

Case for Annihilationism

My case for Annihilationism begins, quite appropriately, in the Creation and Fall narratives of Genesis 1-3. This story is fundamental to the understanding of Scripture as a whole and provides a template for many recurring themes and stories throughout both the OT and the NT; one of these themes that I will focus on particularly is the pattern of rebellion and exile.

The Bible begins with the story of Yahweh creating the world from a “formless and void” (common translation from the hebrew “tohu vavohu), or, as Tim Mackie often translates it, “wild and waste” state¹. **Key point A: *The overall concept behind the six creative acts in Genesis 1 is that Yahweh is bringing order and life into a chaotic and disordered void.*** This is evident in the way his creative acts are described: the darkness and light are separated and named, then the waters are separated into those above the sky dome and those in the deep oceans², and then the lower waters are again separated from the land, and the land sprouts vegetation. The next three days’ creative acts parallel these three acts of separation, bringing life into each of the realms to govern them - first the host of heaven³ to govern the light and darkness, then the birds and fish to govern the skies and the lower waters, and then the creatures of the land to govern it. The culmination of the sixth day of creation are the humans, created male and female in the Image of God. (Genesis 1:27).

Key point B: *Yahweh’s creation and the order and life present within it are constantly sustained by Him.* Throughout the Bible, Yahweh is not only portrayed as the creator of the universe, but the sustainer of the created order and life. See, for example, how the ideas of creating and sustaining creation are linked in Hebrews 1:16-17: “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Similarly, Psalm 104 is a beautiful poem about Creation that alternates between descriptions of Yahweh’s initial creative acts from Genesis and his sustaining hand in every minute aspect of creation, from causing plants to grow to feeding the creatures of the earth. Verse 30 of the Psalm states: “When you send your Spirit they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.”

This idea is, in fact, present back in Genesis 1-2, though in a subtler form than these later, more explicit passages. Genesis 1:2 describes how “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters,” implying its participation in the creative works that came afterwards. However, the most explicit description of the Spirit’s work in creation comes in Genesis 2:7, with the creation of the Human, Adam: “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being”. Humans are, by

¹ See, for example, <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/science-faith/>

² Ancient cosmological conception of the universe in which the sky is a dome, above which are waters. See <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/series/ancient-cosmology/>

³ The heavenly lights were perceived as divine/spiritual beings in the ancient cosmology, perhaps best understood as angels in the Christian understanding. See <https://bibleproject.com/explore/category/spiritual-beings-series/>

the biblical account, creatures of dirt and Spirit - the low elements of the earth, yet animated with the breath of the Divine. There are many later instances of the Spirit manifested as wind in the OT and NT, such as Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 20:22 and Acts 2:1-4.

The concept of the Spirit as the Breath of God is actually very deeply rooted in the languages of the Bible. The Hebrew word for Spirit or the Holy Spirit, “ruakh,” also means “wind” or “breath”, and the Greek word for Spirit, “pneuma”, from which we derive many wind-related words, has the same connotations⁴. The Biblical imagination of the Spirit’s sustaining force in creation is actually very beautiful when you consider it - the very air we breathe in and out every second to stay alive is the Breath of God, the life from the Divine within us, animating us.

Now, at this point, you may be wondering what all this has to do with Annihilationism. The reason I have spent so long describing the creating and sustaining force of Yahweh through his Spirit is because I believe this provides us with a Biblical understanding of human mortality and immortality. The understanding that seems most naturally derived from key points A and B combined with Genesis 3 is Conditional Immortality (CI). **Key point C: Humans are naturally mortal, possessing Conditional Immortality on the basis of whether or not they possess Yahweh’s sustaining life force within them. All life is dependent on being in communion with God, and hence any form of immortality is contingent on being within His presence.**

To understand this best, we should look at Genesis 3, the story of the Fall, keeping in mind everything previously discussed about Genesis 1 and 2. In Genesis 2:17, Yahweh gives the human the first command in the bible, “you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” Previously, in 2:9 we learned that this tree was placed in the middle of the garden, right next to the tree of life, presenting somewhat of a test for humans - trust the sustaining source of life provided by God, or seek to gain wisdom on their own terms in violation of the commandment he gave them?

