D. A. Carson, The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2011). In response to Chapter 13: On Banishing the Lake of Fire, pgs. 515-536:

**Response**

Carson focuses on conservative annihilationists, which I appreciate. However, he still spends a lot of space addressing philosophical and emotional arguments rather than exegetical ones which is unfortunate.

Carson provides three reasons for why he is addressing annihilationism. The first is that evangelicalism is expanding to allow conditionalism to be seen as a valid viewpoint as the number of its evangelical adherents is rapidly increasing. This could be seen as proof that liberalism is on the rise, but it could also indicate that there's a strong biblical case that hasn't been sufficiently answered. The second is the fact that some conditionalists really are theological liberals who primarily appeal to emotion and God's love instead of addressing the Bible. I strongly reject that along with Carson. The third is that there is a movement of conservatives for whom this issue is entirely hermeneutical, but who "are proving unwilling to be corrected by more careful exegesis." We will evaluate that claim in the following analysis.

**A. Introduction**

Carson does a good job of summarizing the conditionalist position. He notes that there are different views of anthropology, the intermediate state, and other doctrines among conditionalists, but the common beliefs that "the punishment is unending," the wicked "are finally destroyed," and the rejection of the traditional view of eternal conscience torment (ECT). He distinguishes between conditional immortality and annihilationism stating that their anthropology is different; however, most people use these terms interchangeably. Conditional immortality states that there is a condition that's required for eternal life, believing in Christ, while annihilationism (not non-existence, but death and destruction) describes the fate of those who don't meet that condition. It's a difference in emphasis rather than being two separate positions.

Carson gives a bibliography for treatments on hell, both historical and modern. He doesn't discuss them here, though he fears "these are largely unread by those who espouse annihilationism." However, I’ve read a lot of materials from traditionalists at this point and grew up only knowing about the traditional view of hell as is the case with many other conditionalists. It is much more often the case that traditionalists don’t understand conditional immortality and have studied the doctrine of hell very little.

Carson states that in this chapter he’s avoiding "idiosyncratic interpretations" in his treatment of conditionalism, not addressing the fate of people who don't hear the gospel, and not discussing side questions that may arise. While Carson doesn’t provide idiosyncratic interpretations, he does use idiosyncratic methods to come to those interpretations. In the following analysis, I seek to demonstrate that conditionalism is simply the result of consistent hermeneutics applied to scriptural passages about the final fate of the wicked.

**B. The Case for Conditional Immortality**

He briefly lays out seven arguments used to defend conditional immortality in this section:

1. Passages that say the wicked will be destroyed "suggests total destruction, i.e., cessation of existence." I'm not sure why traditionalists insist on characterizing annihilationists as saying that the wicked will "cease to exist." When a person dies, their body does not cease to exist. It's just dead. Likewise, the soul of a person may still exist after it is destroyed. The point is that the body and soul of the wicked will be killed and destroyed, i.e., they will not be alive or conscience. Mark Corbett's video [Apollumi: The Word that Tells Us What Happens to People in Hell (Annihilation or Eternal Torment?)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8Lcq51oHRQ) thoroughly demonstrates that *apollumi*, the Greek word translated destruction, does indeed mean killing or slaying when refereeing to people (see Phil 3:19).

2. An unquenchable fire destroys that which it burns. Unquenchable means inextinguishable, which emphasizes the certainty of its devouring and consuming (see Mat 3:12 // Isa 66:24). The reason it destroys is precisely because it will not be put out or stopped. All of the metaphors that explain the unquenchable fire such as chaff, trees, thorns, and thistles demonstrate that Jesus is talking about a consuming fire rather than a fire of torment. Carson does a good explaining this argument.

3. I agree with Carson that the words translated eternal and forever in Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 14:11 refer to an endless amount of time, so this point stands. Most conditionalists would agree with this as well. It is typically universalists that argue against that. There is a little nuance in Matthew with the word eternal because it relates to the concept of an age, but I will address that more later on. It still retains the connotation of eternal.

4. In Matthew 25:46, eternal is used to describe life and punishment. This is refereeing to the everlasting life believers, and the final, everlasting death of the wicked. Everlasting death is properly called an eternal punishment. There is no justification for saying eternal punishment must refer to perpetually inflicted torment. I agree with the way he stated this argument, and it's solid. The argument still must be made that death is the punishment for sin, but everything checks out grammatically and logically with calling everlasting death an eternal punishment.

5. This argument is based on the love of God. I'm not going to focus on this one. I'm just going to stick to the ones that focus on exegesis.

