane of existence which makes it possible in time to reincarnate either on earth or elsewhere. Virginia Essene, who claims to be speaking as a channel for Jesus, states: Death is an automatic and nearly immediate entrance into a greater sphere of learning, growth, and service to which you are well-accustomed already. You simply live at that higher level of purpose, joy and understanding.<sup>34</sup>

In many ways, the New Age's view of death as the immediate entrance into a higher sphere of living reflects the traditional Christian belief in the conscious survival of the soul at death. Both beliefs can be traced back to the first lie uttered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden: You will

not die ([Gen 3:4](#)). This lie has lived on through the centuries with devastating effects on both Christian and non-Christian religions.

In his penetrating analysis of the New Age Movement, Elliot Miller keenly observes: It has been rightly noted by many Christian observers that the core New Age/channeling doctrines, 'You can be as God,' and 'You shall not die,' were first uttered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden ([Gen 3:4-5](#)). Embraced then, this 'gospel' produced all of the world's misery. Embraced now, it will make all that God has done in Christ to remedy the situation of no avail to the individual in question.<sup>35</sup>

Miller is right in noting that the belief in innate immortality promoted by the New Age today makes of no avail Christ's provision of salvation, since people think they already have the resources to enter into a higher level of existence after death. Unfortunately, Miller fails to realize that the success of the New Age in promoting such a belief is largely due to the traditional Christian dualistic view of human nature. Christians who believe that the body is mortal and the soul immortal have no major difficulty in accepting the New Age view of death as the transition into a higher sphere of living. After all, the latter largely corresponds to the belief in the conscious existence of the saints' souls in the bliss of Paradise.

**Conclusion.** The preceding survey shows how Satan's lie, You shall not die ([Gen 3:4](#)) has lived on in different forms throughout human history until our time. While during the Middle Ages, belief in the afterlife was promoted through literary and artistic, superstitious representations of the bliss of the saints and the torments of the sinners, today such a belief is propagated in a more sophisticated way through mediums, psychics, scientific research into near-death experiences, and New Age channeling with the spirits of the past. Satan's methods have changed, but his objective is still the same: make people believe the lie that no matter what they do they will not die but become like gods by living for ever. Our only protection against such a deception is through a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the nature of death and the state of the dead. To these questions we now turn our attention.

## **PART II: THE NATURE OF DEATH**

**The Death of Socrates and of Christ.** To illustrate the Biblical view of death, Oscar Cullmann contrasts the death of Socrates with that of Jesus.<sup>36</sup> In his book *Phaedo*, Plato offers an impressive description of the death of Socrates. On the day of his death, Socrates taught his disciples the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and showed them how to live out such a belief in dying. He explained to his disciples how to liberate the soul from the prison of the body by occupying oneself with the eternal truths of philosophy. Since death completes the process of liberating of the soul, Plato tells us that Socrates went to his death by drinking the hemlock in complete peace and composure. For Socrates, death was the soul's greatest friend because it sets the soul free from the shackles of the body.

How different was Jesus' attitude toward death! On the eve of His death in Gethsemane, Jesus was greatly distressed and troubled ([Mark 14:33](#)) and said to His disciples, My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death ([Mark 14:34](#)). For Jesus, death was not a great friend but a dreadful enemy, because it would separate Him from His Father. He did not face death with the

composure of Socrates who met death peacefully as a friend. When confronted with the reality of death, Jesus cried to God saying: Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt ([Mark 14:36](#)).

Jesus knew that to die means to be separated from God. Thus, He cried to God because He did not want to be forsaken by the Father or even by His disciples. What a contrast between Socrates and Jesus in their understanding and experience of death! Cullmann notes that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews . . . writes that Jesus 'with loud cries and tears offered up prayers and supplications to him who was able to save him' ([Heb 5:7](#)). Thus, according to the Epistle of Hebrews, Jesus wept and cried in the face of death. There is Socrates, calmly and composedly speaking of the immortality of the soul; here Jesus, weeping and crying.<sup>37</sup>

The contrast is evident, especially in the death-scene. Socrates drank the hemlock with sublime calm. Jesus cried: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? ([Mark 15:34](#)). This is not death as a friend, but as an enemy. Paul rightly calls it the last enemy ([1 Cor 15:26](#)), which at the end will be cast into the lake of fire ([Rev 20:14](#)).

If death released the soul from the body and thus made it possible for the soul to enjoy communion with God, then Christ would have welcomed death for offering Him the opportunity to be reunited with His Father. But Jesus saw death as separation from God, who is life and the Creator of all life. He sensed this separation more than any other human being, because He was and still is closely connected to God. He experienced death in all its horror, not only in the body but also in His soul. This is why He cried: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? ([Matt 27:46](#)).

The contrast between the death of Socrates and the death of Jesus helps us to appreciate the Biblical view of death. In Greek thought, the death of the body was not in any sense the destruction of the true life. In Biblical thought, death is the destruction of *all* life created by God. Therefore it is death and not the body which must be conquered by the resurrection.<sup>38</sup> This is why the resurrection of Jesus is so fundamental to the Christian faith. It provides the needed reassurance that death has been conquered for those who accept Christ's provision of salvation.

Cullmann points out that belief in the immortality of the soul is not belief in a revolutionary event. Immortality, in fact, is only a *negative* assertion: the soul does *not* die, but simply lives on. Resurrection is a positive assertion: the whole man, who has really died, is recalled to life by a new act of creation of God. Something has happened—a miracle of creation! For something has also happened previously, something fearful: life formed by God has been destroyed.<sup>39</sup>

**Sin and Death.** To understand the Biblical view of death, we need to go back to the account of creation where death is presented, not as a natural process willed by God, but as something unnatural opposed to God. The Genesis narrative teaches us that death came into the world as a result of sin. God commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and added the warning: In the day that you eat of it you shall die ([Gen 2:17](#)). The fact that Adam and Eve did not die on the day of their transgression has led some to conclude that human beings do not actually die because they have a conscious soul that survives the death of the body.

This figurative interpretation can hardly be supported by the text, which, literally translated, reads: dying you shall die. What God simply meant is that on the day they disobeyed, the dying process would begin. From a state in which it was possible for them not to die (conditional immortality), they passed into a state in which it was impossible for them not to die (unconditional mortality). Prior to the Fall the assurance of immortality was vouchsafed by the tree of life. After the Fall, Adam and Eve no longer had access to the tree of life ([Gen 3:22-23](#)) and, consequently, began experiencing the reality of the dying process. In the prophetic vision of the New Earth, the tree of life is found on both sides of the river as a symbol of the gift of eternal life bestowed upon the redeemed ([Rev 21:2](#)).

The divine pronouncement found in [Genesis 2:17](#) places a clear connection between human death and the transgression of God's commandment. Thus, life and death in the Bible have religious and ethical significance because they are dependent upon human obedience or disobedience to God. This is a fundamental teaching of the Bible, namely, that death came into this world as a result of human disobedience ([Rom 5:12](#), [1 Cor 15:21](#)). This does not diminish the responsibility of the individual for his participation in sin ([Ez 18:4](#), [20](#)). The Bible, however, makes a distinction between the first death, which every human being experiences as a result of Adam's sin ([Rom 5:12](#), [1 Cor 15:21](#)), and the second death experienced after the resurrection ([Rev 20:6](#)) as the wages for sins personally committed ([Rom 6:23](#)).

**Death as the Separation of the Soul from the Body.** A major question we need to address at this point is the Biblical view of the nature of death. To be specific: Is death the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body, so that when the body dies the soul lives on? Or, is death the cessation of existence of the whole person, body and soul?

Historically, Christians have been taught that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body, so that the soul survives the body in a disembodied state. For example, the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: By death the soul is separated from the body, but in the resurrection God will give incorruptible life to our body, transformed by reunion with our soul.<sup>40</sup> Augustus Strong defines death in similar terms in his well-known *Systematic Theology*: Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body. We distinguish it from spiritual death, or the separation of the soul from God.<sup>41</sup>

In his *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (widely used as a textbook), Calvinistic theologian Henry Clarence Thiessen expresses himself in a similar way: Physical death relates to the physical body; the soul is immortal and as such does not die.<sup>42</sup> In his *Christian Dogmatics*, Francis Pieper, a conservative Lutheran theologian, states most clearly the historic view of death: Temporal death is nothing other than a tearing asunder of men, the separation of the soul from the body, the unnatural disruption of the union of soul and body which has been created by God to be one.<sup>43</sup> Statements like these could be multiplied, since they are found in most systematic theology textbooks and in all major confessional documents.

The above historical view of the nature of death as the separation of the soul from the body has come under a massive attack by many modern scholars. A few examples suffice to illustrate this point. Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus writes: Death is more than a departure of the soul from the body. The person, body and soul, is involved in death. . . . The Christian faith knows nothing

about an immortality of the personality. . . . It knows only an awakening from real death through the power of God. There is existence after death only by an awakening of the resurrection of the whole person.<sup>44</sup>

Althaus argues that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul does not do justice to the seriousness of death, since the soul passes through death unscathed.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the notion that a person can be totally happy and blessed without the body denies the significance of the body and empties the resurrection of its meaning.<sup>46</sup> If believers are already blessed in heaven and the wicked are already tormented in hell, why is the final Judgment still necessary?<sup>47</sup> Althaus concludes that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul rips apart what belongs together: the body and the soul, the destiny of the individual and that of the world.<sup>48</sup>

In his book *The Body*, John A. T. Robinson states: The soul does not survive a man—it simply goes out, draining away with the blood.<sup>49</sup> In his monograph *Life after Death*, Taito Kantonen makes this pointed statement: The Christian view of death is in full accord with the view of natural science as far as the latter goes. When we die we are really dead. Our hopes and desires cannot change this fact. Man does not differ from the rest of creation by having a soul that cannot die.<sup>50</sup>

Even the liberal *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, in its article on death explicitly states: The 'departure' of the *nephesh* [soul] must be viewed as a figure of speech, for it does not continue to exist independently of the body, but dies with it ([Num 31:19](#); [Judg. 16:30](#); [Ez 13:19](#)). No Biblical text authorizes the statement that the 'soul' is separated from the body at the moment of death. The *ruach* 'spirit' which makes man a living being (cf. [Gen 2:7](#)), and which he loses at death, is not, properly speaking, an anthropological reality, but a gift of God which returns to him at the time of death ([Eccl 12:7](#)).<sup>51</sup>

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* acknowledges that we are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea, that the body dies, yet the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and is nowhere found in the Old Testament. The *whole man* dies, when in death the spirit ([Ps 146:4](#); [Eccl 12:7](#)), or soul ([Gen 35:18](#); [2 Sam. 1:9](#); [1 Kings 17:21](#); [Jonah 4:3](#)), goes out of a man. Not only his body, but his soul also returns to a state of death and belongs to the nether-world; therefore the Old Testament can speak of a death of one's soul ([Gen 37:21](#); [Num 23:10](#); [Deut 22:21](#); [Judg. 16:30](#); [Job 36:14](#); [Ps 78:50](#)).<sup>52</sup>

This challenge of modern scholarship to the traditional view of death as the separation of the soul from the body has been long overdue. It is hard to believe that for most of its history, Christianity by and large has held to a view of human death and destiny which has been largely influenced by Greek thought, rather than by the teachings of Scripture. What is even more surprising is that no amount of Biblical scholarship will change the traditional belief held by most churches on the intermediate state. The reason is simple. While individual scholars can and will change their doctrinal views without suffering devastating consequences, the same is not true for well-established churches.

A church that introduces radical changes in its historical doctrinal beliefs undermines the faith of its members and thus the stability of the institution. A case in point is the Worldwide Church of

God which lost over half of its members when doctrinal changes were introduced by its leaders early in 1995. The high cost of rectifying denominational religious beliefs should not deter Bible-believing Christians who are committed, not to preserve traditional beliefs for tradition's sake, but to constantly seek for a fuller understanding of the teachings of Word of God on issues relevant to their lives.

**Death as Cessation of Life.** When we search the Bible for a description of the nature of death, we find many clear statements that need little or no interpretation. In the first place, Scripture describes death as a return to the elements from which man originally was made. In pronouncing sentence upon Adam after his disobedience, God said: In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for . . . you are dust and to dust you shall return ([Gen 3:19](#)). This graphic statement tells us that death is not the separation of the soul from the body, but the termination of one's life, which results in the decay and decomposition of the body. Since man is created of perishable matter, his natural condition is mortality ([Gen 3:19](#)).<sup>53</sup>

A study of the words to die, death, and dead in Hebrew and Greek reveals that death is perceived in the Bible as the deprivation or cessation of life. The ordinary Hebrew word meaning to die is *muth*, which occurs in the Old Testament over 800 times. In the vast majority of cases, *muth* is used in the simple sense of the death of men and animals. There is no hint in its usage of any distinction between the two. A clear example is found in [Ecclesiastes 3:19](#), which says: For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other.

The Hebrew *muth* to die is sometimes used, as in English, in a figurative way to denote the destruction or elimination of a nation ([Is 65:15](#); [Hos 2:3](#); [Amos 2:2](#)), a tribe ([Deut 33:6](#); [Hos 13:1](#)), or a city ([2 Sam. 20:19](#)). None of these figurative uses supports the idea of individual survival. On the contrary, we find that the word *muth* [to die] is used in [Deuteronomy 2:16](#) in parallel with *tamam*, which means to be consumed or to be finished. The parallelism suggests that death is seen as the end of life.

The corresponding, ordinary Greek word meaning to die is *apothanein* which is used 77 times in the New Testament. With few exceptions, the verb denotes the cessation of life. The exceptions are mostly figurative uses which depend upon the literal meaning. For example, Paul says: We are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died ([2 Cor 5:14](#)). It is evident that this is not referring to physical death but to the effects of Christ's death on the believer's position before God. We could translate therefore all have died as therefore all are counted to have died. None of the literal or figurative uses of the Hebrew *muth* or of the Greek *apothanein* suggests that the soul or spirit survives the death of an individual.

**Old Testament Descriptions of Death.** We have just noted that the Hebrew and Greek verbs used in Scripture for to die do not really explain the meaning and nature of death, except to tell us that the death of men and animals is identical. More revealing is the use of the Hebrew noun *maveth* which is used about 150 times and is generally translated death. From the use of *maveth* in the Old Testament, we learn three important things about the nature of death.

First, there is no remembrance of the Lord in death: For in death [*maveth*] there is no remembrance of thee; in Sheol who can give thee praise ([Ps 6:5](#)). The reason for no

remembrance in death is simply because the thinking process stops when the body with its brain dies. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that day his thoughts perish ([Ps 146:4](#)). Since at death the thoughts perish, it is evident there is no conscious soul that survives the death of the body. If the thinking process, which is generally associated with the soul, survived the death of the body, then the thoughts of the saints would not perish. They would be able to remember God. But the fact is that the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing ([Ecc 9:5](#)).

Second, no praise of God is possible in death or in the grave. What profit is there in my death [*maveth*], if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise thee? Will it tell of thy faithfulness? ([Ps 30:9](#)). By comparing death with dust, the Psalmist clearly shows that there is no consciousness in death because dust cannot think. The same thought is expressed in [Psalm 115:17](#): The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence. Here the Psalmist describes death as a state of silence. What a contrast with the noisy popular vision of the afterlife where the saints praise God in Heaven and the wicked cry in agony in Hell!

Third, death is described as a sleep. Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death ([Ps 13:3](#)). This characterization of death as sleep occurs frequently in the Old and New Testaments because it fittingly represents the state of unconsciousness in death. Shortly we examine the significance of the sleep metaphor for understanding the nature of death.

Some argue that the intent of the passages we have just quoted and which describe death as an unconscious state is not to teach that the soul of man is unconscious when he dies, but rather that in the state of death man can no longer take part in the activities of the present world.<sup>54</sup> In other words, a dead person is unconscious as far as this world is concerned, but his soul is conscious as far as the world of the spirits is concerned. The problem with this interpretation is that it is based on the gratuitous assumption that the soul survives the death of the body, an assumption which is clearly negated in the Old Testament. We have found that in the Old Testament the death of the body, is the death of the soul because the body is the outer form of the soul.

In several places, *maveth* [death] is used with reference to the second death. As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live ([Ez 33:11](#); cf. [Ez 18:23](#), [32](#)). Here the death of the wicked is evidently not the natural death that every person experiences, but the death inflicted by God at the End on unpenitent sinners. None of the literal descriptions or figurative references to death in the Old Testament suggests the conscious survival of the soul or spirit apart from the body. Death is the cessation of life for the total person.

**New Testament References to Death.** The New Testament references to death, a term rendered by the Greek *thanatos*, are not as informative regarding the nature of death as those found in the Old Testament. The reason is partly due to the fact that in the Old Testament many of the references to death are found in the poetic or wisdom books like Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes. This kind of literature is absent in the New Testament. More important is the fact that death is seen in the New Testament from the perspective of Christ's victory over death. This is a dominant theme in the New Testament which conditions the Christian view of death.

Through His victory over death, Christ has neutralized the sting of death ([1 Cor 15:55](#)); He has abolished death ([2 Tim 1:10](#)); He has overcome the devil who had power over death ([Heb 2:14](#)); He has in His hand the keys of the kingdom of death ([Rev 1:18](#)); He is the head of a new humanity as the first-born from the dead ([Col 1:18](#)); He causes believers to be born anew to a living hope through His resurrection from the dead ([1 Pet 1:3](#)).

Christ's victory over death affects the believer's understanding of physical, spiritual, and eternal death. The believer can face physical death with the confidence that Christ has swallowed up death in victory and will awaken the sleeping saints at His coming ([1 Cor 15:51-56](#)).

Believers who were spiritually dead through trespasses and sins ([Eph 2:1](#); cf. [Eph 4:17-19](#); [Matt 8:22](#)) have been regenerated into a new life in Christ ([Eph 4:24](#)). Unbelievers who remain spiritually dead throughout their lives and do not accept Christ's provision for their salvation ([John 8:21, 24](#)), on the Day of Judgment will experience the second death ([Rev 20:6, 21:8](#)). This is the final, eternal death from which there is no return.

The figurative meanings of the word *thanatos*—death depend entirely on the literal meaning as cessation of life. To argue for the conscious existence of the soul on the basis of figurative meaning of death is to attribute to the word a meaning which is foreign to it. This runs contrary to literary and grammatical rules and destroys the connections among physical, spiritual, and eternal death.

**Death as Sleep in the Old Testament.** In both the Old and New Testaments, death is often described as sleep. Before attempting to explain the reason for the Biblical use of the metaphor of sleep for death, let us look at a few examples. In the Old Testament, three Hebrew words meaning sleep are used to describe death.

The most common word, *shachav*, is used in the frequently occurring expression so-and-so slept with his fathers ([Gen 28:11](#); [Deut 31:16](#); [2 Sam. 7:12](#); [1 Kings 2:10](#)). Beginning with its initial application to Moses (Behold, you are about to sleep with your fathers – [Deut 31:16](#)), and then to David (Thou shall sleep with thy fathers – [2 Sam 7:12, KJV](#)), and Job (Now I shall sleep in the dust – [Job 7:21, KJV](#)), we find this beautiful euphemism for death running like an unbroken thread all through the Old and New Testaments, ending with Peter's statement that the fathers fell asleep ([2 Pet 3:4](#)). Commenting on these references, Basil Atkinsom aptly observes: Thus the kings and others who died are said to sleep with their fathers. If their spirits were alive in another world, could this possibly be regularly said without a hint that the real person was not sleeping at all?<sup>55</sup>

Another Hebrew word for sleep is *yashen*. This word occurs both as a verb, to sleep ([Jer 51:39, 57](#); [Ps 13:3](#)) and as a noun, sleep. The latter is found in the well-known verse of [Daniel 12:2](#): And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Notice that in this passage both the godly and ungodly are sleeping in the dust of the earth and both will be resurrected at the End.

A third Hebrew word used for the sleep of death is *shenah*. Job asks this rhetorical question: But man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he? ([Job 14:10](#)). His answer is: As

waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake, or be roused out of his sleep [*shenah*] ([Job 14:11-12](#); cf. [Ps 76:5](#), [90:5](#)). Here is a graphic description of death. When a person takes the last breath, where is he? that is, what is left of him? Nothing. He does not exist any more. He becomes like a lake or river whose water has dried up. He sleeps in the grave and will not awake till the end of the world.

