

A Closer Look at Revelation 20:10

By Patrick Navas (2007)

"Even if we [traditionalists] conceded Matthew 25:46 to the annihilationists, what could they possibly say in response to John's words... 'they will be tormented day and night forever and ever'?"

—Professor Alan Gomes, *Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell Part 2*, *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1991

"...and the Devil, who is leading them astray, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where [are] the beast and the false prophet, and they shall be tormented day and night—to the ages of the ages."

—Revelation 20:10, Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible

The expression that occurs in Revelation 20:10—"**they will be tormented day and night forever and ever**" (NASB)—has long been perceived by traditional interpreters as conclusively establishing the notion that the "unsaved" will suffer a perpetual, conscious state of fiery torment that will never come to an end. In fact, according to the traditionalist way of thinking, even the unfortunate human souls cast into the lake of fire thereafter—"*anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life*"—will be deliberately made immortal and indestructible by God, forced to consciously endure a literally *eternal, never-ending sentence* of physical torture (or spiritual/mental anguish), the final judgment of God against the wicked (Rev. 20:15). This is, generally speaking, the traditional, mainstream conception of "hellfire," maintained and defended by conservative Catholics and Protestants to this day.¹

The "lake of fire" imagery, of course, is taken by traditional interpreters to represent the place where the wicked will be burned alive for all of eternity, never to be completely consumed

¹ Although traditionalists believe that all persons condemned to hell will suffer some form of never-ending conscious torment, they do believe that the degree of severity and pain will be determined by the extent to which the person sinned against God in his or her lifetime.

or put to an end—the result of the just judgment of God against evil men.²

It should be noted, however, that—contrary to the misleading impression given by some—the powerful, graphic and fear-inspiring image of the “lake of fire” is clearly a symbolic reference, for both “death and hades” are thrown into it (Rev. 20:14). Obviously, “death” and “hades” (the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol*; the grave in general), are abstract concepts, not physical objects that can be literally “thrown” into a real lake of physical fire. But the clear sense—communicated by means of graphic, poetic language and intense symbolic imagery—is that death itself (and the entire grave as a general concept) will ultimately be brought to nothing. In the end, in the new heavens and new earth where “righteousness dwells,” death and the grave will no longer be. Since “the wages of sin is death,”³ the absence of sin will mean the absence of death in God’s righteous kingdom. This is in fact verified by Revelation 21:4 (only a few verses after) which explicitly states that, in the new heaven and new earth, death itself “**will be no more.**” This corresponds to Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 15:24-25 about the point in time when “the last enemy, death, will be **brought to nothing** [**‘destroyed’** (RSV), **‘defeated’** (TEV), **‘abolished’** (NEB)],” and, perhaps, in 15:54 when death is finally “**swallowed up in victory.**” These expressions, in all likelihood, are related to the same point poetically described in the book of Revelation when *death* and *hades* are figuratively hurled into the symbolic lake of fire, “the second death.”

These are facts strongly suggesting that, in the book of Revelation, “the lake of fire” serves not to denote a literal place where immortal souls are endlessly tortured throughout eternity (the traditional concept of hell), but as a vivid and fearful “sign” or image *symbolizing* the reality of ultimate destruction, obliteration or complete eradication.⁴ The lake of fire (defined

² Although all traditionalists believe that the suffering of hell is conscious and never-ending, not all believe that the fire or burning is literal, but that it could be a figurative reference to some form of horrible, spiritual or mental anguish, the result of being eternally separated from God’s love.

³ 2 Peter 3:13; Romans 6:23

⁴ According to one commentary on Revelation: “The ‘lake of fire’ in Rev. 20:10 is not literal since Satan (along with his angels) is a spiritual being. The ‘fire’ is a punishment that is not physical but spiritual in nature. ‘The beast and false prophet’ are not literal but figurative for unbelieving institutions composed of people. Even ‘day and night’ is not literal but figurative for the idea of the *unceasing* nature of the torment...” —*The New International Greek Testament Commentary, The Book of Revelation, A Commentary on*

specifically as 'the second death') thus represents a point where that which is figuratively thrown into it—particularly all that is contrary to God's righteous will, including those whose names are not found written in the book of life—are eventually "brought to nothing," including death which "shall not exist any more" (Rev. 20:14; 21:4, 8, Darby Translation). This would harmonize well with, and appear to represent the ultimate fulfillment of, the Psalmist's prayer that "sinners be consumed out of the earth" and that "the wicked be no more" (Psalm 104:35, ASV).⁵

The other seemingly difficult aspect of this verse states the following:

"...[the devil, beast and false prophet] will be tormented day and night forever and ever (*tous aiōnas ton aiōnon*)."