6. This argument is about the fairness of hell. The argument that ECT is unfair can be made from the Bible. If a country has a law that says murders will face capital punishment but instead locks them up in a dungeon for torture, everyone would say that was unjust. Likewise, if God said that "the wages of sin is death" but instead keeps sinners alive to eternally torment them, that would be unjust. Of course, that argument assumes "death" really means death as in the Old Testament sacrificial system and does not mean separation from God, which brings us back to asking, what did God declare the just punishment of sin to be, and how are we to understand that? He doesn't state this as a biblical argument but as an emotional one, so I won't focus on it.

7. The last argument is that ECT would mar the new heavens and new earth. This argument can be bolstered. It is actually impossible for traditional hell to exist in the new heavens and new earth (Rev 21:4). Traditionalist scholar G. K. Beale writes that "the reality underlying the figurative lake of the second death must exist somewhere else, perhaps in a different dimension from that of the new creation" ([The Book of Revelation](https://archive.org/stream/g.k.beale-the-book-of-revelation/Revelation_G.Beale_djvu.txt), 1061), but the Bible doesn’t say that. It specifically says they will be cast into Gehenna, a real place on Earth, and therefore not another dimension. Moreover, God has "no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Eze 33:11). If death means ECT, then God would eternally be sustaining something that brings Him no pleasure. We will be made like God, so we will take no pleasure in the ECT of the wicked either. However, if death means they die, I trust that Jesus will perfectly comfort us after their deaths, and we will be able to fully enjoy the presence of the Lord eternally. Again though, Carson only raises this as a philosophical argument.

**C. Biblical and Theological Responses**

Carson begins his response by addressing the terms Sheol and Hades. He is right that they "have roughly the same semantic range and overtones." Both refer to "the abode of the dead." He is also correct that there is a mention of torment in Hades (Lk 16:23), although many believe this is an example story much like the story of the good Samaritan (10:25:37), the rich fool (12:13-21), or the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14). If that’s the case, then this story is a graphic portrayal of the dichotomy between the fate of the righteous and the damned after death, but the details are not necessarily intended to be actual descriptions of Hades.

However, Carson goes off course when he tries to conflate Hades with Gehenna, the final destination of the wicked. The reason he gives for this is that Revelation 20:10, 14 link Hades with the lake of fire. So now Carson conflates Gehenna, the lake of fire, and Hades. Gehenna is a real valley outside of Jerusalem where body and soul will be destroyed. The lake of fire is a symbolic picture in John's vision which corresponds to the second death (Rev 20:15; 21:8). Hades is the abode of the dead before they are raised and cast into Gehenna. Even the verses Carson cites maintain a clear distinction between Hades and the lake of fire. Hades releases its dead, so that they can be judged and thrown into the lake of fire. Subsequently, Hades is thrown into the lake of fire, demonstrating that they are two different places:

"Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them. They were judged, each one according to his works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev 20:13-14).

Carson moves on to define Gehenna, the name of the place that actually refers to the final destination of the wicked. Carson repeats the myth that Gehenna was "the burning dump outside of Jerusalem." Traditionalist scholar Robert Reymond at least informs the reader that the garbage dump theory first comes "from late Jewish tradition (David Qimchi, c. A.D. 1200)" in his treatment, but Carson doesn't do that. He also doesn't inform the reader of Jeremiah 7 or 19, which prophesies about the future eschatological judgment in Gehenna (that might be important to know!):

"'Therefore behold, the days come', says Yahweh, 'that it will no more be called ‘Topheth’ or ‘The valley of the son of Hinnom’, but ‘The valley of Slaughter’; for they will bury in Topheth until there is no place to bury. The dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky, and for the animals of the earth. No one will frighten them away'" (Jer 7:32-33).

This is the background for Jesus' teaching about Gehenna (Gehenna is derived from the Hebrew meaning “Valley of Hinnom”). Gehenna will be called "The Valley of Slaughter." God will slay His enemies there. The worms, birds, and other scavengers will devour their dead bodies, and fire will burn up and consume them. This picture intensely portrays death, destruction, and annihilation, not eternal torment. This refutes Carson's claim that Gehenna conveys "notions of suffering." That's only the case if you ignore the Old Testament background for late, unsupported Jewish tradition. The final punishment will include however much suffering God considers fit for each person, but the focus of Gehenna is destruction.

He then cites parallel passages in which Jesus warns of the destruction of body and soul which will take place in Gehenna. How can we expect anyone to live in Gehenna forever? Surely God casting his enemies into Gehenna, destroying them soul and body, and burning up their dead bodies which are consumed by scavengers does not permit an eternal torment reading:

"Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. Rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna." "But I will warn you whom you should fear. Fear him who after he has killed, has power to cast into Gehenna." (Mat 10:28 // Lk 12:5).