One wonders, would Job have given us such a negative description of death if he believed that his soul would survive death? If death introduced Job's soul into the immediate presence of God in heaven, why does he speak of waiting till the heavens are no more ([John 14:11](#)) and till my release should come ([Job 14:14](#))? It is evident that neither Job nor any other Old Testament believer knew of a conscious existence after death.

**Death as a Sleep in the New Testament.** Death is described as sleep in the New Testament more frequently than in the Old. The reason may be that the hope of the resurrection, which is clarified and strengthened by Christ's resurrection, gives new meaning to the sleep of death from which believers will awaken at Christ's coming. As Christ slept in the tomb prior to His resurrection, so believers sleep in the grave while awaiting their resurrection.

There are two Greek words meaning sleep which are used in the New Testament. The first is *koimao* which is used fourteen times for the sleep of death. A derivative of this Greek noun is *koimeeteerion*, from which comes our word *cemetery*. Incidentally, the root of this word is also the root of the word home—*oikos*. So the home and the cemetery are connected because both are a sleeping-place. The second Greek word is *katheudein*, which is generally used for ordinary sleep. In the New Testament it is used four times for the sleep of death ([Matt 9:24](#); [Mark 5:39](#); [Luke 8:52](#); [Eph 5:14](#); [1 Thess 4:14](#)).

At the time of Christ's crucifixion, many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep [*kekoimemenon*] were raised ([Matt 27:52](#)). In the original, the text reads: Many bodies of the sleeping saints were raised. It is evident that what was resurrected was the whole person and not just the bodies. There is no reference to their souls being reunited with their bodies, obviously because this concept is foreign to the Bible.

Speaking figuratively of Lazarus' death, Jesus said: Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep [*kekoimetai*], but I go to awake him out of sleep ([John 11:11](#)). When Jesus perceived that He was misunderstood, He told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead ([John 11:14](#)). Then Jesus hastened to reassure Martha: Your brother will rise again ([John 11:23](#)).

This episode is significant, first of all, because Jesus plainly describes death as sleep from which the dead will awaken at the sound of His voice. Lazarus' condition in death was similar to a sleep from which one awakens. Christ said: I go to awake him out of sleep ([John 11:11](#)). The Lord carried out His promise by going to the tomb to awaken Lazarus by calling: 'Lazarus, come out.' And the dead man came out' ([John 11:43-44](#)).

The *awakening* of Lazarus out of the sleep of death by the sound of Christ's voice parallels the awakening of the sleeping saints on the day of His glorious coming. They, too, shall hear the

voice of Christ and come forth to life again. The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs *will hear his voice* and come forth ([John 5:28](#); cf. [John 5:25](#)). For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a *shout*, with the *voice* of the archangel, . . . And the dead in Christ will rise first ([1 Thess 4:16](#)). There is harmony and symmetry in the expressions sleeping and awakening as used in the Bible for going into and coming out of a death state. The two expressions corroborate the notion that death is an unconscious state like sleeping, from which believers will awake on the day of Christ's coming.

**Lazarus Had No Afterlife Experience.** Lazarus' experience is also significant because he spent four days in the grave. This was not a near-death experience, but a real death experience. If, as popularly believed, the soul at death leaves the body and goes to heaven, then Lazarus would have had an amazing experience to share about the four days he would have spent in paradise. The religious leaders and the people would have done all in their power to elicit from Lazarus as much information as possible about the unseen world. As Robertson Nichol puts it, Had he [Lazarus] learned anything of the spirit world, it must have oozed out.<sup>56</sup> Such information would have provided valuable answers to the question of life after death which was so hotly debated among the Sadducees and Pharisees ([Matt 22:23, 28](#); [Mark 12:18, 23](#); [Luke 20:27, 33](#)).

But Lazarus had nothing to share about life after death, because during the four days he spent in the tomb he slept the unconscious sleep of death. What is true of Lazarus is also true of six other persons who were raised from the dead: The widow's son ([1 Kings 17:17-24](#)); the Shunammite's son ([2 Kings 4:18-37](#)); the widow's son at Nain ([Luke 7:11-15](#)); the daughter of Jairus ([Luke 8:41, 42, 49-56](#)); Tabitha ([Acts 9:36-41](#)); and Eutychus ([Acts 20:9-12](#)). Each of these persons came out of death as if it were out of a profound sleep, with the same feeling and individuality, but with no afterlife experience to share.

There are no indications that the soul of Lazarus, or of the other six persons raised from the dead, had gone to heaven. None of them had a heavenly experience to share. The reason being that none of them had ascended to heaven. This is confirmed by Peter's reference to David in his speech on the day of Pentecost: Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is still with us to this day ([Acts 2:29](#)). Some could argue that what was in the grave was David's body, not his soul which had gone to heaven. But this interpretation is negated by Peter's explicit words: For *David did not ascend into the heavens* ([Acts 2:34](#)). The Knox translation renders it, *David never went up to heaven*. The Cambridge Bible has the following note: *For David is not ascended. Better ascended not. He went down to the grave and 'slept with his fathers.'* What sleeps in the grave, according to the Bible, is not merely the body but the whole person who awaits the resurrection awakening.

**Paul and the Sleeping Saints.** In the two great chapters on the resurrection in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15, Paul repeatedly speaks of those who have fallen asleep in Christ ([1 Thess 4:13, 14, 15](#); [1 Cor 15:6, 18, 20](#)). A look at some of Paul's statements sheds light on what Paul meant by characterizing death as sleep.

In writing to the Thessalonians, who were grieving over their loved ones who had fallen asleep before experiencing the coming of Christ, Paul reassures them that as God raised Jesus from the dead, so He will through Christ bring with him those who have fallen asleep ([1 Thess 4:14](#)).

Some maintain that Paul is here speaking of disembodied souls, which allegedly ascended to heaven at death and which will return with Christ when He descends to this earth at His return.

This interpretation ignores three major things. First, our study has shown that the Bible nowhere teaches that the soul at death ascends to heaven. Second, in the context, Paul is not speaking of immortal souls but of those who are asleep ([1 Thess 4:13](#); cf. [1 Thess 4:14](#)) and of the dead in Christ ([1 Thess 4:16](#)). The dead in Christ will *rise* first from their graves ([1 Thess 4:16](#)) and will not descend from heaven. There is no hint that the bodies *rise* from the graves and the souls *descend* from heaven to be reunited with the bodies. Such a dualistic notion is foreign to the Bible. Leon Morris' comments that Paul says *will bring*, not 'will raise'<sup>58</sup> is inaccurate, because Paul says both: Christ will raise the dead and bring them with Him. Thus, the context suggests that Christ brings with Him the dead which are raised first, that is, prior to the translation of the living believers.

Third, if Paul really believed that the dead in Christ were not really dead in the grave but alive in heaven as disembodied souls, he would have capitalized on their blissful condition in heaven to explain to the Thessalonians that their grieving was senseless. Why should they grieve for their loved ones if they were already enjoying the bliss of heaven? The reason Paul did not give such an encouragement is obviously because he knew that sleeping saints were not in heaven but in their graves.

This conclusion is supported by the assurance Paul gave to his readers that living Christians would not meet Christ at His coming before those who had fallen asleep. We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep ([1 Thess 4:15](#)). The reason is that the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air ([1 Thess 4:16-17](#)).

The fact that the living saints will meet with Christ at the same time as the sleeping saints indicates that the latter have not yet been united with Christ in heaven. If the souls of the sleeping saints were already enjoying fellowship with Christ in heaven and were to descend with Christ to earth at His second Advent, then obviously they would have an unmistakable priority over the living saints. But the truth is that both sleeping and living believers are awaiting their longed-for union with the Savior; a union which both will experience at the same time on the day of Christ's coming.

Paul's discussion of the sleeping saints in 1 Corinthians 15 confirms much of what we have already found in 1 Thessalonians 4. After affirming the fundamental importance of Christ's resurrection for the Christian faith and hope, Paul explains that if Christ had not been raised . . . Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished ([1 Cor 15:18-19](#)). Paul could hardly have said that the sleeping saints would have perished without the guarantee of Christ's resurrection, if he believed that their souls were immortal and were already enjoying the bliss of Paradise. If Paul believed the latter, he probably would have said that without Christ's resurrection the soul of the sleeping saints would remain disembodied for all eternity. But Paul makes no allusion to such a possibility, because he believed that the whole person, body and soul, would have perished without the guarantee of Christ's resurrection.

It is significant that in the whole chapter which is devoted to the importance and dynamics of the resurrection, Paul never hints at the alleged reunification of the body with the soul at the resurrection. If Paul had held such a belief, he hardly could have avoided making some allusions to the reattachment of the body to the soul, especially in his discussions of the transformation of the believers from a mortal to an immortal state at Christ's coming. But the only mystery that Paul reveals is that we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed ([1 Cor 15:51](#)). This change from a perishable to an imperishable nature occurs for all, living and dead, at the same time, namely, at the sounding of the last trumpet ([1 Cor 15:52](#)). The change has nothing to do with disembodied souls regaining possession of their resurrected bodies. Rather, it is a change from mortal to immortal life for both the living and the dead in Christ: The mortal puts on immortality ([1 Cor 15:54](#)).

**The Significance of the Sleep Metaphor.** The popular use of the sleep metaphor to describe the state of the dead in Christ raises the question of its implications for the nature of death. Specifically, why is this metaphor used and what insights can we legitimately derive from it about the nature of death? There are three major reasons for the use of the sleep metaphor in the Bible. First, there is a similarity between the sleep of the dead and the sleep of the living. Both are characterized by a condition of unconsciousness and inactivity which is interrupted by an awakening. Thus, the sleep metaphor fittingly represents the unconscious state of the dead and their awakening on the day of Christ's return.

A second reason for the use of the sleep metaphor is suggested by the fact that it is a hope-inspiring figure of speech to represent death. It implies the assurance of a later awakening. As a person goes to sleep at night in the hope of awakening in the morning, so the believer falls asleep in the Lord in the assurance of being awakened by Christ on resurrection morning. Albert Barnes aptly remarks: In the Scripture sleep is used to intimate that death will not be *final*: that there will be an awakening out of this sleep, or a resurrection. It is a beautiful and tender expression, removing all that is dreadful in death, and filling the mind with the idea of calm repose after a life of toil, with a reference to a future resurrection in increased vigor and renovated powers.<sup>59</sup>

When we hear or say that a person is dead, we automatically think that there is no more hope of bringing him/her back to life. But when we say that a person is sleeping in the Lord, we express the hope for his or her restoration to life on the day of the resurrection. Bruce Reichenbach notes that the sleep metaphor is not only a nice way to speak about death, but more important still, it strongly suggests that death is not the end of human existence. Just as a person who is sleeping can be raised, so too the dead, as 'sleeping,' have the possibility of being re-created and living again. This is perhaps the significance of the difficult account in [Matthew 9:24ff](#) where Jesus says that the girl is not dead, but only sleeping. People who considered her dead had no hope for her. But because Jesus considered her sleeping, He saw that there was hope indeed that she could be resurrected to live again. He saw a potentiality in her that the others, unaware of the power of God, could not see. The metaphor 'sleep,' then, does not describe the ontological state of the dead [that is, the sleeping condition], but rather refers to the possibility of the deceased: that though they now no longer exist, by the power of God they can be recreated to live again.<sup>60</sup>

**The Sleep of Death as Unconsciousness.** A third reason for the use of the sleep metaphor is suggested by the fact that there is no consciousness of the elapse of time in sleep. Thus, the

metaphor provides a fitting representation of the unconscious state of the deceased between death and resurrection. They have no awareness of the passing of time. In his early writings, Luther expressed this thought in a most graphic way: Just as one who falls asleep and reaches morning unexpected when he awakes, without knowing what has happened to him, so shall we suddenly rise on the last day without knowing how we have come into death and through death.<sup>61</sup> Again Luther wrote: We shall sleep until He comes and knocks on the little grave and says, Doctor Martin, get up! Then I shall rise in a moment and be happy with Him forever.<sup>62</sup>

For the sake of accuracy, it must be pointed out that later in life Luther largely rejected the notion of the unconscious sleep of the dead, apparently because of Calvin's strong attack against this doctrine. In his *Commentary on Genesis*, which he wrote in 1537, Luther remarks: The departed soul does not sleep in this manner [regular sleep]; it is, more properly speaking, awake and has vision and conversation with the angels and God.<sup>63</sup> The change in Luther's position from the unconscious to the conscious state of the dead only serves to show that even influential reformers were not exempted from the theological pressures of their time.

Like Luther, most Christians today believe that the sleep metaphor is used in the Bible to teach, not the unconscious state of the dead, but that there is a resurrection, an awakening.<sup>64</sup> Some scholars argue that death is compared to a sleep, not because a person is unconscious, but because the dead do not return to this earth nor are aware of what is happening where they once lived.<sup>68</sup> In other words, the dead are unconscious as far as what happens on the earth, but are very conscious as far as their life in Heaven or Hell.

This conclusion is not based on Scripture, but on the use of the sleep metaphor in intertestamental literature. For example, *1 Enoch*, dated about 200 B. C., speaks of the righteous as having a long sleep ([1 Enoch 100:5](#)), but their souls are conscious and active in heaven ([1 Enoch 102:4-5](#); cf. [2 Baruch 36:11](#); [2 Esdras 7:32](#)). After examining this literature, John Cooper concludes: The metaphors of sleep and rest are used of persons in the intermediate state who are conscious and active, but not in earthly, bodily ways.<sup>66</sup>

The Biblical meaning of the sleep metaphor cannot be decided on the basis of its use in the intertestamental literature, because, as we have seen, during that period, Hellenistic Jews tried to harmonize the teachings of the Old Testament with the Greek dualistic philosophy of their time. The outcome was the adoption of such beliefs as the immortality of the soul, the reward or punishment given immediately after death, and prayers for the dead. Such beliefs are foreign to the Bible.

Our study of the sleep metaphor in the Old and New Testaments has shown that the metaphor implies a state of unconsciousness that will last until the awakening at the resurrection. It is worth noting that in 1 Corinthians 15 sixteen times Paul uses the verb *egeiro*, which literally means to wake up from sleep.<sup>67</sup> The reiterated contrast between sleeping and awakening is impressive. The Bible uses the term sleep frequently because it enshrines a vital truth, namely, the dead who sleep in Christ are unconscious of any lapse of time until their resurrection. The believer who dies in Christ falls asleep and rests unconscious, until he awakes when Christ calls him back to life at His coming.

**The Meaning and Ground of Immortality.** Immortality in the Bible is not an innate human possession but a divine attribute. We noted already that the term immortality comes from the Greek *athanasia*, which means deathlessness, and hence unending existence. This term occurs only twice; first in connection with God who alone has immortality ([1 Tim 6:16](#)) and second in relation to human mortality which must put on immortality ([1 Cor 15:53](#)) at the time of the resurrection. The latter reference negates the notion of a natural immortality of the soul, because it says that immortality is something that the resurrected saints will put on. It is not something that they already possess.

The ground of immortality, as Vern Hannah puts it, is soteriological and not anthropological.<sup>71</sup> What this means is that immortality is a divine gift to the saved and not a natural human possession. As P. T. Forsyth said, a sure belief in immortality does not rest where philosophy puts it, but where religion puts it. It is not founded on the nature of the psychic organism, but on its relation to Another.<sup>72</sup> The Another is Jesus Christ who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel ([2 Tim 1:10](#)).

Nowhere the Bible suggests that immortality is a natural quality or right of human beings. The presence of the tree of life in the garden of Eden indicates that immortality was *conditional* to the partaking of the fruit of such tree. Scripture teaches that immortality is to be *sought* ([Rom 2:7](#)) and put on ([1 Cor 15:53](#)). It is, as 'eternal life, the *gift* of God ([Rom 6:23](#)) to be *inherited* ([Matt 19:29](#)) by *knowing* God ([John 17:3](#)) *through Christ* ([John 14:19](#); [17:2](#); [Rom 6:23](#)). In Paul's view immortality is tied solely to the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15) as the ground and pledge of the believer's hope.<sup>73</sup> Those who insist in finding the philosophical idea of the immortality of the soul in the Bible, ignore God's revelation and insert dualistic Greek ideas into the Biblical faith.

**Conclusion.** The traditional and popular belief that death is not the cessation of life for the whole person, but the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body can be traced back to Satan's lie, You shall not die ([Gen 3:4](#)). This lie has lived on in different forms throughout human history until our time. Today, belief in the survival of the soul either in paradise or hell is promoted, not through the superstitious and gruesome literary and artistic representations of the Middle Ages, but through the polished image of mediums, psychics, the sophisticated scientific research into near-death experiences, and the popular New Age channeling with the spirits of the past. Satan's methods have changed, but his objective is still the same: make people believe the lie that no matter what they do they will not die but will become like gods by living forever.

The traditional view of death limits the death experience to the body, since the soul continues its existence. Vern Hannah rightly states that such a radical re-definition of death is in fact a denial of death—a definition, no doubt, which the 'subtle serpent' of Genesis 3 would find most appealing.<sup>74</sup> The Bible takes death much more seriously. Death is the last enemy ([1 Cor 15:26](#)) and not the liberator of the immortal soul. As Oscar Cullmann puts it, death is the destruction of *all* life created by God. Therefore it is death and not the body which must be conquered by the resurrection.<sup>75</sup>

Helmut Thielicke keenly observes that the idea of the immortality of the soul is a form of escapism which allows the real person to evade death. It is an attempt to disarm death. He goes

on explaining that we may hold in idealistic fashion to some 'inviolable ego region,' but death is not a 'passing over' but a 'going under,' and it leaves no room for romanticism or idealism. We may not devalue and obscure the reality of the grave through the idea of immortality. The Christian outlook is resurrection, not the immortality of the soul.<sup>76</sup>

Our only protection against the popular misconception of death is through a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches on the nature of death. We have found that both the Old and New Testaments clearly teach that death is the *extinction of life* for the whole person. There is no remembrance or consciousness in death ([Ps 8:5](#); [146:4](#); [30:9](#); [115:17](#); [Ecc 9:5](#)). There is no independent existence of the spirit or soul apart from the body. Death is the loss of the *total being* and not merely the loss of *well-being*. The whole person rests in the grave in a state of unconsciousness characterized in the Bible as sleep. The awakening will take place at Christ's coming when He will call back to life the sleeping saints.

The sleep metaphor is frequently used in the Bible to characterize the state of the dead because it fittingly represents the unconscious state of the dead and their awakening on the day of Christ's coming. It suggests that there is no consciousness of time elapsing between death and resurrection. The sleep metaphor is truly a beautiful and tender expression which intimates that death is not the *final* human destiny because there will be an awakening out of the sleep of death on resurrection morning.

A major challenge to our conclusion that death in the Bible is the extinction of life for the whole person comes from unwarranted interpretations given to five New Testament passages ([Luke 16:19-31](#); [23:42-43](#); [Phil 1:23](#); [2 Cor 5:1-10](#); [Rev 6:9-11](#)) and to the two words, *sheol* and *hades*, which are used in the Bible to describe the dwelling place of the dead. Many Christians find in these texts and words Biblical support for their belief in the conscious existence of the soul after death. We shall proceed to examine these texts and words in chapter 5 which focuses on the state of the dead during the interim period between death and resurrection, commonly called the intermediate state.

## CHAPTER IV

### HELL: ETERNAL TORMENT OR ANNIHILATION?

Few teachings have troubled the human conscience over the centuries more than the traditional view of hell as the place where the lost suffer conscious punishment in body and soul for all eternity. The prospect that one day a vast number of people will be consigned to the everlasting torment of hell is most disturbing and distressing to sensitive Christians. After all, almost everyone has friends or family members who have died without making a commitment to Christ. The prospect of one day seeing them agonizing in hell for all eternity can easily lead thinking Christians to say to God: "No thank you God. I am not interested in your kind of paradise!"

It is not surprising that the traditional view of hell as a place of eternal torment has been a stumbling block for believers and an effective weapon used by skeptics to challenge the credibility of the Christian message. For example, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), a British

philosopher and social reformer, faulted Christ for allegedly teaching the doctrine of hellfire and for the untold cruelty such a doctrine has caused in Christian history.

