

Has Robert Peterson Defeated Annihilationism?

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Anyone who has done much reading on the evangelical debate over the nature of final punishment in the last two decades will have encountered Robert Peterson. He has made a literary career of defending the traditional doctrine of eternal torment against the challenge posed by annihilationism. He is the author of *Hell On Trial*¹ and has written a number of journal articles attacking the position set forth by a number of evangelicals who have voiced support for annihilationism—in particular, Edward Fudge, the author of *The Fire That Consumes*.² Most recently (at the time of writing this article), Peterson co-authored *Two Views of Hell* with Fudge, where the traditionalist and the annihilationist views were presented side by side and critiqued.³ It

¹ Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995.

² A list (although not meaning to be exhaustive) of Peterson's articles on the topic would include "A Traditionalist Response to John Stott's Arguments for Annihilationism," *JETS* 37:4 (1994), 553–568; "Basil Atkinson: A Key Figure for Twentieth-Century Evangelical Annihilationism," *Churchman* 111:3 (1997), 198–217; "Does the Bible Teach Annihilationism?" *BSac* 156 (Jan–March 1999), 13–27; "The Hermeneutics of Annihilationism: The Theological Method of Edward Fudge," in Michael Bauman and David Hall (eds.), *Evangelical Hermeneutics: Selected Essays from the 1994 Evangelical Theological Society Convention* (Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1995), 191–212.

³ Edward Fudge and Robert Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2000). The reader familiar with the book will recall that Fudge prefers the term "conditionalist" to annihilationist. Conditionalism is of course shorthand for the doctrine of "conditional immortality," the view that immortality in its literal sense is not inherent to all human beings, it is a gift that the saved will receive, while the unsaved on the other hand literally will lose life itself, and be

would be fair to say that more than any other evangelical author, Dr. Peterson has been the bastion of the traditional doctrine of hell in recent times and the most vocal critic of annihilationism. In particular, Peterson has taken on the task of writing a number of articles specifically directed at various defenders of annihilationism and critiquing their arguments, seeking to show that they have each failed. Here I pick up on this method, only this time the tables will be turned. I will critically examine some key features of Dr Peterson's own case and suggest that while it may constitute the strongest case available against annihilationism, it has some major shortcomings and is ultimately unsuccessful.

I. MISREPRESENTATION

The first task before we can begin to make headway interacting with Peterson's arguments, as with many critics of annihilationism it seems, is to clear the ground of the mistakes and distractions that must be dealt with before any of the theological and biblical issues can be addressed at all, a somewhat arduous and frustrating task in any debate, but a necessary one in order to have any cogent or fruitful interaction. One fairly persistent obstacle that blocks the path to actually engaging the issues is misrepresentation of the position being attacked. Of course, this problem is not unique to Peterson or even to this issue, it is commonplace in debate and must simply be taken as a matter of course and dealt with to advance the discussion further. Perhaps the most obvious example of misrepresentation in Dr Peterson's writing comes when he discusses the annihilationist view that Jesus' death on the cross is a foretaste of the death that all lost sinners must die. Annihilationists have argued that Jesus bore the consequences of our sin

destroyed. When it comes to the doctrine of final punishment, we will use the terms "annihilationism" and "conditionalism" interchangeably.

on the cross and was *killed* rather than eternally tormented, hence death is a more accurate picture of the fate that awaits the lost than eternal torment. As Peterson notes, Fudge devotes six pages of exegesis to explain his observation that “Jesus’ death involved total destruction,” after having already argued on exegetical grounds that “Calvary reveals God’s judgment,” “Jesus’ death was ‘for sin,’ ” and “Jesus died the sinner’s own death.”⁴ Fudge builds up his case from a wide variety of biblical passages, but regrettably, Peterson’s response does not make any reference to them or explain where Fudge’s exegesis is mistaken. Instead, in describing Fudge’s position, Peterson says, “To be precise, Fudge concurs with Edward White who held that when Jesus died in crucifixion his humanity was annihilated, but not his divinity.”⁵ To assure the reader that this genuinely is what Fudge says, Peterson footnotes a reference to Fudge’s book at this point. The reader will assume that Peterson has read Fudge’s book and observed the claim that Jesus’ humanity was annihilated, while his divinity was not.

Ordinarily, when observing an attack on one’s own position, it is common to find misrepresentations. While nearly unavoidable and generally unintentional, with a thick skin, a sense of humor, and some charity, they are bearable. This kind of misrepresentation however, is not, being all the more inexcusable given that Dr Peterson has added a footnote to Fudge’s book, indicating that Peterson has seen Fudge make this claim. The reason that while Peterson included a footnote to Fudge’s book, he did not provide a quote, is that there is no place on the indicated page where Fudge stated what Peterson accuses him of saying (or anything like it), when describing “precisely” what he wrote. In fact there is nothing in either edition of the entirety

⁴ In the second edition, the section Peterson refers to occupies only three pages rather than six, in Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes* (Rev. ed., Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 143–145.

⁵ Peterson, “The Hermeneutics of Annihilationism” 207.

of *The Fire that Consumes* to suggest this view, and I am unable to point the reader to a quote that might have been misinterpreted to mean this. Moreover, Fudge does not cite Edward White at this point, and even if he had, it must be pointed out that White never taught (“precisely” or otherwise) that Jesus’ humanity was destroyed but his divinity was not, and neither is Peterson able to quote him as doing so. In fact, Peterson repeats the same accusation against Basil Atkinson (again, without quotation), who likewise never suggested that the two natures in Christ were separated, but affirms with Fudge that the whole person Jesus Christ truly died and rose three days later.⁶ What is going on here? Is this really “precisely” what Fudge (and other conditionalists) stated, or is Peterson misrepresenting them in order to set them up for an easy rebuttal? Unfortunately, all indications are that the latter is the case. “Nothing less than orthodox Christology is at stake,”⁷ Peterson then announces, and moves in for the kill. After accusing Fudge of saying that Jesus’ humanity was destroyed and his divinity was not, Peterson goes on to quote the Chalcedonian definition, which affirms that Christ’s deity and humanity cannot be separated. Next comes Peterson’s conclusion, charging Fudge with heresy (if one assumes that a denial of Chalcedonian Christology is indeed heresy): “Indeed, to hold that Jesus’ humanity was annihilated on the cross [and not his deity], brings one into conflict with Chalcedonian Christology.” A theological disaster! This may be true, but in fact it is somewhat moot, since Fudge never expressed this view in the first place. Peterson has created a straw man, and

⁶ Peterson, “Basil Atkinson” 204. We have scoured the noteworthy modern defenses of annihilationism from Edward White, Henry Constable, Sidney Hatch, Clark Pinnock, John Wenham, John Stott, Philip Hughs, and Adventist authors Leroy Froom and Samuele Bacchiocchi, and noted that none of these authors have suggested that Jesus’ humanity was destroyed and not his deity, separating the two natures. Peterson’s misrepresentation has no excuse on the grounds of mistakenly lumping Fudge together with other annihilationist authors, since the claim is absent from all of them.