This is certainly a text—perhaps *the preeminent text*—that, on the surface, seems to weigh heavily in favor of the traditionalist doctrine of hell-fire. Before making a determination about its true meaning and purpose, however, there are several important points that must be taken into consideration.

(1) The expression occurs in the book of Revelation; a book remarkably dominated by poetic language and prophetic symbolism. The apostle John's Revelation is, in fact, permeated with hyperbolic imagery (exaggerated language), vivid signs, figures of speech, and dramatic word-pictures, all used to convey the eventuality of certain, real concepts and events that, according to the prophecy, "must very soon take place." Yet this is precisely what should caution interpreters from making hasty decisions about the significance of various images, expressions and themes occurring throughout the book. We are even told specifically that it is "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his slaves the things that must shortly take place. **He made it known by signs**, sending his angel to his slave John who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ..." (Rev. 1:1).

Of the expression regarding signs in the introduction to the Revelation, the respected Bible commentator Albert Barnes noted: "He indicated [the revelation] by signs and symbols. The

the Greek Text, by G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans/Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1999), pp. 1029, 1030.

⁵ Compare the expression made in Psalm 73:27: "For behold, those who are far from you [Jehovah] shall perish; *you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you*" (ESV).

word occurs in the New Testament only in John 12:33 John 18:32; 21:19; Acts 11:28; 25:27 and in the passage before us, in all which places it rendered *signify, signifying or signified. It properly refers to some sign, signal, or token by which anything is made known,* (compare Matthew 26:28; Romans 4:11; Genesis 9:12-13; 17:11 Luke 2:12; 2 Corinthians 12:12; 1 Corinthians 14:22) and is a word most happily chosen to denote the manner in which the events referred to were to be communicated to John—for *nearly the whole book is made up of signs and symbols...*The general sense is that, sending by his angel, he made to John *a communication by expressive signs or symbols.*"⁶

In this light (the fact that John's revelation is expressed through 'signs' and symbols), we should be extremely careful about taking as strictly literal that which was never intended to be.

(2) The phrase "tormented day and night forever and ever" *only* applies to the devil, beast and false prophet directly,⁷ not to mankind in general or to those whose names are not written in the book of life. These are said to be thrown into the lake of fire as well (as are death and hades), but John nowhere states that these will suffer *everlasting* torment.

(3) The "lake of fire" is, in fact, defined as "the second death" (Rev. 20:14; 21:8). Death and Hades are thrown into it; and we know this represents the point when death "will be no more," "brought to nothing," "destroyed," "abolished"—completely and finally "swallowed up..." This suggests, again, that the lake of fire is a symbol of ultimate and irrevocable eradication, although it may very well involve the torment of persons thrown into it, for an unstated, unspecified duration, before bringing them to complete destruction. However, unlike the first death, frequently likened unto "sleep" in scripture⁸, and which is experienced by all of humankind, the *second* death carries with it no stated expectation or hope of resurrection—no future "awakening."

⁶ *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament, Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1847; 2005), pp. 35, 36 (emphasis added).

⁷ It was even noted by respected Baptist minister George Eldon Ladd: "**They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.** It is impossible to visualize the actual terms of this verse. The devil and his angels are spirits, not physical beings; fire belongs to the material physical order. How a lake of literal fire can bring everlasting torture to nonphysical beings is impossible to imagine. It is obvious that this is picturesque language describing a real fact in the spiritual world: the final and everlasting destruction of the forces of evil which have plagued men since the garden of Eden. **Verse 11.** After the destruction of Satan, John witnesses the final judgment, the destruction of the old order, and the inauguration of the eternal state." —*A Commentary on The Revelation of John*, by George Eldon Ladd, Professor of New Testament Theology and Exegesis, Fuller Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 270-271.

