

"THE PLAIN MEANING" - A REVIEW ESSAY

A review of Robert A. Morey's *Death and the Afterlife* (Bethany House Publishers, 1984)

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I. Three Views of Final Punishment

Christians since the third century have held three major opinions concerning the final destiny of the wicked. As to what earlier Christians believed on this subject, that is part of the controversy. The three may be styled the traditionalist, the conditionalist, and the universalist.

What the views have in common. The three views have a lot in common. Many advocates of all three look to Scripture to support their respective conclusions. In their best forms, all three views say that the wicked will be raised, will face God in judgment, then be banished into a painful hell. Only then do the scenarios these three views propose begin to differ.

The difference between the three views. Traditionalists say that those who enter hell will there suffer unending conscious torment forever and ever. This, they claim, is the only proper interpretation of the phrase "eternal punishment," which we have from the very mouth of Jesus (Mt. 25:46). Morey is a traditionalist.

Conditionalists agree that those who go to hell may suffer conscious pain of whatever degree and duration God may justly determine. But in the end, they say, the wicked will be consumed entirely and be no more. This is punishment since it is neither accidental nor self-imposed but is the penal sentence handed down at God's great Judgment Day. It is eternal, they insist, both because it occurs in the Age to Come but also because its outcome will never be reversed or undone. I am a conditionalist. This is the view with which I conclude my study in [*The Fire That Consumes*](#).

Universalists of the sort we are describing believe that hell's fire is remedial and purgative so that its victims, once thoroughly cleansed, will graduate, so to speak, to heaven. Yet they also say they believe in eternal punishment, since they teach that the wicked must face God on the other side of Time, where they will surely answer for their sins.

Taking each view in its best form. Any viewpoint can attract its share of crazies, of course, who discredit the position and embarrass others who stand by their side. It is a mark of maturity, however, to distinguish between what is essential to a view and what is merely superfluous, and to judge a position by its strongest evidence and not by its abuses or extremes.

Some traditionalists, for example, have taken great pleasure in the thought of their theological adversaries writhing forever in unspeakable torment. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that all traditionalists share such a psychological warp.

Some conditionalists believe that earthly death is the final end of the wicked and that they will never be seen again. Yet that is an extreme viewpoint which most conditionalists have rejected soundly through the years.

Some universalists wish to dispose of hell altogether - or even of divine judgment. But it would be unfair to impute their inclination to all who argue that the entire human family will somehow ultimately come to salvation through Christ.

Since Morey and I both reject the universalist position, as I suspect do most of our readers, we will leave that opinion at this point and focus attention on the other two.

II. Traditionalism's Strongest Arguments

Traditionalists offer two chief reasons for their belief that the wicked will suffer conscious pain forever. One reason is theological; the other is historical.

Theological: sinners are indestructible

The first traditionalist argument involves man as they perceive him. It has had two primary forms, one ancient and one modern. The first concerned man's soul, and creation. The second concerns his body, and the resurrection.

The ancient argument: immortal souls -

In the third and fourth centuries after Christ, traditionalists argued that the wicked were indestructible because that is simply the nature of the soul. But they disagreed with the pagan Platonic Greek philosophy, which they had held even before they became Christians, in one important way. Where many pagans held that the soul existed from eternity past and was inherently immortal, these Christian philosophers insisted that God created even the immortal soul, and they added that God could also destroy it if he ever so decided. But when they discussed the final fate of the wicked, men like Tertullian seemed to have forgotten that they had made this important point. Hell's fire could not consume the soul, they reasoned, because, as everyone knows, souls are immortal and cannot be destroyed.

The modern argument: immortalized resurrected sinners -

Most traditionalists of recent years have reasoned from another basis. Immortality is not the soul's inherent quality, many now point out. It is rather an attribute to be bestowed at the resurrection of the dead.

Morey and I agree, therefore, that the soul is God's creation; it does not exist of itself or on its own (p. 94). We also agree that immortality is a gift to be opened at the resurrection. When the New Testament uses the words "immortal" and "incorruptible," Morey points out, "it is obvious" that it is speaking of "attributes of the resurrection body" and not "the condition of man's soul after death" (p. 95). In fact, he notes, the phrase "the immortality of the soul" is "never found in Scripture," because its authors wished to avoid "the pagan connotations" that term so often implies (p. 95).

