

DESTRUCTION FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD

Paul's Intertextual Use of the LXX in 2 Thess. 1:9

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Abstract

Amongst the various passages about final judgment in the New Testament, 2 Thess. 1:9 stands as the main Pauline text that many interpreters see as most explicitly stating the final fate of the wicked. What is often left unexplored, however, is the Second Temple backgrounds to this apocalyptic text, the echoes Paul invokes from the Old Testament, and their national significance.

This paper explores the way 2 Thessalonians 1:9 uses the LXX, and leans in the direction that Paul is speaking also of an “apocalyptic” and “political” judgment upon the oppressors of the people of God. These apocalyptic and political readings of “final judgment” favor the doctrine of annihilationism, and offer wider considerations for modern Christians struggling with first century questions.

Introduction

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Introduction

The language of destruction in the New Testament is varied and covers a wide spectrum of authors and literary contexts. The purpose of this article is singular in purpose, but multifold in approach. Within the scholarly debate about eternal punishment and the extent and efficacy of salvation—whether universal or particular—there lies a specific and central figure: the apostle Paul and his writings.¹ In terms of methodology and exegetical explorations, of first importance is an investigation about the relationship between the LXX and the various terms concerning destruction that appear within the Pauline corpus. The second order of exegetical prominence is to determine how Paul himself² utilizes these various terms in their theological and grammatical fixtures, and how this may influence our modern debate concerning the fate of the wicked. The issue of intertextual echoes will also be explored. As we shall see, Paul's view of the fate of the wicked—as expressed in 2 Thess. 1:9—is far closer to the Old Testament prophets than he is to Augustine, Origen, Calvin or Luther.

1. Painting a Pauline Mosaic: Images and Iconography

It goes without saying, but Paul never uses the language of "hell" in any of his extant epistles, and the author of Acts is also silent on this matter. Paul's rather distinct vocabulary also lacks the language we find in the Synoptic Gospels regarding Gehenna³ or "punishment" (c.f. Matt. 25:46).⁴ In addition to these facts, there is also a distinct absence of "torment" language regarding human persons in Paul's lexicon unlike what

¹ The sea of literature is wide, but see *Four Views of Hell*, edited by Preston Sprinkle (2nd. Ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

² I am including the so-called Deutero-Pauline corpus in my research. For the purpose of full disclosure, I believe 2 Thessalonians, Colossians and Ephesians are Pauline, but I have some reservations about the authorship of 1-2 Timothy and Titus. This, however, need not detain our explorations and I will treat the Pastoral Epistles as Pauline.

³ C.f. Matt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6.

⁴ καὶ ἀπελεύσονται οὗτοι εἰς κόλασιν αἰώνιον, οἱ δὲ δίκαιοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

we find in the Synoptic tradition, in 2 Peter and in the Book of Revelation.⁵ Paul's own terminology includes ἀπόλλυμι,⁶ ἀπώλεια,⁷ ὄλεθρος,⁸ and τέλος.⁹ Not every use of these words carries an inherent eschatological aspect, but these are the terms regularly employed by Paul and each of these words carries distinct but overlapping meanings and concepts. Before we examine these words in greater detail, we should consider the witness of Paul's Bible, the LXX. An entire survey of this language is impossible, but to map the terrain is feasible if one limits themselves to two crucial interpretive features: first, in assessing Paul's terminology, we search for what Richard Hays calls an "intertextual echo."¹⁰ That is, "if we are to arrive at a properly nuanced estimate of Paul's theological stance toward his own people and their sacred texts, we must engage him on his own terms, by following his readings of the texts in which he heard the word of God."¹¹

This will reveal potential literary links and aid our assessment of these disputed Pauline texts. Second, we intentionally limit ourselves to examples of human or divine agents within the LXX.¹² There are also some key terms within 2 Thess. 1:9 that merit additional consideration: for instance, how does the preposition ἀπὸ ("from") function? How are ὄλεθρον and αἰώνιον ("eternal") related? What is the theological significance of προσώπου ("presence")? These will be explored in light of the LXX. How does all of this

⁵ The operative cognate normally used is βασανίζω. C.f. Rev. 9:5; 11:10; 12:2; 14:10; 20:10.