⁸ Compare Daniel 12:2; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:20

(4) The expression “forever and ever” is literally “to the ages of the ages” in Greek. One question worth asking is, does the expression “to the ages of the ages” necessarily mean “(absolutely) never-ending” as the traditional English translation suggests to many minds? Could it mean “into the ages of ages,” i.e., “into an unstated, unspecified duration of time and succeeding epochs”? It will be argued below that the surrounding context favors this interpretation completely.

(5) The weight of scriptural evidence overwhelmingly supports the “conditionalist” understanding of final, *aionion* (eternal) punishment.⁹ Upon careful analysis Rev. 20:10 becomes the *only* biblical text that actually appears—based on the traditional English translation—truly difficult to reconcile with “conditionalism.”¹⁰ Not even Matthew 25:46 (‘eternal punishment’) lends solid support to the traditionalist view; nor does it represent difficulty for the ‘conditionalist’ view, at all. This is made clear when we consider the term “eternal” (*aionios*: more literally: ‘age-enduring,’ ‘age-lasting’ or ‘of the age’) when applied to other concepts like “eternal judgment” (Heb. 6:2), “eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12), “eternal sin” (Mark 3:29), “eternal destruction” (2 Thess. 1:9), and so forth. That is to say,—as it has been noted by several interpreters in the past—*none of these references carry the idea of “a never-ending process of judging” or “an everlasting process of redeeming” or “a process of sin (or destruction) that never ends.”* Yet this is in fact the ultimate sense that traditionalists attribute to the phrase “eternal (*aionion*) punishment,” i.e., the wicked shall go into a never-ending process of torturous punishment,” since these too will go into the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” where the devil and his messengers “shall be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Matt. 25: 41; Compare Rev. 20:10).

But the general idea of “eternal” (*aionion*) used in connection with these terms seems to be either (1) a reference to a judgment/redemption/sin/destruction with *everlasting*,

⁹ According to one source: “Allowance should be made for use of hyperbole in Revelation 20:10. The traditional interpretation of 20:10 imposes a literal meaning of this verse, in a context (20:1-10) that abounds in symbolic elements. Apart from this text, there is no indication of eternal torment, and much evidence of final destruction.” —R. G. Bowles, ‘Does Rev. 14:11 Teach Eternal Torment? Examining a Proof-Text on Hell’, EQ, 23 (2001), 33 note 33 (op. cit., 30).

¹⁰ Even the noted Bible scholar Edward Fudge felt that, from his perspective as a ‘Conditionalist’, there was “no easy solution” to the expression made in Revelation 20:10. —*The Fire That Consumes, A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Lincoln: Universe.com, 2001), p. 304.

permanent results—yet the act itself is clearly not everlasting; or (2) a judgment/redemption/sin/destruction having to do with the age in view, that which has the *quality* belonging to the age to come; or a judgment/redemption/sin whose effects extend into the coming age, or both.

Traditionalists believe that in Matthew 25:46 Jesus intends “*aionion kolasin*” (eternal punishment) to convey the sense of “*never-ending* punishment, i.e., everlasting, conscious torture in the fires of hell without the possibility of relief.” But that is to read far too much into the statement and language than is warranted. The literal meaning of the phrase is “age-lasting punishment/chastisement”; yet the nature of that “punishment” in this case is not specified. But it is, like other nouns of action qualified by the adjective *eternal*, that which carries with it a permanent and everlasting (*aionion*) result; and that is why it can, like other scriptural concepts, be described as “eternal,” even though the actual act—whether it be sin, judgment, destruction, redemption, salvation, *punishment*, etc.—does not literally continue on forever without end. Or we could also justifiably conclude—based on the term’s derivation from *aion* (‘age,’ ‘period of time’)—that it is the *kind* or *quality* of punishment belonging not to this present age but to the age to come. It is an “*aionion*” (of the age [to come]) punishment. It might even be rendered “age-lasting chastisement” or “cut off” (reflecting the Old Testament expression ‘shall be cut off from his people.’ Compare Ge. 17:14; Ex. 30:33, 38; Lev. 7:20, 21; Num. 9:13). The language itself certainly does not convey the sense of “never-ending process of (torturous) punishment,” a meaning unwarrantedly read into the text by traditional proponents of hell-fire.

