Second Thoughts about Hell

Understanding What We Believe

Ronald J. Allen
Robert D. Cornwall

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"What an informative, readable, and well-conceived book! Ronald Allen and Robert Cornwall offer brief summaries of how biblical writers, early Christians, major theologians, and contemporary scholars think about hell. And they do so in a lively way. Allen and Cornwall even reveal their own views at the end. This is a great book for small group discussions!"

—Thomas Jay Oord, author of *God Can't: How to Believe in God and Love after Tragedy, Abuse, and Other Evils*

"Second Thoughts about Hell is an informative, thought-provoking, and accessible read. Tackling a topic many avoid, this book explores the concept of hell through historical, biblical, Protestant, and modern lenses. Ideal for study groups and faith communities, it includes a comprehensive study guide that encourages deeper reflection and discussion. A valuable resource for anyone wanting to engage seriously with one of theology's most challenging subjects."

—Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Professor of Theology, Earlham School of Religion, and author of *Earthbound*, *When God Became White*, and *Invisible*

"Allen and Cornwall describe historical and contemporary understandings of the afterlife, deftly demonstrating how social/cultural contexts inadvertently invite the church to embrace one understanding over another. But this volume is not simply an academic, ivory tower exploration. The authors know that what we believe about last things, about heaven and hell, strongly inform our understandings of the mission of the church, the purposes of worship and preaching, and the ways we provide care and hope to our congregations and wider communities. It is a very important conversation. (Or we might say a hell of a conversation.)"

— Mary Donovan Turner, Professor Emerita of Preaching, Pacific School of Religion

"When people say, 'Go to hell,' few know more than it is not a nice place. I love this book, which could be titled *Everything You Want to Know about Hell but Were Afraid to Ask*. What happens after we die? Is hell real? What does it have to do with God? In clear, simple language, Allen and Cornwall faithfully review what

the Bible and theologians through the ages have said, opening a surprising range of possibilities for readers to consider. No study is more helpful than this for both preachers and laypeople in seeking answers."

—Paul Scott Wilson, Professor Emeritus of Homiletics, Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto

"Anyone who has had second thoughts about hell will appreciate Allen and Cornwall's efforts in this book to help us understand better what we believe about this and why. They have done their homework (on a vast literature), written clearly and succinctly (on difficult associated concepts), and treated a full range of views charitably and yet without avoiding the critical questions from other perspectives. If *Second Thoughts about Hell* does not prod you to change your mind, it will at least equip those with pastoral and teaching responsibilities to engage and also facilitate important conversations about a Christian doctrine with deep roots in the theological tradition."

—Amos Yong, Chief Academic Officer, Dean of the School of Mission and Theology, and Professor of Theology and Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary

"In *Second Thoughts about Hell,* authors Allen and Cornwall guide readers on a journey of understandings of hell in the Bible, the history of the church, and more recent theological reflection. They helpfully summarize the major views of hell today, from a literal hell to universal salvation, advocating for an understanding of hell that supports rather than undermines a life-affirming, hope-filled depiction of God and the human future. Readers will appreciate the book's clarity and the authenticity with which the authors share, but do not impose, their own beliefs. A study guide for small groups and web-accessible suggestions for both topical and lectionary-based sermon series accompany the book."

—Alyce M. McKenzie, Le Van Professor of Preaching and Worship and Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor, Perkins School of Theology, SMU, and codirector, The Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence, SMU

An online resource to help preachers engage the notion of hell in the pulpit is available at **www.wjkbooks.com/Hell**. The resource includes a general orientation to the subject and suggestions for sermon series based on biblical texts and topics.

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Introduction

*T*his book came about in the same way as our earlier *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming.* We became aware of a question put to us in many Bible study groups in congregations in which we have been guest leaders in the long-established denominations. The question is some form of "what can we Christians believe about hell?" Most of the time, this question seems to come from an honest curiosity. People are exposed to popular ideas about hell in conversation and on the internet and wonder what to make of them. Even seasoned Bible students are often influenced in their perceptions of hell more by the excruciating pictures in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* or John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* than by the more limited images of hell in the Bible. Often, the question comes from a deep struggle over whether a God "abounding in steadfast love" (Exod 34:6–7) would condemn people to an eternity of punishment, whether by fire or by some other means.

At other times, a participant's question comes from a difficult personal background. "My father was an alcoholic who abused his family and left us destitute. Is he burning in hell right now?" Sometimes the question is asked in the frame of social justice. Referring to a person or group who caused others to suffer, someone said, "I want to know that those who did wrong to so many will get what they deserve." If the questioner has a somewhat conservative religious orientation, the question is sometimes a little suspicious, as if the participant is thinking, "We've heard about liberal ministers who do not believe the Bible. Are you one of those?" If the questioner has a progressive religious orientation, the question is often

suspicious in a dismissive way. "I have decided that a God of love would not tolerate a fiery hell. You are committed to the Bible. Does that mean you are committed to the idea of hell?" Then there is the question of freedom of choice. C. S. Lewis, in *The Great Divorce,* writes, "Any [person] may choose eternal death. Those who choose it will have it."[1] Well, is that true?