We all know how the story goes in Genesis 3. The snake deceives the woman, telling her that it will not make her die as God said it would. She and the man choose to eat the fruit of the tree they were forbidden to take from, and as a result they end up being exiled from the Garden. God issues two curses as he addresses the man and woman after they sin, one upon the snake and one upon the ground.

At the end of the second curse, in verse 19, He speaks the famous line: “until you return to the ground, for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to the dust you will return.” Consider this statement in light of Genesis 2:7, which I discussed earlier. Adam, the human, was created as a creature of dust and Spirit, and when the animating Spirit is removed from him, he becomes dust - dead, devoid of life. Without Yahweh’s life sustaining humanity, we are nothing but dirt in the Biblical imagination. While Adam and Eve do live for some time after being banished/exiled from the garden, they eventually die, as warned by God - the natural consequence of losing the Conditional Immortality they had in the Garden where they were close to the presence of God. If you read through the genealogies throughout Genesis, a clear pattern of life spans getting shorter and shorter, from averaging around a millennium in early Genesis to a few decades over 100 years by the time of Abraham.

This pattern is repeated in Genesis 6, except on a more cosmic scale. In Genesis 6:3 Yahweh declares, “My Spirit will not remain with [or contend with] humans forever, for they are

⁴ See <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/holy-spirit/>. I also strongly recommend their podcast series on the topic - very fascinating and informative.

corrupt [or mortal]¹; their days will be a hundred and twenty years.” While this passage has sometimes been understood as limiting the lifespan of humans to 120 years, this doesn’t actually accord with the length of many significant biblical characters’ lives after Genesis 6; a more logical interpretation of the verse that I first heard from Tim Mackie is that this is a countdown to the flood. In other words, God’s sustaining presence in Creation will remain for 120 years until the flood, when Creation collapses back into chaos and disorder for a fresh start.

This interpretation also works well with the portrayal of the Flood as a de-creation event. As the waters above the sky (in the ancient cosmological understanding) are released and the waters on the earth below flood over the land (Gen. 7:11), the order and separation of the 2nd and 3rd days of creation are undone. It’s like a reversal of the created order, a descent back into the “tohu vavohu” of the pre-creation state. Just as Yahweh removed his Spirit from humanity, resulting in their mortality, the removal of His Spirit from Creation results in its collapse. And, through the collapse of creation into the pre-creation state, there is a righteous remnant that passes through the waters and emerges into the new creation on the other side. The flood recedes, and Yahweh begins again, a fresh start.

This pattern of de-creation and the remnant is repeated constantly throughout the Old and New Testaments. One of the next major instances in the book of Genesis is the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah in chapter 19. Genesis 19:25 introduces a new type of flood-like judgment - raining burning sulfur upon the cities and completely destroying them. While the first major judgment in Genesis 6 came through a flood of water that rained down from the sky, the second here in Genesis 19 comes through the raining down of fire⁵.

As the biblical story continues, these two parallel images of judgment will be used as a template for other judgments enacted by Yahweh. One major example of this would be the Exodus story, which repeats the motif of passing through the waters. The Israelites walk through the midst of the Red Sea and the armies of Pharaoh perish (see footnote 5). The city of Jericho is burned (Joshua 6:24) but Rahab passes through the judgment unscathed because of her righteous actions. In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar tries to create his own fiery judgment but God delivers Daniel and his friends through the fire because of their righteousness. Through the many repetitions of these theme, they eventually become images used in the prophets to describe the Day of the Lord