However, with respect to Revelation 20:10 specifically, it may be pointed out that although the devil, beast and false prophet will be tormented “day and night” in the symbolic lake of fire “to the ages of the ages” (a reference to a long, indefinite duration of time, with no end specified in the expression itself),¹¹ John

¹¹ It was noted by scholar of languages Solomon Landers: “The Coptic text of Revelation 20:10 translates *eis tous aionas ton aionon* by the Coptic Egyptian phrase *sa eneh neneh*. Like the Greek phrase, this could be translated ‘for ever and ever,’ but not necessarily so. Like *aion*, the Coptic word *eneh* can mean simply ‘age, period of time’ (Crum’s Coptic Dictionary, page 57). So the basic significance is, to put it another way, ‘for long periods of time.’ That could be ‘forever,’ but it need not be. The context would have to be consulted for clues” (Correspondence: May 6, 2007).

immediately after speaks about the brand new creation which follows, *when there will no longer be any more pain or outcry;* for, as John indicates, at that time, the things that once were will no longer be in existence.

*"And I saw **a new heaven and a new earth**; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...And I heard a loud voice out of the heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God [is] with men, and he shall tabernacle with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them...And he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and **death shall not exist any more, nor grief, nor cry, nor distress [pain, NASB] shall exist any more, for the former things have passed away.** And he that sat on the throne said, Behold, **I make all things new.** And he says [to me], Write, for these words are true and faithful."*

—Revelation 21:1-5, Darby Translation

When we seriously reflect on the significance of such a hopeful and joy-inspiring vision of what the future holds for the righteous, is it reasonable to believe that the one who intends to create a world where "pain shall no longer exist," and who intends to "make all things new" will, on the other hand, preserve a corresponding realm or co-existing dimension where the wicked will be kept alive against their will to be consciously tortured by fire throughout the endless stretches of eternity, without the remotest possibility of relief or cessation? What would be the benefit or purpose of this? And how would such truly harmonize with the spirit of God's intention to ultimately "make all things new" through Jesus Christ?

That the expression often translated "forever and ever" (Rev. 20:10) is not to be taken literally (in the sense of 'absolute, never-ending, eternal duration') may be verified by the way the same expression is used in Revelation 19:3, regarding the destruction of "Babylon." The text reads:

*"Once more [the great multitude in heaven] cried out, 'Hallelujah! **The smoke from her [Babylon the great prostitute] goes up forever and ever** (eis tous aiōnas ton aiōnon)."*

—Revelation 19:3, ESV

At this point it is extremely doubtful that any credible Bible interpreter would suggest that the *literal* city of Babylon's

destruction will result in *real* smoke *literally* ascending from the fallen city forever without end, as if there will always remain some place on the earth or in the universe where smoke perpetually rises from the ruins of an actual city into the endless stretches of eternity. The expression is, clearly, metaphorical, a picture of complete and final destruction, with the image of perpetually ascending smoke connoting the permanency and lasting memory of the city's violent demise. This point is also verified by the expression found in the preceding chapter which says that Babylon "will be burned up with fire," so that "the great city [will] be thrown down with violence, and **will be found no more...**" (Rev. 18:21, ESV). That is, the great city of Babylon, or whatever is *represented by* the city in John's vision, will be completely removed from existence, never to be found again.

Additionally, and most significantly, it should be noted that the same type of language (about smoke ascending 'forever') was first used in the prophecies of Isaiah (over six centuries earlier) in reference to the historical downfall of the city of Edom.

*"For [Jehovah] has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion. And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; **its smoke shall go up forever.**"*
—Isaiah 34:8-10, ESV

The smoke from the city of Edom's destruction "shall go up forever." Although the English word "forever" technically means "without end,"¹² in the original Hebrew the word that occurs is really an expression of indefinite time ('to the age,' Young's Literal Translation; 'times age-abiding,' Rotherham), not to be taken, at least in this context, as meaning "absolutely endless." And although we use the word "forever" for translation, we rightly understand this to be a case of poetic and hyperbolic language, used to communicate the power and dramatic nature of the literal point; namely, that the city of Edom and its inhabitants will be completely and utterly destroyed, beyond the hope of revival.

