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## Revisiting the Afterlife: The Inadequacies of "Heaven" and "Hell"

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## REVISITING THE AFTERLIFE: THE INADEQUACIES OF "HEAVEN" AND "HELL"

By Christopher P. Davis

### INTRODUCTION

"Daddy," asked Adam, John's six year old son, "where did King David go when he died?" "To heaven, son," John answered. "Daddy, where did mommy go when she died?" John gently replied, "To heaven, son." While this concept is surely a comfort to both John and Adam, the reality is that Adam's questions actually require two separate answers. Whereas the second question was answered correctly, the former was not. Though John might not be expected to know the answer to David's whereabouts in the afterlife, many scholars would plainly agree with his statement. But once this assessment is accepted, a number of problems ensue, and out of these problems numerous speculative answers are given. The end result is yet one more area within Christendom where everyone is left without a clear answer. In reality, the terms "heaven" and "hell" adequately express the positive and negative aspects of the afterlife but are far too ambiguous for understanding the immediate and future results of death. In other words, the state of humans after death should be described with more specific terms such as "torments" and "heaven" for this dispensation, and "paradise" for the Old Testament saints.

### BIBLICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The typical anthropological debate between evangelicals focuses on whether man is a dichotomous or trichotomous creature.<sup>1</sup> In other words, does man possess a body and soul (dichotomy), or is he made up of body, soul, and spirit (trichotomy)? While both positions have strengths and weaknesses it is clear that either one can exist within an evangelical framework.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, the major issues within each of these positions is philosophical *not* biblical. For many years opposition to these theories has come from naturalistic evolutionists who seek to explain every aspect of the universe in terms of observable data. In this system the mention of a soul is all but superfluous since there is no way to test the invisible. However, this is no longer the only position seeking to rethink this concept. The ideas that once were relegated to antisupernaturalism have now become commonplace within Christendom.

John W. Cooper separates anthropological theories into two camps: (1) monism, and (2) dualism.<sup>3</sup> What we will call strict monism is obviously the choice of the evolutionary minded (and for the purposes of this paper this form will be dismissed at this point), but there are two other forms that have been considered Christian options. The first form posits a resurrection immediately after death, and the other argues for a state of nonexistence between death and the general resurrection.<sup>4</sup> Yet, each case argues that man cannot exist apart from the flesh. Aside from the many problems that will be explored below, each of these views creates some problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Elmer L. Towns, *Theology for Today* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* This argument is irrelevant to the discussion and here it is assumed along with Towns that man is essentially a dichotomy.

<sup>3</sup> John W. Cooper, "Created for Everlasting Life: Can Theistic Evolution Provide an Adequate Christian Account of Human Nature?," *Zygon* 48, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 487.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

By arguing for an immediate resurrection, first, one has to deal a deathblow to a literal resurrection, since it is obvious that the flesh is still in the ground, and second, there is no reason to believe in a resurrection at the end of time (this deviation casts out one of the most fundamental Christian doctrines).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, a nonexistent state controverts biblical data that speaks of life immediately after death (2 Cor. 5:8; see more below).

Grant R. Gillett, while admittedly avoiding a discussion of the theological conclusions of his position, seems to at least lay the groundwork for monism. His major point is that the definition of man needs to be significantly different than the higher animals. The novel approach he takes to explain how humans are different melds Cartesian reasoning and the scientific approach of unification in the universe. In other words, he starts by validating the majority of scientific findings and the ultimate point of Descartes that an individual can know that he alone exists. However, in order to make his case, he also has to move beyond this initial point of Descartes. In the end, Gillett's system describes man in terms of "identity," "quality of life," and "responsibility," which are all reasonably knowable by rational beings.<sup>6</sup> But once man is defined in such terms, it seems unnecessary to even speak of a soul. Again, Gillett does not answer in either direction, but he does seem to redefine the idea of a soul along the lines of monism when he states, "The soul of a human being shows that he or she is of a certain biological complexity and the sciences of humanity show that he or she has a rational soul."<sup>7</sup> The irony of this statement is only appreciated when one reads Gillett's next conclusion: "The truths of natural science, however, do not give us an understanding of the soul, nor do the truths of religion and morality give us an understanding of the brain."<sup>8</sup> Yet, if this is the case (which actually is quite agreeable), it no longer seems possible to define the soul along the lines of scientific terms as he does. This logical contradiction calls into question any form of anthropological definition that seeks to understand the human soul in scientific terms.

