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Debating the Nature of Hell

A Comparative Analysis and Discussion of Origen's, Athanasius' and Augustine's Positions

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Summary

Is hell real? If so, what's it like? Or, will everyone eventually be saved? These are the questions examined in this thesis. The questions are of vast importance and have been relentlessly and eagerly debated for centuries.

To help us reach more clarity on this issue I have turned to the three great theologians of the Patristic period: Athanasius, Origen, and Augustine. These three admirable thinkers provide arguments for three distinct perspectives on final punishment for the wicked. Origen gives a sophisticated argument that no one will be eternally lost, but that God eventually will be *all in all* and bring about the salvation of all human beings, who will be subjected to Him in His new kingdom. Augustine refers to Origen and his allies and calls them “tenderhearted”, but wrong. Augustine himself pays much attention to this topic in his works, claiming that unrepentant sinners will suffer eternal conscious torment in hell. Athanasius also rejects the idea that all shall be saved and affirms eternal punishment to unrepentant sinners. However, Athanasius believes the eternal punishment is an irreversible destruction of the wicked implying that their ultimate fate is a state of non-existence.

I am especially interested in the Biblical arguments for the three distinct perspectives on hell and I am determined to dedicate much attention to the Biblical arguments the three thinkers provide in the primary sources to their theology. In addition to this, I end with both analyzing and discussing their arguments by means of theologians and exegetes from all periods of church history.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Field and Problem

“In this world, nothing is certain, except for taxes and death” is what one of the founding fathers Benjamin Franklin writes in a letter to French physician Jean-Baptiste Leroy in 1789.¹ You might be able to evade the tax collector for a while, but he will eventually find you. The same thing is true of the grim reaper. The late James Sire writes that there are seven questions that all worldviews need to answer.² One of them is “What happens at death?”. Naturalists will typically say that death is a period mark. Nothing happens after death. As American philosopher Alexander Rosenberg, who is an Atheist, writes: “What happens when we die? Everything pretty much goes on as before, except us”.³ In Christian theology, however, the claim is that death is no period mark, it is a comma, and what happens *after* that comma has been subject to great discussion all the way from the Patristic Fathers throughout the medieval period, all the way to modern theologians. The eternal and extravagant joy that awaits the people of God in the new heaven and new earth has been thoroughly reviewed, as has the fate of the wicked in Gehenna. It is the latter controversy we will discuss here.

The American theologian Preston Sprinkle remarks: “Now, however, Christians are more than ever questioning a traditional view of hell. In the last one hundred years, towering Christian thinkers have described hell in nontraditional terms. Theologians and writers such as Karl Barth, C. S. Lewis, John Stott, and N. T. Wright all believe in hell, but their depictions don’t match what many Christians have believed”.⁴ It is an understatement to say that Christians have described hell in non-traditional terms in the last hundred years. And by non-traditional terms I understand Sprinkle to mean anything that is something other than ‘eternal conscious torment’. A survey of the Patristic period will reveal that the first Christians also differed on the nature of hell, implying that defining the “traditional” view of hell as eternal conscious torment might be inaccurate. This is no conclusion, but perhaps Sprinkle’s statement is slightly spectacular because he wants to actualize the topic of hell to contemporary

1. Daniel Defoe, the author of ‘Robinson Crusoe’ wrote something similar like this a few decades before Benjamin Franklin, but the idiom has been known through the letter of Benjamin Franklin.

2. All seven questions are: 1) What is prime reality? 2) What is the nature of external reality? That is, the world around us. 3) What is a human being? 4) What happens to a person at death? 5) Why is it possible to know anything at all? 6) How do we know what’s right and wrong? 7) What is the meaning of human history? James Sire writes this in his book *The Universe Next Door*.

3. Rosenberg, *The Atheist Guide to Reality*, 7

4. Sprinkle, *Four views on hell*, 9.

theologians. The American theologian J Millard Erickson is more nuanced when he writes: “Just as in the past, the question of the future state of the wicked has created a considerable amount of controversy in our day”.⁵ The debate on hell is a timeless debate.

The Danish theologian Kaj Mogensen points out that the Patristic creeds do not commit a believer to any specific view on the nature of hell.⁶ The creeds of the apostles say about Christ that he will “come again and judge the living and the dead”, but nothing about whether that judgment means eternal conscious torment, eternal destruction, or a purifying judgment that in the end will lead to salvation.⁷ The same goes with the Nicene Creed which states that Christ “Sitteth on the right hand of the Father; from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom has no end”. Identical to the apostle’s creed, nothing about the nature of hell is conveyed. The Athanasian Creed is a bit longer and more detailed in its description. It says this: “[Christ] who suffered for our salvation; descended into hell; rose again the third day from the dead. He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence he will come to judge the living and the dead. At whose coming all men will rise again with their bodies; And shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire.”⁸ (Building upon the gospel according to Matthew’s words from chapter 25:41-46). However, this text isn’t unambiguous either, as there is disagreement on whether eternal fire means eternal in duration, or eternal in effect. Thus, we see that the three formative creeds do not commit believers to any specific view of the nature of hell. Mogensen claims that the Athanasian Creed excludes the possibility of a universalism view on hell but says nothing about the nature of hell.

We might ask if tradition is important. Some would say yes. At least that historical theology provides an essential for contemporary statements of theology. The Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth argues that theology necessarily includes a dialogue with the past: “We cannot be in the church without taking as much responsibility for the theology of the past as for the theology of the present. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher, and all the rest are not dead but living. They speak and demand a hearing as living voices, as surely as we know that they and we belong together in the church.”⁹ As nearly all theological questions have been dealt with in the past, it is virtually impossible to do theology as if it had nev-

5. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1234.

6. Mogensen, *Frelse og Fortabelse*, 17.

7. Livingstone, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*

8. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*

9. Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert*, 3.

er been done before. The British theologian Alister McGrath states that historical theology serves as a pedagogical tool for contemporary theology. He points to the fact that historical theology provides us with a “state of the question” report on different theological themes. This is helpful to us, because it means we can analyze key arguments for different positions. When we discuss, for example, soteriology, we can examine strengths and weaknesses in different soteriological views by analyzing different arguments that have been made in church history. McGrath points also towards what he calls “landmarks” in church history that remain relevant and important today, because they shape what theological issues we should prioritize as essential, and what we should think of them. Such landmarks are writers (such as Augustine, Athanasius, and Aquinas), debates (such as the Arian and Donatist-controversies), as well as documents (such as the creeds).¹⁰

Historical theology is most certainly helpful and an unavoidable asset for nuanced contemporary systematic theology. On the other hand, we should be careful not to give historical theology too much normative influence. Church history isn’t part of the canon, and therefore also not the ultimate authority for Protestant Christians. Protestant Christians are therefore able to confirm the majority views in church history when they can, but also to confront the majority views in church history when they are Biblically obliged to do so. The latter takes a risk, that it will cause action as adrenaline-filled as poking a hungry bear. We do need to keep in mind two very important things: First, that some majority views early in church history have been adjusted over time. Whether or not God can suffer is a question that exemplifies a doctrine that has changed over time. Early in church history, the Patristic Fathers leaned heavily towards a “no” to the question of whether God could suffer. However, the rejection of God as a sufferer did not remain undisputed, but during the centuries has been object for critique. The majority view now, the “new orthodoxy”, is a growing sympathy for the view that God indeed can suffer. One of the deciding factors behind the view of the Patristic Fathers was the influence of their contemporary philosophy. This leads me to the second important thing to bear in mind; Christian thinkers are bound to be influenced by absorbing ideas and values from their contemporary cultural backdrop. The Patristic Fathers were influenced by thinkers such as Philo and Plato. The Jewish writer Philo defended vigorously that God was unchangeable and therefore impassible and could not suffer. All Scriptures depicting Him as suffering are to be seen as metaphors. Philo was highly influential in general, and therefore also formative amongst the Patristic Fathers on this distinct issue. The same thing is true with

10. McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 11.

modern theology, it is no exception to the rule that Christian thinkers will consciously or subconsciously be highly influenced by their cultural backdrop.

I don't want to undermine the importance of church history. However, in a Protestant context, tradition will not be the deciding factor on how to interpret a Biblical text or a concept within systematic theology. Instead, we can think of good systematic theology as critical reappropriation, as Karl Rahner and Karl Barth suggest. That means we can make use of the wisdom of the past in present debates.

1.1.1 Hell in Church History

Hell in the Early Church

The Christians in the first half-millennium of the church's existence cherished the same Scripture, they all worshipped the Triune God and Christ as Lord. They lived the same sacramental lives, and they even all believed in hell. Though not all of them believed in the literal and everlasting hell. The unity of the Patristic Fathers on issues like the Trinitarian nature of God or the deity of Jesus Christ is clear. But clear also is the diversity of their views on hell. Alan Bernstein claims that the New Testament itself displays a variety of views of punishment after death, reflecting different religious sensibilities.¹¹ Therefore, according to Bernstein, we shouldn't be surprised by the variation in the treatment of the topic of hell within the persecuted sect in the Roman empire during the first few centuries A.D. The differences in Christian teaching concerning hell continued, even after Theodosius I abolished the Roman state religion in 392 and his successors legislated against Christian heresies, thus making Christianity built upon the Nicene Creed the official religion of the Roman Empire.¹² We get valuable insight into the early theological debates and divisions through the early Church Fathers. Men such as Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome, the unknown "Barnabas", Polycarp, and the anonymous author of the Didache provide close links to the authors of the New Testament. These men were not inerrant, and their testimonies sometimes disagreed. Still, their understanding of Scripture deserves careful consideration in our attempts to make sense of the Biblical texts.

More modern theologians, who hold to different interpretations of various theological questions, often claim the Church Fathers' support. The hell debate is no exception. Anyone

11. Bernstein, *The formation of Hell*, 269.

12. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*

who approaches literature on final punishment in search of authorities and statements from early Church Fathers can find plenty – on all sides! Henry Constable and LeRoy Edwin Froom claim that the apostolic Fathers support their view of annihilationism.¹³ Annihilationism implies the total destruction of the wicked after the final judgment. Defender of hell being an eternal conscious torment, Steward Salmond, objects strenuously and pronounces their failures in finding apostolic authority for an annihilationist view. He writes: “[Statements from the apostolic Fathers are] either incidental statements which have to be balanced by others that are at once more definite and more continuous; or they are popular statements and simple repetitions of the terms of Scripture”.¹⁴ Also in the Church Fathers’ writings, the observant readers will spot the diversity of views.

It is difficult to underestimate the impact Augustine has had on Christian theology. In his great work *City of God (De Civita Dei)*, he lists seven universalist or semi-universalist positions present in the church already in the early fifth century, and famously calls the proponents of this view *miser cordia*, which means “our compassionate ones”. Universalism is the idea that God will bring about the salvation of every human being. All shall be saved – no one will be eternally lost. Augustine himself explicitly and boldly defends a view of hell that includes the eternal conscious torment of the wicked and dedicates a lot of effort in defending it against pagan and Christian objections in his book *City of God*.

Hell in the Medieval Period

The diversity we see in the early church is also to be found in the medieval period: “Thus, during the early Middle Ages, among authors who considered themselves Christian, there was a remarkable variety of interpretations of hell”.¹⁵ The spread and expansion of Islam in the Mediterranean area led to structural changes and political destabilization in this area. The political situation stabilized itself after a few centuries and by the eleventh century the former great Roman empire had been replaced by three distinct major power groupings: The first being the Byzantines, centered in Constantinople. The second was the Western Europeans, centered in Rome under the influence of the Pope.¹⁶ The third group was the growing Islamic

13. In his book “Duration and Nature of Future Punishment” Constable singles out Clement of Rome, regarding him as a typical of the apostolic fathers. Froom goes through the writings of several of the apostolic fathers in his book *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*.

14. Salmond, *The Christian Doctrine of Immortality*, 593-594.

15. Bernstein, *The formation of Hell*, 271.

16. Though, there were at a point, two rival claims of Papacy in the West. One based in Rome, the other one at the southern city of Avignon in France.

Caliphate region, embracing much of the extreme east and south part of the Mediterranean. Alan Bernstein writes of this period:

The authority of the Pope was embryonic. Christians of Greek-speaking lands, commonly called Byzantine, who formed the root of the Greek Orthodox Church did not recognize, or only sporadically recognized, papal authority, preferring that the emperor and his patriarch in Constantinople and the councils should define matters of faith. Since that (papal) authority was severely curtailed after the first century and then declined further, it is hardly surprising to see a proliferation of views about hell, which is a very important aspect of a religion whose other doctrines also engendered divergent interpretations.¹⁷

There was also an increasing interest in the nature of hell amongst theologians in the medieval period. What is hell really like? The Catholic theologian and philosopher, Erasmus, when commenting on other theologians' enthusiastic writings on the topic of hell, remarked that they had "evidently been there!"¹⁸ A graphic description of hell was found in Dante Alighieri's 14th century three books *The Divine Comedy*, where hell is a place where Satan dwells. When one enters hell, one is met with a sign that says: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!" according to Dante.¹⁹ Alister McGrath notes that this graphic view of hell being a place with literal, everlasting torment of sentient beings was of major influence at the time, but also in the centuries that were to come: "This static medieval view of hell was unquestionably of major influence at the time and continues to be of importance into the modern period."²⁰

Before we enter the Reformation period, let me point out one of the major differences that exists between Protestant and Catholic understanding of the last things. Purgatory is a concept, developed under the Patristic period, where both Origen and Clement of Alexandria taught that those who had died without works of penance would be "purified through fire" in the next life. This reference, purifying fire (*purgatorius ignis*), became incorporated into most medieval accounts of purgatory. D'Ambrosio quotes Gregory the Great, who describes it well in his exposition of Matthew 12:32: "As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the final judgment, there is a purifying fire, for he who is the truth declares that 'whoever ut-

17. Bernstein, *The formation of Hell*, 271.

18. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 439.

19. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 35

20. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 439.

ters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be pardoned either in this age or in the age which is to come'. From this statement, it is to be understood that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, whereas certain others will be forgiven in the age which is to come".²¹ This theory was developed further in the medieval period but was rejected with the 16th-century Reformers.

Hell in the Reformation and Modern Theology

A major shift in the methods, vocabulary, and concepts of Christian theology in western Europe changed in the 16th century. The movement was complex, yet often referred to in a single word – the Reformation. Central figures of the Reformation rejected the doctrine of purgatory mainly over two major lines of criticism. Luther, Calvin and the other Reformers stated that the doctrine lacked any substantial Scriptural foundation and that it was inconsistent with the highly regarded doctrine of justification by faith. Luther explicitly taught a view on hell that included an eternal conscious torment for the wicked. He also revealed how terrified he was of this concept. We learn this from both his expositions and commentaries on Holy Scripture. In a sermon preached in his home in 1553 Luther states that “[Those who have heard the gospel but have not believed] must lie in darkness, cut off from God’s light, that is, from all comfort, in eternal torment, anguish, and sadness, so that they will nevermore see one spark of light”.²² The view of hell that implies an everlasting and conscious torment may be found clearly stated in Jonathan Edwards’ famous sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an angry God* preached on July 8th, 1771.²³ In this sermon the theologian and revivalist continues to thoroughly depict hell as a sort of torture chamber ruled by Satan: “It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God for one moment, but you must suffer it for all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite, horrible misery. You will know that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflict with this almighty merciless vengeance”.²⁴ This view of hell has been “under fire”, with ample Biblical and philosophical objections. The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz found it hard to believe in such a concept of everlasting conscious torment in hell, as it implies the compromise of God’s final and total triumph over evil: “It seems strange that, even in the great future of eternity, evil must triumph over good, under the supreme authority of the one who is the

21. Gregory the Great, *Dialogia IV*, xli.3. Quoted in D’Ambrosio, *Who Where the Church Fathers?*

22. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 3 vols. 2:625-27.

23. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 458.

24. This quote is gathered from a book that includes Edwards’ sermon in written form. Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, 24.

sovereign good. After all, there will be many who are called, and yet few who are chosen or saved”.²⁵

McGrath states that a lack of interest in the topic of hell has been descriptive for modern theology: “While answers may be given to these objections,²⁶ there has been a perceptible loss of interest in the idea of hell in both popular and more academic Christian circles”.²⁷ However, as McGrath himself points out, there has been a growing debate on the *nature and duration* of hell in modern times as well. One response to the Biblical and philosophical objections to the eternal conscious torment view on hell has been the doctrine of conditional immortality. Conditional immortality is closely related to the idea of annihilationism but emphasizes the presupposition that the default state of a human being, at least after the fall, is mortality, and immortality is given only to those God provides salvation for. The sentient beings God does not save will not live forever but be ultimately destroyed. This view has met considerable resistance from a variety of evangelical theologians, such as the late Canadian theologian J. I. Packer, who rejected the view because he felt it was logically inconsistent and lacked adequate scriptural foundation.²⁸ This debate continues in the Christian community to this day.

1.2 The Material

Relevant theological sources must be provided and discussed to present a qualified analysis of the topic of hell. I have decided to use three renowned thinkers from the Patristic period who provide different Biblical arguments for distinct views on hell. They are Origen of Alexandria, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo. All three theologians are located at around the same time, and they have extensively argued for their distinctive views, with Scripture as a basis. They give persuasive and powerful arguments for three different views of hell. Firstly, I have decided to use Origen as an advocate for the apokatastasis view on hell. Origen, who succeeded Clement as the great schoolmaster of Alexandria, was a leading theologian in the third century. American scholar Everett Ferguson calls him “The greatest scholar and most prolific author in the early church”.²⁹ Whether or not he was the greatest of the

25. Leibniz, *Essais de theodicée*, part 1, 82.

26. The biblical and philosophical objections to an eternal, conscious torment view of hell.

27. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 440.

28. When the late J.I. Packer retired from his chair in Regent College, he was replaced by Canadian theologian John G. Stackhouse Jr. who is a devout defender of Conditional Immortality.

29. Dowley (ed.) Ferguson, *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 104.

scholars in the early church might be open for discussion, but it is hard to underestimate his impact on modern theology, particularly when it comes to the subject of hell. His work *On First Principles (De Principiis)* is neatly structured as a systematic theology causing some to recognize him as the first systematic theologian of the Christian church. At least he should be commended for realizing that the Christian faith should be explained in holistic terms if it is to be seen as a serious alternative among other worldviews of that age. What causes Origen to be highly relevant to this study is his thorough reflection and discussion on the topic of hell. Origen sees, similar to some other ancient theologians, the fire of hell as a purifying fire burning away the sin of man.³⁰ Even so, Origen was the first to give the concept a clear form, labeling it after the Greek word *apokatastasis*, which means ‘restoration’. What sets Origen apart from other advocates of the *apokatastasis* view on hell is his thoroughness and his method. What is particularly interesting is how Origen is basing his views on Scripture. The *apokatastasis* view has received criticism for being Biblically inferior amongst many modern theologians, so I regard it as valuable that Origen is not exclusively arguing philosophically but bases the arguments in Scripture.

Secondly, I refer to the 4th-century theologian Athanasius of Alexandria. Athanasius was one of the most important theologians in the formation of Christian orthodoxy. His significance relates primarily to Christological issues, and his contribution to the Arian controversy has not gone unnoticed. He wrote the short treatise *On The Incarnation (De Incarnatione Verbi Dei)*, which is a powerful defense of the idea that God became human in Jesus Christ. But this treatise and some of his other works also reveal his thoughts about the eternal destiny of the wicked. He builds a sophisticated argument for annihilationism claiming that unrepentant persons by nature are mortal beings and headed toward death and corruption. These terms could be understood to signify an eternal conscious torment view on hell, but Athanasius unpacks vividly what he means by death and corruption, that is the state of non-being. Athanasius has, on some occasions, been understood as a universalist.³¹ It is an over-exaggeration to say that nothing in Athanasius’ literature suggests this. However, even though the arguments for understanding Athanasius as a universalist are interesting, they are somewhat lacking in explanatory power and in explanatory scope. Either they are built on quotations from Athanasius with content that isn’t *exclusively* held by universalists, or they don’t bring the totality of Athanasius’ work into consideration. Athanasius is, without doubt, the

30. Such as Gregory of Nyssa and Clement of Alexandria.

31. The most thorough argument for this that I have found is by historian Iliara Marelli’s book ‘A Larger Hope?’.

vaguest of the positions I will explore, but I consider it a perfectly legitimate position to consider him an annihilationist.³² When deciding on a proponent of the annihilation view, I also considered Irenaeus of Lyon but found his arguments to be less sophisticated, and Biblically inferior, compared to Athanasius's. Presupposing that Athanasius indeed argued for the ultimate annihilation of the wicked, which I believe he did, he is by far providing the most sophisticated case for annihilationism in the Patristic period.

Lastly, I use the fourth and fifth-century theologian, Augustine of Hippo, as a proponent for the eternal conscious torment view on hell. There are plenty of reasons why I choose Augustine to be one of the theologians explored in this thesis. As McGrath states, Augustine is "Probably the greatest and most influential man of the Christian church throughout its long history".³³ Biology has its Darwin, classical music has its Mozart, physics has its Einstein and theology has its Augustine of Hippo. After a dramatic conversion, Augustine moved from Italy to North Africa where he was made bishop of Hippo in modern Algeria in 395. In his great work *City of God (De Civita Dei)*, Augustine isn't gleeful about the fate of the lost, but ardently defends the view of hell as eternal conscious torment. Book 21 of *City of God* is dedicated to the topic of hell. Or, as the introduction states: "Of the end reserved for the city of the devil, namely, the eternal punishment of the damned; and of the arguments which unbelief brings against it".³⁴ The entire book is structured as an apology to the charge that the fall of Rome was due to its having abandoned classic paganism in favor of Christianity. Yet, as he defended Christianity against those charges, he inevitably ended up giving a systematic explanation and defense of the Christian faith. That includes the doctrine of endless, conscious torment. Augustine's discussion is primarily philosophical, but there are several occasions where he points directly to Scripture to provide a Biblical basis for his beliefs. All three thinkers give thorough, Biblical, and powerful arguments for their distinct views.

1.2.1 The Use of Scripture and the Question of Canon

As I am primarily interested in how the three thinkers are basing their distinct views on hell in Scripture, the question of the canon must be briefly addressed. The question of the canon is concerned with what defined group of writings is accepted as authoritative within the Christian church. Historically speaking, the formation of the New Testament canon was a continu-

32. I review Ramelli's case for Athanasius holding a universalist view in 2.2.5

33. McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 25.

34. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.

ous process in the first centuries of the church. Some use the phrase “criteria of canon” when describing why some books are being canonized and some are kept out of the Biblical canon, implying elements such as apostolicity, age, orthodoxy, etc. This might be helpful, as apostolicity is an important feature of canonical texts. On the other hand, it is a bit misleading, as it gives the impression that someone is standing over the canonical books, judging them by an external standard that is not found internally in the canonical books. This is not a correct description of the canon process, and it over-inflates the role of the church. As McGrath points out: “The evidence suggests that earlier Christians did not really think in terms of ‘criteria of canonicity’ but acted on the basis of how widely the documents were accepted and used”.³⁵ Instead of picking which texts were to be within the canon, the early church rather received the texts that were authoritative and normative. American theologian Dr. Michael J. Kruger explains this brilliantly when he discusses the canonicity of the four gospels, saying that to ask why the early Christians ‘chose’ the four gospels is the equivalent to asking someone why they chose their parents.³⁶ It presupposes a choice where there isn’t one. McGrath describes it well: “The basic principle appears to have been that of the recognition rather than the imposition of authority. In other words, the works in question were recognized as already possessing authority, rather than having an arbitrary authority imposed upon them. For Irenaeus, the church does not create the canon; it acknowledges, conserves, and receives canonical Scripture based on the authority which is already inherent in it”.³⁷ The gradual consensus over which texts to recognize as authoritative is an open process that we can trace throughout the first few centuries. Many theologians point to the Festal Letter written by Athanasius in 367, identifying the 27 books of the New Testament, which is now canonical, as the first list of books that were recognized as inspired books. Some would say you could even point to Origen’s homily in the mid-third century where he writes:

Matthew first sounded the priestly trumpet in his Gospel; Mark also; Luke and John each played their own priestly trumpets. Even Peter cries out with trumpets in two of his epistles; also, James and Jude. In addition, John also sounds the trumpet through his epistles, and Luke as he describes the Acts of the Apostles. And now that last one comes, the one who said, ‘I think God displays us apostles

35. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An introduction*, 111.

36. Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 73-87. Kruger is acknowledging Dr. Charles E. Hill for this analogy.

37. McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 28.

last', and in fourteen³⁸ of his epistles, thundering with trumpets, he casts down the walls of Jericho and all the devices of idolatry and dogmas, all the way to the foundation.³⁹

The canon was closed at the beginning of the fifth century and wasn't discussed until the Reformation. The Reformation brought the question of canon into life again. Luther's doubts upon some of the New Testament books reaped little support. However, when doubting some of the works in the Old Testament, the Reformers succeeded in making changes. They argued that the only Old Testament writings that ought to be regarded as belonging in the canon are the ones that were included in the Hebrew Bible. That was not the case with their contemporary Bibles in Greek or Latin (Vulgate) that included Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, I and II Maccabees and additions to Daniel and Esther. These books are found in the Septuagint, but not in the Hebrew Bible. The Reformers' slogan *Sola Scriptura* implies two differences from their Catholic opposition. They attach different status to Scripture, but they are also disagreeing over what Scripture really is. The outcome of this debate is that the Protestant congregations omitted the Apocryphal texts whilst the fourth session of the Council of Trent in 1546 produced a detailed list that included the works of the Apocrypha as authentically Scriptural. The distinction the Reformers made in the 16th century persists even today and creates a dilemma for theologians trying to analyze arguments from a Biblical basis. What do we mean when we talk about "Scripture"? I have tried to lay out the reason why I must clarify what I mean when I henceforth refer to "Scripture" and when I say I want to analyze the three theologians on the basis of their *use of Scripture*. As a Protestant theologian, writing from a Protestant viewpoint, I will hold the three positions responsible from this viewpoint of Scripture. This could be seen as an anachronistic principle of canon, where I apply a more modern understanding of canon and apply this to the reading of the historical texts.

1.3 The Method

The method I am using can be classified as a systematic theological methodology. Let me also briefly mention three of my priorities when I examine the positions from history. First, the approach I have to the positions is a hermeneutical reading of the texts, implying that my fo-

38. Origen was obviously referring to Paul in this part of the homily, believing that also the book to the Hebrews was of Pauline origin.

39. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, book 7.1.

cus is primarily to read the texts that expose the three theologians' different viewpoints and formulate a justifiable interpretation of those texts. Secondly, whilst reading the texts of Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine you notice that they, at times, argue with quotations straight from the Bible, as Augustine does, in book twenty-one of his great work *City of God*, where he writes: "As for those who find an empty threat rather than a truth in such passages as these: 'depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire' and 'These shall go away into eternal punishment' and 'Their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched'. Such persons, I say, are most emphatically and abundantly refuted, not by me so much as by the divine Scripture itself".⁴⁰ Elsewhere, we see the theologians arguing on a Scriptural basis, without quoting Scripture. Augustine provides a good example of this, when writing on the story of Nineveh: "For though He spared them on their repentance, yet He was certainly aware that they would repent, and, notwithstanding, absolutely and definitely predicted that the city should be overthrown".⁴¹ This last excerpt is without any direct quote from the Scriptures, but it's beyond doubt that this is an example of Biblical argumentation. As I am focusing on how the figurant's perspective is anchored in Scripture, it is useful to distinguish between direct quotations from Scripture used to support the three thinkers' viewpoints and Biblical arguments for their viewpoints. I will examine both. Lastly, I will prioritize Athanasius', Origen's and Augustine's writings. However, I also acknowledge that we can get valuable information from secondary literature as well. I will therefore use both the original writings of the three thinkers and operate with secondary literature when I view it as helpful.

1.4 The Process

This thesis is structured with six chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to an introduction to the theological field I am writing about, which is systematic theology, and the topic I am writing on, which is the topic of hell. This chapter has also included some clarifications concerning the priority of theologians, literature, and interpretation of both primary and secondary literature. The second chapter addresses the doctrine of annihilationism, mainly found in the writings of Athanasius. The third chapter will address the doctrine of universalism. This view is held by many theologians throughout church history, but my focus will be centered primarily on the writings of Origen. Chapter four will describe a third alternative in the hell debate,

40. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 21.24.

41. Augustine, *City of God*, book 21. 18.

namely the doctrine of eternal conscious torment. My focus here will be primarily on Augustine's arguments for this alternative.

According to American theologian Bernhard Ramm, the "Two greatest minds of the early church – Augustine and Origen – were philosophers as well as theologians".⁴² Because of this, you will find some philosophical arguments in the literature authored by the two well-respected theologians (and philosophers), but my objective is to describe and analyze their Biblical arguments. In chapters two, three, and four I will focus on the Athanasius', Origen's and Augustine's use of Scripture when arguing for their respective views. This is a solely descriptive analysis of their statements concerning hell; the critical assessments begin in chapter five. In this fifth chapter, I analyze the arguments given by the three theologians. Whilst chapters two, three, and four are more descriptive in nature, the fifth chapter is more normative in nature. The Norwegian theologian, Torleiv Austad, writes that systematic theology's purpose is to describe what we ought to believe concerning several theological issues and challenges.⁴³ Because of this, it will be unavoidable that chapter five will be more normative in nature, as it examines the three different perspectives in a critical manner. In this chapter, I will also refer to theologians outside of the Patristic period as I examine the positions. The sixth and final chapter is dedicated to a conclusion.

1.5 The Ambition

In the Gospel according to Matthew, the author reports the words of Jesus related to events that will bring on the end of time – the second coming of Christ, or the Parousia. He explains that the Son of Man will judge all nations, dividing them as a shepherd divides his sheep from goats. The righteous from the unrighteous. To the sheep, whom he calls "The blessed of my Father" he says that they will go into the eternal life, but the goats, whom he calls "Cursed", are dismissed, as he orders them to depart from him, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels. What happens to the wicked? Is there any hope that God will restore everything he has created, even the wicked people? Or are they damned to either an eternal, irreversible destruction or an everlasting, conscious torment? American Professor of History Alan Bernstein claims that there are "Powerful presentations of alternatives to eternal damnation"

42. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 173.

43. Austad, *Tolkning av Kristen Tro*, 2008.

in the early church.⁴⁴ The ambition of this task is to examine these powerful alternatives. The ambition is twofold: First, my target is to examine Origen's, Athanasius', and Augustine's Biblical arguments and their explanations for their distinct views on hell. Whilst doing so, I will also be able to understand better a few secondary issues. One of them will be to give a nuanced description of the diversity of views on hell in the early church. Another secondary target I'd like to achieve is to give a normative statement on what we ought to think the Bible teaches about hell.

44. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell*, 1.

2. Athanasius: The Fire that Consumes

2.1 Athanasius' Life and Work

Athanasius of Alexandria is a major figure in the history of Christian theology. He has rightly earned the title “Champion of orthodoxy” for his contribution to the articulation of Christian theology in a period where theological debates were present in the fourth century. Even though our knowledge of Athanasius' life may be sparse, his intellectual influence has not remained unnoticed. Being born in the last decade of the third century, in Egypt, Athanasius entered the world in a time filled with theological controversies.⁴⁵ This was a critical and formative period in the history of Christianity. Church architecture and liturgy, creeds and doctrine, and clerical hierarchies took recognized forms, and divisions and conflicts within the church flourished in this period. It was in this environment that Athanasius became Bishop of Alexandria in 328.

Athanasius and the theological controversy he was a part of started earlier; sometime around 318, Arius, a charismatic and tall preacher, challenged bishop Alexander, who was one of Athanasius' predecessors, on the topic of Christology. Arius objected to Alexander's teaching on the trinity, reporting it was on the verge of committing a modalism heresy. This ongoing debate was the forerunner of the Council of Nicea, where these Christological issues, and especially some of Arius' controversial claims, were debated. This council cannot be left unnoticed when writing biographies on Athanasius. His presence and contribution to this decisive event in church history are at the center of his theological career. American professor of theology Marcellino D'Ambrosio compares Athanasius to the great sculptor Michelangelo. What they had in common was that their most famous masterpiece was made whilst they were in their early twenties. In the case of the Italian sculptor, his masterpiece was the renowned Pietà, located in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. For the deacon Athanasius, it was the short treatise called “On the Incarnation”.⁴⁶ In this book, written before the Arian controversy, Athanasius expands on the topic of Christology. Here, Athanasius states that sin isn't merely an offence towards God, but it pollutes and corrupts the image of God within human beings. This

45. There is discrepancy concerning the year of the birth of Athanasius, though I have not come across someone who places it elsewhere than in the last decade of the third century. In his academic book on Athanasius, David Gwynn gives a thorough chronology of Athanasius' life, stating he was born approximately 295. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria, Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*, 15.

46. D'Ambrosio, *Who Were the Church Fathers?* 162.

corruption of man can only be put right by its Creator. He has done so through the divine Christ who claimed divinity and was raised from the dead as vindication of his claims. McGrath summarizes Athanasius' argument as follows:

1. Only God can save
2. Jesus Christ saves
3. Therefore, Jesus Christ is God.⁴⁷

Arius, on the other hand, was quick to point out that the Son is a creature like no other. Still, a creature; God he was not. Bishop Alexander, accompanied by Athanasius, was deeply worried about Arius' serious heresy and gathered more than one hundred bishops to get Arius condemned and thrown out of the Church. Bishop Alexander gave a powerful defense of the divinity of Jesus. However, the renowned bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia (not to be confused with Eusebius of Caesarea), protected Arius, which led to a further discussion in the aftermath of the council. The Nicene Creed, as formalized in 381, clearly displays the victory of Bishop Alexander, Athanasius, and their peers: “(We believe in) one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father.”⁴⁸

2.2 Athanasius on Hell

Athanasius, though writing primarily on the topic of Christology and soteriology, is portraying his views on hell in his writings. When expanding on how the Word became flesh, took upon himself the iniquities of mortal men, and nailed them to the cross, in order to achieve salvation for humankind, Athanasius also reveals his opinions on the eternal fate of the wicked. Scripture's guidance in theological issues is of vital importance to Athanasius, which he himself points to. In his great masterpiece *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius asks Macarius to survey his position and see whether or not he finds Scripture to approve Athanasius' perspectives: ⁴⁹ “This will give you (Macarius) a beginning, and you must go on to prove it's true by the study of the Scriptures. They were written and inspired by God; and we, who have learned from inspired teachers who read the Scriptures and became martyrs for the Godhead of Christ,

47. McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 50.

48. The Nicene Creed as Formalized in 381.

49. Saint Macarius I of Jerusalem served as bishop in Jerusalem from 312 to shortly before 325.

make further your contribution to your eagerness to learn.”⁵⁰ This reveals Athanasius’ attitude toward Holy Scripture. He is holding his own views up against the standards of the Bible, indirectly showing that Scripture is the ultimate authority for Christian dogmatics. Even though Athanasius seldom refers to specific texts in Scripture, his arguments are highly Biblical in nature.

2.2.1 God as the Creator of All and the Fall of Mankind

Athanasius is thorough in his work, so his starting point is to explore the creation of the universe, the creation of mankind, and the fall. When commenting on the beginning of the universe, he begins by declaring his own view, claiming that “All things that are, owe their being to His will and power”.⁵¹ He then refers to three different groups, the Epicureans, the Platonists, and the Gnostics, and show both how they differ from his own creation theology, as well as arguing for their perspectives’ inadequacies.

Athanasius goes from there to explore highly relevant topics: the creation of human beings; the nature of human beings; the purpose of human beings; and, lastly, how the fall has affected both the nature and purpose of human beings. When addressing the creation of human beings and the nature of human beings Athanasius brings us back to the first few chapters of Genesis. He calls mankind “animals”, but argues that men, being created in *imago Dei*, are exalted over the other animals: “He bestowed a grace which other creatures lacked – namely the impress of His own Image, a share in the reasonable being of the very Word Himself, so that, reflecting Him and themselves becoming reasonable and expressing the Mind of God even as He does.”⁵² According to Athanasius, God has created mankind with a gift; a share in the reasonable being of the very Word himself. What does that mean? Athanasius expands on this:

But, in fact, the good God has given them a share in His own Image, that is, in our Lord Jesus Christ, and has made even themselves after the same Image and Likeness. Why? Simply in order that through this gift of Godlikeness in themselves they may be able to perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Word Himself, and

50. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 9:56.

51. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1:1.

52. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1:3

through Him to apprehend the Father; which knowledge of their Maker is for men the only really happy and blessed life.⁵³

Human beings, according to Athanasius, were created as rational beings with the ability to abide in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise. He emphasizes that man's designated, God-given purpose is this; to express the mind of God and to reflect the perfection of the Word.

The next step for Athanasius was to describe the implications of the fall. Human beings' telos was to reflect the Word, but what happens when they rebel against the will of God, instead of obeying it? Athanasius claims that death and corruption would follow:

But since the will of man could turn either way, God secured this grace that He had given by making it conditional from the first upon two things – namely, a law and a place. He set them in His own paradise and laid upon them a single prohibition. If they guarded the grace and retained the loveliness of their original innocence, then the life of paradise should be theirs, without sorrow, pain, or care, and after it the assurance of immortality in heaven. But if they went astray and became vile, throwing away their birthright of beauty, then they would come over the natural law of death and live no longer in paradise, but dying outside of it, continue in death and corruption.⁵⁴

The cessation of gazing on God would culminate in men placing themselves inevitably under the law of death, throwing away the sureness of blessedness in paradise and immortality in heaven. As we've explored earlier, Athanasius mentions that the gift God provided for men, that sets them apart from other creatures, is the knowledge of the Word. This sheds a light on the seriousness, consequences, and nature of sin, according to Athanasius. Athanasius writes:

But as we have already seen, men, foolish as they are, thought little of the grace they had received, and turned away from God. They defiled their own soul so completely that they not only lost apprehension of God but invented for themselves other gods of various kinds. They fashioned idols for themselves in place of

53. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 3.11

54. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1.3

the truth and revered things that are not, rather than God Who is, as St. Paul says, ‘worshipping the creature rather than the Creator’ (Romans 1:25).⁵⁵

Since God is the source of all being, not merely the craftsman who creates from already existing matter, but creating everything out of nothing, turning away from Him would be to return to a state of death and corruption, disconnected from the source of life. Athanasius writes: “This is what the Holy Scripture tells us, proclaiming the commands of God, ‘Of every tree in the garden you shall surely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ye shall not eat, but in the day that ye do eat, ye shall surely die’ (Genesis 2:16-17). Not just die - but remain in the state of death and corruption”.⁵⁶ Athanasius describes the fracture between man’s nature before and after the fall. With the starting point of a life abiding in blessedness and immortality, the consequences of the fall implied death, corruption, and mortality after the fall.

The mortality of humanity subsequent the fall is frequently emphasized in his literature. Such as when describing King David, Athanasius writes that he “Celebrates the Lord, as the everlasting God and King, but sent to us and assuming our body which is mortal”.⁵⁷

2.2.2 The Lost, who Remain in Death and Corruption, will Ultimately be Destroyed

“Death” and “corruption” are the words Athanasius most frequently uses when describing the fate of the wicked, for instance when describing the period after the fall, he states that “death and corruption were gaining ever firmer hold on them (the human race)”.⁵⁸ Those terms might be conceived as ambiguous and somewhat lacking precision. However, we need not wonder what Athanasius meant when using these terms, as he elaborates on it himself: “And as they had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning to non-existence again, so they were now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again. The presence and love of the Word had called them into being; inevitably, therefore when they lost the knowledge of God, they lost existence with it”.⁵⁹ The fall led human nature into a state of death and corruption, which is a state of non-existence. It

55. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 3:11.

56. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1:4.

57. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 12:47.

58. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 2:6.

59. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 1:4.

seems to be no coincidence that Athanasius gives a precise account of his position - that God has created *ex nihilo*, and not out of pre-existent matter as the Platonists suggest. Athanasius uses this point, when explaining what it means that men are in a state of death and corruption, namely going back to where they came from; non-existence. This is Athanasius' most precise account of the ultimate fate of the wicked. However, as he writes extensively on the topic of salvation, the consequences of unforgiven sin, and remaining in the mortal, corrupted nature, these are issues he often revisits, and he is strikingly consistent in his descriptions of the lost.

2.2.3 Destruction Upon the Blaspheming Arians who are not Christians

When writing a harsh polemical text against the Arians, Athanasius describes the fate awaiting the unbelieving, and even blaspheming Arians. He states that they eventually will learn, though too late, that they as Arians “are not Christians”.⁶⁰ And when expanding on the seriousness of their blasphemous claims about the (non)-divinity of Jesus, he states:

And shall not all humankind at Arius' blasphemies be struck speechless, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, to escape Himself, have a reason to denounce men so irreligious, nay, so unthankful, in the words which he already uttered by the prophet Hosea ‘Woe unto them, for they have fled from Me; destruction upon them, for they have transgressed against Me; though I have redeemed them, yet they have spoken lies against Me’ (Hosea 7:13) And soon after, they imagine mischief against Me; they turn away to nothing.⁶¹

Athanasius is, as we see, echoing his former terminology when writing on the topic of perdition. Athanasius was dedicated to warning against the blasphemous claims of the Arians, and, as we've seen, some of those warnings imply the perdition of those who follow their teachings. He does so later on in his work, *Discourses Against the Arians (Orationes Contra Arianos)*. When doing a comparative analysis of different Christological positions, Athanasius quotes Romans 9:5, where Jesus is depicted as “God over all”, as a proof text for his own viewpoint that Christ is divine, which the Arians denied. He then goes on to elaborate on the

60. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 3:10.

61. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 2:7.

gruesome consequence of holding such a blasphemous position as the Arians are reprehensible for holding:

But if He be the Word of the Father and true Son, and God from God, and ‘over all blessed forever’ (Romans 9:5) is it not becoming to obliterate and blot out those other phrases and that Arian Thalia⁶², but as a pattern of evil, a store of irreligion, into which, whoso falls, ‘knows not that giants perish with her, and reaches the depth of Hades’. For if they (the Arians) speak, a condemnation will follow; and if they be suspected, proofs from scripture will be cast at them from every side. Wherefore in their craft, as children of this world, after feeding their so-called lamp from the wild olive, and fearing lest it should soon be quenched, for it is said, the light of the wicked shall be put out (Job 18:5).⁶³

In this text, it seems plausible that Athanasius is commenting primarily on the ideas of Arius, stating that The Thalia will be obliterated and blotted out. It will reach the depths of Hades and perish. After this, Athanasius isn’t commenting primarily on the ideas, but on the people who hold the blasphemous ideas, stating that their light will be put out.

These are important texts, because they all bear witness to Athanasius’ views on the nature of the ultimate destiny of the wicked. The punishment is, according to Athanasius, eternal in effect, but not in duration. It is true that the wicked will be eternally lost, but in the sense of an irreversible punishment, not punishing conscious beings forever.

2.2.4 Immortality is Provided through the Finished Work of Christ

As we’ve previously seen, Athanasius argues that humankind was created with the ability to abide in the blessedness of the Logos, and in the hope to continue in incorruptibility and immortality:

But since the will of man could turn either way, God secured this grace that He had given by making it conditional from the first upon two things – namely, a law and a place. He set them in His own paradise and laid upon them a single prohibi-

62. The Thalia was one of Arius’ main work summarizing his Christological views.

63. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 3:10.

tion. If they guarded the grace and retained the loveliness of their original innocence, then the life of paradise should be theirs, without sorrow, pain, or care, and after it the assurance of immortality in heaven.⁶⁴

However, their position in the garden was changed drastically after the fall:

If they went astray and became vile, throwing away their birthright of beauty, then they would come over the natural law of death and live no longer in paradise, but dying outside of it, continue in death and corruption.⁶⁵

After the fall, humankind was in a state of corruptibility and mortality. According to Athanasius, immortality was inherent in human beings at creation, but was lost in the fall, and restored in the incarnation. The Image of the unalterable God, who is unchangeable, the same yesterday, today and forever became human to make possible the deification of all men.⁶⁶ Athanasius states: “What advancement then was it to the Immortal (Jesus) to have assumed the mortal? Or what promotion is it to the Everlasting to have put on the temporal? What reward can be great to the Everlasting God and King in the bosom of the Father? See ye not, that this too was done and written because of us and for us, that us who are mortal and temporal, the Lord, became man, might make immortal, and bring into the everlasting kingdom of Heaven?”⁶⁷ According to Athanasius, The Son was incarnated to bring mortal humans back to immortality and invite them into the everlasting Kingdom of God. It was the people’s sin that cut them off the tree of immortality but therefore also the forgiveness of sin that makes us grafted back into an immortal nature. He goes on to say: “He saw also their universal liability to death. All this He saw and, pitying our race, moved with compassion for our limitation, unable to endure that death should have the mastery, rather than his creatures should perish and the work of his Father for us men to come to nought, He took himself a body, a human body even as our own”.⁶⁸ Notice also the consequent terminology when the repercussions of sin are mentioned. Driven by his compassion for his people being held by a bondage of sin, Christ came to free us. And he was the only one who could achieve this. Athanasius states:

64. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1.3

65. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1:3.

66. Athanasius quotes Hebrews 13:8 and argues for the eternity and inalterability of Christ in *Discourses Against the Arians*, 10:36.

67. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 12:48.

68. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 2:8.

“We have seen that to change the corruptible to incorruption was proper to none other than the Savior Himself. Who, in the beginning made all things out of nothing; that only the image of the Father could re-create the likeness of the image in men, that none save our Lord Jesus Christ could give mortals immortality”.⁶⁹

Athanasius has already argued that one of the many outcomes of the incarnation is that immortality, which was lost in the fall, has now been redeemed in Christ. If God did not become human in Christ, the human race would perish and die, as mortal beings. The incarnation hindered this to be an inconvenient truth about mankind’s destiny, according to Athanasius. His main concern is the incarnation, and he clearly points toward the incarnation when explaining how immortality has been retained by Christ. However, several times, he also points to both the death of Christ and the resurrection when he elucidates how Christ has regained immortality:

Have no fears then. Now that the common Savior of all has died on our behalf, we who believe in Christ no longer die, as men died aforetime, in fulfillment of the threat of the law. That condemnation has come to an end; and now that, by the grace of the resurrection, corruption has been banished and done away, we are loose from our mortal bodies in God’s good time for each, so that we may obtain thereby a better resurrection. Like seeds cast into the earth, we do not perish in our dissolution, but like them shall rise again, death having been brought to nought by the grace of the Savior. That is why blessed Paul, through whom we all have the surety of the resurrection says: This corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality; but when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?

(1. Corinthians 15:53).⁷⁰

Athanasius points to the resurrection and quotes from Paul’s famous chapter on the resurrection to explain how Christ has provided immortality. Not only the resurrection but also the crucifixion is used as an explanation: “Moreover, the Scriptures are not silent even about his

69. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 4:20.

70. Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*, 4:21.

death. On the contrary it refers to it with the utmost clearness. They have not feared to speak also of the cause of it. He endures it, they say, not for his own sake, but for the sake of bringing immortality and salvation to all”.⁷¹ One might infer that Athanasius is paraphrasing 2 Timothy 2:10 in this quotation. Here, Paul writes: “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory”. That might be the case, but Paul here is not referring to Christ enduring the excruciating pain at the cross, but his own suffering for the Evangelion. Still, Athanasius explicitly states that the Scripture is what tells us that Christ endures the pain for our immortality’s sake. One solution to this “problem” would be that Athanasius’ point that Christ endured the pain on the cross for the sake of human salvation and eternal life with him is easily found elsewhere in Scripture, and that Athanasius is making use of Paul’s terminology in 2 Timothy chapter 2 and applying the point to Christ. Another solution would be that Athanasius isn’t paraphrasing Scripture but making a valid inference of teaching the Scripture gives, and his writing style is permeated by Biblical terminology. It’s limited how much these speculations will get us anywhere, so let me conclude by pointing out that, either way, Athanasius is indeed arguing that the crucifixion serves to bring the immortality, that was lost in the fall, back to humankind. Athanasius points to the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection when arguing for the regaining of immortality. The entirety of Christ’s work on earth serves to provide immortality and eternal life for the elect:

Since then the Word, being the image of the Father and immortal, took the form of the servant, and as a man underwent for us death in His flesh, that thereby He might offer Himself for us through death to the Father; therefore also, a man, He is said that because of us and for us to be highly exalted, that as by His death we all died in Christ, so again in the Christ Himself we might be highly exalted, being raised from the dead, and ascending into heaven, ‘whither the forerunner Jesus is for us entered’ (Hebrews 6:20), not into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.⁷²

71. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 6:34.

72. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 11:41.

