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**They Shall Not Inherit the Kingdom of God”:
Is the Bible’s Language of Judgment and Sin too
condemnatory to Patiently Deal with Human Sins?**

by Rev. Dr. John Michael Kiboi

Senior Lecturer in Theology, St. Paul’s University, Limuru, Kenya¹

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¹ Kiboi earned his PhD in dogmatic theology from the Catholic University of East Africa, Nairobi, Kenya; his MA from the University of Toronto; and his BD from St. Paul’s University, Limuru, Kenya. He holds a certificate in counseling from the Stephen Ministries (CSM), Saint Louis, Missouri. He is a leader of St. Paul’s University’s PhD programme in Theology, in charge of faculty and post-graduate research and training clinics, head of systematic theology. He has published two books, *The Tripartite Office of Christ in the Light of Worgoondet: Towards a Sabaot Christology of Inculturation* (Nairobi: CUEA Press, 2017; 249 pp.) and *Assurance of Salvation: Towards a Cumulative Case Argument* (Latvia, European Union: Scholars’ Press, 2018; 210 pp.). He has led many seminars and published several articles, including, “The Imperative of the Great Commission and the Quest for Christian-Muslim Relationship: Dialogue, Diapraxis, or Inculturation?” *African Christian Studies* (September 2015); “From a Post-Colonial Hermeneutic of Suspicion to a Dialectical Theology of Instantaneous and Progressive Divine Revelation,” *African Christian Studies* (December 2015); “Inter-Religious Conflicts in 21st Century: Dialectical-Scepticism as a Panacea,” *African Ecclesial Review* (March/June 2017); and “Towards a Theodicy of Divine Impotence as a Solution to the Problem of Evil,” *African Christian Studies* 33, no. 2 (June 2017). See www.SPU.ac.ke and jkiboi@spu.ac.ke.

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Introduction

The Bible presents two strands of revelation regarding the nature of God’s dealings with humankind at the eschaton: 1) God’s wrath over the sinner as unrelenting and 2) God forgiving and therefore likely to forgive sinners. Many see contradiction. Since God is the revealer of Himself, and in Him there is no contradiction, the double revelation needs to be explained. We forward that since God is absolute truth and could not reveal Himself in contradiction, any appearance of contradiction belongs to the nature of the progressive pattern of revelation on the part of the faithful.

Is the Bible’s language of judgment too condemnatory to patiently deal with human sins? This question is not new and has been dealt with in a variety of ways in the history of Christianity. We give a fresh systematic and analytical approach.

Clearly, the Biblical language on the fate of a sinner definitively sounds condemnatory, yet there are also texts in Scripture that could be interpreted differently (as tolerant). Donald G. Bloesch in discussing the doctrine of predestination observes that, “There are both universalistic and particularistic motifs in holy Scripture.”² In this article, the particularistic motif is based on condemnatory texts whereas the universalistic motif is based on clemency texts and also drawn from logical and theological coherence. When these contradictory texts are encountered in the same Scripture, a dilemma is created for the believer.

The Bible presents two strands of texts—condemnatory and clemency—which in turn have given rise to various strands of interpretations, such as Universalism, Particularism, and Annihilationism. We will juxtapose the texts that are condemnatory against those that teach God’s clemency on sinners. After exploring the existing interpretations of the two strands of Biblical revelations on the fate of the sinner in the eschaton, we will provide an alternative

² Donald G. Bloesch, *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 182.

perspective that views the two strands as God’s way of revelation that is both instantaneous and progressive. We propose this new perspective with an aim of finding pastoral solace in progressive divine revelation.

A. Problem: Polarities of God’s Judgment and Mercy

1. Condemnatory Texts

Although the Scriptures have a lot of texts that are condemnatory and that emphasize God’s justice, there are also a lot of texts that teach God’s clemency. Beginning with condemnatory texts, we encounter caution against taking God’s promises lightly.³ Galatians 6:7 confirms the justice of God in rewarding people according to their deeds, and therefore people are cautioned against being deceived otherwise: “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.” Various texts in the Old and N.T.s attest to the wrath of God and intensity of punishment in hell. Regarding the fate of sinners in the eschaton, Daniel 12:1b states:

There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence... many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

And 2 Thessalonians 1:9 states, “These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”

The Bible clearly teaches God’s justice and depicts God as one who does not tolerate human sins. However, it should be noted that OT references to God’s wrath are texts about the consequences of Israel breaking the covenant, which is indeed different from the wrath of God experienced at the eschaton. It should be further put into mind that the NT references are all dealing with the latter perspective on wrath and are more properly the focus of this study. Jesus teaches

³ Regarding the fate of sinners, Rev 14:10–11, speaking of the antichrist it states, “They will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever.” Isa 66:24 declares, “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathed to all mankind.” Deut 32:22 portrays hell as a place where God pours out His wrath on the sinners. It says, “For a fire is kindled in my anger, and shall burn to the lowest *sheol* (hell); It shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains.” Also compare Ps 34:21–22, Rom 8:1, John 3:18, Matt 25:46, Mark 9:43, Rom 6:23, 2 Thess 1:9–10, and Rev 21:8.

that God's word shall come to pass and not a single iota shall be removed. He also teaches that mountains shall pass away, but God's word shall be fulfilled as promised. This assertion makes it difficult for anyone to doubt these condemnatory texts, yet there are texts that stand opposed to them in the same Scriptures which, which we take as the same strength that God's word shall come to pass and cannot be ignored.