Millard J. Erickson has noticed many of the same problems with the foundations of monism and posits an alternative anthropology that he calls "conditional unity."<sup>9</sup> However, before going into his position, it is necessary to note that Erickson is in fundamental agreement with the monist position on the issue of melding science with biblical data.<sup>10</sup> The problem for him is the fact that monism seems to subvert the biblical notion of an intermediate state after death (cf. Luke 23:43). In fact, both of the monist positions above do away with this concept. The first gets rid of it by placing man in the eternal resurrected state upon death, and the second does so by placing man in the grave until resurrection. This will be dealt with more fully below, but it is sufficient to say for now that monism suffers from biblical as well as philosophical problems.

Agreeing with Erickson's critique is only part of the issue. As already noted, his presuppositions require him to retain a measure of allegiance to certain scientific data. So, like his monist opposition, he agrees that Christian dualism is not the best anthropological understanding. Erickson describes his position thus:

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Edgar, "Biblical Anthropology and the Intermediate State. Part I," *Evangelical Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 116.

<sup>6</sup> Grant R. Gillett, "Brain, Mind, and Soul," *Zygon* 20, no. 4 (December 1, 1985): 428.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 490.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 446. While this discussion is dealing with Erickson's view of creation, the same premise is evident throughout his entire dealings with the doctrine of man.

We might think of a human as a unitary compound of a material and an immaterial element. The spiritual and the physical elements are not always distinguishable, for the human is a unitary subject; there is no conflict between the material and immaterial nature. The unity is dissolvable, however; dissolution takes place at death. At the resurrection a compound will again be formed, with the soul (if we choose to call it that) once more becoming inseparably attached to a body.<sup>11</sup>

This description borders on the esoteric and does not actually seem necessary when one defines Christian dualism correctly. First, this theory suffers from the same problem of monism in that it seeks to describe the invisible union of material and immaterial in biological terms. How this is maintained by Erickson, while he decries its practice earlier is not quite clear. At best, Erickson could *possibly* be correct, but he offers a solution to a speculative problem by adding a different speculation. Second, melding the spiritual and physical in such a close manner seems to militate against biblical ideas of setting oneself against the flesh (Rom. 7:20-25). Warring against something that is indistinguishable from the spiritual within the body does seem tangible. In other words, this position reintroduces biblical problems. Finally, Christian dualism retains the best of Erickson's position while discarding the negatives.

While Erickson seems to be averse to the idea of an immortal soul due to its association with Greek philosophy, this does not immediately render such a notion invalid. Surely the Greek ideal of living on without the flesh is flawed; however, the traditional Christian view of a soul is its existence in an intermediate state *until* it is given new flesh.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Paul Enns in defining a typical dichotomous position states, "The non-material part of man is the soul and spirit, which are of the same substance; however, they have a different function."<sup>13</sup> Notice, there is no essential variance between this view and what Erickson is trying to say. The difference is purely in the way the immaterial and the material relate to one another. This is precisely where Erickson is without biblical grounds. The speculation he engages in requires, like monism, the identification of natural processes existing within the spiritual realm. But as this treatise has shown, this transgression of arenas renders this position untenable.

At this point, one might conclude the following: First, monism in all its forms satisfies some philosophical problems but ultimately undermines the biblical material. Second, unconditional unity places itself in the awkward position of failing both philosophical and biblical issues. Third, while philosophical problems still plague the traditional dualist position, the biblical material is fully satisfied. Fourth, when Christian dualism is specified to its dichotomous form, many of the philosophical problems disappear. For example, the soul (not the spirit and soul) lives on into the intermediate state to be rejoined to the flesh at the resurrection. This, of course, assumes the reality of the intermediate state, a theory that must now be proved.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 492.

<sup>12</sup> This is essentially what Erickson is saying, but he seeks to make the soul, as immaterial, a part of the material. Perhaps this is due to his insistence that evolution played a part in the creation of man. In this system it is not possible to view the soul as a separate entity, even if integrated within man, because it would have had to evolve along with flesh.