⁷ Peterson, “The Hermeneutics of Annihilationism” 207.

intentionally or not, the scene is cast where Peterson is portrayed as the champion of orthodox Christology against the annihilationist heretics, who deny Chalcedonian Christology and thus make themselves worthy of serious reprimand.⁸ “Such a prospect ought to cause conditionalists to re-examine their views,”⁹ Peterson warns, since nobody would want to find oneself denying something so important. The move might serve to scare orthodox Christians away from considering annihilationism as a possibility. But the supposed denial of Chalcedonian Christology has been spun out of thin air, and the rebuttal achieves nothing against the *actual* position annihilationists hold.

Worthy of note is that each time Peterson has commented on the conditionalist view of Christ’s death, he has categorized it separately from exegetical arguments, instead calling it an “appeal to systematic theology” or an appeal to “Christology.”¹⁰ However, Fudge does not present his comments on Christ’s death this way. Instead, the case is built (correctly or otherwise) simply from what Scripture states about Christ’s death as an atoning event, along strictly exegetical

⁸ Several years after Peterson made this claim, and over a year before *Two Views of Hell* appeared, I personally contacted him, responding to each of the points he made in “The Hermeneutics of Annihilationism.” I pointed out to him that Fudge has never made the claim attributed to him, but instead taught that the *person of Christ* truly died, and not merely one of His natures as Peterson asserted. Peterson toned down the accusation in *Two Views*, saying that Fudge’s position would *lead* to one of two possibilities, one that Jesus’ whole person died (which, in Peterson’s view, is anti-Trinitarian), and the other that his humanity but not his divinity died. In all his published articles, and in *Two Views*, Peterson has never produced the relevant quotation from Fudge (or Atkinson) to show that they have said what he explicitly attributed to them, and he has never issued a retraction, even though the error was pointed out to him over a year before his most recent work on the subject was published.

⁹ Peterson, “The Hermeneutics of Annihilationism” 208.

¹⁰ See Peterson, *Ibid.*, 207, and “Basil Atkinson” 203, respectively.

lines. It is not an accurate representation to call Fudge's comments on Christ's death "an appeal to systematic theology," treated separately from Fudge's (perceived) exegetical shortcomings. What this move does is to allow Peterson to avoid dealing with any of the exegetical observations that Fudge has made about Christ's death, and instead launch into a theological attack against a straw man. We can only wonder how Peterson would have fared had he actually sought to address the numerous biblical passages that Fudge appealed to and discussed at this point, but we may never know.

II. MISSED POINTS

Revelation 20:10 is a crucial proof text in Peterson's case for eternal torment. In John's vision at this point, we read that "the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire where the beast and the false prophet are as well. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever." The annihilationist has an onus to explain why this ought not to be read as teaching the doctrine of eternal torment. And explain they have. Interpreters from a variety of theological backgrounds appear to be agreed that the Beast of Revelation represents not one single individual, but a kingdom, a "system." Reformed preterist Kenneth Gentry sees the image as representing Rome, with Nero Caesar in particular as its representative.¹¹ Dispensationalist/futurist John Walvoord sees it as the revived Roman Empire in the last days.¹² Idealist Sam Hamstra sees the beast representing "the spirit and empires of the world."¹³ While these views of the beast obviously

¹¹ Gentry devotes an entire work to establishing this thesis, *The Beast of Revelation* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

¹² John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 199.

¹³ Sam Hamstra, "An Idealist View of Revelation," *Four Views on Revelation* (ed. Marvin C. Pate, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 118.

differ from one another, they demonstrate the broad consensus that the beast is not a personal entity, but instead a symbol for an abstract or corporate entity of some sort. This much at least seems clear given the divine interpretation of Daniel's vision, where the same beast represents a kingdom on earth (Dan 7:17, 23). This, however, throws a spanner into the works for the traditional interpretation of Rev 20:10. The difficulty is spelled out (albeit briefly) by Fudge, who notes that, "According to many Bible scholars these [i.e. the beast and the false prophet] are not actual people but represent governments which persecute believers and false religions which support those governments. Neither institution will be perpetuated forever, *nor could they suffer conscious, sensible pain*" (emphasis added).¹⁴ Thus, whatever the lake of fire signifies, it could not signify eternal torment. Peterson has a comeback:

However, Fudge fails to mention the devil, who, along with the beast and the false prophet, is cast into the lake of fire. I understand the beast and the false prophet to be individuals capable of suffering pain, but I'll put that to one side for a moment. What about Satan? Fudge, as an evangelical Christian, refuses to depersonalize the devil. So here is one personal being who will suffer in everlasting torment. Revelation 20:10 tells us that the devil will be thrown into the lake of fire. Five verses later we read that human beings will be cast into the same lake of fire. Wouldn't normal hermeneutics dictate the understanding that human beings will be heading for eternal torment too?¹⁵

Peterson has not grasped the point of the argument. The observation that Fudge makes does not deny that some humans will share the fate of the devil and the beast. Rather, Fudge's comments are set in the context of his discussing the nature of the lake of fire. If it depicts a fate that will be suffered by an impersonal or corporate entity (the beast), then clearly whatever it is, it is not conscious suffering, since this cannot *be* applied to such an entity. In other words, whatever the lake of fire signifies, it must be a fate that can be applied to both personal entities (such as the devil or lost human beings) *as well as* impersonal entities (such as the beast). Destruction would