In the New Testament, Morey continues, the words "immortal" and "incorruptible" describe the resurrection bodies of the "resurrected saints" (emphasis added). These words tell us that the redeemed not only will have eternal existence; they will enjoy life without "degeneration" in a body "incapable of death."

Here conditionalists stand to applaud. That is precisely the point, they say. "Immortal" and "incorruptible" describe the resurrection bodies of the saved. But where does Scripture ever hint that the wicked will also be raised immortal or incorruptible? And if it does not, then why should anyone suppose the wicked will forever exist? Why should we not take at face value Scripture's repeated warnings that those who go to hell will finally perish, die, corrupt and be destroyed?

Historical: the Jewish view at the time of Christ

The traditionalist's second major argument is historical in nature. During the time between the testaments the idea of hell as a place of everlasting conscious torment developed out of Old Testament roots. And by the time of Jesus, he says, this understanding was "the accepted Jewish view." Since Jesus did not directly contradict this perception, traditionalists argue, he must have approved of it as well. We should therefore read Jesus' words with this understanding in mind.

There was a time when traditionalists could be excused for holding this opinion. Did not Alfred Edersheim, the great 19th-century Christian scholar of Judaica, say that this was the ancient state of affairs? And did not Josephus, the Jewish apologist and contemporary of Paul, report that Pharisees and Essenes alike held to what we have called the traditionalist view? What more needs to be said?

At least this. Our own century has seen a great increase in the number of primary sources which shed light on this subject. The Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, which began to be discovered only in 1947, make it plain that the Jewish community at Qumran, probably Essene in character, held strictly to the view that the wicked would finally become extinct. Jewish writings which the scholars group under the heading of Pseudepigrapha have likewise become popularly available in English only since 1914. These writings, too, demonstrate clearly the great diversity of Jewish opinion at the time Jesus walked the paths of Palestine.

Recent scholarship has changed its opinion on the date of much rabbinic material as well, including the Mishna and the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. Scholars today generally believe that these collections of rabbinic doctrines and traditional interpretations of controversial points probably date from after the destruction of

Jerusalem in A. D. 70, an event which gave major impetus to the formation of classical rabbinic Judaism. The Mishna, for example, might not have been codified in its present form until the third century after Jesus Christ.

We must not fault men like Edersheim in this regard. He did the best he could with the materials he had, and he was not accountable for anything more. It is a different matter, however, for an author working today to be content to repeat Edersheim's opinions. Morey's book, inexcusably, falls into this error (pp. 89, 119, 126-127).

What is more, even Edersheim's testimony proves a diversity of Jewish belief, though Morey repeatedly says that Edersheim proves eternal torment was the accepted Jewish view at the time of Christ. In the very quotation from Edersheim which Morey includes as an appendix to his book we learn that both Shammai and Hilel taught that some would go down to Gehenna to stay, while others would go down but come up again (p. 26B). And Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai, we learn, was so uncertain about the wicked's final fate in hell that he didn't know whether God would bind them with eternal fetters, be angry with an eternal wrath, or kill with an eternal death (p. 269). And this is Morey's highest authority for a uniform first-century Jewish view.

III. Conditionalism's Strongest Argument

Conditionalists like to make their point by simply lining up in long rows the very words and expressions Old and New Testament writers use to describe the final end of the lost.

The Old Testament's vocabulary. Even traditionalists say that they are hard pressed to find their view in the Old Testament, but conditionalists believe that their expedition proves more fruitful. The Old Testament uses more than 70 different Hebrew words or phrases to depict the fate of the wicked and not one of them sounds anything like everlasting conscious torment. Froom lists these terms in his massive work, as I do in part in mine. I also criticize Froom for some over-zealous picking of proof texts, though Morey erroneously charges that conditionalists since Froom have simply repeated his list and his claims, citing, in his misnumbered footnote, my work on this point.

The expressions used by Jesus. As to the terms found in the Gospels - *Gehenna, the undying worm, the unquenchable fire, and the weeping and grinding of teeth* - the conditionalist urges us to observe how the same expressions are commonly used in the Old Testament. We will be absolutely amazed, he tells us, to see how these terms there all seem to indicate a divine punishment of destruction which can neither be resisted nor reversed.