2. Texts of God's Clemency

What was said above about God's wrath can also be said about his mercy. In the OT, the context is always the Sinai Covenant and the object is Israel. Although God in the foregoing texts is depicted as wrathful and just, there are also texts in the same Scripture that portray God as being lenient to the sinner. He forgives even those who reject His grace. Here below follows a brief survey of such texts.

Many OT prophets began their proclamations declaring judgment, but later they proclaimed restoration. For instance, within Joel, there are both condemnatory and forgiving texts. Joel 1:1–2:11 prophesizes God's judgment and punishment on Israel, but in 2:12b hope is proclaimed: "Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." 1Chronicles 16:34 declares that God's steadfast love endures forever. This is echoed by the Psalmist who sings of God's mercies as enduring forever (Ps 136:1–26).

In the prophecy of Jonah, God is set to punish Nineveh, but He sends Jonah to preach to them that he may warn them of impending judgment (3:4b); yet, when the king of that nation and its people repented of their sins, God had compassion on them and "God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (3:10). In chapter 4, Jonah protests God's change of heart in verse 4:2b, lamenting,

That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.

Thus, in Joel and Jonah, we find the two attributes of God, justice and mercy, juxtaposed to each other.

Isaiah in the same manner declares God's wrath on His rebellious nation, but that is later followed by God's forgiving character. In Isaiah 5, the prophet passes judgment on the rebellious nation. He

uses the imagery of a fruitless vineyard which, despite being well tendered, produced wild grapes (5:1–4). In verses 5–6 judgment is pronounced. The farmer is going to remove the hedge he had put around the vineyard. Now the vineyard is going to be ignored and will not be cared for, and it will be vandalized. In verse 7, the writer likens the house of Israel and Judah to the vineyard. But in chapter 27, he presents God as having changed His heart and now cares and protects the same vineyard. God’s anger is then redirected against those who harm Israel and Judah—His vineyard. Although in verses 4–5, the assurance of protection is conditional, in verse 6 the prophet makes a quick reassurance. He declares, “In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit.” In Isaiah 43:25–26, the prophet reassures the people that when God forgives, He does not count the past sins on those He has forgiven: “I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.”

Observed from the texts above, one can infer a particular rhythm, warning, punishment, and redemption. It is evident that God’s warning precedes His action (punishment). God first warns the transgressing nation of possible punishment. In many OT prophecies, although the nation is punished it is restored and not annihilated; this remnant theme abounds in the entire OT. Unlike the current era, OT period sins were punished within the time of the errant generation.

In many ways, the entire Bible story is that of warning, punishment, and restoration. For example, in the days of Noah, the nations are warned and then punished, but there is a remnant. In the days of Isaiah a similar theme and flow of rhythm is seen in warning, punishment, and restoration. The current era of Christ’s prophecy has a warning which will be followed by punishment and a restoration in the eschaton.

How then does one reconcile the two opposing strands of revelation in the Holy Scripture? If we hold that all scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit, then both strands must be inspired, and an attempt to reconcile opposing texts in the Scripture is dangerous as it may lead to emphasis of one over the other. Attempts have been made in the past to resolve the problem of texts that are condemnatory, that depict God’s attributes contradictorily, by advancing theories regarding the fate of the sinner. Some of the traditional theories

include particularism (the traditional view), universalism, and annihilationism.

Besides the traditional interpretations, new theological hermeneutics have proposed the nature of hell as a state of non-being and a state of shame. Jerry L. Walls avers that,

These disputes hinge largely, of course, on different interpretations of scripture. Proponents of each of these positions can cite passages of scripture that, on the face of it at least, appear to support their view.⁴

He goes on to state that “Universalists and annihilationists as well as traditionalists make the case that scripture, rightly interpreted, teaches their view.”⁵ He further notes that,

This requires that each position offer a plausible interpretation of those texts that appear to support positions contrary to their own. For instance, advocates of the traditional view that hell consists of conscious eternal misery must provide an explanation of those texts that appear to support annihilation and show why they do not do so.⁶

B. Three Perspectives on Condemnatory Texts: Particularism, Universalism, and Annihilationism

1. Particularism

They are the traditional view that holds to a literal punishment for sinners and a reward for the saved in the eschaton.

The condemnatory texts point toward imminent punishment for obstinate sinners in the eschaton who are sent to hell. Particularism is the traditional defense of hell as a matter of divine justice.⁷ They view hell as a state of eternal damnation for the sinners who rejected the offer of salvation. As we have already observed, there are several texts both in the OT and NT that explicitly teach the existence of hell and the eternal punishment of the sinners.

⁴ Jerry L. Walls, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.

⁵ Walls, *Eschatology*, 15.

⁶ Walls, 15.

⁷ Walls, 15.