Some of our progressive friends, when hearing about this project, seemed bemused. "Who is interested in hell these days?" While that may be the case in many progressive orbits, we continue to see articles about hell in the news. One of Ron's friends sent him several newspaper, magazine, and online articles about hell from respectable sources that were published in 2024 as we were working on the book.

Along the way, a discussion often ensues in a study group or other setting in which participants put forward their differing views on what hell may be and how people might experience it. For example:

- Hell is a literal place of blistering punishment.
- Hell is a "refiner's fire" purifying the self from the effects of sin (often similar to the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory).
- Hell is alienation from God and others in the present and/or in the future.
- Hell is annihilation (the consciousness of the human being disappears).
- Hell does not exist because a loving God will not punish people in the ways associated with hell (e.g., an eternity of fire) and will ultimately save everyone (universal salvation).

This list is only representative of a much wider field of interpretations. In the study guide at the end of this volume, we invite readers to add to this list their own associations with hell and other interpretations they have heard.

The Meaning of "Hell" in This Book

Over the years, we (Bob and Ron) have noticed that church groups sometimes get into discussions without being clear regarding what

the discussion is about. Hence, we pause for clarification. In this book, we follow the definition offered by Alan Bernstein, who speaks of hell as "a divinely sanctioned place of eternal torment for the wicked. It is 'divinely sanctioned' because the God (or, the gods) who established it could have refrained from creating it and could at any time demolish it. Its existence depends on some divinely established purpose."[2] The first thing that often comes to mind when we think of hell is an underworld of fire and brimstone where people suffer for eternity. However, we will see later in the book that this is not the only way in which hell is pictured in the Bible and other Jewish and Christian writings.

We say that hell is an ongoing form of punishment, usually in the afterlife, to distinguish it from singular acts of punishment that God metes out for a limited duration and that typically take place in this life. Revelation 20:10 is an example of the popular view of hell as eternal punishment: God throws the devil into the lake of fire to join the beast and the false prophet in being "tormented day and night forever and ever." There is no release from this fire. As an example of an act of singular punishment, we note that Second Isaiah declares that God had acted through the Babylonians to punish Judah for its idolatry and concomitant sins by sending the leaders of Judah into exile (e.g., Isa 43:27–28). In two generations, according to Isaiah, God released the Judahites from exile and returned them to their own land, using Cyrus the Persian (e.g., Isa 45:1). The exile, while painful and lasting two generations, was nonetheless a limited event.

To be sure, in Jewish and Christian history and theology, hell as eternal punishment in the afterlife and judgment as a singular event are not hard-and-fast categories, nor are they exhaustive. We concentrate on views of hell in the Bible and Christian traditions. Other religious traditions have views of harsh things that take place after death, but such traditions lie beyond the scope of this book.

Uses of the Word "Hell"

We begin with a definition because the word "hell" is used in so many ways. One of the most common uses of "hell" is as a general

expression for suffering, as when a person is in a painful health crisis and says, "I am going through hell." Strictly speaking, according to the understanding of hell set out above, that statement would mean that the person believes God sent the illness as a punishment. However, most theologies today would say that this expression is technically incorrect. God does not visit sickness upon people to punish them. Illness occurs when parts of the body malfunction.

People use the word "hell" in many other ways. It sometimes functions as an expletive, as in "Damn it to hell!," "Hell, yes!," or "Oh hell!" It can mean "really good" as in "That was a hell of a sermon." In situations in which people disagree, it sometimes has a disparaging character, as in "To hell with it" or "Oh, go to hell." A person does something "for the hell of it," meaning just for the fun of it. Someone who "catches hell" is being severely criticized. A minister might think of a particular pastorate as "a long time in hell." Someone memorably said, "Hell is a hell of a thing to think about."

While we explore many different interpretations of hell in this volume, it is important to remember that when we speak of hell, we tend to have in mind God punishing people for long time periods, typically in the afterlife. At the same time, readers need to be alert to the specific associations with hell (and broader views of punishment) in particular passages in the Bible and Christian history and theology.

This Book Offers a Wide Range of Possibilities

Our purpose with this book is not to persuade readers that hell exists or does not exist. Nor do we try to lead the reader to a particular understanding of hell. Rather, we set out different views of hell in the Bible, Christian history, and Christian theology, including the idea that there is no hell and that God does not directly punish individuals or communities. We try to describe the viewpoints clearly, succinctly, and respectfully. We hope that those who hold the views we depict will recognize what they really think and not feel put down, dismissed, or disrespected. Along

the way, we identify what we see as strengths and weaknesses in these views.