Carson proceeds to cite Romans 2:5-9, 11, 16 in favor of ECT, but no support can be found here. Rather than an eternity of wrath, Paul speaks of a "day of wrath" (2:5) when God "will pay back to everyone according to their works" (2:6). Paul writes that "now, being made free from sin" we have "the result of eternal life" (6:22), but "the wages of sin is death" (6:23). God is the "potter,” and we are "clay" (9:21). The wicked are clay "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (9:23). While Paul doesn't mention Gehenna by name, he certainly doesn't shy away from addressing the final fate which awaits unbelievers in Gehenna—death and destruction.

Carson cites another passage from Paul, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, but he cites the NIV which renders the verse very inaccurately. The NIV: "everlasting destruction and shut out from." The ESV: "eternal destruction, away from." The NLT: "eternal destruction, forever separated from." However, the Greek says, "eternal destruction from [apo] the presence of the Lord." The phrases "and shut out," "away," and "forever separated" are not in the Greek but are interpretive and misleading. Going with the alternative rendering in the footnote of the ESV, the verse reads:

"They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction that comes from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might."

They will be destroyed from an encounter with God's presence. No ECT here. Moreover, verses 7-8 provide important context because they give a clear reference to Isaiah 66:15: "For, behold, Yahweh will come with fire, and his chariots will be like the whirlwind; to render his anger with fierceness, and his rebuke with flames of fire." It goes on to say, "For Yahweh will execute judgment by fire and by his sword on all flesh; and those slain by Yahweh will be many" (Isa 66:16). And in the next chapter, Paul says that "the Lord will kill [the lawless one] with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the manifestation of his coming" (2 Thes 2:8) reinforcing that the destruction comes from the presence of the Lord.

The very next verse that Carson cites is another reference to Isaiah 66. Jesus connects Gehenna and Isaiah 66 with a direct quote, describing it as the place "where their worm doesn’t die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mk 9:48 // Isa 66:24). We just saw a few verses earlier in Isaiah that God's enemies were slain. In the part Jesus quotes from, it describes "the new heavens and the new earth" where believers "will go out, and look at the dead bodies of the men who have transgressed against me; for their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind" (Isa 66:22-24). In the final judgment, unbelievers will be slain and burned up by God. Believers will walk out and see their corpses. Isaiah says that explicitly, and both Jesus and Paul attest to that reality.

He points out that the judgment is characterized by "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mat 8:12), but the crying and anger is never said to last eternally. Of course, that is the reaction of people facing the judgment of God, but it is no support for ECT. That phrase is even used in conjunction with people perishing: "The wicked will see it, and be grieved. He shall gnash with his teeth, and melt away" (Ps 112:10).

Carson says that there "is no escape from hell: there is a great fixed chasm (Luke 16:26)." I don't know why he insists on conflating Hades (which is the actual word used in this verse) with Gehenna, but it doesn't help his argument. There is a time when everyone will be brought out of Hades. Then the wicked will face judgment and be cast into Gehenna from which there is no return.

If we check the verses Carson cites about the "'everlasting chains' (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6)," we read that angels (not humans) are "kept in everlasting bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day" and that God "committed them to pits of darkness to be reserved for judgment." The chains hold angels *for* the judgment of the great day. It does not say that angels will have chains eternally, and it isn't about humans anyway.

If we check the verse that Carson cites to support the claim that the "lost 'suffer the punishment of eternal fire' (Jude 7)," we read that Sodom and Gomorrah "are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire" (NASB). The historical example of the complete destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah functions typologically to show what will happen to the wicked on judgment day. The eternal fire represents complete, everlasting destruction:

"Then Yahweh rained on Sodom and on Gomorrah sulfur and fire from Yahweh out of the sky. He overthrew those cities, all the plain, all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew on the ground. But Lot’s wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. Abraham went up early in the morning to the place where he had stood before Yahweh. He looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and saw that the smoke of the land went up as the smoke of a furnace." (Gen 19:24-28).

Carson writes that they "suffer 'everlasting contempt' (Dan. 12:2)," but it is more accurate to say that they are remembered with everlasting contempt because they won't be alive to have contempt for God or believers any longer. Daniel 12:2 is connected to Isaiah 66:24 by the words "contempt" and "loathsome" which are the only occurrences of the Hebrew word [*deraon*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/strongs_1860.htm). Isaiah writes that the “dead bodies” of the wicked "will be loathsome to all mankind." Just as contempt for Nero outlives his life, Daniel says that contempt for unbelievers will last forever, and he contrasts that fate with life forever.

I understand that Carson has limited space and cannot explain every point in this section, but the rapid-fire proof texting used in this section does not reflect the "more careful exegesis" that supposedly supports the traditionalist view. It was more of the same basic mistakes that characterize many traditionalist writings like mixing up Hades with Gehenna, getting the background for Gehenna wrong, using verses that are clearly translated inaccurately, citing passages about the intermediate state as if they were about Gehenna, and not addressing the passages that the NT authors keep quoting from like Isaiah 66 to understand the context. It is always better to explain a few passages carefully than many passages in this way.