<sup>13</sup> Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2008), 318.

## THE AFTERLIFE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament material on the nature of the afterlife is admittedly scarce. The point, however, is not to prove the essential nature of the concept, but rather to argue that even the ancient Hebrews realized that there was *some sort of life* beyond the grave. While a bit dated, Harry E. Fosdick's idea of sheol being a place that the Jews thought of as a state of empty existence beyond life has pervaded much of Christendom today.<sup>14</sup> This is unfortunate because it has been used as evidence for casting doubt on God's early people by basically discounting their views as superstitious. Yet one wonders if the biblical record actually houses such a pessimistic view of the afterlife. Moreover, even if such is the case, pointing to the superstitions of the people seems to avoid one problem only by creating a new one—namely, the invalidity of God's inspiration.

One of the major issues with the concept of the afterlife (in both the Old and New Testaments) is the inability to define the idea based upon linguistic concerns. In particular, the major word used by the Old Testament for the afterlife, *še'ol*, is also used for death in general and many other concepts, most of which are negative (e.g., the origin of greed is from sheol).<sup>15</sup> This requires each mention of the word to be understood within its context. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to separate the negative and positive elements with which sheol is associated because there is quite a bit of theological baggage attached to even its simplest usages.

At a basic level, the Old Testament views life after death as a given. For example, Moses condemns mediums based upon the fact that they “inquire of the dead” (Deut. 18:11 HCSB).<sup>16</sup> Later, Isaiah taunts the king of Babylon by assuring him that the dead in sheol will rejoice and speak to him when he arrives (Isa. 14:9-10). Clement J. McNaspy even sees implicit evidence for such an assumption. The first account he mentions is Jacob's comment about going “down to Sheol to my son [Joseph]” (Gen. 37:35). McNaspy argues that Joseph was not buried but was rather “eaten” by wild animals, so Jacob's comment makes no sense if it is translated as the grave.<sup>17</sup> While this example seems a bit strained, his next point is harder to deny. He states, “the common figure for ‘death,’ namely, ‘to be gathered to one's fathers,’ indicates, if it does not prove peremptorily, that Sheol is not the grave; for it is used to describe death even before one is buried, or when one is not interred in the ancestral tomb at all.”<sup>18</sup> Although this does not actually prove what McNaspy believes it does, the argument does help point to the general notion of consciousness beyond death. To argue otherwise would make certain instances of this phrase incoherent. It is hard to see how the following promise would offer comfort to Josiah if it simply included death and burial: “I will indeed gather you to your fathers, and you will be gathered to your grave in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster that I am bringing on this place and on its inhabitants” (2 Chron. 34:28). Avoiding disaster (which invariably includes death) is great, but if death and death alone is the promised way out of this, one wonders how this is a benefit.

One final example should serve to at least give credence to the idea that the dead are not unconscious in Hebrew thought. During a time of sheer desperation, when the Spirit of the Lord

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<sup>14</sup> Harry E. Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1933), 99–100.

<sup>15</sup> W. A. Van Gemeren, “Sheol,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Baker Academic; Paternoster Press, 2001), 1099.

<sup>16</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the HCSB, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>17</sup> Clement J. McNaspy, “Sheol in the Old Testament,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (July 1, 1944): 327–8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

had departed from him, King Saul went and inquired of a medium in order to discern God's will. After conjuring the spirit, to the medium's surprise, she actually brought Samuel *up* (1 Sam. 28:12). This scene has caused much debate in the scholarly realm, but explanations like Fred Blumenthal's "fictional, symbolic portrayal of the struggle within Saul's mind" do not seem to take seriously the veracity of the scriptural witness.<sup>19</sup> After all, this is not portrayed as taking place in Saul's mind (1 Sam. 28:15), and the message that is given is clearly not demonic (28:17; cf. 15:28). Furthermore, no credit has to be given to necromancy in this instance. According to Eugene H. Merrill,

That Samuel's appearance, even in visionary form, was not the expected result clearly teaches that necromancers or mediums have no real power over the deceased, especially the righteous, but can only produce counterfeits. Samuel's appearance here is explained by the intervention of the Lord who graciously permitted Saul one last encounter with the prophet whom he had first sought so long ago in pursuit of his father's lost donkeys (1 Sam. 9:6-9).<sup>20</sup>

Assuming the natural reading of this passage, Samuel is seen to have been in spirit form (28:14) and disturbed from some place (28:15). Two things are important here: (1) the monist position requires there to be *no* life without the flesh; and (2) Samuel was not only alive enough to speak, but he seemed to not mind whatever it is that he had been disturbed from. Because Samuel was in spirit form, regardless if he was unconscious prior to this, the monist position is ruled out due to his life without flesh.<sup>21</sup> Finally, Samuel's enjoyment of where he came from implies that there are distinctions within sheol—namely, the experience of the righteous differs from the wicked.