In the end, we hope readers will be able to identify the perspective(s) that make the most sense to them given what they believe about God and the world and why they believe what they believe. We further hope that study groups using the book will become communities of respectful conversation as people come to better understand one another on the journey to clarification.

Why Devote a Book to the Topic of Hell?

Some friends point out that in the strict sense, we cannot *know* whether there is a hell in the sense of God invoking long-lasting punishment, so why worry about it now? What is the point of thinking about what Christians believe about hell in an epoch of history marked by so many tensions in matters of race and ethnicity, sexuality and gender, ecology, political polarization, and economic uncertainty, not to mention violence? With so many experiences and issues of immediate existential importance in the present moment, it is not surprising that many people are disinterested in hell.

This disinterest extends not only to many laypeople but also to many clergy. We recently led a workshop on our book *Second Thoughts about the Second Coming* for preachers and asked, "How many of you preach at least once in a while on the second coming?" Only one hand went up. The others replied with variations on the remark, "There is so much happening *now* that I really feel I need to address that."

We offer a threefold response. First, we hope the book helps readers come to greater clarity regarding the place of hell in Christian witness. The mission of the church is to witness to what it most deeply believes to be true about God, God's purposes for the world, and appropriate responses. To oversimplify, we may say that from the time of the writing of the last twenty-seven books of the Bible to the present, many Christians and many churches have believed that while God's intent to save is God's primary purpose, hell awaits those who disobey God's purposes.

- If a Christian or a congregation or Christian movement continues to believe that God will condemn the unfaithful to hell—whether imagining hell as a burning pit in which the fire never goes out or in some other form—then that community is morally obligated to make it a part of their witness. They need to alert people to the possibility of hell as a final destination and invite people to take steps to avoid hell.
- If a Christian or a congregation or a Christian movement believes that disastrous consequences of a singular event of punishment can come because of disobedience—whether God directly causes those consequences or people bring the consequences on themselves—they are morally obligated to make that belief clear so that others have opportunities to choose to live more faithfully and to avoid the consequences.
- If a Christian or a congregation or a Christian movement does not believe that hell awaits, they too are obligated to clarify their position to relieve others of the unnecessary anxiety of the fear of hell, anxiety that often siphons off energy that could go into fuller living toward God's positive purposes for humankind and nature.

The integrity of the Christian witness is at stake. We need to say what we believe and believe what we say, and we need to live accordingly.

Second, many individuals and congregations in the long-established churches are uncertain about what they believe about hell because they have inadequate data to make informed choices. Preaching and teaching in these churches have given little overt attention to the notion of hell over the last generations. As a result, many people are left to think about hell based on little more than images of hell in popular media and references to hell in folk theology that are passed from person to person without serious interaction with the Bible or Christian history and theology.

Ron remembers a conversation among progressive and moderate ministers that drifted into the subject of hell. After a few humorous interchanges about hell, one of the ministers said flatly, "I don't preach about hell because I don't care about it. I care about what is happening now." While this preacher may not care about it, our impression is that some laypeople in the long-established churches do care about it (per our report from our Bible study experiences above) and would welcome responsible guidance.

Our inkling is that many evangelical churches are clear in believing that there is a hell and that people should accept God's grace and live in such a way as to avoid landing there. Our impression is also that many evangelical preachers today go lightly on "fire and brimstone" sermons and take more reasoned approaches to hell. However, our further inkling is that such congregations are seldom exposed to the wider range of responsible interpretations of hell, including arguments that hell does not exist.

A growing postevangelical movement has come to life in which many evangelicals express serious questions about whether they can continue to believe in hell, at least as popularly understood. Many of these people are aware of their doubts about hell, but they're not aware of resources that can help them reformulate their thinking about hell in ways that are appropriate to their freshly redeveloping deepest convictions about God. We believe this book, with its array of resources, will be of particular interest to the postevangelical movement.

Third, what we believe about hell has practical consequences for how we live in the present. For some, this means evangelizing friends, family, and neighbors, to make sure they don't end up in hell. For others, those who reject the idea of hell, there is sometimes the need to reinforce the idea that a God of love would not consign a person to an eternity of torment in hell. This message may draw some into the church, but it can also push them away. Among the reasons noted by many who leave behind Christianity is the message that the Christian God consigns people to eternal damnation if they do not become Christians (accept Jesus as savior). Many people are simply confused, believing that a God of love would not consign people to hell, and yet they are not sure there is another option. What this means for clergy is that these questions and concerns have a pastoral dimension, which we will take note of later in the book.