2.2.5 Athanasius - an Annihilationist?

The terminology Athanasius uses to describe the consequence of sin is that the fallen man abides in ‘corruption and death’, which he also defines as a state of ‘non-existence’. Despite this terminology, there is an ongoing discussion on whether or not Athanasius in fact held to an annihilationist view on hell. The Italian historian Ilaria Ramelli suggests that Athanasius should be read as an extension of Origen’s universalism. She writes: “Athanasius often displays universalistic overtones: ‘Flesh was taken up by the Logos to liberate all humans and resurrect all of them from the dead, and ransom all of them from sin’”.⁷³ Ramelli suggests that because of Athanasius’ perspective that salvation has universal scope, he proposes an apokatastasis view. She then continues to quote and paraphrase alleged proof-texts for universalism from a variety of Athanasius’ works of literature. Examples of this are: “In the cross of Christ, there is salvation for all people in all places” and “Christ wants the repentance and conversion of the human being, rather than its death. In this way, evil, all of it, will be burned away from all humans”.⁷⁴ It is legitimate to believe that this might infer that Athanasius believes everyone will eventually be saved. However, I don’t think this is necessarily the case, and there might be a few things one would have to explain, in order to maintain such a suggestion. First, I would say that the quotations Marelli brings up won’t be theological persuasions only universalists are qualified to hold to. That Christ’s death on the cross offers salvation for all people fits into many different soteriological and eschatological perspectives, not exclusively universalism. One can also believe that Jesus wants the repentance and conversion of human beings and that in this way all the evil will be burned away from all humans, without being a universalist. These words of Athanasius, paraphrased by Marelli, seem to be texts very close to the Scriptural formulation of how the cross will offer salvation for everyone. This is a theological persuasion that both theologians who hold to limited atonement and unlimited atonement relate to.⁷⁵

There are also direct quotations from Athanasius that do not fit well with the apokatastasis view- for example, where it seems as though he qualifies Christian individuals to be the ones who will avoid death: “Have no fears then. Now that the common Savior of all has died on our behalf, we who believe in Christ no longer die, as men died aforetime, in fulfill-

73. Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?* 88

74. Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?* 89

75. E.g. 1 John 2:2 “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

ment of the threat of the law. That condemnation has come to an end; and now that, by the grace of the resurrection, corruption has been banished and done away".⁷⁶ In this passage from *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius suggests that condemnation will be avoided by those who have placed their faith in Christ. Another reason to disregard Athanasius as a Christian universalist is that, when he describes the inheritance of eternal life, he describes Christian persons who have been provided with salvation, and therefore avoids the fear of death and destruction:

A very strong proof of this destruction of death and its conquest by the cross is supplied by a present fact, namely this. All the disciples of Christ despise death; they take the offensive against it and, instead of fearing it, by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ trample on it as on something dead. Before the divine sojourn of the Savior, even the holiest of men were afraid of death and mourned the dead as those who perish. But now that the Savior has to tread it underfoot as nothing, and prefer to die rather than to deny their faith in Christ, knowing full well that when they die they do not perish, but live indeed, and become incorruptible through the resurrection.⁷⁷

A third reason, which in my opinion is the strongest one, is that he, in his conclusion of *On the Incarnation* describes the return of the Lord and the forthcoming judgment in a way that is incompatible with a universalist view:

From the Scriptures you will learn also of His second manifestation to us, glorious and divine indeed, when he shall come not in lowliness but in His proper glory, no longer in humiliation but in majesty, no longer to suffer but to bestow on us all the fruit of His cross – the resurrection and incorruptibility. No longer will He then be judged, but rather will Himself be Judge, judging each and all according to their deeds done in the body, whether good or ill. Then for the good is laid up the heavenly kingdom, but for those that practice evil outer darkness and the eternal fire.⁷⁸

76. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 4:21.

77. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 5:27.

78. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 9:56.

This quote, and perhaps especially how Athanasius chooses to articulate the ending of it, using the Biblical terms “outer darkness” and “eternal fire”, could be understood as an eternal, conscious torment of the lost.”⁷⁹ He could mean so, but when carefully examining the totality of Athanasius’ view on the ultimate fate of the lost one might find it highly unlikely. On several occasions, he states that those who live in sin abide in *death and corruption*, which he defines as a state of non-existence. It does not make sense with the rest of his explanations on the ultimate fate of the lost, if this is to be understood as Athanasius promoting an eternal conscious torment view on hell. Another alternative is, it would be fair to say, that Athanasius’ main point is that all people will be judged by Christ, and he is conveying that there are two possible outcomes for all human beings on judgment day that are of eternal importance. He conveys that not all indeed will be saved on the last day and refers to the two Biblical terms: “eternal fire” and “outer darkness”, in order to anchor it Biblically. If we were to conclude that Athanasius, by quoting these Biblical terms, holds to an eternal conscious torment view on hell, we would have to presuppose that we know how Athanasius interprets the Scriptural passages that speak of “outer darkness” and “eternal fire”. But since Athanasius never expands on those passages or does any exegetical work on them, we should hesitate to conclude that the use of these terms implies that he believes that hell is a place of never-ending, conscious torment. This is especially true when he is all things but silent elsewhere on the nature of the final destiny of the lost, describing it as “non-existence”.

The soul is a central part of Athanasius’ writings. Concerning the soul, Athanasius seems to reproduce some of the very thoughts and phrases by Plato, that were openly employed by other contemporary Christian thinkers, such as Athenagoras of Athens (133-190 AD) and Tertullian (155-220 AD). The view Athanasius held was that the mortal body was led by a rational and immortal soul, like a musician is leading his lyre. That Athanasius holds to the idea of an immortal soul might seem contradictory to his claims elsewhere that death and non-existence awaits the wicked. But, in the closing paragraph of his book, *Against the Heathen (Contra Gentes)*, he refers to the price of life everlasting and writes: “Immortality and the kingdom of heaven is the fruit of faith and devotion towards him (God), if only the soul be adorned according to his laws”.⁸⁰ It seems then that Athanasius is persuaded into believing that there is a possibility that the soul will not be adorned with immortality in the end.

79. The term «outer darkness» is mentioned three times in the New Testament. Each one of them by Jesus himself in the Gospel of Matthew. The three passages are; Matthew 8:22, Matthew 22:13 and Matthew 25:30. Also, there are plenty of passages in the New Testament that includes an eternal punishment or an “eternal lake of fire” or so, but only two passages directly mention “eternal fire”. Those are Matthew 25:41 and Jude 7.

80. Athanasius, *Against the Heathens*, 47.4

Athanasius could be accused of being a bit vague on his position on hell. However, despite the arguments laid forth that Athanasius is proposing a different fate than the ultimate annihilation for the wicked, it is perfectly legitimate to say that the totality of his literature gives the impression of him arguing for annihilationism.

2.2.6 Immortality is Provided for the Saints

The end of immortality was lost for human beings in the fall, and they remained in a state of death and corruption. If it hadn't been for the finished work of Christ, they would remain in this state. "For if the Lord had not become man, we had not been redeemed from sins, not raised from the dead, but remaining under the earth; not exalted into the heaven but lying in Hades."⁸¹ According to Athanasius, this dreadful fate will not be realized in the life of those who are in Christ. "And the Law was spoken by Angels, and perfected no one (Hebrews 7:19), needing the visitation of the Word, as Paul has said; but that visitation has perfected the work of the Father. And then, from Adam unto Moses death reigned (Romans 5:14), but the presence of the Word abolished death (2 Timothy 1:10), and no longer in Adam are we all dying (1 Corinthians 15:22), but in Christ we are all reviving".⁸² Here, Athanasius points to several passages in the New Testament whilst arguing for the death of death because of Christ's death. He repeats the words of Paul, that all will be made alive in Christ. As I have mentioned earlier, this is not a universal immortalization but is provided for the individuals who are in Christ.⁸³

2.3 Conclusion

In Athanasius' writings you will find a sophisticated argument for an annihilationist view of hell. I will refer to three distinctive and important viewpoints argued for in the writings of Athanasius to display this. They are as follows: The only one who is immortal is the Word, Jesus Christ. Human beings, because of the fall, are, by nature, mortal. The lost, who remain in death and corruption, will die inherently mortal and be ultimately destroyed. Their ultimate fate will be in a state of non-existence. Immortality is provided through the finished work of

81. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 1:11

82. Athanasius, *Discourses Against the Arians*, 13:59.

83. I expand on this in 2.2.5

Christ and is provided only for those who put their trust in Christ. We have seen Athanasius argue specifically for the truth of these claims.

3. Origen: That All Shall be Saved

3.1 Origen's Life and Work

Origen of Alexandria, also known as Origen Adamantius, was a remarkable theologian in the third century. There are few biographical sources that give us insight into the personal life of Origen, although we are provided with some sources by the historian Eusebius. The significance of Origen is portrayed clearly when Eusebius writes that everything he did and said should be remembered. Even what he did in the cradle was considered no exception to this rule!⁸⁴ He was the perfect Christian scholar and a literal saint according to Eusebius. Origen was born in Alexandria, a city founded by Alexander the Great in 332 BC. He had Christian parents and eight younger siblings. Growing up, he was given the best education his family could afford, in one of the largest and most vibrant cities in the world, second only to Rome. The catechetical school in Alexandria was led by Titus Flavius Clemens, whom we now know as Clement of Alexandria. In 202 A.D., seemingly out of nowhere, a great persecution erupted Alexandria, led by the Emperor Septimus Severus. The catechetical school that Clement led, and Origen was attending, had to shut down. Because of the brutal persecution, Clement was forced to escape Alexandria, and Origen was forced to relocate his studies from the school's premises to his home. The persecution that led Clement to flee was one day present at the door of Origen's home. The soldiers broke in and dragged Origen's father Leonidas into custody. Even though Origen was determined to go after his father and die with him, his mother convinced him to stay behind and care for her, his siblings and his studies. Origen did as his mother told him. He stayed in Alexandria and taught Greek classical philosophy as well as disciplining himself to a very simple lifestyle. When the persecution finally came to an end, Demetrius, the bishop, wanted to reopen the catechetical school. He chose the young Origen to lead it. This was the starting point of a long and diverse career that would eventually lead him to be one of the foremost theologians of his era.

The Alexandrian school, being one of the two main centers of Christian education in the ancient world has produced plenty of influential theologians.⁸⁵ Arguably the most central of them was Origen; at least according to German theologian Johannes Quasten, who described Origen as “a man of encyclopedic learning, and one of the most original thinkers the

84. Eusebius, *Historical Ecclesiastes*, 6:2:2.

85. The other city being Antioch.

world has ever seen”.⁸⁶ British church historian Gerald Bray informs us that Origen is “credited with something like 800 works, almost all of which have been lost.”⁸⁷ Despite the fact that plenty of the original manuscripts of Origen’s writings have been lost, Bray affirms that: “Our general picture of Origen’s beliefs has not been seriously distorted as a result”.⁸⁸

Among Origen’s most important works must be counted *On First Principles* which Bray calls “The first manual of systematic theology to have been written by a Christian”.⁸⁹ There is a discussion on whether this work should be counted as the first systematic theology, as the work is lacking a chapter devoted to soteriology. However, the holistic approach to the Christian faith is evident, and one could also point to the fact that soteriology is a theme that is described throughout the entire work. This latter point is important as *On First Principles* is clear on Origen’s teaching about the universal salvation. When commenting on patristic eschatology British professor of theology Brian Daley describes Origen as “Without a doubt the most controversial figure in the development of early Christian eschatology”.⁹⁰ Let us further explore his teachings on hell.

3.2 Origen’s Universalism

Even though Origen was a highly original and independent thinker, no-one is practicing theology in a vacuum, and some would argue that neither should we. As we have already seen, in Origen’s case, his theological context was the Alexandrian school, called Didascalium. Founded in ca. 190 A.D. by St. Pantaenus, the Didascalium was of vast importance for the development of Christian theology.⁹¹ The Alexandrian school was thoroughly universalist, and several of the important figures explicitly defended that all shall be saved. For instance, Clement of Alexandria, who served as Origen’s predecessor in Alexandria. Origen wrote extensively on eschatology, and as American professor of philosophy Jerry Walls remarks: “Universalism is the outcome of several motifs in his theology”.⁹²

86. Quasten, *Patrology*, 37.

87. Bray & Eseler (ed.), *The Early Christian World*, 560.

88. Bray & Eseler, (ed.), *The Early Christian World*, 560.

89. Bray & Eseler, (ed.), *The Early Christian World*, 562

90. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology*, 47.

91. Saint Jerome claims that the Alexandrian school was founded by John Mark the Apostle, but the vast majority of scholars do not deny this claim and attribute the founding of the highly respected school to St. Pantaenus.

92. Walls, *Universalism in Origen’s First Principles; Asbury Seminarian*, 6.

3.2.1 The End is Like the Beginning

A crucial argument in Origen's eschatology is that the end will be like the beginning. He summarizes this point very well himself:

For the end is always like the beginning: and therefore as there is one end to all things, so ought we to understand that there was one beginning; and as there is one end to many things, so there spring from one beginning many differences and varieties, which again are recalled to one end, which is like unto the beginning.⁹³

The beginning of the universe and human existence is crucial to Origen's eschatology, because in order to understand the end, we need to understand the beginning, as they are the same thing. Origen believes that the entire universe, and every being, both physical and spiritual, is made by the incorporeal God, who is incapable of being measured and is incomprehensibly good. His creation also reflects his goodness. He created all men equal and in a state of blessedness, and, most importantly, free.⁹⁴ In this section, I survey Origen's perspective, that the end is like the beginning. Origen also describes the human condition in between the beginning and the end, as free with a *telos*. This is a vital part of his cumulative case for universal restoration, but not one we will immediately deal with here.

Origen almost never describes the beginning of the universe without connecting it to the end of it. He argues that this connection between the end and the beginning is present in the Holy Scripture, and quotes the apostle Paul, declaring that "The creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by the reason of Him who has subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:20-21). This verse, according to Origen, points both backwards and ahead of us. He states: "Now, by the expression which he employs, that the creature was made subject to vanity, he shows that there was a beginning to this world: for if the creature were made subject to vanity on account of some hope, it was certainly made subject from a cause; and seeing it was from a cause, it must necessarily have had a beginning: for, without some beginning, the creature could not be subject to vanity, nor could that (creature) hope to be freed from the bondage of corruption, which had not begun to serve".⁹⁵

93. Origen, *On First Principles* 1.6.2.

94. Origen argues that if God did not create men equal, he would not be just in *On First Principles* 3.5.4.

95. Origen, *On First Principles* 3.5.1.

He says that there are multitudes of passages in the Holy Scriptures that speak of the beginning of the world, and the future hope. Romans 8:20-21 is only an example he uses to portray how you cannot isolate the end from the beginning. We were created in perfect union with God in the beginning and will also experience this great union with our maker at the end of time. Even though Origen stresses the fact that the end will be like the beginning, he does point out one difference. Origen comments on some contemporary philosophers who believe that the ultimate meaning of life is to become as much like God as possible. Origen answers by referring to Genesis 1:26-27: “But this definition (of the ultimate meaning of life) I regard not so much as a discovery of theirs, as a view derived from Holy Scripture. For this is pointed out by Moses, before all other philosophers, when he describes the first creation of man in these words: and God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our own image, and after Our likeness’ (v 26) and then he adds the words: ‘So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him, male and female created He them, and He blessed them’. Now the expression: ‘In the image of God created He him’, without any mention of the word ‘likeness,’ gives no other meaning than this, that man received the dignity of God’s image at his first creation; but that the perfection of his likeness has been reserved for the consummation – namely, that he might acquire it for himself by the exercise of his own diligence in the imitation of God, the possibility of attaining to perfection being granted him at the beginning through the dignity of the divine image, and the perfect realization of the divine likeness being reached in the end by the fulfilment of the works.”⁹⁶ In Origen’s view, this passage from Genesis 1 is concerned with both the beginning and the end. Verse 27 speaks of what happened in the past - that God created man in His image. Verse 26 speaks of the future; God says, “Let us make men after our likeness”. Verse 27 speaks descriptively, that God made men with dignity and in union with him, verse 26 speaks of the human telos. The end of human history is that humans will be in his likeness.

This ultimate telos for human beings is also evident in the New Testament. Origen points us to the First Letter of John that states: “Little children, we do not yet know what we shall be; but if a revelation be made to us from the Saviour, you will say, without any doubt, we shall be like Him”. (1 John 3:2) Origen calls this “clear and unmistakable” evidence that we will be like Jesus. What does this imply? Origen explains that those who have become “united to God shall have been made one Spirit with him”.⁹⁷ This restoring work is brought to

96. Origen, *On First Principles*, 3.6.1.

97. Origen, *On First Principles*, 3.6.6.

be by the Saviour Himself, and Christ is in advance declaring this in his high-priestly prayer: “Father, I will that where I am, these also may be with Me; and as You and I are one, they also may be one in Us” (John 17:24). In the end we will go from being “merely similar” to “the same” because “undoubtedly in the consummation or end God is all in all”.⁹⁸ The observant reader will notice that Origen, in this quote, quotes another of his important proof texts from Scripture, 1 Corinthians 15:27-28, that says: “For God has put all things in subjection under his feet. But when it says, all things are put in subjection, it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all”. Walls summarizes Origen’s use of these passages well when he writes: “It is apparent that the lines separating creature from Creator are not clearly drawn here, if at all. The final state is unity indeed.”⁹⁹

So far, we haven’t explored anything that is unique for the apokatastasis view. Theologians who hold to a wide range of views on hell would agree that the end indeed is quite the same as the beginning and that in the end, God will be all in all. This does change when Origen expands on who will be a part of God’s new creation.

3.2.2 Will All Be United with God in the End?

Origen refers to the already mentioned passage in 1 Corinthians when qualifying those who will unite with God in the end. He writes:

While God is said to be in all things, He may also be said to be in a vessel of wickedness. For if we now assert that God is everywhere and in all things, on the ground that nothing can be empty of God, we nevertheless do not say that He is now ‘all things’ in those whom He is. I am of the opinion that the expression, by which God is said to be ‘all in all’, means that he is ‘all’ in each individual person. Now He will be ‘all’ in each individual in this way: when all with any rational understanding, cleansed from the dregs of every sort of vice, and with every cloud of

98. Origen, *On First Principles*, 3.6.1.

99. Walls, *Universalism in Origen’s First Principles*, 5.

wickedness completely swept away, can either feel, or understand, or think, will be wholly God.¹⁰⁰

God is able to cleanse everyone, even the evil vessels, from wickedness, and bring them to unity with himself. Every rational creature, a part of this world's diversity, will eventually be one with God. The American historian John Wesley Hanson summarizes Origen's view that the end will be like the beginning in the following way:

So, then, when the end has been restored to the beginning, and the termination of things compared with their commencement, that condition of things will be reestablished in which rational nature was placed, when it had no need to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so that, when all feeling of wickedness has been removed, and the individual has been purified and cleansed, he who alone is the one good God becomes to him 'all', and that not in the case of a few individuals, or of a considerable number, but he himself is 'all in all'.¹⁰¹

3.2.3 What Happens Between the Beginning and the End?

As we have already seen, the keyword to explain both the end and the beginning is "unity". The keyword for the time in between is "diversity". The fracture between unity and diversity is dealt with thoroughly in his book *On First Principles*. This fracture is due to the misuse of human free will that God has endowed men with. Do human beings possess free will? Origen uses the Biblical theme of divine judgment as an argument *for* the existence of a free will. He starts the chapter on freedom in *On First Principles* by writing: "Since the teaching of the Church includes the doctrine of the righteous judgment of God, a doctrine which, if believed to be true, summons its hearers to live a good life and by every means avoid sin, for it assumes that they acknowledge that deeds worthy of praise or blame lie within our power".¹⁰² In Origen's view, men have some essential qualities and some accidental qualities. He explains how freedom of the will is an essential quality for a human being, whilst morality is an accidental quality. The latter differs from God in that God is essentially good in his nature, whilst human goodness is contingent on the nature of their free choices. That men are free means

100. Origen, *On First Principles*, 6.3.3-4.

101. Hanson, *Universalism in the Early Church*, 141.

102. Origen, *On First Principles*, 3:1:1.

that God's righteous judgment is over responsible people. But God's righteous judgment shouldn't be seen as eternal separation from his presence, but rather a restoration to his presence. The restoration is, according to Origen, a process he has started in every individual and an expression of his providence. Our condition is affected both by our freedom of the will, and God's providence to direct us to the telos, which is the contemplation of his goodness.

Origen himself connects human salvation and restoration to God's providence: "For nothing is impossible to the Omnipotent, nor is anything incapable of restoration to its Creator: for He made all things that they might exist, and those things which were made for existence cannot cease to be".¹⁰³ Because of this, we can label Origen's soteriology as cosmological soteriology, not anthropological soteriology. Human beings are saved and restored to unity with God not because they are good, but because God is essentially good and his good will is to restore all creation to himself through Christ. It is not possible to understand Origen's soteriology without recognizing his points that the freedom of the will creates diversity amongst human beings, and the providence of God leads human beings back to their telos, which is unity.

3.2.4 Origen's use of the Greek Term *Aionios*

There are several different angles of incidence that Origen has when explaining how God will let no one perish, but rather correct them into perfect beings, able to contemplate Him forever. One of the important foundations that Origen lays out when describing his eschatological views is how he treats the Biblical term *aionios*. The often-used Greek term that is often translated "eternal" in English Bibles, has been an object for great discussion throughout church history to this present day.¹⁰⁴ Some would say that *aionios*, in the context of the New Testament teaching, is best understood as having a quantitative size. For example, in the Gospel of Matthew Christ says: "They (the damned) will go away to eternal punishment (*aionios kolasis*), but the righteous to the eternal life (*aionios zoe*)" (Matthew 25:46). Some would argue that the eternal life described in the New Testament implies never-ending life in the presence of God. And since the unending life awaits the righteous, the unrighteous can expect an unending punishment, not merely some limited or unspecified amount of time.¹⁰⁵ Plato separated *chronos* and *aionios* as two different kinds of times. Chronos was defined by change, and

103. Origen, *On First Principles*, 6.5.6.

104. 67 times in Neste-Aland. Mostly (17 times) used in the Gospel of John.

105. This is the view being portrayed in Carson's NIV Zondervan Study Bible, 1987.

therefore consists of successive events. Hart explains this view by stating: “Things cannot exist in their entirety all at once but are allowed to unfold their essences through a diachronic extension and through a process of arising and perishing”.¹⁰⁶ *Aionios*, on the other hand is best understood as “the totality of every essence realized in its fullness in one immutable state”.¹⁰⁷ Origen treats the term *aionios* in this fashion. He acknowledges that *aionios* is used in Scripture to describe the duration of the punishment but argues that *aionios* is no more than a limited time period. He uses Hebrews 9:26 to argue for his view. This verse states: “For then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away the sin by the sacrifice of himself”. Origen writes:

This world, however, which is itself called an ‘age’, is said to be the end of many ages. Now the holy apostle teaches that Christ did not suffer in the age that was before this, nor yet in the age before that; and I do not know whether it is in my power to enumerate all the previous ages in which he did not suffer. I will, however, quote the statements of Paul from which I have arrived at this point of knowledge. He says: “But now once at the consummation of the ages he has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26). He says that Christ has become a ‘sacrifice’ once, and that ‘at the consummation of the ages he has been manifested to put away sin.’¹⁰⁸

Origen argues from Hebrews 9:26 that the period when Christ dies is described as an *aionion*. Therefore, the author of Hebrews is using this term to describe a finite, limited period. Origen continues:

But after the present age, which is said to have been made for the consummation of other ages, there will yet be ‘further ages to come’: for we learn this plainly from Paul himself when he says, ‘that in the ages to come he might show us the exceeding riches of his grace in kindness towards us’ (Ephesians 2:7). He did not

106. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 121-122.

107. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 121-122

108. Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.3.5.

say, ‘in the age to come’; nor, ‘in two ages’; but ‘in the ages to come’. I think, therefore, that the indications of this statement point to many ages.¹⁰⁹

Origen’s view of the term *aionios* that delineates the duration of the punishment is, therefore, to be understood as finite, not infinite. What happens in the *aionios* to come?