When salvation by grace is juxtaposed to condemnatory texts, especially Galatians 5:19–21,⁸ the question arises, “Must inheritors of the Kingdom be perfect?” In responding to this question, Mark J. Edwards quoted 6th century Fabius Planciades Fulgentius as saying:

Since God is righteous, such people do not obtain the kingdom of heaven so long as they do such things. But since God is merciful, the wicked, if they cease doing revolting things by which they try God’s patience and turn to God in humble amendment; they do without doubt obtain the kingdom of God.⁹

According to Dieter Lührmann, Paul means by the Kingdom of God that “eschatological world in which God’s righteousness will clearly be the order of the world” and such vices will not be entertained.¹⁰

The particularist First, based on the condemnatory texts found in the Bible, the argument raised by particularists is that God’s word cannot go unfulfilled.¹¹ Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 21:33 all declare that “heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.” In regard to this promise, 2 Peter 3:7 states the means by which the earth shall be destroyed: “But by the same word the present heaven and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the Day of Judgment and destruction of the godless.” Matthew 25 clearly teaches that the goats will have to be separated from the sheep (i.e., sinners from the righteous).

They argue that for God to be just, the two states of heaven and hell must exist. For God’s attribute of holiness to be upheld, God has to punish sin. In other words, God’s holiness cannot tolerate sin and sinners. For this reason, God has to separate Himself completely from sin and sinners. In sum, hell the reward for those who rejected the gospel invitation to life, and heaven is the reward for those who accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ and believed in the only Son of God (John 3:16–18).

⁸ Paul lists particular sins and warns that whoever commits them will not inherit the kingdom of God. Such are sins of the flesh, viz., fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing.

⁹ Mark J. Edwards, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: N.T. VIII—Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 89.

¹⁰ Dieter Lührmann, *Galatians: Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 111.

¹¹ Cf., condemnatory texts already provided.

2. Universalism

Although the Christian Holy Scripture teaches the ultimate triumph of kingdom of God, Origen was condemned and declared a heretic by the Church for postulating universal salvation, including the salvation of Satan. This practice of sanction has for many years made Christian theologians to keep away from declaring the non-existence of hell, despite many texts and theological interpretations that point towards universal reconciliation.

The theology of Universal Reconciliation is grounded in the theology of the Cross. If God's purpose and aim in the incarnation of Jesus Christ was to reconcile everything back to Himself, then Christ's death on the Cross was for all humankind a means of reconciling them back to their Creator. Thus, if by his death he conquered death and hell, then all must be reconciled to the Creator.

Bauckham quotes a Swabian revivalist Christoph Blumhardt,

There can be no question of God's giving up anything or anyone in the whole world, either today or in all eternity. The end has to be: Behold, everything is God's! Jesus comes as the one who has borne the sins of the world. Jesus can judge but not condemn.¹²

Jurgen Moltmann, in line with this perspective, concludes regarding universal reconciliation by stating that:

Judgment is not God's last word. Judgment establishes in the world the divine righteousness on which the new creation is to be built. But God's last word is 'Behold, I make all things new' (Rev 21:5). From this no one is excepted. Love is God's compassion with the lost. Transforming grace is God's punishment for sinners. It is not the right to choose that defines the reality of human freedom. It is the doing of the good.¹³

According to Paul Tillich, the doctrine of two-fold eternal destiny (i.e., salvation and condemnation) contradicts the idea of God's permanent creation of the finite as something "very good." His argument is based on the following syllogism:

If 'Being' is good, nothing that 'is' can become completely evil. Human beings 'are' (i.e., they have being and is included in the creative divine love).

¹² Richard Bauckham, ed., *God Will Be All in All: Eschatology of Jurgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd, 1999), 47.

¹³ Bauckham, *God Will Be All in All*, 47.

Therefore, human beings cannot be completely evil because they are included in the creative divine love.¹⁴

People who subscribe to the universalist perspective argue that “He [God] does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency” (Micah 7:18b). Similar theology resonates with Lamentations 3:22, “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.” This theme is echoed in the NT in James 2:13 which states, “For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.” In Psalms 136, the Psalmist emphasizes the fact that “God’s mercy endures forever.”¹⁵ They further argue that the NT declares that in the end every human being shall bow and confess to the Lordship of Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9–11).

They also argue that since all God’s attributes are eternal, his enduring love and mercy are also eternal and, therefore, from eternity He never willed damnation of humankind.

Actually, it is not in the eschaton that God’s mercies will overcome His wrath. Since all things in God happen instantaneously, judgment and forgiveness already happened in His timeless realm (eternity), the extinction of hell already happened in His time; that is, the extinction of hell happened before the incarnation of Jesus Christ and eventual conquering of death and hell, an event that happened in time. In His eternal foreknowledge and eternal design for creation, God’s redemption already happened in Jesus Christ.

This can be inferred from Bloesch’s words, “Moreover, his triumph in his death and resurrection mirrors his original triumph at the beginning of all things, his victory at the creation where he brought the primordial chaos under control.”¹⁶ According to Bloesch, this triumphant grace shall persist into the eschaton in which God’s grace shall eventually triumph over evil. Just as it happened at creation, where God’s grace triumphed over chaos, at the eschaton, “God’s victory over the chaos will be given additional confirmation in

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 479.