Words for Hell in the Bible

We will talk about this matter at important points in the book, but we mention it now so that readers can be alert to it. Different

words in Hebrew and Greek lie behind the English translations that use "hell." In the older versions of the Bible, "hell" often translates the Hebrew word *sheol,* as in Psalm 139:8 in the King James Version: "If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there." Today's reader may think of hell in Psalm 139 (and many other places in the Old Testament) as the fiery place of punishment, whereas most of the time *sheol* refers in a much more neutral way to the underworld abode where the dead reside, without real suggestion of it being a place of punishment. Many of the more recent English versions simply use "Sheol."

In the New Testament, in both older and newer versions, the English term "hell" sometimes renders the Greek *hades* or *gehenna.* The word *hades* usually refers to an abode of the dead similar to *sheol.* But occasionally it seems to be a way of speaking about a place of punishment. While that word is sometimes translated as "hell," it is also sometimes transliterated as "Hades." (In transliteration, the writer simply uses comparable English letters for the letters in the original language.)

Similarly, the Greek *gehenna* is sometimes translated as "hell" and sometimes transliterated as "Gehenna." It is derived from the Hebrew name that means "Valley of Hinnom," a location near Jerusalem where child sacrifice occurred (2 Kgs 16:3; Jer 19:4–5) and where the Babylonians slaughtered many Judeans (Jer 7:29–34). In the Old Testament, this valley is infamous as a symbol of idolatrous and sinful behavior but is not associated with an afterlife. However, in the last centuries before the New Testament, several Jewish writings described the valley as a place of punishment. We explain this development in chapter 2.

Many other expressions in the New Testament also bespeak a place of punishment in the life beyond this one. Three examples illustrate the wide range of references to hell. We have already referred to "the lake of fire" (Rev 20:10). Matthew denotes hell when speaking of the place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). Paul occasionally speaks of "perishing" as a way of indicating the final disposition of the unfaithful (e.g., 1 Cor 1:18).

Our point here is simply that the reader needs to consider which meaning of a word or phrase is at work in a particular passage. Of course, scholars and others can debate "which meaning of a word or phrase" is present in a particular passage.

A Two-Step Approach to Making Sense of What We Believe about Hell

Coming to a clear and well-founded understanding of hell requires two steps, which we preview here and draw on more fully as we approach different interpretations of hell as the book unfolds. The first step is to consider what sources ask readers to believe about hell in light of the historical, literary, and theological settings of the source. When studying the Bible, this work is sometimes called biblical exegesis. The second step is to consider whether we believe the same things that particular sources believe or whether we come to different beliefs. We make this second determination—what we believe—based on our deepest convictions about God.

The idea here is to honor the otherness, the distinctive characteristics, of a text in the Bible or a voice in Christian history. The ancient and not-so-ancient authors spoke and wrote at specific moments of history, addressed issues pertinent to their time, used language that had meanings particular to that moment, operated out of worldviews they took for granted, and did not envision speaking to people several centuries down the road. Their ideas can be quite different from ours. In the biblical period and for quite a while afterward, for instance, many people thought of the world as a three-story universe with heaven above, the earth in the middle, and an underworld below. They could speak literally of going "up" to heaven and "down" to hell.

Concerning the first step, we can often reconstruct what the biblical writers and sources meant when they spoke about hell. To be sure, scholars sometimes disagree about aspects of what an ancient source asked their hearers and readers to believe, but these disagreements take place under the umbrella of trying to reconstruct what the ancient "other" had in view. The key question is,

"What did a particular source ask readers or hearers to believe about hell in light of that source's context in history?" For example, what does the Gospel of Matthew intend when it speaks of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30)?

Many Bible study groups attempt to follow this model. But uneasiness with certain biblical passages sometimes leads Christians to look for ways of interpreting the Bible that make them feel better but that do not honor the integrity of the text. When thinking about a particular passage in the Bible, we sometimes hear people say, "Well, my interpretation of this text is . . ." and then put forward an idea that might be creative but is not something an ancient or not-so-ancient writer would have had in mind. For example, one person in a Bible study group, commenting on the reference to the lake of fire in Revelation 20:10, said, "Hell to me is just a state of mind of being aware of separation from God." To be sure, we need to consider the degree to which the verse in Revelation refers to literal fire or fire as a symbol, but to our knowledge, no responsible interpreter would say it refers only to a state of mind in the book of Revelation.

The second step in making sense of hell is to clarify what we believe about it. In a sense we carry out an exegesis of our process of coming to clarity, recognizing the different sources that come into play—and how we draw on them—in seeking to come to clarity: the Bible, voices from history, contemporary voices, our own experience, and the logic or reasoning by which we arrive at a particular interpretation. We bring what we discovered in step one into conversation with voices from history, tradition, reason, and experience as well as what we most deeply believe about God. A key question for all approaches is how to reconcile the notion that God acts in love and justice with beliefs about hell.

