

“Our God is a Consuming Fire”

Kyle Butt, M.A.

In an effort to bolster the idea that the punishment of the wicked in the afterlife will be annihilation, proponents of annihilationism frequently have focused on the biblical terms “consume” and “consuming.” Since the Bible does indeed say that “our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29), and since the words “consume” and “consuming” can, and sometimes do, refer to the annihilation of physical matter, then many annihilationists have asserted that God will annihilate the souls of wicked humans. Homer Hailey, in his posthumously published book, *God’s Judgements and Punishments*, has an entire chapter titled “Our God—A Consuming Fire.” In that chapter, he deals almost entirely with the Old Testament usage of the terms “consume” and “consuming.” Concerning these terms, he remarked:

The word needing a clear definition is “consume” or “consuming.” The English word is translated from so many Hebrew words, and the Hebrew words are translated by so many English words, that it is difficult to find a precise definition for “consume.” It is best therefore to learn its meaning from usage and examples (2003, p. 136).

Hailey then proceeded to the burning bush passage, in which Moses approached the bush that “burned with fire” but “was not consumed” (Exodus 3:2). Hailey concluded: “In this instance, ‘consumed’ meant ‘burned up’ ” (p. 136). He then cited an example of a burnt offering being “consumed” on the altar (Leviticus 9:23-24) as evidence to suggest that “consumed” means to burn up.

After listing these non-human subjects of consumption, Hailey listed several Old Testament examples in which sinful humans are said to have been “consumed”: “Let sinners be consumed out of the earth. And let the wicked be no more” (Psalm 104:35); “But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of Jehovah shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; in smoke shall they consume away” (Psalm 37:20). Hailey also listed the rebellion of Korah, where God told Moses and Aaron to get away from the rebels “that I may consume them in a moment” (Numbers 16:21). And later in the same context, God sent a plague among the people in which God made the same comment about consuming them as He did concerning the rebels in verse 21.

When it came time to summarize his chapter, Hailey placed two columns at the top of the final page, one titled “What is Said,” and the other titled “What is Not Said.” In the “What is Said” column, he listed Hebrews 12:29, Numbers 16 and Deuteronomy 4:24. Then he listed the “means of consuming,” and recorded the

Earth swallowing the rebels with Korah, the plague, and fire arriving from heaven. In the “What is Not Said” column, the entire text under the column is one line that reads: “That they all burn forever” (p. 139). He obviously was attempting to lead the reader to conclude that consume and consuming must mean annihilation.

Is it correct to understand that the biblical use of the words “consume” and “consuming” **must** entail that the souls of the wicked will be annihilated? Simply put, no. First, in order to conclude that the words imply annihilation, Hailey provided examples like the burning bush and the burning of an offering that do refer to the item being consumed—burned up completely. Conspicuously missing, however, are those examples in which the item that is consumed is **not** burned up completely. The Hebrew words translated “to consume” can mean any number of things, including: “to eat, devour, slay, to be wasted, to be destroyed, to feed, exterminate, to cause to cease, be accomplished, and exhaust, among others” (see “*Akal*,” 1999; “*Kalah*,” 1999). Are there examples in which the terms “consume” and “consuming” do **not** insinuate total incineration? Certainly. For instance, in Jeremiah 14, the Lord commented that He by no means would accept the idolatrous Israelites, and then stated: “But I will consume them by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence” (14:12). Would their being consumed necessitate that their bodies would be completely burned into nonexistence? The text answered that question when it stated that the bodies of those consumed would “be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword; they will have no one to bury them” (14:12). The consuming taking place in Jeremiah obviously did not entail a complete burning up, but instead a punishment of physical death in which the bodies of those who were consumed would still remain for some time to decay in the open streets.

Again, in Genesis 31:15, Rachel and Leah, in their discussion of their father’s behavior, commented: “Are we not considered strangers by him? For he has sold us, and also completely consumed our money.” Did they mean to say that their money had been burned and annihilated into nonexistence? No. Rather, it had been spent or wasted, and thus no longer was of use to them.

