HELL: ETERNAL PUNISHMENT OR TOTAL ANNIHILATION?

Gerald Bray

Sheol in the Old Testament

Any consideration of the subject of Hell ought naturally to begin with the Biblical evidence. This is more extensive than many people realise, though much of what is classified under the term 'hell' in the Authorized Version refers to a state of the dead which is by no means necessarily the same as the condition of punishment which we naturally associate with this term. This has recently led to a number of attempts to reconsider the Biblical evidence for the traditional picture of Hell. Almost invariably these have modified it in a way which makes the place of the departed seem considerably less fearsome. Whether this softening has led to general public indifference to the concept of Hell, or been caused by it, is difficult to say, but it is certainly true that belief in any sort of negative afterlife is now very rare outside Christian circles and not very common even within them.

In some ways this modern vagueness is a return to the Old Testament picture, where the place of departed spirits (Sheol) was presented as a shadowy underworld about which little could be known for certain. It is true that the wicked were consigned there after death (cf. Num. 16:33; Job 24:19; Psa. 9:17) and there are even hints from time to time that they would be eternally punished (Isa. 66:24—a verse alluded to by Jesus in Mark 9:48).

But the OT also suggests that the righteous go to Sheol (Psa. 16:10; 30:3; Isa. 38:10), though there is some evidence tht they were treated differently from the wicked (cf. Psa. 28:3). Certainly the idea that Sheol should be reserved exclusively for the wicked, as the modern concept of Hell maintains, cannot be supported from the Old Testament. There is no suggestion, for instance, that it is the abode of Satan, an idea which first appears in the First (Ethiopic) book of Enoch, where he is given the name 'Semyaza' (6:3). That book, which was composed out of diverse elements sometime between 250 and 50 BC, is the first to dwell on Sheol as a place of torment for the souls of the 'Sons of God' who rebelled against the

Lord and were cast out of His presence. In this context, the ancient place of departed spirits has been assimilated to the Valley of Hinnom (Gehinnom or later, Gehenna) which was the rubbish tip of Jerusalem and represents a place where whatever is cast into it is burnt by fire.

That this fate did not necessarily await human sinners can be inferred from the fact that there is no mention anywhere that anything like this befell Adam after his fall from grace. We are told in I Peter 3:18 that there were spirits who were imprisoned in the days of Noah, but it is not clear what was happening to them when Jesus went to preach to them. They were obviously in prison, which must have involved some kind of punishment, but nothing is said about the torments of the damned mentioned in Enoch. Neither is it known whether the preaching of Christ released them from their imprisonment or merely confirmed the justice of it!

Sheol (Hades) in the New Testament

The New Testament picture of Hell is considerably richer than anything found in the Old Testament, though the number of overall references is approximately the same in proportion to the text—22 or 23, as compared with 65 in the OT, which is three times as long. Particularly noticeable is the heavy concentration of these references in the Gospels, and on the lips of Jesus Himself (15 of the total, of which four are references to Hades and 11 to Gehenna).

It is generally agreed by commentators that Hades is the nearest equivalent to the OT Sheol, though it is not at all clear how this differs in practice from Gehenna, which is a place of torment. Luke 16:23 refers to Hades as the place from which Dives, in his agony, glimpses the blessedness of Lazarus in Heaven, and Matt. 11:23 (paralleled in Luke 10:15) refers to it as the place of punishment for the unbelief of Capernaum. The only other reference to Hades in the Gospels comes in Matt. 16:18, where Jesus tells us that 'the gates of Hell' will not prevail against the Church. This might be taken to mean that Hell has some kind of adversarial rôle vis-à-vis the Church, which would make it an appropriate dwelling-place for Satan, but this is not clear from the text. It is more likely to be saying that death and destruction will have no power over the Church, which will stand as an eternal witness to the power and majesty of God.

