

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND SIN'S PENALTY

A voice from the past (Part Two)

By Henry Constable

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A graduate of Ireland's University of Dublin, Henry Constable (1816–1891) was an able Bible scholar. After his ordination to the Anglican priesthood in 1850, he served at Kilgarriffe, Cork, Desertmore and later London. The contents of this article are abridged with some stylistic changes from his classic book, *The Duration and nature of Future Punishment*, first published in 1868. You'll enjoy this voice from the past, regardless of his affiliation with the Anglican church. He speaks strictly from what the Scriptures have to say about the nature of human life as God made it in His image, which most traditionalists reject because of the teachings of Plato. He would be turning over in his grave if he knew what the church he belonged to turned into. He would not agree with Anglicans' beliefs, for he came to the Conditionalist stand on salvation.

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Chapter Four:

In the Old Testament, loss of life as sin's penalty is not merely implied; it is distinctly stated to be the punishment for sin (Ezek. 3:18, 13:22). We have only to inquire what is meant in the Old Testament by "life."

"LIFE" IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Life is common language means "existence." A man is said to be yet alive, though his moral condition may be of the most degraded character, though his happiness is utterly gone. This sense however would not suit the Augustinian. He has recourse to some secondary sense; and, because life is frequently associated with its proper action and happiness, he assumes these to be its sense when spoken of in Scripture.

"Life," says Professor Bartlett, "signifies true functional action, welfare, prosperity, happiness and the like."¹ Now while we are perfectly satisfied that life, *as given by God and unaltered from the state in which he gave it*, is always associated with true functional action and happiness, and so in such a state may from invariable association come to be synonymous with them, we yet see that they are really two distinct and different things, from the fact that they may be and are frequently disassociated.

If life were identical with true functional action and happiness, then, where these have ceased to exist, there life too would cease to exist. But this is not in conformity with the language of the Old Testament. There the utterly wicked are said to be possessed of life, which they value, and would fain perpetuate forever; and the wretched to be possessed of life so unutterably wretched that they long for its departure (Ezek. 3:18; 13:22; Job 3:20). Life, then, and life's happiness, are distinct things.

While the creature keeps the condition in which he was created they are, from the Creator's loving nature, inseparable; when he abandons it, they are seen to be distinct. The life which the wicked man has, and which false teachers promise him that he will continue to have in the future age, that life God tells him he will be deprived of in that

solemn time when He will “bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Eccl. 12:14).

OTHER HEBREW WORDS FOR PUNISHMENT

But it is not only through the terms “life” and “death” that the Old Testament describes the punishment of the ungodly. By every expression in the Hebrew language significant loss of life, loss of existence, the resolution of organized substance into its original parts, its reduction to that condition in which it is as though it had never been called into being – by every such expression does the Old Testament describe the end of the ungodly.

“The *destruction* of the transgressors and of sinners shall be together; prepare them for the day of *slaughter*,” “the *slain* of the Lord shall be many;” “they shall go forth and look on the *carcasses* of the men that have sinned;” “God shall *destroy* them;” “they shall be *cut off*,” “they shall be *rooted out of the land of the living*,” “*blotted out* of the Book of Life;” “they *are not*” (Isa. 1:28, 46:16, 24; Jer. 12:3; Psa. 28:5, 37:20, 73:27, 52:5, 69:28; Job 27:19).

The Hebrew scholar will see from the above passages that there is no phrase of the Hebrew language significant of all destruction, short of that philosophical annihilation of elements which we never teach, that is not used to denote the end of the ungodly. The English reader need only turn to his English dictionary to see that the *primary sense of all the above terms is significant of the loss of existence*. At a subsequent place we will show that the primary sense of words in the *only* sense that is allowable where a lawgiver is laying down for the guidance of men his penalty for transgression.

For the sake of greater plainness we will present instances of the meaning of some of these phrases in things that relate to the present life. We are thus enabled to see clearly their exact force.

There are several Hebrew words applied to future punishment translated by the word “perish.” *Abad* is one of the most common of these. When Heshbon was utterly cut off by the sword of Israel: when a sentence of extermination was pronounced against the house of Ahab: when the memory of the wicked has departed from the earth: when Esther apprehends her death at the hands of Ahasuerus: it is this word which is used: they have, or will, or may perish (Num. 21:30, II Kings 9:8, Job 18:17, Esther 4:16). *Haras* is another term in frequent use for future punishment. What is its meaning in common life? When the altar of Baal was thrown down, stone after stone: when the strongholds of Zion were leveled to the ground: when a wall is broken down so that its foundation are discovered: this is the term used (Judges 6:25; Lam. 2:2; Ezek. 12:14).