⁶ 1 Cor. 1:18-19; 8:11; 10:9-10; 15:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3, 9; 2 Thess. 2:10.

⁷ Rom. 9:22; Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thess. 2:3; 1 Tim. 6:9.

⁸ 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:9; 1 Tim. 6:9.

⁹ Rom. 6:21-22; 10:4; 1 Cor. 10:11; Phil 3:19; 1 Thess. 2:16; 1 Tim. 1:5.

¹⁰ See Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989); *The Conversion of the Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

¹¹ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, x.

¹² To include metaphors and analogies would greatly supplement my argument, but would also unfortunately add to the page length.

work together to form a coherent whole? In order to form a more perfect picture, we begin with the LXX.

2. The LXX and the Whispers of the Sounds of Obliteration

The LXX utilizes hundreds of words to communicate destruction and death, especially from the ἀπώλεια word group.¹³ The various writers of the LXX, however, do not use ὄλεθρος as often, and a STEP Bible search reveals only 13 results of the noun. This is relevant due to the relatively small sample size of the term; proportionately Paul uses the same term 4 times in his surviving writings, and these 4 uses are the only times we find this term in the New Testament altogether.

In 1 Kings 13:33-34, we have Jeroboam acting in an “evil” (κακίας) manner, and “this sin eventually came to pass in the house of Jeroboam and [resulted] in destruction (ὄλεθρον) and in utter obliteration (ἀφανισμόν) from the face of the earth (ἀπὸ προσώπου τῆς γῆς)” (AT). The text of 1 Kings states because of Jeroboam’s sin, destruction and utter obliteration were a consequence upon the earth. This strong language of both destruction and utter obliteration is clearly metaphorical.

Proverbs 1:27 contains a use of ὄλεθρος, and Wisdom (1:20) is rejoicing over the ἀπωλεία (v.26) and ὄλεθρος that “should come” (ἔρχομαι) upon her enemies. Both nouns are preceded by the same subjunctive (ἔρχομαι), which suggests that Wisdom cries out for the destruction of those who “mock her” (1:26a). In a corporate context, this language seems to evade an easy ‘spiritual’ concept, and is rather focused on the utter physical destruction of Wisdom’s enemies—metaphorical, national, physical, individualistic, or all the above.

¹³ A search in the STEP bible reveals 263 uses in the LXX. A similar search in STEP reveals 72 uses of ἀπώλεια in the LXX.

Proverbs 21:7 refers to the ὄλεθρος of “the ungodly” (ἀσεβέσιν) because these “ungodly ones” have refused to do what is “just” (δίκαια). The author’s use of ὄλεθρος most likely echoes what we found in Proverbs 1:27, where the Wisdom literature views the end of the wicked as a temporal event: death. If we read the book of Proverbs as speaking to a corporate and common people, then this “destruction” would apply to another oppressive nation; in any case, the removal of the enemies of Israel results in their exclusion and ultimately their death.

Moving into the Prophets, we find Jeremiah 25:31 where in a judgment discourse has commenced, and the Lord is acting against the kings in an act of violent political judgment. This ὄλεθρος has come upon (ἐπι) a section of the earth (μερος της γης), and God’s judgment is fierce against the “nations” (εθνεσιν). The use of ὄλεθρος most probably denotes eschatological and political destruction, as these “nations” are “handed over” (εδοθησαν) to the “sword” (μαχαιραν): namely, the destructive end of a political kingdom, the tearing down of oppressive regimes, and the violent end of the oppressors of Israel. By using ὄλεθρος, Jeremiah is arguing that God will bring to a cataclysmic end these oppressive nations, and this will be against the corporate totality of the empire and her people (προς πασαν σαρκα)—without partiality or distinction, as God’s custom.

