

ANNIHILATIONISM UNDER FIRE: THE SEMANTIC AND LOGICAL FALLACIES OF CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY

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Abstract: The doctrine of annihilationism, or conditional immortality, seems to be a growing trend among evangelicals. So, this paper seeks to investigate some of the major exegetical arguments that support this theological view. Responding to Edward Fudge’s book *Fire That Consumes*, acknowledged as containing the major arguments supporting conditional immortality, this paper evaluates three major contentions: (1) the meaning of “eternal punishment”; (2) the meaning of “immortality”; and (3) the meaning of “destruction” and “fire.” Fudge argues that deeper investigation of these terms in the biblical text supports conditional immortality. This paper evaluates the arguments based on interpretive principles of James Barr and D. A. Carson and finds that the analysis of the meanings of these terms commits critical semantic and logical fallacies. Thus, the basis for conditional immortality is without exegetical support in these three major arguments.

Keywords: annihilationism, conditional immortality, eternal torment, eternal punishment, eternal life, destruction

1. *Introduction*

The task of theology is burdened by biblical interpretation. In the preface of *Semantics of Biblical Languages*, James Barr remarks, “In recent years, I have come to believe that one of the greatest dangers to such sound and adequate interpretation comes from the prevailing use of procedures which, while claiming to rest upon a knowledge of the Israelite and Greek ways of thinking, constantly mishandle and distort the linguistic evidence of the Hebrew and

Greek languages as they are used in the Bible.”¹ The importance of procedures in biblical interpretation cannot be understated for the theological enterprise, not only in one’s use (or misuse) of the Hebrew and Greek text but in one’s methodology in interpreting the text and drawing theological conclusions.²

In light of this six-decade-old warning, my objective in this paper is to identify some of the major textual arguments that are used to support annihilationism, or conditional immortality, and explain how these arguments are based on some of the fallacies that Barr and others have noted. I am less interested in the philosophical and theological arguments in this paper but will focus on the arguments from the exegesis of biblical prooftexts, as I believe that theological conclusions should be derived from proper and responsible exegesis.³ While in recent decades a few prominent biblical scholars and theologians have embraced or sympathized with conditional immortality, including Richard Bauckham, R. T. France, John Stott, Clark Pinnock, and Anthony Thiselton, among others, the major exegetical arguments of conditional immortality are based on some critical semantic and logical fallacies. Particularly, I want to identify three major textual arguments used to support conditional immortality: (1) the semantics of “eternal punishment”; (2) the semantics of “immortality”; and (3) the semantics of “destruction” and “fire.” As a representative of the view, I will interact primarily with Edward Fudge, whose book *Fire That Consumes* is still acknowledged as the standard and most comprehensive book outlining this view.⁴

1. Barr, *Semantics*, iii.

2. Cf. Porter, ed., *James Barr Assessed*, a collection of essays which address some of the major committals of various Barrian fallacies.

3. Cf. Nel, “Rethinking Hell,” who argues from ethics and theology. He argues that either side is able to provide biblical prooftexts for their side (3). While prooftexts can be provided, deeper analysis into the arguments of the biblical texts is necessary, as I aim to show in this paper.

4. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*. For example, Richard Bauckham, in the foreword to Fudge’s book, writes that this book “has been the fullest and most thorough exposition and defense of the view that the fate of the unsaved will be final destruction, not (as in the tradition of doctrine of hell) eternal torment” (ix). John Wenham also writes that this book “sets out the case for conditional immortality in a thorough and systematic way” (xiii). An internet search (2025) is consistent with this view. Interestingly, Fudge was an attorney by trade in Houston

To be clear, conditional immortality is the view that hell is “a place of total, everlasting destruction.”⁵ It is a view that unbelievers who face the judgment and wrath of God experience suffering in hell. But a major difference between this view and a more traditional view of eternal conscious torment is that conditional immortality states that the suffering ends in the annihilation of soul and body, a discontinued existence, while believers and those saved from judgment receive immortality and eternal life. There is little to no debate on the fate of believers; the debate is regarding the fate of unbelievers. While in years past annihilationism was commonly seen to be something of a “theological compromise” or an emotional reaction to a difficult doctrine,⁶ many annihilationists, or conditionalists, claim and insist that their view is based on a careful and honest exegesis of the biblical text. For example, Fudge writes,

