Apokatastasis:
Universal Salvation vs. Eternal Damnation
By W. J. Whitman

In Papist/Protestant mythology, “hell” is conceived as a place where God is not present. It is a place in the underworld where sinners are tortured and burned for all eternity as a punishment for their sins. This, however, is a pagan doctrine, borrowed from Plato and Homer. It has absolutely no biblical basis whatsoever. In the early days of the Church, this conception of hell was not common. In fact, most of the Church Fathers believed in universal salvation, which they referred to as the *apokatastasis*, or “restoration,” of all creation to its primordial *good* condition—the restoration of creation to its position before the fall. This doctrine is still—at least to some extent—the position of the Eastern Christians. It is common among Orthodox, Monophysite, and Nestorian believers. The pagan concept of hell as a place of “eternal punishment” is incompatible with New Testament eschatology. The heretical Western “Christian” concept of “hell” developed as a consequence of the paganization of Christianity under the influence of Augustine’s neo-Platonism in the 4th and 5th centuries AD.

The story of sin and redemption in the Bible goes like this: Adam committed the original sin, causing all of creation to fall into corruption. As a consequence, death entered into the world. Christ came to earth as the “Second Adam” in order to undo what the first Adam messed up. Death affected all men because of Adam’s sin, but Christ’s righteousness and resurrection defeated death, so that all men can have eternal life. This is biblical eschatology, and it requires some sort of universalist concept of salvation. Here are a few of the important biblical passages to consider:

“Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.” (Romans 5:18)

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:22)

“And, having made peace through the blood of His cross, by Him, to reconcile all things unto Himself, through Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven.” (Colossians 1:20)
“For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth…. For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men.” (1 Timothy 2:3-4, 4:10)

“Therefore God has also highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” (Philippians 2:9-11)

“And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.” (1 John 2:2)

“The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)

The Bible clearly teaches universal salvation. Christ redeemed all men, granted eternal life to all men, and saved all men without exception. The Protestant and Papist knuckleheads that preach “eternal damnation and everlasting punishment in hellfire” are relying on mistranslations of the biblical text and misconstruing the historical teachings of Christianity. When Jesus talks about “hell,” it is extremely important to understand both the historical context and the language in which he was speaking. Let’s just look at one of those passages where Jesus talks about “hell” and then we’ll put it into context.

“It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” (Mark 9:43-44)

The Greek word that is translated as “hell” in this passage is Gehenna, which means “Hinnom Valley” (Ge Hinnom in Hebrew). This term actually refers to a literal valley just outside the city of Jerusalem. In ancient times, the pagans performed human sacrifices there to the gods Moloch and Baal. The valley was also used as the garbage dump for the city. It was filled with burning
waste. It was a flaming trash heap. Unfaithful Jews who committed adultery or prostitution were not allowed to be buried in Jewish cemeteries. It is likely that such people would have their bodies thrown into the garbage dump in Hinnom Valley when they died. Sharon L. Baker writes:

“When Jesus spoke of ‘hell,’ he used the word ‘Gehenna.’ We translate it ‘hell’ in our English versions of the Bible. But ‘hell’ might not accurately describe the ‘Gehenna’ Jesus talked about. The word gehenna, used twelve times in the New Testament, comes from the Aramaic/Hebrew word ge-hinnom. It means ‘valley of [the sons of] Hinnom’ (Josh. 15:8), an actual valley located southwest of the city of Jerusalem…. The Hinnom Valley has a quite interesting history, familiar to Jews of the first century.

“The valley saw much bloodshed, beginning (as far as we know) with the Canaanite worship of the gods Molech and Baal. These gods demanded the sacrifice of children by passing them through the fire and into the hands of the gods. The practice of child sacrifice by fire continued in the valley for centuries, even throughout the rule of the Hebrew Kings Ahaz and Manasseh (2 Kgs. 23:10)…. The prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah speak of the fires in the valley as devouring flames that burn forever, that are never quenched (Isa. 30:33). During times of war, soldiers piled dead bodies in the valley, where they burned seemingly forever. And for centuries, the community dumped the dead bodies of criminals into Gehenna…. Because of all this, the people referred to Gehenna as the abyss or the accursed valley. Only the guilty and the accursed ended up there, where their bodies would seem to burn forever, where they forever dwelt in darkness, at the outer limits of civilization.”\(^1\)

Putting Jesus’ sayings into their historical and linguistic context gives us an entirely different picture of “hell.” Jesus uses the image of Gehenna as a metaphor to describe the condition of

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\(^1\) Sharon L. Baker, *Razing Hell*, Chapter 10
souls in the afterlife. Knowing that Gehenna is a literal place on this earth (not some place in the hereafter) reminds us that we must not take these sayings literally.