3.2.5 The Corrective Punishment in the *Aionios* to Come

What happens in the *aionios* to come? This is a vital question that leads us to the core of Origen’s apokatastasis view. According to Origen, this will be a period of corrective punishment, where God’s wrath is a fire that is purifying. He writes: “When thou hearest of the wrath of God, believe not that this wrath and indignation are passions of God; they are condescensions of language designed to convert and improve the child. So, God is described as angry, and says that he is indignant, in order that thou mayest convert and be improved, while in fact he is not angry”.¹¹⁰ Virtue is where human beings can find peace, and God’s punishment functions pedagogically to lead human beings to become perfect, without spot or blemish, and at peace. As we’ve already seen, the New Testament writers, on some occasions, use “fire” as imagery of God’s punishment. According to Origen, God is a “consuming fire” in the sense that he does indeed consume and utterly destroy. He consumes all evil thoughts, deeds, and sinful desires that have found their way to every man. The food and fuel for this fire is every human being’s wickedness. God consumes everything that harms his children, and the fire will annihilate all of it. There are a few analogies one could make to explain this process well. One is made by Hanson, who explains that just as physicians, to heal someone, sometimes intervene in a hurtful way – God, who is the greatest physician, desires to remove the defects of our souls, and therefore applies the punishment of fire. Another explanatory analogy is that, in order to make silver shiny and pure, you need to remove the silver slag. The same goes for human beings. In order to free us from impurity that has adulterated us, God removes sin from us to enable us for his perfect kingdom. We have already seen that Origen advocates for a view on soteriology I call cosmological soteriology, as human beings are saved contingent on God’s goodness and love for the cosmos, not because they are good or deserving of salvation.

109. Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.3.5

110. Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.22. You will also find a similar passage in his *Homily on Jeremia*, 18.6.

Origen also expands his views on the scope of God's saving power. He argues that the scope of salvation is the entire world and that no one is standing outside God's power and will to save. In the letter to Celsus, Origen writes this lengthy paragraph on the subject:

The Stoics, indeed, hold that when the strongest of the elements prevails all things shall be turned into fire. But our belief is that the Word shall prevail over the entire rational creation and change every soul into his own perfection; in which state everyone, by the mere exercise of his power, will choose what he desires, and obtain what he chooses. For although, in the diseases and wounds of the body, there are some which no medical skill can cure, yet we hold that in the mind there is no evil so strong that it may not be overcome by the Supreme Word and God. For stronger than all the evils in the soul is the Word, and the healing power that dwells in him; and this healing he applies, according to the will of God, to every man. The consummation of all things is the destruction of evil, although as to the question whether it shall be so destroyed that it can never anywhere arise again, it is beyond our present purpose to say. Many things are said obscurely in the prophecies on the total destruction of evil, and the restoration to righteousness of every soul; but it will be enough for our present purpose to quote the following passage from Zephaniah.¹¹¹

Origen goes on to quote Zephaniah 3:9 that states: "For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord" (Zeph 3:9). So, the eternal fire is curative and applied with the objective of healing. God doesn't ask his people to put away anger and wrath only to be guilty himself of what he prohibits of us. Therefore, he argues that the wrath of God is apparent, but not real. At least not real in the sense that it is combined with his passion. What we call God's wrath may just as well be described as his disciplinary process; what we call the fires of God may just as well be of the same significance. In *Against Celsus*, Origen ties the fires of Gehenna to a text in the Old Testament:

Now as we found that Gehenna was mentioned in the Gospel as a place of punishment, we searched to see whether it is mentioned anywhere in the ancient

111. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 8.72.

Scriptures, and especially because the Jews use the word also. And we ascertained that where the valley of the Son of Ennom was named in Scripture in the Hebrew, instead of *valley*, with fundamentally the same meaning, it was termed both the valley of Ennom and also *Gehenna*. And continuing our research, we find that what was termed *Gehenna*, or *the valley of Ennom*, was included to the lot of Benjamin and the valley of Ennom. We find a certain confirmation of what is said regarding the place of punishment, intended for the purification of such souls as are to be purified by torments, agreeably to the stating: ‘The Lord cometh like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap: and He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and gold.’¹¹²

Origen’s paraphrasing of Malachi 3:1-2 serves to give us even more insight into the Biblical basis for his claim that the fire is curative, rather than an expression of God’s wrath. On purpose, I refrain from saying that Origen argues that the fire is curative rather than torturing or painful. The reason for this is that he actually does point out that the pedagogical and curative process is painful for the ones who experience it. The torture is real, but the purification is sure. Origen offers a hopeful account of how God will, through the fire, restore all creation to himself:

And this result must be understood as being brought about, not suddenly, but slowly and gradually, seeing that the process of amendment and correction will take place imperceptibly in the individual instances during the lapse of countless and unmeasured ages, some outstripping others, and tending by a swifter course towards perfection, while others again follow close at hand, and some again a long way behind; and thus through the numerous and uncounted orders of progressive beings who are reconciled to God from a state of enmity, the last enemy is finally reached, who is called death, so that he also may be destroyed, and no longer be an enemy.¹¹³

According to Walls, death, quoted in the previous passage from *On First Principles*, is the devil. And the devil’s destruction doesn’t mean that he is going from existence to non-

112. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 6.25.

113. Origen, *On First Principles*, 3.6.6.

existence but being made no longer an enemy.¹¹⁴ The mention of progressive beings and the devil leads me to another vital part of Origen’s view on universal restoration.

3.2.6 Will Satan be Saved?

The possibility of the salvation of Satan was open to discussion early in the church’s history. The possibility that Satan, the most stubborn enemy of them all, would in the end consent to bowing down before the Almighty was shocking to some, and we have records of emperors thunderously protesting this. The debate was not whether Satan should or could be saved, but whether Divine Love was limited in any way, and whether this resulted in Satan being excluded from grace. There has been some debate among readers of Origen on whether he believed that the universal restoration was all-encompassing to the extent that it also included Satan and his peers. There was aftermath following Origen’s great work *On First Principles* that included lengthy theological discussions and several controversies. One of the mistakes that several thinkers of his time believed Origen made was his proposed salvation for the devil. Shortly after the publication of *On First Principles* there was a debate between Origen and Candidus. The *Dialogus cum Candido* is lost, but Jerome gives a summary of the debate. In this debate Candidus claims: “The devil is of an evil nature, and he cannot be saved”.¹¹⁵ Origen’s response is two-fold. Firstly, he responds that Satan “Is not of perishable substance, but because of his own desire, he fell and can be saved”.¹¹⁶ Satan has retained his power to choose but has consistently chosen evil. This has turned his whole mind towards an evil end. The second point he addresses is about the final restoration. When God is “all in all”, where then does that leave the devil? When surveying Origen’s work, one might get the impression that salvation is all-encompassing, which also includes demonic beings. Despite this impression one might get, another theory could be interpreted, from his work *Against Celsus*, where he says that Satan became destruction (*apoleia*).¹¹⁷ He cites the prophet Ezekiel to argue for that view: “All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more forever” (Ezekiel 28:19). I will not be making any normative reflections at this point but remain loyal to my task of illustrating the theology of Origen. Let

114. Walls, *Universalism in Origen’s First Principles*, 13.

115. Jerome, *Contra Rufinus*, 2.19. The quote is found in D’Ambrosio, *Who Were the Church Fathers?*

116. Jerome, *Contra Rufinus*, 2.19. The quote is found in D’Ambrosio, *Who Were the Church Fathers?*

117. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 6.44.

me conclude with the remark that these two views found within the literature of Origen could be interpreted as a contradiction.

3.2.7 The Curriculum in God's Great School of Souls

What is the learning objective in God's great school of souls? According to Origen, it is a consenting will to salvation. He writes:

God the Father of all things, in order to ensure the salvation of all his creatures through the ineffable plan of his Word and wisdom, so arranged each of these, that every spirit, whether soul or rational existence, however, called, should not be compelled by force, against the liberty of his own will, to any other course than that to which the motives of his own mind led him.¹¹⁸

The subjection under him who is Lord of all is not pressured, but a free choice. The whole world shall be subdued to God, not by force, but by word, reason, and doctrine. The hymn of Christ in Philippians 2:5-11 explains that "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father". This is a text that Origen uses for the sake of his argument: "And if every knee is bent to Jesus, then, without doubt, it is Jesus to whom all things are subject, and He it is who exercises power over all things, and through whom all things are subject to the Father; for through wisdom, i.e., by word and reason, not by force and necessity, are all things subject."¹¹⁹ This quotation is one out of many lines of argumentation gathered from his work *On First Principles*. The controversial book was written before any official creed was formed, and therefore, he did not have any official teaching to be guided or influenced by. He also freely admitted the speculative quality of some of his theological statements concerning consummation: "These subjects are, indeed, treated by us with great solicitude and caution, in the manner rather of an investigation and discussion, than in that of fixed and certain decision".¹²⁰

118. Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.1.2.

119. Origen, *On First Principles*, 1.2.10.

120. Origen, *On First Principles*, 1.6.1.

3.3 Conclusion

Origen argues that the end of human history is equal to the beginning of human history. When the beginning of human history is described as a state where all human beings enjoyed unity and harmony with God, Origen believes that unity and harmony with God is the ultimate fate for all people. This implies that all shall eventually be saved, no one will be eternally lost. How will God bring about the salvation of everyone? In order to understand this, two core ideas of Origen are vital to understand. The first one is that the Greek term *aionios*, which is often translated as “eternal”, does not mean eternal in the sense of *everlasting*, according to Origen. Instead, Origen argues that *aionios* should be understood as a limited time period in *the age to come*. So, when the New Testament speaks of *eternal punishment* (e.g. in Matthew 25:46), Origen does not see this as an everlasting punishment, but a punishment that one will receive in the age to come. The second core idea of Origen that is vital to this point is that God will, in the age to come, burn away every sin in all human beings. In this process God will, not by force, but by reason and doctrine, subject everyone to himself, when all finally bend their knees and freely consent to salvation.

4. Augustine: The Fire as God's Wrath upon Sinners

4.1 Augustine's Life and Work

Augustine of Hippo has a special place in the history of Christianity. No person in the ancient world is more accessible to us than Augustine. While we sometimes struggle to get insight into the lives of several of the ancient figures that constitute church history, the portrait of Augustine is thoroughly painted. The story of Augustine's life is not only narrated by others, but also by himself, which gives a unique insight into the details of his life. His work *Confessions* is a classic of ancient literature and would alone ensure his permanent fame, even if he hadn't written any other works.

He was born in a small Numidian village called Thagaste, around 150 miles from the big city Carthage. His mother, Monica, birthed not only him, but also two girls and another boy – whose names we never find out. His father sat at the town council, which is a role that is typically called *Curiales* in ancient Rome. In the town council, you were expected to keep the village community going with the help of your own resources, and considering his family only owned a few acres of land, you can surely say that Augustine was not born with a silver spoon. His two parents had different backgrounds, beliefs, and ambitions for their son, Augustine. His father, Patricius, a pagan, was eager to see his son enrolled in higher education, and later, when he observed Augustine's great intellectual capacity, his ambition was to one day see him as a lawyer. The pursuit for a career in law led seventeen-year-old Augustine to the major city of the Roman Empire in Africa, Carthage. In Carthage, Augustine wanted to honor his father's wishes for his life and opened the book *Hortensius* by the great Roman orator Cicero, in order to improve his rhetoric. However, what was intended to honor his father, rather turned in to something that fulfilled his mother's dream for his life. The book caused Augustine to reflect on the vanity of his ambitions, and he started looking for reason and meaning elsewhere. This led Augustine to interact with different worldviews in different parts of the geographical area around the Mediterranean Sea.

Augustine was a gifted man, and for such men all roads led to Rome. Despite the first year in the Eternal City was disappointing, the following year was a lot more eventful and pleasing for the young Augustine. The emperor in Rome needed a rhetorician to be the official orator of the Empire. The governor of Rome happened to be impressed with Augustine from North Africa and an appointment was made for Augustine to travel to Milan. Receiving this great news, Monica set sail for the imperial capital as well. As an ardent churchgoer, she

immediately started attending the cathedral in Milan. She was impressed by how the bishop in the cathedral was gifted to speak. She informed Augustine, who was attracted to the cathedral, to experience the rhetoric of bishop Ambrose of Milan. The encounter with Ambrose changed Augustin's direction. The curiosity for Ambrose's rhetoric led to an interest in the Holy Scriptures. Augustine found himself listening to Ambrose unpacking the Scriptures every Sunday. Monica's prayers for a spiritual father to Augustine had been answered in Ambrose, and Augustine was ready to become a catechumen, one of those who received personal teaching from Ambrose himself. Ambrose was an ardent student of the philosopher Plato, and since Augustine was recently trained in literature, and not in philosophy, he too started surveying the books of the Greek giant. His studies of Plato were going to highly impact his intellectual understanding of the Christian faith. Some of the ideas derived from Neoplatonism are also closely connected to Augustine's thoughts on hell, e.g, the incorporeality and immortality of the soul.

Also, through Ambrose, Augustine was indirectly inspired by two other giants in the early Church - namely Athanasius and Origen. Ambrose was inspired by Origen, from whom he had learned that the humble surface of the Biblical Scriptures concealed depths of meanings that were truly inexhaustible. Obviously, Augustine still had questions, but Ambrose's attitude towards the Scriptures offered a satisfaction the Manicheans fell short on. Ambrose's knowledge of the works of Athanasius and Origen provided him with solid answers to Augustine's questions.

4.2 Augustine's Hell

Augustine's view on hell is argued for both Scripturally and philosophically in several of his works. He describes his persuasions on final punishment on several occasions in different books, but his most thorough elaboration on this topic is an apologetical text. In his masterpiece *City of God*, he answers pagan critics who scoff at his preaching on the last things.

4.2.1 Origin of the City of God

The Donatist schism had a great impact on Augustine's view of the state, Church, and society. This was also the event that caused Augustine's idea of two cities - one of God, and one of Satan. The Donatists claimed to be the legitimate successors of the African Christians who had remained steadfast in the faith during the big persecution in the fourth century and there-

fore were to be seen as the “Church of the pure”. They preached that human beings were in nature free and able not to sin, which was contrary to Augustine’s view of radical dependence on the grace of God, and that every human being is spiritually dead because of the fall of the first Adam.¹²¹ In Augustine’s treatise *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* (*De Baptismo Contra Donatistas*), he tries to polemically argue against the Donatist self-understanding as the church of the pure, by referring to the two cities, one of the holy, one of the pagans. He says that it is not two cities living separately, but they are mixed: “Just as many sheep wander without, so many wolves lurk treacherously within”.¹²² The visible earthly church is not without qualification identifiable with the kingdom of God. In 412-413, right after the polemical debate with the Donatists, Augustine was brought into a close fellowship with the aristocrats of Carthage. In this environment, they discussed fine rhetorical and philosophical issues, which one would imagine Augustine handled admirably. Questions concerning the credibility of the Christian faith surfaced. The sophisticated pagan Volusian’s perspective was that Christianity was destructive to Rome’s imperial interest and in no way constructive for the Eternal City, especially after 24th August 410, when Rome had fallen to Alaric and his Gothic army. Was the increase of Christianity to blame for this? The rapes made by Gothic soldiers on Christian daughters showed no divine protection. The old polytheism created peace, but the Christian faith meant chaos for the Roman empire, the pagans objected. It was in this context Augustine started writing his lengthy, thorough, 22-book apologia against the objections of the pagans.

The writing of *City of God* occupied Augustine for fourteen years between 413-427. The same point he made against the Donatists was now being made to the pagan objectors to Christianity. The two cities - the earthly and the heavenly - are prefigured in the Biblical cities of Babylon and Jerusalem. The two cities, even though filled with contrast, are mixed until Christ comes again to judge the quick and the dead. Near the end of this masterpiece, Augustine’s general aim is to discuss the ends of the two cities, explaining how God’s judgment will affect them both. Book twenty and twenty-one zooms into the topic, and addresses various objections, with reference to Platonic philosophy, Augustine’s own experiences, as well as to Scripture.

121. Two of Augustine’s theological views explicitly taught in *Confessions*.

122. Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, 6.1.1.

4.2.2 Augustine and the Gospels on Hell

The nineteenth book of his work *City of God* is perhaps the most studied book of all the twenty-two books in the work. It is regularly used in discussions on the history of political theory and is probably the nearest we get to Augustine's own political views. Even though the main theme in this book is something other than judgment and eschatology, Augustine ends the book with a reference to the topic he will expand on in the books to come:

But on the other hand, they who do not belong to this city of God shall inherit eternal misery, which is also called the second death, because the soul shall then be separated from God its life, and therefore cannot be said to live, and the body shall be subjected to eternal pains ... For in this life, when this conflict has arisen, either pain conquers and death expels the feeling of it, or nature conquers and health expels the pain. But in the world to come the pain continues that it may torment, and the nature endures that it may be sensible of it; and neither ceases to exist, lest punishment also should cease. Now, as it is through the last judgment that men shall pass to these ends, the good to the supreme good, the evil to the supreme evil, I will treat of this judgment in the following book.¹²³

We will accept Augustine's invitation to further explore the topic and continue to survey his next book.

4.2.3 The Augustinian Defense of God's Judgment

Book twenty deals with the separation of the two cities. Augustine is set on providing Biblical testimony that the judgment of God will happen, as well as elaborating on Scripture's description of how it will happen. He uses texts from both the New and the Old Testaments to prove that God, in fact, has already started his judgment over human beings. Before God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, which, in and of itself, is an expression of judgment, God judged the angels who rebelled against him. Augustine claims that it is difficult for us limited human beings to discern the judgment of God whilst still in this earthly life. It is not apparent for us why the man who, in our opinion, ought to suffer acutely, enjoys himself, and the one

123. Augustine, *City of God*, 19.28.

who leads a praiseworthy life is being dismissed and condemned. Augustine says, at one point, we will see the fairness of the judgment of God. He refers to two passages in Paul's letter to the Romans. One where Paul asks the question: "Is there injustice with God?" and then immediately answers the question himself: "Absolutely not" (Romans 9:14). God's judgment is praiseworthy and all objections to his divine judgment will be brought to shame on the last day. "Oh, the depth of riches both of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and untraceable his ways" (Romans 11:33).

He then proceeds to the Scriptural evidence for the judgment starting with a thorough review of the New Testament (*City of God* 20.5-20), then to proceed with the Old Testament. Augustine's further arguments are drawn from the teachings of Jesus in, respectively, Matthew and John. There are no thorough or lengthy exegetical works being made, but plenty of Scriptural quotations and a brief explanation that helps his reader see what Christ is telling us about the divine judgment at the end of the world. For instance, he uses Jesus' denunciations of the different cities that he performed miracles in, in Matthew 11:20-24, to explain that there is indeed a judgment coming up. The Saviour Himself, while reproving the cities in which He had done great works, but which had not believed, and while setting them in unfavorable comparison with foreign cities said: "But I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment than for you." And a little after this He says: "Verily, I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of the judgment than for thee." Here, he most plainly predicts that a day of judgment is to come.¹²⁴ Augustine uses plentiful similar passages to point towards the inescapable judgment of God upon all human beings.¹²⁵ In this part of *City of God*, Augustine does a separation between the first and the second resurrection. The first resurrection, in his view, is the baptism, where the soul is liberated, and the dead man has come alive. The second resurrection will be the final judgment. In this final judgment people will be divided into that of life and that of damnation. He relies on this text when making this statement:

Truly, truly I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Fa-

124. Augustine, *City of God*, 20.5.

125. He reports chiefly from Matthew 11-13, 19 and 25, but also from John chapter 5.

ther has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement.
(John 5:24-29).

When commenting on the second resurrection Augustine uses plenty of the potent texts from the book of Revelation. There are several doctrines Augustine elaborates on in this part of *City of God*, e.g. the reference to Christ's thousand-year reign when Satan is bound (Rev 20:4-6). For the sake of Augustine's arguments concerning the last judgment, it is not Satan being bound that is more interesting, but rather what Augustine comments on about Satan being set free and judged:

And yet there shall be a Church in this world even when the devil shall be loosed, as there has been since the beginning, and shall be always, the places of the dying being filled with new believers. For a little after John says that the devil, being loosed, shall draw the nations whom he has seduced in the whole world to make war against the Church, and that the number of these enemies shall be as the sand of the sea. 'And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. And the devil who seduced them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever' (Revelation 20:9-10) This relates to the last judgment.¹²⁶

Now, Augustine's use of these verses that, throughout millennia, have been debated verses connected to the topic of hell, stands in a different context in his literature - namely the context of what happens when the devil is loosed after the thousand years of his boundedness, where then, Augustine points out that he and the individuals, both sentient human beings and spiritual beings, will suffer the fate described in Revelation 20:9-10. Augustine's handling of these verses is brief, and he only states that they are related to the last judgment. I am there-

126. Augustine, *City of God*, 20.8.

fore hesitant to use this as an isolated argument that Augustine argues for hell being an eternal conscious torment - as he doesn't elaborate on these verses. Plenty of other readers of these verses could make the same judgment and relate Revelation 20:9-10 to the judgment of the devil and his peers, without presupposing that the judgment will be followed by an everlasting torment of body and soul. It is important to mark here that the use of this verse serves Augustine's target of the chapter: namely to affirm that there is a judgment. The target of this part of his argument is not to say anything about the quality or nature of that judgment, which is the theme of book 21. Another of Augustine's comments on judgment verses in Revelation is of exactly the same nature. After elaborating on the eternal blessedness and rest for individuals in Christ, Augustine quickly turns to the individuals who are not in Christ and do not belong to the church. The verse Augustine uses is Revelation 14:9-11:

“And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.’”

Now, the point he makes in this paragraph is not about the nature of hell, but of the reality of the judgment and the perdition. Augustine writes this about the beast: “And what this beast is, though it requires a much more careful investigation, yet it is not inconsistent with the true faith to understand it of the ungodly city itself, and the community of unbelievers set in opposition to the faithful people and the city of God”.¹²⁷ Augustine's red line throughout the entire twentieth book in his large-volume *City of God* is the clear argumentation for a judgment on the last day that will separate the Church of Christ from the inhabitants of the ungodly city, filled with unrepentant sinners. Both will be resurrected on the last day,¹²⁸ both body and soul,¹²⁹ and await either eternal bliss or eternal condemnation. The nature of the condemnation is surveyed further and thoroughly in the twenty-first book of *City of God*.

127. Augustine, *City of God*, 20.9.

128. Augustine, *City of God*, 20.10.

129. Augustine, *City of God*, 20.10

4.2.4 Defending the Nature of Condemnation

In the twenty-first book of *City of God*, Augustine deals with both eternal bliss and eternal punishment. He elaborates on the latter first, both because it is harder to believe in eternal torment than eternal bliss, but also because passages from the New Testament formulate the judgment with damnation before bliss. He begins with quoting two passages from the Gospel of Matthew: “The Son of man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things which offend, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of His Father ... These shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal” (Matthew 13:41-43, 25:46). By referring to these verses, Augustine claims that the Christian position on the end of history is the judgment of all people that will lead to either eternity in blessedness or in everlasting torment: “First of the punishment of the devils, and afterward of the blessedness of the saints, because the body partakes of either destiny”.¹³⁰

After quoting Scripture to lay forward the Christian position, he continues to interact with the pagan objections. These objections are of philosophical nature, but we will survey them in short. Augustine echoes the first objection from the pagans already in the first few sentences of *City of God*, book twenty-two: “And it seems to be more incredible that bodies endure in everlasting torment than that they continue to exist without any pain in everlasting felicity”.¹³¹ When answering the objection that human bodies cannot last through the torments of everlasting fire, Augustine refers to the Almighty One who could possibly do even the impossible.¹³² Augustine claims they are too demanding of proof if they don’t accept this, and keep demanding examples from the present physical world. Despite believing they are too demanding, Augustine continues to give arguments that human bodies could endure eternal pain without being destroyed. He states that there are instances where worms, who are mortal beings, can live in water hotter than any human being can put his hand in. And in the end, says: “Is it strange that anything could suffer in fire and yet live, but stranger that it should live in the fire and not suffer? If, then, the latter be believed, why not also the former?”¹³³

In chapter two-six of the twenty-second book of *City of God*, Augustine proceeds to counter the objection, by enumerating the fantastic in nature, that the pagans themselves can-

130. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.1.

131. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.1

132. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.2.

133. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.2.

not explain. He expands by pointing to the Sicilian volcanoes that have always burned, but still the mountains remain intact, the fire that blackens logs but brightens stones, and the straw which keeps snow cold but fruits warm. In chapter seven he gives the ultimate argument for believing that it is indeed possible that bodies might spend eternity in the fire without ceasing: “God who is to do the things which seem impossible is the same God who made the promise that incredible things would be accepted as credible by incredulous people”.¹³⁴

Although Augustine dedicates much time explaining how physical beings can experience pain for eternity without being destroyed, he also notes that it is misplaced to think that pain is merely a bodily phenomenon. The soul will also experience pain, as it experiences all other sorts of sensations. He writes: “For the spirit, whose presence animates and rules the body, can both suffer pain and cannot die. Here then is something which, though it can feel pain, is immortal”.¹³⁵ Augustine is drawing from both the Gospel of Luke and from formerly Platonist writers to argue for this. He states that the rich man who is tormented in the flames of hades in Luke 16:24 wouldn’t have suffered if he was soulless. It is reasonable, then, to conclude that indeed there is eternal torment of immortal beings in the afterlife. Here, Augustine is also referring to Virgil, the Roman poet, to justify his claims. Gerard O’Daly, when commenting on Augustine’s use of Virgil, writes:

Augustine recalls, Virgil, Aeneid 6. 719-21, 730-4, which he has discussed in (*City of God*) 14.3 and 14.5.¹³⁶ Those Virgillian passages, which he takes to represent a Platonist position, suggest that, although bodies are the source of passions, even disembodied and purified souls desire to return to bodies. Desire entails the possibility of experiencing pain. The soul is an instance of an immortal entity experiencing pain and not being annihilated by it. Pain is not a proof of future death.¹³⁷

After commenting souls experience of pain, Augustine returns to the topic of bodily pain in hell and anchor his views in Scripture. He starts by saying: “God by His prophet has said of the everlasting punishment of the damned it shall come to pass – shall without fail

134. Augustine, *City of God* . 22.7.

135. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.3.

136. Augustine, *City of God* 14.3 and 14.5 (he mistakenly refers to the twelfth book of *City of God* here).

137. O’Daly, *Augustine’s City of God*, 249.

come to pass – “their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched”.¹³⁸ He then proceeds to put more force into this argument by referring to the Lord Jesus Christ. He expands on Jesus’ words of warning in Mark 9:42-48 about forfeiting hand, foot or eye in order to escape the “unquenchable fire, where the worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched” and that “It is better for thee to enter to the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire”. Augustine observes that Christ repeats these words three times in the same passage, and many would find it hard to object to Augustine’s interpretation: “Who is not terrified by this repetition, and by the threat of that punishment uttered so vehemently by the lips of the Lord Himself?”¹³⁹

4.2.5 Does the Material Fire Torment Immaterial Entities?

Another question arises for Augustine: “If the fire is not to be immaterial, analogous to the pain of the soul, but material, burning by contact, so that bodies may be tormented in it, how can evil spirits be punished in it?”¹⁴⁰ The background for the question is the saying of Jesus in Matthew 25:41: “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”. Surely, the same fire that punishes men is the same fire that punishes the evil spirits. This fire, which punishes and agonizes human beings is also described elsewhere in the gospels. Augustine brings up the rich man in Luke chapter 16 where he, according to Augustine is “burning in hell when he exclaims ‘I am tormented in this flame’”.¹⁴¹ Augustine’s interpretation of these verses is particularly interesting. As Augustine refers to this story to convey his beliefs about hell, I find it appropriate to quote it here:

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and

138. Augustine, *City of God*, 22.9. This could be a reference to either Isaiah 66:24 or to Mark 9:48, or to both. But since Augustin goes on to write on the teaching of Jesus on final punishment straight after this quotation, and demonstrably placing this cited verse prior to the handling of Christ teaching, I would suggest that Augustin is quoting Isaiah 66:24, and not Mark 9:48, as that is a teaching from Christ.

139. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.9.

140. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.10.

141. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.10

Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame’. But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us’. And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment’. But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent’. He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’ (Luke 16:19-31).

When Augustine is referring to this text in the Gospel according to Luke, he seems to presuppose that this takes place in the intermediate state between death and the resurrection. Augustine states: “All of which took place where souls exist without bodies”.¹⁴² Augustine elsewhere argues that once the soul is without God, it will be incapable of escaping the pains of the body – as if the person still has a body and soul tied together in hell. But not in this text, observes Augustine. He believes this happens at a place where only an unembodied soul is present and affected by the fire’s torment. The reason Augustine mentions it in the first place is to explain how the spiritual beings mentioned in Matthew 25:41 could be tormented by the literal fire, his logic being that since unembodied persons (souls, spirits, etc.) are being tormented by the fire in Luke 16, why cannot the same be true for the case of Matthew 25? There are still a few unsolved mysteries for Augustine. He believes that Scripture teaches that the literal fire torments both bodies and unembodied persons, but how is this so? Augustine hesitates to give a categorical answer but states:

But that hell, which also is called ‘a lake of fire and brimstone’ (Rev 20:10), will be material fire, and will torment the bodies of the damned, whether men or devils – the solid bodies of the one, aerial bodies of the others; or if only men have bodies as well as souls, yet the evil spirits, though without bodies, shall be so con-

142. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.10.

nected with the bodily fires as to receive pain without imparting life. One fire certainly shall be the lot of both, for thus the truth has declared.¹⁴³

Augustine's handling of these passages of Scripture seems to lead us to the conclusion - that Augustine believes the worms and fire might be literal and might both be served as an argument that the teaching of Jesus on hell is the eternal conscious torment of both the body and soul of the human being. However, Augustine is not done with the passage in Matthew and uses these verses to address the objection that "The punishment neither of the devil nor of wicked men shall be eternal".¹⁴⁴ An objection we will survey more thorough in the next subchapter.

4.2.6 Eternal Conscious Torment in Matthew and Revelation

The passage that is central to Augustine's reasoning goes like this:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left ... Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me'. Then they also will answer saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

(Matthew 25:31-33,41-46).

According to Augustine, no man can invalidate what Christ has said and evacuate neither spiritual beings in opposition to God, nor evil human beings from the fire of hell, as he gives a

143. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.10.

144. Augustine, *City of God*. 21.23.

clear indication that the devil and his angels are to burn in the eternal fire. And by comparing Scripture with Scripture we can know the destiny of the devil, his angels and human beings, for the Book of Revelation tells us another verse that Augustine quotes: “And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10). Referring to the two passages just cited, Augustine reasons: “Eternal in the first passage is expressed in the second by ‘forever and ever,’ and those words have only one meaning in scriptural usage: the exclusion of any temporal end. This is why there cannot conceivably be found any reason better founded or more evident for the fixed and immutable conviction of true religion that the devil and his angels will never attain to justification and to the life of the saints.”¹⁴⁵ In Matthew 25:41 Jesus likens “cursed” humans to the same inevitable fate as to the devil and his angels. Augustine is therefore compelled to conclude that unrepentant sinners will also be thrown into the lake of fire where they will be tortured day and night forever and ever. The eternality of this condemnation is, according to Augustine, an inescapable interpretation. Indeed, he points out: “Christ, in the very same passage, included both punishment and life in one and the same sentence when he said, ‘So those people will go into eternal punishment, while the righteous will go into eternal life’ (Matt 25:46)”. Augustine reasons:

If both are ‘eternal’, it follows necessarily that either both are to be taken as long-lasting but finite, or both as endless and perpetual. The phrases ‘eternal punishment’ and ‘eternal life’ are parallel, and it would seem absurd to use them in one and the same sentence to mean: ‘Eternal life will be infinite, while eternal punishment will have an end’. Hence, because the eternal life of the saints will be endless, the eternal punishment also, for those condemned to it, will assuredly have no end.¹⁴⁶

A frequent objection, which was also one in Augustine’s time, is that the eternal punishment for wrongdoings made by people in time and space is necessarily disproportionate. They might be great sins that do plenty of harm, but they would still be limited in time and space. Augustine is not convinced by this equal retaliation model. He points out that legal punishment is almost never proportioned to the crime which has been committed. The example he

145. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.23.

146. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.23.

gives is if a man kisses another man's wife. He asks, "Is not the fault of an instant visited with long hours of atonement, and the momentary delight punished with lasting pain? What shall we say of imprisonment? Must the criminal be confined only for so long a time as he spent on the offence for which he is committed? Or is not a penalty of many years' confinement imposed on the slave who has provoked his master with a word, or has struck him a blow that is quickly over?"¹⁴⁷ When so ever the punishment of sin does not need to be proportional to the transgression that has been made in terms of duration, one could defend that capital punishment could be given to someone who has done a serious crime, even though the length of the crime is limited. Augustine's logic here is that if a temporal transgression can forever banish you from the society of the living, sentencing one to the first death, why is it impossible that a temporal sin could be punished by exclusion from the society of the living in God's new creation, sentencing one to the second death? Both of them are eternal and irreversible punishments for temporal sin. It's self-evident that this view on hell is a brutal and dark one, but Augustine cautions his readers not to adopt the attitude of those who, "While not slighting the authority of the sacred Scriptures, nevertheless interpret them wrongly and suppose that what is to happen will be not what the Scripture speaks of, but what they themselves would like to happen".¹⁴⁸

This is the Biblical case Augustine gives, that the New Testament teaches hell as an unending, eternal, conscious torment of body and soul. This concludes that Augustine rejects the thoughts of Origen, (that the fire is cleansing all sentient beings from their sins, leading to the great apokatastasis) and the thoughts of Athanasius of Alexandria (that the fire consumes all unrepentant sinners and destroys them).

4.3 Conclusion

When trying to explain the great divide between heaven and hell after the judgment, Augustine uses a well-known analogy of two cities. In his book *The Enchiridion of Faith, Hope and Love* he writes:

But after the resurrection, when the universal judgment is over and done with, the two cities will have their boundaries, one of Christ and the other of the devil, one

147. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.11.

148. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.27.

of good and one of the wicked, both composed of angels and men. The former will have no will to sin and the latter no ability to do so, nor will either have any possibility of dying; the former will live truly and happily in eternal life, the latter will exist unhappily in eternal death without the possibility of dying, for the condition of both will be without end. But among the former some will rank above others in blessedness while among the latter misery will be more tolerable for some than for others.¹⁴⁹

This is a representative quote for Augustine's position. The wicked will not be in a state where the evil in their hearts will be burned away in order to make them ready for the kingdom of God, as the misericordia believes.¹⁵⁰ Neither will they be annihilated, but both body and soul will eternally suffer from conscious torment.

149. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 29.111.

150. The «misericordia» or, «the tenderhearted» is what Augustine calls the individuals who holds to the belief that everyone will, in the end, be saved.

5. Discussion

This chapter includes the discussion of Athanasius', Origen's, and Augustine's arguments for their distinct views on hell. Here, we examine the central ideas of their perspectives with emphasis on how they interpret different passages from Holy Scripture.

5.1. Analyzing Athanasius

The first theologian to be thrown some well-directed darts at is Athanasius of Alexandria who argued for total destruction as being the final end of the wicked. His argument is threefold: Human beings are mortal after the fall of Adam and find themselves abiding in death and corruption. The only hope for immortality for a person is if God provides salvation for him/her. Those who God provides salvation for will live eternally; those who are unrepentant will not live forever, rather they will cease to exist.

5.1.1 The Exclusive Immortality of Jesus Christ and the Mortality of Man

The first part of Athanasius' argument deals with the consequences of human nature after the fall. He describes how human beings are animals but set apart from other animals by being the sole creature that knows the Word and that are created to be like the Word. Immortality and blessedness are what humanity was created with. However, the fall created a shift in human nature, according to Athanasius. Humanity is now mortal and abides by death and corruption. The birthright of beauty and the gift of immortality in the heavens has been thrown away. The fall has all-encompassing effects on the whole human being, both body and soul, leaving every human that is guilty of worshipping the 'created' instead of the 'Creator' to become a mortal being. There is a broad agreement that sin, whether your perspective is that the fall in Genesis is a historical event or not, has a serious effect on human beings. Whether this includes humanity going from an immortal nature to a mortal nature is what needs to be examined. The first question that needs to be asked is whether humans were created mortal or immortal; would they have died if they had not sinned? This is a question in which both Calvinists and Arminianists typically hold the position that physical death entered with the curse in Genesis

3.¹⁵¹ It seems as though there is a link between the first sin and physical death where the curse includes the phrase, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19). This view, that human beings were created immortal but became mortal after the fall, is a common view, but has, as any other theological standpoint, been the object of some criticism. Augustine of Hippo mentions the Pelagian view that the principle of death and decay is a part of the whole of creation.¹⁵² Human beings were created mortal, just as every other animal who, sooner or later, will die. One of the arguments that Pelagians use, according to Augustine, is that, if men were created immortal, then the serpent would have been right and God would have been wrong in saying “for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). Adam and Eve were not struck dead immediately after committing the first sin. Because of this, the Pelagians see death as an accompaniment to being human, and it always has been. The Biblical reference to death as a consequence of sin is understood as spiritual death, which includes separation from God, rather than physical death, but the question is more intricate than this. There are a few verses in the New Testament that appear to be confirming the proposition that physical death came with the fall of Adam. Romans 5:12 is such an example “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned”.

On the other hand, there are also some passages that would suggest otherwise. One of the obstacles to viewing the consequence of sin as being merely physical death is the sinless life of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross. The American Theologian J Millard Erickson brings out this objection: “Not only did he not sin himself (Hebrews 4:15), but he was not tainted by the corrupted nature of Adam. Yet he died. How could mortality have affected someone who, spiritually, stood where Adam and Eve did before the fall?”¹⁵³ When we are surveying the Biblical literature, we can easily point to passages that appear to mean that sin causes physical death. However, the example of Jesus shows us that physical death occurs also where there is no sin. Are there any possible ways to say something meaningful about this dilemma? Berkhof writes that the answer to this question is that the separation between physical death and spiritual death, which is intuitively evident for us, is much more synthetic in the Biblical texts: “The Bible does not know the distinction, so common among us, be-

151. For the Calvinist position, see the Dutch-American reformed theologian Louis Berkhof’s *Systematic theology*. For the Arminian position, see the American theologian Henry Orton Wiley’s *Christian Theology*.

152. Augustine of Hippo, *Merits and Remission of Sin, and Infant Baptism*, 1.2

153. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 558

tween a physical, a spiritual and an eternal death; it has a synthetic view of death and regards it as separation from God".¹⁵⁴ His point is that it is difficult to separate the ideas of physical death and spiritual death in the Biblical literature. Let's use an example from one of the Pauline letters. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes on the topic that physical death is defeated through Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead. Humans still die, but the finality of death is removed. In this text, Paul attributes to sin the power that physical death possesses in the absence of resurrection. But sin itself, and thus spiritual death, is defeated when Christ is resurrected (v. 55-56). If it were not for the resurrection of the Son of Man, we would remain in our sin, that is, we would remain spiritually dead (v. 17). In this way, it could be said that physical and spiritual death should not be treated as two distinct entities, but they are closely related to each other. If one goes for this alternative, one might say that Adam went from immortality to mortality when he became spiritually dead after committing the first sin. The sin causes the potential mortality of human beings to become actual mortality for human beings. Therefore, we can see that the Athanasian viewpoint, that men are mortal after the fall is well-founded in the Biblical literature, and would also be met with approval in church history.

Even though the idea that human beings are mortal after the fall is an uncontroversial one, this is the vital part of Athanasius' argument. There might be discrepancies on whether human beings were mortal or immortal *before* the fall, but this isn't at the center of Athanasius' argument. The center of Athanasius point is not what humanity *used to be*, but the state humanity is in *now* - which is the state of mortality. Almost like a string quartet without a violin, Athanasius' argument lacks reference to 1 Timothy 6:15-16. This passage says that Jesus Christ is: "The only Sovereign, the King of Kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be the honor and eternal dominion. Amen." Even though some theologians will attach the immortal soul to Christian theology, Stott sees this as a proof-text that the Greek concept of an immortal and indestructible soul is not a Biblical concept, but, according to the text in First Timothy, only God possesses immortality in himself.¹⁵⁵ To this, Stott received few objections, and there is broad agreement that this text indeed not only tells of the immortality of God, but also of the mortality of human beings.

154. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 258-59

155. Stott, *Essentials*.

5.1.2 The State of Non-existence as Final Punishment for the Wicked

When Athanasius expands on the future destiny of the blasphemers, and unrepentant sinners, he extensively uses two words: *death* and *corruption*. These two words might seem ambiguous, but Athanasius renders no doubt that they mean to be in a state of non-existence. Athanasius' main concern, his life's biggest contribution to the history of theology, is his Christological work. Much of the argumentation he formulated was of polemic nature towards the Arians who did not share Athanasius' view that Jesus indeed is God in flesh. Athanasius' view said that there was nothing Christian in neglecting the divinity of Jesus, therefore he condemned them explicitly, and used Scripture to warn them about what they will encounter in the future. Both verses he quotes are from the Old Testament, and neither of them are considered eschatological texts.

In Hosea 7, the people of Ephraim are warned because of their lack of obedience to the God of Israel. Verse 13, the one Athanasius quotes, says, "Woe to them, for they have strayed from me! Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against me! I would redeem them, but they speak lies against me." (Hosea 7:13). The inhabitants of Ephraim have fled both the temple and from the worship of God. They have rebelliously cast off the authority of God. *Destruction to them* is the consequence, the prophet warns. Is this warning to be seen as an eschatological text warning about the ultimate destiny of the wicked after the final day of judgment? Most commentaries on Hosea would say 'no'. The English Methodist theologian Joseph Benson writes that this text should be understood as God's judgment for their apostasy, that includes the ruination of their country and commonwealth.¹⁵⁶ Therefore it is reasonable to interpret this as a judgment within time and space, and not referring to the last judgment at the end of times.

The other verse Athanasius makes use of is a verse in the poetic book of Job, in the Old Testament. The honorable Job, who had done no iniquity, lost his family, and therefore suffered immensely. Job is the main character in the book of Job, but he is not the only one. His three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, are sharing their perspectives on their friend Job's suffering. In the IVP New Bible Commentary, theologians and co-editors D.A. Carson, R.T. France, J.A. Motyer and G.J. Wenham have an ambiguous relationship to the friends of Job. It is not the case that the three friends are entirely wrong in their perspectives. In general, what they say, "Might be true in other circumstances", but they are inaccurate, in that they fail

156. Benson, *Benson's Commentary of the Old and New Testaments*

to go beyond their eyes and ears, in Job's situation.¹⁵⁷ They know that Job is a good man, and they wrong him by thinking his suffering is a proof of his inadequacy. The quote Athanasius refers to, in the book of Job, is a saying from Bildad, one of Job's friends. He says "Indeed, the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of his fire does not shine." (Job 18:5). Despite the phrasing bearing witness to a punishment that is final and ultimate, there are two reasons why we should be cautious to see this as a proof-text for an annihilationist view of hell. The first one is that, since the quote comes from Bildad and we have good indication from the text itself that we should be hesitant to be obedient to the words of Bildad, as he is not described as bearing the authoritative word of God. Actually, when God reveals his verdict upon Bildad and his friends in the book of Job, he reproves their theology: "The LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My anger burns against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has'" (Job 42:7). The other reason is that it is very difficult to know whether the saying of Bildad should be understood as an eschatological saying, about the final judgment of the wicked at the end of times, rather than an act of judgment in his time and space. Bildad's word renders without authoritative power upon our eschatological perspectives, because of God's reproof of his words. The Scripture which Athanasius is referring to in this part of his argument lacks persuasive power. It does not help for one bit to serve his argument that the wicked will perish. Rather, the Old Testament seems silent on the afterlife. Australian theologian Paul R. Williamson writes:

The general consensus views the Old Testament as saying little, if anything, about personal (i.e. individual) eschatology. The text focuses more on God's plan for Israel and the nations, rather than the eschatological fate of the individual. This is arguably true in relation to the righteous as well as the wicked – while the former will be blessed and the latter will experience God's wrath, such blessing and wrath often aligns with the fate of the nation, and generally corresponds to what happens in the here and now; less is said about the lot of individuals after death, or in the age to come. And for the most part, the Old Testament is more concerned with the living than with the dead¹⁵⁸

157. (Editors) Carson, France, Motyer, G.J. Wenham, *New Bible Commentary*, 460-461

158. Williamson & Carson (Editor), *Death and the Afterlife*, 130

Despite the Old Testament being silent on the afterlife, Athanasius' suggestion that the wicked will perish might be affirmed by passages from the New Testament, which indeed is not silent about the matter. One text that is interesting, in this case, is one of Jesus' sayings in the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 10 Jesus is warning the disciples about persecution and tells them how to manage the harsh treatment that will follow them. Here, Jesus says to the disciples: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Here, and in the parallel-text in Luke (12:4-5), could this mean that the teachings of Jesus imply that the wicked will be annihilated in hell?

5.1.3 What is *Gehenna*?

Jesus uses the term *Gehenna* (translated hell), which is one of the several terms He uses when speaking of the final destination for the wicked after the last judgment.¹⁵⁹ What exactly is *Gehenna*? *Gehenna* takes its name from the Valley of (Ben) Hinnom, a deep gorge outside of the city of Jerusalem, with a terrifying past. It was a notorious site where children were offered as sacrifices to Moloch (Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5-6, 32:35, 2 Kings 16:3, 21:6). In response to the offering, Jeremiah prophesied that the valley would be renamed 'The Valley of Slaughter', a place where bodies would be consumed by scavengers. It is natural to believe that the listeners to Jesus' words would have had fearful associations to this Valley of Hinnom. NT Wright gives us a view on how the hearers of Jesus would understand his usage of the Hinnom Valley. In his book *Surprised by Hope* he writes that we should understand Jesus' warnings about the Hinnom Valley politically. Wright suggests that the matter of interest is the persistent attempts of the Jews to establish God's kingdom on their own terms, for example, through an armed revolt against Rome: "Rome would turn Jerusalem into a hideous, stinking extension of its own smoldering rubbish heap".¹⁶⁰ Wright therefore concludes that the usage of the Hinnom Valley sheds little light upon the post-mortem destiny for the wicked. However, Wright's suggestion wouldn't make sense in the context of all the occasions that Jesus uses the term.¹⁶¹ Wright also refers to the theory that the Valley of Hinnom was a large

159. E.g. in Matthew 5:22, 5:29, 10:28, 18:8-9, 23:15, 23:33, and parallel texts in the other Gospels.

160. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*

161. E.g. Mark 9:43-48 where there are no signs of a desire to establish God's kingdom on earth, on their own terms.

garbage dump in the times of Jesus, but there is, actually, little historical confirmation for this claim.¹⁶²

However, Jesus frequently used this place as an image for the eschatological fate of the wicked. *Gehenna* is associated both as a place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:48) and a place where the soul and body will be killed (Matthew 10:28). The Biblical background of Mark 9:48, especially the phrases “worm does not die” and “the fire is not quenched” might help us receive more insight to the teachings of Jesus. The late American theologian Edward Fudge says that, whilst some assume *unquenchable fire* means unending conscious torment, the expression has its background in the Old Testament, where it has the frequent and regular sense of “destruction that cannot be resisted”.¹⁶³ God’s fire of punishment cannot be put out or extinguished by anyone else. Therefore, the fire will burn the wicked up, until there is nothing left, exactly like John the Baptist announced concerning sinners’ doom, in his word about Jesus’ eschatological wrath: “He will clear his threshing floor burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12). The Lord’s expression of the undying worms comes directly from Isaiah 66:24. The language of Isaiah 66 is figurative, prophetic symbolism. God judges “with fire and with his sword” (v. 16), and all flesh shall worship before the Lord (v. 23), before they “go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me (God). For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh” (v 24.). Fudge believes: “the righteous view is their destruction, not their misery”, since verse 23 states that all that exist are partaking in the worship of the Lord, and verse 24 bears witness, not to living people or immortalized people, but dead bodies. When *Gehenna* is associated with the undying worms and unquenchable fire in Mark 9:48, one could be open to interpreting this as a total extinction.

5.1.4 Paul’s Phrases

The topic of the eternal fate for the unrepentant is also a topic in Pauline literature. When describing the fate of the wicked, Paul uses a few different words such as death (θάνατος), perish (ἀπολοῦνται), and destruction (ὄλεθρον). This last word features in one of Paul’s most explicit texts about the future of evildoers: “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessaloni-

162. The first person to suggest this was a Jewish writer named David Kimchi writing in the 12th and 13th centuries.

163. Fudge, *The Final end of the Wicked*, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society.

ans 1:9). Some theologians would argue that this verse tells of the punishment that disobedient individuals will be suffering in an ongoing existence that never ends. They provide several lines of argumentation for this. Carson argues: “Paul has in view not the annihilation of unbelievers but their unending punishment” because of two factors.¹⁶⁴ The first is that Paul is familiar with Christ’s teaching on the topic of eternal punishment for the wicked and sticks with this. Christ’s teaching is the everlasting torment for the wicked, therefore Paul is arguing the same thing.¹⁶⁵ Other theologians find this unconvincing; in order for Carson’s argument to succeed, one would have to presuppose that Christ indeed believes that the eternal fate of the wicked will include an eternal conscious torment. If one interprets the teachings of Christ to say that he is warning of the destruction of body and soul in hell, one would not be persuaded by this first line of argumentation. The other reason provided is the presence of the word *eternal* before *destruction*. If Paul is trying to say that the wicked will be destroyed, why emphasize that it is an *eternal* destruction? As Williamson writes: “In any case, if the word ‘destruction’ itself implies annihilation, why is the qualifying term even necessary?”, implying there is a strange tautology to this proposition.¹⁶⁶ This second line of argumentation could also be doubted, as the author of Hebrews also uses a similar formulation when he writes “of instructions about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:2). Few will consider the act of judgment to be an everlasting ongoing process, but rather that the effect of the judgment is irreversible. Because of this, it is difficult to maintain a view that Paul, in Second Thessalonians is arguing for eternal conscious torment. One could agree with Carson that Paul indeed argues right in line with the view of Jesus Christ - but this line extends from Jesus’ words that God will destroy the soul and body of the wicked in hell, to the teaching of Paul that they will be punished with eternal destruction.