The more deeply one digs into the Scriptures for understanding regarding final punishment, the clearer it becomes why many godly pastors and teachers are taking out their Bibles and restudying matters that they formerly took for granted. For example, Scripture makes it clear that God will resurrect (or transform) the redeemed unto immortality and incorruption, but Scripture never hints that the wicked will be raised either immortal or incorruptible.⁷

The aim of this paper is not to judge whether or not these godly pastors and teachers are faithful to their understanding of Scripture but to evaluate the major arguments and identify the fallacies of the interpretations of various texts. D. A. Carson states, “A critical interpretation of Scripture is one that has adequate justification—lexical, grammatical, cultural, theological, historical, geographical, or other justification. In other words, critical exegesis in this

and had studied theology and philosophy in the 1960s before obtaining his JD and practicing law for a majority of his career with the Lanier Law Firm. Slightly more recent is Thiselton, “Claims about ‘Hell’ and Wrath,” which is a shorter reproduction of a section of his chapter in Thiselton, *Life after Death*, 145–65. Thiselton argues for conditional immortality based on the occurrences of words related to “destruction,” similar to the arguments made by Fudge (see below).

5. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, xxiii.

6. Mohler, “Modern Theology,” 16.

7. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 3.

sense is exegesis that provides sound reasons for the choices it makes and the positions it adopts.”⁸ I contend in this essay that the three main arguments listed above are inadequate in their justification of conditional immortality due to the semantic fallacies upon which they are based.

2. Semantics of “Eternal Punishment”

A major passage in the discussion regarding the nature of hell comes from the words of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel: “Then they will go away to *eternal punishment*, but the righteous to *eternal life*” (Matt 25:46 NIV [italics mine]; *καὶ ἀπελεύσονται οὗτοι εἰς κόλασιν αἰώνιον, οἱ δὲ δίκαιοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον*). This verse is located in what is commonly called the Olivet Discourse and, within the Olivet Discourse, in the Sheep and the Goats Judgment, where Jesus teaches that those who do not do the will of the Father, the goats, are cursed in eternal fire, while those who do the will of the Father, the sheep, inherit the kingdom. After describing the activity of the goats, who gave no food, clothing, hospitality, or visitation to the least of these, Jesus makes the well-known statement that goats will go away into eternal punishment. Traditionally, this term “eternal punishment” has been understood to refer to an experience of punishment that endures forever, without end, but conditionalists have proposed an alternative understanding.

Fudge poses the question: “Does *aionios* describe time in unending duration (‘everlasting’), some unknown quality of the age to come (‘eternal’), both of these, or neither of them? Do these translations represent its sense, or should we coin some new adjective such as ‘aionic’ or ‘aionian’?”⁹ Coining a new adjective such as these does nothing to solve the so-called problem and in fact obscures the issue further; one must still define the meaning of the term. But in essence, Fudge wants to ask whether the word “eternal” is qualitative or quantitative, both or neither. Traditionally, Fudge says, it has been understood in this passage to refer to quantity: eternal refers to ongoing time, and thus, “eternal punishment” refers to a punishment that continues without end. After a terse

8. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 16.

9. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 33–34.

diachronic study of the lexeme *αἰών* and its cognates (in which he only cites Moulton and Milligan's *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* from 1914¹⁰), Fudge concedes that the overwhelming use of *αἰών/αἰώνιος* in nonbiblical Greek is in a temporal sense. However, for a strange reason, he turns to Hebrew uses of the so-called equivalent word to "eternal" (עולם), and citing Emmanuel Petavel, states that the word "eternal" is used in the Old Testament to refer to things that come to an end (such as Passover, the Aaronic priesthood, and Solomon's temple).¹¹ He states, "In biblical interpretation, the important thing is not secular etymology so much as sacred usage,"¹² citing Carson and Moisés Silva.¹³ In this point alone, however, there is a committal of at least several fallacies.

First is in his treatment of the meaning of "eternal" as if the Greek, Hebrew, and English glosses all have the same meanings, that is, equivalent semantic ranges. While there is overlap among these words, they are not the same words, and each word in each language should be treated separately, in the same way that *δικαιοσύνη* and "justification" do not have the exact same meanings; their meanings are modulated according to context.¹⁴ The Hebrew word עולם may have the meaning that Petavel and Fudge contend for, but that does not mean *αἰών/αἰώνιος* has the same meaning and use. Second, assuming words in the Bible have distinct so-called sacred meanings apart from so-called secular usages is a faulty and false understanding of Koine Greek and Biblical Hebrew. Since the time of Deissmann, the notion of a "Holy Ghost Greek" has been effectively disestablished.¹⁵ Sure, meanings and uses of word are modulated in religious contexts, but this is different than dividing sacred-versus-secular meanings of words. Third, Fudge cites Carson and Silva erroneously: Carson

10. Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*.

11. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 35.

12. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 35.

13. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 28; Silva, *Biblical Words*, 35–36. But neither Carson nor Silva makes this assertion, especially on the pages that Fudge cites, as I note below.

14. See Yoon, *Discourse Analysis of Galatians*, 82–88, for a more detailed description of context especially in light of register.

15. Deissmann, *Bible Studies*; see also Barr, *Semantics*, 214–15, 239–41; Yoon, "Is There Register."

and Silva both discuss root and etymological fallacies in the cited pages, which are unrelated to Fudge's point about secular-versus-sacred usage of words in the Bible but only tangentially related to etymology. In short, the proper procedure to determine a word's meaning is to examine its usage in its context.¹⁶

Nils Arne Pedersen offers a similar critique of Ilaria Ramelli and David Konstan, who also argue for temporary punishment as taught by early Christian writers up to and including Origen.¹⁷ Ramelli argues that the word ἀποκαταστάσις (“restoration”; and its corresponding verb ἀποκαθίστημι “to restore”) in the early Christian literature refers to the notion of universal restoration. Ramelli and Konstan argue that the word αἰώνιος (“eternity”) refers not to a continual stretch of time but to the future αἰών (“the world to come”). Pedersen notes, “These arguments [of Ramelli and Konstan] contain a number of methodological errors: the meaning of words is not sought in the contexts in which they are used, and the possibility of stylistic variation is not taken into account.”¹⁸

Returning to Fudge's argumentation, he argues that both qualitative and quantitative meanings of “eternal” are found in the New Testament.¹⁹ In posing the question of whether “eternal” is qualitative or quantitative, Fudge makes the claim that “eternal,” at least in Matt 25:46, has a qualitative meaning to it, that it refers to the quality of punishment rather than quantity of punishment. The “quantitative meaning” of “eternal” would refer to some type of association with the life to come, or the αἰών. Fudge argues,

It suggests something that partakes of the transcendent realm of divine activity. It indicates a relationship to the kingdom of God, to the age to come, to the eschatological realities that in Jesus have begun already to manifest themselves in the present age. It reminds us that while the

16. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 140.

17. Pedersen, “Ilaria Ramelli's History”; cf. Ramelli, *Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*; and Ramelli and Konstan, *Terms for Eternity*. I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing these works out to me.

18. Pedersen, “Ilaria Ramelli's History,” 135.

19. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 34–35. This, however, is based on the word αἰών, which is discussed further below.

nouns it modifies may be familiar, they are somehow set apart from our present experiences.²⁰

But he also admits that this does not negate a quantitative meaning of the word synonymous with the word “everlasting.”

Here is the crux of Fudge’s argument regarding Matt 25:46:

Both the life and the punishment pertain to the age to come, and are therefore “eternal” in the qualitative sense. This book attempts to show that both the life and the punishment are also unending, and are therefore “eternal” in the quantitative sense. This “punishment” can encompass a broad spectrum of degrees of conscious suffering based on varying degrees of guilt, but the essence of this “punishment” is the total and everlasting dissolution and extinction of the person punished (Matt 10:28; 2 Thess 1:9).²¹

In other words, Fudge argues that the punishment does not continue forever, but the effect of the punishment lasts forever; the soul is killed or extinguished forever.

One major problem with this contention is that he commits what Barr calls “illegitimate totality transfer,” which is when all the potential meanings of a single word are loaded onto an instance or a series of instances of the word. In Barr’s words, “The error that arises, when the ‘meaning’ of a word (understood as the total series of relations in which it is used in the literature) is read into a particular case as its sense and implication there, may be called ‘illegitimate totality transfer.’”²² Although Fudge is not directly stating that every time *αἰώνιος* appears in the extant literature it means “something that partakes of the transcendent realm of divine activity, etc.,” he argues for both quantitative and qualitative meanings when referring to “eternal” punishment. This is probably because in his very brief lexical survey of the meaning of *αἰώνιος*, a quantitative meaning cannot be avoided.