¹² It is worth pointing out that even in the English language we often use words like "forever" in a figure of speech, as in "the professor lectures forever," meaning "the professor lectures for far too long of a time." This point alone gives insight into the flexible and dynamic nature of language and the importance of understanding context, cultural conventions and genres of literature before making determinations about meaning and intent.

With respect to the “torment” spoken of as lasting “forever and ever” in Revelation 20:10, it was pointed out by one source:

Attempts have been made to show that these are reduplications, if no other forms of the word convey the idea of eternity. But the literal meaning of [*tous aiōnas ton aiōnon*] is the ages of the ages...It is perfectly manifest to the commonest mind that if one age is limited, no number can be unlimited. Ages of ages is an intense expression of long duration, and if the word *aiōn* should be eternity, ‘eternities of eternities’ ought to be the translation, an expression too absurd to require comment. If *aiōn* means eternity, any number of reduplications would weaken it...The thought of eternal duration was not in the mind of Jesus or his apostles in any of these texts, but long duration, to be determined by the subject.”¹³

Although another respected source expressed partiality toward the traditionalist interpretation of Revelation 20:10 (that ‘ages of ages’ means ‘absolutely forever without end’), it was nevertheless harmoniously acknowledged,

“Strictly speaking, even the expression ‘they will be tormented *forever and ever*’ is figurative; *eis tous aiōnas ton aiōnon* literally can be rendered ‘unto the ages of the ages’; at the least, the phrase figuratively connotes a very long time. The context here and in the whole Apocalypse must determine whether this is a limited time or an unending period...”¹⁴

These are the essential reasons why it is safe to accept that although the expression “to the ages of the ages” can implicitly carry the idea of “forever and ever” in reference to a certain number of concepts that demand such a meaning, that—contrary to the conclusion of traditional interpreters and that of the reference work cited above—this sense is not demanded in the case of Revelation 20:10 and is, in fact, *qualified, deliberately overshadowed, and ultimately limited by* the closely following expression regarding the creation of *a new heaven and a new earth*, and which explicitly indicates this will represent a point in time when both *death* and *pain* “**will no longer exist.**”¹⁵ Thus—

¹³ John Wesley Hanson, *The Greek Word Aion—Aionios, Translated Everlasting-Eternal in the Holy Bible, Shown to Denote Limited Duration*, 1875.

¹⁴ Beale, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary, The Book of Revelation, A Commentary on the Greek Text*, p. 1030.

¹⁵ One example which helps to illustrate how an intense expression like “to the ages of the ages” (‘forever and ever,’ *NASB*) can be qualified is found in Jude 1:6, where it is written, “And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in **eternal** [Gk. *aidios*; ever-existing] **chains** under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day...” (Jude 1:6, *ESV*). Unlike the word

in addition to the fact that in Revelation 19:3 the very same expression used does *not* mean or demand a strict and literal eternity—the larger, surrounding context of Revelation 20:10 determines “to the ages of the ages” to denote a long and intense but limited duration, for the period of time itself is qualified by John’s vision of the future state when “**all things**” will be made “**new**,” for the “**former things**”—including mourning, outcry and pain—will have “**passed away**” (Rev. 21:3-5).

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aionion (normally translated ‘eternal,’ yet which means more literally ‘age-enduring’ or ‘pertaining to the age’), the term *aidios* in Greek actually means, unequivocally, *everlasting*. Yet we should note that—in reference to the *chains* used by God to confine the rebellious angels—Jude seems to nevertheless limit the technically absolute sense of *aidios*, a term that actually does denote “never-ending duration.” The context thus seems to rule out the notion that the confining chains spoken of in this case are *literally everlasting* in the absolute sense, for the angels are kept by these “eternal” chains “for (‘unto’ ASV or ‘until’ ESV) the judgment of the great day.” In the same way, in Revelation 20:10, where it is said of the devil, beast and false prophet (and not of the unsaved in general), that they “will be tormented day and night *unto the age of the ages*,” it is purposefully and shortly after stated—in an illuminatingly hopeful vision a future, righteous world—that God will eventually bring a new creation into existence, *and the former things will have passed away*.