Russell wrote: "There is one 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—an attitude which is common with preachers, but which does somewhat detract from superlative excellence. . . . 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 all this doctrine, that hellfire 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."<sup>1</sup>

Russell's charge that Christ is "partly responsible" for the doctrine of everlasting punishment which "gave the world generations of cruel torture" cannot be dismissed lightly as the fruit of an agnostic mind. If Christ really taught that the saved will enjoy eternal bliss while the unsaved will suffer eternal torment in hellfire, then we would have reason to question the moral integrity of His character. It is hard to imagine that the God whom Jesus Christ revealed as the merciful "Abba—Father" would wreak vengeance on His disobedient children by torturing them for all eternity!

It is not surprising that today we seldom hear sermons on hellfire even from fundamentalist preachers, who theoretically are still committed to such a belief. John Walvoord, himself a fundamentalist, suggests that the reluctance to preach on hellfire is due primarily to the fear of proclaiming an unpopular doctrine.<sup>2</sup> In my view, the problem is not merely the reluctance of preachers today to tell the truth about hell, but primarily the awareness that the traditional view of hellfire is morally intolerable and Biblically questionable.

Clark Pinnock keenly observes: "Their reticence [to preach on hellfire] is not so much due to a lack of integrity in proclaiming the truth as to not having the stomach for preaching a doctrine that amounts to sadism raised to new levels of finesse. Something inside tells them, perhaps on an instinctual level, that the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not the kind of deity who tortures people (even the worst of sinners) in this way. I take the silence of the fundamentalist preachers to be testimony to their longing for a revised doctrine of the nature of hell."<sup>3</sup> It is such a longing, I believe, that is encouraging theologians today to revise the traditional view of hell and to propose alternative interpretations of the scriptural data.

**Objectives of This Chapter.** The issue addressed in this chapter is not the *fact* of hell as the final punishment of the lost, but the *nature* of hell. The fundamental question is: Do impenitent sinners suffer conscious punishment in body and soul for all eternity, or are they annihilated by God in the second death after suffering a temporary punishment? To put it differently: Does hellfire torment the lost eternally or consume them permanently?

This fundamental question is examined first by analyzing the *traditional* view and then by presenting the *annihilation* view, to which I subscribe. The first part of the chapter analyzes the major Biblical texts and arguments used to support the literal view of hell as the place of a literal everlasting punishment of the wicked.

The second part of this chapter considers briefly two alternative interpretations of hell. The first is the *metaphorical* view, which regards hell as a place where the suffering is more mental than physical. The fire is not literal but metaphorical, and the pain is caused more by the sense of separation from God than by physical torments.<sup>4</sup> The second is the *universalist* view of hell, which turns hell into a purging, refining fire that ultimately makes it possible for every person to make it into heaven.

The third part of this chapter presents the *annihilation* view of hell as a place of the ultimate dissolution and annihilation of the unsaved. Some call this view *conditional* immortality, because our study of the Biblical wholistic view of human nature shows that immortality is not an innate human possession; it is a divine gift granted to believers on condition of their faith response. God will not resurrect the wicked to immortal life in order to inflict upon them a punishment of eternal pain. Rather, the wicked will be resurrected mortal in order to receive their punishment which will result in their ultimate annihilation.

Some may question our use of "annihilation" for the destiny of the wicked, because the first law of thermodynamics says that nothing is destroyed but changed into something else. When corpses are burned, their smoke and ashes remain. This is true, but what remains is no longer human life. From a Biblical perspective, the fire that consumes the wicked annihilates them as human beings.

## **PART I: THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF HELL**

With few exceptions, the traditional view of hell has dominated Christian thinking from the time of Augustine to the nineteenth century. Simply stated, the traditional view affirms that immediately after death the disembodied souls of impenitent sinners descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of a literal eternal fire. At the resurrection, the body is reunited with the soul, thus intensifying the pain of hell for the lost and the pleasure of heaven for the saved.

**Graphic Views of Hell.** Not satisfied with the image of fire and smoke of the New Testament, some of the more creative medieval minds have pictured hell as a bizarre horror chamber where punishment is based on a measure-for-measure principle. This means that whatever member of the body sinned, that member would be punished in hell more than any other member.

"In Christian literature," writes William Crockett, "we find blasphemers hanging by their tongues. Adulterous women who plaited their hair to entice men dangle over boiling mire by their neck or hair. Slanderers chew their tongues, hot irons burn their eyes. Other evildoers suffer in equally picturesque ways. Murderers are cast into pits filled with venomous reptiles, and worms fill their bodies. Women who had abortions sit neck deep in the excretions of the damned. Those who chatted idly during church stand in a pool of burning sulphur and pitch. Idolaters are

driven up cliffs by demons where they plunge to the rocks below, only to be driven up again. Those who turned their back on God are turned and baked slowly in the fires of hell."<sup>5</sup>

These early images of hell were refined and immortalized by the famous fourteenth-century Italian poet, Dante Alighieri. In his *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*), Dante portrays hell as a place of absolute terror, where the damned writhe and scream while the saints bask in the glory of paradise. In Dante's hell, some sinners wail loudly in boiling blood, while others endure burning smoke that chars their nostrils, still others run naked from hordes of biting snakes.

The more cautious approach of Luther and Calvin did not deter later prominent preachers and theologians from portraying hell as a sea of fire, in which the wicked burn throughout eternity. Renowned eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards pictured hell as a raging furnace of liquid fire that fills both the body and the soul of the wicked: "The body will be full of torment as full as it can hold, and every part of it shall be full of torment. They shall be in extreme pain, every joint of them, every nerve shall be full of inexpressible torment. They shall be tormented even to their fingers' ends. The whole body shall be full of the wrath of God. Their hearts and bowels and their heads, their eyes and their tongues, their hands and their feet will be filled with the fierceness of God's wrath. This is taught us in many Scriptures. . . ." <sup>6</sup>

A similar description of the fate of the wicked was given by the famous nineteenth-century British preacher Charles Spurgeon: "In fire exactly like that which we have on earth thy body will lie, asbestos-like, forever unconsumed, all thy veins roads for the feet of Pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the Devil shall for ever play his diabolical tune of hell's unutterable lament." <sup>7</sup> It is hard to comprehend how the Devil can torment evildoers in the place of his own punishment.

Today, those who believe in a literal eternal hellfire are more circumspect in their description of the suffering experienced by the wicked. For example, Robert A. Peterson concludes his book *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*, saying: "The Judge and Ruler over hell is God himself. He is present in hell, not in blessing, but in wrath. Hell entails eternal punishment, utter loss, rejection by God, terrible suffering, and unspeakable sorrow and pain. The duration of hell is endless. Although there are degrees of punishment, hell is terrible for all the damned. Its occupants are the Devil, evil angels, and unsaved human beings." <sup>8</sup>

In making his case for hell as a place of eternal punishment, Peterson marshals the following witnesses: the Old Testament, Christ, the Apostles, and Church History (early church, Reformation, and the modern period). He devotes chapters to each of these witnesses. A similar approach is used by other scholars who support the traditional view of hellfire. <sup>9</sup> A comprehensive response to all the alleged witnesses of eternal punishment of the wicked would take us beyond the scope of this study. Interested readers can find such a comprehensive response in *The Fire that Consumes* (1982) by Edward Fudge. The book, with a foreword by F. F. Bruce, is praised by many scholars for its balanced and fair treatment of the Biblical and historical data. Our response is limited to a few basic observations, some of which will be expanded in the second part of this chapter.

## **1. The Witness of the Old Testament**

The witness of the Old Testament for eternal punishment rests largely on the use of *sheol* and two main passages, [Isaiah 66:22-24](#) and [Daniel 12:1-2](#). Regarding *sheol*, John F. Walvoord says: "*Sheol* was a place of punishment and retribution. In Isaiah [14:9-10] the Babylonians killed in divine judgment are pictured as being greeted in *sheol* by those who had died earlier."<sup>10</sup>

Regarding *sheol*, our study of the word in chapter 5 shows that none of the texts supports the view of *sheol* as the place of punishment for the ungodly. The word denotes the realm of the dead where there is unconsciousness, inactivity, and sleep. Similarly, Isaiah's taunting ode against the King of Babylon is a parable, in which the characters, personified trees, and fallen monarchs are fictitious. They serve not to reveal the punishment of the wicked in *sheol*, but to forecast in graphic pictorial language God's judgment upon Israel's oppressor and his final ignominious destiny in a dusty grave, where he is eaten by worms. To interpret this parable as a literal description of hell means to ignore the highly figurative, parabolic nature of the passage, which is simply designed to depict the doom of a self-exalted tyrant.

**[Isaiah 66:24](#): The Fate of the Wicked.** The description of the fate of the wicked found in [Isaiah 66:24](#) is regarded by some traditionalists as the clearest witness to eternal punishment in the Old Testament. The setting of the text is the contrast between God's judgment upon the wicked and His blessings upon the righteous. The latter will enjoy prosperity and peace, and will worship God regularly from Sabbath to Sabbath ([Is 66:12-14, 23](#)). But the wicked will be punished by "fire" ([Is 66:15](#)) and meet their "end together" ([Is 66:17](#)). This is the setting of the crucial verse 24, which says: "And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

R. N. Whybray sees in this text "an early description of eternal punishment: though dead, the rebels will continue for ever."<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, Peterson interprets the phrase "their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched" as meaning that "the punishment and shame of the wicked have no end; their fate is eternal. It is no wonder that they will be loathsome to all mankind."<sup>11</sup>

Isaiah's description of the fate of the wicked was possibly inspired by the Lord's slaying of 185,000 men of the Assyrian army during the reign of Hezekiah. We are told that "when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies" ([Is 37:36](#)). This historical event may have served to foreshadow the fate of the wicked. Note that the righteous look upon "dead bodies" (Hebrew: *pegerim*), not living people. What they see is destruction and not eternal torment.

The "worms" are mentioned in connection with the dead bodies, because they hasten the decomposition and represent the ignominy of corpses deprived of burial ([Jer 25:33](#); [Is 14:11](#); [Job 7:5](#); [17:14](#); [Acts 12:23](#)). The figure of the fire that is not quenched is used frequently in Scripture to signify a fire that consumes ([Ezek 20:47-48](#)) and reduces to nothing ([Am 5:5-6](#); [Matt 3:12](#)). Edward Fudge rightly explains that "both worms and fire speak of a total and final destruction. Both terms also make this a 'loathsome' scene."<sup>12</sup> To understand the meaning of the phrase "the fire shall not be quenched," it is important to remember that keeping a fire live, to burn corpses required considerable effort in Palestine. Corpses do not readily burn and the firewood needed to

consume them was scarce. In my travels in the Middle East and Africa, I often have seen carcasses partially burned because the fire died out before consuming the remains of a beast.

The image of an unquenchable fire is simply designed to convey the thought of being completely burned up or consumed. It has nothing to do with the everlasting punishment of immortal souls. The passage speaks clearly of "dead bodies" which are consumed and not of immortal souls which are tormented eternally. It is unfortunate that traditionalists interpret this passage, and similar statements of Jesus in the light of their conception of the final punishment rather than on the basis of what the figure of speech really means.

**Daniel 12:2: "Everlasting Contempt."** The second major Old Testament text used by traditionalists to support everlasting punishment is [Daniel 12:2](#), which speaks of the resurrection of both good and evil: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Peterson concludes his analysis of this text, by saying: "Daniel teaches that whereas the godly will be raised to never-ending life, the wicked will be raised to never-ending disgrace ([Dan 12:2](#))."<sup>13</sup>

The Hebrew term *deraon* translated "contempt" also appears in [Isaiah 66:24](#) in which it is translated "loathsome" and describes the unburied corpses. In his commentary on *The Book of Daniel*, André Lacocque notes that the meaning of *deraon* both "here [[Dan 12:2](#)] and in [Isaiah 66:24](#) is the decomposition of the wicked."<sup>14</sup> This means that the "contempt" is caused by the disgust over the decomposition of their bodies, and not by the never-ending suffering of the wicked. As Emmanuel Petavel puts it: "The sentiment of the survivors is disgust, not pity."<sup>15</sup>

To sum up, the alleged Old Testament witness for the everlasting punishment of the wicked is negligible, if not non-existent. On the contrary, the evidence for utter destruction of the wicked at the eschatological Day of the Lord is resoundingly clear. The wicked will "perish" like the chaff ([Ps 1:4](#), [6](#)), will be dashed to pieces like pottery ([Ps 2:9](#), [12](#)), will be slain by the Lord's breath ([Is 11:4](#)), will be burnt in the fire "like thorns cut down" ([Is 33:12](#)), and "will die like gnats" ([Is 51:6](#)).

Perhaps the clearest description of the total destruction of the wicked is found on the last page of the Old Testament in the English (not Hebrew) Bible: "For behold, the day comes burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch" ([Mal 4:1](#)). Here the imagery of the all-consuming fire which leaves "neither root nor branch" suggests utter consumption and destruction, not perpetual torment. The same truth is expressed by God's next prophet, John the Baptist, who cried in the wilderness summoning people to repentance in view of the approaching fire of God's judgment ([Matt 3:7-12](#)).

## **2. The Witness of Intertestamental Literature**

The literature produced during the 400 years between Malachi and Matthew is far from being unanimous on the fate of the wicked. Some texts describe the unending conscious torments of the lost, while others reflect the Old Testament view that the wicked cease to exist. What accounts

for these contrasting views most likely is the Hellenistic cultural pressure the Jews experienced at that time as they were widely dispersed throughout the ancient Near East.

Unfortunately, most people are not aware of the different views because traditionalists generally argue for a uniform Jewish view of the final punishment as eternal torment. Since Jesus and the apostles did not denounce such a view, it is assumed that they endorsed it. This assumption is based on fantasy rather than facts.

**Eternal Torment.** The Second Book of Esdras, an apocryphal book accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholic Church, asks if the soul of the lost will be tortured immediately at death or after the renewal of creation ([2 Esd 7:15](#)). God answers: "As the spirit leaves the body . . . if it is one of those who have shown scorn and have not kept the way of the Most High . . . such spirit shall . . . wander about in torment, ever grieving and sad . . . they will consider the torment laid up for themselves in the last days" ([2 Esd 7:78-82](#)).<sup>16</sup>

The same view is expressed in Judith (150-125 B. C.), also an apocryphal book included in the Roman Catholic Bible. In closing her song of victory, the heroine Judith warns: "Woe to the nations that rise up against my race; the Lord Almighty will take vengeance of them in the day of judgment, to put fire and worms in their flesh; And they shall weep and feel pain for ever" ([Judith 16:17](#)). The reference to the fire and worms probably comes from [Isaiah 66:24](#), but while Isaiah saw the dead bodies consumed by fire and worms, Judith speaks of "fire and worms" as causing internal, unending agonies inside the flesh. Here we have an unmistakable description of the traditional view of hell.

A similar description of the fate of the wicked is found in *4 Maccabees*, written by a Jew with Stoic leanings. The author describes the righteous ascending to conscious bliss at death (10:15; 13:17; 17:18; 18:23) and the wicked descending to conscious torment (9:8, 32; 10:11, 15; 12:19; 13:15; 18:5, 22). In chapter 9, he tells the story of the faithful mother and her seven sons who were all martyred under the tyranny of Antiochus Epiphanes (see [2 Macc 7:1-42](#)). The seven sons repeatedly warn their wicked torturer of the eternal torment that awaits him: "Divine vengeance is reserved for you, eternal fire and torments, which shall cling to you for all time" ([4 Macc 12:12](#); cf. [9:9](#); [10:12](#), [15](#)). "The danger of eternal torment is laid up for those who transgress the commandments of God" ([4 Macc 13:15](#)).

**Total Annihilation.** In other apocryphal books, however, sinners are consumed as in the Old Testament. Tobit (about 200 B.C.), for example, describes the end time, saying: "All the children of Israel that are delivered in those days, remembering God in truth, shall be gathered together and come to Jerusalem and they shall dwell in the land of Abraham with security . . . and they that do sin and unrighteousness shall cease from all earth" ([Tob 14:6-8](#)). The same view is expressed in Sirach, called also Ecclesiasticus (about 195-171 B.C.) which speaks of "the glowing fire" in which the wicked will "be devoured" and "find destruction" ([Eccl 36:7-10](#)).

*The Sibylline Oracles*, a composite work, the core of which comes from a Jewish author of perhaps the second century B. C., describes how God will carry out the total destruction of the wicked: "And He shall burn the whole earth, and consume the whole race of men . . . and there shall be sooty dust" (Sib. Or. 4:76). *The Psalms of Solomon*, most likely composed by Hasidic

Jews in the middle of the first century B. C., anticipates a time when the wicked will vanish from the earth, never to be remembered: "The destruction of the sinner is forever, and he shall not be remembered, when the righteous is visited. This is the portion of sinners for ever" ([Ps. Sol. 3:11-12](#)).

**Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls.** Traditionalists often cite Josephus' description of the Essene belief about the immortality of the soul and the eternal punishment of the wicked to support their contention that such a belief was widely accepted in New Testament times. Let us look at the text closely before making any comment. Josephus tells us that the Essenes adopted from the Greeks not only the notion that "the souls are immortal, and continue for ever," but also the belief that "the good souls have their habitations beyond the ocean," in a region where the weather is perfect, while "bad souls [are cast in] a dark and tempestuous den, full of never-ceasing punishments."<sup>17</sup> Josephus continues explaining that such a belief derives from Greek "fables" and is built "on the supposition that the souls are immortal" and that "bad men . . . suffer immortal punishment after death."<sup>18</sup> He calls such beliefs "an unavoidable bait for such as have once had a taste for their [Greek] philosophy."<sup>19</sup>

It is significant that Josephus attributes the belief in the immortality of the soul and in unending punishment not to the teachings of the Old Testament, but to Greek "fables," which sectarian Jews, like the Essenes, found irresistible. Such a comment presupposes that not all the Jews had accepted these beliefs. In fact, indications are that even among the Essenes were those who did not share such beliefs. For example, the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are generally associated with the Essene community, speak clearly of the total annihilation of sinners.

The *Damascus Document*, an important Dead Sea Scroll, describes the end of sinners by comparing their fate to that of the antediluvians who perished in the Flood and of the unfaithful Israelites who fell in the wilderness. God's punishment of sinners leaves "no remnant remaining of them or survivor (CD 2, 6, 7). They will be "as though they had not been" (CD 2, 20). The same view is expressed in another scroll, the *Manual of Discipline* which speaks of the "extermination" of the men of Belial (Satan) by means of "eternal fire" (1QS 2, 4-8).<sup>20</sup>

It is noteworthy that the *Manual of Discipline* describes the punishment of those who follow the Spirit of Perversity instead of the Spirit of Truth in an apparent contradictory way, namely, as unending punishment which results in total destruction. The text states: "And as for the Visitation of all who walk in this [Spirit of Perversity], it consists of an abundance of blows administered by all the Angels of destruction in the everlasting Pit by the furious wrath of the God of vengeance, of *unending dread and shame without end*, and of disgrace of destruction by fire of the region of darkness. And all their time from age to age are in most sorrowful chagrin and bitterest misfortune, in calamities of darkness *till they are destroyed with none of them surviving or escaping*" (1QS 4.11-14).<sup>21</sup>

The fact that the "unending dread and shame without end" is not unending but lasts only "till they are destroyed" goes to show that in New Testament times, people used such terms as "unending," "without end," or "eternal," with a different meaning than we do today. For us, "unending" punishment means "without end," and not until the wicked are destroyed. The recognition of this fact is essential for interpreting later the sayings of Jesus about eternal fire and

for resolving the apparent contradiction we find in the New Testament between "everlasting punishment" ([Matt 25:46](#)) and "everlasting destruction" ([2 Thess 1:9](#)). When it comes to the punishment of the wicked, "unending" simply means "until they are destroyed."

The above sampling of testimonies from the intertestamental literature indicates that in this period, there was no consistent "Jewish view" of the fate of the wicked. Though most of the documents reflect the Old Testament view of the total extinction of sinners, some clearly speak of the unending torment of the wicked. This means that we cannot read the words of Jesus or the New Testament writers assuming that they reflect a uniform belief in eternal torment held by Jews at that time. We must examine the teachings of the New Testament on the basis of its own internal witness.