But a more significant problem with Fudge’s interpretation of “eternal punishment” lies in the following notion: “eternal” has a qualitative reading for Fudge, but it is contingent upon the fact that it modifies a “noun of the class that names the result of an ac-

20. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 41.

21. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 39.

22. Barr, *Semantics*, 218.

tion.”²³ The notion of “punishment” being in a so-called class of “result nouns” is a crux of the argument here. A similar argument is made by Basil F. C. Atkinson.²⁴ He states,

When the adjective *aionios* meaning “everlasting” is used in Greek with nouns of *action* it has reference to the *result* of the action, not the process [but are there process nouns? See below]. Thus the phrase “everlasting redemption” is comparable to “everlasting salvation,” both Scriptural phrases. No one supposes that we are being redeemed or being saved forever [this is theologizing the Greek language]. We were redeemed and saved once and for all by Christ with eternal results. In the same way the lost will not be passing through a process of punishment forever but will be punished once and for all with eternal results. On the other hand, the noun “life” [is this English or Greek?] is not a noun of action, but a noun expressing a state. Thus the life itself is eternal.²⁵

To be sure, Louw and Nida in their lexicon admit that the most common usage of the word *αἰώνιος* is with *ζωή* (i.e., “eternal life”) and that there is in some sense reference to a quality of life in this construct. However, Fudge takes this qualitative reading further and writes, “Of the seventy usages of the adjective ‘eternal’ *aionios* in the New Testament, at least five times the adjective modifies a noun that names the result of an action.”²⁶ In a footnote for this statement, he writes,

These nouns that name the result of some action often are recognizable (in English as well as in Greek) from the form or morphology of the word itself. In Greek, “result” words often end with *-ria* (*soteria*), *-ma* (*krima*), or *-sis* (*lutrosis*). In English, “result” words commonly end with *-tion* (salvation, redemption), or with *-ment* (judgment, punishment, atonement). Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 152–53.²⁷

23. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 39.

24. Atkinson, “Doom of the Lost,” 100–102.

25. Atkinson, “Doom of the Lost,” 100; cf. my personal comments in brackets.

26. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 38.

27. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 38n32; 145.

There are at least two major errors regarding this statement and reference.

First, Fudge is incorrect in identifying a category of nouns that name the result of an action, at least for Greek. Not many Greek grammars identify such a category of nouns, especially based on its morphology.²⁸ Robertson does put “result” in parentheses after noting *-μα* nouns, but it seems to be more a passing thought than a robust description of noun classifications.²⁹ But I am not even sure that such a category reflects English grammar either, despite studies on such. Taking English as an example, the word “punishment” is simply defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as “the infliction or imposition of a penalty as retribution for an offence,” without any comment as to its inception, progress, or result. In fact, nouns by definition do not grammaticalize progress, result, or completion, or any type of process of action. Verbs and verbal phrases do. Nouns are simply an abstraction of verbal processes. Greek nouns are the same: nouns do not grammaticalize the progress, result, or completion of an action, even if these nouns are nominalizations of verbs or predicators. Rather, verbal aspect in Greek reflects how a process is depicted, and nouns do not grammaticalize verbal aspect (except for substantive participles, of course).³⁰ So, Fudge’s categorizing nouns that name the result of an action should be questioned, at least.

Second, Fudge is plainly inaccurate in his citation of Robertson. He cites Robertson to support the contention that the morphology of a noun determines its function as a so-called “result noun.” This is a fallacy of false attribution, or inaccurate citation, where the source of the citation does not state anything of relevance and may even state something contrary to the author’s point. The pages in Robertson that are cited are within a discussion regarding etymology, or the history and development of how words have been formed, particularly Greek words. The section has nothing to do with classifications of nouns and is irrelevant to

28. But see von Siebenthal, *Ancient Greek Grammar*, 665 (cf. 60), who refers to nouns ending in *-μα* being result nouns. I thank the anonymous reviewer who pointed this out to me.

