

Jesus and the End Time | Notes on Everlasting Punishment

Introductory Notes

In the last part of the End Time or Olivet discourse of the Gospel of Matthew, Matt. 25:31-46, the KJV Bible uses the words "everlasting punishment" and "everlasting fire" to describe the teachings of Jesus about the Judgment. Surprisingly, the words "everlasting punishment" do not appear as such anywhere else in the Bible. In addition, the words "everlasting fire" appear as such in only one other Bible text, Matt. 18:8-9, a text which suggests that the words "everlasting fire" and "hell fire" (a term now usually spelled "hellfire") can be treated as synonyms. When End Time prophecies of Jesus like these are read only in English, they can easily be interpreted to mean that he taught that the damned will be punished by being sent or cast into hell, where they will suffer a punishment by fire that will continue without end or "last" forever, an idea also known as Eternalism or Eternal Conscious Torment. But when these End Time prophecies are read in view of the Greek words from which they were translated, and in view of what the New Testament as a whole teaches about the punishment of the damned, other interpretations become apparent. Prominent among these is the idea that the damned will be condemned to a punishment by fire that will end with their destruction, a result which will endure or "stand" forever, an idea also known as Annihilationism. The remainder of this page will be devoted to pointing out and discussing KJV Bible texts that support these and other ideas about the meaning of everlasting punishment. Additional information about the meanings of these words may be found in a page titled "Senses of the Word Everlasting", which includes an in-depth discussion of the meanings of that word.

In the Notes that follow the writer will keep his discussion to a manageable size by focusing on New Testament texts which describe Jesus using words that the Bible often associates with punishments that God has decreed or inflicted, or will decree or inflict, on enemies, sinners, and other evildoers. Among the most commonly used words of this kind are words like hell, death, destroy, destruction, consume, perish, burn, cast, and fire. The writer will do this by citing or quoting, and then discussing specific examples of texts of this kind. He will also cite or quote, and discuss Old Testament texts that Jesus quotes or alludes to in order to explain or support his teachings about the punishment of the damned. By focusing on texts like these, the writer hopes to clarify the teachings of Jesus about damnation in general, and everlasting punishment in particular.

The Meaning of Everlasting Punishment

In v. 41 of his description of the End Time Judgment, Matt. 25:31-46, Jesus describes the cursed being ordered to depart "into everlasting fire". In v. 46 of that text he describes the cursed as going "into everlasting punishment". These words, however, can mean two very different things, depending on the sense in which Jesus uses the word "everlasting". One possibility is that he uses everlasting in a temporally infinite sense in which it refers to things, such as God and His attributes (His power, wisdom, etc.), which will always exist. Another is that he uses everlasting in an absolutely final sense in which it refers to things, such as divinely decreed fates or appointed ends, that will never be changed or undone. In other words, Jesus may use the word "everlasting" to describe things that will go on or "last" forever, or he may use it to describe things that will endure or "stand" forever. Which of these senses of this word Jesus had in mind in Matt. 25:31-46 could hardly be more important. This is because these senses correspond to interpretations or meanings of everlasting punishment that determine whether the pain associated with this punishment will or will not eventually end and, consequently, whether the punishment as a whole is finite or infinite.

Although the answer to the question of whether the punishment mentioned in Matt. 25:46 is finite or infinite may seem simple, it is not. One reason is that, even if it is assumed that the everlasting fire

mentioned in Matt. 25:41 will burn for an infinitely long time, it does not necessarily follow that this fire will do to human beings anything different from what any ordinary fire would: injure and kill them and reduce their bodies to ashes or "dust". The writer uses the word "necessarily" because it can be argued that the parallelism between everlasting fire (v. 41) and everlasting punishment (v. 46) suggests that God will enable persons sent into this fire to feel pain without ever being killed or destroyed. Plausible as this argument may seem, it is not consistent with the many KJV Bible texts that describe divinely decreed punishments. This is because such texts almost always couple words like punish and punishment with forms of words like destroy, devour, consume and perish, all of which are associated with processes that end when they have nothing left to act on. Examples of texts of this kind will be cited in the Notes that follow.