Jeremiah 48 has three uses of ὄλεθρος (v.3, 8, 32) and we will discuss each one in turn. In v.3, we have a “voice” (φωνη), which is the God of Israel (v.1) proclaiming in pain or crying out (κεκραγότων) from Horonaim: this proclamation concerns “destruction and great annihilation!” (ὄλεθρος καὶ σύντριμμα μέγα), and this is immediately clarified in v.4 as the passive verb συνετρίβη is used to describe the utter “annihilation” of Moab in v.4a. This prophetic declaration of Israel’s God against the evil nations again employs

the language of destruction, of breaking, and of shattering them. This is eschatology identified as apocalyptic political desecration of evil regimes, which cannot stand against Israel's God: they can only suffer ὄλεθρος.

Similarly in Jeremiah 48:8, where "destruction" (ὄλεθρος) "and [this destruction] comes upon every city" (καὶ ἦξει...¹⁴ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν πόλιν) and Jeremiah against utilizes the further imagery of destruction by deploying the verb σώζω ("to save")¹⁵ which is negated by a double adverbial idiom (οὐ μὴ). These cities are defined as not "being saved or spared," and are instead utterly destroyed. The further use of "destruction language" appears in the remainder of v.8 where the ἀπώλεια word group is deployed (καὶ ἀπολεῖται ὁ αὐλὼν, καὶ ἐξολεθρευθήσεται ἡ πεδινή, καθὼς εἶπεν κύριος). The God of Israel prophesies against these wicked regimes, and their days are numbered, and the fact that additional violent language is employed simply adds to the already clear point: God, as he violently deposes dictators and oppressors, bringing the cities of Moab to the sword, so shall it be with the ungodly.

Finally in Jeremiah 48:32, ὄλεθρος is utilized in a metaphorical fashion to refer to the "destruction" or "ruin" of the "fruits" (ὀπώραν). The analogy is not directly applicable, as fruit does not carry the same linguistic weight as a person, since one is alive and the other is not. However, one can imagine the "new wine skins" of Mark 2:22/Matt. 9:17 as fulfilling a typological function, but one can only press intentionally metaphorical language so far.

In Jeremiah 51:55, the God of Israel is "repaying Babylon" (v.25) for their sins, and Jeremiah applies the same language: the Lord is active, using three key "destruction"

¹⁴ This is where the noun ὄλεθρος resides.

¹⁵ Specifically, Jeremiah uses σωθῆ, an aorist subjunctive middle/passive.

terms: ἐξώλεθρευσεν ("utterly destroy"), ἀπόλεσεν ("destroy"), and ὄλεθρον ("destruction"). The Lord is doing all of these things against Babylon with his φωνήν ("voice") and is "paying back" (ἀνταποδίδωσιν; v.56) Babylon for her sins. The city of Babylon, according to Jeremiah, will be leveled to the ground "and her high gates shall be burned with fire. The peoples exhaust themselves for nothing, and the nations weary themselves only for fire" (v.58). So it ends with Jeremiah, who envisions God utterly annihilating his political enemies, who oppress Israel and will suffer their own just reward. There is no hint of torment, torture, or an eternal existence for the wicked: the silence of death is an appropriate Divine punishment, according to the Prophet.

In the book of Ezekiel we have two uses of ὄλεθρον (6:14; 14:16). The first instance combines a specific syntactical phrase: εἰς ἀφανισμόν καὶ εἰς ὄλεθρον ("into utter annihilation and into destruction"), which is preposition + accusative noun + connecting conjunction + preposition + accusative noun. The conjunction καὶ may be connective, suggesting that these two nouns are two different sides of the same coin: like saying "shot and stabbed" to describe a death or "sweet and bubbly" to describe a drink. While one cannot fold a specific meaning into both terms, thus risking a fallacious totality transfer, one can safely say they are *corresponding* and the conjunction shows they are complements, not contrasts. One would expect a contrast as being something like "life" and death," but here we do not have contrasting terms. "Utter annihilation" and destruction," thus, suggest complete national and physical extinction. The use of the subsequent preposition ἀπὸ is locative, "from the desert to Diblah" (ἀπὸ τῆς ἐρήμου Δεβλαθα) and also expansive. God says he will "stretch out my hand" (καὶ ἐκτενῶ τὴν χεῖρά μου) over the earth, and this results in "utter annihilation and destruction" against