### 3. The Witness of Jesus

**Did Jesus Teach Eternal Torment?** Traditionalists believe that Jesus provides the strongest proof for their belief in the eternal punishment of the wicked. Kenneth Kantzer, one of the most respected evangelical leaders of our time, states: "Those who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord cannot escape the clear, unambiguous language with which he warns of the awful truth of eternal punishment."<sup>22</sup>

Australian theologian, Leon Morris, concurs with Kantzer and emphatically states: "Why does anyone believe in hell in these enlightened days? Because Jesus plainly taught its existence. He spoke more often about hell than he did about heaven. We cannot get around this fact. We can understand that there are those who do not like the idea of hell. I do not like it myself. But if we are serious in our understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, we must reckon with the fact that he said plainly that some people will spend eternity in hell."<sup>23</sup>

Morris clearly affirms that Jesus taught the existence of hell. In fact, Jesus uses the term *gehenna* (translated "hell" in our English Bibles) seven of the eight times the term occurs in the New Testament. The only other reference is found in [James 3:6](#). But the issue is not the *reality* of hell as the place of the final punishment of impenitent sinners. On this point, most Christians agree. Rather, the issue is the *nature* of hell. Did Jesus teach that hell—*gehenna* is the place where sinners will suffer eternal torment or permanent destruction? To find an answer to this question, let us examine what Jesus actually said about hell.

**What Is Hell—*Gehenna*?** Before looking at Christ's references to hell—*gehenna*, we may find it helpful to consider the derivation of the word itself. The Greek word *gehenna* is a transliteration of the Hebrew "Valley of (the sons of) Hinnon," located south of Jerusalem. In ancient times, it was linked with the practice of sacrificing children to the god Molech ([2 Kings 16:3](#); [21:6](#); [23:10](#)). This earned it the name "Topheth," a place to be spit on or aborred.<sup>26</sup> This valley apparently became a gigantic pyre for burning the 185,000 corpses of Assyrian soldiers whom God slew in the days of Hezekiah ([Is 30:31-33](#); [37:36](#)).

Jeremiah predicted that the place would be called "the valley of Slaughter" because it would be filled with the corpses of the Israelites when God judged them for their sins. "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of Hinnom, but

the valley of Slaughter: for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the beasts of the air, and for the beasts of the earth; and none will frighten them away" ([Jer 7:32-33](#)).

Josephus informs us that the same valley was heaped with the dead bodies of the Jews following the A. D. 70 siege of Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> We have seen that Isaiah envisions the same scene following the Lord's slaughter of sinners at the end of the world ([Is 66:24](#)). During the intertestamental period, the valley became the place of final punishment, and was called the "accursed valley" (1 Enoch 27:2,3), the "station of vengeance" and "future torment" (2 [Bar 59:10, 11](#)), the "furnace of Gehenna" and "pit of torment" (4 Esd 7:36).

Though the imagery of the *gehenna* is common in the Jewish literature of this period, the description of what happens there is contradictory. Edward Fudge concludes his survey of the literature, saying: "We have seen a few passages in the Pseudepigrapha which specifically anticipate everlasting torment of conscious bodies and/or souls, as well as one such verse in the Apocrypha. Many other passages within the intertestamental literature also picture the wicked being consumed by fire, but it is the consuming, unquenchable fire of the Old Testament which utterly destroys for ever, leaving only smoke as its reminder. It is fair to say that, to those who first heard the Lord, *gehenna* would convey a sense of total horror and disgust. Beyond that, however, one must speak with extreme caution."<sup>27</sup>

**Jesus and Hell's Fire.** With this note of caution, let us look at the seven references to *gehenna*—hell fire that we find in the Gospels. In The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states that whoever says to his brother "you fool!" shall be liable to the hell [*gehenna*] of fire" ([Matt 5:22](#); KJV). Again, He said that it is better to pluck out the eye or cut off the hand that causes a person to sin than for the "whole body go into hell [*gehenna*]" ([Matt 5:29, 30](#)). The same thought is expressed later on: it is better to cut off a foot or a hand or pluck out an eye that causes a person to sin than to "be thrown into eternal fire . . . be thrown into the hell [*gehenna*] of fire" ([Matt 18:8, 9](#)). Here the fire of hell is described as "eternal." The same saying is found in Mark, where Jesus three times says that it is better to cut off the offending organ than "to go to hell [*gehenna*], to the unquenchable fire . . . to be thrown into hell [*gehenna*], where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" ([Mark 9:44, 46, 47-48](#)). Elsewhere, Jesus chides the Pharisees for traversing sea and land to make a convert and then making him "twice as much a child of hell [*gehenna*]" ([Matt 23:15](#)). Finally, he warns the Pharisees that they will not "escape being sentenced to hell [*gehenna*]" ([Matt 23:33](#)).

In reviewing Christ's allusions to hell—*gehenna*, we should first note that none of them indicates that hell—*gehenna* is a place of unending torment. What is eternal or unquenchable is not the punishment, but the fire. We noted earlier that in the Old Testament this fire is eternal or unquenchable in the sense that it totally consumes dead bodies. This conclusion is supported by Christ's warning that we should not fear human beings who can harm the body, but the One "who can destroy both soul and body in hell [*gehenna*]" ([Matt 10:28](#)). The implication is clear. Hell is the place of final punishment, which results in the total destruction of the whole being, soul and body.

Robert Peterson argues that "Jesus is not speaking here of literal annihilation," because in the parallel passage in [Luke 12:5](#) the verb "destroy" is not used. Instead, it says: "Fear him who, after killing the body, has power to throw you into hell" ([Luke 12:5](#)). From this Peterson concludes: "The destruction mentioned in [Matthew 10:28](#), therefore, is equivalent to being thrown into hell,"<sup>28</sup> that is, eternal torment. The fundamental problem with his argument is that he assumes *first* that "being thrown into hell" means everlasting torment. *Then* he uses his subjective assumption to negate the self-evident meaning of the verb "to destroy—*apollumi*." Peterson ignores a basic principle of Biblical interpretation which requires unclear texts to be explained on the basis of those which are clear and not vice versa. The fact that Jesus clearly speaks of God destroying both the soul and body in hell shows that hell is the place where sinners are ultimately destroyed and not eternally tormented.

**"Eternal Fire."** Traditionalists would challenge this conclusion because elsewhere Christ refers to "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment." For example, in [Matthew 18:8-9](#) Jesus repeats what He had said earlier ([Matt 5:29-30](#)) about forfeiting a member of the body in order to escape the "eternal fire" of hell—*gehenna*. An even clearer reference to "eternal fire" is found in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in which Christ speaks of the separation that takes place at His coming between the saved and the unsaved. He will welcome the faithful into His kingdom, but will reject the wicked, saying: "Depart from me, you cursed, into *eternal fire* prepared for the devil and his angels; . . . And they will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into eternal life" ([Matt 25:41, 46](#)).<sup>29</sup>

Traditionalists attribute fundamental importance to the last passage because it brings together the two concepts of "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment." The combination of the two is interpreted to mean that the punishment is eternal because the hellfire that causes it is also eternal. Peterson goes so far as to say that "if [Matthew 25:41](#) and [46](#) were the only two verses to describe the fate of the wicked, the Bible would clearly teach eternal condemnation, and we would be obligated to believe it and to teach it on the authority of the Son of God."<sup>30</sup>

Peterson's interpretation of these two critical texts ignores four major considerations. First, Christ's concern in this parable is not to define the nature of either eternal life or of eternal death, but simply to affirm that there are two destinies. The nature of each of the destinies is not discussed in this passage.

Second, as John Stott rightly points out, "The fire itself is termed 'eternal' and 'unquenchable,' but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed forever, not tormented forever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which 'rises forever and ever' ([Rev 14:11](#); cf. [19:3](#))."<sup>31</sup>

Third, the fire is "eternal—*aionios*," not because of its endless duration, but because of its complete consumption and annihilation of the wicked. This is indicated clearly by the fact that the lake of fire, in which the wicked are thrown, is called explicitly "the second death" ([Rev 20:14](#); [21:8](#)), because, it causes the final, radical, and irreversible extinction of life.

**Eternal as Permanent Destruction.** "Eternal" often refers to the *permanence of the result* rather than the *continuation of a process*. For example, Jude 7 says that Sodom and Gomorrah

underwent "a punishment of eternal [*aionios*] fire." It is evident that the fire that destroyed the two cities is eternal, not because of its *duration* but because of its *permanent results*.

Similar examples can be found in Jewish intertestamental literature. Earlier we noted that in the *Manual of Discipline* of the Dead Sea Scrolls, God hurls "extermination" upon the wicked by means of "eternal fire" (1QS 2. 4-8). The "Angels of destruction" cause "unending dread and shame without end, and of the disgrace of destruction by the fire of the region of darkness . . . till they are destroyed with none of them surviving or escaping" (1 QS 4. 11-14). Here, the shameful and destructive fire is "unending . . . without end," yet it will last only "till they are destroyed." To our modern critical minds, such a statement is contradictory, but not to people of Biblical times. To interpret a text correctly, it is vital to establish how it was understood by its original readers.

The examples cited suffice to show that the fire of the final punishment is "eternal" not because it lasts forever, but because, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorra, it causes the complete and permanent destruction of the wicked, a condition which lasts forever. In his commentary on *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, R. V. G. Tasker expresses the same view: "There is no indication as to how long that punishment will last. The metaphor of 'eternal fire' wrongly rendered *everlasting fire* [KJV] in verse 41 is meant, we may reasonably presume, to indicate final destruction."<sup>32</sup>

Fourth, Jesus was offering a choice between *destruction* and *life* when He said: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to *destruction*, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to *life*, and only few find it" ([Matt 7:13-14](#)).<sup>33</sup> Here Jesus contrasts the comfortable way which leads to *destruction* in hell with the narrow way of trials and persecutions which leads to *eternal life* in the kingdom of heaven. The contrast between *destruction* and *life* suggests that the "eternal fire" causes the eternal destruction of the lost, not their eternal torment.

**"Eternal Punishment."** Christ's solemn declaration: "They will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into eternal life" ([Matt 25:46](#)) is generally regarded as the clearest proof of the conscious suffering the lost will endure for all eternity. Is this the only legitimate interpretation of the text? John Stott rightly answers: "No, that is to read into the text what is not necessarily there. What Jesus said is that both the life and the punishment would be eternal, but he did not in that passage define the nature of either. Because he elsewhere spoke of eternal life as a conscious enjoyment of God ([John 17:3](#)), it does not follow that eternal punishment must be a conscious experience of pain at the hand of God. On the contrary, although declaring both to be eternal, Jesus is *contrasting* the two destinies: the more unlike they are, the better."<sup>34</sup>

Traditionalists read "*eternal punishment*" as "*eternal punishing*," but this is not the meaning of the phrase. As Basil Atkinson keenly observes, "When the adjective *aionios* meaning 'everlasting' is used in Greek with nouns of *action* it has reference to the *result* of the action, not the process. Thus the phrase 'everlasting punishment' is comparable to 'everlasting redemption' and 'everlasting salvation,' both Scriptural phrases. No one supposes that we are being redeemed or being saved forever. We were redeemed and saved once for all by Christ with eternal results. In the same way the lost will not be passing through a process of punishment for ever but will be

punished once and for all with eternal results. On the other hand the noun 'life' is not a noun of action, but a noun expressing a state. Thus the life itself is eternal."<sup>35</sup>

A fitting example to support this conclusion is found in [2 Thessalonians 1:9](#), where Paul, speaking of those who reject the Gospel, says: "They shall suffer the *punishment of eternal destruction* and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might."<sup>36</sup> It is evident that the destruction of the wicked cannot be eternal in its duration, because it is difficult to imagine an eternal, inconclusive process of destruction. Destruction presupposes annihilation. The destruction of the wicked is eternal—*aionios*, not because the *process* of destruction continues forever, but because the *results* are permanent. In the same way, the "eternal punishment" of [Matthew 25:46](#) is eternal because its *results* are permanent. It is a punishment that results in their eternal destruction or annihilation.

**The Meaning of "Eternal."** Some reason that "if the word 'eternal' means without end when applied to the future blessedness of believers, it must follow, unless clear evidence is given to the contrary, that this word also means without end when used to describe the future punishment of the lost."<sup>37</sup> Harry Buis states this argument even more forcefully: "If *aionion* describes life which is endless, so must *aionios* describe endless punishment. Here the doctrine of heaven and the doctrine of hell stand or fall together."<sup>38</sup>

Such reasoning fails to recognize that what determines the meaning of "eternal" is the object being qualified. If the object is the life granted by God to believers ([John 3:16](#)), then the word "eternal" obviously means "unending, everlasting," because the Scripture tells us that the "mortal nature" of believers will be made "immortal" by Christ at His Coming ([1 Cor 15:53](#)).

On the other hand, if the object being qualified is the "punishment" or "destruction" of the lost, then "eternal" can only mean "permanent, total, final," because nowhere does the Scripture teach that the wicked will be resurrected immortal to be able to suffer forever. Eternal punishment requires either the natural possession of an immortal nature or the divine bestowal of an immortal nature at the time the punishment is inflicted. Nowhere does the Scripture teach that either of these conditions exists.

The punishment of the wicked is eternal both in *quality* and *quantity*. It is "eternal" in *quality* because it belongs to the Age to Come. It is "eternal" in *quantity* because its results will never end. Like "eternal judgment" ([Heb 6:2](#)), "eternal redemption" ([Heb 9:12](#)), and "eternal salvation" ([Heb 5:9](#))—all of which are eternal in the results of actions once completed—so "eternal punishment" is eternal in its results: the complete and irreversible destruction of the wicked.

It is important to note that the Greek word *aionios*, translated "eternal" or "everlasting," literally means "lasting for an age." Ancient Greek papyri contain numerous examples of Roman emperors being described as *aionios*. What is meant is that they held their office for life. Unfortunately, the English words "eternal" or "everlasting" do not accurately render the meaning of *aionios*, which literally means "age-lasting." In other words, while the Greek *aionios* expresses perpetuity *within limits*, the English "eternal" or "everlasting" denotes *unlimited* duration.

**The Meaning of "Punishment."** Note should also be taken of the word "punishment" used to translate the Greek word *kolasis*. A glance at Moulton and Milligan's *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* shows that the word was used at that time with the meaning of "pruning" or "cutting down" of dead wood. If this is its meaning here, it reflects the frequent Old Testament phrase "shall be cut off from his people" ([Gen 17:14](#); [Ex 30:33, 38](#); [Lev 7:20, 21, 25, 27](#); [Num 9:13](#)). This would mean that the "eternal punishment" of the wicked consists in their being permanently cut off from mankind.

As a final observation, it is important to remember that the only way the punishment of the wicked could be inflicted eternally is if God resurrected them with immortal life so that they would be indestructible. But according to the Scripture, only God possesses immortality in Himself ([1 Tim 1:17](#); [6:16](#)). He gives immortality as the gift of the Gospel ([2 Tim 1:10](#)). In the best known text of the Bible, we are told that those who do not "believe in him" will "perish [*apoletai*]," instead of receiving "eternal life" ([John 3:16](#)). The ultimate fate of the lost is destruction by eternal fire and not punishment by eternal torment. The notion of the eternal torment of the wicked can only be defended by accepting the Greek view of the immortality and indestructibility of the soul, a concept which we have found to be foreign to Scripture.

**"Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth."** Four times in the Gospel of Matthew we are told that on the day of judgment "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" ([Matt 8:12](#); [22:13](#); [24:51](#); [25:30](#); KJV). Believers in literal, eternal hell fire generally assume that the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" describes the conscious agony experienced by the lost for all eternity. A look at the context of each text suggests, however, that the "weeping and grinding of teeth" occurs in the context of the separation or expulsion that occurs at the final judgment.

Both phrases derive most likely from the weeping and gnashing of teeth associated with the Day of the Lord in the Old Testament. For example, Zephaniah describes the Day of the Lord in the following words: "The day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall *cry there bitterly*" ([Zeph 1:14](#); KJV).<sup>39</sup> In a similar fashion, the Psalmist says: "The wicked shall see it, and be grieved; *he shall gnash with his teeth*, and melt away; the desire of the wicked shall perish" ([Ps 112:10](#)).<sup>40</sup> Here the Psalmist clearly indicates that the gnashing of teeth is the outcome of the judgment of the wicked which ultimately results in their extinction.

Edward Fudge perceptively observes that "the expression 'weeping and grinding of teeth' seems to indicate two separate activities. The first reflects the terror of the doomed as they begin to truly realize that God has thrown them out as worthless and as they anticipate the execution of His sentence. The second seems to express the bitter rage and acrimony they feel toward God, who sentenced them, and toward the redeemed, who will forever be blessed."<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. The Witness of Paul

The word "hell" (*gehenna*) does not occur in the writings of Paul. Instead, the apostle refers a few times to God's judgment executed upon the evildoers at the time of Christ's coming. Traditionalists appeal to some of these passages to support their belief in the eternal punishment of the lost. Earlier we examined the important passage of [2 Thessalonians 1:9](#), where Paul speaks

of the "punishment of eternal destruction" that the wicked will suffer at Christ's coming. We noted that the destruction of the wicked is eternal—*aionios*, not because the *process* of destruction continues forever, but because the *results* are permanent.

**The Day of Wrath.** Another significant Pauline passage often cited in support of literal unending hellfire is his warning about "the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will render to every man according to his works: . . . to those who do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek" ([Rom 2:5-9](#)). The "wrath, fury, tribulation, distress" are seen by traditionalists as descriptive of the conscious torment of hell.<sup>42</sup>

The picture that Paul presents of "the day of wrath," when the evildoers will experience wrath, fury, tribulation and distress is most likely derived from Zephaniah, where the prophet speaks of the eschatological Day of the Lord as a "day of wrath . . . a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom" ([Zeph 1:15](#)). Then the prophet says: "In the fire of his jealous wrath, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full, yea, sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth" ([Zeph 1:18](#)).

We have reason to believe that Paul expresses the same truth that the Day of the Lord will bring a sudden end to evildoers. Paul never makes any allusion to the everlasting torment of the lost. Why? Simply, because for him, immortality is God's gift given to the saved at Christ's coming ([1 Cor 15:53-54](#)) and not a natural endowment of every person. The Apostle borrows freely from the Old Testament's prophetic vocabulary, but he illuminates the vision of the Day of the Lord with the bright light of the Gospel, rather than with lurid details of conscious eternal torment.

## 5. The Witness of Revelation

The theme of the final judgment is central to the book of Revelation, because it represents God's way of overcoming the opposition of evil to Himself and His people. Thus, it is not surprising that believers in eternal hell fire find support for their view in the dramatic imagery of Revelation's final judgment. The visions cited to support the view of everlasting punishment in hell are: (1) the vision of God's Wrath in [Revelation 14:9-11](#), and (2) the vision of the lake of fire and of the second death in [Revelation 20:10, 14-15](#). We briefly examine them now.

**The Vision of God's Wrath.** In Revelation 14, John sees three angels announcing God's final judgment in language progressively stronger. The third angel cries out with a loud voice: "If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of his holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name" ([Rev 14:9-11](#)).

Traditionalists view this passage together with [Matthew 25:46](#) as the two most important texts which support the traditional doctrine of hell. Peterson concludes his analysis of this passage, by

saying: "I conclude, therefore, that despite attempts to prove otherwise, [Revelation 14:9-11](#) unequivocally teaches that hell entails eternal conscious torment for the lost. In fact, if we had only this passage, we would be obligated to teach the traditional doctrine of hell on the authority of the Word of God."<sup>43</sup> Robert Morey states categorically the same view: "By every rule of hermeneutics and exegesis, the only legitimate interpretation of [Revelation 14:10-11](#) is the one that clearly sees eternal, conscious torment awaiting the wicked."<sup>44</sup>

These dogmatic interpretations of [Revelation 14:9-11](#) as proof of a literal, eternal torment reveal a lack of sensitivity to the highly metaphorical language of the passage. In his commentary on *Revelation*, J. P. M. Sweet, a respected British New Testament scholar, offers a most timely caution in his comment on this passage: "To ask, 'what does Revelation teach – eternal torment or eternal destruction?' is to use (or misuse) the book as a source of 'doctrine,' or of information about the future. John uses pictures, as Jesus used parables (cf. [Matt 18:32-34](#); [25:41-46](#)), to ram home the unimaginable disaster of rejecting God, and the unimaginable blessedness of union with God, while there is still time to do something about it."<sup>45</sup> It is unfortunate that this warning is ignored by those who choose to interpret literally highly figurative passages like the one under consideration.