The link between Hades and death is brought out clearly in the remaining NT references. Acts 2:27 and 2:31 are simply a quotation from Psa. 16:10, and portray Hades as a place of decay and corruption. The same can be said of I Cor. 15:55 (where the reading 'Hades' is inferior to 'death', the word which is now preferred in most translations of the NT) and by the four references in Revelation (1:18; 6:8; 20:13 and 20:14) all of which are formulaic—'death and Hell', which start off as a condition of imprisonment for the dead, give them up for judgement and are themselves condemned to 'the lake of fire'. What is this? The image of fire would suggest Gehenna, but that is not clearly stated. An alternative interpetation is that the fire is one of total annihilation, though that contradicts Rev. 20:10, where Satan is thrown along with the beast and the false prophet into a lake of burning sulphur, where 'they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever'. It is curious but true that this passage, taken together with Rev. 20:14, is the only time that the Bible suggests that Satan and Hades are directly linked—and both are being consumed by fire in a place not previously mentioned!

The witness of Revelation is important for the belief that Hades is a kind of intermediate state between death and the last judgement. It is notoriously difficult to square this with the promise of eternal life made by Jesus and repeated by the Apostle Paul as his own personal hope (Phil. 1:21), but the usual solution is to say that 'death and Hades' are to be understood as temporal concepts, whereas eternal life is by definition outside time. If that is so, of course, Hades cannot be regarded as a place of eternal torment, since at the end of time it will cease to exist!

The Abyss

The closest we come in the NT to a dwelling-place for Satan roughly equivalent to our notion of Hell is in the use of the term 'abyss', an adjective meaning 'bottomless' and generally used to translate the Hebrew word Tehom. In the OT it occurs as a synonym for Sheol (Psa. 71:20; 107:26), a usage which is also found in Paul (Rom. 10:7f.). In the NT however it can also designate a prison for demons (Luke 8:31) from which smoke rises, at least metaphorically (Rev. 9:1). The ruler of the Abyss is an angel called Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek (Rev. 9:11). Whether this angel is to be identified with Satan or not is a matter of controversy, particularly as he is protrayed as being bound in the Abyss for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1,3). There is no doubt that the abyss is a prison which suits his true character, and which prevents him from roaming freely to and fro in the earth. But as the point of the passage is that believers are protected from Satan's power only for the duration of the thousand-year reign, the Abyss is an unlikely spot for his permanent residence. If Satan is the prince of this world, who is normally free to deceive men and women within it, it is hard to see how he can be relegated permanently to the Abyss, which is a place cut off from this world, and whose angel-prince is a destroyer, not merely a deceiver.

Gehenna

This word occurs 12 times in the NT, all but once (Jam. 3:6) in the Gospels. The 11 Gospel references can be reduced to five, once repetitions are taken into account, but all of these clearly indicate a place of punishment and destruction, mainly by fire. This is clear for example in the three references in Matt. 5 (vv. 22, 29 and 30, the last two of which are paralleled in Mark 9:43 and 45), as well as in Matt. 10:28 (paralleled in Luke 12:5) and Matt. 18:9 (paralleled in Mark 9:47). The remaining two references mention the Pharisees, who are described as 'sons of Hell' (Matt. 23:15) to which they will be condemned (Matt. 23:33). It will be seen from the above that Matthew's is the Gospel which contains the full range of

references to Gehenna, and that the three references in Mark all occur in the same passage. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that Matthew is the only NT writer to have a strong and clearly expressed doctrine of Gehenna as a place of eternal torment, though it should not be forgotten that his testimony is placed on the lips of Jesus, a source which is confirmed by the other Synoptic Gospels.

There is no doubt that in the NT Gehenna is a place reserved for the punishment of the wicked, and the emphasis on destruction suggests that it might be equated with the Abyss where Apollyon reigns. The punishment is administered by fire, which may be associated with God as much, if not more, than with the angel of destruction. In Matt. 10:28, Jesus says that both body and soul may be destroyed in Hell, but it is not clear who the agent of that destruction will be. Given that it is understood as a punishment for wickedness, it would seem natural to suppose that the ultimate author of the torment must be God, even if it is administered more immediately by demons or by Satan. This would tie in well with the witness of Hebrews, which speaks of God as a consuming fire (12:29), into whose hands one should be extremely careful not to fall (10:31). Elsewhere we are told that even the unjust works of the godly will be consumed by fire before they are admitted into Heaven (I Cor. 3:11–15), and the inference is that this is the work of God, not of any power hostile to Him.