the land. The use of ὄλεθρον here is a signature image of God's cataclysmic and apocalyptic response to evil, whether national or individual, Jew or Gentile. None are exempt from this judgment, and Israel is not excluded either—according to Ezekiel 6.

In Ezekiel 14:16, we have a severe condemnation of idolaters, most likely Israel. In v.14, we begin with a declarative statement from God: ζῶ ἐγώ, λέγει κύριος ("as I live, declares the Lord"), which is then followed by a conditional particle ("if"). God then follows this with a future middle participle σωθήσονται, which is contrasted with ἡ δὲ γῆ ἔσται εἰς ὄλεθρον ("but the earth is destroyed"). The author uses the verb σώζω ("salvation, liberation") and the noun ὄλεθρον to contrast two specific concepts: liberation and destruction. Had Israel not rebelled into idolatry, they would be saved. However, because of idolatry, the sons and daughters of Israel will undergo destruction.

Echoing the themes found in Ezekiel, Hosea 9:6 speaks of God's judgment of Israel because of their unfaithfulness (v.1), and the lot (or "silver") of Israel will inherit¹⁶ ὄλεθρος. These days are spoken of in terms of "vengeance" (ἐκδικήσεως) and "paying back" (ἀνταποδόσεως); this language poses a great threat to Israel if they do not repent, and while we know the ending of the story in Hosea 14, this violent language remains and causes us to greatly consider—as modern Christians—our own "inheritance" based on our own idols: greed, lust for political power, and sexual immorality. In the New Testament, an inheritance can be revoked if a person or community participates in sin.¹⁷ As God exhorts Israel in 14:1, "Return Israel, to the Lord your God!" The call for repentance requires the active participation of those at fault, and while God is forgiving,

¹⁶ Future active verb: κληρονομήσει

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 5:4-5.

God is also aware of the great cost of permitting oppression and enduring his own heartache.

In summation, the various uses of ὄλεθρος in the LXX are specifically directed at foreign nations or evil empires. In several of these texts, the use of the noun γῆ ("earth, land") and her cognates are employed. We saw this in 1 Kings 13:34, Jer. 25:31 and in both Ezekiel texts. This is not directed at the literal ground, as if God is angry at dust and rocks. Rather, the earth represents the corporate nature of living creation, of humanity, the people living on God's actual earth. The creational aspect cannot be missed, and this ties in nicely with the aspect of political and national boundaries. Because the earth is divided amongst kings and kingdoms, oppressors and rulers, the divine judgments spoken about in the LXX result in the utter ruination of oppressive nation-states opposed to God and God's minority people. The violence here is almost wholly directed at tyrannical foreign powers, hell-bent on dominating and subjecting Israel. God's response, then, is the liberation of the oppressed and the annihilation of the tyrannical political powers. The language envisions a King attacking a domineering foreign kingdom with full and comprehensive violent force, and sometimes God even directs his own wrath against his disloyal subjects who oppress their own people. This illustrates that God is more concerned with right or covenantal behavior than one's ethnicity, gender, or social status.

3. The Intertextual Paul and the Destruction of the Wicked

Having quickly surveyed the LXX and her various uses of ὄλεθρος, we are now in a better state to understand what Paul exactly means by his own use of the phrase ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον. However, before we can do this, we must look at the three other uses of this noun in Paul's other epistles. This will take the form of a cursory summary.