¹⁵ If we understand “endure forever” to mean eternally, this will mean that in eternity, before creation of the universe, God’s mercy endured; and that is why in eternity he begot His Son for the purpose of salvation of humanity – God was about to create. I.e., God’s mercies endure from eternity to eternity, before creation to after judgment. This then means that after judgment, God’s mercy triumphs over His wrath.

¹⁶ Bloesch, *Last Things*, 216.

his second coming, which will bring worldly history to an end and supplant the kingdoms of this world by the kingdom of God.”¹⁷

According to Bloesch, “Sacred tradition attests that God created all people for eternal life (Wisdom 2:23).” He goes further to observe that this point was discerned by Count Zinzendorf who averred, “All human souls ... are designed for salvation ... many more persons are saved than lost. The lost are the exceptions.”¹⁸

Discussing the doctrine of (double) predestination, Bloesch holds that divine election is both universal as well as particular. He explains that “election is universal in its outreach and particular in its efficacy for faith.”¹⁹ According to him,

All are elected to be in the service of Christ, but only some are destined for fellowship with Christ. The invitation goes out to all, but adoption is only for some. Unbelief is the reason for being barred from fellowship with Christ—God is the cause of our salvation; unbelief is the cause of our damnation.²⁰

Although Bloesch holds this universal perspective of salvation, he takes into account texts that teach the dialectical nature of God and the texts in the Scripture that teach both God’s mercy and God’s judgement (cf. Isa 49:2; John 12:47–48; 2 Cor 2:15–16; Heb 4:12; Eph 6:17; Rev 1:16, 2:12, 16–17, 19:15).²¹

Bloesch notes that it was Aquinas “who sought to hold together the polarities of judgment and mercy in God’s dealings with humanity.”²² Aquinas said, “Although in Justice God could deprive of existence and annihilate a creature that sins against him, yet it is more becoming justice that he keep (*sic*) it in existence to punish it.”²³ Aquinas argued that, “In the case of annihilation, Justice would have no admixture of mercy, since nothing would remain to which he might show mercy; and yet it is written (Ps 25:10) that all the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth.”²⁴ Some in the Catholic Church have inclined towards the doctrine of universal salvation as it can be

¹⁷ Bloesch, 216.

¹⁸ Bloesch, 215.

¹⁹ Bloesch, 183.

²⁰ Bloesch, 183.

²¹ Bloesch, 183.

²² Bloesch, 217.

²³ Aquinas quoted in Bloesch, 217.

²⁴ Bloesch, *Last Things*, 217.

inferred from the Catholic mystic Francois Fenlon who is quoted as having taught: “Thou grantest grace even to those who will forever experience the rigour of thy justice.”²⁵

Bloesch’s stated clearly his position in regard to universalism:

From my perspective hell as the outer darkness, eternal perdition, has been destroyed by the cross and resurrection victory of Christ, since he died for all and his gracious election goes out to all. The possibility of ontological separation from God has been cancelled by Jesus Christ through his universal atoning sacrifice. This kind of hell has been excluded from God’s purposes. Yet an inner darkness remains as a sign and shadow of what has been overcome. To the rejected it appears to include the horror of eternal separation from God. The truth of the matter is that the pain in hell is due to the presence of God rather than to his absence, to his unfathomable love rather than to any abysmal hatred, or that is worse, gross indifference.²⁶

Another argument for universal salvation by Bloesch is based on his understanding of Psalm 139:7–12: “Even if we make our bed in hell, Christ is there ready to restore us if we will only accept the fact that he has borne the judgment on sin in our place and in the place of all humanity.”²⁷ Clearly, Bloesch’s doctrine of universal salvation includes that Christ will save people even in hell. As if in conclusion, Bloesch declares, “In depiction of the last things that is fully consonant with the mysteries of Christian faith, we must affirm no ultimate dualism but instead a duality within an ultimate unity. There is no coeternal evil, but an evil that has been overturned by good.”²⁸

3. Annihilationism

Annihilation is the view that hell is a permanent once-and-for-all termination of the sinful soul, that it will be blotted out and be as though it never existed. According to this view, the unbeliever will cease to exist anymore with both the body and soul following the physical death. The view takes a literal view of biblical references such as, “The soul that sins shall die” (Ezek. 18: 4) and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6: 23).

²⁵ Francois Fenelon, *Christian Perfection*, trans. Mildred Whitney Stillman (New York: Harper and Bros., 1947), 128. Quoted in Bloesch, 217.

²⁶ Bloesch, *Last Things*, 217.

²⁷ Bloesch, 218.

²⁸ Bloesch, 218.

This teaching is based on the argument that if God’s ultimate purpose is to redeem the whole of his creation, then the existence of hell negates or defeats God’s purposes. This is a thesis that builds on the doctrine of eternal punishment (unending suffering) as seemingly incompatible with the nature of God who is loving and merciful. They propose that hell is the final annihilation of the impenitent to preserve the view that God is loving and merciful and that annihilation will help answer the question of how God will ultimately achieve his goal of universal salvation.