Another reason that the answer to the question of whether the punishment mentioned in Matt. 25:46 is infinite or finite is not simple is that Matt. 25:41 says that the everlasting fire was "prepared for the devil and his angels:". These words are important because the Bible describes angels as spirits and as ministers of flaming fire (Ps. 104:4), but describes human beings as made of dust or, as we would now say, matter (Gen. 2:7 and 3:19 and Eccl. 3:20). As a result, it seems reasonable to ask whether the fire that Jesus speaks about in Matt. 25:41 is a physical fire at all and, if it is, whether this fire affects angels and human beings differently. Such questions are important because, depending on their answers, they may or may not support the idea that angels suffer in this fire for an infinitely long time without being destroyed by it, while human beings suffer in it only until they are consumed or burned to ashes. Since the KJV Bible has little to say about this subject, the writer will, in the Notes that follow, not only describe what he has discovered about how the Bible uses the phrases "everlasting fire" and "everlasting punishment", but also what he has discovered about what the Bible means when it uses their constituent words and their apparent synonyms, e.g., eternal, flame, torment, and for ever ("forever" in American English).

Judgment and Punishment in the Gospel of Matthew

Surprisingly, none of the words or phrases everlasting punishment, everlasting fire, hell fire, eternal punishment and damnation appears as such anywhere in the Old Testament. In addition, the first two of these phrases appear only a few times in the New Testament, all in verses that include words spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Specifically, Jesus uses everlasting punishment only once, in v. 46 of Matt. 25:31-46, and uses everlasting fire only twice, once in v. 41 of Matt. 25:31-46, and once in v. 8 of Matt. 18:2-9. Of these, the latter text is important because it includes two verses, v. 8 and 9, that begin with phrases like "If thine...offend thee" and say essentially the same thing, except that v. 8 ends with "everlasting fire" while v. 9 ends with "hell fire", thereby suggesting that these two phrases are synonymous with one another. In addition, Matthew includes an earlier "If thine...offend thee" text, Matt. 5:27-32, v. 29 and 30 of which use the word "hell" by itself at the places where v. 8 and 9 of Matt. 18:2-9 use everlasting fire and hell fire, respectively, thereby suggesting that all these words and phrases have the same or similar meanings. Even these texts, however, do not make clear whether Jesus used "everlasting" in a temporally infinite sense, a sense in which everlasting punishment means essentially the same thing as Eternal Conscious Torment, or in an absolutely final sense in which it means a punishment that produces an end result or final outcome that will be never be changed or undone. Stated differently, without additional information, the words "everlasting punishment" are as consistent with Eternalism as they are with Annihilationism. To deal with this ambiguity, the writer will now turn to other texts that may help resolve this situation.

Interestingly, both of the above-described Matthean "If thine...offend thee" texts appear near texts which may shed light on the sense in which Jesus used the word "everlasting". Matt. 18:2-9, for example, appears just before Matt. 18:23-35, in which Jesus tells a parable about an unforgiving

servant who is tormented "till he should pay all that was due unto him." (v. 34). In addition, Matt. 5:27-32 appears immediately after Matt. 5:21-26, in which Jesus warns a person to avoid being cast into prison because he will not come out till he "hast paid the uttermost farthing." (v. 26). Since both Matt. 18:2-9 and Matt. 5:27-32 use one or more of the words "everlasting fire", "hell fire" and "hell", and appear near texts in which Jesus speaks of punishments that eventually end, it seems reasonable to think that Jesus is more likely to have used these words in their absolutely final sense than in their temporally infinite sense. It is arguably unclear, however, whether the release of a person who has paid "all that was due", or "the uttermost farthing", would be followed by his being given another chance to achieve salvation, e.g., by reincarnation, as Origen of Alexandria thought, or would take the form of his total destruction, i.e., his annihilation. The difference between these possibilities could hardly be more important. This is because, if it were the former, it would support the idea many people describe as universal salvation, or Universalism, but, if it were the latter, would support the idea many people describe as Annihilationism. The effect of Mark 9:41-48, which arguably comprises still another "If thine ... offend thee" text, will be discussed later in connection with the Gospel of Mark.