Other words used in the NT for torment and destruction include Kolasis and Orgē, the former meaning 'punishment' and the latter 'wrath'. Kolasis appears only twice in the NT (Matt. 25:46 and I Jo. 4:18), and only in the former passage does it refer to eternal punishment in the sense we now attribute to Hell. It is not a major NT concept, though typically it is Matthew who brings it to our attention. It is interesting to note that it has become the Modern Greek word for Hell, having displaced Hades in that function, though even Hades was used to refer to a place of eternal punishment as early as the time of Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 200) and is pupil Origen (c. AD 185–c. 254).

Orgē, as a translation of the Hebrew Aph, appears much more frequently, being found no fewer than 35 times in the NT. In sharp contrast to the other words we have looked at. Orgē scarcely appears at all in the Gospels (only five times, one of which is a parallel passage), but it is found 20 times in the Pauline Epistles (11 of them in Romans), and six times in Revelation. Occurrences are divided roughly equally between clear references to 'the wrath of God', to 'the wrath which is to come' and to wrath in general, which could refer to either of these (if they are genuinely distinct from each other, which seems unlikely). The wrath of God is associated with the Last Judgement, and involves destruction (Rom. 9:22), which will be administered as punishment for wickedness in this life. It does not appear to be connected in any way with Satan, who is not even mentioned as a recipient of it, nor is it directly linked to Hades or Gehenna. The only suggestion that the wrath of God might have a duration is in John 3:36, where it is said that 'the wrath of God remains on them', though this is hardly a solid basis on which to build a doctrine of eternal punishment! Nor is it clear whether the destruction referred to in Rom. 9:22 is momentary or enduring, so firm conclusions cannot be drawn from that either.

The most that can be said about Orgē is that it entails punishment and destruction, without specifying the place or duration of either. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the agent of Orgē is God, not Satan or another fallen creature, and it is also clear that it is fully deserved by those who will be its recipients. Orgē is therefore directly related to the concept of divine justice, which plays such a powerful rôle in Pauline theology.

General Conclusions from the Biblical Evidence

We may now draw together the Biblical evidence and conclude that Scripture clearly asserts that the wicked will be punished after death. This punishment will come as a judgement from God, even if there is some ground to suppose that He will work through an agent like the angel-prince of the Abyss. The experience of torment, particularly by fire, is not to be excluded from this punishment, though the emphasis is on the pain of spiritual separation from God, rather than on lingering physical suffering. Given that at death we pass from the physical to the spiritual realm this is only to be expected. In any case, scholars have long assumed that references to the fire which is not quenched and to the worm which does not die are metaphorical, rather than literal descriptions of what will happen to the wicked. Nevertheless, there are no grounds for supposing that the wicked will be unconscious of what is happening to them, still less that they will cease to exist in the ontological sense. 'Destruction', even if it should mean annihilation, must be understood as a working out of divine punishment, not as some kind of release from, or remission of it.

What we should call this post-mortal state is more difficult. Hades and Gehenna are both Biblical words, as is Sheol, but with the possible exception of Gehenna, they are inadequate to express what we mean. The Greeks have resolved this problem by objectifying 'punishment' (Kolasis) and identifying it as a place, but this cannot be done in English with the same effect. It is better therefore to retain the traditional word Hell, recognising that it represents a complex pattern of ideas, that it has often been overloaded in the course of Christian history, but that at the end of the day it says what none of the other terms manages to convey—i.e. that after death the wicked will receive a just punishment from God.