The conditionalist quite agrees that New Testament writers may change the meaning of these terms if they wish, or increase or enhance their meaning. But he cannot understand the regular traditionalist practice of simply ignoring all the Old Testament occurrences of these expressions, choosing to define them instead by uninspired Jewish writings or even the literature of pagans.

The regular Pauline words. Conditionalists also list the major Pauline terms describing the end of the wicked, and offer them as *prima facie* evidence to support their view. Words like *die, perish, destroy, consume, and corrupt* seem clearly to say what the conditionalist wishes to convey. He does not claim that these words are always used literally. He does note that figurative or metaphorical meanings are possible only if the words have some plain meaning from which the non-literal usage derives its content and power. And the conditionalist is confident that the ordinary man in the street can tell us what those words usually mean to him. Scripture was not written by scientists, the conditionalist notes, or in some technical or mystical language, but in the everyday Greek language of the common citizen, first century A. D.

One would never suspect it from Morey's book, but these very words Paul uses were used in the regular Greek conversations of the first century to describe the future of man after death - and by partisans of all opinions. Those who argued that every soul will live forever denied that any soul will ever die, perish, corrupt or be destroyed - using these very words used throughout the New Testament epistles. Others who argued that death will end every man insisted that every soul will die, perish, corrupt and be destroyed at the point of what we call physical death. They used these same Greek words to assert their claim.

New Testament writers employ the identical Greek terms--though they disagree with both groups of pagan thinkers mentioned above. Instead Scripture affirms that those who are redeemed by Christ will never

perish, die, corrupt, or be destroyed. And it warns, on the other hand, that those who persistently reject God's grace until the end will indeed die, perish, corrupt, be consumed and be destroyed forever.

Whether we think of first-century Greek or 20th-century English, the "plain meaning" of the Bible's words fit the conditionalist viewpoint very well.

The Traditionalists' Response

Traditionalists will not have this, of course, and they respond in this way. We must understand, they tell us, that words like *die*, *perish*, *destroy*, *corrupt* and *consume* - when used of the wicked - all mean something entirely different from what we might suspect. After all, science tells us that nothing is ever annihilated at all, but only changes form. What the traditionalist does not tell us is that the same law of thermodynamics also says nothing is ever created. Christians affirm that God did create all things, mankind included, and they all know that if he so chooses, God can thoroughly annihilate it all as well.

Yet traditionalists continue to mumble about the impossibility of technical "annihilation," a word conditionalists do not generally even use. Does anyone really imagine that the family of a martyr about to die at the stake would find any comfort in the explanation that their loved one will not really "perish," since his body will merely change its form to ashes instead of flesh and blood?

Morey spends several pages in his first chapter calling for the "plain meaning" of Biblical words (pp. 20-22). But then he spends the rest of his book explaining why these words all really mean something precisely the opposite of what their "plain meaning" would suggest to ordinary people in every land and age. Conditionalists see this as a complete dodge of the evidence, and they still wait for something more.

IV. Particular Weaknesses of This Book

Besides repeating the several ordinary and inherent weaknesses of the traditionalist position, Morey's book contains numerous errors of his own. Some major ones are as follows:

Attacks on the person

Guilt by association.

Throughout the book, Morey refers to "universalists and annihilationists," as if the two were somehow related. All they have in common is that they both reject the traditionalist view as being unbiblical and a slander to the heavenly Father. In fact, more universalists have probably been spawned in reaction to the traditionalist view than by any other single factor throughout Christian history. Morey also leaves the impression that conditionalists border on the "cultic," which is patently false in most instances.

Libelous personal judgments.

Morey charges that conditionalists are people seeking to "silence their conscience," "justify their wicked lives" and "defend their evil ways" (p. 157). He says they are capitulating to "liberalism" and a "weak view of Scripture" (p. 203). The truth is that conditionalists are frequently so thoroughly devoted to Scripture that they are willing to resist a majority opinion, even against overwhelming odds, when they feel that loyalty to the Bible demands it. A "high view of Scripture" is demonstrated far better by one's faithful use of the Bible than by bold but bare claims that may be easily made.

Outright falsehoods.

Morey's account of the origin, purpose, and subsequent history of Verdict Publications is vicious and untrue. He calls it a "covert Adventist operation" which moved to America from Australia to hide its true intent, then for the same purpose changed its paper's name (pp. 202-203).