**Four Elements of the Judgment.** Let us now consider the four major elements in the angel's announcement of God's judgment upon the apostates who worship the beast: (1) The pouring and drinking of the cup of God's wrath, (2) the torment with burning sulphur inflicted upon the ungodly in the sight of the angels and of the Lamb, (3) the smoke of their torment rising forever, and (4) their having no rest day or night.

The pouring of the cup of God's wrath is a well-established Old Testament symbol of divine judgment ([Is 51:17, 22](#); [Jer 25:15-38](#); [Ps 60:3](#); [75:8](#)). God pours the cup "unmixed," that is, undiluted, to ensure its deadly effects. The prophets used similar language: "They shall drink and stagger, and shall be as though they had not been" (Ob 16: cf. [Jer 25:18, 27, 33](#)). The same cup of God's wrath is served to Babylon, the city that corrupts the people. God mixes "a double draught for her," and the result is "pestilence, mourning, famine" and destruction by fire ([Rev 18:6, 8](#)). We have reason to believe that the end of Babylon, destroyed by fire, is also the end of the apostates who drink God's unmixed cup.

The fate of the ungodly is described through the imagery of the most terrible judgment that ever fell on this earth—the destruction by fire and sulphur of Sodom and Gomorrah. "He shall be tormented with fire and sulphur, in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb" ([Rev 14:10](#)). The imagery of fire and sulphur that destroyed the two cities frequently is used in the Bible to signify complete annihilation ([Job 18:15-17](#); [Is 30:33](#); [Ezek 38:22](#)).

Isaiah describes the fate of Edom in language that is strikingly similar to that of [Revelation 14:10](#). He says: "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" ([Is 34:9-10](#)). As [Revelation 14:10](#), we have here the unquenchable fire, the sulphur (brimstone), and the smoke that goes up forever, night and day. Does this mean that Edom was to burn forever? We do not have to go far to find the answer because the verse continues: "From generation to generation *it shall lie waste*; none shall pass through it forever and ever" ([Is](#)

[34:10](#)).<sup>46</sup> It is evident that the unquenchable fire and the ever-ascending smoke are metaphoric symbols of complete destruction, extermination, and annihilation. If this is the meaning of this imagery in the Old Testament, we have reason to believe that the same meaning applies to the text under consideration.

This conclusion is supported by John's use of the imagery of the fire and smoke to describe the fate of Babylon, the city responsible for enticing God's people into apostasy. The city "shall be burned with fire" ([Rev 18:8](#)) and "the smoke from her goes up for ever and ever" ([Rev 19:3](#)). Does this mean that Babylon will burn for all eternity? Obviously not, because the merchants and kings bewail the "torment" they see, and cry: "Alas, alas, for the great city . . . In one hour she has been laid waste. . . and shall be found no more" ([Rev 18:10, 17, 19, 21](#)). It is evident that the smoke of the torment of Babylon that "goes up for ever and ever" represents complete destruction because the city "shall be found no more" ([Rev 18:21](#)).

The striking similarity between the fate of the apostates and the fate of Babylon, where both are characterized as tormented by fire whose smoke "goes up forever and ever" ([Rev 14:10-11](#); cf. [18:8](#); [19:3](#)), gives us reason to believe that the destiny of Babylon is also the destiny of those who have partaken of her sins, that is, both experience the same destruction and annihilation.

" **No Rest, Day or Night.**" The phrase "they have no rest, day or night" ([Rev 14:11](#)) is interpreted by traditionalists as descriptive of the eternal torment of hell. The phrase, however, denotes the *continuity* and not the *eternal duration* of an action. John uses the same phrase "day and night" to describe the living creatures praising God ([Rev 4:8](#)), the martyrs serving God ([Rev 7:15](#)), Satan accusing the brethren ([Rev 12:10](#)), and the unholy trinity being tormented in the lake of fire ([Rev 20:10](#)). In each case, the thought is the same: the action continues while it lasts. Harold Guillebaud correctly explains that the phrase "they have no rest, day or night" ([Rev 14:11](#)) "certainly says that there will be no break or intermission in the suffering of the followers of the Beast, *while it continues*; but in itself it does not say that it will continue forever."<sup>47</sup>

Support for this conclusion is provided by the usage of the phrase "day and night" in [Isaiah 34:10](#), where, as we have seen, Edom's fire is not quenched "night and day" and "its smoke shall go up for ever" ([Is 34:10](#)). The imagery is designed to convey that Edom's fire would continue until it had consumed all that there was, and then it would go out. The outcome would be permanent destruction, not everlasting burning. "From generation to generation it shall lie waste" ([Is 34:10](#)).

To sum up, the four figures present in the scene of [Revelation 14:9-11](#) complement one another in describing the final destruction of the apostates. The "unmixed" wine of God's fury poured out in full strength suggests a judgment resulting in extinction. The burning sulphur denotes some degree of conscious punishment that precedes the extinction. The rising smoke serves as a continuous reminder of God's just judgment. The suffering will continue day and night until the ungodly are completely destroyed.

**The Lake of Fire.** The last description in the Bible of the final punishment contains two highly significant metaphorical expressions: (1) the lake of fire, and (2) the second death ([Rev 19:20](#); [20:10, 15](#); [21:8](#)). Traditionalists attribute fundamental importance to "lake of fire" because for

them, as stated by John Walvoord, "the lake of fire is, and it serves as a synonym for the eternal place of torment."<sup>48</sup>

To determine the meaning of "the lake of fire," we need to examine its four occurrences in Revelation, the only book in the Bible where the phrase is found. The first reference occurs in [Revelation 19:20](#), where we are told that the beast and the false prophet "were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur." The second reference is found in [Revelation 20:10](#), where John describes the outcome of Satan's last great assault against God: "The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." God's throwing of the devil into the lake of fire increases its inhabitants from two to three.

The third and fourth references are found in [Revelation 20:15](#) and [21:8](#), where all the wicked are also thrown into the lake of fire. It is evident that there is a crescendo as all evil powers, and people eventually experience the final punishment of the lake of fire.

The fundamental question is whether the lake of fire represents an ever-burning hell where the wicked are supposed to be tormented for all eternity or whether it symbolizes the permanent destruction of sin and sinners. Five major considerations lead us to believe that the lake of fire represents the final and complete annihilation of evil and evildoers.

First, the beast and the false prophet, who are cast alive into the lake of fire, are two symbolic personages who represent not actual people but persecuting civil governments and corrupting false religion. Political and religious systems cannot suffer conscious torment forever. Thus, for them, the lake of fire represents complete, irreversible annihilation.

Second, the imagery of the devil and his host who are devoured by fire from heaven and then cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, is largely derived from Ezekiel 38 and 39, where even the code names "Gog" and "Magog" are found, and from 2 King 1:10, which speaks of the fire that came down from heaven to consume the captain and the fifty soldiers sent against Elijah. In both instances, the fire causes the annihilation of evildoers ([Ezek 38:22](#); [39:6](#), [16](#)). The similarity of imagery suggests that the same meaning and function of fire as utter destruction applies to the fate of the devil in [Revelation 20:10](#).

Third, it is impossible to visualize how the devil and his angels, who are spirits could "be tormented [with fire] day and night forever and ever" ([Rev 20:10](#)). After all, fire belongs to the material, physical world, but the devil and his angels are not physical beings. Eldon Ladd rightly points out: "How a lake of literal fire can bring everlasting torture to non-physical beings is impossible to imagine. It is obvious that this is picturesque language describing a real fact in the spiritual world: the final and everlasting destruction of the forces of evil which have plagued men since the garden of Eden."<sup>49</sup>

Fourth, the fact that "Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire" ([Rev 20:14](#)) shows that the meaning of the lake of fire is symbolic, because Death and Hades (the grave) are abstract realities that cannot be thrown into or consumed with fire. By the imagery of Death and Hades being thrown into the lake of fire, John simply affirms the final and complete destruction of

death and the grave. By His death and resurrection, Jesus conquered the power of death, but eternal life cannot be experienced until death is symbolically destroyed in the lake of fire and banished from the universe.

**"The Second Death."** The fifth and decisive consideration is the fact that the lake of fire is defined as "the second death." Before we look at the usage of the phrase "second death," it is important to note that John clearly explains that "the lake of fire is the second death" ([Rev 20:14](#); cf. [21:8](#)).

Some traditionalists interpret "the second death," not as the ultimate death, but as the ultimate separation of sinners from God. For example, Robert Peterson states: "When John says that Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire" ([Rev 20:14](#)), he indicates that the intermediate state gives way to the final one. He also does this by revealing that the 'lake of fire is the second death' ([Rev 20:14](#)). As death means the separation of the soul from the body, so the second death denotes the ultimate separation of the ungodly from their Creator's love. Accordingly, God reunites the souls of the unsaved dead with their bodies to fit the lost for eternal punishment. If eternal life entails forever knowing the Father and the Son ([John 17:3](#)), its antithesis, the second death, involves being deprived of God's fellowship for all eternity."<sup>50</sup>

It is hard to understand how Peterson can interpret "the second death" as eternal conscious separation from God when, as we noted in chapter 4, the Bible makes it abundantly clear that there is no consciousness in death. The "second death" is the antithesis of "eternal life," but the antithesis of eternal life is "eternal death" and not eternal conscious separation from God. Furthermore, the notion of the souls of the unsaved being reunited with their bodies after the intermediate state, to make them fit for eternal punishment can only be supported on the basis of a dualistic understanding of human nature. From a Biblical perspective, death is the cessation of life and not the separation of the body from the soul. The meaning of the phrase "second death" must be determined on the basis of the internal witness of the book of Revelation and of contemporary Jewish literature rather than on the basis of Greek dualism, foreign to the Bible.

Throughout the book of Revelation, John explains the meaning of a first term by the use of a second. For example, he explains that the bowls of incense are the prayers of the saints ([Rev 5:8](#)). "The fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints" ([Rev 19:8](#)). The coming to life of the saints and their reigning with Christ a thousand years "is the first resurrection" ([Rev 20:5](#)). Following the same pattern, John explicitly explains that "the lake of fire is the second death" ([Rev 20:14](#); cf. [21:8](#)).

Some traditionalists wish to define the second death as the lake of fire, in order to be able to argue that the second death is not the final death, but eternal torment in the lake of fire. A quick reading of [Revelation 20:14](#) and [21:8](#) suffices to show that the opposite is true. John unmistakably states: "The lake of fire is the second death" and not vice versa. The meaning of the second death derives from and is dependent upon the meaning of the first death experienced by every human being at the cessation of life. The second death differs from the first death, not in *nature* but in *results*. The first death is a temporary sleep because it is followed by the resurrection. The second death is permanent and irreversible extinction because there is no awakening.

**References to the "Second Death."** Since John clearly defines the lake of fire to be the second death, it is crucial for us to understand the meaning of "the second death." This phrase occurs four times in Revelation but does not appear elsewhere in the New Testament. The first reference is found in [Revelation 2:11](#): "He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death." Here "the second death" is differentiated from the physical death that every human being experiences. The implication is that the saved receive eternal life, and will not experience eternal death.

The second reference to "the second death" occurs in [Revelation 20:6](#), in the context of the first resurrection of the saints at the beginning of the millennium: "Over such the second death has no power." Again, the implication is that the resurrected saints will not experience the second death, that is, the punishment of eternal death, obviously because they will be raised to immortal life. The third and the fourth references are in [Revelation 20:14](#) and [21:8](#), where the second death is identified with the lake of fire into which the devil, the beast, the false prophet, Death, Hades, and all evildoers are thrown. In these instances, the lake of fire is the second death in the sense that it accomplishes the eternal death and destruction of sin and sinners.

The meaning of the phrase "second death" is clarified by its usage in the Targum, which is the Aramaic translation and interpretation of the Old Testament. In the Targum, the phrase is used several times to refer to the final and irreversible death of the wicked. According to Strack and Billerbeck, the Targum on [Jeremiah 51:39, 57](#) contains an oracle against Babylon, which says: "They shall die the second death and not live in the world to come."<sup>51</sup> Here the second death is clearly the death resulting from the final judgment which prevents evildoers from living in the world to come.

In his study *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*, M. McNamara cites the Targums of [Deuteronomy 33:6](#), [Isaiah 22:14](#) and [65:6, 15](#) where the phrase "second death" is used to describe the ultimate, irreversible death. The Targum on [Deuteronomy 33:6](#) reads: "Let Reuben live in this world and die not in the second death in which death the wicked die in the world to come."<sup>52</sup> In the Targum on [Isaiah 22:14](#), the prophet says: "This sin shall not be forgiven you till you die the second death, says the Lord of Hosts."<sup>53</sup> In both instances, "the second death" is the ultimate destruction experienced by the wicked at the final judgment.

The Targum on [Isaiah 65:6](#) is very close to [Revelation 20:14](#) and [21:8](#). It reads: "Their punishment shall be in Gehenna where the fire burns all the day. Behold, it is written before me: 'I will not give them respite during (their) life but will render them the punishment of their transgressions and will deliver their bodies to the second death.'"<sup>54</sup> Again, the Targum on [Isaiah 65:15](#) reads: "And you shall leave your name for a curse to my chosen and the Lord God will slay you with the second death but his servants, the righteous, he shall call by a different name."<sup>55</sup> Here, the second death is explicitly equated with the slaying of the wicked by the Lord, a clear image of final destruction and not of eternal torment.

In the light of the preceding considerations, we conclude that the phrase the "second death" is used by John to define the nature of the punishment in the lake of fire, namely, a punishment that ultimately results in eternal, irreversible death. As Robert Mounce points out, "The lake of fire indicates not only the stern punishment awaiting the enemies of righteousness but also their full and final defeat. It is the second death, that is, the destiny of those whose temporary resurrection

results only in a return to death and its punishment."<sup>56</sup> The same view is expressed eloquently by Henry Alford who writes: "As there is a second and higher life, so there is also a second and deeper death. And as after that life there is no more death ([Rev 21:4](#)), so after that death there is no more life."<sup>57</sup> This is a sensible definition of the "second death," as the final, irreversible death. To interpret the phrase otherwise, as eternal conscious torment or separation from God means to negate the Biblical meaning of "death" as cessation of life.

**Conclusion.** In closing this examination of the traditional view of hell as the place of a literal, everlasting punishment of the wicked, three major observations can be made. First, the traditional view of hell largely depends upon a dualistic view of human nature, which *requires* the eternal survival of the soul either in heavenly bliss or in hellish torment. We have found such a belief to be foreign to the wholistic Biblical view of human nature, where death denotes the cessation of life for the whole person.

Second, the traditionalist view rests largely on a literal interpretation of such symbolic images as *gehennah*, the lake of fire, and the second death. Such images do not lend themselves to a literal interpretation because, as we have seen, they are metaphorical descriptions of the permanent destruction of evil and evildoers. Incidentally, lakes are filled with water and not with fire.

Third, the traditional view fails to provide a rational explanation for the justice of God in inflicting endless divine retribution for sins committed during the space of a short life. The doctrine of eternal conscious torment is incompatible with the Biblical revelation of divine love and justice. This point is considered later in conjunction with the moral implications of eternal torment.

In conclusion, the traditional view of hell was more likely to be accepted during the Middle Ages, when most people lived under autocratic regimes of despotic rulers, who could and did torture and destroy human beings with impunity. Under such social conditions, theologians with a good conscience could attribute to God an unappeasable vindictiveness and insatiable cruelty, which today would be regarded as demonic. Today, theological ideas are subject to an ethical and rational criticism that forbids the moral perversity attributed to God in the past. Our sense of justice requires that the penalty inflicted must be commensurate with the evil done. This important truth is ignored by the traditional view that requires eternal punishment for the sins of even a short lifetime.

## **PART II: ALTERNATIVE VIEWS OF HELL**

The serious problems posed by the traditional view of hell has led some scholars to seek for alternative interpretations. Brief consideration is given here to two fresh attempts to understand the Biblical data, and to redefine the nature of hell.

### **1. The Metaphorical View of Hell**

The most modest revision of the traditional view of hell involves interpreting metaphorically the nature of the unending torment of hell. According to this view, hell is still understood as everlasting punishment, but it is less literally hellish, because the physical fire no longer tortures

or burns the flesh of the wicked, but represents the pain of being separated from God. Billy Graham expresses a metaphorical view of hellfire when he says: "I have often wondered if hell is a terrible burning within our hearts for God, to fellowship with God, a fire that we can never quench."<sup>58</sup> Graham's interpretation of hellfire as "a terrible burning within our hearts for God" is most ingenious. Unfortunately, it ignores that the "burning" takes place not within the heart, but without where the wicked are consumed. If the wicked had a burning within their hearts for God, they would not experience the suffering of the final punishment.

**Figurative Imagery.** In his compelling presentation of the metaphorical view of hell, William Crockett argues that Christians should not have to face the embarrassment of believing that "a portion of creation find ease in heaven, while the rest burn in hell."<sup>59</sup> His solution is to recognize that "hellfire and brimstone are not literal depictions of hell's furnishing, but figurative expressions warning the wicked of impending doom."<sup>60</sup> Crockett cites Calvin, Luther, and a host of contemporary scholars, all of whom "interpret hell's fire metaphorically, or at least allow for the possibility that hell might be something other than literal fire."<sup>61</sup>

Crockett maintains that "the strongest reason for taking them [the images of hell] as metaphors is the conflicting language used in the New Testament to describe hell. How could hell be literal fire when it is also described as darkness ([Matt 8:12](#); [22:13](#); [25:30](#); [2 Pet 2:17](#); Jude 13)?"<sup>62</sup> He continues, asking a pertinent question: "Did the New Testament writers intend their words to be taken literally? Certainly, Jude did not. He describes hell as 'eternal fire' in verse 7, and then further depicts it as the 'blackest darkness' in verse 13. . . . Fire and darkness, of course, are not the only images we have of hell in the New Testament. The wicked are said to weep and gnash their teeth ([Matt 8:12](#); [13:42](#); [22:13](#); [24:51](#); [25:30](#); [Luke 13:28](#)), their worm never dies ([Mark 9:48](#)), and they are beaten with many blows ([Luke 12:47](#)). No one thinks hell will involve actual beatings or is a place where the maggots of the dead achieve immortality. Equally, no one thinks that gnashing teeth is anything other than an image of hell's grim reality. In the past, some have wondered about people who enter hell toothless. How will they grind their teeth?"<sup>63</sup> The answer that some have given to the last question is that "dentures will be provided in the next world so that the damned might be able to weep and gnash their teeth."<sup>64</sup>

On the basis of his metaphorical interpretation of hellfire, Crockett concludes: "Hell, then, should not be pictured as an inferno belching fire like Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. The most we can say is that the rebellious will be cast from the presence of God, without any hope of restoration. Like Adam and Eve they will be driven away, but this time into 'eternal night,' where joy and hope are forever lost."<sup>65</sup>

**Evaluation of the Metaphorical View.** Credit must be given to the proponents of the metaphorical view of hell for pointing out that the images used in the Bible to describe hell, such as fire, darkness, voracious maggots, sulphur, and gnashing of teeth are metaphors and not actual descriptions of fact. When interpreting a text, it is important to distinguish between the medium and the message. Metaphors are designed to communicate a particular message, but they are not the message itself. This means that when interpreting the highly symbolic images of hell, we must seek to understand the message being conveyed instead of taking the images as a literal descriptions of the reality.

Proponents of the metaphorical view are correct in pointing out that the fundamental problem with the traditional view of hell is that it is based on a literalism that ignores the highly symbolic nature of the language used. But the problem with the metaphorical view of hell is that it merely wants to replace the physical torment with a more enduring mental torment. But, by the lowering the pain quotient in a non-literal hell, they do not substantially change the nature of hell since it still remains a place of unending torment.

Some may even question the notion that eternal mental torment is more humane than physical torment. Mental anguish can be as painful as physical pain. By making hell more humane, the metaphorical view has not gained much because it is still burdened with the same problems of the traditionalist view. People are still asked to believe that God tortures evildoers endlessly, though presumably less severely. In my view, the solution is to be found not in humanizing or sanitizing hell so that it may ultimately prove to be a more tolerable place for the wicked to spend eternity, but in understanding the nature of the final punishment which, as we shall see, is permanent annihilation and not eternal torment.