.The Day of the Lord is a phrase used throughout the OT to describe two seemingly different but highly interconnected concepts: 1) the collapse and judgment of one oppressive empire and 2) the final judgment and collapse of all oppressive empires, popularly known as the End Times⁶. Isaiah, Revelation, and almost all of the prophets contain passages referring to the Day of the Lord; while these do often refer to a specific, “little d” day of the Lord, they also

⁵ For those dubious about the fire-water flood connection here, there’s additional scriptural evidence to support this parallel in the way the NT riffs on the themes of the OT. If one studies baptism within the Bible, it becomes evident that it is patterned after the stories of the Flood and the Exodus, both of which involve passing through the waters in some sort of test, which separates the righteous from the wicked. In the Flood, Noah is the righteous remnant while the rest of humanity perishes, and in the Exodus, the Israelites pass through as the remnant while the armies of Pharaoh are destroyed by the waters. However, Deuteronomy 4:20 poetically reflects on the watery Exodus judgment as a “blazing furnace”. Similarly, there is a parallel baptism “of fire and the Spirit” (Luke 3:16) to the baptism of water. The concept of baptism itself follows the motif of a remnant passing through judgment/death into new creation from both the water and fire floods.

⁶ See <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/day-of-the-lord/>.

generally provide commentary/insight on the “big D” final Day of the Lord. Revelation, for example, refers to the downfall of Rome in many instances but is also accepted as a source of wisdom regarding the final Day of the Lord, which it obviously is also commenting on if you read, for example, chapters 19-22.

As such, these apocalyptic passages in Revelation and the Prophets provide us excellent insight on the fate of those who undergo final judgment in the “big D” Day of the Lord. This leads me to **Key point D: Apocalyptic texts overwhelmingly describe the fate of those who reject God in the Day of the Lord with imagery of fire and the Flood.** Thematically, then, one should look at the fire/flood theme to understand the nature of the final judgment. The original template for the Flood in Genesis 6 describes the destruction of all life on the earth, which had become corrupt) except for the righteous remnant on the ark who pass through into a New Beginning. In other words, those who are not among the remnant perish. This makes sense when we reconsider the logical progression of key points A, B, and C. Since the Flood is, as previously described, literarily portrayed as the removal of Yahweh’s sustaining force upholding creation, his sustaining life force within humanity would also be removed, causing them to perish given their nature of Conditional Immortality.

The same logical outcome occurs when one considers the fire imagery tied with the final judgment (see, for example, Matthew 10:28 and Revelation 20:14). The remnant will pass unscathed through the judgment of purifying fire, like Daniel, while the wicked will be burned up by it. In fact, the imagery of Sodom and Gomorrah, the first instance of the fiery judgment theme, is explicitly tied to the final judgment of Babylon, the archetype of evil and rebellion against God in the bible in Isaiah 13:19.

Having covered a robust logical argument for Conditional Immortality and Annihilationism, I will also provide some very explicit scriptural evidence that supports my final key point, **Key point E: The final judgment is consistently and explicitly described as death throughout scripture.** For example, take Isaiah 66:24, where the “corpses of those who sinned against me [God]” are depicted at the end of an apocalyptic Day of the Lord passage. In Revelation 20:14, the final judgment is described as the “second death”. Both these instances, along with others, show the finality of this judgment - not an ongoing judgment, but one resulting in “death”. Even the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, favors an Annihilationist reading over an ECT reading: “...will **not perish**, but have eternal life”. It does not say “will not suffer eternal punishment,” but instead uses the word “perish,” which lines up with the other imagery of death/finality in Isaiah and Revelation.

When one does not presuppose ECT, the most natural understanding of the final judgment is annihilation/death. This interpretation is Biblically sound from many different angles. It is logically consistent with the themes of the Bible going all the way from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. It also has explicit evidence from several passages of scripture, including John 3:16, perhaps the most famous verse of all time. While perhaps not a mainstream view in modern Christianity, I believe it is the most rational view of hell, given the scriptural evidence we have.