Carson offers six reflections at this point:

1. He begins by addressing *apollumi*. I already cited an in-depth word study of *apollumi* in the first argument. A quote from Edward White's [*Life in Christ*](https://books.google.com/books/about/Life_in_Christ.html?id=bvsCAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false) makes the point forcefully: "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" (365). Carson writes, "of course those who suffer destruction are destroyed. But it does not follow that those who suffer eternal destruction cease to exist." Torment is not destruction and arguing that they don't "cease to exist" is just word games. They are as "natural animals to be taken and destroyed... [and] will in their destroying surely be destroyed" (2 Pet 2:12).

Next, Carson argues that eternal punishment cannot refer to the result of the punishment being eternal in Matthew 25:46 but must refer to an ongoing process of punishing. He cites several scholars that agree with him, but this is obviously wrong. In English and Greek, punishment is a generic word that can refer to various kinds of punishments, and eternal can refer to either an everlasting state or process. I'll quote a few articles that explain it well and can provide more depth than I can here:

Chris Date writes, "Punishment, whether in English or in Greek, is polysemous. And it is context and the nature of the punishment that determine whether it carries a process or result reading. The modifier 'eternal' does not give it a process reading, anymore than it does 'salvation' and 'redemption' in the epistle to the Hebrews" ([No Retreat on Nouns of Action: TurretinFan's Premature Celebration](https://rethinkinghell.com/2013/06/02/no-retreat-on-nouns-of-action-turretinfans-premature-celebration/), 2013).

In another article, Christ Date notes that "many deverbal nouns are polysemous, ambiguous between a process or result meaning. For example, the phrase, 'The translation of the book took ten years,' means that the process of translating lasted ten years. The phrase, 'The translation has been published recently,' on the other hand, means that the translation that resulted from, or was the outcome of, the translating process was recently published" (["Punishment" and the Polysemy of Deverbal Nouns](https://rethinkinghell.com/2012/06/19/eternal-punishment-and-the-polysemy-of-deverbal-nouns/), 2012).

And building on the previous example, Joseph Dear says, "The question is, what meaning of 'punishment' was intended? Was Jesus referring to the act of punishing (like 'the translation of the book took ten years'), or was he referring to the result of the act of punishing (like 'the translation has been published recently')? Either one would be 'punishment'" ([Matthew 25:46 Does Not Prove Eternal Torment – Part 1](https://rethinkinghell.com/2014/01/15/matthew-2546-does-not-prove-eternal-torment-part-1/), 2014).

2. Carson moves on to arguments about the descriptions of hell. The first one he addresses is that the fire is a consuming fire. Fire describes destruction, not torment:

Carson's initial response to this argument is that most "interpreters recognize that there is a substantial metaphorical element in the Bible's descriptions of hell." He tries to show that the Bible uses contradictory language to describe hell to substantiate this claim. However, he does this by mixing up symbolic depictions of the final judgment in Revelation, descriptions of Hades (the intermediate state), and scenes from parables with actual descriptions of Gehenna, and he interprets the actual descriptions of Gehenna in a wooden and silly way.

This attitude that the biblical language about hell is obviously metaphorical will not do. I don't accept that. A little work in the Old Testament background and context of these passages reveals a consistent, noncontradictory teaching that the wicked will finally perish in Gehenna. Only conditionalism can take the biblical descriptions of hell and the language of life, death, perishing, destruction, slaying, burning up, Gehenna, etc. in their natural sense.

The traditional view relies fundamentally on the metaphorical interpretation of passages about the final fate of the wicked with an improper literal interpretation of Revelation, while the conditionalist view relies fundamentally on a literal, straightforward interpretation of passages about the final fate of the wicked with a proper metaphorical interpretation of Revelation. Refuting the over-allegorizing tendencies of the traditional view destroys a core assumption undergirding traditionalism.

Carson uses three examples to support the allegorizing of Gehenna and its descriptions, which I will state and then challenge:

(1) We don't normally "think of unquenchable fire and worms coexisting." We might not normally think of that, but there is nothing contradictory about Gehenna consisting of fire and maggots. Those are specific details about the way the dead bodies of the wicked are destroyed. The fire won't be able to be put out and the worms won't be able to be killed, so they will destroy the dead bodies of the wicked: "They will go out, and look at the dead bodies of the men who have transgressed against me; for their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind" (Isa 66:24).

(2) "It is hard to imagine how a lake of fire coexists with utter darkness." The lake of fire is a symbolic picture in Revelation which is interpreted as the second death, literally dying a second time in the age to come (Rev 21:8). Outer darkness is a parabolic way of describing refusal to the Kingdom of God such as when the servant is tied hand and foot and thrown out of the wedding feast into outer darkness by the King (Mat 22:1-14). It is also obvious that the servant, being bound hand and foot and thrown into the Judean wilderness, will surely die, not be tormented in the parable. Angels are also described as being held "under darkness" (Jude 6 // 2 Pet 2:4), but this is refereeing to the intermediate state before the judgment. Conditionalists affirm that the wicked will be refused entrance to the Kingdom of God, will face the second death, and that the angels are held under darkness for the judgment in the intermediate state. None of those suggest that we need to allegorize Gehenna.