The Gospel of Matthew includes two other texts which shed light on the sense in which Jesus uses the word "everlasting" in Matt 25:31-46 of the Matthean discourse, Matt. 13:36-43 and Matt. 13:47-50, both of which describe those who "do iniquity" (v. 41) or are "wicked" (v. 49), and are gathered (v. 41) or severed (v. 49) by angels and cast into a furnace of fire where "there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth". That these texts ought to be regarded as relating to the subject of the End Time Judgment is clear from the fact that both couple references to a furnace of fire with references to the end of the world (v. 40 and 49) and, in the case of Matt. 13:41, to the Son of man. It is also clear from the fact that the activities of the angels mentioned in Matt. 13:41 and 13:49 are similar to those of the angels mentioned in v. 31 of Matt. 24:29-36 of the Matthean discourse. In view of these similarities it is reasonable to treat Matt. 13:36-43 and Matt. 13:47-50 as End Time texts which provide additional information about the fates of those gathered before the Son of man, even though they do not use phrases like everlasting fire and hell fire as such.

Of the similarities and differences between Matt. 13:36-43 and 13:47-50 on the one hand and the Matthean discourse on the other, the most revealing is the use of the unusual phrase "wailing and gnashing of teeth" to describe the fate of those who are cast into a (or the) furnace of fire. This is because the very similar phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" is used in 51 of Matt. 24:37-51 and v. 30 of Matt. 25:14-30 of the Matthean discourse, i.e., just before the reference to everlasting fire in v. 41 of Matt. 25:31-46. This is also because, as explained earlier in connection with Matt. 24:37-51, all of these phrases seem to be based on v. 10 of Ps. 112:1-10: "The wicked shall see it, and be grieved; he shall gnash with his teeth, and melt away: the desire of the wicked shall perish.". When these New and Old Testaments texts are considered together, they seem to make clear that there is no inconsistency between saying that wicked persons will go into everlasting fire and saying that they will melt away or perish. These texts therefore seem to support the idea that Matt. 25:31-46 uses the word "everlasting" in its absolutely final or Annihilationist sense, rather than in its temporally infinite or Eternalist sense. If this conclusion is correct, it would cast serious doubt on the correctness of the idea that people today often describe as Eternal Conscious Torment.

Judgment and Punishment in the Gospel of Mark

While the Gospel of Mark never uses the phrase "everlasting punishment" as such, it does include two End Time texts which describe teachings of Jesus that seem to help shed light on the meaning of this phrase: Mark 3:22-30 and Mark 9:41-48. Turning first to Mark 3:22-30, this text is helpful because v. 29 thereof includes the one and only occurrence of the phrase "eternal damnation" in the

KJV Bible, and because the words "everlasting" and "eternal" have senses in which they are synonymous with one another. Both of these words, for example, have senses in which they describe things that continue forever (or are temporally infinite) and senses in which they describe things that do not change with time (or are absolutely final). In fact, the word "eternal", unlike the word "everlasting", also has a more technical sense in which has a meaning related to that of the noun "eternity", a word that philosophers use to describe a plane (or mode) of existence which excludes change because it transcends time. As a result, if this more technical sense of the word "eternal" is taken into account, it arguably favors the idea that the word "eternal" in v. 29 of Mark 3:22-30 is used in its absolutely final rather than in its temporally infinite sense. Also worthy of consideration is the fact that, in the NRSV Bible, v. 46 of Matt. 25:31-46 uses the words "eternal punishment" where the KJV Bible uses the words "everlasting punishment".

Turning next to Mark 9:41-48, it is interesting to observe that, although Mark does not use the word "everlasting" or the phrase "everlasting fire" as such, he does use the phrase "hell fire" as such in v. 47 of that text. This is important because the two "If thine...offend thee" verses in Mark 9:41-48 (v. 43 and 45) are related to Matt. 18:2-9, verses 8 and 9 of which treat hell fire and everlasting fire as synonymous with one another. Mark 9:47, however, uses hell fire in the phrase "cast into hell fire", a phrase which seems to be a contraction of the words "cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched", and which is repeated, almost word for word, in Mark 9:43 and 45. Even more important is the fact that Mark describes Jesus explaining v. 43, 45 and 47 by coupling them with v. 44, 46 and 48, all of which read, "Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.". Unfortunately, the true significance of these words cannot be fully understood without understanding the Old Testament passage to which it alludes, v. 24 of Is. 66:15-24. Accordingly, the writer will now digress briefly to discuss how the latter text affects the meaning of Mark 9:41-48.