The truth is that Verdict Publications began for the purpose of propagating Reformation principles of justification within the Seventh-day Adventist community. Its influence spread because of its solid offerings, and it became popular around the world. The magazine was first named Present Truth because that had been the name of a pioneer SDA journal, and the publishers wished to make the point that the "present truth" for today (PT 1:12) is justification through trust in Christ's work alone and not reliance on Ellen G. White. The name was later changed to Verdict because people confused the former name with Herbert W. Armstrong's periodical of a similar title.

False appeals to authority

Outdated testimony.

We have already noted Morey's use of Edersheim and Josephus to prove his claim of a uniform or accepted Jewish view of final punishment at the time of Christ. In this instance, as we pointed out there, Edersheim simply relied on information that today is outdated by better sources. It is commonly understood by scholars that Josephus writes from a clearly biased viewpoint on some matters in an effort to present his people in the best light to the victorious Romans. The Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha and Dead Sea Scrolls are all available for any scholar today who wishes to obtain primary information on first-century Jewish thought.

Following the majority or human wisdom.

Morey cites "the best of human minds" and "the best of the human race" who have always believed in the immortality of the soul, with emphasis on "philosophers from Socrates to the present" (pp. 67-68). We should rather keep in mind Paul's warnings against philosophical notions which are contrary to the resurrection faith, as well as Jesus' words about following the crowd down its broad road away from him and his teaching.

Mishandling primary sources by inaccurate summarization.

Morey's treatment of the intertestamental literature involves this error at almost every juncture. Space allows these outstanding examples alone.

He cites Ecclesiasticus 7:16-17 as proof that the author accepted his view of hell, imposing on Sirach's "fire and worms" a meaning first found in Judith 16:17. He does not mention that the "fire and worms" in this text were "decay" in the original Hebrew, that the original author's grandson changed it to "fire and worms" in the Greek edition to suit a later doctrine, or that at least three other passages in Ecclesiasticus sound exactly like total destruction.

Morey claims that I took Wisdom of Solomon 2:1-12 out of context and misused it. The truth is, I didn't even mention the passage. The page he

cites in my book does give nine other quotations from this book disagreeable to Morey's position which he totally ignores.

He claims that conditionalists do not mention passages in 4 Maccabees because they teach the traditional doctrine. In fact, I cite these texts explicitly as proof that the traditional view does appear in some pseudepigraphal literature.

Morey quotes 2 Baruch's expectation that the wicked will be "tormented yet more" in "the last time" to come, says conditionalists do not note this passage, and says it is "absurd" to claim Baruch as an advocate of the conditionalist view. I cite the same text he does, observe that it doesn't say whether the torment will ever end or not, then give six other passages from Baruch which are claimed by traditionalists as well as twelve others which indicate total extinction.

Morey has nine lines in his book concerning the Book of Jubilees, citing two passages from it, and says I claim the book teaches that the wicked will cease to exist. My book devotes more than 165 lines to Jubilees, cites 11 passages from it, and points out plainly that this book offers an inconsistent witness on the subject at hand.

Fallacies in reasoning from the evidence

Erecting a "straw man" and then knocking it down.

Morey's book is replete with this debater's error. He says, for example, that conditionalists:

- (1) admit no degree of punishment (p. 154);
- (2) deny that *aion* has any sense of endlessness (p. 129);
- (3) deny that the traditionalist view appears in the pseudepigrapha (p. 123);
- (4) have no emotional problem with the thought of extinction (p. 101);
- (5) teach that the wicked receive their full punishment by passing into non-existence at death (p. 87);

- (6) say that *Sheol* means the physical grave (p. 75);
- (7) deny an afterlife, and that based on denying the indestructibility of the soul (pp. 67-68);
- (8) think Socrates and Plato didn't hold to the survival of the soul after death (p. 56);
- (9) give "soul" one rigid meaning throughout the Bible (p. 49-50);
- (10) refuse to let the New Testament give new meaning to Old Testament words (p. 23);
- (11) teach that no one has "everlasting" life now (p. 27);
- (12) dismiss Luke 16:19-31 as "nothing" (p. 30).

Suffice it to say that these representations are the concoctions of Morey's own fertile imagination and do not represent responsible conditionalist authors at all. What is more, many conditionalist books (including *The Fire That Consumes*) say a great deal more on each point to the contrary than Morey does in his book. Thoughtful readers will not accept such "straw men" on mere assertion, but will seek solid evidence when an author purports to represent his theological opponent.