This can be a messy process, and if the experience of Bob and Ron is true for others, we are often tempted to default too quickly to a point of view that makes us feel better than some other viewpoints. For this reason, it is important to do some of this thinking in community, because other people can help us recognize and deal with unnamed presuppositions and gaps in logic.

We note three main patterns by which Christians often make this move. We use the illustration of moving from what biblical writers believed about hell to what we might believe as an example of how Christians might approach other historical and contemporary voices.

1. Some Christians take the Bible in a literal way—that is, assuming a one-to-one correlation between what the Bible asked readers in antiquity to believe and what we should believe today. For example, if a biblical witness depicts God casting the unfaithful into an "outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 25:30), this group of interpreters will believe that such a fate awaits the unfaithful. When asked how to square this action with the notion that God acts in love, these interpreters reply that all deserve condemnation; however, as an act of grace, God in love offers the way to salvation. God will welcome into the world of salvation those who accept God's invitation to salvation and then live faithfully. Those who reject the offer and live unfaithfully receive the condemnation they deserve.
2. Many Christians recognize differences in the ancient and contemporary views of the universe and want to take account of other cultural differences between the past and the present, to "translate" ancient views of hell into contemporary equivalents. These Christians do not take hell to be a literal place of fire but identify other modes of suffering that God assigns because of disobedience. These folk are aware that they are not simply repeating the biblical way of thinking but are adapting it in light of a contemporary understanding of the universe. To return to an earlier example, some folk may think that hell is the painful sense of being alienated from God in the present and continuing beyond death, perhaps in magnified form. This viewpoint also faces the theological question of how to make sense of saying that God acts out of love when God condemns people to an eternity of alienation.
3. Some Christians believe they have the freedom to disagree with the Bible and with many voices in Christian tradition. When it comes to hell, these people insist that God's love overrides all other divine behaviors and that a loving God could not sentence people to suffering, even in the reduced terms of painful alienation from God. God's fundamental purpose is to redeem all.

> This point of view faces the question of accountability. Do those who have been unfaithful get off scot-free? If so, is that fair or just to those who have been faithful, and especially to those whose faithfulness has caused them to suffer in this present life?

While we think that these three patterns of moving from biblical portrayals of hell as a place in the afterlife to contemporary beliefs about hell are workable, we need to remember that the lines between these patterns are sometimes arbitrary. Moreover, these may not be the only ways that people sort through what they believe about hell.

The Plan of This Book

This book is divided into four parts that move chronologically from the time of the Bible into the present.

Part 1 considers voices on hell in the world of the Bible. We begin (chap. 1) with a study of present and future punishment in the Old Testament. Significant developments in the move toward a notion of hell took place in Jewish literature from 300 BCE to 200 CE (chap. 2). The heart of part 1 is chapter 3, which focuses on how the concept of hell functions in the New Testament, taking into account apocalyptically oriented books—Mark, Matthew, the Lukan literature, Paul's letters, several other letters, and of course the book of Revelation—as well as the Gospel and Letters of John.

Part 2 focuses on voices on hell from the early history of the church up to the twentieth century. We cover many centuries and listen to many voices from many places. In chapter 4 we go from the second century CE to the Reformation (early sixteenth century) and consider such material as the Apocalypse of Paul, Cyprian of Carthage, Origen, and Augustine. This chapter traces the emergence of the doctrine of purgatory.

Chapter 5 takes in the Protestants Luther and Calvin and the Catholic Ignatius Loyola, among others. John Wesley deserves mention, as does Jonathan Edwards and his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Part 2 wraps up with a look

at how hell was discussed in popular religious life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Part 3 brings the discussion into the contemporary era with voices that nuance their views of hell or move away from the traditional views. These viewpoints include Roman Catholic perspectives (chap. 6). Some voices modernize the view of hell through a process called demythologizing (chap. 7). Others take the language of hell in more figurative or metaphorical directions, following the lead of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and theologians within the postliberal movement (chap. 8). Jürgen Moltmann and others offer the possibility of escaping from hell (chap. 9). A more complicated discussion takes place in connection with liberation theology as well as the idea that some people believe that sin in the present brings about punishment in the present (through social process) with little consideration of what might happen in the afterlife (chap. 10). Those who follow open and relational theologies tend to believe that hell does not exist as a fiery place of punishment. Marjorie Suchocki and some other process theologians envision hell as a function of consciousness and offer a range of possibilities from choices in the afterlife through universal salvation to the idea that at death, consciousness simply stops. There is no hell because there is no awareness after death (chap. 11).

Part 4 is a summary of the three main views that weave in and out of the periods of the Bible and the history of the church: hell as a place of eternal punishment (chap. 12); annihilationism, sometimes called the conditional view of hell (chap. 13); and universalism, the view that there is no hell because all will be saved (chap. 14).