The doctrine of annihilation finds support from some leading evangelicals, like John Stott who advances three scriptural arguments to support the idea of annihilation. The first thesis is that the doctrine of hell (or the idea of unending punishment) contradicts God’s promises regarding final victory over *all* evil. The doctrine is also hard to reconcile with the teaching of the NT texts which suggest universal salvation.²⁹

The second thesis is that the scriptural language indicates that the final fate of the wicked is destruction and not torture. This means that they will not continue existing in a form of perpetual suffering, but actually will be *destroyed*. The imagery of fire, for example, signifies not suffering but *destruction*. Stott writes, “The main function of fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction, as all the world incinerators bear witness.”³⁰

The third thesis holds that the idea of an everlasting punishment is not compatible with what we know of divine justice as revealed in the scripture. Stott argues that it is unlike God’s nature to subject one to a suffering experienced for all eternity (literally unending torture) for sins committed in time.³¹

Besides Stott’s three theses, the other argument for annihilation is that sin deserves punishment. It is not, however, in God’s intention or even of his nature to punish the sinner forever. The unrighteous will be judged and handed punishment commensurate with their sin. Then

²⁹ David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal—Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), 312–320. Cf., John 12:32, “Christ will draw all humanity to himself”; Eph 1:10, “God will finally unite all things under Christ’s headship”; Col 1:20, “God will finally reconcile all things to himself through Christ”; Phil 2:10–11, “every knee shall bow, every tongue confess”; and 1 Cor 15:28, “God will in the end be all in all.”

³⁰ Edwards and Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 312–32.

³¹ Edwards and Stott, 312–320.

they will be annihilated after having suffered punishment commensurate to their sins.

C. Contradictions of the Three Perspectives

1. Nature of Hell as Non-being

There have been disagreements regarding the state of affairs in the hereafter, whether in heaven or hell. Theologians have argued that it is not reasonable to anticipate the temperatures in hell or the pleasant state of affairs in heaven since the descriptions in the NT seem to contradict.³² There have also been disputes on whether fire exists in hell at all. Even those who hold onto the tradition of the existence of fire in hell have questioned its nature. They have also questioned the length of punishment in hell. What will be the nature of bodies burning in hell?

Recently the Church of England in its “Doctrine Commission of the Church of England” did away with hell fire, replacing it by “total non-being.” They declared “Hell is not eternal torment, but it is the final and irrevocable choosing of that which is opposed to God so completely and so absolutely that the only end is total non-being.”³³ This perspective can easily be mistaken for annihilationism. Yet all that the Anglican Church is stating is that since God is the source of human being, once the sinner alienates the self from their source of being, i.e., from the Being of God, they lose their source of being and the result is them becoming “non-being.”

According to Jurgen Moltmann,

‘Fire’ and ‘annihilation’ are merely metaphors for an inescapable remoteness from God, or for a God-forsakenness from which there is no way out. Hell is not supposed to be an eternal concentration camp from which there is no release, even by death. On the contrary, it is supposed to be ‘the ultimate affirmation of the reality of human freedom.’³⁴

This is in agreement with the Doctrine Commission whose stand is that “the reality of hell (and indeed of heaven) is the ultimate

³² “Reinhold Niebuhr warned against speculating on the ‘furniture of heaven’ and the ‘temperature of hell,’” quoted in Bloesch, 229.

³³ *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God’s Gift* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995), 199, in *God will be All in All: Eschatology of Jurgen Moltmann*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd, 1999), 43.

³⁴ Richard Bauckham, ed., *God will be All in All: The Eschatology of Jurgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 45.

affirmation of the reality of human freedom.”³⁵ Moltmann holds that, “The logic of hell is nothing other than the logic of human free will, in so far as this is identical with freedom of choice.”³⁶ God in love preserves our human freedom to choose between Him and rejecting Him. This is the essence of heaven and hell—choosing God or rejecting God in total freedom.

God, whose nature is love, preserves human freedom, for freedom is the condition of love. For this reason, the human is free either to choose God or reject God. When humans in this freedom choose God, they choose heaven; when they reject God, they reject heaven and choose hell. God in His utmost love grants the human choice. Thus, heaven and hell are human choices, and God’s demonstration of His uttermost love is in letting that which He loves have their choice.

In other words, God, who is love, sets the object of His love—human beings—free to choose. Human beings in their freedom make choices which land them either in heaven (epitome of eternal being) or in hell (epitome of eternal non-being). Thus, hell is the state of permanent humans’ rejection of God and God’s permanent acceptance of their rejection, while heaven is the state of humans’ permanent choice of God and God’s permanent acceptance of that human choice of choosing Him in their love and freedom.

In sum then, God does not designate some people to heaven or hell, for hell does not exist as a *place* of torment but as a *state* of humans rejecting their source of being and acceptance of state of rejection by God.

However, the question that arises from this perspective would be: If hell or heaven are the result of humans exercising their freedom to choose God or reject His gospel offer of salvation, how many people have such freedom of choice today? And as Moltmann would ask, “What happens to the people who never had the choice, or never had the power to decide?”³⁷

Given that there are many people in the world that do not have both the capacity and the opportunity to exercise freedom of choice,

³⁵ Bauckham, *God will be All in All*, 45.

³⁶ Bauckham, 44.