¹⁴ Fudge, *Two Views* 78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

certainly be a possible interpretation (just as the total annihilation of *death* is depicted by a picture of it being personified and thrown into the lake of fire), but conscious suffering would not. Presumably, Peterson's reply would be that the beast *is* a person, and it this *will* be capable of being consciously tormented forever. It is bewildering then that this is the very aspect of the argument that he chose to "put to one side for a moment," since this was the whole point of Fudge's observation—the fact of the beast's impersonal nature demands an annihilationist interpretation rather than the traditionalist one, since eternal torment cannot apply to such an entity.¹⁶ Either Peterson has not realized that this was the point, or he has avoided the argument altogether—on one of his most important texts. Other traditionalists *have* realized the importance of this point. It is intriguing to note that in his general work on the book of Revelation, as noted, traditionalist John Walvoord was happy to see the beast as representing a kingdom or corporate entity, but when it comes to his debate on the doctrine of eternal punishment, the beast transforms into an individual "world ruler" and suffers eternal torment.¹⁷ No explanation – or even an acknowledgement – is given for this sudden change of heart, but in light of the argument indicated here, it is fairly clear why such a change was necessary. A theology of eternal torment has forced an exegetical shift. As a brief indication of the kind of response that would be required to this annihilationist argument, Don Carson has offered a teaser in response to Stott, who makes the same point that Fudge has made about the impersonal nature of entities like death, the whore of Babylon or the beast.

¹⁶ We might also observe that Peterson has subtly begged the question with respect to the nature of the beast in the above quotation. He says that Fudge "refuses to depersonalize" the Devil. Implicit here is the suggestion that Fudge has depersonalized the beast. However, it is only possible to *depersonalize* the beast if the beast is a person, and this is what Fudge's comment was calling into question to begin with.

¹⁷ John F Walvoord, "The Literal View," *Four Views on Hell* (ed. William Crockett, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 23.

I have to say that this really will not do. (a) In my view the beast and the false prophet are best thought of as *recurring* individuals, culminating in supreme manifestations of their type, rather than mere symbols that cannot experience pain. (b) More importantly, Stott does not comment on the devil's pain. Even if Stott were right in his reading of the beast and the false prophet, the devil is cast into the lake of fire with them, and the torment "day and night for ever and ever" is *his* experience. Stott does not side with those who depersonalize the devil. Thus Satan... constitutes at least one sentient being who is clearly pictured as suffering conscious torment forever.¹⁸

Carson, at least, has sought to tackle the point that if the beast is a figure representing a corporate entity, then it cannot, in literal terms, be tortured. His response however is just as ineffective, since all he does is assert that in fact the beast "is best thought of" as a recurring individual. Now, it is simply unclear what this means, and how it helps the traditional view. Does Carson mean that the beast *is* an individual man who recurs throughout history? If so, how in the world could this play out? Reincarnation might be an option for some people, but it is not for Carson. Does he mean, then, that the beast is *representative* of a body of people who occur one after the other in history? If so then he must concede Stott's point, since while an individual man may suffer, a corporate entity cannot. Simply asserting that the beast is one kind of thing rather than another, and failing to explain clear difficulties that arise in doing so just does not answer the argument. This is all the more important given the *prima facie* evidence favoring a corporate understanding of the beast. Consider Daniel's vision once more, where the kingdoms represented by the beasts are replaced, not with God as the king, but rather with God's *kingdom* (Dan. 7:11-14 cf. the vision in Dan 2 where the rock crushes and replaces the worldly kingdoms), together with the fact that in Daniel the beasts are slain and in Revelation they are tortured, creating an uneasy contradiction if the same strictly literal hermeneutical method of traditionalists commenting on Revelation 20:10 is consistently applied in both cases, and traditionalism has much more explaining to do than either Peterson or Carson have offered.

¹⁸ Don A. Carson, *The gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 527.

Besides Carson's attempts to make the beast a personal entity, the beast is actually only one of several such problematic examples for traditionalists. There is still the problem of, say, death or the whore of Babylon, one of whom is also thrown into the lake of fire and the other of whom it is said that her smoke rises up forever, yet neither of whom can sensibly be thought of as individual persons. Like Peterson, Carson falters when he insists that since the devil is personal, the lake of fire must therefore literally signify eternal torment. If the devil is personal, but entities like the "beast" and "death" are not, then the lake of fire must signify a fate suitable for both types of entity, and everlasting suffering simply does not work.

III. EXEGESIS

While, as seen already, there are *some* exegetical and hermeneutical arguments that Peterson seems to evade (mistakenly viewing them as arguments from silence, or missing the point in the case of Revelation 20), he is by no means silent altogether on the exegetical debate over annihilationism. On the contrary, he clearly intends to persuade the reader that his rejection of annihilationism is first and foremost based on exegetical concerns. We turn then to his responses to some exegetical arguments. Annihilationists have noted that instead of speaking in terms of everlasting suffering, the Bible predominantly describes the fate of the lost in terms of *destruction*. In light of this fairly uncontroversial observation, John Stott has commented that "it would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed." He concurs with his partner in dialogue David Edwards (while they disagree on many other things)

that it is “difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing.”¹⁹ Annihilationists frequently make this kind of observation. Clark Pinnock’s comments are representative at this point:

Our Lord spoke plainly of God’s judgment as the annihilation of the wicked when he warned about God’s ability to destroy body and soul in hell (Matt. 10:28). He was echoing the terms that John the Baptist had used when he pictured the wicked as dry wood about to be thrown into the fire and chaff about to be burned (Matt. 3:10, 12)...

The Apostle Paul creates the same impression when he wrote of the everlasting destruction that would come upon unrepentant sinners (2 Thess. 1:9). He warned that the wicked would reap corruption (Gal. 6:8) and stated that God would destroy the wicked (1 Cor. 3:17; Phil 1:28). . . . Concerning the wicked, the apostle stated plainly and concisely: “their destiny is destruction” (Phil. 3:19). . . .

It is no different in any other New Testament book. Peter spoke of the “destruction of ungodly men” (2 Peter 3:7) and of false teachers who denied the Lord, thus bringing upon themselves “swift destruction” (2:1, 3).²⁰

Pinnock goes on to cite further evidence to the same effect, but the nature of the argument is clear. The predominant language that the Bible uses to describe final punishment is the language of death and destruction. This leads to an annihilationist view rather than the traditional picture of eternal torment. Reflecting on the NT evidence, nineteenth-century translator R. H. Weymouth remarked:

My mind fails to conceive a grosser misinterpretation of language than when the five or six strongest words which the Greek tongue possesses, signifying “destroy,” or “destruction,” are explained to mean maintaining an everlasting but wretched existence. *To translate black as white is nothing to this [italics original].*²¹

¹⁹ David L. Edwards and John R. Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal–Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 312–320.