Theological Tradition: The Platonic Paradigm of Hell

The NT evidence for the doctrine of Hell is both reticent and clear, but the fact remains that popular notions have been developed by a long-standing theological tradition which has exercised a strong influence on the imagination. The first ingredient in this tradition stems largely from a Platonic conception of Reality. This identifies the Good with Being, and consigns Evil to a state of 'Non-Being', which amounts in practice to

much the same thing as annihilation. As long as something exists it must have a residue of good in it; as long as there is a residue of good, there is some potential for redemption. Hell is portrayed as the lowest order of Being, a place in which rebellious souls yearn for self-destruction. But the God of love, who made souls of the same substance as Himself, cannot allow them to pass into the realm of Non-Being, since to do so would be to abandon something of the highest part of the Creation. God therefore prevents these souls from achieving their desire. This involuntary preservation is a form of love from His point of view, but it is experienced as torment by the souls in question, because their own wicked desires are being frustrated!

This picture has formed the essence of much imaginative literature, as can be seen from reading Harry Blamires, *Knowing the Truth about Heaven and Hell* (Ann Arbor, 1988). Perhaps the most famous statement of this position is the one by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* II, 6, 3. In the Platonic scheme of things, the continuing existence of rebellious souls is a lesser evil than their total destruction, especially as a remote hope of redemption is held out for them still. Gregory of Nyssa believed that even Satan himself would ultimately be redeemed (*Orat. Cat.* 26), though it must be said that generations of his successors have tried to explain away this aspect of his thought as a misunderstanding. Gregory reached his conclusion by applying the Origenistic doctrine of Apocatastasis (cf. Acts 3:21) to the entire cosmos, which he believed would eventually be redeemed *in toto* by Christ.

Also part of this worldview is the way in which the doctrine of Christ's descent into Hell came to be understood. Based ultimately on 1 Peter 3:18, this doctrine maintains that Christ went to Hades (Sheol) after His death and before His resurrection, though apart from preaching to the souls imprisoned in the days of Noah, it is not clear what exactly He did there, or why. Was His purpose to experience the full horrors of human death, including the torments of Hell, as Calvin apparently believed? There is no evidence to support this. Or was His purpose to open the gates of Hell and liberate those who were captive to Satan's tyranny—the famous 'harrowing of Hell' which formed the theme of so many medieval frescos? There is no evidence for that either. In a Platonic scheme, Christ's descent into Hell could easily be seen as giving the dead one last chance to repent, a chance which, with their new-found knowledge (think of Dives!), they would hardly refuse. A hard core might well continue to resist (this was Dostoyevsky's view), but the vast majority would take the opportunity to escape. Such a doctrine turns Hell into a kind of Purgatory, though only in the sense that it would have a limited duration and end on a positive note, not in the sense that hell would be a place of progressive purification from sin. Sadly, there is no evidence for that interpretation either.

In spite of all the attempts to unravel it, Christ's descent into Hell (Hades) remains a mystery which may be affirmed on the basis of I Peter 3:18, but which cannot be explained in any detailed or satisfactory way, and has little bearing on the question of eternal punishment.

The replacement of a basically Platonic worldview by one which is generally described as 'Aristotelian' took place in the Western Church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The effect which it had on the doctrines of the afterlife was much greater than many people have realised. For the first time, elaborate descriptions of Hell came into common currency, the greatest of them being found in the first third of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which may be dated to the years 1300–1320. Dante remains the most accessible source for yet another idea, that of Purgatory, which occupies the second third of his great epic. For the first time we learn that there are many gradations of Hell, determined by moral considerations. Those who have sinned most unashamedly occupy the lowest rungs of the ladder, whilst the souls of unbaptised children, who have not committed actual sin, dwell in the highest reaches, known as Limbo, and approximating to a painless state not all that different in some ways from 'Non-Being'. Limbo is not so much a punishment as a kind of remission for souls which could be said to have landed up in hell through no fault of their own!