In the KJV Bible version of the Old Testament, v. 24 of Is. 66:15-24 describes God saying, "...for* their worm shall not die, neither shall their* fire be quenched;". God says this, however, in the middle of a long verse that begins with the words "And they shall go forth, and look at the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me:" and ends with the words "and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.". In addition, Is. 66:15-18 makes clear that these carcasses are those of persons God will slay with fire and sword when He comes to gather all nations to see his glory, while Is. 66:20-24 adds that all flesh will see these carcasses near Jerusalem. As a result, it is clear that, when Is. 66:24 is read in context, it speaks not about the place Christians call hell, but rather about the place the Old Testament calls "the valley of the son of Hinnom", the valley south of Jerusalem where trash, human waste, dead bodies, etc. were disposed of in fires that burned day and night. See, for example, 2Chron. 28:1-3, Jer. 7:31-32 and Jer. 19:2-7. This idea is confirmed by the fact that, in their original Greek, Mark 9:43 and 47 refer to this place using the word that transliterates into English as "Gehenna". Thus, even without more, Jesus' allusion to v. 24 of Is. 66:15-24 suggests that Mark 9:41-48 portrays Jesus warning people about a fate that involves a process of annihilation by fire, and not a process of torment by fire that will continue without end for all eternity, i.e., Eternal Conscious Torment.

* Special Note on Is. 66:24: Surprisingly, v. 44, 46 and 48 of Mark 9:41-48 eliminate the parallelism between the phrases "*their* worm" and "*their* fire" in Is. 66:24, and show these phrases as "*their* worm" and "*the* fire", respectively. In addition, v. 44, 46 and 48 of Mark 9:41-48 use the words "*Where* their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.", at the point where Is. 66:24 uses "... : *for* their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and..." [italics added].

Importantly, there are problems with v. 24 of Is. 66:15-24 which make it difficult to reconcile with the idea that Mark 9:41-48 speaks about a punishment that is temporally infinite rather than absolutely final. One problem is the way Is. 66:24 uses the word "worm". More particularly, Is. 66:24 uses the

singular noun "worm" with a plural pronoun "their" that refers back to the carcasses of an unspecified number of dead men and thus, if interpreted literally, would seem to call for a single giant worm that "dieth not". If the word "worm" is not interpreted literally, on the other hand, it could be regarded as a metaphor that personifies processes of decay and disintegration that cannot be stopped (dieth not?). The same may be true of the word "fire" because fire produces effects like those of "the worm" and produces them even more quickly. Another problem is that attempts to interpret the word "worm" non-literally as a symbol or disparaging figure of speech for the bodies of evil persons that God will raise from the dead and make indestructible must somehow deal with the fact that the canonical books of the Old Testament do not provide support for this idea. Finally, as stated earlier, the important thing about a fire is not whether it is everlasting, or cannot be quenched, but rather what it does to persons who are cast into it. Thus, for all these reasons, it seems likely that v. 24 of Is. 66:15-24 supports the idea that Mark 9:41-48 warns of a punishment that is absolutely final rather than a punishment that is temporally infinite.

Judgment and Punishment in the Gospel of Luke

Although the Gospel of Luke does not include any verses which describe teachings of Jesus that use either of the phrases "everlasting fire" and "hell fire" as such, or any form of words like punish and quench, it does include three texts which describe teachings that use the word "hell" as such: Luke 10:1-16, Luke 12:2-7 and Luke 16:19-31. Of these, Luke 10:1-16 is interesting because it is a description of the sending out of the seventy in which Jesus speaks about hell (v. 15) as a place where a city (Capernaum) can be thrust down. See also v. 23 of Matt. 11:20-24 in which Jesus uses very similar words while upbraiding cities where he did mighty works. These texts are interesting because, by speaking about hell as a place where a city can be thrust down, they suggest that Jesus uses the word "hell" in one of the Old Testament senses discussed in the Auxiliary Sense file titled "Senses of the Word Hell", namely, the sense in which it means a place below the surface of the earth. Thus, there is little about Luke 10:1-16 which supports the idea that v. 46 of Matt. 25:31-46 uses the word "everlasting" in its temporally infinite sense, rather than in its absolutely final sense.

The second Lukan text which describes Jesus using the word "hell" as such, Luke 12:2-7, is interesting because, although it does not use the word "hell" with the word "fire", it warns people to fear most him which "after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell;" (v. 5), thereby suggesting that there are punishments which can be inflicted on a person after he is dead. Curiously, however, this Lukan text is closely paralleled by Matt. 10:26-31, v. 29 of which warns the disciples to fear most him which "is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.". While interpreting these texts in conjunction with one another raises difficult questions about the nature of life after death, Matthew's version at least suggests that there is nothing inconsistent with a person being in hell and being destroyed, body and soul. As a result, it seems reasonable to think that these texts are consistent with the idea that v. 46 of Matt. 25:31-46 uses the word "everlasting" in its absolutely final sense rather than in its temporally infinite sense.