## 2. The Universalist View of Hell

A second and more radical revision of hell has been attempted by *universalists*, who have reduced hell to a temporary condition of graded punishments which ultimately leads to heaven. Universalists believe that ultimately God will succeed in bringing every human being to salvation and eternal life so that no one, in fact, will be condemned in the final judgment to either eternal torment or annihilation. This belief was first suggested by Origen in the third century, and it has gained steady support in modern times, especially through the writing of such men as Friedrich Schleiermacher, C. F. D. Moule, J. A. T. Robinson, Michael Paternoster, Michael Perry, and John Hick. The arguments presented by these and other writers in support of universalism are both theological and philosophical.

**Theological and Philosophical Arguments.** Theologically, appeal is made to "universalist passages" ([1 Tim 2:4](#); [4:10](#); [Col 1:20](#); [Rom 5:18](#); [11:32](#); [Eph 1:10](#); [1 Cor 15:22](#)), which seem to offer hope of universal salvation. On the basis of these texts, universalists argue that if all human beings are not ultimately saved, then God's will for "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" ([1 Tim 2:4](#)) would be frustrated and defeated. Only through the salvation of all human beings can God demonstrate the triumph of His infinitely patient love.

Philosophically, universalists find it intolerable that a loving God would allow millions of persons to suffer *everlasting* torment for sins committed within a span of a few years. Jacques Ellul articulates this view admirably, asking the following probing questions: "Have we not seen the impossibility of considering that the New Creation, that admirable symphony of love, could exist *beside* the world of wrath? Is God still double-faced: a visage of love turned toward his celestial Jerusalem and a visage of wrath turned toward this 'hell?' Are then the peace and joy of God complete, since he continues as a God of wrath and of fulmination? Could Paradise be what Romain Gary has so marvelously described in *Tulipe*, when he said that the trouble is not the concentration camp but 'the very peaceable, very happy little village *beside* the camp'—the little village alongside, where people were undisturbed while millions died atrociously in the camp."<sup>66</sup>

**Purgatorial Process.** Universalists argue that it is unthinkable that in the final judgment God would condemn to eternal torment the countless millions of non-Christians who have not responded to Christ because they have never heard the Christian message. The solution proposed by some universalists is that God will save all the unfaithful by enabling them to be gradually transformed through a "purgatorial" process after death.

This view represents a revision of the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, which limits this remedial process only to the souls of the faithful. The universalists extend this privilege also to the souls of the *unfaithful*. Thus, beyond death, God continues to draw all the unsaved to Himself, until ultimately all will respond to His love and rejoice in His presence for all eternity.

**An Appealing but Unbiblical View.** No one can deny that the theological and philosophical arguments of universalism appeal to the Christian conscience. Any person who has deeply sensed God's love longs to see Him saving every person and hates to think that He would be so vindictive as to punish millions of persons—especially those who have lived in ignorance—with eternal torments. Yet, our appreciation for the universalists' concern to uphold the triumph of God's love and to justly refute the unbiblical concept of *eternal* suffering must not blind us to the fact that this doctrine is a serious distortion of Biblical teaching.

First of all, the "universalist passages" declare the *scope* of God's universal saving *purpose*, but not the *fact* of universal salvation for every human being. For example, in [Colossians 1:19-23](#), God's plan "to reconcile to himself all things" is said to include the Colossian believers, "*provided that you continue in the faith.*"

Similarly, in [1 Timothy 2:4](#), God's *desire* for "all men to be saved" is expressed together with the *fact* of a final judgment that will bring "ruin and destruction" to the unfaithful ([1 Tim 6:9-10](#); cf. [5:24](#); [4:8](#)). God extends to all the provision of salvation, but He respects the freedom of those who reject His offer even though it causes Him utmost anguish.

Second, the argument that God ultimately will save all because the doctrine of *everlasting* torment for the unsaved is impossible to accept, inasmuch as it negates any sense of divine justice as well as the very peace and joy of paradise, is a valid argument. However, such an argument, as we have shown, rests upon an erroneous interpretation of the Biblical teaching about the nature of the final punishment of the wicked. Universal salvation cannot be right just because eternal suffering is wrong.

Third, the notion of a remedial punishment, or of gradual transformation after death, is totally foreign to the Scripture. The destiny of each person is firmly fixed at death. This principle is explicitly expressed by Christ in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus ([Luke 16:19-21](#)). In [Hebrews 9:27](#), also, it is clearly stated that "it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment." For the impenitent sinners, "the prospect of judgment" is a "fearful" one, because they will experience not universal salvation but "a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries" ([Heb 10:26-27](#)).

Fourth, regarding the challenge of those who had no opportunity to learn and to respond to the message of Christ, it is *not* necessary either to surrender the belief in salvation solely through

Jesus Christ or to consign all the non-Christians to everlasting torment. The less privileged may find salvation on the basis of their trusting response to what they have known of God. Paul mentions that the Gentiles who do not know the law will be judged according to the law which is "written in their hearts" ([Rom 2:14-16](#)).

Universalism, though attractive at first sight, is erroneous because it fails to recognize that God's love for mankind is manifested not by glossing over sins, nor by limiting human freedom, but rather by providing salvation and freedom to accept it. This truth is aptly expressed in the best-known text about God's love and the danger involved in rejecting it: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" ([John 3:16](#)).

**Conclusion.** Both the metaphorical and universalistic views of hell represent worthy attempts "to take the hell out of hell." Unfortunately, they fail to do justice to the Biblical data and thus they ultimately misrepresent the Biblical doctrine of the final punishment of the unsaved. The sensible solution to the problems of the traditionalist view is to be found, not by lowering or eliminating the pain quotient of a literal hell but, by accepting hell for what it is, the final punishment and permanent annihilation of the wicked. As the Bible says: "The wicked will be no more" ([Ps 37:10](#)) because "their end is destruction" ([Phil 3:19](#)).

### **PART III: THE ANNIHILATION VIEW OF HELL**

**"Sectarian Belief."** The annihilation view of hell has been associated mostly with "sects" like the Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and smaller Sabbatarian churches (Church of God Seventh-day, Worldwide Church of God, United Church of God, Global Church of God, International Church of God). This fact has led many evangelicals and Catholics to reject annihilationism a priori, simply because it is a "sectarian" belief and not a traditional Protestant or Catholic belief. Such a belief is regarded as an "absurdity"<sup>67</sup> and the product of secular sentimentality.<sup>68</sup>

To a large extent, all of us are children of tradition. The faith we received was mediated to us by Christian tradition in the form of sermons, books, Christian education at home, school, and church. We read our Bible in the light of what we have already learned from these various sources. Thus, it is hard to realize how profoundly tradition has moulded our interpretation of Scripture. But as Christians, we cannot afford to become enslaved to human tradition, whether it be "Catholic" tradition, "Evangelical" tradition, or even our own "denominational" tradition. We can never assume the absolute rightness of our beliefs simply because they have been hallowed by tradition. We must retain the right and duty of testing our beliefs and reforming them in the light of Scripture when necessary.

**Tactics of Harassment.** The strategy of rejecting a doctrine a priori because of its association with "sectarian" churches is reflected in the tactics of harassment adopted against those evangelical scholars who in recent times have rejected the traditional view of hell as eternal conscious torment, and adopted instead the annihilation view of hell. The tactics, as already noted in chapter I, consist in defaming such scholars by associating them with liberals or with sectarians, like the Adventists. Respected Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock writes: "It seems

that a new criterion for truth has been discovered which says that if Adventists or liberals hold any view, that view must be wrong. Apparently a truth claim can be decided by its association and does not need to be tested by public criteria in open debate. Such an argument, though useless in intelligent discussion, can be effective with the ignorant who are fooled by such rhetoric."<sup>69</sup>

Despite the tactics of harassment, the annihilation view of hell is gaining ground among evangelicals. The public endorsement of this view by John R. W. Stott, a highly respected British theologian and popular preacher, is certainly encouraging this trend. "In a delicious piece of irony," writes Pinnock, "this is creating a measure of accreditation by association, countering the same tactics used against it. It has become all but impossible to claim that only heretics and near-heretics [like Seventh-day Adventists] hold the position, though I am sure some will dismiss Stott's orthodoxy precisely on this ground."<sup>70</sup>

John Stott expresses anxiety over the divisive consequences of his new views in the evangelical community, where he is a renowned leader. He writes: "I am hesitant to have written these things, partly because I have great respect for long-standing tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of Scripture, and do not lightly set it aside, and partly because the unity of the worldwide evangelical community has always meant much to me. But the issue is too important to be suppressed, and I am grateful to you [David Edwards] for challenging me to declare my present mind. I do not dogmatize about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among evangelicals on the basis of Scripture."<sup>71</sup>

Emotional and Biblical reasons have caused John Stott to abandon the traditional view of hell and adopt the annihilation view. Stott writes: "Emotionally, I find the concept [of eternal torment] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed Evangelical, my question must be—and is—not what my heart tells me, but what does God's word say? And in order to answer this question, we need to survey the Biblical material afresh and to open our minds (not just our hearts) to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilationism, and that 'eternal conscious torment' is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture."<sup>72</sup>

In response to Stott's plea to take a fresh look at the Biblical teaching on the final punishment, we briefly examine the witness of the Old and the New Testament by considering the following points: (1) death as the punishment of sin, (2) the language of destruction, (3) the moral implications of eternal torment, (4) the judicial implications of eternal torment, and (5) the cosmological implications of eternal torment.

## **1. Death as the Punishment of Sin**

**"The Wages of Sin Is Death."** A logical starting point for our investigation is the fundamental principle laid down in both Testaments: "The soul that sins shall die" ([Ezek 18:4, 20](#)); "The wages of sin is death" ([Rom 6:23](#)). The punishment of sin, of course, comprises not only the first death which all experience as a result of Adam's sin, but also what the Bible calls the second

death ([Rev 20:14](#); [21:8](#)), which, as we have seen, is the final, irreversible death experienced by impenitent sinners. This basic principle sets the stage for studying the nature of the final punishment because it tells us at the outset that the ultimate wages of sin is not eternal torment, but permanent death.

Death in the Bible, as noted in chapter 4, is the cessation of life not the separation of the soul from the body. Thus, the punishment of sin is the cessation of life. Death, as we know it, would indeed be the cessation of our existence were it not for the fact of the resurrection ([1 Cor 15:18](#)). It is the resurrection that turns death into a sleep, from being the final end of life into being a temporary sleep. But there is no resurrection from the second death. It is the final cessation of life.

This fundamental truth was taught in the Old Testament, especially through the sacrificial system. The penalty for the gravest sin was always and only the death of the substitute victim and never a prolonged torture or imprisonment of the victim. James Dunn perceptively observes that "The manner in which the sin offering dealt with sin was by its death. The sacrificial animal, identified with the offerer in his sin, had to be destroyed in order to destroy the sin which it embodied. The sprinkling, smearing and pouring away of the sacrificial blood in the sight of God indicated that the life was wholly destroyed, and with it the sin and the sinner."<sup>73</sup> To put it differently, the consummation of the sin offering typified in a dramatic way the ultimate destruction of sin and sinners.

The final disposition of sin and the destruction of sinners was revealed especially through the ritual of the Day of Atonement, which typified the execution of God's final judgment upon believers and unbelievers. The genuine believers were those Israelites who, throughout the year, repented of their sins, bringing appropriate sin offerings to the sanctuary, and who on the Day of Atonement rested, fasted, prayed, repented, and humbled their hearts before God. At the completion of the purification rites, these persons were pronounced "clean before the Lord" ([Lev 16:30](#)).

The false believers were those Israelites who, during the year, chose to sin defiantly against God (cf. [Lev 20:1-6](#)) and did not repent, thus failing to bring atoning sacrifices to the sanctuary. On the Day of Atonement, they did not desist from their toil nor did they engage in fasting, prayer, and soul searching (cf. [Num 19:20](#)). Because of their defiant attitude on the Day of Atonement, these persons were "cut off" from God's people. "For whoever is not afflicted on this same day *shall be cut off from his people*. And whoever does any work on this same day, that person *I will destroy from among his people*" ([Lev 23:29-30](#)).<sup>74</sup>

The *separation* that occurred on the Day of Atonement between genuine and false Israelites typifies the separation that will occur at the Second Advent. Jesus compared this separation to the one that takes place at harvest time between the wheat and the tares. Since the tares were sown among the good wheat, which represents "the sons of the kingdom" ([Matt 13:38](#)), it is evident that Jesus had His church in mind. Wheat and tares, genuine and false believers, will coexist in the church until His coming. At that time, the drastic separation typified by the Day of Atonement will occur. Evildoers will be thrown "into the furnace of fire," and the "righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" ([Matt 13:42-43](#)).

Jesus' parables and the ritual of the Day of Atonement teach the same important truth: False and genuine Christians will coexist until His coming. But at the Advent judgment, typified by the Day of Atonement, a permanent separation occurs when sin and sinners will be eradicated forever and a new world will be established. As in the typical service of the Day of Atonement impenitent sinners were "cut off" and "destroyed," so in the antitypical fulfillment, at the final judgment, sinners "shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction" ([2 Thess 1:9](#)).

**Jesus' Death and the Punishment of Sinners.** In many ways, the death of Jesus on the Cross reveals how God ultimately will deal with sin and sinners. Christ's death on the Cross is a supreme visible manifestation of the wrath of God against all human ungodliness and unrighteousness ([Rom 1:18](#); cf. [2 Cor 5:21](#); [Mark 15:34](#)). What Jesus, our sinless Savior, experienced on the Cross was not just the physical death common to humanity, but the death that sinners will experience at the final judgment. This is why He was "greatly distressed, troubled . . . very sorrowful, even to death" ([Mark 14:33-34](#)).

Leon Morris reminds us that "It was not death as such that He feared. It was the particular death that He was to die, that death which is 'the wages of sin' as Paul puts it ([Rom 6:23](#)), the death in which He was at one with sinners, sharing their lot, bearing their sins, dying their death."<sup>75</sup> It is no wonder that Jesus felt forsaken by the Father, because He experienced the death that awaits sinners at the final judgment. At the time of His passion, Jesus went through a period of increasingly excruciating agony culminating in death. The suffering lasted several hours.

"There is no reason why we should not take this [Christ's death] as the model and example of the final punishment of sin. We are not likely to go far wrong if we conclude that His suffering was the most extreme that will be inflicted on the most defiant and responsible sinner (?Judas Iscariot) and comprised therefore in itself, and covered, all lower degrees of desert. When the Lord Jesus at last died, full satisfaction was made for the sins of the whole world ([1 John 2:2](#)), God's holy law was vindicated and all sins potentially or actually atoned for. If He bore the punishment of our sins, that punishment cannot under any circumstances be eternal conscious suffering or misery, for He never suffered this and it is impossible that He could have. Thus the facts of the suffering and death of Christ Jesus prove conclusively that the punishment of sin is death in its natural sense of the deprivation of life."<sup>76</sup>

Some argue that Christ's death cannot be equated with the final punishment of sinners in hell because He was an infinite Person who could absorb infinite punishment in a single moment. By contrast, sinners must suffer eternal torment because they are finite. This artificial distinction between "finite" and "infinite" punishment and victims does not derive from Scripture but from medieval speculations based on feudalistic concepts of honor and justice.<sup>77</sup> It also consists of adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing infinities, which mathematically speaking is nonsense.

There are no indications in the Bible that God changed the nature of the punishment for sin in the case of our Lord from everlasting torment to literal death. Edward White correctly states: "If it be asserted that it was the presence of the Godhead within which dispensed with the infliction of endless pains, through the substitution of an Infinite Majesty for the infinitely extended misery of

a finite being, we reply, that this is an 'afterthought of theology' which finds no place in the authoritative record."<sup>78</sup>

The Cross reveals the nature of hell as the manifestation of God's wrath that results in death. If Jesus had not been raised, *He*—like those who have fallen asleep in Him—would simply have perished ([1 Cor 15:18](#)), and not experienced unending torment in hell. His resurrection reassures us that believers need not fear eternal death, because Christ's death marked the death of Death ([2 Tim 1:10](#); [Heb 2:14](#); [Rev 20:14](#)).

## 2. The Language of Destruction in the Bible

**The Language of Destruction in the Old Testament.** The most compelling reason for believing in the annihilation of the lost at the final judgment is the rich vocabulary and imagery of "destruction" often used in the Old and New Testaments to describe the fate of the wicked. The writers of the Old Testament seem to have exhausted the resources of the Hebrew language at their command to affirm the complete destruction of impenitent sinners.

According to Basil Atkinson 28 Hebrew nouns and 23 verbs are generally translated "destruction" or "to destroy" in our English Bible. Approximately half of these words are used to describe the final destruction of the wicked.<sup>79</sup> A detailed listing of all the occurrences would take us beyond the limited scope of this chapter, beside proving to be repetitious to most readers. Interested readers can find an extensive analysis of such texts in the studies by Basil Atkinson and Edward Fudge. Only a sampling of significant texts are considered here.

Several Psalms describe the final destruction of the wicked with dramatic imagery ([Ps 1:3-6](#); [2:9-12](#); [11:1-7](#); [34:8-22](#); [58:6-10](#); [69:22-28](#); [145:17](#), [20](#)). In Psalm 37, for example, we read that the wicked "will soon *fade like grass*" (v. 2), "they shall be *cut off* . . . and will *be no more*" (vv. 9-10), they will "*perish* . . . like smoke they *vanish away*" (v. 20), "transgressors shall be altogether *destroyed*" (v. 38). Psalm 1, loved and memorized by many, contrasts the way of the righteous with that of the wicked. Of the latter it says that "the wicked shall not stand in the judgment" (v. 5). They will be "like chaff which the wind drives away" (v. 4). "The way of the wicked will *perish*" (v. 6). Again, in Psalm 145, David affirms: "The Lord preserves all who love him; but all the wicked he will *destroy*" (v. 20). This sampling of references, on the final destruction of the wicked is in complete harmony with the teaching of the rest of Scripture.

**The Destruction of the Day of the Lord.** The prophets frequently announce the ultimate destruction of the wicked in conjunction with the eschatological Day of the Lord. In his opening chapter, Isaiah proclaims that "rebels and sinners shall be *destroyed together*, and those who forsake the Lord shall be *consumed*" ([Is 1:28](#)). The picture here is one of total destruction, a picture that is further developed by the imagery of people burning like tinder with no one to quench the fire: "The strong shall become tow, and his work a spark, and both shall burn together, with none to quench them" ([Is 1:31](#)).

Zephaniah stacks up imagery upon imagery to portray the destructiveness of the day of the Lord. "The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; . . . A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of

clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry . . . In the fire of his jealous wrath, all the earth shall *be consumed*; for a full, yea, sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth" ([Zeph 1:14, 15, 18](#)). Here the prophet describes the destruction of the Day of the Lord in the context of the historical judgment against Jerusalem. By means of the prophetic perspective, the prophets often see the final punishment through the transparency of imminent historical events.

Hosea, like Zephaniah, uses a variety of images to describe the final end of sinners. "They shall be like the morning mist or like the dew that goes early away, like the chaff that swirls from the threshing floor or like smoke from a window" ([Hos 13:3](#)). The comparison of the fate of the wicked with the morning mist, the early dew, the chaff, and the smoke hardly suggests that sinners will suffer forever. On the contrary, such imagery suggests that sinners will finally disappear from God's creation in the same way as the mist, dew, chaff, and smoke dissipate from the face of the earth.

On the last page of the Old Testament English Bible (not the Hebrew Bible), we find a most colorful description of the contrast between the final destiny of believers and unbelievers. For the believers who fear the Lord, "the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings" ([Mal 4:2](#)). But for unbelievers the Day of the Lord "comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes *shall burn them up*, says the Lord of host, so that *it will leave them neither root nor branch*" ([Mal 4:1](#)). The day of the final punishment of the lost will also be a day of vindication of God's people, for they "shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of [their] feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts" ([Mal 4:3](#)).

We need not interpret this prophecy literally, because we are dealing with representative symbols. But the message conveyed by these symbolic images is clear. While the righteous rejoice in God's salvation, the wicked are consumed like "stubble," so that no "root or branch" is left. This is clearly a picture of total consumption by destroying fire, and not one of eternal torment. This is the Old Testament picture of the fate of the wicked, total and permanent destruction and not eternal torment.