While there is some division in the experiences of sheol, the Hebrews still did not place their entire hope in this place. Indeed, the transitory nature of sheol is the greatest addition of the Old Testament to the idea of the afterlife. It is here that one can first see the makings of an intermediate state. Unfortunately, the majority of instances that establish this concept are negative, which has led many to assume that sheol is simply a term meaning hell. The problem with this is the finality that is often associated with hell. Jon E. Braun seems to get carried away when he pronounces, "Plainly, simply, and clearly, the Old Testament here draws a sharp distinction between the destiny of the righteous and the unrighteous. The *place* of the righteous provides *forever* blessing. The *place* of the unrighteous provides *forever* misery" (emphasis added).<sup>22</sup> The problem is not with the "blessing" and the "misery," but rather with Braun's use of the singular "place." The Hebrews did not have such a geographically eternal understanding.

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<sup>19</sup> Fred Blumenthal, "The Ghost of Samuel: Real or Imaginary?," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 105.

<sup>20</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "1 Samuel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 453.

<sup>21</sup> It might be argued at this point that Saul was experiencing a vision, but this too runs aground since it is not likely that Samuel would speak as though he were affected if he were a mere character in a vision. Moreover, even if this were a vision, it is not altogether clear that visions are so removed from reality that the entities involved are not alive. For example, John saw many things while taken in the Spirit to heaven, not least of which was an angel speaking to him (Rev. 10:9). Where a vision ends and reality begins is often blurred in these accounts, hence it would be unwise to subvert the natural reading of 1 Samuel 28, by replacing it with an even less likely (or at least less clear) concept.

<sup>22</sup> Jon E. Braun, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (New York, NY: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), 134.

Instead, they realized that wherever the righteous and the wicked ended up, they would each receive their just deserts.<sup>23</sup>

A few examples should suffice to show the temporary nature of sheol in the Old Testament mindset. Righteous Job was one of the first to express his thoughts toward sheol. After explaining his desire to avoid suffering by going to the grave, Job wonders if resurrection is possible (Job 14:13-14). While the answer does not come here, later Job is seen extolling God as a “living Redeemer” (19:25), whom he will one day see with his own eyes (19:27). Likewise, King David rejoices over the fact that his flesh will only be left in the grave for so long (Ps. 16:9). Then he adds, “[Y]ou will not abandon my soul to Sheol” (16:10 ESV). There is a hope beyond this place. Finally, the sons of Korah exult in a similar truth: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me” (49:15 ESV).

### THE AFTERLIFE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Judging by the concepts developed in the New Testament it is probable that the above information was simply assumed. One issue, however, exists due to the use of the Greek word *haidēs* to translate the Hebrew word *še’ol*. It was noted previously that sheol designates many ideas within the Old Testament, but when hades is in view within the New Testament it is almost always used in reference to the abode of the wicked. Hence, many have asserted that hades (= sheol) has always been the place of the wicked. Yet, this anachronistic reasoning does not offer the best conclusions. While it cannot be denied that hades in the New Testament sense is a place for the wicked dead, this does not mean hades was always used in such a manner. Said otherwise, there is good evidence that hades is used as a synonym for “torments” because one element of it (i.e., the place of the righteous) has been relocated.