British theologian Robin Parry defends a universalist view, but finds that, on the surface, the text in Second Thessalonians seems to teach everlasting torment. Digging deeper will lead to a universalist view of this text, according to Parry. His argument begins in an identical way to Carson’s; if Paul wanted to teach that the wicked will be destroyed, why the qualifying word *eternal*? After their initial arguments, Parry and Carson go in different directions. Parry’s argument for understanding this text as leading to universalism is threefold. He states that we cannot simply assume that the word *eternal* (αἰώνιον) means everlasting. He argues that the

164. Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 2451

165. Carson refers to Matthew 5:29-30, 12:32, 18:8-9; 25:41,46 and Luke 16:23-25 when explaining Christ’s view on hell.

166. Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*, 153.

adjective might refer to *the age to come*, and therefore that the punishment of destruction will happen “in the age to come”. Parry adds: “Of course, such punishment *may* still be eternal, but equally, it may not. We cannot settle *that* issue by the means of *this* word”.¹⁶⁷ We’re back to the status quo, according to Parry. He believes Paul’s main focus in this text is the divine retributive punishment on the enemies of God’s people in Thessalonica. He emphasizes that when Paul writes that “God considers it just to repay with affliction” those who afflict the church in Thessalonica, in verse 6; this implies some proportioning of punishment related to the suffering inflicted on the church. This is still not an argument *for* universalism, but rather an argument *against* the everlasting torment of unrepentant sinners. The third line of argument from Parry is that, since this text is incompatible with the everlasting torment of sinners, but compatible with universalism and annihilationism, we need to survey the other texts of the Pauline letters, in order for Scripture to interpret Scripture. Parry then, is led to the belief that since Paul teaches universalism elsewhere, we ought to think that the text in Second Thessalonians teaches this as well. Parry’s main accomplishment is to exclude everlasting torment as a possible interpretation of this text. He is, however, still open for the two other views on hell when reading 2 Thessalonians 1. Parry’s persuasion, that 2 Thessalonians speaks of a universal salvation, is not inherently in this text, but because he assumes Paul elsewhere argues for universalism. It seems, then, that the interpretation of this text is contingent on what Paul elsewhere conveys. Therefore, the universalist objection to annihilationism built upon 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is in and of itself without force.

5.1.5 Immortality is Contingent on the Saving Act of God

In this final line of reasoning by Athanasius, he argues that immortality is contingent on the saving act of God. He surely gives Biblical arguments, without quoting Scripture in favor of his perspective. His argument could be summarized in that the incarnation of Christ brings mortal men back to immortality. If it were not for the incarnation, all humans would perish. Because of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, human beings are being re-created out of their state of mortality, back to the likeness of the Word, who is immortal.

It is typical for Athanasius to argue Biblically, without explicitly mentioning proof-texts for his perspective. In this case, we see Athanasius phrasing one very important proof text from 1 Corinthians, and then paraphrasing another text from 2 Timothy. In order to argue

167. Parry, Gundry & Sprinkle (ed.), *Four Views on Hell*, 122

for his view that, because of Christ's atoning work and resurrection, mortal beings are now clothed with immortality, Athanasius refers to the resurrection chapter in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:53-55). That this text states that the resurrection is sufficient for providing immortality for human beings seems to be quite uncontroversial. The other text Athanasius is paraphrasing is one from 2 Timothy that says: "(Jesus Christ) who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace, which He gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel". (2 Timothy 1:9-10). The late Canadian theologian, Clark Pinnock, who studied under F.F Bruce, argues Scripturally that even though some philosophers and theologians will attach human beings' inherent immortality to Christian theology, this is not something found in Scripture.¹⁶⁸ You might accuse Pinnock of glancing over Athanasius' shoulder as he uses the exact same passages as Athanasius does when arguing for the inherent mortality of man, and that Christ provides immortality for those who belong to him. Pinnock states: "The Bible states that God alone has immortality (1 Tim 6:16) and that everlasting life is something God gives to humanity by grace (1 Cor 15:51-55). Eternal life is not something we can possess by any natural right according to Scripture. Immortality is not inherent in human beings. We are dependent on God for what happens to us after death. Rather than speaking of immortal souls, the Bible refers to resurrected bodies, to persons being reconstituted through the power of God".¹⁶⁹ Men, in their natural state, are inherently mortal and contingent on the salvation of God to be immortalized. This has been made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ. As French Lutheran theologian Oscar Cullmann writes: "In a word, Jesus Christ has 'abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (1 Tim 1:10)".¹⁷⁰ This confirms the inaugural proposition, that human beings are inherently mortal, Christ's atoning death on the cross and resurrection is sufficient for salvation and immortalization of human beings.

168. E.g. the French Catholic philosopher Jaques Maritain who states: "The human soul cannot die. Once it exists, it cannot disappear; it will necessarily exist forever and endure without end". From the book *The Range of Reason* page 60.

169. Pinnock, *The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent*, 14

170. Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul, or Resurrection of the Dead?* 187

The last, and vital part of the argument is that the immortality of human beings is contingent on the grace of God. Pinnock justifies this by referring to 1 Corinthians 15:51-55:

Behold! I tell you a great mystery. We shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?

It is difficult to find anything in this text that qualifies only a group of people to receive immortality. On the other hand, this passage seems to imply that the salvation and immortalization of human beings has a universal scope, as it says that *all* shall be changed. This passage could pose a serious objection to the idea that the wicked will either suffer eternally or be annihilated forever, especially if one additionally refers to one of the most-cited passages by advocates for the apokatastasis view: “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). When commenting on these verses, Walls, who himself does not believe that all shall be saved, states that he cannot deny the appeal of a universalistic picture.¹⁷¹ Even though Walls’ justification for his rejection of Christian universalism is interesting and substantive, his argumentation skips entirely the passage in 1 Corinthians 15, and is therefore somewhat inaccurate. When understanding the great resurrection chapter, Carson, helps us to see the full picture:

The events at the end of history argue for a bodily resurrection: Christ was raised from the dead first, and his followers will be raised from the dead when he returns (v. 23); Christ’s return brings the end of the present world as he finally eliminates all powers that oppose God (v. 24); Jesus’ present rule lasts until he has subjected all enemies to God’s rule (v. 25, alluding to Psalm 110:1); then death, the believ-

171. Walls, Gundry (editor) & Sprinkle (editor), *Four Views on Hell*, 141.

er's last enemy, will be destroyed (v. 26-27, which quotes Psalm 8:6) and Christ's victory will result in God's victory (v. 28).¹⁷²

The hermeneutical key to this passage is found in verse 23 of Chapter 15 and qualifies the group of people that will receive the eternal life; those who "belong to Christ". Despite the fact that Carson, who wrote this analysis of the texts in 1 Corinthians 15, is himself a fervent defender of the idea that hell is an unending conscious torment; his reasoning is posing a serious objection to his own perspective on hell. Stott suggests Paul's quote that God shall be "all in all" in 1 Corinthians 15:28 is incompatible with the unending cosmological dualism where heaven and hell are co-existing forever. He 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?"¹⁷³ Following Carson and Stott's arguments shows us that we should be hesitant to interpret the text in 1 Corinthians 15 to imply that all shall be saved. Rather, verse 23 qualifies a group to be the receivers of life eternal. The text also posits a challenge for apologists for the eternal conscious torment view on hell, as it is difficult to combine an everlasting rebellion against the will of God with the Biblical picture of God being all in all in the end.

It seems that the view of Athanasius is not affected by any of these objections and is close to the Biblical text. Immortality and life everlasting is provided for every individual who is *in Christ*, as 1 Cor 15:23 states. Also, the finally wicked will not live forever in rebellion against God, but will be forever annihilated, led into a state of non-existence, on the last day. God will indeed be *all in all* because those who have rebelled against him are no more. At least, we can take heed of what John Stott wrote after defending the view that the wicked will be forever annihilated:

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 constituency has always meant much to me. But the issue is too important to suppress, and I am grateful to you (D. Edwards) for challenging me to declare my present mind. I do not dogmatize about the position to which I have come. I hold

172. Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 2354

173. Stott, *Essentials*, 314

it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among evangelicals on the basis of Scripture. I also believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, Biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.¹⁷⁴

5.2 Analyzing Origen

After we have thrown some well-directed darts at the theological standpoints of Athanasius, let us have a look at Origen. I will deal with the core arguments Origen formulates that constitute his view that all shall be saved.

5.2.1 The End is Like the Beginning

This argument lays at the heart of Origen's case for universalism. A close reading of his work shows that he seldom writes about the beginning of the universe without tying it to the end, stating several times that the end shall be like the beginning. The American East-Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart has popularized some of Origen's arguments for Christian universalism. The argument from Origen that deals with the end being like the beginning is found in Hart's literature, where he posits the argument I will call "responsible Creator-argument". The argument is that when God creates the universe ex nihilo, he is responsible for the first cause. And although there are "innumerable forms of 'secondary causality', none of these can exceed or escape the one end toward which the first cause directs all things".¹⁷⁵ The end of the universe is intentionally enfolded within God's decision to create ex nihilo. God is good and wants everyone to be saved; the salvation of all is, then, something that follows more or less ineluctably from any coherent contemplation of what it means to see God as a free Creator of all things. What Origen would think of this sequel to his argument is unclear, but there are similarities and differences between Hart's and Origen's lines of reasoning. Even though they both draw the line from the beginning to the end, leading them both to an apokatastasis view, Origen's argument is centered around Scripture, rather than analytic philosophy which is true in Hart's case. I mention Hart because I find his an interesting and improving addition to Origen's main thoughts, but since we presuppose the importance of Scripture, I

174. Stott, *Essentials*, 319-20

175. Hart, *That All Shall be Saved*, 69

will now return to Origen's main argument. There are a few things that need to be true, in order for this argument to succeed. First, we need to establish that the end is indeed like the beginning. Secondly, we need to establish what conditions existed in the beginning. Lastly, we must establish, if the prior suggestions are true, that indeed the end is like the beginning and the beginning consisted of harmony with God, that there are no exceptions that exclude a group or some individuals when the end has come.

5.2.2 Is the End Like the Beginning?

Origen leans heavily on Scripture when positing this. He states that he could point to several passages, but finds Romans 8:20-21 to be illustrative in this case:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

(Romans 8:20-21).

Origen argues that since this text points in both directions, backwards to the beginning and forwards to the end, we cannot isolate the end from the beginning but treat them the same. That creation was made subject to futility implies a beginning without futility. The hope that creation was made subject to futility on account of, is the hope that creation will be freed from that futility. In this way, Romans 8:20-21 speaks on the identical conditions before creation was made subject to futility and after it will be freed from this ephemeral, frail condition. This line of reasoning seems indeed reasonable. As the IVP New Bible Commentary says: "God decreed a curse on the earth as a result of Adam's sin (Genesis 3:17-18; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:27). But the decree of subjection was always accompanied by hope that God would one day make his creation what he originally intended it to be".¹⁷⁶ According to this commentary, there is indeed a line between God's creation and God's new creation. The main purpose of the text seems to be that Paul wishes to make clear that "God's redemptive work not only restores the lost glory of human beings but also involves the renewal of the whole creation".¹⁷⁷ The redemptive work includes removing the curse that was laid on the ground for man's

176. Carson, France, Motyer, Wenham, *New Bible Commentary*. 1141.

177. Kruse, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: Romans*. 343

sake.¹⁷⁸ The suggestion that the end will be like the beginning (in terms of there being no curse that separates human beings with God) seems appropriate.

It is well-founded Biblically that the curse given in Genesis 3 is removed in Revelation 22. Eschatology is a branch of theology where there is certainty in very few places. Therefore, we should be cautious to conclude in questions about details, but - on a superficial level - one could affirm Origen's first line of argument. C.E.B. Cranfield will have the honor to conclude this section: "We may, however, assume that the liberty proper to the creation is indeed the possession of its own proper glory – that is, of the freedom fully and perfectly to fulfil its Creator's purpose for it, that freedom which it does not have, so long as man, its lord (Gen 1:26, 26 Psalm 8:6) is in disgrace".¹⁷⁹

What properties constitutes the beginning? Origen refers to the creation of man in Genesis where it is written that human beings are created *After our likeness* (Genesis 1:26-27). Our main purpose is to live in union and harmony with the One who created us and to bear His character. The same idea is found in the New Testament, says Origen, and refers to Jesus' high-priestly prayer in John 17, and claims it is found even more clearly in 1 John 3:2 where the author states: "When he appears, we shall be like him, because we see him as he is". Origen believes this is clear and unmistakable evidence that we will go from being "merely similar" to "the same" because "undoubtedly in the consummation or end God is all in all".¹⁸⁰ I believe Origen succeeds in showing how Scripture tells of a unity both in the beginning and the end of human history, as the concept of unity between God and man is present in the Scriptures he refers to.

5.2.3 Are there any Exceptions?

After we have established that the Bible could support Origen's idea that the end is like the beginning, and that the beginning (and therefore also the end) is described as a unity with God, where human beings are in God's likeness, we need to settle another final issue. Does Scripture support this being a truth with universal scope, or are there any exceptions? The reason we need to clarify this is that, even though these two first lines of argument might be true, it does not follow that the eschatological description of unity with God is the final destiny for *everyone*. Therefore, we must ask if there are any exceptions to this. Origen's argument

178. Bruce argues for this in *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Romans*, 160.

179. Cranfield, *Romans*, 416

180. Origen, *On First Principles*, 3.6.1

is for the universal scope of salvation, where no-one is outside of God's power and will to save. Therefore all shall be saved. He argues for this by stating that the term *aionios*, which is often translated "eternal" in English Bibles, does in fact not mean eternal as in *everlasting*, *without end etc.* In order to understand exactly how Origen interprets this word we ought to follow his explanation of Hebrews 9:26. The verse goes like this: "for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself". The word translated "ages" here is *aionion*. Origen points out that the usage of the word in Hebrews 9 tells of a limited period, which is the period that Christ has died in, and is not used to mean an everlasting ongoing duration of things. A better understanding of the Greek term is that it tells of *the age to come*, according to Origen. This is connected to another part of Origen's argument for universal salvation; the judgment in the age to come is *corrective* and functions as a refining fire that perfects all human beings and makes all fit for the new kingdom of God. That is the education in God's great school of souls in the age to come.

5.2.4 *Aionios*

Throughout the centuries, the discussion about final punishment has often been accompanied by controversy concerning the Greek adjective *aionios*. Does this word describe time in unending duration (*everlasting*)? Some unknown quality of the age to come? Both of these? Or neither of them? Jesus spoke in one single sentence about "eternal life" and "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46). This is one out of plenty of occasions in the New Testament where the final punishment is accompanied with the word *aionios*. Ever since Augustine, many theologians have looked upon these texts and argued that the punishment must be everlasting. Anyone who differed from this had to submit the arguments for their minority view. Origen was one of these, who thought of *aionios* as *the age to come*, rather than an everlasting period.

The Italian historian, Ilaria Ramelli, and the American classicist, David Konstan's book *Terms for Eternity* surveys the uses of the two ancient adjectives *aionios* and *aidios*. Both words are commonly translated as "eternal" – from their earliest occurrences in poetry and pre-Socratic philosophy, down through the Septuagint, to the New Testament and the early Christian theologians. They argue that when desiring to describe the idea of an infinitely extended time, Greek-speaking writers would generally use the term *aidios*. In the Greek literature, and also in the Greek New Testament, *aionios* has a wide range of meanings but does *not* denote absolute eternity. Ramelli writes that generally in all of Greek literature, apart from

in the technical Platonic language *aionios* does not mean ‘absolutely eternal’, a meaning that is reserved for *aïdios*. With this in mind we observe that Origen chooses his terminology carefully. In his work *Philocalia*, the *aionios* life is defined as that which will occur in the future *aion*. He writes that God gave Scripture as a “body for those who existed before us, soul for us, and spirit for those in the *aion* to come, who will obtain life *aionios*”.¹⁸¹ Since it is *aionios*, and never *aïdios*, that is applied to the punishment of humans in the afterlife, Origen could find support in the Biblical usage of this word for his doctrine of the finite duration of hell. However, this isn’t the only perspective on the meaning of *aionios*. Some defenders of the eternal conscious torment view have insisted that this word does in fact mean *endless time*.¹⁸² Others, that the term is strictly qualitative, and has nothing to do with time.¹⁸³

More interesting than people’s opinions are their arguments. We’ve already seen the argument, based on non-Biblical literature, which leads to the idea that *aionios* is not everlasting, but rather *the age to come*, or an unspecified time-period. There is another view that challenges this perspective. Even though it might be true that *aionios* speaks of the age to come, this could be an age that has no end, writes Australian theologian Leon Morris, in a Bible commentary.¹⁸⁴ The same point is being noticed by the American theologian, Harry Buis. Buis affirms the everlasting torment view on hell, and justifies it, partly by conceding the qualitative sense for *aionios*, but insists that it retains a quantitative meaning as well. The British theologian and Bible translator, Harold Guillebaud, notes the same point and writes, “Though ‘eternal’ is *more* than endless, the idea of permanence is an essential part of it”¹⁸⁵. They are not mutually exclusive, according to Guillebaud. He argues that in the New Testament, you will find several passages which contrast the temporary with the permanent.¹⁸⁶

The last argument for believing that the adjective *aionios* could describe something permanent is that there are several instances in the New Testament where an irreversible, permanent act is made, and described as being eternal (*aionios*). Six of the 70 usages of the adjective *aionios* in the New Testament signify acts or processes (and not persons or things). They are “eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9), “eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12), “eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:2), “eternal sin” (Mark 3:29), “eternal punishment” (Matthew 25:46),

181. Origen, *Philocalia*, 1.30.21-23

182. E.g. William G.T. Shedd in his book *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, 87.

183. Such as English philosopher of religion and theologian Don Cupitt in his book *The Language of Eschatology*, 305

184. Morris, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 263

185. Guillebaud, *The Righteous Judge: A study of the Biblical Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment*, 7

186. Such as Luke 16:9 and 2 Corinthians 4:17-5:4

and the “eternal destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Now, some of these texts could be understood as occurring in *the age to come*, after this *aion*, as some universalist interpreters would suggest. For example, of the eternal (*aionios*) punishment in Matthew 25:46, Parry writes: “We could very plausibly render Jesus’ words as referring to a parallel between the age to come, and the life of the age to come. That is to say, the life and punishment that (a) belong in the age to come, and (b) are appropriate to the age to come”.¹⁸⁷ Parry argues that in the context of Matthew 25:46, punishment is only for a limited time in the age to come, and the punishment leads to universal salvation. However, in other contexts, one needs to add a lot of goodwill in order for the case to make sense. This is said to be true for the eternal sin, which is also described as the unforgivable sin, in Mark 3:29. The grave warning Jesus gives is about the only unforgivable sin, which is to blaspheme the Holy Spirit. Carson, Motyer, France and Wenham explain this phenomenon: “This seem to mean the deliberate closing of the heart and mind to the witness of the Spirit to Jesus, something of which the teachers had just shown themselves to be guilty. Such a willful and deliberate twisting of truth makes repentance and salvation impossible, for it has shut the one gate to salvation that God has opened”.¹⁸⁸ It seems as though the proper interpretation of this text takes seriously the permanence of the unforgivable sin, and therefore, it won’t make sense to be adamant that *aionios* is exclusively qualitative. Fudge writes:

Here we see again the *other-age* quality of the eternal. There is something transcendent, eschatological, divine about this judgment, this sin, this punishment and destruction, this redemption and salvation. They are not merely human, *this-age* matters, but are of an entirely different nature. On the other hand, something about this judgment, sin, punishment, destruction, redemption, and salvation will have no end. If in one sense these things are *timeless*, they are in another sense without temporal limits. They belong to that *age to come* which is not bound by time and which will never end.¹⁸⁹

For several reasons, it is difficult to maintain that *aionios* exclusively means *the age to come*, as the meaning of the word is more ambiguous than that. Bauer’s ‘Lexicon of the New Testa-

187. Parry, *Four Views on: Hell*”, 120

188. Carson, France, Motyer, Wenham, *New Bible Commentary*, 956

189. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 44. In this paragraph, Fudge also refers to two other books. The first being *Christ and Time* by French Lutheran theologian Oscar Cullmann, and the book *Biblical Words for Time*, by Scottish theologian James Barr.

ment and Other Early Christian Literature' captures this ambiguity well as it divides the definition of *aionios* into three different meanings:

1. Pert. to a long period of time, long ago.
2. Pert. to a period of time without beginning or end, *eternal*
3. Pert. to a period of unending duration, *without end*.¹⁹⁰

This weakens Origen's argument that all shall be saved. The term *could* mean an unspecified period of time, or an age to come, but both internally, in the New Testament, and externally in other early Christian literature, it has been used both as an act/process that is irreversible, as well as also depicting something eternal indeed, such as God.¹⁹¹

5.2.5 The Refining Fire in the Old Testament

Another part of Origen's case for universalism is that the fire will refine, rather than burn up or torment. When he argues for this, he refers to two passages from the Old Testament, Malachi 3:1-2 and Zephaniah 3:9. He argues that the text in Malachi shows that the fire is curative and that the text in Zephaniah shows that God is intending to change all people from all nations, to worship Him in the end. This constitutes exactly what Origen believes will happen in the age to come. God's curative fire will change everyone from all nations to praise him. This is the text in Malachi:

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to this temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and you can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.

(Malachi 3:1-3)

190. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

191. The eternal God (*aioniou Theou*) is described e.g. in Romans 16:26. An eternal (*aionios*) act/process is described e.g. in Hebrews 6:2.

The author clearly borrows the image of God purifying his people in the smelter's furnace from Isaiah 1:25, Jeremiah 6:29 and Ezekiel 22:22, and he also uses the image of soap that makes the clothes white and free from stains. This dual of cleansing by fire and soap portrays the wickedness of the people and the degree of punishment needed to restore the proper worship of God, and, especially since Malachi is tying this process of restoration to the forthcoming day of the Lord, it is easy to believe that this is indeed what will happen after death, as Origen argues. It seems accurate to place this event of restoration to the second coming of Christ. However, the usage of the literature in Malachi to argue for universalism is flawed, as there are no indications that this is a universal refinement. Carson writes: "The day of God's judgment occurs at the second coming of Christ (Matthew 13:24). For Malachi, it purifies, vindicates, and restores the righteous", but then Carson points out the decisive argument: "And it judges and destroys the wicked".¹⁹² He writes this with a reference to the beginning of chapter 4 in the book of Malachi:

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. (Malachi 4:1-2)

There is a teaching of purification in Malachi 3, but it will only be encountered by the people of God. In addition to the text saying that it is the people of God who will be made righteous, the chapter after this describes a separation of the righteous (who will be made righteous and leap like calves released from the stall), and the unrighteous (who will be destroyed).