Purgatory on the other hand is a different concept altogether, and one which has recently been studied in detail by Jacques Le Goff (*The Birth of Purgatory*, Chicago, 1984). According to him, Purgatory was invented by the medieval Church as a means of permitting souls which had not achieved the perfection of sainthood in this life (the vast majority) to enter Heaven eventually. In its own way it was a form of assurance of salvation, since a soul which found itself in Purgatory could know that after a few million years (which was nothing *sub specie aeternitatis*), and thanks to the intercession of grieving relatives left behind to obtain indulgences for them, they would eventually make it into the realm of the blessed. In a society where the vast majority of the population was baptised and buried with the rites of the Church, Purgatory came as close as anything could to proclaiming a doctrine of universal salvation—a form of universalism, incidentally, which did no violence to the justice of God. Sin would be paid for one way or another, but the end result was bless all round. Hell remained for the incorrigible reprobates, but these would be few in number and notoriously evil.

One peculiarity is that Purgatory was by definition temporal, not eternal, and therefore not in the same league as either Heaven or Hell. Punishment in Purgatory was therefore temporal by definition, not eternal, and it was directly related to retribution for sins committed in this life. Purgatory had no power to remit original sin, which could only be achieved by baptism, and so cannot be regarded as a competitor with Limbo.

It is important to bear this in mind when we come to the Reformers' objections to Purgatory, which they claimed could not be found in Scripture, in spite of the rather spurious appeal made by some Roman theologians to passages like I Cor. 3:11–15. The abolition of purgatory restored the stark option of Heaven or Hell, a choice which had to be decided in this life, since there was no intermediate state after death in which the baptised, at least, could be given a

further chance. It would not be unfair to say that most Protestants have had a mental picture very similar to that of Dante, but without Purgatory as a link between Heaven and Hell. One possible difference is that what Dante classified as Limbo many Protestants would be inclined to move into Heaven, especially where unbaptised babies are concerned.

Whether they would be quite as prepared to admit 'good pagans' to the same rank is less certain; only in relatively recent times has the suggestion been made that a pagan who has lived a good life by his own lights in ignorance of the Gospel might be found in Heaven. That view is certainly more common now than it has ever been, but then the doctrine of hell is weaker than ever before, and it is hard not to think that the two things go together. Certainly at least among Evangelicals, the idea that it is not necessary to preach the Gospel to non-Christians because they may have an alternative way of salvation, is strongly resisted, even if there are relatively few who would unhesitatingly condemn such people to Hell. It may be admitted that God's plan of salvation is greater than our efforts at evangelism, and does not depend on them, so that a pagan outside the sound of the Gospel might be saved by some other means unknown to us, but we cannot be sure of this, and it certainly does not excuse us from preaching the Gospel to as many people as we can. The Bible is silent on the issue, and so it remains a matter of speculation rather than of certainty among Evangelicals. More Liberal Protestants of course, seldom hesitate to affirm universalism, which disposes of the entire problem!

It is also worth recording here that the standard Protestant view of the relationship between Satan and Hell has been greatly influenced by John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Milton's Biblicism partially conceals the fact that much of what he has to say is a product of his poetic imagination, not a rational deduction from the witness of Scripture. In his mind, Hell becomes the headquarters of Satan's rebellion against God, so that the defeat of the latter would logically entail the destruction of the former. The concept of war in Heaven is certainly Biblical (Rev. 12:7), but this is nowhere associated with the idea that the wicked are to suffer either eternal punishment or total annihilation.

Evangelical Concerns about Eternal Punishment

In recent years a minor stir has been caused in Evangelical circles by statements from certain prominent theologians to the effect that total annihilation is to be preferred to eternal punishment as an explanation of the ultimate fate of the wicked. These ideas have been put forward in different ways by John Wenham (*The Goodness of God*, 1974; since reissued as *The Enigma of Evil*!), by Edward Fudge (*The Fire that Consumes*, 1982), John Stott (*Essentials*, 1988) and Philip Hughes (*The True Image*, 1988). The gist of their arguments is that eternal punishment would be needless cruelty, since there would be no possibility of redemption, that the new heaven and the new earth would be 'spoiled' by the continuing presence of evil, and that the joy of the saints would be diminished as long as others were still suffering.