There are many passages where the Bible speaks of punishment in the afterlife. However, the Bible never once mentions “eternal punishment.” However, we do have verses in our English translations that say “eternal punishment,” etc. Such passages in our English versions are mistranslations of the Greek text—or, rather, loose translations of the text based upon the translators’ personal interpretations of the passages. There is actually no Greek word corresponding to the English word *eternal*. The Greek word that is translated as “eternal” is *aionos*, from which we get the English term “aeon” or “eon.” The word literally means “an indefinite period of time,” usually meaning a very long time. This word *aionos* is actually used by the Apostle Paul when he refers to “this present evil age” or “this world.” (Cf. Galatians 1:4) The word *aeon* just refers to a long period of time. It can refer to eternity, but it usually does not. We must remember that when our English Bible speaks of punishment or torment that is “eternal” or lasts “forever and ever,” the original Greek text merely says that the punishment lasts for “ages and ages.” (Cf. Matthew 25:46, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Revelation 14:11, etc.) The original Greek text does not specify whether the “ages” are temporal or eternal.

Moreover, there are many biblical passages that suggest that hell is not an eternal state of affairs. For example, in the midst of verses where Jesus speaks of sinners being “cast into hell,” Jesus says, “Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there until you have paid the last penny.”(Matthew 5:25-26) The “adversary” here is the devil (cf. 1 Peter 5:8), the “judge” is God (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:17), and the “prison” is hell (cf. 1 Peter 3:18-20). The Apostle Paul speaks of everyone passing through fire on the Judgment Day. He says that our sinful works will be burnt up, but our righteous works will endure through the fire: “If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss: but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”(Cf. 1 Corinthians 3:11-15) Paul, like Jesus, uses fire as a metaphor to describe the process of purification during the Final Judgment. The *fire* in the biblical passages about hell is really a metaphor for the purifying presence of God. It is written, “The LORD thy God is a consuming fire.”(Deuteronomy 4:24) And again, “For our God is a consuming fire.”(Hebrews 12:29)

St. Isaac of Nineveh (ordained as bishop of Nineveh in 676AD) writes:
“As for me, I say that those who are tormented in hell are tormented by the invasion of love. What is there more bitter and more violent than the pains of love? Those who feel that they have sinned against love bear in themselves damnation much heavier than the most dreaded punishment. The suffering of which sinning against love afflicts the heart is more keenly felt than any other torment. It is absurd to suppose that sinners in hell are deprived of God’s love. Love is offered impartially, but by its very power it acts in two ways: it torments sinners (as happens here on earth, when we are tormented by the presence of a friend to whom we have been unfaithful) and it gives joy to those who have been faithful. That is what the torment of hell is, in my opinion, — remorse.”

Everything sinful and wicked is burned up by the purifying presence of God and his all-embracing love. The sinner becomes aware of God unconditional love. Everyone is saved and enters into God’s presence in the eschaton. Christ saved everyone from death. Everyone is resurrected on Judgment Day. Everyone receives eternal life! Everyone was redeemed. No one is rejected by God and turned over to eternal punishment in hell. During the Final Judgment, the sinner finally recognizes the gravity of his sins and realizes what he has done. Upon realizing the depths of his own depravity and the unlimited and universal character of God’s love and mercy, the sinner realizes that God has overlooked all of his sins. The sinner, therefore, feels remorse and guilt for his sinful ways and, hopefully, repents and turns to God. The presence of God is metaphorically called fire and the torment of guilt is metaphorically called punishment, and the process is called hell. This is the way hell was understood in the early Church.

It is theoretically possible for this torment of guilt to last for all eternity due to the existence of free will. Since we have free will, it is possible for us to refuse to repent of our sins and reconcile ourselves to God. We can refuse to love God reciprocally. However unlikely this sounds, it remains a definite possibility. Everyone has been saved, not just in potential, but in reality. No one faces any literal punishment for all eternity. No one is rejected by God. We simply have to decide whether or not we are going to enjoy our salvation. We can embrace it and

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2 Ascetic Treatises: Homily 84; cf. C. S. Lewis, God in the Dock, Part III, Ch. 4
have everlasting joy in the presence of God and the saints, or we can close ourselves up and refuse to participate in the heavenly bliss.