³⁷ Bauckham, 44–45.

due to their state, that dilemma renders the argument for the existence of hell as a product of human freedom of choice invalid. Therefore, it behooves us to redefine the nature of hell.

If the ultimate state of existence will be either heaven or hell, where will the earth and all other beings who have not “chosen” be? In heaven or in hell? This question is complicated by the fact that a God of love cannot annihilate the earth or send it to hell when it did not have the capacity and freedom to choose like other humans had or did. Yet, 2 Peter is explicit on the fate of the entire universe, stating emphatically,

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

The question also arises from the argument that if God declared at the end of creation that all that He had created was good, how is He in His love going to annihilate that which was declared good?

If we go by Moltmann’s concept of hell as that which is already defeated, then the nature of hell needs to be either redefined or rethought. Moltmann says, “Christ suffered the ‘inescapable remoteness from God’ and the ‘God-forsakenness’ that knows no way out, so that he could bring God to the God-forsaken.”³⁸ He goes ahead to state that Christ “suffered the torments of hell so that for us they are not hopeless and without escape.”³⁹ He argues that by Christ descending into hell, he took hope to the place where all who enter must abandon hope.⁴⁰ Thus, if Christ has dealt death and hell a lasting blow (“Through his sufferings Christ has destroyed hell. Hell is open: ‘Hell where is thy victory?’” 1 Cor 15:55),⁴¹ it has no more powers, then we really need to apply new hermeneutics to the doctrine of hell and the qualifications for entry into heaven. When Christ entered hell and through His victorious resurrection, hell was opened up and no longer has capacity to confine anyone in it.

Based on the above, hell only exists as that which has no capacity to confine anyone, and sinners are not found in it since they have

³⁸ Bauckham, 46.

³⁹ Bauckham, 46.

⁴⁰ Bauckham, 46.

⁴¹ Bauckham, 46.

become “non-being” after losing the source of their being—God. Arguably, hell can only exist if there are some occupants in it. Since the occupants’ nature is that of “non-being,” then hell’s nature too is that of “non-being.” The syllogism resolves itself: hell cannot continue existing if its occupants are non-being, nor can hell exist as non-being, for non-being does not exist.

2. Hell as a State of Shame

Unlike those who hold that heaven as the total presence of God and hell as His absence,⁴² those who hold that since God is omnipresent, then God is present in hell in His love too. According to Luther, “Even hell, no less than heaven, is full of God and the highest Good.”⁴³ Knowing that God is love and that God continues loving in spite of adamant rejection, even into hell, this knowledge is the cause for the sinner’s torment.

The torment will not be due to any form of fires or exclusions but of shame that they did not heed the invitation, very much as expressed in Prov 25:21–22, which states, “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads” (see also Rom 12:20). God who exhorts us to continue showing love even to our enemies is our example Himself. Luther held that God’s love remains even in deathly and hellish pain.⁴⁴ By God continuing to show His steadfast love even in hell, the adamant sinner will be tormented by the fact that they rejected God.

But for how long will this shame last?

In line with our earlier argument of hell as a state of non-being, we should also postulate that since God in eternity begot His Son for the purpose of conquering that same hell, hell is only spoken of as enduring as that which is already conquered. Essentially, it is only God’s love and mercies that endure forever. Therefore, hell can only be spoken of as enduring as that which expresses God’s eternal love.

Since God is light, and wherever God is there light abounds, we can say hell will not be an epitome of suffering due to fire but a

⁴² Bloesch, *Last Things*, 221.

⁴³ Ewald Plass, ed., *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 2.6.28, quoted in Bloesch, 222.

⁴⁴ *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 14:143, quoted in Bloesch, 223.

suffering due to shame that the sinner will be exposed to. The sinner's past evil done in secrecy shall be exposed by God's light to the public, and thus the nature of suffering will be that of shame.⁴⁵ The sinners in the eschaton will seek to hide their evil acts, and the only place they think is suitable is in hell. They think this is the place where the light of God is absent. They forget that God's omnipresence will light them, exposing their evil and subjecting them to shame. In line with this position, Bloesch states, "But this is precisely what hell is; being exposed to the light that redeems even when darkness is much preferred."⁴⁶

Furthermore on the question of how long shall this shame last, it appears to be a question of categories of time: the heavenly versus the earthly categories of time. Since time in heavenly realm is eternal, in other words timeless, we can say the duration in hell will be eternal. Yet, this should not be understood as forever. When heavenly categories are literally interpreted using earthly categories it creates a categorical problem.

Secondly, it should be understood that "God afflicts sinners not to annihilate or ruin them but to show them the error of their ways, to chastise them and also to drive them to repentance."⁴⁷ For this reason, we can argue that hell does not endure forever because God desires that by feeling the sting of His anger, sinners will be restrained and corrected. It should also be noted that, since God's punishment is not sheer vengeance but holy love, and since hell is related to both God's justice and his mercy, the punishment of the guilty is tempered by God's mercy. Therefore, hell cannot endure forever.⁴⁸

Isaiah 60:11 and Revelation 21:25 speak of the gates of heaven being continually open. If the gates of heaven are continually open, then to whom are they open? There are theologians who hold onto universal salvation in which "even when one is in hell one can be

⁴⁵ Sinners do not like performing their evil acts in the light but in darkness (cf. John 3:16–f). After evil acts, they wish these acts were never brought to the light. For this reason, they hide from God's light. After sinning in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were filled with shame and sought to hide themselves from the condescending righteousness of God.