**Jesus and the Language of Destruction.** The New Testament follows closely the Old Testament in describing the fate of the wicked with words and pictures denoting destruction. The most common Greek words are the verb *apollumi* (to destroy) and the noun *apoleia* (destruction). In addition, numerous graphic illustrations from both inanimate and animate life are used to portray the final destruction of the wicked.

Jesus also used several figures from inanimate life to portray the utter destruction of the wicked. He compared it to the following: weeds that are bound in bundles to be *burned* ([Matt 13:30, 40](#)), bad fish that is *thrown away* ([Matt 13:48](#)), harmful plants that are *rooted up* ([Matt 15:13](#)), fruitless trees that are *cut down* ([Luke 13:7](#)), and withered branches that are *burned* ([John 15:6](#)).

Jesus also used illustrations from *human life* to portray the doom of the wicked. He compared it to: unfaithful tenants who are *destroyed* ([Luke 20:16](#)), an evil servant who will be *cut in pieces* ([Matt 24:51](#)), the Galileans who *perished* ([Luke 13:2-3](#)), the eighteen persons *crushed* by

Siloam's tower ([Luke 13:4-5](#)), the antediluvians *destroyed* by the flood ([Luke 17:27](#)), the people of Sodom and Gomorrah *destroyed by fire* ([Luke 17:29](#)), and the rebellious servants who were *slain* at the return of their master ([Luke 19:14, 27](#)).

All of these figures denote capital punishment, either individually or collectively. They signify violent death, preceded by greater or lesser suffering. The illustrations employed by the Savior very graphically depict the ultimate *destruction* or *dissolution* of the wicked. Jesus asked: "When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?" ([Matt 21:40](#)). And the people responded: "He will miserably *destroy* [*apollumi*] those wicked men" ([Matt 21:41](#)).

Jesus taught the final destruction of the wicked not only through illustrations, but also through explicit pronouncements. For example, He said: "Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him [God] who can *destroy both soul and body in hell*" ([Matt 10:28](#)). John Stott rightly remarks: "If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being."<sup>80</sup> In our study of this text in chapter 3 we noted that Christ did not consider hell a place of eternal torment, but of permanent destruction of the whole being, soul and body.

Often Jesus contrasted eternal life with death or destruction. "I give them eternal life, and they shall never *perish*" ([John 10:28](#)). "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to *destruction*, and those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" ([Matt 7:13-14](#)). Here we have a simple contrast between life and death. There is no ground in Scripture for twisting the word "perish" or "destruction" to mean everlasting torment.

Earlier we noted that seven times Christ used the imagery of *gehenna* to describe the destruction of the wicked in hell. In reviewing Christ's allusions to hell—*gehenna*, we found that none of them indicates that hell is a place of unending torment. What is eternal or unquenchable is not the punishment but the fire which, as the case of Sodom and Gomorra, causes the complete and permanent destruction of the wicked, a condition that lasts forever. The fire is unquenchable because it cannot be quenched until it has consumed all the combustible material.

**Paul and the Language of Destruction.** The language of destruction is used frequently also by the New Testament writers to describe the doom of the wicked. Speaking of the "enemies of the cross," Paul says that "their end is *destruction* [*apoleia*]" ([Phil 3:19](#)). Concluding his letter to the Galatians, Paul warns that "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap *destruction* [*phthora*]; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from that Spirit will reap eternal life" ([Gal 6:8, NIV](#)). The Day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, "like a thief in the night, . . . then sudden *destruction* [*olethros*] will come upon them [the wicked]" ([1 Thess 5:2-3](#)). At Christ's coming, the wicked "shall suffer the punishment of eternal *destruction* [*olethron*]" ([2 Thess 1:9](#)). We noted earlier that the destruction of the wicked cannot be eternal in its duration because it is difficult to imagine an eternal inconclusive process of destruction. Destruction presupposes annihilation.

John Stott perceptively remarks: "It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and, . . . it is 'difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing.' It cannot, I think, be replied that it is impossible to destroy human beings because they are immortal, for the immortality—and therefore indestructibility—of the soul is a Greek and not a Biblical concept. According to Scripture only God possesses immortality in himself ([1 Tim 1:17](#); [6:16](#)); he reveals and gives it to us through the gospel ([2 Tim 1:10](#))."<sup>81</sup>

In [Romans 2:6-12](#), Paul provides one of the clearest descriptions of the final destiny of believers and unbelievers. He begins by stating the principle that God "will render to every man according to his works" ([Rom 2:6](#)). Then he explains that "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be *wrath and fury*. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek" ([Rom 2:7-9](#)).

Note that "immortality" is God's gift to the faithful, awarded at the resurrection, and not an inherent human quality. The wicked do not receive immortality, but "wrath and fury," two words associated with the final judgment ([1 Thess 1:10](#); [Rev 14:10](#); [16:19](#); [19:15](#)). Paul largely repeats the words and phrases found in Zephaniah's classic description of the great day of the Lord, as "a day of wrath . . . distress and anguish" ([Zeph 1:15](#)). God will "*consume*" the whole world with "the fire of his jealous wrath" and He "will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth" ([Zeph 1:18](#)).

This is most likely the picture Paul had in mind when he spoke of the manifestation of God's "wrath and fury" upon the wicked. This is indicated by the following verse where he says: "All who have sinned without the law will also *perish* [*apolountai*] without the law" ([Rom 2:12](#)). Paul draws a contrast between those who "perish" and those who receive "immortality." In this whole passage, there is no allusion to eternal torment. Immortality is God's gift to the saved, while corruption, destruction, death, and perishing is the wages of sin and sinners.

In view of the final destiny awaiting believers and unbelievers, Paul often speaks of the former as "those who are being saved—[*hoi sozomenoi*] and of the latter as "those who are perishing—[*hoi apollumenoī*]" ([1 Cor 1:18](#); [2 Cor 2:15](#); [4:3](#); [2 Thess 2:10](#)). This common characterization is indicative of Paul's understanding of the destiny of unbelievers as ultimate destruction and not eternal torment.

**Peter and the Language of Destruction.** Peter, like Paul, uses the language of destruction to portray the fate of the unsaved. He speaks of false teachers who secretly bring in heresies and who bring upon themselves "swift *destruction*" ([2 Pet 2:1](#)). Peter compares their destruction to that of the ancient world by the Flood and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which were burned to ashes ([2 Pet 2:5-6](#)). God "condemned them to *extinction* and made them an example to them who were to be ungodly" ([2 Pet 2:6](#)). Here Peter states unequivocally that the extinction by fire of Sodom and Gomorrah serves as an example of the fate of the lost.

Peter again uses the example of the destruction of the world by the Flood, in dealing with scoffers who mocked at Christ's promised coming ([2 Pet 3:3-7](#)). He reminds his readers that as

the world "was deluged with water and perished" at God's command, "by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and *destruction* of ungodly men" ([2 Pet 3:7](#)).

The picture here is that the fire that will melt the elements will also accomplish the destruction of the ungodly. This reminds us of the tares of Christ's parable that will be burnt up in the field where they grew. Peter alludes again to the fate of the lost when he says that God is "forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should *perish*, but that all should reach repentance" ([2 Pet 3:9](#)). Peter's alternatives between repentance or perishing remind us of Christ's warning: "unless you repent you will all likewise *perish*" ([Luke 13:3](#)). The latter will occur at the coming of the Lord when "the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be *burned up*" ([2 Pet 3:10](#)). Such a graphic description of the destruction of the earth and evildoers by fire hardly allows for the unending torment of hell.

**Other Allusions to the Final Destruction of the Wicked.** Several other allusions in the New Testament imply the final destruction of the lost. We briefly refer to some of them here. The author of Hebrews warns repeatedly against apostasy or unbelief. Anyone who deliberately keeps on sinning "after receiving the knowledge of the truth," faces "a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will *consume* the adversaries" ([Heb 10:27](#)). The author explicitly states that those who persist in sinning against God ultimately experience the judgment of a raging fire that will "*consume*" them. Note that the function of the fire is to consume sinners, not to torment them for all eternity. This truth is reiterated consistently throughout the Bible.

Throughout his epistle, James admonishes those who do not practice the faith that they profess. He warns believers not to allow sinful desires to take root in the heart, because "sin when it is full-grown brings forth *death*" ([James 1:15](#)). Like Paul, James explains that the ultimate wages of sin is death, cessation of life, and not eternal torment. James speaks also of God "who is able to save and to *destroy*" ([James 4:12](#)). The contrast is between salvation and destruction. James closes his letter encouraging believers to watch for the welfare of one another, because "whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from *death* and will cover a multitude of sins" ([James 5:20](#)). Again, salvation is from death and not from eternal torment. James consistently refers to the outcome of sin as "death" or "destruction." Incidentally, James speaks of saving the "soul from death," implying that the soul can die because it is part of the whole person.

Jude is strikingly similar to 2 Peter in his description of the fate of unbelievers. Like Peter, Jude points to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah "as an example of those who suffer the *punishment of eternal fire*" (Jude 7, NIV). We noted earlier that the fire that destroyed the two cities is eternal, not because of its *duration*, but because of its *permanent results*. Jude closes, by urging his readers to build themselves up in the faith, caring for one another. "Convince some, who doubt; save some, by *snatching them out of the fire*" (Jude 23). The fire to which Jude refers is obviously the same kind of fire that consumed Sodom and Gomorrah. It is the fire that causes the permanent destruction of the wicked, as envisioned by Jesus, Paul, Peter, James, Hebrews, and the entire Old Testament.

The language of destruction is present, especially in the book of Revelation, because it represents God's way of overcoming the opposition of evil to Himself and His people. We noted earlier how John describes, with vivid imagery, the consignment of the devil, the beast, the false prophet, death, Hades, and all the wicked into the lake of fire, which he defines as "the second death." We found that the phrase "second death" was commonly used to describe the final, irreversible death.

A text not mentioned earlier is [Revelation 11:18](#), where at the sounding of the seventh trumpet John hears the 24 elders saying: "The time has come for judging the dead . . . and for *destroying* those who destroy the earth." Here, again, the outcome of the final judgment is not condemnation to eternal torment in hell, but destruction and annihilation. God is severe but just. He does not delight in the death of the wicked, let alone in torturing them for all eternity. Ultimately, He will punish all evildoer, but the punishment will result in eternal extinction, not eternal torment.

This is the fundamental difference between the Biblical view of final punishment as utter extinction and the traditional view of hell as unending torment and torture—a view shared by many cruel pagan systems. The language of destruction and the imagery of fire that we have found throughout the Bible clearly suggests that the final punishment of the wicked is permanent extinction and not unending torment in hell. In the light of this compelling Biblical witness, I join Clark Pinnock in stating: "I sincerely hope that traditionalists will stop saying that there is no Biblical basis for this view [annihilation] when there is such a strong basis for it."<sup>82</sup>

**The Language of Destruction Is Metaphorical.** Traditionalists object to our interpretation of the language of destruction which we have just surveyed, because they maintain that words like "perish," "destroy," "consume," "death," "burned up," "lake of fire," "ascending smoke," and "second death" are often used with a metaphorical meaning. This is true, but their figurative meanings derive from their literal, primary meanings. It is an accepted principle of Biblical interpretation that words occurring in non-allegorical prose are to be interpreted according to their primary meaning, unless there is some reason to attribute to them a different meaning.

Scripture never indicates that these words should not be interpreted according to their ordinary meaning when applied to the fate of the wicked. Our study of the usage of these words in Scripture and extra-Biblical literature has shown that they describe a literal, permanent destruction of the wicked. For example, John's vision of the "smoke ascending forever" ([Rev 14:11](#)) occurs in the Old Testament to portray the silent testimony of complete destruction ([Is 34:10](#)) and not of eternal torment. Similarly, the "lake of fire" is clearly defined as the "second death," a phrase used by the Jews to denote final, irreversible death. Incidentally, if the "lake of fire" *annihilates* Death and Hades, we have reason to believe that it hardly can preserve the lost in conscious torment for all eternity. We sincerely hope that traditionalists will find the courage to take a long, hard look at the Biblical data which envision hell as the permanent destruction of the lost.

### 3. The Moral Implications of Eternal Torment

The traditional view of hell is being challenged today not only on the basis of the language of destruction and the imagery of the consuming fire we find the Bible but also for moral, judicial, and cosmological considerations. To these we must now turn our attention. Let us consider, first,

the moral implications of the traditional view of hell which depicts God as a cruel torturer who torments the wicked throughout all eternity.

**Does God Have Two Faces?** How can the view of hell that turns God into a cruel, sadistic torturer for all eternity be legitimately reconciled with the nature of God revealed in and through Jesus Christ? Does God have two faces? He is boundlessly merciful on one side and insatiably cruel on the other? Can God love sinners so much as He sent His beloved Son to save them, and yet hate impenitent sinners so much that He subjects them to unending cruel torment? Can we legitimately praise God for His goodness, if He torments sinners throughout the ages of eternity?

Of course, it is not our business to criticize God, but God has given us a conscience to enable us to formulate moral judgments. Can the moral intuition God has implanted within our consciences justify the insatiable cruelty of a deity who subjects sinners to unending torment? Clark Pinnock answers this question in a most eloquent way: "There is a powerful moral revulsion against the traditional doctrine of the nature of hell. Everlasting torture is intolerable from a moral point of view because it pictures God acting like a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for His enemies whom He does not even allow to die. How can one love a God like that? I suppose one might be afraid of Him, but could we love and respect Him? Would we want to strive to be like Him in this mercilessness? Surely the idea of everlasting, conscious torment raises the problem of evil to impossible heights. Antony Flew was right to object that if Christians really believe that God created people with the full intention of torturing some of them in hell forever, they might as well give up the effort to defend Christianity."<sup>83</sup>

Pinnock rightly asks: "How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon His creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself."<sup>84</sup>

John Hick expresses himself in a similar fashion: "The idea of bodies burning for ever and continuously suffering the intense pain of third-degree burns without either being consumed or losing consciousness is as scientifically fantastic as it is morally revolting. . . . The thought of such a torment being deliberately inflicted by divine decree is totally incompatible with the idea of God as infinite love."<sup>85</sup>

**Hell and the Inquisition.** One wonders if the belief in hell as a place where God will eternally burn sinners with fire and sulphur may not have inspired the Inquisition to imprison, torture, and eventually burn at the stake so-called "heretics" who refused to accept the traditional teachings of the church. Church history books generally do not establish a connection between the two, evidently because inquisitors did not justify their action on the basis of their belief in hellfire for the wicked.

But, one wonders, what inspired popes, bishops, church councils, Dominican and Franciscan monks, Christian kings and princes to torture and exterminate dissident Christians like the Albigenses, Waldenses, and Huguenots? What influenced, for example, Calvin and his Geneva City Council to burn Servetus at the stake for persisting in his anti-Trinitarian beliefs?

A reading of the condemnation of Servetus issued on October 26, 1553, by the Geneva City Council suggests to me that those Calvinistic zealots believed, like the Catholic inquisitors, that they had the right to burn heretics in the same way God will burn them later in hell. The sentence reads: "We condemn thee, Michael Servetus, to be bound, and led to the place of Champel, there to be fastened to a stake and burnt alive, together with thy book, . . . even till thy body be reduced to ashes; and thus shalt thou finish thy days to furnish an example to others who might wish to commit the like."<sup>86</sup>

On the following day, after Servetus refused to confess to be guilty of heresy, "the executioner fastens him by iron chains to the stake amidst fagots, puts a crown of leaves covered with sulphur on his head, and binds his book by his side. The sight of the flaming torch extorts from him a piercing shriek of 'misericordia' [mercy] in his native tongue. The spectators fall back with a shudder. The flames soon reach him and consume his mortal frame in the forty-fourth year of his fitful life."<sup>87</sup>

Philip Schaff, a renowned church historian, concludes this account of the execution of Servetus, by saying: "The conscience and piety of that age approved of the execution, and left little room for the emotions of compassion."<sup>88</sup> It is hard to believe that not only Catholics, but even devout Calvinists would approve and watch emotionlessly the burning of a Spanish physician who had made significant contributions to medical science simply because he could not accept the divinity of Christ.

The best explanation I can find for the cauterization of the Christian moral conscience of the time is the gruesome pictures and accounts of hellfire to which Christians constantly were exposed. Such a vision of hell provided the moral justification to imitate God by burning heretics with temporal fire in view of the eternal fire that awaited them at the hands of God. It is impossible to estimate the far-reaching impact that the doctrine of unending hellfire has had throughout the centuries in justifying religious intolerance, torture, and the burning of "heretics." The rationale is simple: If God is going to burn heretics in hell for all eternity, why shouldn't the church burn them to death now? The practical implications and applications of the doctrine of literal eternal hellfire are frightening. Traditionalists must ponder these sobering facts. After all, Jesus said: "By their fruits ye shall know them" ([Matt 7:20, KJV](#)). And the fruits of the doctrine of hellfire are far from good.

A colleague who read this manuscript questioned my attempt to establish a causal connection between the belief in eternal torment in hell and the policy of the Inquisition to torture and burn "heretics" who refused to recant their beliefs. His argument is that the final annihilation of the wicked by fire is no less cruel than their punishment by unending hell-fire. The problem with this reasoning is the failure to recognize that a capital punishment that results in death does not harden or cauterize the Christian conscience like a capital punishment that causes unending atrocious suffering. The difference between the two can be compared to watching the instantaneous execution of a criminal on the electric chair versus watching the unending execution of the same criminal on an electric chair that shock his ever conscious body for all eternity. It is evident that witnessing the latter over an indefinite period of time will either drive a person to insanity or cauterize the moral conscience. On a similar fashion the constant exposure of medieval people to artistic and literary portrayal of hell as a place of absolute terror and eternal

torment, could only predispose people to accept the torturing of "heretics" by religious authorities who claimed to act as God's representatives on this earth.

**Attempts to Make Hell More Tolerable.** It is not surprising that during the course of history there have been various attempts to make hell less hellish. Augustine invented purgatory to reduce the population of hell. More recently, Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield have also attempted to lower the population of hell by developing a postmillennial eschatology and by allowing for the automatic salvation of babies who die in infancy. The reasoning appears to be that if the total number of those who are going to be tormented is relatively small, there is no reason to be unduly concerned. Such reasoning hardly resolves the problem of the morality of God's character. Whether God inflicted unending torments on one million or on ten billion sinners, the fact would remain that God tormented people everlastingly.

Others have tried to take the hell out of hell by replacing the physical torment of hell with a more enduring mental torment. But, as we noted above, by lowering the pain quotient in a non-literal hell, the metaphorical view of hell does not substantially change its nature, since it still remains a place of unending torment.

Ultimately, any doctrine of hell must pass the moral test of the human conscience, and the doctrine of literal unending torment cannot pass such a test. Annihilationism, on the other hand, can pass the test for two reasons. First, it does not view hell as everlasting torture but permanent extinction of the wicked. Second, it recognizes that God respects the freedom of those who choose not to be saved. God morally is justified in destroying the wicked because He respects their choice. God desires the salvation of all people ([2 Pet 3:9](#)), but respects the freedom of those who refuse His gracious provision of salvation. God's final punishment of the wicked is not vindictive, requiring everlasting torment, but rational, resulting in their permanent annihilation.

Our age desperately needs to learn the fear of God, and this is one reason for preaching on the final judgment and punishment. We need to warn people that those who reject Christ's principles of life and the provision of salvation ultimately will experience a fearful judgment and "suffer the punishment of eternal destruction" ([2 Thess 1:9](#)). A recovery of the Biblical view of the final punishment will loosen the preachers' tongues, since they can proclaim the great alternative between eternal life and permanent destruction without fear of portraying God as a monster.