Conclusions without evidence.

A prime example of this fallacy is Morey's statement that "once man dies, he . . . becomes a disembodied supradimensional energy being and is capable of thought and speech without the need of a body" (p. 79). This probably states his own opinion very clearly - and probably that of Plato and Socrates as well - but where, if ever, does such a notion appear in the Word of God? If this is the true state of affairs, it singlehandedly eliminates the need of a bodily resurrection, since this "disembodied supradimensional energy being" gets along so well without a body and might even travel faster so unencumbered!

Evidence with non sequiter conclusions.

Two examples must do here. At the Reformation, Morey says that "even given the anti-Christian bias of the classic European philosophers . . . the doctrine of the immortality of the soul remained a part of Western thought" (p. 174). His implication is that the doctrine of immortal souls was so firmly entrenched in Christian thinking that even an anti-Christian

public could not uproot it. The fact is that the doctrine of immortal souls has always depended far more on pagan philosophy than it has on Scripture, and that pagans, humanists and Christian "liberals" have for centuries taught that doctrine even while rejecting Scripture and the resurrection.

A second example comes when Morey states that the Septuagint used *psuche* (sic) for *nephesh* because its translators believed in the immortality of the soul and this Greek word everywhere had that meaning (p. 50). The truth is that the same Greek word was used by those who believed it lived forever and always had. That the Septuagint's translators chose it does not prove what they believed, therefore, about the soul's immortality. Even if it did, however, it might mean only that they were importing into the Greek Old Testament a concept never there in its original Hebrew.

Refuting a point by agreeing with it.

Morey complains about the way conditionalists use biblical expressions like "eternal judgment" and "eternal redemption" to show that the word "eternal" sometimes describes the end result of an activity and not the process or activity itself. Yet, when Morey explains these expressions for himself, he gives them the very same meaning the conditionalists have ascribed. "Eternal judgment" and "eternal redemption," Morey says, refer to the "permanent and irreversible" verdict and salvation awaiting the righteous, in contrast to a "temporary" verdict or salvation.

Conditionalists totally agree!

V. A Word of Credit to Morey

I wish to end this review by noting some points about Morey's book which we may deeply appreciate. He is right in urging that we take seriously the holiness of God and the necessity of divine judgment (pp. 103-107). In a secular world where anything goes, these points need to be made again and again.

He deserves credit for bravely noting that Jesus' story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is borrowed from a common rabbinical tale of his day and that it should not be taken as a literal preview of the world to come (pp. 30-31, 84-85). He also is right that in Scripture the body is intrinsically good, not merely a prison for the soul (pp. 43, 94-95), and that the "soul" and "spirit" in the Bible do not refer to "separate entities in man," but describe man's "multi-dimensional function and relationships" (p. 44). And he shows courage in asserting that man is not a three-part being composed of the entities body-soul-spirit, though he probably goes too far in saying that "soul" and "spirit" are "actually synonyms." Sometimes,

maybe; certainly not always (p. 64). We all are making some progress in understanding along these lines.

Morey could not be more on target when he affirms that "man is always and absolutely dependent upon the Creator for this life as well as for the next life," and that life "in this world and in the next must always be viewed as a gift from God" (p. 94). He is also to be praised for noting that when Scripture speaks of "immortal" or "incorruptible" in a human context, it uses the adjectives to describe the resurrection body of the saints (p. 95). These two truths alone are sufficient to raise fatal questions about the traditional view which Morey expounds, and to provide a solid biblical framework for the case conditionalists wish to present.

Finally, I commend Morey's summary of the Bible's teaching about the final results of sin and of grace. "The curse of God for man's disobedience is death," he writes, "in contrast to God's blessing of life. . . . Did not Moses . . . warn . . . 'You shall surely perish'? . . . Does not the New Testament teach that disobedience leads to death?" (p. 107). All we need to do now is give these scriptural tenets their "plain meaning," as Morey urges so well in his opening pages, and the controversy will be over.

NOTE: This review was originally published in the Advent Christian journal, *Henceforth*, 14:1 (Fall 1985): 18-31. All content has been retained, with the exception of typographical errors which have been corrected, and the layout of the material in a style more suitable for internet viewing (paragraph divisions remain substantially unchanged).

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