⁴⁶ Bloesch, *Last Things*, 224.

⁴⁷ Bloesch, 225.

⁴⁸ Bloesch, 225.

forgiven.”⁴⁹ Thus, given the character of God as loving and forgiving, He possibly will not allow human beings to suffer under His watch forever.

3. Conclusion on Three Perspectives on Condemnatory Texts

Particularism goes against God’s intrinsic nature of justice. How can sins committed in temporary time find its punishment in the eternal realm? It depicts God as unjust and a sadist who enjoys seeing His creation suffer. Thus, it contradicts both God’s nature as forgiving and the teaching that God’s mercy endures forever overcoming His wrath. In other words, particularism ignores the existence of texts of God’s clemency and only emphasizes God’s wrath.

Universalism overlooks the biblical condemnatory texts and emphasizes texts of clemency. If we hold that the entire Bible is Spirit breathed, then no particular texts should be emphasized over and above the others, or ignored for that matter, yet that is what universalism does. Moreover, interpretations where the devil is forgiven have been condemned by most of the orthodox and evangelical Churches’ best theologians.

Although annihilationism attempts to reconcile particularist and universalist perspectives, it fails at the same time to uphold the biblical teachings that—in the end—all creation shall bow before Christ and confess that Christ is Lord. Holding the two perspectives in tension leads to defeatism; God ends up saving only a handful of His creation and annihilates the rest, which is in any case a larger proportion.

Since the Bible has Scriptures in tension between condemnatory and clemency, a twenty-first century theologian needs to be honest. Through historical criticism and source criticism, we have learned that such tensions exist as a result of the Biblical compilers not wanting to leave out any tradition, included contradictory traditions in the same Bible. With the teaching that all scripture is inspired, the compilers of the texts that became canonized may have feared excluding some of the texts (or shown that some may have been earlier traditions that were later amended or traditions held in different regions or times).

⁴⁹ Bloesch drawing an inference from Eduard Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, trans. Keith R. Crim (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), 66, in Bloesch, *Last Things*, 227.

Therefore, any of these perspectives of God’s dealings with His creatures (humankind) could be right as long as it has biblical backing and theological coherence. Therefore, it is advisable to put into consideration the entire biblical teaching and Church tradition when interpreting any particular text. We should be aware of texts opposed to those that appeal to us.

D. Alternative Perspectives

1. The Dialectical Nature of Biblical Doctrines

The Bible appears to contain some verses that oppose each other and which led to the appearance of paradox of interpretations like universalism and particularism regarding God’s love and justice. The classic tension seems to rise from the doctrine of God’s grace, which teaches that human beings shall be saved by God’s grace, and that is taught in the same Scripture which teaches human responsibility (all human beings shall account for their deeds).

Holding these two doctrines together creates a dilemma and anxiety. The question is, do I work for my salvation or do I wait upon God’s grace to save me? Christian Scripture teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility: i.e., although God is in control (doctrine of providence), human beings are still the captains of their own actions and therefore responsible and accountable for them. It is thus evident that whereas the Bible abounds in texts that teach conditional salvation, there are those that teach unconditional salvation.

Another example of doctrines standing opposed to each other is that of Election versus Reprobation. Some theologians like St. Augustine and Calvin taught the doctrine of divine election. According to these theologians, their interpretation of Romans 9 was that God elected in eternity and created those to be saved and predestined others for damnation. According to some critics of this doctrine, the doctrine of double predestination portrays God as unjust, a character that is inconsistent with God’s true nature.

Yet even Augustine realized the complicated tension, teaching that regarding the atoning work of Christ, saying, “Without God we cannot; without us, he [God] will not.”⁵⁰ He meant that God who

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Nature and Grace* (415). Cited in Bloesch, 185.

created humankind without their cooperation or participation in the process that cannot save humankind without the human being's participation in the process of salvation. He went ahead to state, "He who created you without your help, will not save you without your cooperation."⁵¹ This runs against his view of Romans 9 and against Calvin's doctrine of undeserved grace and the irresistibility by the elect, as summed in the Calvinist acronym TULIP.⁵²

The Scriptures are inspired by the Spirit of God, and each should be revered in equal measure. What do we do with texts that depict God as wrathful versus those that depict Him as forgiving or lenient with the sinners (condemnation vs clemency)? Since God is Pure Act and He is the absolute truth (John 14:6f), He cannot contradict Himself—never has and never will. Therefore, these traditions seem to stand opposed to each other, and we need to better coherence.