Genesis 31:40 serves as a final example of the various ways the word “consumed” can be used. In this text, Jacob describes the hardships he endured during his tenure with Laban.

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In that discussion, Jacob stated: “There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes.” Was Jacob completely burned up or annihilated during the day? Not in any sense. Interestingly, the same Hebrew word is used in Genesis 31:40 that is used in Deuteronomy 4:24—which was cited by Hailey, and from which his Hebrews 12:29 quote is taken. It is evident, then, that the words “consume” and “consuming” do not **necessarily** connote complete annihilation, but can, and often do, make reference to a state of waste and ruin, or, as in Jacob’s case, pain, suffering and hardship.

It also is interesting to note that, among the examples given by Hailey that supposedly imply the annihilation of those things (or people) which were consumed, are the individuals who were consumed in the rebellion of Korah in Numbers 16. Yet in the New Testament, Jude offered divinely inspired commentary on certain sinful individuals, stating: “Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah” (vs. 11). Jude further commented that these sinners were “raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever” (vs. 13). Therefore, these sinners had “perished

in the rebellion of Korah,” and yet their souls were not completely consumed or annihilated, but had a reservation in a place where there was “blackness of darkness **forever.**” From the New Testament commentary offered by Jude, it is evident that those consumed in the rebellion of Korah did not go out of existence altogether, but that their physical lives were ended and their souls awaited a punishment in darkness forever.

Once again, an appeal to incomplete word studies in an attempt to force the idea of annihilationism on the biblical text is speculative and unfounded, to say the least. The overwhelming evidence of Scripture explicitly states and implicitly teaches that the souls of the wicked will be punished in the fires of hell forever—without respite.

REFERENCES

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- Hailey, Homer (2003), *God’s Judgements & Punishments* (Las Vegas, NV: Nevada Publications).
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IN THE NEWS

On December 24, 2004, the spacecraft that has been orbiting Saturn—Cassini—deployed a gold, wok-shaped disc known as the Huygens probe. On January 14, 2005, that particular spacecraft was scheduled to descend to Saturn’s largest moon—Titan. The 705-pound science probe will be the first manmade object to descend to the surface of another planet’s moon. The cost for the Cassini-Huygens project was \$3.27 **billion** dollars. Why would we spend so much money to analyze a moon from a distant planet? In a single word—life. Many scientists have abandoned past research projects to focus on a new area, astrobiology. Astrobiology—a field that has mushroomed from obscurity to the front page of the local newspaper—is the study of life in the Universe.

Bear in mind that we’ve established an entire field of science, even though life has never been found outside of the Earth. Also recognize that the surface temperature of Titan is believed to be approximately **200° below zero**, which scientists acknowledge would be far too harsh to sustain life. (All life forms need liquid water, and this temperature would be too cold for that.) But speculations abound, and the push to find life “out there” continues.

Jeffrey L. Bada has provided some valuable insight as to why this search continues. Having reviewed a new book titled *The Living Uni-*

verse: NASA and the Development of Astrobiology, Bada observed:

Today, it seems nearly everyone is an astrobiologist. A decade ago, I knew essentially none. Why this sudden obsession with a field that encompasses so many diverse areas in both the physical and life sciences? So far, life has not been found to exist away from Earth, although the surge in interest in astrobiology suggests there is intense optimism within at least parts of the science community that this singularity will change in the future. But scientific curiosity alone likely cannot explain the explosive growth of astrobiology. After reading *The Living Universe: NASA and the Development of Astrobiology*, **I came to the conclusion that one of the field’s attractions was money—and lots of it** (2005, 307:46, emp. added).

A case in point? The Huygen’s probe. We often are asked why scientists continue pursuing research that is known to be false (e.g., evolution). Bada’s conclusion sums it up: “Money—and lots of it.”

REFERENCES

- Bada, Jeffrey L. (2005), “A Field With a Life of Its Own,” *Science*, 307:46, January 7.

Brad Harrub