The book proper concludes with an afterword in which the authors straightforwardly say what we believe about hell. In the manner of sharing among friends, we explain what we believe and why. We hope that having these two statements and interchange between the authors illustrates one of the goals of the book in that we share our different accents of conviction in a context of respect for one another.

The book contains suggestions for further reading for those who wish to dive more deeply into the subject. The entries are lightly annotated.

This volume includes a study guide that can be used by small groups and individuals. The study is set up for five sessions, but the material can be telescoped into three sessions or expanded to more than five. The study guide, like the book itself, is designed to help bring options to the surface and to provide prompts for conversation that help participants listen to and identify possible views of hell that make the most sense to the reader. The study guide will help readers reflect on the consequences of how congregations live and witness and will help readers compare and contrast those consequences so they will be in positions to make conscientious choices that are appropriate to their deepest beliefs.

Online Resource for Preaching

Although we wrote this book with a general audience in mind, we hope preachers will find the material of interest, so we developed an online resource to help preachers engage the notion of hell in the pulpit. The resource includes a general orientation to the subject and suggestions for sermon series based on biblical texts and topics. It deals with preaching in conversation with hell in the Christian year and the Revised Common Lectionary, in free selection of texts. We raise the possibility of preaching topical sermons on hell and discuss possible sermon series. This resource is available free of charge at www.wjkbooks.com/Hell.

Sending This Book Forward in Hope

As we point out in a section above, "Why Devote a Book to the Topic of Hell?," this work is being published in a chaotic and treacherous season of history. We hope and pray it can help readers strengthen their resolve to live according to God's intentions for the communities of humankind and nature to live together in love, peace, justice, freedom, and abundance. Put negatively, for those who believe in hell, this book might be a pastoral warning to avoid contributing to the violation of God's purposes that bring about suffering in the present and that could lead to their

own eternal punishment. For those who do not believe in hell, the book might function as a warning that while God does not directly consign us to punishment, attitudes and behavior that undermine God's intentions and abundance set in motion forces that can effectively turn a part of the world into a hell for us and unmitigated suffering for others. Put positively for those who believe in hell, this book is an invitation to live faithfully in ways that are consistent with God's purposes and that limit the possibilities of a final condemnation. Put positively for those who do not believe in hell, this volume might function similarly—as an invitation to cooperate with God and God's purposes in thinking and acting in ways that urge humankind and nature toward a world that promotes love, justice, peace, and abundance.

Part 1

Voices on Hell from the World of the Bible

In part 1 we look at how the concept of hell functions in the Bible. Chapter 1 sets the stage for the discussion by considering the role of punishment in the life of Israel. In chapter 2, we follow the emergence of the notion of hell in Jewish literature beginning about 300 BCE; chapter 3 sketches attitudes toward hell in the Gospels and Letters.

Chapter 1

Voices from the Old Testament

If this chapter were titled "Hell in the Old Testament," it could be one of the shortest chapters in the history of publication, because the idea of hell as conscious ongoing punishment in the afterlife does not directly appear in the First Testament. However, two aspects of the Old Testament offer useful background on the concept of hell: (1) the notion of an afterlife called Sheol; (2) the broader notion of why God punishes Israel and others in the context of this life.

Sheol: The Afterlife in a Shadowy Underworld

The King James Version of the Bible often uses "hell" to translate the Hebrew word *sheol.* Psalm 139:8 is an example: "If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there." A person reading the psalm in English today could easily interpret "hell" in this context as a place of punishment and ask, "Why is the psalmist making a bed in such a place, and why is God there?" However, few English versions today translate *sheol* as "hell." Many versions simply render the Hebrew letters into English and speak directly of Sheol. Thus, we read, "If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there."

The word *sheol* refers to an afterlife, but not to a place of fiery punishment. To the Hebrews Sheol was a shadowy underworld where a form of a person goes at death. The Old Testament sometimes refers to the inhabitants of Sheol as "shades," suggesting

that they are shadows of their former selves (e.g., Job 26:5; Ps 88:10; Isa 14:9).

Some passages indicate that Sheol is a dark place (e.g., Job 17:13; Lam 3:6). Jacob goes down to Sheol in mourning because he grieves for Joseph, whom he presumes is dead (Gen 37:35). According to some writers, the dead do not praise God in Sheol (Ps 6:5; Isa 38:18). Sheol can represent the place of farthest removal from God (Ps 139:7–8; Amos 9:2). For Ecclesiastes, "there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol" (Eccl 9:10). Some writers personify Sheol, that is, speak as if it is animated. For instance, Sheol is hungry to receive the living (Isa 5:14; Hab 2:5).

Sheol appears to be the destination of both the faithful (as in Gen 37:35; Job 21:13) and the unfaithful (e.g., Num 16:30; Pss 9:17; 31:17; 55:15; Isa 5:14; 14:11). Occasional passages cast a negative pall on Sheol (e.g., Pss 49:14; 116:3), but there is no extended suggestion that God actively rewards the faithful or actively punishes the unfaithful in Sheol.

The Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, renders the Hebrew *sheol* into Greek with the word *hadēs,* which comes into English as "Hades." The translators of the Septuagint probably chose "Hades" because some of the Greeks used Hades as the name of the gatekeeper of the underworld. The underworld itself, accessed through gates, was sometimes called by the same name. This usage appears in the New Testament (e.g., Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27), as we note in chapter 3.The Old Testament itself, then, does not have a developed view of punishment in the afterlife. However, the idea of hell as a place of prolonged punishment does emerge in Jewish literature beginning about 300 BCE.

God Punishes People in This Life

We focus now on God directly punishing individuals, communities, and nations. The Old Testament contains far-reaching discussions of human crimes and punishment, including principles and mechanisms by which human agents pass judgment and inflict punishment. While that is an important topic, our focus in this section is on God's role as a direct punishing force.

Many biblical writers share the idea that things happen in the world either by God's immediate direction or with God's permission. According to this way of thinking, God sometimes directly orchestrates acts of punishment, but in other instances, human attitudes and behavior bring about circumstances that function as punishment. God does not directly push the button to start a punishment. However, God does not push the button to stop it, though God could. Either way—by direct initiation or passive permission—God is responsible for all that happens.

As we have previously made clear, the Old Testament does not envision significant punishment taking place in an afterlife. Instead, punishment takes place in the context of present life and history.

God punishes when human beings violate God's aims for the human family and for the created world. "Justice" (Heb. *mishpat*) is one of several biblical ways of speaking about what God hopes for the human family in relationship with other human beings, with animals, and with all other elements of nature. God seeks a world of justice, and God acts according to justice. Isaiah represents this dominant biblical view by declaring, "The LORD is a God of justice" (Isa 30:18). Justice is often paired with righteousness (Heb. *tsedeq*) as, for example, in Psalm 33:5, God "loves righteousness and justice." Righteousness is doing the "just thing," which, in the Bible, is to encourage people and nature to live together rightly, that is, in mutual support. Indeed, these two realities are the foundation of God's throne (Ps 97:2).

In the broad sense, justice has a relational meaning that refers to creating conditions whereby people and nature relate to one another in a mutually supportive community. People are righteous—they live rightly—when they live into the things that make for a just world. Genesis 1 depicts the fully just world as one in which each element of creation is honored in its own integrity and in which all things work together to create a world of blessing for each and all. To be righteous is to do what is right to encourage such a community. God, the paradigm of righteousness, always does what is right by inviting, creating, and maintaining a mutually supportive community in the pattern of Genesis 1. Theologian Clark M. Williamson writes that blessing is "*shalom* (peace) with oneself and, because we are related to all else that is, with God,

and with all our neighbors, with all the living things in the environment that are also to be fruitful and multiply."[1]

God positively encourages the human community toward the possibility of living in justice. For example, through the mouth of Moses the writers of Deuteronomy admonish the covenantal community: "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue" (Deut 16:20). For the writers of Deuteronomy, as for many others, the driving human purpose in covenantal living is to create a community in which all relationships are just, that is, in which everyone and everything has access to the things that make for support, in which everything works together for blessing for all.

There is a background notion here. God created the world out of the deep primeval chaos to be a network of interlocking and supportive relationships (Gen 1:1–2). But it was "a world in precarious balance, where every action (human or divine) affected the equilibrium toward either greater harmony or to chaos and destruction." God seeks to "maintain a balance in the universe that induces harmony and well-being." The practice of justice contributed to the stability of the world and its capacity to be fruitful and multiply. By contrast, "when someone violated individual or communal norms, that person [or group] tipped the balance away from shalom, threatening the community's prosperity and well-being." According to this ancient viewpoint, punishment can remove a threat to the just community and restore the balance of the universe.[2]

All talk about punishment in Israel takes place under the umbrella of God's overarching purpose to create a truly just world. To the best of our knowledge, the biblical writers never regard punishment as an end in itself. God never punishes in a mode of uncontrolled emotional outrage, as parents today sometimes do when confronted by defiant children. In a sentence, God uses punishment to remove threats to the community so that justice, righteousness, blessing, and all things that make for authentic community can prosper. While punishment may inflict immediate pain on specific individuals, communities, or nations, the eventual aim of punishment is the restoration of the circumstances that make for blessing. When God destroys (or allows destruction of) a community, one aim is to remove the threat posed by that community to the possibilities of blessing to others and to those within

the community under punishment. Another aim is to awaken those in the community being punished to the fact of their disobedience. The biblical writers who tell of such things also do so to show the later readers what went wrong, why, and the consequences, so the readers will be forewarned and can avoid making their own versions of the same mistake(s).