The greatest evidence for this view comes from Jesus’ words to the Pharisees. While describing the lot of a rich man he tells them, “[B]eing in torment in Hades, he [the rich man] looked up and saw Abraham a long way off, with Lazarus at his side” (Luke 16:23).<sup>24</sup> Notice that Jesus does not say being in hades, the rich man looked up, but rather being in “torments in hades.” The point Jesus is trying to make here is that both Lazarus and the rich man are in hades at this point. However, each of them is experiencing a different part of it. While Abraham is comforting Lazarus in one area, the rich man is being tormented in another. This has become more convoluted by the incorrect association of the location of Lazarus within “Abraham’s Bosom” (as though this were a title for the place where he was; cf. 16:22). This idea, no doubt, takes its cue from the translations that place Lazarus *in* Abraham’s bosom.<sup>25</sup> But Abraham’s bosom is simply one aspect of the section of hades that houses the righteous. For Jews, much

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<sup>23</sup> Towns, *Theology for Today*, 818. This is not the only place that Braun argues for such an eternal aspect to sheol. In fact, Towns approvingly quotes Braun in order to capture the essence of Old Testament thoughts on hell. In doing so, however, Towns contradicts his earlier position that the Hebrews thought of sheol as a temporary holding place prior to the resurrection. These two positions are mutually exclusive: either sheol is temporary or it is eternal. Furthermore, using the term “hell” does not remove the problem because the referent is still sheol.

<sup>24</sup> Another point of interest is the fact that the rich man looked up to Abraham. This seems to imply that the separation between the wicked and the righteous was spatial and vertical. Though Dante’s “descending circles of hell” is not an accurate portrayal of the reality of hades, the notion of levels is present in this passage.

<sup>25</sup> Pieter W. Van der Horst, “Abraham’s Bosom, the Place Where He Belonged: A Short Note on Apenechtēnai in Luke 16.22,” *New Testament Studies* 52, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 142. Van der Horst’s translation of this passage, as well as the NKJV and NASB (though not as clearly as his), make it all too easy for this association to take place.

comfort would come from this image, but one would not expect ancient saints prior to Abraham to derive any hope in this term. Instead, the point is that this location is a gathering place of the many saints of God who are awaiting something. Furthermore, there is no reason to think up a title for this place since it was already given a name by Jesus: paradise.

The next step in establishing an understanding of an intermediate state is to understand Jesus' concept of paradise. While suffering on the cross, Jesus turned to the criminal on his side and declared, "I assure you: Today you will be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). It seems highly unlikely that this promise was meant to assure the criminal that upon death he would be placed in a state of unconscious paradise. Likewise, it would be strange to see this as an indication of an immediate resurrection after death since Christ was not resurrected for three days. Instead, "paradise" captures the notion of edenic ideals and extrapolates them unto the afterlife.<sup>26</sup> The point is that wherever this criminal is going is a place of blessing.

For further clarity one must also take into account Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel: "For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights" (Matt. 12:40). Perhaps the most common understanding of this comment is that Christ was simply foretelling his death and burial.<sup>27</sup> Still, it seems hard to accept that the "heart" of the earth is an adequate description of the grave. More likely this term should be understood in light of Lazarus' location in Hades. In fact, the early church established a statement known as the Apostles' Creed in order to retain just such a concept.

The Creed reads simply: "He descended into Hell [Hades]."<sup>28</sup> While Jesus' sign is a great way to support this doctrine, it is not actually the verse that was used as proof. For this the early church looked to Eph. 4:9, which reads, "But what does 'He ascended' mean except that He descended to the lower parts of the earth?" Today, however, an interesting phenomenon occurs at the interpretation of this verse; many scholars will find some way to avoid the most natural understanding. For example, after concluding that this verse is most certainly referencing *a belief* that Christ descended into hades, William Bales states, "I believe that the author used the descent phrase in 4:9 metaphorically in order to indicate Christ's sacrificial death."<sup>29</sup> In other words, Paul was using metaphorically a concept that was believed to be literal during his day. But would this not require that the fundamental concept first be literal in order for Paul to use it in such a manner?

Wayne A. Grudem moves to the next logical step by arguing that this segment of the Apostles' Creed should simply be removed. After offering alternative understandings of the passages that seem to indicate a descent of Christ, Grudem states,

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<sup>26</sup> Larry J. Waters, "The Believer's Intermediate State after Death," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169, no. 675 (July 1, 2012): 295.

<sup>27</sup> Louis A. Barbieri Jr., "Matthew," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 47; Stuart K. Weber, "Matthew," in *Holman New Testament Commentary*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), sec. 12:39–40. Weber, in particular, identifies the term "heart" as another word for "tomb," but evidence for this association outside of the imagination is severely lacking.