Another text Origen uses is Zephaniah 3:9: "For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord". Neither does this verse tell of universal salvation. As the American theologian, Owen Palmer Robertson, notes in his commentary on Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah: "After having dealt with Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush, and Assyria, the prophet now focuses on Jerusalem. (The) coming judgment on the rebellious city of Jerusalem shall occur in association with the arrival of the *the day* (3:8). The Day of Yahweh will bring not only destruction for the unrepentant, but purification of the remnant (vv. 9-13). This glad oc-

192. Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 1887

currence will occasion mutual rejoicing among God and his people”.¹⁹³ Neighboring nations had previously been declared fit for the judgment of God, but now it’s time for Jerusalem to stand before Yahweh’s scrutinizing eyes. The inhabitants of Jerusalem were not without spot or blemish and received God’s just punishment. Now the prophet introduces a new dimension to God’s judgment. The fire of God’s wrath must fall, but the preceding section leads to something different. Palmer Robertson continues:

Zephaniah had depicted the final assembly of nations on *the* day. Because of his own nation’s stubborn resistance to every summon to humility, they too would be among those judged in that awesome assembly. But now speaking out of the framework of an assumed scattering of his own people in judgment, the prophet depicts the formation of a new community of holy people. This restored remnant shall consist not only of a purged and forgiven group from Israel. The converted from the nations shall join with his people in the worship and service of the one true God.¹⁹⁴

It is true that both the converted remnant and the Israelites will be purified, but since the text isn’t describing this as a universal event at the end of times, it is reasonable to conclude, as Palmer Robertson does, that this judgment is God’s intervention in time and space to reconstitute his people and converted remnants, excluding those who willfully live in oppression to Yahweh. I have earlier argued that I believe the Old Testament is somewhat silent on the ultimate fate of the wicked, and I still believe that claim is true, after surveying these two texts.¹⁹⁵ Therefore, I will hold to the claim that Origen is unsuccessful when arguing for his view, based on texts in the Old Testament.

5.2.6 The Curriculum in God’s Great School of Souls:

God’s punishment will include a fire that purifies, rather than torments, is what Origen argues. I argue that Origen is unsuccessful when he argues this. Nevertheless, for the sake of the argument, let us proceed in examining the other lines of his argumentation. What are the learn-

193. Palmer Robertson, *The books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. 314

194. Palmer Robertson, *The books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*, 326-327.

195. I argue for this in 5.1.3

ing objectives in God's great school of souls? According to Origen, it is a consenting will to salvation that makes the difference. The whole world shall be subject to God; not by force, but by word, reason and doctrine. Origen refers to the hymn of Christ, in Philippians 2:5-11, to argue for this position:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This wonderful hymn tells of the universal confession to Jesus Christ as the Lord; a confession which *all* people in the end will utter, as they are *all* saved. There are two highly interesting comments to this paragraph. First, is Origen's defence that, even though God will bring about universal salvation for everyone, human beings are still free. The other one is the usage of the hymn in Philippians as an argument for universal salvation. Let us explore the first issue first. The vast majority of universalism defenders suggest that God does not save anyone against their will. American philosophers, Eric Reitan and John Kronen, write that the means God may use to save the wicked is to preserve them indefinitely and work on their salvation until a day comes when they accept his offer of salvation.¹⁹⁶ Some would say that this is impossible. There is no way that God can make anyone freely submit to him. Let us take the decision made by the disciple Peter to follow Jesus, to exemplify this objection to Reitan and Kronen. In order for Peter to be genuinely free, it must have been possible for him to refrain from doing it. If refusing to bow before Jesus was psychologically impossible, Peter's choice was not free. Parry summarizes the objection: "If people are *free*, God cannot *ensure* that they will accept the gospel. Consequently, unless God violates our freedom, he cannot *guarantee* that all will be saved."¹⁹⁷

196. Kronen & Reitan, *God's Final Victory: A comparative philosophical case for universalism*, 44-47

197. Parry, *Four Views on Hell*, 125.

This objection has been commented on by several universalists, and non-universalist theologians and philosophers. Plenty of the modern defenders of apokatastasis refer to Thomas Aquinas' thoughts that free will is rational desire, and that the will of human beings is free, but only insofar as the intellect is free to make or revise its judgments.¹⁹⁸ The American professor of philosophy, Thomas Talbott, argues for this, and invites us to reflect on the nature of freedom. He tells an extreme story to prove that a genuinely free act requires a somewhat basic level of rationality. If someone performs an action when they have (a) no motive for doing so and (b) an extraordinarily strong motive for not doing so, we tend to consider their actions *irrational*, not genuinely free. Imagine a young man placing his hand on a hot stovetop. The young man has no reason for doing so, and every reason to avoid doing it. We would not celebrate his freedom; we would rationally tell him in sincerity. The only course of action we would consider free is that in which the young man refused to put his hand on top of the heated stove – even if this choice was so psychologically compelling that no alternative action was a live possibility. In this way, Talbott argues that it is possible that God, through reason, is able to realise his wish that everyone should want to be saved.¹⁹⁹

That God will bring about everyone to desire salvation will conclude in a scene described in Philippians 2:6-11, according to Origen. The end of history is the confession of every tongue that Jesus is Lord, and every human being will bow before him, to the glory of the Father. In these verses, Paul cites a verse from Isaiah. God states in Isaiah 45:23: “By myself, I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall return: to me, every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance”. The verse before is about God, the only savior. “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, there is no other”. (Isaiah 45:22). Along with verse 6, the crucial verses 10 and 11 of Philippians 2, is one of the New Testament's many indications that Jesus is divine. Carson's comment on this text describes this well: “Paul borrows the language of Isaiah of how God alone is to be worshipped and uses it to talk of the worship that Jesus is to receive (cf. Revelation 4-5). There is only one God, but Christ – with the Father and the Spirit – is included in the being of the one God”.²⁰⁰ Carson's comment reveals the main focus of the text, which is Christology. God becoming man in Jesus Christ, who are to be worshipped as the one true God.

However, this does not exclude that the text *also* could say something about the end times. A text could speak of both Christology and eschatology. If it is the case that this text

198. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Free Will 1.1*

199. See Talbott, *Inescapable Love of God*, 167-206

200. Carson, *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 2418

portrays the eschatological universal confession that Jesus is Lord, one does not have to believe that this infers that all shall be saved. The Canadian theologian, Walter G. Hansen, distinguishes between acknowledgment and worship. He agrees that everyone will, in the end, *acknowledge* that Jesus is the true God. However, this does not imply that everyone will join the church's worship of Him.²⁰¹ The British New Testament scholar, Ralph P. Martin, notes the same thing. The acknowledgment of every tongue that Jesus Christ is Lord does not mean universal participation in the confession of faith made by the church, but "the open and irrevocable admission that this is the rightful Lord of the universe because God has installed Him on the seat of uncontested authority".²⁰² One could say that, if we had persuasive reasons to believe that universalism is true, and presuppose this when encountering the passage in Philippians 2, it could be uncontroversial to interpret this as a passage that confirms the already established belief that everyone shall be saved. However, in and of itself, this text provides no proof for the salvation of all, as it could be the case that every individual will, indeed, acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, but not join the church's worship of Him.

5.3 Analyzing Augustine

Finally, let us examine Augustine's arguments for the eternal conscious torment of the wicked. Augustine's argument is twofold. Firstly, he argues that God's judgment upon all human beings will not be dormant, but that all of us one day will face the righteous judgment of God. This judgment will separate the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous. This leads to his second claim that the punishment for the wicked will include eternal conscious torment. He argues for this by referring to several New Testament passages, as well as answering a diverse collection of pagan objections.

5.3.1 God's Judgement in Augustine's Literature

The twentieth book of Augustine's *City of God* is initiated with the sentence: "Concerning the last judgment, and the declarations regarding it in the Old and New Testaments".²⁰³ Here, Augustine argues that the two cities will be divided. Those who are considered blameless in the eyes of God will inherit eternal bliss, whilst the wicked will be punished forever. His ar-

201. Hansen, *The Letter to Philippians: The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, 165

202. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 264.

203. Augustine, *City of God*, 20.1

guments are heavily reliant on different passages from the Old and New Testaments, and even though some elements in his line of reasoning are a bit controversial, his arguments are well-articulated.²⁰⁴ Augustine constitutes his argument based on several texts from both the New and the Old Testament, and it will be accurate to say that Augustine builds a persuasive cumulative case for the judgment day to be a day of separation between the wicked and the righteous. At the center of Augustine's argument are the words of Jesus, from John chapter 5, that says:

And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement. (John 5:27-29)

This text shows us that God provides new life already for those who put their faith in Christ; that the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13-14 will rule in the future kingdom including executing judgment, and that the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked will take place on the last day.²⁰⁵ However, the text implies two different outcomes of this judgment: condemnation and life. From this verse, Augustine goes on to cite several passages from the New Testament, especially from the book of Revelation, in order to argue for his view that there will be a judgment that includes the resurrection of all people, but which leads some to bliss and some to punishment. Many of these passages are referred to again in book twenty-one of *City of God*, where the topic is the nature of hell. Augustine's red line throughout the twentieth book in *City of God* is the clear argumentation for a judgment on the last day that will separate the church of Christ from the inhabitants of the ungodly city, filled with unrepentant sinners. Both will be resurrected on the last day, both body and soul, and await either eternal bliss or eternal condemnation.²⁰⁶ I consider this one of Augustine's least controversial claims and refer to

204. When I mention the controversial parts of his line of reasoning, what I have in mind is where Augustine believes that Matthew 13:52 teaches that one would need to examine the New Testament before the Old Testament. One could argue that this is not what this exact text implies. However, the attitude that the New Testament has priority over the Old Testament is well-established in Biblical hermeneutics. Augustine's principle that The New Testament is in the Old concealed, and the Old Testament in the New revealed has been a central idea in Biblical hermeneutics.

205. Keener summarizes with these three points in his book *The NIV Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 277.

206. Augustine, *City of God*, 20.10.

Craig Keener's confirmation of this claim representing the vast majority of Biblical scholars. Augustine's arguments for his perspective on the nature of hell will provide more controversy and we will devote the next subchapters to survey them.

5.3.2 The Argument for an Eternal, Tormenting Fire

The twenty-first book of *City of God* starts in the same manner as book twenty. The quotation of John 5:29 is also present here, but rather than to serve the argument for a judgment day, it inaugurates the topic of the nature of hell. Augustine argues both philosophically and Biblically for his view that the wicked will be eternally tormented. He refers to several passages from the New Testament, but at the center of his argument lie five different passages that I will deal with accordingly.

Matthew 25:41-46

The first passage Augustine refers to is gathered from Jesus' words to his disciples in Matthew 25:

Then he will say to those on his left, 'depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me' ... Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me'. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

(Matthew 25:41-43, 45-46).

It is on this sobering note that the final discourse ends, and the Passion narrative in Matthew begins. Both this final discourse and the Passion narrative demonstrate how seriously God takes the matter of sin, and our response to his calling. Augustine refers to this passage in the context of dealing with objections to the eternal punishment for the wicked, claiming that it is not impossible logically, and neither is it out of harmony with the divine writings. In other words, this is the text that Augustine refers to first when his view is challenged for Scriptural support. His usage of this passage is two-fold. Other than bringing this up in the context of Scriptural support for the eternal conscious torment view in general, Augustine also applies

this verse in another context. The other instance he uses it, in book twenty-one, is when answering the objection that it seems odd that the literal fire might torment immaterial beings (such as demons, souls etc.). Augustine points to different solutions to this dilemma, though the entire dilemma is inescapable, because he presupposes that Matthew 25:41 teaches that the fate of the wicked will be somewhat the same as for the devil and the demons: “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”. Augustine’s argument in short, is that the nature of hell is described in Matthew 25:41-46, which teaches the fire’s eternal torment of the wicked.

The North American Professor of the New Testament, Craig Keener, invites us into the background of the hell-debate amongst different Jewish groups: “Some Jewish traditions (like the Qumran War Scroll) report that Belial (Satan) was created for the pit; destruction was not God’s original purpose for people (4 Ezra 8:59-60). Jewish tradition was divided on the duration of hell; this passage’s description of it as ‘eternal’ was certainly not merely a concession to a universal image in Judaism”.²⁰⁷ The discussion amongst different Jewish traditions was concerning the duration of hell. Some believed that hell was temporary and that at the end some people would be annihilated, and some would be released to paradise. Other Jewish teachers claimed that hell was eternal. Keener believes that Jesus, in Matthew 25:41-46 sides with the latter group. The American Professor of New Testament, Ben Witherington III, agrees with Keener and adds that the scenario when the goats are commanded to the eternal fire is played out in detail in Revelation 20:7-15.²⁰⁸ He concludes: “The concept here is of eternal torment, not obliteration”.²⁰⁹ The same line between Matthew 25:41-46 and Revelation 20:7-15 is drawn by Augustine. These two passages, according to Witherington III, constitute the most persuasive argument for the eternal conscious torment of the wicked.

When the late Stott, reflected on some of the formulations in the Lausanne Covenant, he wrote that the expression in the Covenant, “eternally separated from God”, echoes the words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 25:46.²¹⁰ He confirmed the seriousness and reality of this threat and denied any opportunity to reverse this final judgment. However, Stott was no be-

207. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 118-119

208. «And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever”. Revelation 20:7-15.

209. Witherington III, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Matthew*, 467

210. Stott. Written in an article included in the book *Rethinking Hell*, by Chris Date. 50

liever in the eternal conscious torment of the wicked view. He believed in the annihilation of the wicked, but Stott highlights the irreversibility of God’s judgment. The door is shut entirely. This leads to another manner of understanding these verses. The British theologian, Stephen Travis, expands on this when commenting on Matthew 25:46: “New Testament references to ‘eternal punishment’ do not automatically mean what they have traditionally been assumed to mean. ‘Eternal’ may signify the permanence of the result of judgment rather than the continuation of the act of punishment itself.”²¹¹ He is describing the punishment as an act of punishment where results cannot be reversed, rather than an experience of being punished forever. Fudge calls this act an “irreversible and unending retribution for those who have finally rejected God’s grace” and refers to the discussion on the term *aionios* that I have already commented on in 5.2.4.²¹² The British Cleric, Robert Farrar, was not impressed with the King James version of the Bible’s translation of Matthew 25:46. He writes about the King James translators’ betrayed bias and non-linguistic expertise with their “everlasting” punishment, but “eternal” life. He calls it “a purely wanton and arbitrary variation”.²¹³ Fudge agrees with this, and claims that the interpretation of this verse is too ambiguous to use it as a proof-text for eternal conscious torment. He refers to the eternal fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorra in Genesis 19, which is echoed in Jude 7: “The fire is also eternal in this sense – just as Sodom was destroyed by ‘eternal fire’ since its results were to last forever (Jude 7)”.²¹⁴ Fudge’s argument is that we already have an example from the New Testament that the eternal fire *destroys* rather than torments - why is it impossible that this is the case, also, in Matthew 25:41-46?

The vast majority of Biblical commentaries approve what Augustine says, that this text indeed tells of an eternal, unending torment for the wicked. However, some objectors posit that the passage is a bit more ambiguous than Augustine claims, both because the term for “eternal” (*aionios*) is an ambiguous one, as well as because of the fact that there are incidents in the New Testament where an act is depicted as “eternal” (*aionios*), but in the sense of *permanent or irreversible*. This could possibly also be the case in Matthew 25:41-46.²¹⁵

211. This quote is gathered from a volume of a book series that was edited by British theologian Michael Green called “I believe in...” that were intended to explore different controversial doctrines of Christianity. In a chapter called ‘The Dark Side of Hope’ Travis outlined a Biblical view of judgment and the fate of the unsaved that ultimately landed on annihilation.

212. The quote is from Edward Fudge’s book *The Fire That Consumes*, 20.

213. Farrar, *Eternal Hope*, 198

214. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 195

215. See 5.2.4 for an expanded discussion concerning the Greek term *aionios*.

Revelation 20:7-12 (and Revelation 14:10-11)

We've already seen that some theologians believe it is natural to connect the verses in Matthew 25 already mentioned with a passage in the book of Revelation. Augustine does the same thing when addressing a specific objection to eternal, conscious torment. The objection Augustine deals with is concerning the material fire, and how it could torment the wicked spirits who are immaterial. When answering that objection Augustine points to Revelation 20:10, saying that the Scripture tells of a material fire that indeed will burn both bodies and souls.²¹⁶ Augustine tells of different ways in which this could be possible, but most important to him is the Scriptural basis for the claim, which he finds in, among other passages, Revelation 20:10. Augustine does not empty his inventory of ink whilst writing on this passage and writes sparingly in his comments on the passage. However, I will devote some space for it here, as it is a part of Augustine's cumulative case for eternal, conscious torment. I also consider this text to be one of the best arguments for such a perspective on hell:

And when the ten thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. (Revelation 20:7-10).

This passage is frequently used by advocates for an eternal, conscious torment view on hell. One of these is the American theologian, Grant Osborne, who, in a commentary on Revelation, explains how this verse tells of the unending torment of the false trinity contained as the beast, Satan and the false prophet.²¹⁷ The American Professor Emeritus of anthropology Charles Kraft agrees with Osborne and connects these verses to the divine judgement of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38:22: "I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones and burning sulfur

216. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.10

217. Osborne, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation*, 715.

on him”.²¹⁸ This judgement will be continued forever and ever, according to Revelation. In an article called *The Final End of the Wicked*, published by the Evangelical Theological Society, Fudge problematizes this by asking for where the human beings are in this text.²¹⁹ Even though it is true that Revelation 20:7-10 does not explicitly mention human beings, Osborne still believes that this fate is also descriptive of the fate of those who follow the beast. His argument is that the language in Revelation 20:10 is a collage of phrases used to describe the fate of the wicked in Revelation 14:10-11:

He also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives a mark of its name.

(Revelation 14:10).

Osborne adds to this verse: “This is another passage that makes it difficult to accept the belief of some who say the fate of the wicked is ‘annihilation’ (they will simply cease to exist). The picture here is too detailed to mean anything other than eternal punishment”.²²⁰ In the context of his commentary, it appears that Osborne means eternal, conscious torment when writing ‘eternal punishment’. The final judgment at the arrival of the eschaton implies the sentence to the eternal torment of both the false trinity and their followers, according to Osborne. This is derived from both Revelation 20:7-10 which portrays eternal torment for Satan, the false prophet and the beast; and Revelation 14:10-11, which tells that the wicked will share the fate of Satan, the false prophet, and the beast. Osborne presupposes that Revelation 14:10-11 actually teaches that human beings will share the same fate as the three enemies of God. His argument will prevail if that is not the case. Osborne does get a lot of support from a broad range of theologians. The Australian Anglican Bishop and New Testament scholar, Paul Barnett, observes that the third angel “proclaimed the wine of God’s fury, the cup of his wrath, and everlasting torment awaits those who worship the beast and its image”.²²¹ The American New Testament scholar Robert Mounce’s commentary on Revelation asserts that those who

218. Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes: Handbuch zum Neuen Testament*.

219. Fudge, *The Final End of the Wicked*, published by the Evangelical Theological Society (1984)

220. Osborne, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation*, 716.

221. Barnett, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 118

worship the beast and bear his mark are to “drink the wrath of God and endure eternal torment in fire and brimstone”.²²² Even the British Biblical scholar, John Wenham, who believes the wicked will be finally annihilated, acknowledges that “Revelation 14:11 is the most difficult passage that the conditionalist has to deal with. Certainly, on the face of it, ‘having no rest day or night with smoke of torment going up forever and ever’, sounds like everlasting torment”.²²³

However, despite the range of support, there are a few objections worth noticing, from scholars skeptical of the sureness of the defenders of eternal torment. Australian Biblical scholar Ralph Bowles’ objection is constructed of two elements. First, Bowles claims, is that the judgment of God by fire and sulfur is a cipher for the total destruction at Sodom and Gomorrah and thereafter.²²⁴ He assumes that the text rests heavily on Old Testament texts where the situation is not the eternal torment of these cities, but rather the obliteration of them.²²⁵ The same goes for “the smoke of their torment” that ascends forever. In Bowles’ perspective this is a “certification and memorial of this accomplished destruction, just as the smoke that Abram saw rising from Sodom pointed to the finality of its destruction (Genesis 19:28).”²²⁶ Not only does Bowles make reference to Genesis 19, but believes also that the author of Revelation is referring to the destruction of Edom in Isaiah 34:10ff : “Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation, it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it forever and ever”. Isaiah says that Edom’s destruction is certain and complete, but also irreversible. The desolation will be unending.

Stott also comments on this verse. He notices that the torment is to be experienced “in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” (Revelation 14:10). I have yet to read a scholar that believes that the *Lamb* is not Christ himself; and as the torment is experienced in his presence. Stott therefore believes that this text refers to the moment of judgment, rather than to the eternal state *after* the judgment.²²⁷ This reading of Revelation 14:10-11 has been challenged by Carson. He draws attention to what he believes is the crucial statement: “They have no rest day or night”. He believes this sentence invalidates the idea of completed destruction which Stott, Bowles and others lay forth. If the author of Revelation is

222. Mounce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation*, 274

223. Wenham, *Enigma*, 87

224. Bowles’ argument is formulated in an article published in *Evangelical Quarterly* 73:1 entitled “*Does Revelation 14:11 Teach Eternal Torment? Examining a Proof-text on Hell*”.

225. Bowles’ refers to Genesis 19:23-28, Deut 29:23, Job 18:15-17, Isaiah 30:27-33; 34:9-11 and Ezekiel 38:22.

226. Bowles. *Evangelical Quarterly* 73:1, *Does Revelation 14:11 Teach Eternal Torment? Examining a Proof-text on Hell*”

227. Stott, *Essentials*, 318

stating the case for a completed destruction of the wicked, “why, then, does John insist that the lost ‘enjoy no rest day or night,’ after the smoke of their completed destruction is said to be ascending?”²²⁸ To this, many who believe in annihilationism would respond that this comment (no rest, day or night) is referring to the uninterrupted suffering of the wicked *while it is ongoing*, without implying that it will continue forever.²²⁹ Carson is not convinced, and makes a strong case that the sequence of statements in Revelation 14:11 does seem to pose a serious exegetical problem for the annihilationist. The sequence is first the torment, then the smoke and then restless suffering *after* the smoke. This indicates a continuing, perpetual tormenting judgment, according to Carson. Even though Stott, Bowles, and their fellow partisans might succeed in casting some doubts on the traditional interpretation of “the smoke that ascends forever”, and the “torment of fire and brimstone”, Carson’s argument shows that the traditional interpretation of Revelation 14:10-11, which implies eternal conscious torment, is the most viable one. If that is true, Osborne is right in using Revelation 14:10-11 as a text that clarifies the interpretation of Revelation 20:7-10 and causes both of them to be persuasive arguments for the eternal conscious torment view on hell, thus confirming Augustine’s usage of this passage in *City of God* book twenty-one.

However, most theologians advocating for the eternal destruction of the wicked believe in a limited conscious torment for them, and they normally connect this to the intermediate state and/or the act of judgment.²³⁰ The British theologian, Richard Bauckham, believes that careful attention should be given to John’s use of the oracle against Edom in Isaiah 34:8-17, and writes: “Isaiah 34:8-17 is a major source for John’s oracle against Babylon, and also supplies the imagery of the judgement of the worshippers of the beast (Rev 14:10b-11: Isaiah 34:9-10a). Clearly John read Isaiah 34 as a key prophecy of the eschatological judgement of all the nation, led in their opposition to God’s kingdom by Rome (Edom)”.²³¹ In the Isaianic passage, the destruction of Edom in the prophet’s vision includes the same elements found in Revelation 14:9-11. The judgment is by fiery sulfur, a quenchless judgment night and day and a smoke that goes up forever. Only the order of elements is slightly different in the case of Isaiah 34. In Isaiah the order is fire and sulfur first, then the ceaseless, quenchless punishment, and then the latter element is the smoke ascending forever. Carson’s argument was based up-

228. Carson, *Gagging of God*, 525

229. E.g. Edward Fudge in *The Fire That Consumes*, 243

230. E.g. John Stackhouse that states: “It seems evident to me that unless the lost have atoned for those sins during the so-called intermediate state, those sins and the implications of those sins, remain” in *Four Views on: Hell*, 76.

231. Bauckham, *Prophecy*, 318

on the chronology of the elements. However, the text that Revelation 14 is connected to in Isaiah 34:8-17 speaks of a judgment that starts with Gods wrath against his enemy (34:9) and ends with utter desolation and death (34:12). One could argue that chronology is not the decisive factor when interpreting this text. Bauckham's arguments, then, leave this passage open for interpretation both ways. This difficult apocalyptic text that creates dissent between prolific scholars should keep us humble when approaching and interpreting these ancient passages.