(3) If "one is cast into a lake of fire, what need of chains?" Again, the lake of fire is a graphic portrayal of the death of the wicked in John's vision. And as previously mentioned, the chains hold angels for the judgment day (Jude 6 // 2 Pet 2:4). The chains are not about Gehenna. These are still not good reasons to metaphorically interpret passages about Gehenna.

Carson continues by asking, what sustains the worms (because they are said to not die) if they have already consumed the people? But nowhere are the worms said to be eternal worms. It doesn't say they will never die *ever*. That's like arguing that the statement, "Bob won't get off the video game" means that, "Bob won't get off the video game *ever*." Obviously, there is a context in both situations: Bob won't get off the video game until he finishes his match, and the worm won't die until it finishes consuming its meal.

Even if the language is interpreted woodenly to mean that the worms will never die ever, at most this says there are eternal worms. That's a weird way to understand it, but it doesn't support ECT. Carson says that his question was "ugly and silly, precisely because it is demanding a concrete and this-worldly answer to the use of language describing the realities of punishment in a future world still largely inconceivable." Instead, it appears that his question was "ugly and silly" because it relies on understanding the phrase "their worm does not die" out of context.

Carson points to several more reasons he believes the annihilationist reading is wrong:

(1) It is called "their worm" rather than "the worm" which "suggests that it is perpetually bound up with those who are suffering." This is a strange argument. It was not written "the worm" because it isn't a specific worm that won't die, nor worms in general that won't die. It's "their worm" because it's referring to the worms consuming their bodies. And as a reminder, the context is not worms eating "those who are suffering," but is about the "dead bodies of the men who have transgressed against me; for their worm will not die…" (Isa 66:24 // Mk 9:48).

(2) The logic of this argument is that "unquenchable fire" is a fire that cannot be extinguished so that it either burns up but does not last forever or burns forever but does not burn up. He claims that the former interpretation has difficulties because "unquenchable fire" is paralleled with "eternal fire" (Mat 18:8). Carson's initial framing of this argument is a false dilemma. The fire could last forever but still burn up. Earlier in Matthew, it is explicitly stated that they "will burn up [*katakaió*] with unquenchable fire" like chaff (Mat 3:12). *Katakaió* means to burn down utterly, incinerate, consume wholly.

That still leaves the question of what eternal fire means in Matthew 18:8 and 25:41. Before these verses, Matthew indicates that the hellfire will burn up (3:12; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50), the wicked will be destroyed (7:13-14; 10:28), and they will perish in Gehenna (5:22; 5:29; 10:28). The word *aiōnios* (eternal) can simply refer to an age. In these verses, it relates to the concept of two ages, this age which is passing away, and the final, everlasting age that's coming. Because it refers to the fire/punishment of that final age, it carries both connotations of relating to the final age and being eternal.

With that groundwork laid, what does eternal fire/punishment refer to? It refers to that ultimate punishment of the age to come, which results in the loss of eternal life from the irreversible, everlasting destruction of soul and body by hellfire.

We can check our work by looking at Jude's use of the phrase “eternal fire.” Jude 7 tells us that the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah functions typologically as an example of eternal fire. That means the final punishment of fire in store for the wicked which is called the "eternal fire" looks like the historical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Because the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah underwent "the punishment of eternal fire" and those cities are not still burning, we must conclude that it is not a fire that burns forever, but rather a fire that burns up completely and eternally.

The final objection Carson raises is that this view would deny degrees of punishment. He says, "must we not also infer that fire consumes everyone at more or less the same rate"? No, of course not. That inference is not from the text and is clearly wrong. There are different degrees of fire, which consume people at different rates. It is conceivable that some could be instantly incinerated while others are slowly burned to death, so this objection fails. I will also clarify that everyone will not die by the fire even though everyone will be finally burned up and destroyed by it. "Yahweh will execute judgment by fire and by his sword on all flesh" (Isa 66:16), so some may die by the flame and others by the sword; however, all will ultimately be cast into Gehenna to be destroyed by unquenchable fire.

After finishing that more in-depth section, Carson writes that the conditionalist interpretation appears to go astray "because illegitimate and arbitrary inferences are being drawn from the language, against the more natural readings, in order to support a theory that is being imposed on the text." However, this reveals an error that many traditionalists including Carson are making. They are confusing what feels like for modern readers are "more natural readings" with what the text actually means.