2. Divine Revelation as Instantaneous and Progressive

We propose that revelation is both instantaneous and progressive in nature, leading a solution between the above outlined tensions. In an article on equality in Kenya, Hazel Ayanga said, "Any cursory reading of the Bible shows that it contains both positive and negative teaching on gender equality."⁵³ Thus, according to Ayanga, the Scriptures hold seemingly contradictory doctrines at tension without making an effort to resolve them. I did some work on this in an article on post-colonial hermeneutics, arguing that although the Bible appears to teach contradictory themes, it is because God's revelation, although instantaneous, the human beings' understanding of these apparently contradicting doctrines is progressive.⁵⁴

Various Biblical accounts depict divine revelation as dialectical in nature. The two kinds of texts—condemnatory and clemency—co-exist in the same Scriptures and demand an explanation. Although it is biblical to claim that God is wrathful, it is not rational, nor is it

⁵¹ Augustine, *Sermons*, 169.13. Cited in Bloesch, 185.

⁵² Total Deprivation; Undeserved Grace; Limited Grace; Irresistible Grace; Persevering Grace.

⁵³ Hazel Ayanga; "Inspired and gendered: The Hermeneutical challenge of teaching gender in Kenya"; cf., H. Jurgens Hendriks, Elna Mouton, L. D. Hansen, Elisabet Le Roux, *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew? Addressing Gender Inequality in Africa*. EFSA (Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research) (Sun Press, Stellenbosch, 2012), 86.

⁵⁴ John M. Kiboi, "From a Post-Colonial Hermeneutic of Suspicion to a Dialectical Theology of Instantaneous and Progressive Divine Revelation," *African Christian Studies* 31, no. 4 (December 2015): 24–53.

biblical to claim that His wrath endures forever. Such a claim would also contradict God's character of love. The Bible is clear on the question of God's wrath; God's wrath does not endure forever as His grace/mercy does. This evidence thus disqualifies the particularist argument for eternal damnation of the sinner.

Our contention is that although God's wrath consumes like fire, it does not last forever. Based on this understanding, we could conclude that His wrath is overcome by His grace—this is the nature of instantaneous and progressive revelation. God who reveals Himself as wrathful also reveals Himself as gracious and forgiving, instantaneously. The question of how long would God's wrath last creates a problem of categories. In the hereafter, time does not exist; therefore, since "forever" belongs to the category of time (as we experience it here on earth), it does not apply in the hereafter.

The condemnatory texts that reveal God's character as wrathful should be taken as belonging to an earlier human understanding of who God is, which with time has received new clarity.⁵⁵ Therefore, the earlier condemnatory texts should be understood pedagogically as one that served its purpose in the remote situations till the clarifications were made in Jesus Christ himself. The O.T. revelation of God as condemning served before Jesus came to clarify that God is love through his incarnation, life, suffering, death, and resurrection; God who loves, self-empties Himself of His glory to condescend and live among His creation, influence their morals through his teachings and life example, and dies on the Cross on their behalf—the supreme example of love. How can such a God abandon them at the end?

To bolster our argument that divine revelation is both instantaneous and progressive, we could draw lessons from biblical exegeses. In an article published in the *African Christian Studies*, it is observed that the Genesis 1 account of creation is a post-exilic version of the older Genesis 2 account. The exegetes claim that it was during exile when Jews found that the Gentile creation accounts competed

⁵⁵ In the Bible we have many doctrines which seem with time to have received new understanding: e.g., in the OT, the Spirit of God is initially understood to be impersonal, *ruach* (wind); but later as the revelation gets clearer, it is discovered that the Spirit of God is God and therefore personal (cf. Gen 1:1ff, and Ps 139). The Genesis 2 creation account depicts God as creating from pre-existing material, while chapter one presents creation as being created from nothing. Similarly, initially God is perceived to be revengeful, but later He is understood to be forgiving and loving (cf. Jesus' beatitudes re-interpret the Old Jewish laws, e.g., an eye for an eye to forgiving one's enemy).

with their creation account that they (Jews) developed their version (Gen 1) which depicts their God as superior to the Gentile gods who could not create *ex nihilo* like theirs. From such biblical exegetes' perspectives, we can argue for progressive revelation that the chronological revelation is the process by which that which was initially revealed and was obscure becomes clearer.⁵⁶

Therefore, God's revelation is instantaneous but also progressively unfolds itself to us in time. Through this gradual revelation we get to know Him and His will better. We can conclude that the condemnatory texts were human, crude, and primitive interpretations of who God is; and as the revelation became clearer later, human beings came to know God as merciful and forgiving. This later clarification in the human mind does not however cancel the earlier revelation but elucidates it and naturally replaces it.

Conclusion

All along we have been battling with the question whether the Bible's language of judgment and sin is too condemnatory to patiently deal with human sins. We juxtaposed the contradictory condemnatory versus clemency texts within a survey of the existing perspectives of particularism, universalism, and annihilationism. Therein we saw how the interpretation of non-being and state of shame emanated into some contradictions. We argued that condemnatory texts belong to an earlier primitive human understanding of God's revelation (God's nature), much of which was instantaneously revealed in that ancient time. Then we showed how those texts demonstrating God's clemency most powerfully belong to the later clarified revelation of God's nature. We proposed one way to resolve the tensions from the interpretations of the two strands of texts though the demonstration that God's revelation is both instantaneous and progressive in nature—God is love!



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⁵⁶ John M. Kiboi, "From a Post-Colonial Hermeneutic of Suspicion to a Dialectical Theology of Instantaneous and Progressive Divine Revelation" *African Christian Studies* 31, no. 4, (Dec. 2015): 36.