3.1 The Curious Incident of the Incestuous Man: 1 Cor. 5:1-5

Commentators have debated the nature of the offense in 1 Cor. 5:1-5, but the most natural reading refers to a person (most probably a man) sexually “having” (ἔχειν) his father’s wife. This would be a case of incest, and one that Paul rightly condemns as πορνεία (“sexual immorality”). Because the Corinthian church, reveling in their over-realized eschatology and seeming disdain for the body, have delighted in this man’s sexual immorality. Paul’s response is quite stunning and harsh: “give this man over to Satan for the destruction of the body, so that his life [or ‘spirit’] *might be saved* in the day of the Lord” (AT).¹⁸ The use of the aorist subjunctive verb σωθῆ likely refers to the uncertainty Paul feels about the incestuous man’s repentance, and thus while this measure is intended to restore him, Paul does not view it as probably, or even perhaps likely.¹⁹ There is no need to take ὄλεθρον “figuratively,”²⁰ as the use of ὄλεθρον τῆς σαρκός does merely not refer to the ‘ruination’ of the body, but the utter destruction of the human person.²¹ Given

¹⁸ Παραδοῦναι τὸν τοιοῦτον τῷ Σατανᾷ εἰς ὄλεθρον τῆς σαρκός, ἵνα τὸ πνεῦμα σωθῆ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τοῦ κυρίου. I translate σαρκός as “body” because I do not believe Paul is interested in speaking in a demeaning manner about the body (as his argument in 1 Cor. 15:35-58 illustrates), but is concerned with the addictive destruction sexual immorality has upon the totality of the human person: mind and body, individual and community. To translate the term as “flesh” seems to demean the body, which is not Paul’s intent, and also to carry a great deal of theological baggage that proposes a dualism of the human person, a thought I do not share.

¹⁹ The author of 1 Timothy uses similar language in 1:20, stating that certain false teachers were “handed over to Satan so that they may be corrected and not to blaspheme” (παρέδωκα τῷ Σατανᾷ ἵνα παιδευθῶσι μὴ βλασφημεῖν). The use of the aorist subjunctive leaves the question open to the completion of the disciplinary actions and whether or not Paul believed they would repent.

²⁰ Contra Daniel K. Bediako, “Spirit and Flesh: An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 5:5,” *Cultural and Religious Studies* 1.1 (2013), 23. The affect of ὄλεθρον upon a human person is not ‘figurative,’ but is rather self-destructive not only to the man, but also to the woman and the community at large, and given the dynamics of power amongst men and women, Paul’s exclusion of him may have an inferred egalitarian bent that is predicated upon protecting the woman. The notion of ‘figurative’ is simply mistaken and unwarranted.

²¹ Elsewhere Paul speaks of those who act in sinful or idolatrous ways do not have an inheritance in the Kingdom of God (Eph. 5:5-6), which suggests a concept of somatic ethics is tied to actions and also to how one lives in regards to their sexuality.

the oft-gruesome nature of sexually transmitted diseases in the ancient world,²² this is a cruel and horrific punishment bestowed upon the man, and would lead to a painful and wretched death if he did not repent—or even if he did repent. Barth Campbell notes, “Paul considers such a removal an abandonment of the offender to the destructive power of Satan.”²³ I would also add, to the man’s own sexual vices. Campbell notes, and I concur, that at this point in Paul’s life, *σάρκός* and *πνεῦμα* have become ethical terms.²⁴ The fruit of one’s life is grown within the human body, and sometimes the reward is far too great. The use of the idiom “the day of the Lord” suggests an apocalyptic aspect to this judgment, which is coupled specifically with somatic ethics.