It is helpful to distinguish the roles and emphases of punishment for Israel and for nations outside Israel. Within the covenantal community, Israel, punishment plays an instructional role. When people violate the things that make for justice, God seeks to prompt the community to return to just ways. God typically sends prophets and others to call the community to repent or face significant punishment (e.g., Hos 14:1–3). If people continue in disobedience, God punishes them with an eye toward repentance and restoration. In the version of the covenant in Deuteronomy 27–28, for example, when the people are obedient, blessing follows, but when they are disobedient God visits curses upon them. Malachi uses the language of purification by fire to speak of the role of punishment in the covenant. God "will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and [God] will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver" (Mal 3:3). If it is too late for those in view to repent and turn toward obedience, then the later readers can be forewarned and learn from the disobedience of those who came before.

Beyond the covenantal community, God sometimes punishes peoples and nations who engage in injustice against Israel, who lead Israel into living unjustly, or who otherwise violate God's purposes of blessing for all (e.g., Isa 21:1–10). God's capacity to punish other nations (e.g., causing them to fall) demonstrates the power of God over other gods in the plain sight of both the nations and Israel. This awareness strengthens Israel to remain faithful to God even when confronted by challenges from other peoples. It also reveals the strength of God's commitment to creating circumstances that are ripe for blessing by removing the menace to those circumstances posed by other peoples.

At one time there were no limits on human retribution in the ancient Near East. If one villager kidnapped a member of another village, the second group could destroy the first village. But the

Code of Hammurabi (roughly 1750 BCE) enshrines the idea—accepted later in Israel—that punishment should be meted out in proportion to the violation (and not in excess), "an eye for an eye" (Exod 21:23–27). The extent of the punishment points to the extent of the violation.

It is important to note that the biblical writers imply a similar reciprocity between human violation and divine punishment. God enacts judgment measure-for-measure in relationship to the degree of disobedience. Moreover, the prophets point to a "*correspondence* between sin and judgment, crime and punishment." The punishment is "according to, in some way like, or appropriate in either a literal or symbolic fashion, to the sin committed."[3] Thus Obadiah 15 says,

> As you have done, it shall be done to you;
> your deeds shall return on your own head.

Patrick Miller Jr. writes, "The judgment is not independent of the crime or sin. Rather it is rooted directly in the sin in a relationship of deed and its consequence. The evil that one does comes back upon the sinner even as the good comes upon the righteous." To put it another way, God "brings back not some strange 'punishment' as a result [of a violation] but something indissolubly linked to the deed."[4] Here, too, the nature and extent of the punishment point back to the nature and extent of the violation.

This principle is quite important when interpreting the nature and extent of the punishment meted out through hell. In that world, the punishment is itself an index of the significance of the violation. A severe punishment means that a severe violation has occurred. A violation that merits burning forever is a fundamental threat to the purposes of God.

In some cases, the effects of punishment continue for long periods of time. Indeed, in some cases life is changed significantly after the punishment. After Cain kills Abel, for example, Cain cannot take corrective action by realigning his values and behavior with God in relationship to his brother, because Abel is dead. But as an act of grace, God places a mark on Cain so that others would not kill him (Gen 4:15–17). God's behavior with Cain illustrates a pattern: when God visits a punishment that does not

permit restoration of community, God often provides a measure of grace so that those who are punished can live as fully into God's purposes as their situation allows.

Occasionally, God punishes a people with complete destruction and death (e.g., Exod 14:26–29). God appears to take this action to end a significant threat to God's purposes posed by the people whom God destroys. This notion will recur when we discuss the transition from punishment in the present life to punishment in the afterlife by means of consigning people to hell. Consignment to hell means that the violators can no longer pose a threat to covenantal community.

As this chapter closes, we may say almost categorically that the reason the biblical writers emphasize punishment is *to impress upon the hearers or readers* the importance of living faithfully according to the vision of the just community to be a part of the realm and to avoid punishment. The apostle Paul offers an example of this approach when he recalls the story in Exodus of the people of Israel who worshiped the golden calf. Paul admonishes the Corinthians, "Do not become idolaters as some of them did, as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play'" (1 Cor 10:7; cf. Exod 32:6). Paul wants the Corinthians to avoid idolatry in their situation some thirteen hundred years after the exodus. By doing so, the Corinthians can be part of the movement toward the new world that Paul believed God was bringing about. In this case, as in many others, hearing about the punishment in the past allows the congregation to reflect on its situation and to reinforce its commitment to faithfulness or to take corrective action (e.g., repentance) to avoid the fate of the punished people and to realign the community's life with the purposes of God.

Many of these ideas raise important theological questions about God's love, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness for those who are punished. As we noted at the outset of this section, we put these and other questions on hold until the afterword, when the important matter of what we most deeply believe about God and punishment takes center stage.

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