The first of these arguments demonstrates that these Evangelicals do not accept the Platonic scheme outlined above. For them there is no possibility of redemption after death, and it is this hopelessness which seems to them to justify complete annihilation. Nevertheless, the concept of 'needless cruelty' needs to be reconsidered. Here the model has shifted from punishment justly deserved for sins committed to suffering pointlessly prolonged. The suggested remedy for this is therefore not a belated pardon, which would fit the imprisonment model, but euthanasia. One difficulty with this is that we do not accept euthanasia (i.e. deliberate 'mercy' killing, not suspension of treatment for the incurable) as a valid response to hopeless suffering here on earth, so why should we do so in the afterlife? However bad it may be, continuing existence is a better state than total annihilation, because it preserves the dignity of the individual person.

In addition to this there is the argument that immortality is given to the human spirit (not the 'soul') independently of moral questions, just as it was given to the angels in Heaven. When some of the angels fell they did not cease to exist, because they were immortal. Is there any reason therefore, why fallen human beings should cease to exist? Does this not compromise the concept of immortality, and lower us to a level of life quite separate from that of God and the heavenly hosts? Would it perhaps turn us into nothing more than animals?

There is also a moral question involved for those who think that God would not permit eternal suffering. If annihilation is to be the end result of the punishment, why is it delayed? Why does God not destroy people immediately, instead of putting them through a pointless period of suffering first? In the annihilationist view there is no logical place for suffering at all—destruction might as well be immediate and total. But this surely flies in the face of the Biblical testimony, however vague and uncertain it may be in places! Even more basic, if the non-elect have no hope of salvation and God does not want them to suffer unduly, why were they ever created in the first place? Their existence must serve some purpose, and one that is admitted the view that their eternal punishment glorifies the justice of God seems perfectly logical.

The second argument is a matter of speculation and personal preference, and may well reflect underlying Platonic influence. Certainly Plato would have agreed that the perfection of God would entail the total absence of Evil, but it is not clear how Biblical this concept is. It should not be forgotten that the Biblical vision of the new creation follows hard on the equally Biblical condemnation of Satan to eternal punishment, so that it would appear that the two could co-exist quite happily in the writer's mind. The third argument is equally dubious, since it is not obvious that the joy of the saints would be diminished by the thought that justice had at last been done—punishment in the NT is understood as divine judgement, not as inflicted pain, and objectors to the eternal dimension of this punishment may fairly be accused of putting the comfort of the creature ahead of the justice of the Creator. There is certainly a good deal of evidence

from the Psalms and elsewhere that divine vengeance is not only coming, but is something for the saints to look forward to—and to leave in God's hands. It is hard to think that the joy of these saints would be complete if they felt that the wicked had not received their just deserts!

It appears from all this that the real problem with recent Evangelical attempts to mitigate the punishment of Hell is that the focus of this punishment has shifted from divine justice to human suffering. Those who promote the idea of total annihilation have their eyes fixed on the pain of the wicked, and they very properly insist that no Christian (and certainly not God) could rejoice in that. Hell was certainly not created as a spectacle for the saints' enjoyment, and if we as Christians desire to inflict pain on our enemies then it is we who are at fault in the sight of God. That is all perfectly true and laudable, but it does not remove the reality of punishment as such. For God does not punish the wicked in order to keep us happy, but in order to satisfy the demands of His own justice.

So great are these that in order to save us from a similar fate, He had to send His Son to suffer and die on the cross for us. To respond to this by trying to mitigate the pains of Hell is in a curious way to underplay the sufferings of Christ, who endured the unendurable for our sake. God did not spare His Son, in spite of every motive or desire (speaking in human terms) to do so. We must therefore conclude that in His eyes, suffering is not a worse evil than destruction, nor is it ever pointless, however hard it may be for us to understand it. None of this makes the mystery of suffering any more palatable, or any more comprehensible, but it ought at least to remind us that the issues at stake are serious ones, which will not go away simply by wishing that things might have been otherwise.