²⁰ Clark H Pinnock, “The Conditional View,” *Four Views on Hell* (ed. William Crockett, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 146.

²¹ Quoted from a letter to Edward White, in Henry Constable, *The Nature and Duration of Future Punishment* (6th ed., London: Edward Hobbs, 1886), 36.

But Peterson is unmoved by this kind of argument. He grants that the passages that use the language of destruction could in fact be taken to refer to the literal destruction of the lost. Reflecting on some of the sayings of Christ (in Matthew 10:28, Matthew 7:13–14 and John 3:16), Peterson admits that it is possible to fairly exegete these passages—on their own—as teaching this. He goes on:

In fact many of the passages that contain “the vocabulary of destruction” could, if considered by themselves, be construed to teach the extermination of the wicked (John 10:28; 17:12; Rom 2:12; 9:22; Phil 1:28; 3:19; 1 Thess 5:3; Heb 10:39; 2 Pet 3:7, 9; Jas 4:12). If Scripture gave us no other teaching on the final destiny of the wicked than that provided by these and similar passages, annihilationism would be a viable option.²²

However, in the final analysis Peterson rejects the argument. Firstly, he claims, “some of the passages Stott cites . . . are difficult to reconcile with annihilationism.”²³ As an example of such a verse, let us observe his treatment of 2 Thess 1:9.

Paul says of the disobedient, “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power.” Annihilationism is an unlikely meaning for the words “everlasting destruction.”²⁴

Well might Stott reply—“and why is that?” But Peterson does not say. He makes the claim and then moves to other points, as though it will be self-evident to the reader why “everlasting destruction” is incompatible with annihilationism. Oddly, however, everlasting destruction is precisely what the annihilationist claims to believe will happen to the lost. Peterson has just finished conceding that the language of destruction could indeed legitimately be construed to

²² Peterson, “A Traditionalist Response to Stott” 554. Since there is no such verse as John 10:28 I will assume that this is a citation error, and that Matthew 10:28 was intended, where Jesus claimed that God could destroy the body and soul in *Gehenna*.

²³ Peterson, “A Traditionalist Response to Stott” 554.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 555.

mean annihilation, and simply asserting that the phrase “everlasting destruction” is an exception without showing why this is the case is not likely to persuade anyone. But in addition to the assertion that this phrase cannot mean annihilation, Peterson has another reason to reject Stott’s view of this passage.

Furthermore, does it make sense for the apostle to describe unbelievers’ extinction as their being “shut out from the presence of the Lord”? Does not their being shut out from his presence imply their existence?²⁵

This response however is surprisingly superficial, apparently being written off the cuff without turning to a close examination of the verse in question before offering a reply to Stott’s argument. The English text of the NIV (which Peterson quotes) might possibly (although not definitively) lend some support to Peterson’s rebuttal, but as soon as one looks any more closely than this, the argument begins to break down. As Peterson is treating the passage, he would have us understand that it means that the lost will be placed into a state of ruin (since he does not accept the literal concept of *destruction* suggested by Fudge or Stott in this text), and then as a distinct act, God will shut them out of his presence to live a wretched life of ruin elsewhere. While Peterson makes this distinction more emphatically than some traditionalists, he is not alone in making it. Chris Morgan, defending the teaching of Jonathan Edwards on eternal punishment, uses this verse as an argument against annihilationism by saying, “As Edwards regularly noted,

²⁵ Ibid., 555. It is worth noting that when responding to Stott, Peterson clearly uses *two* responses to Stott’s appeal to Thessalonians 1:9. First, Peterson asserts that the term “everlasting destruction” contradicts the possibility of annihilation, and “furthermore,” he claims that the reference to the lost being “shut out” entails their existence. Some years later when responding to Fudge in *Two Views of Hell* (p. 94), Peterson takes a different line of argument. There, he claims that “everlasting destruction” cannot mean annihilation, *because* the apostle then speaks of the lost being shut out of God’s presence. He has gone from two rebuttals to one, perhaps suggesting that he has become unsatisfied with his own assertion that “everlasting destruction” in itself shows that annihilation is not the intended meaning.

the Bible also links the destruction of the wicked to their separation from God (2 Thess. 1:5-10), which demands conscious existence.²⁶ The interpretation then is that this text says that God will inflict destruction/ruin, and He will cause the wicked to endure life outside of His presence. But the underlying Greek of 2 Thess 1:9 will not allow us to see these as two acts, but rather only as one single act. The words “and shut out” in the NIV, which are given so much emphasis in Peterson’s argument, are in fact not translated from any Greek terms at all. The Greek *olethron aiōnion apo prosōpou tou kyriou* is literally translated, “everlasting destruction from the face of the Lord . . .,” and so forth. This is accurately reflected in the AV, which tells us that the lost “shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord . . .” Granted, there is an ambiguity here. As Fudge noted in *The Fire that Consumes*, the verse may be taken to refer to destruction that *issues* from the face of the Lord, or it may refer to exclusion from the Lord’s presence *by way of* destruction.²⁷ Either view can claim support among commentators.²⁸ Either way, it is surely a weak argument for Peterson to base a significant exegetical point on words that are not even present in the Greek, and it is all the more troubling that he does so when the person he is responding to has *already explained* that “and shut out” is not in the original.²⁹ Peterson, it seems, has spent insufficient time examining the arguments for the position he is seeking to undermine, as well as insufficient time carefully examining the passages conditionalists have used.

Secondly, Peterson rejects Stott’s argument from the “language of destruction” because, he says,

²⁶ Chris Morgan, *Jonathan Edwards and Hell* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 131.

²⁷ Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 18, 153–156.

²⁸ For example Fudge is able to cite Emmanuel Pétavel (conditionalist) and Thayer (traditionalist) in favor of the former view, with Arndt and Gingrich as well as Leon Morris favoring the latter view.

²⁹ Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 18.