29. Robertson, *Grammar*, 153.

30. E.g., Porter, *Idioms*, 20–49; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 499–504.

Fudge’s argument. In fact, abstract nouns (as Robertson, among other grammarians, calls them) ending in the various forms—such as *-μος*, *-σις*, and *-μα*—do not comment upon the result or progress of an action but simply depict an action as an abstraction, in nominal form. For example, take the following words: *πειράσμος*, *γνώσις*, or *βαπτίσμα*. Does it make sense to say that *πειράσμος* means “the result of being tempted,” *γνώσις* “the result of knowing,” or *βαπτίσμα* “the result of being baptized”? Or do these words simply abstract their verbal cognates into a nominal form? To note another example, the word *ἰλασμός* (usually translated “atonement” or “propitiation”) does not depict the progress or the result of atoning but simply refers to the abstract notion of atoning. Its progress, result, or other type of action is communicated by other means (such as use of its verbal cognate, *ἰλάσκομαι* and its aspectual form). The “result noun” contention simply does not work in these examples and many others. Nouns by nature, and nominal words, do not grammaticalize process, Aktionsart, or aspect.

Fudge contends, “This is a powerful argument that conditionalists have pressed with vigor,”³¹ referring to the argument regarding the meaning of “eternal punishment.” It is only powerful to those who impose the category of “result nouns” (in contrast to process nouns?) on both English and Greek and impose a meaning of *αἰών/αἰώνιος* using fallacious methods.³² The word “punishment” does not in and of itself comment upon the progress or result of punishing. It is simply a reference to the act in an abstract manner represented by a noun. Instead, the traditional understanding of the phrase *κόλασιν αἰώνιον* (“eternal punishment”), which is parallel to *ζωὴν αἰώνιον* (“eternal life”) in Matt 25:46, makes the best sense, that the punishment (not just its result) lasts forever just as life lasts forever.

31. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 39.

32. See Porter, “What Can We Learn.” In an interesting study of a Greek mosaic found at Antioch-on-the-Orontes, Porter notes that four terms are used to depict personifications of temporal conceptions: *αιων*, *μελλων*, *ενεστωσ*, and *παρωχημενος*, where *αιων*, in one interpretation, appears to be depicted as unbounded time (i.e., gnomic) and the three others as bounded time (i.e., future, past, and present)—although the mosaic itself is challenging to interpret in light of the ancient Greek grammarians.

3. *Semantics of “Immortality”*

In the traditional view, it is believed that all souls exist forever in the afterlife, either in heaven or in hell. This typically has been called the “immortality of the soul,” whereby God does not destroy souls in hell but allows them to exist forever, undergoing their due punishment. The Westminster Confession of Faith aptly reflects the traditional view: “After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and *immortal souls*” (4.2 [italics mine]). Conditionalists have questioned this notion, based on the meaning of “immortality” as presumably used in Scripture. This is another major argument of conditional immortality, as Fudge writes: “We will discover that the doctrine of immortal souls was the womb from which the traditional Christian teaching of unending conscious torment was born.”³³ As an alternative, conditionalists believe that only believers will be granted immortality and that unbelieving souls will be granted mortality, eternally extinguished after receiving their punishment in hell. In other words, unbelieving souls will not continue to exist forever but will cease to exist after receiving and experiencing their execution for a time.³⁴ One would expect a discussion, then, on the meaning of the word “immortality.” However, there is no discussion on its meaning and support of conditional immortality. Thus, the following is a brief discussion on the meaning of immortality in the New Testament.

There are two Greek words that can be represented by the English word “immortality”: *ἀθανασία* and *ἀφθαρσία*. Both words are found in the same semantic domain in Louw and Nida’s lexicon (Live, Die; 23.126 and 23.127 respectively), and both contain the alpha-privative to depict negation of the root word. *ἀθανασία* is given this definition: “the state of not being subject to death (that which will never die); immortality” and *ἀφθαρσία*, this: “the state of not being subject to decay, leading to death; immortal, immortality.” Valid glosses for both could also be “without death” for *ἀθανασία* and “without decay” for *ἀφθαρσία*.

33. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 19.

34. Interestingly, Fudge does not have a positive statement in his chapter on immortality explaining the precise conditionalist view, but simply that the traditionalist view is wrong (Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 19–32).

There is no passage in Scripture that directly states that the human soul is *ἀθανασία* or *ἀφθαρσία*. However, the English word “immortal” may have different senses or meanings that the Greek words may not have. In the OED, there are two definitions given for “immortality,” one similar to Louw and Nida and the other dissimilar: “the ability to live forever; eternal life” and “the quality of deserving to be remembered for a long time; timelessness” (e.g., “this book has achieved immortality”). This second definition of “immortality” does not fit either *ἀθανασία* or *ἀφθαρσία*. But the main point of identifying the OED definition of “immortality” is simply to illustrate that the word “immortality” in English does not have the same semantic range and meanings as *ἀθανασία* and *ἀφθαρσία* do. First Timothy 6:16 states that *God alone possesses immortality (ἀθανασία)*, but both conditionalists and traditionalists agree that believers are granted immortality (*ἀθανασία*) as well (cf. 1 Cor 15:53–54). So, is God alone immortal or can believers be immortal, too? It depends on how “immortality” is defined in each context.