The third Lukan text which describes Jesus using the word "hell" as such, Luke 16:19-31, is interesting because it portrays him using this word to describe a place of torment and flame (v. 23, 24 and 28) which a person cannot leave (v. 26). It is therefore a text which clearly seems to describe teachings of Jesus about hell and damnation which are (or at least once were) a common feature of Sunday sermons. Even this Lukan text, however, says nothing about how long this torment or punishment will last. In addition, the only text in the Gospel of Matthew which describes Jesus using a form of the word "torment" with reference to individuals other than sick persons or devils is Matt. 18:23-35, which describes him teaching that the torment of the wicked servant will last "till he should pay all that was due unto him." (v. 34). See also v. 26 of Matt. 5:21-26, which describes Jesus

teaching that a person will not come out of prison till he has paid the uttermost farthing. As a result, it seems reasonable to think that Luke 16:19-31 is at least consistent with the idea that v. 46 of Matt. 25:31-46 uses the word "everlasting" in its absolutely final or Annihilationist sense, rather than in its temporally infinite or Eternalist sense.

Judgment and Punishment in the Gospel of John

Like the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of John does not include any texts that describe Jesus using phrases like everlasting fire and hell fire, or any forms of words like punish, quench, gnash or hell. It does, however, include one text, John 15:1-6, v. 6 of which describes Jesus stating that those who do not abide in him are withered branches that will be cast into the fire and burned, a statement similar to that made by John the Baptist in v. 10 and 12 of Matt. 3:7-12. John also includes texts which describe Jesus comparing the difference between those who are saved and those who are not to that between those who have everlasting or eternal life and those who perish (John 3:14-18) or "come into condemnation" (v. 24 of John 5:19-29). V. 29 of this text clarifies this difference by describing it as that between those who come forth "unto the resurrection of life" and those who come forth "unto the resurrection of damnation", a verse which seems to parallel Dan. 12:2: "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." As a result, the Gospel of John seems to suggest that he uses the word "everlasting" in sense in which it contemplates an absolutely final end state, and not in a sense in which it contemplates an ongoing process of Eternal Conscious Torment.

Judgment and Punishment in the Old Testament

Having discussed what the Gospels seem to mean when they discuss teachings of Jesus about everlasting fire, everlasting punishment, hell fire, hell and their apparent synonyms and equivalents, the writer will now discuss what the Old Testament seems to mean when it uses terms of these kinds. Since, as stated earlier, the Old Testament does not use any of the terms "everlasting punishment", "everlasting fire", "hell fire", "eternal punishment" and "damnation" as such, this task reduces itself to that of discussing how the Old Testament uses individual words like everlasting, punishment, fire and hell and their apparent synonyms and equivalents. While doing this necessarily involves discussing some texts that Jesus does not quote from or allude to in the Gospels, the writer believes that they can reveal a lot about what Jesus meant when he used these words. This is because it is reasonable to assume that the books we now call the Old Testament were well known to Jesus and would have affected what he meant when he used words that appear in it.

Turning first to the word "everlasting", a search of the Old Testament reveals that, while it uses this word many times, it never uses it as an adjective with nouns like fire, flame, punishment and torment. It also uses the word "eternal" twice, in Deut. 33:26-29 (v. 27) and Is. 60:1-22 (v. 15), but never as an adjective with nouns like fire, flame, punishment and torment. The Old Testament does, however, often use the word "everlasting" as an adjective with nouns like God, kingdom and mercy. On the other hand, it often uses words like for ever and perpetual, which arguably convey generally the same idea as everlasting, with verbs like destroy, devour, consume and perish. See, for example, Num. 24:14-25 (v. 20), 2Sam. 2:26, Job 4:17-21 (v. 20), Ps. 9:1-8 (v. 5-6), Ps. 52:4-6 (v. 5), Ps 92:7-15 (v. 7) and Obad. 1:10. It therefore seems reasonable to think that, except where the Old Testament uses the word "everlasting" to describe God or things associated with Him, it probably uses this word in its absolutely final sense rather than in its temporally infinite sense.