Even if one could show that every passage that uses the language of destruction is compatible with annihilationism, this still would not prove that it is true. In addition one would have to show that the other passages that speak of hell are consistent with annihilationism. And this cannot be done.³⁰

As an aside, we cannot help but note a misrepresentation of the annihilationist claim. It would clearly be inaccurate to say that Peterson simply thinks that many biblical texts are “compatible with eternal torment.” No, clearly he thinks they *teach* eternal torment. So it is with annihilationists. They do not merely claim that texts that speak of the destruction of the lost are “compatible” with annihilationism, but rather that they teach it. Peterson goes on to note that death and destruction are only one kind of “picture” that the Bible uses to speak of final punishment. But the Bible uses five main pictures, he says. These are: “darkness and separation, fire, ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth,’ punishment, and death and destruction.”³¹ Now, we might wish to quibble over this list. How is punishment a “picture”? But such quibbles would be unnecessary diversions here. After setting out this list, Peterson makes his important claim: “Only the last [picture] fits with the view that the wicked will be blotted out . . .”³² Peterson then makes reference to several verses that use the pictures he lists (e.g. Luke 13:27–28; Matt 8:12; Matt 24:46), which do not add to his above claim, but are simply passages that do in fact use pictures from Peterson’s list. The problem with Peterson’s claim is that there is just no reason to think that it is true, and he does not offer the reader any such reasons. The pictures of darkness and separation, fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth and punishment are not in any way incompatible with the notion of final destruction, and it is difficult to see why Peterson would insist otherwise. The darkness and separation in Luke 13 is in the parable of the wedding feast, where it is dark

³⁰ Peterson, “A Traditionalist Response to Stott,” 555.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 556.

³² *Ibid.*, 556.

outside the house where the lost are cast. To say that it teaches that there will be a realm of darkness where the lost will live for eternity is clearly eisegesis. The point in the passage is that the lost will be *excluded* from life with Christ. Granted, this might be compatible with eternal torment, but that hardly makes it incompatible with annihilationism. The picture of gnashing of teeth clearly cannot be construed as antithetical to literal death and destruction, since it is used elsewhere in Scripture in exactly such a context (the wicked man will “gnash his teeth and fade away” in Psalm 112:10). Punishment is obviously not incompatible with annihilation unless we assume that the punishment will consist of torture rather than death, which would be to flagrantly beg the question, and fire, far from suggesting eternal torment, suggests destruction and consumption. What does fire ordinarily do to the objects thrown into it?³³

On other occasions when footholds are not available in translational shortcomings (as they are in 2 Thess 1:9) and it looks like Peterson has all the exegetical weight against him, he has resorted to assertions that can only be called bewildering. In 2 Pet 2:6 we read that “by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes [God] condemned them to extinction and made them an example of what is coming to the ungodly.” It is not at all difficult to see why a reasonable person might conclude that Sodom and Gomorrah are actually an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly, namely, condemnation to extinction. After all, this is exactly what the text says. “The word *tephrōsas*, *turning into ashes* or ‘covering with ashes,’ is unique in the Bible, but is used by Dio Cassius (lxvi) in his account of the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 when Pompeii and Herculaneum were buried in lava.”³⁴ Such graphic language is not subtle or mysterious. There is

³³ Peterson’s chief comeback to this observation about fire is to refer to the lake of fire in the book of Revelation, but this point has been addressed already under “missed points.”

³⁴ Michael Green, *The Second General Epistle of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Tyndale, 1968), 100.

no disagreement as to the kind of fate being described with regard to Sodom—complete destruction. The question then becomes, What good grounds do we have for exegeting this text in a way other than what would appear to be a “literal” one? Granted, there are many texts of Scripture that, in the final analysis, do not say what they might appear to say at first glance. Is this this kind of passage? Apparently Peterson believes that there is reason to think so:

Taken in isolation it is possible to understand Peter’s words as teaching annihilationism. Nevertheless, we ought not to do so. It is better to take Peter’s words as more generally predicting the downfall of the wicked than to understand them as foretelling their precise fate—reduction to ashes.³⁵

The frustrating aspect of responding to such a claim is that no grounds are given for it. How is this interpretation “better,” given that the annihilationist interpretation of this text appears, as Peterson comes close to conceding, to be the most natural one? Reflecting on Peterson’s comment, Fudge (understandably) says, “If Peter could hear the conversation, he would probably scratch his head and wonder how he could have possibly written more plainly.”³⁶ The impression one gets via a survey of the literature on this verse is that the commentators, annihilationist or not, offer a treatment of this passage that strongly favors annihilationism, the annihilationist writers on final punishment gladly use it as a powerful proof text, and the defenders of eternal torment, with a tiny handful of exceptions, write as though it did not exist. Peterson assures us that although it appears to teach annihilationism, it really does not and we should simply accept that. I ask the reader: Is this a rebuttal or an admission?

Carson has sought to remedy this situation for traditionalism by fending off the apparently strong language of destruction in 2 Peter. He concedes that there is an at least reasonable case to be

³⁵ Peterson, *Two Views* 156.

³⁶ Fudge, *Two Views* 200.

made for annihilationism by appealing to the biblical texts that speak of the destruction of the finally unsaved. He admits while describing the annihilationist view, listing 2 Peter 3:7 as an example, “Fair exegesis of the words involved suggests *total* destruction, i.e., cessation of existence.”³⁷ But ultimately Carson rejects such arguments, calling them “too hasty.”³⁸ “The ἀπώλεια word-group,” he explains, “has a range of meanings, depending on the context.” While it might literally refer to destruction, it need not always have this meaning in some contexts. He points to examples where this is the case: The “lost” son and lost coin of Luke 15, the “ruined” wineskins of Matthew 9:17 and similar examples. None of these things is simply “destroyed,” so we might legitimately read the *apoleia* terms as referring to ruin or loss, and not complete destruction.³⁹

Carson has undermined himself here, committing what he elsewhere categorises as an *Exegetical Fallacy*, one that he calls the “unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field.” This fallacy “lies in the assumption that the meaning of a word in a specific context is much broader than the context itself allows and may bring with it the word’s entire semantic range. This step is sometimes called illegitimate totality transfer.”⁴⁰ He commits the fallacy as follows. He listed 2 Peter 3:7 as an example of a “destruction” text used by annihilationists. He then argued that the *apoleia* word-group has a much wider semantic range than this meaning, and it can mean loss, ruin, waste etc., depending on the context in which it appears. The obvious implication is that *in this text*, which is cited by annihilationists as supporting annihilationism, the words of the *apoleia* group can mean ruin, or loss or waste or something else, over and against “destruction.”