If we turn the discussion to unbelievers, when the Westminster Confession states that all humans are created as immortal souls, we should not interpret this to mean that all humans will attain immortality in the same way that God has immortality. The traditional understanding of the soul is that it does not cease to exist in hell after a time but that it continues in existence forever, suffering the penalty of sin. Immortality in this sense—continued existence; nothing more, nothing less—is how I believe the statement in the Westminster Confession was intended. This is not the same sense of immortality as applied to believers, and especially God, but it is the meaning of immortal in the sense of everlasting existence without extinction. The meaning of “immortal” when applied to God is different from the meaning of “immortal” when applied to unbelievers in hell. It is possible for the same word to have variations in meaning, just like the word “cold” can refer to the temperature or to a particular type of personality someone has, so that a thing can be cold in one way but not cold in the other way. So, is the thing cold or not? It depends. Thus, Fudge’s argument for conditional immortality, then, seems to be based on a simplistic, English understanding of “immortality” rather than on any exegetical argument.

The different senses of a word, determined by its usage in specific contexts, is what Fudge seems to miss when discussing the meaning of the immortality of the soul. A word itself has meaning potential, but its meaning is constrained by the context in which it is used. Fudge's determination of the meaning of "immortality" reflects what Carson calls "unwarranted restriction of the semantic field."³⁵ He writes, "We sometimes fail to appreciate how wide the total semantic range of a word is; therefore when we come to perform the exegesis of a particular passage, we do not adequately consider the potential options and unwittingly exclude possibilities that might include the correct one."³⁶ Fudge does not seem to appreciate the wide semantic range that even the English word "immortality" has, let alone interaction with the Greek words, and misses that meanings of words lie in their use in context. Barr states, "But as a whole the distinctiveness of biblical thought and language has to be settled at sentence level, that is, by the things the writers say, and not by the words they say them with."³⁷ While there is no explicit statement that the soul is immortal (i.e., *ἀθανασία* or *ἀφθαρσία*) in the Bible, the argument that immortality in the sense of eternal existence is given only to believers is without linguistic warrant.

4. *Semantics of "Destruction" and "Fire"*

Another argument to support conditional immortality is regarding the semantics of "destruction" and "fire." Fudge states, "If we really wish to ascertain the purpose of fire as God's agent of punishment, we must examine Scripture passages directly on point. When we do that, we will learn that the fire of the final judgment is intended to *burn up* (Matt 3:12), and to *destroy both soul and body* (Matt 10:28)."³⁸ Fudge contends that we should take the language of destruction and fire *literally*, as in the two verses to which he refers. Matthew 3:12 (NIV) states, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his

35. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 57–60.

36. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 57.

37. Barr, *Semantics*, 270.

38. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 154.

wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” Matthew 10:28 (NIV) states, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” However, there is no literal winnowing fork; it is a symbol for separating believers from unbelievers. There is no literal wheat; it is a symbol for believers. And there is no literal chaff; it is a symbol for unbelievers. Chaff indeed burns easily and quickly. However, the purpose of an analogy is not to equate every aspect of the analogy to its analog but to make a point; here the point is that Jesus will separate believers from unbelievers. Wheat is desirable for a farmer; chaff is not; hence these images are used. Furthermore, to make the point even more poignant, in Matt 10:28, Jesus does not say he *will* destroy (ἀπόλλυμι) both soul and body in hell but says that he *can* (δυναμένον . . . ἀπολέσαι) although this also involves what “destroy” specifically means. In English, I can say, “I got destroyed in that game,” without referring to the fact that I ceased to exist. However, the meaning of ἀπόλλυμι should be investigated as a separate word from the English “destroy.”