#### **4. The Judicial Implications of Eternal Torment**

**Contrary to the Biblical Vision of Justice.** The traditional view of hell is challenged today also on the basis of the Biblical vision of justice. As John Stott concisely and clearly puts it:

"Fundamental to it [justice] is the belief that God will judge people 'according to what they [have] done' (e.g., [Rev 20:12](#)), which implies that the penalty inflicted will be commensurate with the evil done. This principle had been applied in the Jewish law courts in which penalties were limited to an exact retribution, 'life for life, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot' (e. g., [Ex 21:23-25](#)). Would there not, then, be a serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity? I do not minimize the gravity of sin as rebellion against God our Creator, but I question whether 'eternal conscious torment' is compatible with the Biblical revelation of divine justice."<sup>89</sup>

It is difficult for us to imagine what kind of rebellious lifestyle could deserve the ultimate punishment of everlasting, conscious torment in hell. As John Hick puts it, "Justice could never demand for finite sins the infinite penalty of eternal pain; such unending torment could never serve any positive or reformatory purpose precisely because it never ends; and it renders any coherent Christian theodicy [that is, the defense of God's goodness in view of the presence of evil] impossible by giving the evils of sin and suffering an eternal lodgment within God's creation."<sup>90</sup>

The notion of unlimited retaliation is unknown to the Bible. The Mosaic legislation placed a limit on the punishment that could be inflicted for various kinds of harm received. Jesus placed an even greater limit: "You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you" ([Matt 5:38-39](#)). Under the ethics of the Gospel, it is impossible to justify the traditional view of eternal, conscious torment because such a punishment would create a serious disproportion between the sins committed during a lifetime and the resulting punishment lasting for all eternity.

Part of the problem is that as human beings we cannot conceptualize how long eternity is. It is impossible for us to image what eternal torment really means. We measure the duration of human life in terms of 60, 70, and in few cases 80 years. But eternal torment means that after sinners have agonized in hell for a million years, their punishment has hardly begun. Such a concept is beyond human comprehension.

Some reason that if the wicked were to be punished by annihilation, "it would be a happy relief from punishment and therefore no punishment at all."<sup>91</sup> Such reasoning is appalling, to say the least. It implies that the only just punishment that God can inflict upon the unrighteous is the one that will torment them eternally. It is hard to believe that divine justice can be satisfied only by inflicting a punishment of eternal torment. The human sense of justice regards the death penalty as the most severe form of punishment that can be imposed for capital offenses. There is no reason to believe that the divine sense of justice should be more exacting by demanding more than the actual annihilation of the unrighteous. This is not a denial of the principle of degrees of accountability which, as we shall see, determines the "gradation" of the suffering of the lost. The punitive suffering, however, will not last forever; it will terminate with the annihilation of the lost.

**Contrary to the Human Sense of Justice.** Scholastics, like Anselm, tried to justify the notion of infinite punishment by arguing that sins committed against the infinite majesty of God deserve eternal punishing. Such reasoning may have been acceptable in the feudal society of the Middle Ages, where the human value of the serfs who lived at the bottom of the social pyramid faded in comparison with the value of the king, who lived at the top. But today, as Pinnock points out, "We do not accept inequalities in judgment on the basis of the honor of the victim, as if stealing from a doctor is worse than stealing from a beggar. The fact that we have sinned against an infinite God does not justify an infinite penalty. No judge today would calibrate the degree of punishment on a scale of the honor of the one who has been wronged. The old arguments for hell as everlasting punishing do not work."<sup>91</sup>

Furthermore, eternal torment serves no positive, reformatory purpose, simply because it only torments sinners without reforming them. Such a notion only exhibits a vindictiveness on the

part of God, which is clearly contradicted by what Jesus has revealed to us about His Father's love for the lost. Hans Küng correctly points out that at a time when our penal and educational systems are gradually abandoning the notion of retributive punishments without opportunity of probation and rehabilitation, "the idea not only of a lifelong, but even eternal punishment of body and soul, seems to many people absolutely monstrous."<sup>93</sup>

The traditional view of hell is based on the concept of retributive justice, which requires sinners to pay back to God all that they owe and beyond. This view portrays God as the ultimate harsh, exacting, and unappeasable Judge. Annihilation, on the other hand, portrays God as reasonable and fair. People who refuse to obey Him and to accept His provision for their salvation will be visited with the punishment they deserve, namely, utter extinction.

The issue we are addressing is not whether or not the wicked ultimately will be punished by God. Rather, the issue is whether the wicked will be punished with endless suffering or whether they will perish and become extinct after suffering whatever degree of pain God may inflict upon them. In our view, the latter better harmonizes with the overall Biblical teaching and vision of justice.

**Gradation of the Punishment.** Extinction does not exclude the possibility of degrees of punishment. The principle of degrees of accountability based on the light received is taught by Christ in several places. In [Matthew 11:21-22](#), Christ says: "Woe to you, Chorazin! woe to you, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you" (cf. [Luke 12:47-48](#)). The inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon will be treated more leniently in the final judgment than those of Bethsaida, because they had fewer opportunities to understand the will of God for their lives.

Christ alludes to the same principle in the parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants: "And that servant who knew his master's will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating. But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, shall receive a light beating. Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more" ([Luke 12:47-48](#)). In the final judgment, each person will be measured, not against the same standard, but against his own response to the light received (see [Ezek 3:18-21](#); [18:2-32](#); [Luke 23:34](#); [John 15:22](#); [1 Tim 1:13](#); [James 4:17](#)).

Millions of persons have lived and are living today without the knowledge of Christ as God's supreme revelation and means of salvation. These people may find salvation on account of their trusting response to what they know of God. It is for God to determine how much of His will is disclosed to any person through any particular religion.

In Romans 2, Paul explains that "when Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus" (vv. 14-16).

It is because God has written certain basic moral principles into every human conscience that every person can be held accountable—"without excuse" ([Rom 1:20](#))—in the final judgment. A pleasant surprise will be to meet among the redeemed "heathen" who never learned about the Good News of salvation through human agents. Ellen White states this point eloquently: "Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God."<sup>94</sup>

## 5. The Cosmological Implications of Eternal Torment

A final objection to the traditional view of hell is that eternal torment presupposes an eternal existence of a cosmic dualism. Heaven and hell, happiness and pain, good and evil would continue to exist forever alongside each other. It is impossible to reconcile this view with the prophetic vision of the new world in which there shall be no more "mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" ([Rev 21:4](#)). How could crying and pain be forgotten if the agony and anguish of the lost were at sight distance, as in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus ([Luke 16:19-31](#))?

The presence of countless millions forever suffering excruciating torment, even if it were in the camp of the unsaved, could only serve to destroy the peace and happiness of the new world. The new creation would turn out to be flawed from day one, since sinners would remain an eternal reality in God's universe and God would never be "everything to every one" ([1 Cor 15:28](#)). John Stott asks, "How can God in any meaningful sense be called 'everything to everybody' while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against Him and under His judgment. It would be easier to hold together the awful reality of hell and the universal reign of God if hell means destruction and the impenitent are no more."<sup>95</sup>

The purpose of the plan of salvation is ultimately to eradicate the presence of sin and sinners from this world. It is only if sinners, Satan, and the devils ultimately are consumed in the lake of fire and experience the extinction of the second death that we truly can say that Christ's redemptive mission has been an unqualified victory. "Victory means that evil is removed, and nothing remains but light and love. The traditional theory of everlasting torment means that the shadow of darkness hangs over the new creation forever."<sup>96</sup>

To sum up, we can say that from a cosmological perspective the traditional view of hell perpetrates a cosmic dualism that contradicts the prophetic vision of the new world where the presence of sin and sinners is forever passed away ([Rev 21:4](#)).

**Conclusion.** In concluding this study of the various views of hell, it is important to remind ourselves that the doctrine of the final punishment is not the Gospel but the outcome of the rejection of the Gospel. It is by no means the most important doctrine of Scripture, but it certainly affects the way we understand what the Bible teaches in other vital areas such as human nature, death, salvation, God's character, human destiny, and the world to come.

The traditional view of hell as eternal torment is either Biblical or unbiblical. We have sought the answer in God's Word and have found no Biblical support for it. What we found is that traditionalists have tried to interpret the rich language and imageries of destruction of the wicked in the light of the Hellenistic view of human nature and of ecclesiastical dogma rather than on the basis of accepted methods of Biblical interpretation.

Today the traditional view of hell is being challenged and abandoned by respected scholars of different religious persuasions, on the basis of Biblical, moral, judicial, and cosmological considerations. Biblically, eternal torment negates the fundamental principle that the ultimate wages of sin is death, cessation of life, and not eternal torment. Furthermore, the rich imagery and language of destruction used throughout the Bible to portray the fate of the wicked clearly indicate that their final punishment results in annihilation and not eternal, conscious torment.

Morally, the doctrine of eternal conscious torment is incompatible with the Biblical revelation of divine love and justice. The moral intuition God has implanted within our consciences cannot justify the insatiable cruelty of a God who subjects sinners to unending torments. Such a God is like a bloodthirsty monster and not like the loving Father revealed to us by Jesus Christ.

Judicially, the doctrine of eternal torment is inconsistent with the Biblical vision of justice, which requires the penalty inflicted to be commensurate with the evil done. The notion of unlimited retaliation is unknown to the Bible. Justice could never demand a penalty of eternal pain for sins committed during a mere human lifetime, especially since such punishment accomplishes no reformatory purpose.

Cosmologically, the doctrine of eternal torment perpetuates a cosmic dualism that contradicts the prophetic vision of the new world, from which sin and sinners have forever passed away. If agonizing sinners were to remain an eternal reality in God's new universe, then it hardly could be said that there shall be no more "mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" ([Rev 21:4](#)).

The traditional view of hell as conscious torment is in trouble today. The objections to such a view are so strong and the support so weak that more and more people are abandoning it, adopting instead the notion of universal salvation in order to avoid the sadistic horror of hell. To salvage the important Biblical doctrine of the final judgment and punishment of the wicked, it is important for Biblically-minded Christians to reexamine what the Bible really teaches about the fate of the lost.

Our careful investigation of the relevant Biblical data has shown that the wicked will be resurrected for the purpose of divine judgment. This will involve a permanent expulsion from God's presence into a place where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. After a period of conscious suffering as individually required by divine justice, the wicked will be consumed with no hope of restoration or recovery. The ultimate restoration of believers and the extinction of sinners from this world will prove that Christ's redemptive mission has been an unqualified victory. Christ's victory means that "the former things have passed away" ([Rev 21:4](#)), and only light, love, peace, and harmony will prevail throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity.

## Footnotes

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3. George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1974), p. 457.
4. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting. Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, 1989), p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
7. Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the new Testament* (New York, 1958), p. 5.
8. Clark H. Pinnock, "The Conditional View," in *Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett, ed., (Grand Rapids, 1992), p. 161.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
10. John R. W. Stott and David Edwards, *Essentials, A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London, 1988), pp. 319-320.
11. See *Christianity Today* (June 16, 1989), pp. 60-62. In the conference volume, John Ankerberg argues that to deny the traditional view of the immortality of the soul and of everlasting punishment in hell, is tantamount to denying the deity of Christ. (See K. S. Kantzer and Carl F. Henry, eds., *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids, 1990).
12. Cited in G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids, 1972), p. 34. The same view is expressed by Russell Foster Aldwinckle, *Death in the Secular City* (London, 1972), p. 82.
13. Conrad Bergendoff, "Body and Spirit in Christian Thought," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 6 (August 1954), pp. 188-189.
14. An excellent survey of how body-soul dualism has contributed to the rise of modern secularism and the distinction between secular and spiritual or religious life is found in Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, "The Development of Dualism" chapter 7 in *The Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1984).
15. Cited by D. R. G. Owen, *Body and Soul. A Study on the Christian View of Man* (Philadelphia, 1957), p. 28.
16. From John Donne's poem, "The Anniversary."
17. Henlee H. Barnette, *The Church and the Ecological Crisis* (New York, 1972), p. 65.
18. *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1983 ed., s. v. "Holistic Medicine," p. 294.
19. Cited by Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness* (New York, 1979), p. 133. Among the many books on holistic medicine, the following may be noted: David Allen et al., *Whole Person Medicine* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1980); Ed Gaedwag, ed., *Inner Balance: The Power of Holistic*

Chapter two Footnotes

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3. For example, C. Ryder Smith asserts that both the Hebrew words and their Greek equivalents suggest a physical resemblance between God and man (*The Bible Doctrine of Man* [London, 1951], pp. 29-30). Similarly, H. Gunkel appeals to the stark anthropomorphic way in which God is described in the Old Testament (*The Legend of Genesis* [Chicago, 1901], pp. 8-10).
4. R. Laird-Harris, *Man—God's Eternal Creation: A Study of Old Testament Culture* (Chicago, 1971), p. 24.
5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I, XV, 3 (London, 1949), Vol. 1, pp. 162, 165.
6. This view is expressed by Paul Jewett, who follows Karl Barth in regarding the image of God in man as precisely that of male and female. He declares: "Genesis 1:27b ('male and female created he them') is an exposition of 1:27a ('in the image of God created he him')" (*Man: Male and Female* [Grand Rapids, 1975], p. 33).
7. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1974 ed., s.v. "Soul."
8. Claude Tresmontant, *A Study in Hebrew Thought* (New York, 1960), p. 94. This is a highly recommended book on the difference between Greek and Hebrew thought.
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10. Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London, 1926), Vol. 1, p. 99.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.
12. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1974), p. 10.
13. Dom Wulstan Mork, *The Biblical Meaning of Man* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1967), p. 34.
14. Johannes Pedersen (note 10), p. 171.
15. H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburg, 1952), p. 27.
16. Dom Wulstan Mork (note 13), p. 34.
17. Norman Snaith, "Justice and Immortality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17, 3, (September 1964), pp. 312-313.
18. Basil F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality* (London, n. d.), pp.1-2.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Tory Hoff, "Nephesh and the Fulfillment It Receives as Psyche," in *Toward a Biblical View of Man: Some Readings*, eds. Arnold H. De Graaff and James H. Olthuis (Toronto, 1978), p. 103.

22. Basil F. C. Atkinson (note 18), p. 17.
23. The tabulation is from Basil F. C. Atkinson (note 18), p. 3.
24. Hans Walter Wolff (note 12), p. 10.
25. Tory Hoff (note 21), p. 98.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Hans Walter Wolff (note 12), p. 25.
29. Dom Wulstan Mork (note 13), p. 40.
30. Ibid.
31. W. David Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man* (London, 1956), p. 87.
32. Dom Wulstan Mork (note 13), p. 41.
33. Johannes Pedersen (note 10), p. 179.
34. Ibid., p. 180.
35. Edmund Jacob, "Nephesh," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, 1974), Vol. 9, p. 621.
36. Johannes Pedersen (note 10), p. 171.
37. Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 49.
38. Hans Walter Wolff (note 12), p. 20.
39. Edmund Jacob (note 35), p. 619.
40. Tory Hoff (note 21), p. 101.
41. Edmund Jacob (note 35), p. 618.
42. Basil F. C. Atkinson (note 18), p. 10.
43. The monastic rules clearly reveal how important it was to mortify the flesh by providing the body only with what was indispensable for survival, in order to cultivate the well-being of the soul. The Benedictine rule, for example, makes allowance for the use of baths to the sick, but restricts them to the healthy: "The use of baths shall be offered to the sick as often as necessary: to the healthy, and especially to youths, more rarely" (Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* [Oxford, 1967], p. 121).
44. D. R. G. Owen, *Body and Soul* (Philadelphia, 1956), p. 167.
45. Ibid., p. 169.
46. Hans Walter Wolff (note 12), pp. 26-31.

47. Johannes Pedersen (note 10), p. 178.
  48. The tabulation is from Hans Walter Wolff (note 24), p. 40.
  49. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1967), Vol. 2, p. 143.
  50. R. C. Dentan, "Heart," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, 1962), Vol. 2, p. 549.
  51. Hans Walter Wolff (note 24), p. 66.
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  54. The tabulation is from Hans Walter Wolff (note 24), p. 32.
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  59. Friedrich Baumgartel, "Spirit of God," *Bible Key Words* (New York, 1961), p. 1.
  60. See also Ez 21:12; Ex 6:9; Is 61:3; 65:14; Dan 7:15.
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3. The text of this work is found in Calvin's *Tracts and Treatises of the Reformed Faith*, trans. H. Beveridge (Grand Rapids, 1958), Vol. 3, pp. 413-490.
4. See, for example, Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1940), Vol. 3, pp. 713-30; W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids, n.d.), Vol. 2, pp. 591-640. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids, 1972), pp. 32-64.
5. Westminster Confession, chap. 32, as cited by John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Atlanta, 1977), p. 228.
6. See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Published in 1739). For a brief but informative survey of those who attacked the belief in the afterlife as well as of those who revived such a belief, see Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis, 1984), pp. 173-184.
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8. Ibid., pp. 13-14. See also W. D. Rees, "The Hallucinations of Widowhood," *BMJ* 4 (1971), pp. 37-41; G. N. M. Tyrrell, *Apparitions* (Duckworth, 1953), pp. 76-77.

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10. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
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12. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-98.
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14. For a discussion of near-death experiences throughout history, see Hans Schwarz, *Beyond the Gates of Death: A Biblical Examination of Evidence for Life After Death* (Minneapolis, 1981), pp. 37-48.
15. Plato, *Republic*, 10, 614, 621, in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters* (New York, 1964), pp. 839, 844.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 844.
17. See C. S. King, *Psychic and Religious Phenomena* (New York, 1978). For further literature on the subject, see Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof, *Beyond Death: the Gates of Consciousness* (New York, 1989); Maurice Rawlings, *Beyond Death's Door* (New York, 1981); John J. Heaney, *The Sacred and the Psychic: Parapsychology and the Christian Theology* (New York, 1984); Hans Schwarz, *Beyond the Gates of Death: A Biblical Examination of Evidence for Life After Death* (Minneapolis, 1981).
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19. On the cover of R. A. Moody, *Life after Life* (New York, 1975).
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21. Editorial, *Lancet* (June 24, 1978).
22. Paul Kurtz, "Is There Life After Death?" a paper submitted to the Eighth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences, Los Angeles, November 1979.
23. Paul Badham and Linda Badham (note 9), p. 81.
24. Ray S. Anderson (note 1), p. 109.
25. K. Osis and E. Haraldsson (note 7), p. 197.
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30. Lynn Smith, "The New, Chic Metaphysical Fad of Channeling," *Los Angeles Times* (December 5, 1986), Part V.
31. Advertisement, *The Whole Person*, July 1987, p. 1.
32. See Nina Easton, "Shirley MacLaine's Mysticism for the Masses," *Los Angeles Times Magazine* (September 6, 1987), p. 8.

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34. "Jesus" (through Virginia Essene, "Secret Truths—What Is Life?" *Life Times*, 1, p. 3, as cited in Elliot Miller (note 27), p. 172.
35. Elliot Miller (note 27), p. 178.
36. Oscar Cullmann, "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?" in *Immortality and Resurrection. Death in the Western World: Two Conflicting Current of Thought*, Krister Stendahl, ed., (New York, 1965), pp. 12-20.
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38. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
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53. E. Jacobs (note 51), p. 803.
54. Howard W. Tepker, "Problems in Eschatology: The Nature of Death and the Intermediate State," *The Springfielder* (Summer 1965), p. 26.
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56. Emphasis supplied.
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60. Emphasis supplied.

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  65. *Ibid.*, XXXVII, p. 151.
  66. Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis, 1959), Vol. 1, par. 1132.
  67. Howard W. Tepker (note 54), p. 26.
  68. *Ibid.*
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  70. "Egeiro," in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago, 1979), p. 214.
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## Chapter 4 Footnotes

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3. Clark H. Pinnock, "Response to John F. Walvoord," in *Four Views on Hell*, Ed., William Crockett (Grand Rapids, 1992), p. 39.
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5. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.
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8. Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial! The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1995), pp. 200-201.

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10. R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, *New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1975), p. 293.
11. Robert A. Peterson (note 8), p. 32. See also Harry Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Philadelphia, 1957), p. 13.
12. Edward W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes. A Biblical and Historical Study of the Final Punishment* (Houston, 1982), p. 112.
13. Robert A. Peterson (note 8), p. 36.
14. André Lacoque, *The Book of Daniel* (Atlanta, 1979), p. 241.
15. Emmanuel Petavel, *The Problem of Immortality* (London, 1892), p. 323.
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20. The text of the Dead Sea Scrolls is cited from André Dupont-Sommer, ed., *The Essene Writings from Qumran*, trans. G. Vermes (New York, 1962).
21. Emphasis supplied. References to the final destruction of the wicked are found throughout the Dead Sea Scrolls. For other texts and discussion, see Edward Fudge (note 12), pp. 136-140.
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62. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
64. The statement is from Professor Coleman-Norton at Princeton University and quoted by Bruce M. Metzger, in "Literary and Canonical Pseudepigrapha," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972), p. 3.
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