³⁷ Don Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 519.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 522.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Don Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 62.

But this is not the case if, as Carson pointed out, the context is to be the determining factor in which meaning we find in the word. Peter has just used the verb to refer to what the flood did to those living long ago, now in the same breath he uses the noun to refer to what God will do in the future to the godless. To avoid the meaning of destruction (which is clearly the meaning present in the context, as seen from the flood example), Carson would have us prize open the fullest semantic range in mind of the word so that we can select something like “ruin” or “loss” instead, as though *all* the possible meanings of the word were available to us. The presence of the Scriptural precedent for destruction in the previous sentence is the factor that tips the scales against this possibility. Carson’s comeback, while making a serious attempt to engage the exegetical issues in 2 Peter, is just as unsuccessful as Peterson’s. I use the example of Carson just to show that even if Peterson had done more than simply assert that Peter’s words – despite their appearance – are best understood as not referring to literal destruction, it is far from clear what route he could have taken with any hope of success.

IV. MISCELLANEOUS FALLACIES

Finally I will cover some shortcomings in Peterson’s attempted rebuttal of annihilationism that do not fit neatly under one heading. We might call them fallacies and errors *in general*. One key argument used by conditionalists like Fudge is that there are prophetic passages in the Bible that picture the fate of the wicked, and which do so in terms that indicate destruction rather than endless suffering. Fudge sums up the conclusion of this line of argument:

Several Old Testament passages specifically foretell the destiny of the lost at the end of the world. According to these prophetic passages, the wicked will become like chaff or husks of wheat which the wind blows away. They will be like pottery that has been broken to pieces. The wicked will be slain and consumed and will cease to

exist. They will be ashes under the soles of the feet of God's people. None of these Scripture texts even hints at anything resembling eternal conscious torment.⁴¹

This kind of passage is not only in the OT but also in the New, argues Fudge.

In 2 Peter 1:1–3 the apostle warns of false teachers who bring seductive heresies but who finally will be condemned and swiftly destroyed. Both terms are familiar New Testament words for the end of the lost. Neither word carries any inherent meaning of everlasting conscious torment. *Condemnation* refers to God's judicial sentence. *Destruction* is the everlasting outcome of the judgment of condemnation. As we have seen time and again, Jesus warns that God can destroy both body and soul in hell (Mt 10:28), and Paul says that God will punish the lost with everlasting destruction (2 Thess 1:9).⁴²

The argument, then, is that there are some texts that portray the fate of the lost. These texts, argue conditionalists, do not use the language of eternal torment, which would be strange if the fate of the lost really *is* eternal torment. Instead, these texts speak in terms of destruction. Now how does Peterson reply? Specifically, what does he do with the two arguments by Fudge quoted here? The answer is a surprise. Peterson refers to the two quotes above and groups them together (along with other kinds of argument) under the heading, "techniques that do not advance the debate," and then pleads, "I urge readers to look past the . . . techniques that I have criticized. Do not base your verdict as to who wins the debate on these techniques."⁴³ We ought to ignore this central argument altogether, Peterson tells us. But why? It is because, Peterson tells us, the above arguments are no more than "arguments from silence."⁴⁴ He says that this argument "carries very little weight." He says that it is an argument "from what the Bible does not say rather than an argument based on what the Bible does say."⁴⁵ Such an argument, he says "appeals to

⁴¹ Ibid., 29–30.

⁴² Ibid, 69.

⁴³ Peterson, *Two Views* 86.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 85.

emotion, not to reason.”⁴⁶ “When one reads ten times that this or that passage doesn’t hint at X, it is easy to conclude that the Bible says nothing about X.” But to accept such an argument from silence would be “a mistake.”⁴⁷

It is clear that either Peterson has not understood what an argument from silence is, or he has misunderstood Fudge’s arguments as quoted above, or both. The fallacy of an argument from silence is committed where a person infers *something* from *nothing*. For example, critics of the virgin birth have argued that since St Paul did not write about the virgin birth, he did not believe it. Clearly such silence cannot possibly be conclusive of anything, other than that Paul did not write about something. We could just as easily use this lack of evidence the other way: Paul did not deny the virgin birth, therefore he believed it! While this second conclusion might be more acceptable to you and me, the argument is just as fallacious, and this argument does nothing to establish the truth of the virgin birth. Now, how does Peterson suppose that Fudge has used this kind of argument? What Fudge has said in the above quotes is effectively: “These texts are about final punishment, yet their language says nothing about eternal torment. Instead, it refers to destruction and death.” Presumably, Dr Peterson means us to believe that Fudge is arguing from a mere *absence* of reference to eternal torment to the *denial* of eternal torment. But this is not so. The passages Fudge has referred to, if he is correct, are not silent at all on the nature of final punishment. Rather, he claims that they do describe final punishment and *even so* they do not teach eternal torment, but teach annihilationism in its place.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 85.

Fudge's claims do not amount to an argument from silence. It is an argument that certain texts teach annihilationism and do not suggest eternal torment. By labeling them as arguments from silence and telling readers to disregard them, all that Peterson has done is to avoid dealing with the exegetical arguments arising from these texts. His complaint is all the more frustrating when he implicitly acknowledges elsewhere that his accusation is unwarranted. He does this by using the very kind of argument that he is criticizing as part of his own case for eternal torment in the very same book. In his case for eternal torment (which, as it turns out, is actually prepared as a rebuttal of the annihilationist view), Peterson treats Is 66:24 (which is quoted verbatim in Mark 9:48). While traditionalists often cite Mark 9:48 (Jesus' reference to the fire that is not quenched, and the worm that does not die) to teach eternal torment, Fudge (along with other annihilationists) have sought to draw the readers' attention to Is 66:24, where Jesus is quoting from. The verse reads, "And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people 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." And so, the annihilationists point out, the reference is not to living people suffering for eternity in hell, it is to dead bodies being consumed by fire and maggots, a truly revolting sight indeed, but not eternal torment. Peterson's reply is unexpected, given his distaste for what he earlier called an "argument from silence":

It is vital to see that Isaiah *does not teach* annihilation here. He *does not say* that the fire consumes what is put into it; on the contrary he says that the fire will never be put out. *He does not say* that the worms symbolize final and total consumption; rather, he says that the worms never die; that is, their destructive work is never complete. [emphasis added]⁴⁸

If Peterson's cry of "argument from silence" was fair, then what Peterson has presented here is a combination of an argument from silence and some gratuitously question-begging assertions. Notice how Peterson takes note of what Isaiah *does not* say. Is this not the very thing he faulted

⁴⁸ Ibid., 133.