Turning next to the word "punishment", a search of the Old Testament reveals that, while it includes many texts that use the words "punishment" and "punish" to describe actions that God takes or threatens to take against evildoers, it does not include any texts that couple these words with the

word "everlasting". It does, however, include numerous texts that use the words "punishment" and "punish" with words like destroy, devour, consume and cut off. See, for example, Job 31:3, Is. 10:12-18, Is. 13:6-15, Jer. 11:22, Jer. 21:14 and Zeph. 1:7-18. Among texts of this kind, Is. 13:6-15 is of special interest because some of its verses directly parallel parts of the End Time discourses that describe the coming of the Son of man. Compare, for example, Is. 13:6-15 (v. 10 and 13) with Matt. 24:29, Mark 13:24-25 and Luke 21:25-26. Finally, even this search is expanded to include texts that use the words "punishment" and "punish" with words or phrases like for ever and perpetual, rather than with the word "everlasting", it still leads to texts which use these words with verbs like destroy, devour, consume, perish and cut off. See, for example, 2Sam. 2:26, Job 4:17-21 (v. 20), Ps. 9:1-8 (v. 5-6), Ps. 52:4-6 (v. 5), Ps. 92:7-15 (v. 7) and Obad. 1:10. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the Old Testament view of punishment is that it is a thing that *results in* death, rather than a thing that *occurs after* death.

Turning next to the word "fire", a search of the Old Testament reveals that it often uses the word "fire" either in beneficial senses in which it refers to a thing that produces heat and light, e.g., campfires and torches, or in destructive senses in which it refers to a thing that destroys other things. Ordinarily, when the Old Testament uses the word "fire" in a destructive sense it uses it with words like devour and consume. Verses that describe fire devouring things include Ps. 21:9, Ps. 50:3 and Zeph. 1:18. Verses that describe fire consuming things include Num. 11:1, 1Kings 18:38 and Neh. 2:3. Texts that describe fire doing other things include destroying them (Dan. 7:9-14), causing them to melt as wax (Ps. 68:1-4) and consume away into smoke (Ps. 37:16-20). On the other hand, the Old Testament rarely uses the word "fire" with the word "punish". In fact, it contains only one verse that uses both of these words, v. 14 of Jer. 21:11-14, a verse that speaks about a fire as devouring "all things round about it.". Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the Old Testament does not support the idea that God uses fire to inflict a punishment by fire that continues without end forever.

Interestingly, the Old Testament includes a number of verses that use "fire" in a sense that bridges the difference between its beneficial and its destructive senses. Specifically, it includes verses that describe fire as a thing that can refine or purify another thing by destroying its impurities. See, for example, Zech. 13:9 and Mal. 3:2. What is intriguing about verses that use fire in this sense is the question of whether and how they are related to texts in which Jesus tells parables about persons who are imprisoned or punished until they have paid in full for the wrong they have done. See, for example, v. 26 of Matt. 5:21-26 and v. 34 of Matt. 18:23-35, which appear either in or close to the only two texts in which Matthew uses the phrase "hell fire" as such, Matt. 5:21-26 (v. 22) and Matt. 18:2-9 (v. 9), respectively. Among these, the latter text is of particular interest because it is the parallelism between v. 8 and 9 thereof which provides the clearest support for the idea that the phrases "hell fire" and "everlasting fire" are synonymous with one another.

Finally, a search of the Old Testament for the word "hell" reveals that it never uses this word in a sense in which it refers a place where evil persons are punished with fire after they die. It does, however, often use senses of this word in which it is synonymous* with words or phrases like the pit (or grave), death and destruction, or in which it refers to a place under the earth where the dead lie, dwell or have their abode. Examples of texts that use the word "hell" in a sense in which it is synonymous with the pit (or grave) include Is. 14:4-19 (v. 15) and Ezek. 31:13-18 (v. 16). Examples of texts that treat hell and destruction, or hell and death, as synonymous with one another include Ps 116:3-9 (v. 3) and Is. 28:14-21 (v. 15), and Job 26:6-12 (v. 6) and Prov. 15:11, respectively. Finally, examples of texts that use hell in a sense in which it refers to a place under the earth where the dead lie include Is. 14:4-19 (v. 9) and Ezek. 32:3-10 (v. 7). These and other senses of the word "hell" are also shown and discussed in the Auxiliary Sense file titled "Senses of the Word Hell".