Fudge’s argument here may be what Carson calls a “failure to recognize distinctions.”³⁹ He states that this is “the fallacy that argues that because *x* and *y* are alike in certain respects they are alike in all respects,”⁴⁰ using as an example Gal 3:28, where the statement “There is no male nor female” can falsely infer that there are no differences between men and women; gender is eradicated. He states, “Even if someone ultimately decides that those passages do not mean what they seem to mean, it is methodologically illicit to decide in advance that because male and female are alike in certain respects they are therefore alike in all respects.”⁴¹ This is akin to misunderstanding the purpose of analogies: They are meant to illustrate a point, not to supply a one-to-one correlation between all parts of the analogy. When Fudge takes too literally that the burning of chaff is what unbelievers experience in hell, he takes the

39. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 92–93.

40. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 92.

41. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 92–93.

analogy further than what was meant.⁴² Fudge's interpretation of destruction and fire language requires an unwarranted restriction of the semantic field and failure to recognize distinctions in the analogy of destruction and fire. The point of Matt 3:12 is not that unbelievers are like chaff which burns easily and will fail to exist after a period of burning but that they are like chaff in a particular way, unwanted and useless and to be separated from the useful wheat. The point of Matt 10:28 is not that God *destroys to extinction* the soul and body but that he is all-powerful and authoritative.

Thiselton also seems to share Fudge's view of the meaning of destruction, referring to a process of extinction of the object where the object at some point will no longer exist; however, he does not outright define what he thinks destruction means.⁴³ He states, "But many argue, as Powys does, that this loss denotes not everlasting punishment, but sheer destruction. We shall consider shortly whether destruction must be instant, but it certainly is not everlasting."⁴⁴ He does not return to consider this, at least directly. He also writes, "But here [Rom 9:22] there appears to be no hint of eternal torment, only of destruction."⁴⁵ The assumption seems to be that eternal torment is incompatible with destruction, and that they are mutually exclusive of one another. Then, regarding 2 Thess 1:8–9, which refers to those not knowing God as being "punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord" (NIV), Thiselton writes, "But 'eternal destruction' (Greek, *olethron aiōnion*) still means 'destruction,' even if 'eternal' refers to its quality."⁴⁶ But the question is, what does "destruction" mean, especially in the contexts of these verses above? To state that "eternal destruction still means destruction" is begging the question, not putting forth any assertions.

There are several Greek words that are glossed as "destroy" in the New Testament (in no particular order): ἀπόλλυμι, ἀφανίζω, καταλύω, ἀναλίσκω, λυμαίνω/λυμαίνομαι, φθείρω, καταργέω,

42. This could also be identified as "problems in distinguishing the figurative and the literal" (Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 141).

43. Thiselton, *Life after Death*, 153–55.

44. Thiselton, *Life after Death*, 153.

45. Thiselton, *Life after Death*, 153.

46. Thiselton, *Life after Death*, 154. But see the discussion above on the meaning of "eternal."

πορθέω, ἀνατρέπω, διαφθείρω, and the well-known λύω. Words glossed as “destruction” in the New Testament include (in no particular order): ἀπώλεια, ῥῆγμα, φθορά, and ὄλεθρος, with ἀπώλεια occurring most frequently. While this may not be the place to analyze each lexeme’s semantic range, it shows that there may be different nuances and usages of each of these Greek words and that the English gloss “destroy” can also have varying nuances and usages, based on context. One interesting use of ἀπόλλυμι is found in Rom 14:15, which states: “Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died” (NIV; μὴ τῷ βρώματί σου ἐκεῖνον ἀπόλλυε ὑπὲρ οὗ Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν). Does this verse refer to causing a brother to cease existing by eating idol worship food, or does it refer to some sort of ruining your brother or causing him to stumble? Another interesting use of “destroy”/“destruction” words is in 1 Tim 6:9, which states, “Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” (NIV; οἱ δὲ βουλόμενοι πλουτεῖν ἐμπίπτουσιν εἰς πειρασμὸν καὶ παγίδα καὶ ἐπιθυμίας πολλὰς ἀνοήτους καὶ βλαβεράς, αἵτινες βυθίζουσιν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους εἰς ὄλεθρον καὶ ἀπώλειαν). Is Paul teaching Timothy here that those who are greedy for wealth will end up in total extinction and annihilation, or is he teaching that greed results in some sort of ruin and collapse? In the next verse, Paul does state that the love of money is the root of all evil and that *some* (τινες) have wandered away from the faith because of it—but not all. It does not appear that this context is one in which Paul is teaching on hell or eternal punishment but proper Christian living. A final interesting use of a destruction word ἀπώλεια is in Matt 26:8, in which the disciples question Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet with perfume by stating, “Why this waste?” (εἰς τί ἡ ἀπώλεια αὕτη;). The meaning of ἀπώλεια here is probably not about the annihilation of the perfume, although its smell gradually does fade, but about it being a “waste” (most English translations have “waste” here). Thus, it is fallacious to interpret words for destroy or destruction as necessarily referring to the annihilation or extinction of the object being described as such. Its meaning must be determined by its context.