Fudge for? Peterson might reply by pointing out that he explained what Isaiah said *instead* of teaching annihilationism. But firstly this would be to admit that the charge against Fudge was misguided, since this is what Fudge was doing in the cases Peterson cites. Secondly, Peterson does not offer any substantial argument to the effect that Isaiah *does* not teach annihilationism here. He claims with no argument at all that since the fire in Isaiah's prophecy "will not be put out," it therefore does not consume what is put into it but burns it forever. But logically this is merely a *non sequitur*. The conclusion simply does not follow. Peterson might personally *think* that a fire that is not put out will always continue to burn what is put into it, but he has not argued that this is so, he simply expects the reader to believe it. We can easily think of examples that would disprove this odd claim, however. We might think of a house fire that is too fierce for firefighters to put out, or a fire in the fireplace on a winter's night that is not put out, but which is not still burning in the morning. In both cases the fire has a finite duration, and indeed *does* consume what is put into it, and yet in both cases the fire is not quenched. Why Peterson assumes that any reader would understand such a fire to burn forever remains a mystery, as no further argument is offered. Moreover, a simple search in the Bible for references to a fire that will not be quenched would have provided Peterson with a clear counter example, and would probably have held him back from making such a visibly false assertion. Ezekiel 20:47–48 reads,

[S]ay to the forest of the Negeb, Hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord God, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree in you and every dry tree; the blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be scorched by it. All flesh shall see that I the LORD have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.

Clearly what is meant here is a fire that will be allowed to do its destructive work – nobody will put it out. Peterson's appeal to the (allegedly) obvious meaning of a fire that will not be quenched is contrived and easily disproved. It is also nothing more than assertion for Peterson to say that Isaiah "says that the worms never die; that is, their destructive work is never complete." To say

that the worms devouring the corpses in Isaiah 66 “never die” is not semantically the same as saying that “their destructive work is never complete,” and to boldly assert that this is what it means without any kind of argument is hardly an impressive rebuttal. On the contrary, if they never die it would seem more likely that they are indeed able to complete their destructive work. If they *did* die this would be impossible.

Returning to the issue of “arguments from silence,” this is not the only occasion where Peterson uses the very kind of argument he seeks to dismiss. In another place when making a positive case for eternal torment, he turns once more to prolonged rebuttal of the annihilationist position instead, citing Dan 12:2, one of the key ten texts that Peterson believes establishes the traditionalist view. It tells us that “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Responding to the claim that the text teaches eternal torment, Fudge noted, “it is an ‘everlasting’ contempt, because the state is irreversible.”⁴⁹ We must note (although it is obvious), that the “contempt” is not the contempt of the lost, but of the saved, or perhaps of God Himself. As Fudge notes in the same work when he cites Pétavel, “the sentiment of the survivors is disgust, not pity.”⁵⁰ Fudge concurs, “Nothing will change in this sentiment; there is ‘everlasting contempt.’”⁵¹ It is important to note that the claim is not that the text *teaches* annihilationism in this case, since it does not refer to destruction (or torment). The point is only that the reference to eternal contempt need not imply everlasting suffering, since the only “eternal” thing the unrighteous receive here is the contempt of others. Peterson responds: “Surely this is a mishandling of Daniel 12:2. The prophet says nothing

⁴⁹ Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 123.

⁵⁰ Emmanuel Pétavel, *The Problem of Immortality* (London: Elliot Stock, 1892), 323, cited in Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 65.

⁵¹ Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 65.

of annihilation. Instead . . . he uses the same adjective, *everlasting (olam)* to describe the fate of both groups.”⁵² To say that the prophet “says nothing of annihilation” is an argument from silence in Peterson’s own terms. It states what the passage “does not say.” The argument also misses the point. The annihilationist claim is not that this passage *does* teach annihilationism. It is merely an attempt to explain what “everlasting contempt” might refer to if not eternal torment. Peterson’s insistence that “it indicates a never-ending conscious existence that corresponds to the never-ending conscious existence of the righteous” is clearly question-begging.⁵³ Whether or not this is what it indicates is the very thing in dispute, and Peterson has merely asserted his conclusion to be true without offering any arguments, other than the argument from silence that annihilation is not mentioned.

We must suggest then that Peterson’s charge of “argument from silence” is disingenuous, given that he recognizes the validity of the kind of argument Fudge uses in those cases, employing it elsewhere himself (although less successfully due to his false premises). Unfortunately, this is not the only time when Peterson uses incorrect labels to add to a pile of arguments, giving the reader the impression that annihilationist literature is riddled with obvious blunders and poor arguments. When an annihilationist author says that the doctrine of eternal torment is *absent* from the Bible Peterson charges them with arguing from silence.⁵⁴ When an annihilationist claims that the

⁵² Peterson, *Two Views* 136.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 136–137.

⁵⁴ Peterson does this on another occasion in response to the late Basil Atkinson. When Atkinson argues that the Bible never hints that the “eternal fire” will be an abnormal fire causing torment rather than destruction (which he says would have been necessary “to avoid deception”), Peterson calls it an argument from silence combined with “inflammatory language.” Anyone reading the work of Atkinson will see the point. The language of fire naturally suggests destruction, and it would be deceptive,

biblical language is contrary to some of the gruesome language used by traditionalists in history, Peterson cries “emotionally charged language.”⁵⁵ Thus, arguments from Scripture—not always the most important arguments, but arguments nonetheless – are brushed aside and given a label to ensure the reader will ignore them, labels that are as inaccurate as they are dismissive.