<sup>28</sup> Phillip Schaff, "The Apostles' Creed," in *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (USA: WORDsearch Corp., 2004). The explanatory note is in the original and is a great indicator of the obvious nature of this doctrine. The perversion of modern Christendom is twofold: either (1) hell must be understood in demonic and carnal terms, rather than in terms of a location in the center of the earth; or (2) there cannot be a literal center of the earth since this is beyond what the rational mind can accept.

<sup>29</sup> William Bales, "The Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 100.



In addition to the fact that there seems to be little if any Biblical support for a descent of Christ into hell, there are some NT texts that apparently deny the possibility of Christ's going to hell after his death. Jesus' words to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43), imply that after Jesus died his soul (or spirit) went immediately to the presence of the Father in heaven, even though his body remained on earth and was buried.<sup>30</sup>

While a full rebuttal to Grudem's position is impossible at this point, one can look to David P. Scaer for an adequate response to Grudem's thesis that there is little biblical data for a descent of Christ.<sup>31</sup> Scaer, however, does not offer an acceptable alternative in the long run. Instead of refuting Grudem's concept of hell and the spatial realities thereof (e.g., hell is only a literal place of torment) he removes all need for spatio-literal conceptions of hell (not to mention heaven). Scaer avers, "'He descended into hell' is no less needed or effective in proclaiming that Christ has conquered not only sin and the world but, more importantly, Satan. By eliminating the descent from the creed we lose the one reference to the victory of Christ and the defeat of God's major opponent."<sup>32</sup> So, what Scaer is saying is that the only reason retention of the statement is necessary is not because Christ literally descended into hell, but because he literally crushed the powers of hell. Yet, if this is the case, Scaer has essentially removed Grudem's exegetical basis while affirming his conclusion.

The major problem with all of this hermeneutical gymnastics is that it is completely unnecessary. Grudem assumes that hell is only the place of the wicked, but if Schaff's comment is heeded, no reason exists for placing this concept upon the Apostles' Creed—for it is hades that Christ descended into, not hell per se. At this point, it should be clear that theological concerns are not really the issue, but rather a confusion of terms. Few would argue that Christ descended into hell if they truly understood hell as the place of the cursed.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, no one would deny the location of paradise in the center of the earth (hades) if they truly believed that hades was capable of housing both the wicked and the righteous. Therefore, in order to establish a proper doctrine of the afterlife the terms will need to be "redefined."<sup>34</sup>

#### "HEAVEN" AND "HELL"

The major reason most of this discussion has focused upon the abode of the wicked is because the term "heaven" has not been quite as tainted. Christians are correct to see heaven as the place where they will go immediately after death, for this has been established in numerous biblical texts (Mark 16:9; cf. 2 Cor. 5:8). However, if "heaven" is used to refer to the final abode of the righteous, this is not quite accurate. While the notions of bliss and perfection will always remain, the Christian awaits a time of resurrection (Luke 20:36) and rule upon the earth (Rev.

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<sup>30</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture instead of the Apostles' Creed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 1 (March 1, 1991): 113.

<sup>31</sup> David P. Scaer, "He Did Descend to Hell: In Defense of the Apostles' Creed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35, no. 1 (March 1, 1992): 93–6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>33</sup> This is precisely what Grudem believes, so his consistent desire to keep Christ from such a hellish place should be commended.

<sup>34</sup> I use this term loosely since it is my contention that I am not redefining anything, but rather bringing the discussion back to an older and much more obvious understanding. Perhaps "recapturing" is a better term.

2:26-27). Furthermore, paradise is a great concept so long as it is remembered that this experience does not require heaven. Heaven can house and magnify paradise, but paradise could have been available at a different location so long as no wicked were present.