5. Conclusion

There are other shortcomings in *The Fire That Consumes*. Aside from the fallacies mentioned already,⁴⁷ there is the never-ending citing of verses after statements, as if reference to these verses proves the statements.⁴⁸ Fudge also commits the fallacy of appeal to emotions in his introduction and first couple of chapters.⁴⁹ In addition, in the first pages of the book, he refers to Albert H. Mohler when it should be R. Albert Mohler Jr. (I realize this comment may be seen as petty, but it reflects a general lack of scholarly precision, even in editorial factors—Mohler’s name is well known.)⁵⁰ But the presence of these errors (despite having gone through three editions) does not automatically disqualify conditional immortality as legitimate. That would be a fallacious conclusion. What makes conditional immortality invalid is its basis in the arguments presented above that result from critical semantic and logical fallacies. Interestingly, Barr writes,

Firstly, where linguistic evidence has been used in aid of a theological argument, and where I believe that evidence to have been misused, I do not necessarily believe the conclusion of the theological argument to be itself wrong in particular. Quite often I think that theological arguments which I have examined would have been better and more convincing without the linguistic evidence which has been used in their support. But while in some such cases I do not hold the particular point argued to have been disproved because of bad use of evidence, I com-

47. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 116–17.

48. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 122–23; Carson calls this “simplistic appeals to authority.” See, e.g., Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, chs. 3–4. One example of the meaningless citation of verses is, “Where John talks of ‘eternal life,’ the other Gospels generally speak of the ‘kingdom,’ though these expressions are used interchangeably in the Synoptics (Matt 19:16–17, 23; Mark 9:45, 47) and in John (John 3:3, 5, 15, 16). To inherit the kingdom is to enter into eternal life (Matt 25:34, 46)” (*Fire That Consumes*, 36). However, there are some major assumptions being made about synonymity and Synoptic parallels that warrant skepticism of this claim. It is not as simple as tagging Bible verses that overlap in wording to prove one’s point. Furthermore, Fudge commits the word-concept fallacy that Barr identifies in *Semantics*.

49. Cf. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 106–8.

50. Fudge, *Fire That Consumes*, 2. I note that this is a third edition of the book, published in 2011, and the mistake was never corrected.

monly do think that such misuse of evidence argues a wrong understanding of biblical interpretation in general, and almost certainly implies a seriously faulty theological method.⁵¹

In line with Barr's thinking here, perhaps conditional immortality can make a stronger case for itself by not using linguistic or exegetical arguments, such as those identified here, but simply employing theological or philosophical ones—although as I began this essay, theology (and Christian philosophy) is dependent upon legitimate and proper biblical interpretation. Carson also remarks, “The heart of the issue is that semantics, meaning, is more than the meaning of words. It involves phrases, sentences, discourse, genre, style; it demands a feel for not only syntagmatic word studies (those that relate words to other words) but also paradigmatic word studies (those that ponder why *this* word is used instead of *that* word).”⁵²

On a personal note, from my own perspective, I cannot deny that conditional immortality is an extremely attractive viewpoint. As I think of loved ones who have seemingly not repented and acknowledged Jesus as Savior and Lord, who will experience judgment and condemnation, I would *feel better* to think that they will not suffer forever but only for a period of time and then be extinguished and cease from existence. The thought of experiencing eternal conscious torment is unfathomable for my human mind. However, I realize that my theology should not be based on my feelings but on responsible biblical interpretation and procedures. This is why—as Barr has identified and others have noted, despite continual violations of his principles—there is a need for understanding proper linguistics, linguistic methodology, semantic fallacies, lexical fallacies, logical fallacies, and such. However, in the case of conditional immortality, since the major arguments identified above are faulty and fallacious, I conclude that it is a theological viewpoint which lacks sufficient biblical support. The defense attorney's arguments unfortunately do not support his case here.

51. Barr, *Semantics*, 6.

52. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 64.

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