For modern readers (me included), the phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" sounds like eternal torment; however, that anger and sadness is never said to last forever. An "unquenchable fire" sounds like a fire that is burning people perpetually, but "unquenchable" means "inextinguishable." If your house caught on fire with an "unquenchable fire," it would burn down completely because firefighters couldn't put it out. The word hell itself has the definition of a place of eternal torment in most people’s minds, but is a place name in the Greek, Gehenna, a valley outside of Jerusalem with an Old Testament background. Jude 7 says that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered "the punishment of eternal fire," which Genesis describes as "sulfur and fire from Yahweh out of the sky" (Gen 19:24). Understanding eternal (*aiōnion*) fire as that fire of the age to come which burns up completely and eternally may not be a “natural reading” for people in a different context speaking a different language, but the Bible clearly defines it that way.

I could multiply examples, but the point is the idea of hell as a place of eternal torment is thoroughly ingrained in our culture and traditions. However, when we examine the Old Testament backgrounds, perform careful word studies, and are willing to conform our beliefs to the Word of God, all the evidence seems to point squarely towards annihilationism.

Next, Carson moves on to address the big three traditionalist proof texts. I call them the big three because they are the most commonly cited proof texts for ECT. They are typically not analyzed in detail and are assumed to unequivocally teach ECT. Without these three verses, ECT couldn't get off the ground, but with them, the entire Bible is reinterpreted to line up with ECT. These texts are Revelation 14:10-11, Revelation 20:10-15, and Matthew 25:46.

**Revelation 14:10-11:**

"he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is prepared unmixed in the cup of his anger. He will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. They have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name."

The language of fire and sulfur is found in references to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:23, 28; Deut 29:23; Job 18:15-17; Isa 30:27-33; 34:9-11; Ezek 38:22). It paints a picture of decisive annihilation and complete destruction, leaving nothing but ashes in its wake.

Smoke is said to last forever, not torment. The rising smoke symbolizes the permanent destruction of the wicked. This is the same fate of Edom in Isaiah 34:8-10:

"For Yahweh has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion. Its streams will be turned into pitch, its dust into sulfur, and its land will become burning pitch. It won’t be quenched night or day. Its smoke will go up forever. From generation to generation, it will lie waste. No one will pass through it forever and ever."

Isaiah says that Edom’s fire "won’t be quenched night or day." Like Isaiah, John is saying that the fire burns continuously without ceasing "day or night" during the period of torment. It is a ceaseless activity, and a restless time. Carson objects to this interpretation of "night and day" calling it "special pleading" because the order in Revelation is torment, fire, smoke, and then no rest, while in Isaiah the order is fire, no rest, and then smoke. But all of these are just descriptions of different aspects of the judgment with recognizable OT allusions. Carson says that "writers like Fudge constantly resort to serialization of these elements," but that is exactly what he is doing here.

Traditionalist scholar G. K. Beale acknowledges that this passage is not decisive for ECT: "In particular, 'day and night' (ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός) in 14:11 can be taken as a qualitative genitive construction indicating not duration of time (like the accusative construction of the same phrase) but kind of time, that is, time of ceaseless activity... The lack of rest will continue uninterrupted as long as the period of suffering lasts, though there will be an end to the period. Therefore, the imagery of Rev 14:10-11 could indicate a great judgment that will be remembered forever, not one that leads to eternal suffering" ([The Book of Revelation](https://archive.org/details/g.k.beale-the-book-of-revelation/page/762/mode/1up), 762).

Moreover, if we consider that John describes the destruction of Babylon in Revelation 17-19 with the same language of torment, fire, and smoke from the burning ascending forever, we have ample reason to believe that John intends the same meaning here:

"Return to her just as she returned, and repay her double as she did, and according to her works. In the cup which she mixed, mix to her double... Therefore in one day her plagues will come: death, mourning, and famine; and she will be utterly burned with fire, for the Lord God who has judged her is strong… The kings of the earth who committed sexual immorality and lived wantonly with her will weep and wail over her, when they look at the smoke of her burning, standing far away for the fear of her torment, saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For your judgment has come in one hour’... and [they] cried out as they looked at the smoke of her burning, saying, ‘What is like the great city?’..."

"After these things I heard something like a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, 'Hallelujah! Salvation, power, and glory belong to our God; for his judgments are true and righteous. For he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her sexual immorality, and he has avenged the blood of his servants at her hand.' A second said, 'Hallelujah! Her smoke goes up forever and ever.'" (Rev 18:6, 8-10, 18; 19:1-3).