It is at this point that confusion begins to set in; paradise in the contemporary sense can be equated with heaven only insofar as it is not anachronistically attached to the Old Testament concept of the same word. On the other hand, hades can be a great term that designates a temporary holding place for the wicked. Yet this only works so long as it is remembered that hades once held righteous people as well. It was as Christ led "captivity captive" (Eph. 4:8 NKJV) that the righteous individuals in hades were transferred to heaven.<sup>35</sup>

The term "hell" is perhaps the slipperiest eschatological concept to grasp even though it is the most vividly understood. Today, most people, including many scholars (see Grudem), view hell as the final abode of the wicked. If this were the extent of it much would be commendable, for "hell" is a great term to use in reference to what Christ calls *gehenna* (Matt. 5:22; see esp. Mark 9:43-47). There is no question that *gehenna* is thought of as eternal by Christ, and many other ideas in the New Testament seem to describe the fiery eternal nature of this place (cf. James 3:6; Rev. 19:20; 20:10). However, the all encompassing use of the word "hell" for the place that the wicked go now, only to remain there forever, is misguided. Not only does this ignore the fact that the wicked will be resurrected (Dan. 12:2; cf. Acts 24:15), but it also neglects to take into account that the wicked will eventually be cast into the lake of fire (*gehenna*): a place that has yet to become home for anyone (Rev. 19:20).

The best way to keep this discussion from digressing down the many deviant paths that have been mentioned is to maintain a few rules. First, the place of the righteous dead is today rightfully called heaven. Second, when dealing with Old Testament saints the proper terminology for the righteous would be either paradise or sheol/hades, assuming of course one realizes the transient nature of these concepts. Third, the final abode of the wicked should ideally be termed *gehenna* or the lake of fire, but the images associated with these terms have been for so long attached to hell that "hell" should be used strictly in this sense. Finally, for the intermediate state of the wicked, a few terms remain: "hades"/"sheol," or "torments." Again, the first two terms require a bit of clarification in that no righteous soul remains in this location. Therefore, the preferable term is "torments" since this captures the dismal elements for those who die without Christ but can also be qualified in order to allow for its temporal nature.

## APPLICATION

"Well son," John replied to his son, "let me explain a little better where mommy and King David are." With this knowledge Adam's simple question becomes an open door for explaining the gospel in such a clear manner that he is sure to understand. Beginning with David's death John is now in a position to explain to his son that Jesus had to come into this world in order to bring King David and everyone that believed to heaven with him. "A long time ago when good people died angels would carry their souls to the center of the earth where they were allowed a little bit of rest and comfort," John explained. "That doesn't sound like fun, dad," Adam replied. "Exactly!" John quickly added. "Those good people in the Old Testament looked forward to a time when they would actually be with God. Their ultimate hope was not the rest they received, but the time when they would see God face to face... Would you like to see God

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<sup>35</sup> Towns, *Theology for Today*, 819.

face to face?” Hopefully it is clear where this is going, and the truth is, this simple explanation will lead Adam to such a profound understanding of God’s plan that he will find great comfort.

This truth stretches far beyond the six-year-old in the story, and touches each person one might share with. It is not surprising to see the look of shock on someone’s face when they are told that their party friends who died in a car accident did not go to hell. “What? I thought Christians believed in hell and that sort of thing,” they might say. The reality is that hell is only part of the pain associated with the gospel. One of the worst realizations for unbelievers can be to understand that not only is hell in the future, but there will be a time in between which will allow ample room to think about their ultimate fate. There is nothing quite like that moment when one knows he is in trouble and can do nothing but ruminate over the inevitable. This is a missing truth in evangelism today, and when it is reintroduced, the effects are well worth the time spent distinguishing between popular concepts and biblical notions of heaven and hell.

### CONCLUSION

While the terms “heaven” and “hell” are capable of conveying some of the elements of the afterlife, unless significant time is spent in explanation they can often breed confusion. Much of the confusion begins to develop when the naturalistic presuppositions of evolutionary thought are allowed to dictate the Christian’s anthropology. This leads to a monistic idea of human nature, which inevitably requires tampering with the natural understanding of the Bible. But once a dualistic anthropology is accepted, the problem shifts to understanding the abundant Old and New Testament ideas of the afterlife that are often portrayed with only one or two words. Navigating this second area, however, is a feasible task. In fact, the progressive nature of Scripture makes the task so simple that most often scholars dismiss such ideas as naïve. Yet the early church and many modern scholars do not think it wise to dismiss so easily the plain evidence of the Bible. Therefore, due caution is advised when using terms like “heaven” and “hell” to cover multifaceted notions of the afterlife that span over four-thousand years of biblical thought.

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