3.2 Sudden Destruction: 1 Thess. 5:3

In 1 Thess. 5:3, this “destruction” is spoken of as “sudden”²⁵ and is compared to “birth pangs.” The use of the singular verb *ἐφίσταται* (“immanent”) refers to the unanticipated element of the apocalyptic judgment of God “on the day of the Lord” (5:2) and the unavoidable nature of this judgment. Paul’s use of *ὄλεθρος* here contains a possible Christological element, as it is common for “Lord” (*κυρίου*; 5:2) to refer both to Christ and to God. Here, whoever is visiting apocalyptic judgment upon the persecutors, the result is the same: destruction on the day of the Lord. A few examples from the Old Testament should suffice:

- “Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction (*συντριβή*) from the Almighty!...See, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce

²² See, for instance, the discussion and documentation of by Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 172-181.

²³ Barth Campbell, “Flesh and Spirit in 1 Cor. 5:5: An Exercise in Rhetorical Criticism of the NT,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36.3 (1993), 331-342, 340.

²⁴ Campbell, “Flesh and Spirit, 340-341. I had the same thought, but Campbell elucidated it in a clearer manner than I had, so I give him the full credit for his observation.

²⁵ Or rather, the term *αἰφνίδιος* means something like unanticipated or unexpected.

anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy (ἀπολέσαι) its sinners from it. (Is. 13:6, 9).

- “Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord’s wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed (καταναλωθήσεται); for a full, a terrible end (συντέλειαν) he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.” (Zeph. 1:18).

The day of the Lord is an idiomatic phrase loaded with battle imagery and political language: God returns to destroy the oppressors of Israel—and sometimes even those within Israel—and this cataclysmic destruction is irrevocable and final.

3.3 Destruction and More Destruction: 1 Tim. 6:9

The phrase under consideration in 1 Tim. 6:9 is εἰς ὄλεθρον καὶ ἀπόλειαν (“into destruction—even annihilation”). In speaking about βουλόμενοι πλουτεῖν (“desiring to be wealthy”), the author is specifying a life lived that results in utter destruction. The conjunction καὶ, which is in between the two nouns, could be taken epexegetically, that is, creating an intentional rhetorical redundancy (“destruction, annihilation”) and using the second noun as an intensifier. The use of the verb ἀπεπλανήθησαν (“to deceive” or “lead away”) refers to false teachers in Mark 13:22, which suggests apostasy as a result of the exclusive and singular love of wealth. To be committing apostasy, however one defines the term, results in the complete and utter destruction of the human person: whether through a life of sin, or in the end result of death and ultimate annihilation. Thus, “destruction” and “even annihilation” are two sides of the same coin and point us to the same conclusion: the state of utter destruction resulting from the folly of temporal wealth.

4. The Destruction from the Presence of the Lord: 2 Thess. 1:9

ἐν φλογὶ πυρός, διδόντος ἐκδίκησιν τοῖς μὴ εἰδόσι θεὸν καὶ τοῖς μὴ ὑπακούουσιν
τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ, οἵτινες δίκην τίσουσιν ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον
ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ κυρίου καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς δόξης τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ

“In flames of fire, paying back punishment to those not knowing God and not obeying the Gospel of our Lord Jesus, the ones will pay the retribution of eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”

Beginning with the phrase ἐν φλογὶ πυρός (“in/by flames of fire”), we have two immediate texts in the LXX that help clarify this image: Ex. 3:2 and Third-Isaiah 66:15. Ex. 3:2 states that the angel of the Lord came out of the bush ἐν φλογὶ πυρός, and the significance of this is that the bush, contrary to modern science and our own expectation, was not incinerated (οὐ κατεκαίετο). In any normal circumstance, that bush would be ashes. In Third-Isaiah 66:15—the more overt intertextual echo—we have a scene of apocalyptic judgment against the totality of humanity where the Lord appears ἐν φλογὶ πυρός, with the military and political image of “chariots,” returning as King.²⁶ Thus the idiom is always in relation to the appearance of the Angel of the Lord, or YHWH himself. The additional inclusion of ἐκδίκησιν and a different form of διδόντος (ἀποδοῦναι) make it clear that Third-Isaiah 66:15 is a foundation verse for understanding Paul’s language here. The corporate or political element of Third-Isaiah 66 is compounded by Isaiah’s use of ἔθνος (“nations”), adding an additional national element