*Special Note on Other Translations: The writer here uses the word "synonymous" to avoid the difficulties associated with individually discussing the ways in which the words of the original Hebrew version of the Old Testament and the original Greek version of the New Testament have been translated into the English word "hell" in the KJV Bible. One of these difficulties is that the translators of the King James Version of the Old Testament have used all of the English words hell, grave, pit and death to translate the single Hebrew word which is transliterated into English as Sheol. Another is that the translators of the KJV Bible have used the single word "hell" to translate all of the words that the New Revised Standard Version of the New Testament shows as Gehenna, Hades and Tartarus. To make this difference easy to visualize and understand, the author includes below a copy of an image he showed and discussed in his Facebook post dated March 21, 2021.

The Words the KJV Bible Translates Into the English Word 'Hell'	Meanings of These Words As Described in Strong's Exhaustive Concordance
	<p>Sheol: hades or the world of the dead (as if a subterranean retreat), including its accessories and inmates: - grave, hell, pit. (Strong's Concordance # 7585)</p> <p>Hades: "Hades" or the place (state) of departed souls: - grave, hell. (Strong's Concordance # 86)</p> <p>Gehenna: Valley of (the son of) Hinnom; gehenna (or Ge-Hinnom), a valley of Jerusalem, used (fig.) as a place (or state) of everlasting punishment: - hell. (Strong's Conc. # 1067)</p> <p>Tartaroo: the deepest abyss of Hades; to incarcerate in eternal torment: - cast down to hell. (Strong's Conc. # 5020)</p>
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While there is no objective limit on the extent to which searches of the above-discussed kinds can be expanded, there is a point beyond which such searches yield diminishing returns. Accordingly, instead of discussing more searches of these kinds, the writer will close his description of Old Testament teachings about divinely inflicted punishments by summarizing the teachings of a few Old Testament passages that illustrate how it typically describes such punishments, namely, v. 14-18 of Zeph. 1:14-18, v. 22-24 of Jer. 30:18-24 and v. 1-3 and 5 of Mal. 4:1-6. Among these, Zeph. 1:14-18 is of interest because it describes the day of the Lord as a day of wrath, bloodshed and desolation when a devouring fire from God will eliminate all who have sinned against Him. Similarly, Jer. 30:22-24 is of interest because it describes the pain which the Lord will inflict in his anger in the latter days and adds that this anger will pass after He has "performed the intents of his heart" (v. 24). Finally, Mal. 4:1-3 is of interest because it describes a day that shall burn up as an oven when "all that do wickedly" shall be ashes under the feet of those who fear God's name, and because v. 5 of Mal. 4:4-6 teaches that God will send Elijah (a.k.a. Elias) before "the great and dreadful day of the Lord:", a teaching that figures prominently in the teachings of Jesus. Since the Gospels portray Jesus as having great expertise in the Holy Scriptures that existed during the time of his earthly ministry, it is entirely reasonable to think that his own teachings about a divinely imposed punishment would not differ in any substantial way from those taught by those Holy Scriptures.

Proposed Conclusion

In view of the foregoing, it is reasonable to conclude that the King James Version of the Bible does not provide substantial support for the idea of a Judgment at which God imposes on evildoers a punishment by fire that is everlasting because it will go on or "last" forever, but does provide substantial support for the idea of a Judgment at which God imposes on evildoers a punishment by fire that is everlasting because it produces results (being destroyed, devoured, consumed, etc.) that will endure or "stand" forever.

Concluding Conjecture

While it may seem that the total destruction of persons who are not saved is too mild a punishment for those who have lived particularly evil lives, it should be remembered that human beings experience time subjectively. Experiences of joy or triumph that occupy hours or days, for example, can seem to pass very quickly. Experiences of pain or shame that occupy the same amount of time, on the other hand, can seem to drag on forever. It therefore seems reasonable to think that, if the requirements of divine justice were to call for very different afterlife punishments, God might provide for these differences by changing the perceived duration of a punishment, and not its actual duration. Inflicting punishments in this way would, in any case, reflect more favorably on God's wisdom than creating and maintaining a gigantic fiery prison where billions of individuals who did not have a choice about being born will suffer forever at the command of the God who made that choice for them.