Two final rebuttals must be addressed, not because they are among the most powerful, but firstly because Peterson uses them as concluding arguments to hammer in the final nails of annihilationism’s coffin, and secondly because they reveal the noteworthy inconsistency in his standard of determining which arguments are strong and which are fallacious. Peterson is by no means alone in using them, but they cannot pass by unnoticed. For all the accusations of emotionally charged arguments that we see in Peterson’s responses to annihilationism, the closing paragraphs of his article, “Does the Bible teach Annihilationism” are incredible for the extent to which they are driven by pure emotion. Peterson pleads with the reader to reject annihilationism and teach eternal torment because it is likely to result in more evangelism and converts.

In fact annihilationism is a serious error because it leads unrepentant sinners to underestimate their fate. Annihilationists insist that the obliteration of the wicked is a terrible destiny when measured against the bliss of the righteous. However, it is simply not that bad to cease to exist, especially in comparison to suffering in hell forever... This leads to the final implication. If annihilationism is widely accepted by Christians, the missionary enterprise may well be hindered. True, some evangelicals such as John Stott and Michael Green have consistently shown a zeal for evangelism while holding to annihilationism. Nevertheless what would be the effect

Atkinson believed, to use the image of fire if it meant torment – without explaining that it did not carry its ordinary meaning. Peterson might not agree with the point, but it just will not do to brush it off by labeling it unfavorably as he does (Robert Peterson, “Basil Atkinson: A Key Figure for Twentieth-Century Evangelical Annihilationism,” 200).

⁵⁵ Peterson, “Basil Atkinson” 201–202.

on churches and denominations that once held to eternal conscious torment, if they were to shift to annihilationism? Their missionary zeal might well wane.⁵⁶

Three responses need to be made to this: First, it is false, second, it is an *ad hominem* attack, and, third, it is purely emotive and irrelevant. First, it is false because there is no evidence to suggest that believers who come to accept annihilationism tend to lose interest in evangelism. It may in fact be the case that a God who punishes people by making them suffer forever is a view less conducive to winning converts, but again, with no kind of evidence but only speculation, the claim is surely unwise. It is also not obvious that suffering is worse than death. Unpleasantness—even gore, must not be confused with genuine seriousness. In fact, it is precisely the kind of thinking that Peterson presents here that drives the arguments for euthanasia. Pain is worse than loss of life, so the argument goes, so killing those in pain is merciful.⁵⁷ But how do we know that pain is worse than death? How does Peterson know that the destruction of a creature made in God's image is "not as *bad*" as is suffering? Peterson is in no position to simply assert that one is worse than the other, and he does not offer any actual arguments to bolster his view of which is worse. With the annihilationists I say let God be God, who alone can determine what is just and fair, and what genuinely constitutes severity.

Second, it is an *ad hominem* attack (an attack against the person rather than an attack against the argument) because it impugns Christians who believe in annihilationism by suggesting that they are less likely to care about evangelism. But the third and chief thing to note about this argument is that it is purely driven by emotion, and it is irrelevant to the truth of the matter. What Peterson personally sees as a more compelling doctrine of final punishment for the purposes of

⁵⁶ Peterson, "Does the Bible Teach Annihilationism?" 27.

⁵⁷ It should be fairly obvious that I am not attributing this view of euthanasia to Peterson, I am merely pointing out that he *does* accept this view when it comes to the severity of eternal punishment.

evangelism might offer a window on his own soul. The argument might stir pragmatically minded Christians up to cast aside annihilationism because it does not have the same “fear factor” that eternal torment has, but it is logically irrelevant to whether or not annihilationism is *true*. Annihilationists are not annihilationists because they want a strong sales pitch to deliver the unsaved or because they want to tell their brethren whatever tall tales are necessary to make them good evangelists. They believe it because they are persuaded that it is biblical.

V. CONCLUSION

Both annihilationists and traditionalists freely admit that the Bible teaches “eternal punishment.” Where they differ is over what this punishment entails. Is it eternal torment, as the traditionalist believes, or is it eternal (and literal) destruction, as the annihilationist believes?⁵⁸ Peterson is clearly persuaded that the annihilationists have failed to make their case, and has set about seeking their arguments out and responding to them. The net effect has been to put the issue in the spotlight, for which many annihilationists are perhaps grateful. After all, the more attention is drawn to their case, they may well assume, the more people will be convinced by it. But Dr

⁵⁸ It is interesting (and perhaps a little frustrating) that Peterson declares with certainty on a number of occasions that Matthew 25:46 is the most important text in the traditionalist’s arsenal since it places “eternal life” in contrast with “eternal punishment,” clearly showing that they are equally eternal. It should be clear however that the question of whether eternal punishment *is* eternal is not where the real disagreement lies. Annihilationists differ with Peterson over what the “punishment” actually *is* in Matthew 25:46. Peterson claims a victory over the fact that lexicons link the word *kolasin* with “retribution” (*Two Views of Hell*, 142), but the victory is a hollow one since “retribution” seems equivalent to “punishment” even in English. Among traditionalists and conditionalists who believe there will be retribution, the question is – what *kind* of retribution? Torment or destruction?

Peterson's intention has been just the opposite; to expose the weakness and at times even the danger of the annihilationist view.

I have followed the published debate, and it is clear that Peterson believes his arguments against annihilationism are conclusive. He has been using these arguments without obvious alteration for a number of years to knock down annihilationist polemics. He has responded from a variety of angles; philosophical, theological, practical and biblical. And yet on each of these fronts, and throughout his responses in journals and published books, fundamental flaws exist. Considerable misrepresentations are made of his opponents' arguments. Important exegetical points have been missed when they have been crucial to the argument. Very basic exegetical errors have been made, at times by things as simple as relying on one translation without looking at the Greek (or even at other English translations). At times Peterson's responses to exegetical matters are nothing more than assertions made without any apparent warrant at all. At other times his tactics have been truly disappointing, ungraciously impugning the character of annihilationists and using arguments driven by emotionalism and pragmatism. In short, while Peterson has written much in reply to annihilationists, he has not written much by way of a substantial rebuttal.

It would be wrong to suggest that everything that Robert Peterson has written fits into the categories of error described here. It is not all as bad as this, yet it must be said that the errors outlined here are not the only ones. To the committed traditionalist, Peterson's works may have come as a relief. He has responded in print to a number of individual annihilationists, as well as to the position generally. Answers have been published, so traditionalists can breathe easy, the threat is dispelled, some might think. Not so. On close examination, Peterson's responses are weak and unsuccessful. He has not defeated annihilationism.