Beale even interprets the rising smoke to be refereeing to a permanent memorial of the judgment when he comments, "what is precisely underscored is the finality of Babylon’s judgment: ‘her smoke ascends forever.’ The wording comes from Isa. 34:9-10, where the portrayal of smoke continually ascending serves as a permanent memorial to God’s punishment of Edom for its sin. Rev. 14:11 also alludes to Isa. 34:9-10 to describe the never-ending effect of God’s judgment of the beast’s followers. Here Edom’s fall is taken as an anticipatory typological pattern for the fall of the world system, which will never rise again after God’s judgment" ([The Book of Revelation](https://archive.org/details/g.k.beale-the-book-of-revelation/page/279/mode/1up), 929).

It should also be taken into account that the very next picture of judgment immediately following these verses also mentions the “wine of the wrath of God” and is clearly about death: “The angel thrust his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vintage of the earth and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. The wine press was trodden outside of the city, and blood came out of the wine press, up to the bridles of the horses, as far as one thousand six hundred stadia” (Rev 14:19-20).

Carson suspects that there must have been some suffering in Sodom, Gomorrah, and Edom, so surely the suffering part was typological of the final judgment. However, the "sufferings of Edom in Isaiah 34" which might have taken place were unto destruction. The accounts of Sodom, Gomorrah, and Edom are unequivocally about death and destruction throughout the Bible.

Carson provides a quote from Harmon's *The Case Against Conditionalism* which objects to conditionalism because "destruction dominates while punishment and exclusion fall into the background. Indeed, the latter image is hardly discussed." Conditionalists believe the punishment is death and destruction, so that part of the objection doesn't work. It is true that unbelievers will be excluded from the Kingdom of God, eternal life, and a part in the age to come, but that is precisely because they will perish, suffer destruction, and die a second death. Exclusion and separation from God are almost exclusively how traditionalists describe hell, but that is not how the Bible predominantly describes it. This very passage contradicts that. The judgment will take place "in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb."

**Revelation 20:10-15:**

"The devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are also. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever... The sea gave up the dead who were in it. Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them. They were judged, each one according to his works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. If anyone was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire."

G. K. Beale has helpful commentary on this passage as well: "Strictly speaking, even the expression 'they will be tormented forever and ever' is figurative... 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... All unbelievers suffering the first death are held in the sphere of 'death and Hades,' which is a temporary, preconsummate holding tank to be finally replaced by the permanent, consummate 'lake of fire,' which is 'the second death' (see on 20:14)" ([The Book of Revelation](https://archive.org/details/g.k.beale-the-book-of-revelation/page/1025/mode/1up?view=theater), 1030).

Assuming that Carson is correct about the three figures in 20:10 rather than John Stott, John sees a vision in which the three figures, the devil, the beast, and the false prophet, are tormented for an extraordinarily long time. They appear to receive the harshest punishment in the vision. John interprets this vision of the "lake of fire" as a picture of the "second death" (Rev 20:14; 21:8). The vision he sees represents the second death which takes place in the age to come. Carson interprets the figures for us. The devil is Satan, and the beast and false prophet "are best thought of as recurring individuals, culminating in supreme manifestations of their type." Death and Hades are personified individuals in Revelation. They are thrown in and destroyed. Those whose names are not written in the book of life are the enemies of Christ. They are likewise thrown in and destroyed.

Carson says that Satan "constitutes at least one sentient being who is clearly pictured as suffering conscious torment forever." Even if the language demanded that the picture is of Satan, the beast, and the false prophet suffering ECT, the authoritative interpretation given twice is that this is a picture of their death. However, the language doesn't demand that their suffering goes on forever in the vision. John couldn't see an eternal process in a vision. However, he could clearly tell they were suffering for a very long time, and the language he uses clearly reflects that reality.

The last argument for this text Carson gives is that it is reasonable to assume that if Satan is going to suffer ECT in the lake of fire, the unrighteous will too. Again, it is not necessary to understand the picture of the lake of fire as ECT, but the interpretation is still that of death, which Carson does not address. And even if that was addressed, this argument still rests on a huge assumption that Satan will necessarily face the same punishment as everyone else which I do not grant.

**Matthew 25:46:**

"These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

If the fire leads to annihilation, the "eternal" aspect is in the finality and completeness of the destruction, not in a continuous experience of punishment. This verse specifically sets up a contrast between the eternal punishment of the unrighteous and the eternal life of the righteous, so how could the punishment also include eternal life? While the righteous experience life that is eternal in duration (unending and ongoing), the unrighteous experience a punishment that is eternal in consequence (complete destruction with no reversal).

Carson responds that "annihilationists again introduce temporal serialization: first the fire that annihilates, then the eternal punishment which in fact constitutes the nonreversing of the annihilation." However, that misunderstands the argument. We also say that Jesus bore the punishment for our sins by dying for us, but we aren’t denying that Christ’s sufferings on the cross were part of that punishment. Likewise, we say that unbelievers will die because of their sins, but we aren’t denying that suffering will be part of that death. The eternal fire constitutes eternal destruction which constitutes an eternal punishment. The three are interpreted in tandem. The fire is the agent of destruction. The destruction by fire is the punishment. This punishment is final, everlasting, complete, eternal, and of the age to come. Just as chopping off a criminal’s finger for stealing is completed quickly but constitutes a lifelong punishment, the destruction by fire is carried out in a certain timeframe but constitutes an eternal punishment.