Luke 16:24

Another well-known passage Augustine refers to in his case for eternal conscious torment is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus from Luke 16:31-46.²³² Augustine refers to verse twenty-four of the sixteenth chapter in Luke: "And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame'" (Luke 16:24). Augustine mentions this verse twice in book twenty-one of *City of God*. The first time, in the same context as Revelation 20:10, where the issue is whether or not material fire could torment immaterial beings, such as souls, demons, etc.²³³ Augustine believes it can, and points to this text that, he believes, infers the soul of the rich man is being tormented in the flames. The other instance in which Augustine mentions this verse is in a similar context. He uses this text as a proof-text that souls could experience torment even when they are not associated with the body.²³⁴ In this latter instance, Augustine also refers to a few Platonist writers, claiming that the soul is eternal. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that the torment of the soul is eternal for wicked, immortal beings. In order for us to examine this text and the truthfulness of Augustine's argument that this text implies eternal torment for (body and) souls, we need to present the entire parable:

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried,

232. I am aware of the discussion concerning this being a parable or not, but I agree with New Testament scholar Darrell Bock who argues that we should consider the text a parable in *Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: Luke 9:51-24:53*.

233. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.10

234. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.3

and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame’. But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us’. And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment’. But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent’. He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

(Luke 16:19-31).

The parable in Luke 16 is, like any other of Jesus’ parables, filled with theological content. Williamson agrees that we can draw plenty of knowledge about Christ’s principles and teachings from this text, but he hesitates to say that the knowledge this parable gives us is mainly of eschatological nature. He writes: “Now admittedly, this story of the rich man and Lazarus is not primarily designed as instruction on eschatology, or human anthropology for that matter. Rather it constitutes an anti-Pharisaic polemic on the love for money and the abuse of wealth.”²³⁵ The rich man received an unpleasant surprise. Instead of joining the banquet alongside Abraham, he woke up in agony. Like the Pharisees, this man had ignored the teaching of the law and prophets and had to suffer the consequence. This is clearly the central point of the parable, but the teaching of a certain way to manage wealth isn’t mutually exclusive with eschatological teachings. Though the primary object of this text might be to criticize a manner of managing wealth, it could also give eschatological insight, something Williamson gladly admits. Finnish theologian, Outi Lehtipuu, points to the oddness of creating such a detailed story as this parable has, only to create a dramatic setting for teaching on management of money. At least it is difficult to dismiss it as *only* a dramatic setting. Just as the geography

235. Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*, 52

and social circumstances reflected in the parable of the good Samaritan are entirely fictive and inaccurate, so is the case for the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.²³⁶

Even though this parable might tell us something about the hereafter, there are certain elements in the text which cause it to be difficult, perhaps even impossible, to consider it a text about the final punishment *after* the day of judgment. Williamson points out the crucial point in this text, that, even though all the characters in the text are dead (v.30), the five brothers of Lazarus are still alive. Therefore, from an earthly perspective, it is highly likely that this happens *before* the judgment of God. As a result of this one should interpret this text not as a description of the eternal fate of wicked men, but rather as chastisement of the Pharisees for living in rebellion to God's will. Jesus chastises the Pharisees by using the premise of an intermediate state between death and judgment. Another point we can learn about the afterlife in this text that is relevant to the discussion about hell and universal salvation is connected to *the great chasm* that verse 26 speaks of. Between the rich man and Lazarus, a "great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us" (v.26). There is a sovereignly established boundary separating the comforting bosom of Abraham from the place of agony and torment. The American theologian Darrell Bock writes that the "theological passive that such a place 'has been fixed' asserts that God has set up the afterlife in such a way that the righteous and unrighteous do not mix".²³⁷ If this is the case, then the possibility of being saved after death is excluded. I will let American New Testament professor Frederick Danker conclude: "There is no bridge over the chasm. The image is strong and suggests that how we respond in this life is decisive for where we reside in the next, a key point that some find hard to accept".²³⁸

Mark 9:43-48

Lastly, in a comment on the nature of eternal punishment, Augustine refers to the words of his highest authority: Jesus Christ:

And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with twin hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for

236. Lehtipuu, *The Afterlife Imagery in Luke's Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus*, 198

237. Bock, *The Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1373

238. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel*, 285

you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched'. (Mark 9:43-48)

Augustine points out that the Lord did not shrink from using the same example three times: "Who is not terrified by this repetition, and by the threat of that punishment uttered so vehemently by the lips of the Lord himself?"²³⁹ The imagery in Mark 9:43-48 is from the very last verse in the book of Isaiah: "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who 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" (Isaiah 66:24). There is an ongoing debate as to whether the verse in Isaiah is to be understood as destruction or tormenting of the wicked. Keener believes that the imagery from Isaiah quoted in Mark 9:43-48 should be understood as eternal torment, as the imagery had already been applied to eternal torment in the apocryphal book, Judith 16:17.²⁴⁰ The text in Judith 16:17 is: "Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of the judgment; he will send fire and worms into their flesh; they shall weep in pain forever". The apocryphal book of Judith is outside the Protestant Biblical canon and not considered authority on the matter. However, Keener believes this formulation in Judith shows how the verse in Isaiah has formed early Jewish readers to interpret it as eternal conscious torment. Fudge disagrees and remains in the belief that Jesus' reference to Isaiah 66:24 should be interpreted as destruction, despite the Biblical heroine Judith's verse. He writes: "The words *fire* and *worms* here come from Isaiah 66:24, but Judith completely changes Isaiah's picture. The prophet has unburied corpses; Judith has consciously tortured people. Isaiah's fire and worms destroy, Judith's simply torment. In Isaiah the fire and worms are external agents consuming their dead victims, in Judith they are internal agonies perpetually torturing from within. In Isaiah (and all the OT) the victims are destroyed; in Judith they 'feel their pain forever'".²⁴¹ Stott writes that he does not see any reason why we should let Judith decide our interpretation of Mark's use of Isaiah. He writes:

239. Augustine, *City of God*, 21.9

240. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 160

241. Fudge states this in his article "The Final End of the Wicked" that was published by the Journal of Evangelical Theological Society in 1984.

There is the vivid picture of hell as a place where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched’. It is a quotation from the last verse of Isaiah, where the dead bodies of God’s enemies are consigned to the city’s rubbish dump to be eaten by maggots and burned. It is not necessary to apply this as Judith did, however, namely that God would take vengeance on the hostile nations, ‘to put fire and worms in their flesh’ so that ‘they shall weep and feel their pain forever’. Jesus’ use of Isaiah 66:24 does not mention everlasting pain. What he says is that the worm will not die and the fire will not be quenched. Nor will they – until presumably their work of destruction is done.²⁴²

Stott lays forward the possibility that one could interpret this in the sense of the wicked being obliterated rather than tormented. Carson also spots the connection between Mark 9:43-48 and Isaiah 66:24. However, he highlights another point from the text: “The final words of Isaiah describe God’s awful judgment on Jewish idolaters, its imagery evoking Jeremiah’s Valley of Slaughter. If members of Jesus’ newly reconstituted Israel continue to cause these little ones (Mark 9:37,42) or themselves to stumble, they, like the idolaters of Isaiah 66:24, will be similarly excluded from salvation”.²⁴³ Carson refers to this as a teaching on soteriology, rather than merely eschatology, leaving the question on the nature of hell untouched in this instance. The text in Mark 9:43-48 is clear on the exclusion from salvation of the idolaters, but ambiguous or silent on the matter of the nature of the idolaters’ final fate.

242. Stott, *Essentials*.

243. Carson, *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, 2034

6. Conclusion

The one who dives into the pool of literature concerning the final punishment will soon discover that it is a difficult topic to navigate. Not only do Christians normally have strong emotions tied to the topic of hell, but it is also a topic where plenty of the Biblical texts require insight into cultural context, reference texts and koine Greek to accomplish a more accurate interpretation. It might depend on which church one normally attends, but it is not too much of a stretch to say that Christians in the west do not hear thorough reviews about different perspectives on hell from the pulpits. Hell is seldom mentioned, and, if it is, one rarely expands on any of the views. Even though it is easy to have sympathy for the communicators who would like to stick with speaking on the forgiveness of God instead of the judgment of Gog and Magog, one might do the people in the pews a disfavor if never addressing the topic of hell. If we let difficult topics remain unaddressed, it may pose a challenge to the trustworthiness and legitimacy of what we do preach. Biblical theology and systematic theology help us address these difficult issues. As the reader of this thesis has observed, since the very beginning of Christian theology, there has been a fearless examination (down to a detailed level) of the punishment of the finally impenitent. We would be clever to benefit from the insight given to us through church history, without being passive and hesitant to challenge established views. There are some instances in this thesis where I have done just so, and I would like to mention them accordingly.

6.1.1 A Final Word about Hell

All three positions give arguments for their theological perspectives based on arguments both of a philosophical and a Biblical nature. The objective of this thesis has been to examine the Biblical arguments given for universalism, annihilationism and the eternal conscious torment view. Because of this, I have refrained from paying much attention to the philosophical arguments or defenses given, when analyzing the arguments. However, one could derive plenty of thoughtful arguments worth exploring further from their literature that is not of Biblical nature. These are three very different perspectives on hell. They differ from each other in multiple ways, and the outcome of the world will be vastly different from whoever of these proponents are right. The perspective that stands out the most is Origen's universalism. Where the eternal conscious torment view and the annihilationist view claims that the punishment will be eternal, either in duration or effect, the universalism Origen advocates implies only a limited

punishment that leads to the salvation of everyone. In the two former perspectives, the wicked will be permanently and irreversibly lost, while in Origen's teachings all wicked will suffer for a limited period and then be led to consent to God's provision of salvation.

It is admirable that Athanasius, Augustine and Origen encourage readers of their literature to test their perspectives in the Scripture they consider Holy and the true authority in this question. When doing so, Origen's argument that all shall be saved is lacking in several ways. He argues well that the end of human history is like the beginning of human history, implying a state of blessedness and harmony between people and God. However, one cannot presuppose that this will have an all-encompassing scope, and that there are no exceptions to this rule without giving an argument that it is impossible that someone might be lost along the way. Origen gives such an argument, basing it on two premises. Firstly, that the term *aionios*, being translated as *eternal*, should be understood as merely *the age to come*; and secondly by referring to a number of texts in the Old Testament that speak of a corrective punishment that leads to worship, rather than a retributive punishment. Origen's arguments on this note are not convincing, as we have seen that the term *aionios* is an ambiguous term that could mean several things, and not exclusively *the age to come*. Also, the Old Testament references that Origen provides are not eschatological in nature, but, rather, texts that describe the judgment the just God provides for countries or people at a specific time in space. Paul describes the universal acknowledgment that Jesus is Lord in Philippians 2:6-11, a text Origen believes is to be interpreted as describing universal salvation. However, acknowledgment is not the same as worship, leaving Origen's argument impaired. Another reason for dismissing universalism is not only that the arguments *in favor of* universalism are unconvincing, but also that the arguments *against* universalism are convincing. A text in the New Testament that Augustine refers to is seemingly impossible to combine with a universalistic perspective. In Luke 16, Jesus tells the parable of a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. They both die, and the poor beggar, Lazarus, wakes up in the bosom of Abraham in glory, whilst the rich man wakes up, to his surprise, in flames of anguish. The rich man is able to speak with Abraham, and one peculiar sentence from the great ancestor is decisive: "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us" (Luke 16:26). In this passage Jesus indicates that human beings' response to the call for salvation in this world will have permanent consequences for the afterlife. Jesus makes impossible the afterlife conversion which Origen presupposes for his argument to be valid. Jesus' parable in Luke 16 is one of several passages in the New Testament that I consider to be very difficult to combine with the salvation of all

human beings. I am therefore inclined to dismiss the universalism perspective on hell due to a lack of Scriptural support.

The challenge this passage gives is not applicable for the argument Athanasius and Augustine give, as they both affirm a permanent consequence for the wicked. The difference here is rather the nature of the eternal punishment for the wicked. Whilst Athanasius and other annihilationist writers claim that the wicked will be irreversibly destroyed, Augustine and other writers are persuaded that the wicked will suffer an eternal, ongoing conscious torment. In both cases the punishment will be correctly labelled eternal. However, in the former one, the punishment is eternal in effect; in the latter one, the punishment is eternal in duration. Upon examining Athanasius, one observes that his argument is based upon three premises: (1) That all human beings are mortal beings (2) The ultimate fate of the human beings abiding in death and corruption is a state of non-existence (3) Immortality for human beings is contingent on the saving act of God. As I have discussed in my analysis of Athanasius, I consider his perspective convincing, but his argumentation lacking three noteworthy central aspects. First, Athanasius is arguing for the mortality of man from the very first chapters of Genesis. These chapters include the curse God lays upon human beings that (perhaps) teaches the mortality of human beings. However, to argue for this premise, one might do a thorough examination of the New Testament, and one would see it is not silent on the matter. I consider the New Testament to confirm the first proposition of Athanasius and refer to different parts of Pauline literature, such as Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15 and this text in 1 Timothy 6:15-16: “He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen”. The reference to the Pauline texts in the analysis of Athanasius helps to affirm his claim that human beings are mortal and make his case more persuasive and substantive. In and of itself, Athanasius’ argument for the mortality of men is like an orchestra with no string section. It is logically coherent, and sound, but not fully complete. However, by adding the Pauline texts, one adds the viola, violin, and cello to the orchestra, making it complete. When arguing for the eternal fate of the wicked being a state of non-existence, the Biblical references Athanasius makes are from Hosea chapter 7 and Job chapter 18. None of the verses he refers to should be interpreted as eschatological statements of the eternal fate of the wicked. However, one should not dismiss a truth claim merely because the lines of argument being given to support the proposition are being false, as this is a logical fallacy philosophers call *the genetic fallacy*. This fallacy arises whenever we dismiss a claim or argument because of its origin or history. I believe the Biblical texts Athanasius re-

fers to when arguing that the final punishment for the wicked is eternal destruction do not teach that. However, the Biblical case for the destruction of the lost could be found elsewhere. I believe this is the case. Despite the Old Testament being silent on the eternal fate of the wicked, one could refer to Jesus' words that we should "fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). These words from Jesus himself form one out of several passages in the New Testament that one could refer to when arguing that the eternal fate of the wicked is to be destroyed forever. Athanasius' argument that the wicked are on their way to a state of non-existence is a perfectly legitimate perspective to hold from a Biblical perspective. However, this is on a different Biblical foundation than Athanasius provides in his literature. The last line of argument in Athanasius' cumulative case for annihilationism, that immortality is contingent on the saving act of God, could successfully be argued for in Scripture and, in my analysis of this claim, I argue that this truth proposition manages scrutiny and criticism well. I consider the perspective that the wicked human being's body and soul will be eternally destroyed to be well-established in Scripture, and, therefore, a perfectly legitimate viewpoint from a Biblical perspective.

Despite this we have also seen that Augustine argues convincingly from Scripture that the punishment of the wicked includes an eternal conscious torment. Augustine emphasizes Jesus' words in Matthew 25:41-46 where he confirms the seriousness and irreversibility of this judgment; "Then he will say to those on his left, 'depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life'" (Matthew 25:41,46). This verse isolated is not clearly teaching the eternal conscious torment view as it might be the case that the *eternal fire* is a fire that consumes and obliterates, and the irreversible extinction is the *eternal punishment*. However, several theologians, as well as Augustine, find it natural to connect the "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" described in Matthew 25 to the "lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophets were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" described in Revelation 20:10. The careful reader of the latter text observes that nowhere are human beings described, only immaterial beings such as the beast and the false prophets. Whilst this is true, two responses could be given to this objection: Firstly, that if the Gospel of Matthew is describing that the fate of the wicked will be equal to the eternal fate of the devil and his angels, and Revelation describes the fate of the devil and his angels, one could argue that also human beings will, according to Scripture, be "tormented day and night", just as the angels of the devil. Secondly, one could also refer to Revelation 14:10-11 that says that whoever worships the beast and its image will receive a mark on his forehead,

and will also “drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb”. The author continues and states that “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night.” The sequence of statements in Revelation 14 poses a serious exegetical challenge for the annihilationist (as well as the universalist). The sequence is first the torment, then the smoke, and thereafter the restless suffering *after* the smoke. That restless suffering is described as the latter element in the sequence is indicating an endless, continuing, perpetual torment of the wicked. However, I hesitate to conclude firmly on this, because of the similarities between God’s judgment over Edom in Isaiah 34:8-17 and the judgment over God’s enemies in Revelation 14. Both of the texts include fiery sulfur, ceaseless and unquenchable judgment day and night, and smoke that ascends forever. The difference is that in the text in Isaiah 34, the chronology is slightly different. Here, the fiery sulfur is the first element mentioned, then the ceaseless and unquenchable fire, and finally the smoke that ascends forever. The judgment in Isaiah, that Revelation 14 builds upon, starts with the wrath of God over sinners (Isaiah 34:9) and ends with their utter death and destruction (Isaiah 34:12). A viable interpretation of Revelation 14:9-11 is, therefore, that the judgment of God by fire and sulfur is a cipher for total destruction; the smoke of their torment that ascends is a certification of the accomplished destruction; and, lastly, the torment experienced in the presence of the Lamb and the holy angels refers to the moment of judgment, not the eternal state *after* the judgment.

I am inclined to deny the universalist perspective. As I have argued, I find the arguments lacking explanatory power and explanatory scope when the central objective is to examine Biblical texts. However, one could give sound Biblical arguments for the truthfulness of both the annihilationist view and the eternal conscious torment-view. If one believes that Revelation 14 implies the eternal conscious torment of the wicked, one will have to answer the question: how is this compatible with the texts, primarily in the literature of Paul, that speaks of the eternal destruction of the wicked? How one answer this question is determined by your views on a few questions concerning the doctrine of Scripture. To what extent does the Bible have authority? What does authority imply in the case of the Bible? Some would be satisfied with this answer; that Paul could have one theology on the case, and the author of Revelation could have another theology formulated. There is no need to demand harmony between two different authors of Biblical texts! This is a possible outcome of the supposed contradictory theological perspectives among the Biblical authors. Another approach is that one should be open to different priorities, contexts, genres, and presuppositions when reading

different epistles or books in the New Testament. However, there is a difference between different priorities and different theology. A comfortability with an attitude towards Holy Scripture that allows for contradictory theology within the New Testament might compromise the Biblical claim, or even assumption of divine origin, as well as the dependability of the Scriptures. How could one maintain systematic theology as a normative branch of theology if one is open to the possibility that Paul teaches something different than John? This first report of concern is often spurned out because many have found this argument to be circular, but both arguments worth noticing as they are held by plenty of able theologians. These questions about the doctrine of the word of God are controversial. Both approaches to the Scriptures have their advantages, but the advantages are acquainted with new challenges. Nevertheless, they show that presuppositions are important when navigating topics in systematic theology. If, however, one is persuaded by the arguments given in the analysis of Revelation 14:9-11, that the connection to Isaiah 34 opens up for an annihilationist interpretation of this text, one could conclude that they are both describing a judgment that starts with God's wrath against his enemies and ends with their utter destruction.

6.1.2 The Athanasian Perspective on Hell

Athanasius of Alexandria has been of major influence on the history of theology. He has earned the title, *Champion of orthodoxy*, by contributing to the important and intense debate on Christology in the fourth century. Hell is not an essential or central topic in Athanasius' opinion, which is probably the reason that very few comments are made on his theological persuasions concerning the eternal fate of the wicked. However, upon examining able scholars' reviews of Athanasius' perspective on hell, one will observe that there is not unity upon how one should understand his views. The Italian historian, Ilaria Ramelli, suggests Athanasius should be read as an extension of Origen's universalism, and that Athanasius often displays universalistic overtones. She is supported by Danish theologian, Anders Christian Jakobsen, who believes that Athanasius meant that God cannot, and will not let what exists perish, and, therefore, will save all human beings.

I find the evidence for Athanasius being a universalist to be lacking both explanatory power, and explanatory scope. Firstly, Ramelli's arguments are based upon quotations from Athanasius, with theological persuasions that are not exclusive for universalists: "That the cross of Christ implies salvation for all people in all places, and that Christ wants the repentance and conversion of the human being, rather than its death. In this way, evil, all of it, will

be burned away from all humans”.²⁴⁴ These are not exclusive truths only viable for universalists. In this way I find Ramelli’s arguments to be lacking explanatory power. In addition to this I will also argue that Ramelli’s argument is lacking explanatory scope. It fails to include the parts of Athanasius’ literature where he mentions the spokesmen of the heretical views of Arius, where his tone is quite serious. He states that “for the good is laid up the heavenly kingdom, but for those who practice evil outer darkness and the eternal fire”.²⁴⁵

Another argument used for Athanasius’ alleged universalism is how he describes the soul. Athanasius seems to have adopted the thoughts of Plato: that the mortal body is led by a rational and immortal soul. While this description is true, the argument for Athanasius’ universalism based upon this fails to take seriously Athanasius’ statement in the closing paragraph of his book, *Against the Heathen*, where he refers to the prize of life everlasting and reveals that he is persuaded into believing that there is a possibility that the soul will not be adorned with immortality in the end. Athanasius does indeed speak of the cross of Christ that brings salvation to all people in all places, but also of the reality of the outer darkness and eternal fire. He does speak of a mortal body being led by an immortal soul, but also that there is a possibility that the soul will not be adorned with immortality in the end. A firm persuasion for Athanasius’ universalism is over-exaggerated and needs to be challenged. As I do not think the *Champion of orthodoxy* is double tongued, one needs to proceed in getting as much information as possible about Athanasius’ theology from his literature, and then proceed with interpretation of this information. When examining the literature of Athanasius, I’ve found that it seems as though he argues that (1) human beings are mortal after the fall of Adam, (2) human beings become immortal only if God provides salvation for them, (3) those who don’t receive the salvation of God will remain in a state of *corruption and death*. (4) *Death and corruption* are defined as a state of non-existence. Athanasius might on some occasions be vague and confusing. However, it is a perfectly legitimate interpretation to see him as giving a sophisticated argument for annihilationism.

244. Ramelli, *A Larger Hope?* 88

245. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 9:56

6.1.3 Diversity in Church History and the Term “Classical View on Hell”

I argue that church history, especially in the Patristic period, is much more diverse when commenting on the final punishment of the wicked, than many modern theologians would suggest. Already in the early fifth century does Augustine identify seven different universalist positions within the church; each group employing different Biblical texts to provide the case for their convictions. Augustine himself did not believe in any of these versions of universalism and argued explicitly and thoroughly for the eternal conscious torment of the wicked. Amongst the defenders of universalism that Augustine criticized was Origen. Origen believed that the eternal punishment is not eternal in the sense of *everlasting*, but rather the punishment will happen *in the age to come*. This punishment is corrective, not retributive, and will in the end lead everyone to bow their knees before God, confess that Christ is Lord and consent to the salvation He offers. Athanasius structured a sophisticated argument that human beings are mortal in nature and are only granted immortality if God saves them. If one was not saved, as, for instance, he believed not all people were, one was heading towards corruption and death, which he defined as a state of non-existence. Athanasius was not alone; I also mention Irenaeus of Lyon who held a similar view to Athanasius. Even though eternal conscious torment was the majority view in the medieval period, the diversity we see in the early church is also to be found in the medieval period. One author I have quoted states that there is a remarkable variety of interpretations of hell in the medieval period. The concept of purgatory, which was developed during the Patristic period, was now incorporated into many medieval accounts of hell. The idea was that those who had died without works of penance would be purified through fire in the next life. This concept was developed further in the medieval period but was rejected by the 16th-century Reformers. Martin Luther, the Reformer, revealed how terrified he was of the concept of hell, one he believed meant an eternal, conscious torment for the wicked. However, this view of hell was also “under fire” in the 17th and 18th centuries. The philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, found it hard to believe in such a concept, as it implies the compromise of God’s final and total triumph over evil. In more modern times there has been a perceptible loss of interest in the idea of hell, according to some theologians, but despite the alleged loss of interest, another growing debate on the nature and duration of hell has been emerging in recent times. For instance, the important British theologian, John Stott, who advocated that the wicked will eternally perish after judgment day, met considerable resistance from other evangelical theologians, such as American theologian, J. I. Packer, who considered Stott’s view logically inconsistent, and lacking adequate Scriptural foundation.

The ongoing debate on the nature and duration of hell during the entire span of church history forces us to rethink our terminology on hell. We should hesitate to use the nonsensical and inaccurate terms, “Traditional perspective on hell” or “The classical view of hell”, when describing the eternal conscious torment of the wicked. Especially considering this great diversity from the very beginning of church history. To give a view the term “traditional” will, in some cases, be accurate; for instance, when referring to the view that Jesus is divine. However, in more controversial debates with plenty of dissenters, such a term might be misleading - as it gives one perspective an immediate authority. No one approaches the Biblical texts from a purely objective point of view. We are all under the influence of our theological context and background. However, we could, and should, strive to approach the Biblical texts from an objective viewpoint. To employ the term “traditional view” to a highly debated issue will not help us to examine the Biblical texts objectively, it will only add to our prejudices.

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