Again, God will *destroy* the ungodly. One Hebrew word for this is *Tsamath*. It is used in the sense of utterly cutting off and destroying from a place (Psa. 69:4, 101:5, 8). Another Hebrew word is *Shamad*; it is significant of utter extinction. When a woman of the tribe of Benjamin had been slain: when the nations of Canaan disappeared before the sword of Israel: when Moab ceased to be a nation: this is the word used for their destruction (Judges 21:16; Deut. 12:30; Jer. 48:42).

Further, the wicked will be “cut off.” The Hebrew word is *Karath*, in Niphal. What is its use in common life? When truth has become extinct from a sin-loving people: when weapons of war are broken in pieces: when life at the period of the flood perished

from off the earth: when the life of an offender against the law of Moses was ten: this is the word used: “they are *cut off*” (Jer. 7:28; Zech. 9:10; Gen. 9:11; Ex.. 20:33).

By another word, *Nathats*, God threatens future destruction. In matter of this life, it indicates destruction of an utter kind. When the infected house of the leper was cast down and dismantled: when the images of Baal were broken in pieces: when the stones of the altar of the Sun were ground into powder: this is the word used for the process of destruction (Lev. 14:45; II Kings 11:18, 32:12).

We need go no farther at the present time in order to ascertain the clear, distinct, oft-repeated testimony of the Old Testament. By every unambiguous term, it has pointed out the punishment of the wicked as consisting, not in life, but in the loss of life; not in their continuance in that organized form which constitutes man, but in its dissolution; its resolution into its original parts, its becoming as though it had never been called into existence. While the redeemed are to know a life which knows no end, the lost are to be reduced to a death which knows of no awakening for ever and ever. Such is the testimony of God in the Old testament.

If Christian divines refuse to accept it because Plato, and before him Egyptian priests, taught a doctrine of the soul’s essential immortality, let them see to it. We prefer the word of God to the logic of Plato and of Egypt.

THE TERM ANNIHILATION

Our readers may perhaps have remarked that we have avoided hitherto the use of a very well-known term in this question, viz., “annihilation;” and have, in our only reference to it, disclaimed it in one of its senses. If they have an acquaintance with the controversy as conducted by our opponents, both in the schools of Origin and Augustine, they will also have known that this is the term by which our theory is almost invariably described by them. They are never tired of repeating this long Latin word, it is never out of their mouths.

If we may judge by their pertinacious use of it, it seems absolutely essential to their cause; and, indeed, their ablest men have confessed that its use by them is absolutely essential.² If they were to cease for a moment calling our theory one of “annihilation,” and describing us as “annihilationists,” they see to feel that it would be all over with them and their cause. The terms are long ones; Latin ones, and therefore not so grateful to the Saxon ear; somewhat obscure, and therefore distasteful to those who would prefer clearness of expression. But still, use them they must, and use them they do, until at any rate the sound of the term in their sense, is very well-known. We must then say a few words about this term “annihilation,” ere we hand it back to our opponents and return to the good old words of our English version of the Bible.

We have not the smallest objection to the word “annihilate,” *if* it is used in *one of its senses*. The greatest authority in the English language, Webster, tells us in his Dictionary that “to annihilate” means “to destroy,” and “to destroy” means to “annihilate.” Our theory is therefore one of “annihilation” because it is one of destruction.

But the word also has a *philosophical sense*, and in this sense means *reducing those parts of which organized bodies are composed to nothing*. In this sense philosophy concurs with the saying of Bacon – “*It is impossible for any body to be utterly annihilated.*” And now we may see why and wherefore our opponents persist in calling

our theory one of “annihilation;” and why we prefer calling it by the scriptural phrase of “destruction.”

Paraded before the un-enquiring mind as a theory of “annihilation,” while that mind is at the same time carefully taught that all philosophy denies that there can possibly be such a thing as “annihilation,” we are represented as maintaining a system at variance with the maxims of human knowledge. Whether such a mode of conducting a great controversy is ingenious, or candid, or commonly honest, we must leave our readers to decide. For our part we do not think it is. For we do not hold, any more than our opponents, that annihilation of parts which philosophy denies. We challenge them to produce one word of ours, or any advocate on our side, which affirms it.

We not take our leave of this matter with one parting remark. When our opponents charge us with holding a theory of annihilation in that sense of the word which philosophy denies, they bring against us a false accusation. When they charge is with holding a theory of annihilation in its well-established sense of destruction, they only charge us with holding a theory which Scripture from beginning to end maintains. For *the destruction of the wicked is the testimony of the Word of God.*

NOTES:

1. Barlett, *Life and Death*, page 41; Grant, *Religious Tendencies*, Vol. 2, page 141.
2. Bartlet, *Life and Death*, Preface.

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More from this classical book, if time allows, will be posted in the future. Editor.