He appeals to the lake of fire in Revelation 20 for support that the torment is eternal; however, as noted above, the language in Revelation need only refer to a long time of torment, which makes sense in context because the lake of fire is a picture of the second death.

Carson says the "word 'punishment' is graphic, and at least suggests suffering." The word punishment is generic and can refer to all kinds of punishments including capital punishment. And just because annihilationists believe that the final punishment is capital punishment, does not mean that suffering will not be involved. Burning at the stake, crucifixion, and the electric chair are all forms of capital punishment with varying degrees of suffering.

The next argument has been a driving assumption for the continued belief in ECT. Carson writes that "Jesus could not have used such words as these without being understood to be in line with Pharisaic beliefs on the matter." The assumption for a long time was that ECT became the majority view during the intertestamental period. This meant that we should read the NT with the assumption of ECT. However, we now know that conditionalism was by far the majority view during the intertestamental period in keeping with the Old Testament.

The Pharisaic/rabbinic schools believed there would be three final destinies of people: heaven, an in-between group that might go to hell temporarily, or hell. Jesus very clearly rejects this teaching of the Pharisees. He taught that there are only two fates, heaven and hell, that hell’s punishment is eternal, and that even Jews could go to hell if they didn't repent and believe. David Instone-Brewer (Baptist Minister and Senior Research Fellow in Rabbinics at Cambridge) reviewing the primary literature concludes, “This means the verse stating that ‘punishment’ is eternal should be understood to mean that torment plus destruction is eternal—without any means of escape—because this is what his contemporaries meant when they used the same language” (A Consuming Passion, Eugene: Pickwick, 2015). The literature from the Apostolic Fathers reflects that same understanding. It would not be until the middle and latter half of the second century that the doctrine of ECT developed in the church, and the language became increasingly misunderstood after that.

Carson argues that annihilation cannot account for the "eternal sin" (Mk 3:29) which "will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Mat 12:32), but this is another objection that doesn't really stick. If sinners had their sins forgiven, they would be able to enter life. But since people who commit this sin will not be forgiven, they will face the punishment of eternal destruction. God doesn't forgive them, but instead counts their sin against them.

Annihilationism is not a softening of hell. Even if it is more emotionally tolerable to some people, it is simply an attempt to understand the Bible more accurately. However, I would strongly argue that annihilationism is a harsher view of hell. Only one view teaches that God will finally rid the cosmos of sin forever, accomplish justice once and for all rather than having an eternally unfinished punishment, and will take every good thing away from sinners including their very lives.

On the other hand, many traditionalists are guilty of softening the language about hell. Hell has been almost completely psychologized by traditionalists including Carson because physical torment appears more barbaric to modern people. Carson is "reluctant to say that *none* of this suffering is physical in some sense...," but this is quite different from the Bible’s descriptions of a very physical punishment. The unjust will be raised physically to receive their punishment (Jn 5:28-29) which consists of torment, fire, and the sword. There is also a recent view among traditionalists that the wicked will eventually have some kind of sub-human existence while suffering ECT, but this is not based on the Bible. If those who hold to that altered their view slightly, they could affirm with the Bible that the wicked will be turned to ashes and perish.

The final vision of the cosmos for conditionalists is one where God has destroyed all of His enemies. Death was the final enemy to be annihilated. The old things have passed away, and all things are made new. Christ will reconcile all things to himself, and everything will be subjected to the Father, so that God may be all in all. From the traditional view, Carson says, "hell's inmates are full of sin." Wickedness is rampant in hell for eternity. God will never finally stamp out evil but will instead grant the impenitent everlasting life. Justice will never be accomplished because the wicked will never receive all the punishment they deserve. In this view, it is hard to see how God has truly triumphed over evil when the rebels continue in their wickedness for all eternity. This view appears more like an eternal dualism between good and evil than the Bible's description of God's final, decisive victory over sin, death, and evil.

**D. Concluding Reflections**

Carson writes that it "is getting harder and harder to be faithful to the 'hard' lines of Scripture." Like many other traditionalists, Carson feels like he is fighting against liberals and compromisers in this debate over hell. I understand that feeling because ECT is a hard view emotionally for people, is in many protestant confessions, has been the traditional view for a long time, and is often attacked by liberals and cults.

Notwithstanding all of those positive indicators, it appears that ECT simply does not stand up to biblical scrutiny. It misses the clear teaching that the gospel is a life and death issue, eternal life is only granted to believers, and unbelievers will finally perish in hell: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).