²⁶ Paul attributes this text likely to Christ, thus equating him with YHWH’s actions in the Old Testament. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 186-187; Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 31-83, 57-63.

to God's judgment. The fact that God is "paying back" (ἀνταποδοῦναι) the oppressors of the Thessalonians adds an additional element taken from the LXX.²⁷

Regarding the phrase under dispute—ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον—most modern commentators have simply capitalized upon a specific stream of scholarship, all essentially asserting the same theological interpretive model for ὄλεθρον. Abraham Malherbe writes, "[ὄλεθρον] does not mean annihilation, but everlasting ruin."²⁸ Gene Green states, "The apostle by no means implies that those who have rejected God will be annihilated eternally."²⁹ Douglas Moo asserts, "*olethros* would mean not that the wicked simply cease to exist but that they suffer ruin."³⁰ It must be noted that Moo does not actually address the arguments by Daniel G. Reid in his paper on this particular passage at ETS, where Reid argues that the "Divine Warrior" motif denotes annihilation.³¹ Moo, counter to basic exegetical principles, simply adopts a wider semantic range without sufficient justification. When YHWH is continually represented as a King destroying his enemies, Moo's weak rejoinder of "we should not therefore assume that the victory of Yahweh over his enemies must likewise take the form of physical destruction"³² lacks any basis for acceptance. Aside from being a red herring, Moo has simply assumed the validity of his own interpretation and left Reid's robust arguments untouched. If the language of destruction in the Old Testament and the LXX are consistently used in terms

²⁷ For instance, ἀνταποδίδομι appears throughout the LXX in reference to the wicked (ἀδικία) and how God "repays" them for their wickedness and injustice. C.f. Lev. 18:25; Jer. 16:18; 51:6; Hos. 14:2

²⁸ Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 402.

²⁹ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 292. Green also makes a rather condescending comment about annihilationism being "a notion that appears to take the edge off the severity of divine judgment." To be equally as forthright, Green would be hard-pressed to say this directly to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, as spoken of in 2 Peter 2:6. As will be shown below, Green is simply incorrect about the severity of judgment in Paul, and that Paul believed "destruction/death" to be a just punishment.

³⁰ Douglas J. Moo, "Paul on Hell," in *Hell Under Fire* (Ed. Robert A Peterson and Christopher Morgan: Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 106.

³¹ Moo, "Paul on Hell," 105 n.37.

³² Moo, "Paul on Hell," 106.

of physical and national destruction (hint: they are), then Moo needs to provide a sufficient justification for not accepting the basic language and imagery of Scripture.³³ As it stands, he does not do so, and so his arguments should remain unconvincing to critical evangelical readers. Ernest Best also offers a related line of interpretation, stating "in none of these passages [regarding ὄλεθρον in Paul, and in 2 Thess. 1:9] is annihilation suggested; instead the idea is that of 'punishment' as something which takes place in an active way."³⁴ Aside from being largely self-defeating and based on a flagrant misunderstanding of the doctrine of annihilationism (we *do* believe that punishment is active), Best also offers some evidence that contradicts his own interpretation when he cites on the very next page when he suggests that that "the idea of annihilation may however be present in Wisdom 1:14."³⁵ Ben Witherington contradicts his own claims by stating, "eternal destruction, then, is the opposite of eternal life,"³⁶ and simply cites Malherbe's rather terse and unsupported claim that "the phrase here then means everlasting or perpetual ruin, not annihilation."³⁷ Witherington does not appear cognizant of the contradiction between "life" and "destruction," especially a destruction that is largely—if not exclusively—associated with death.³⁸ This will be argued more fully below.

All of the scholars cite some or all of the relevant LXX texts, but do not explain their significance regarding national or physical destruction in their original context. This

³³ Moo attempts to cast a wider semantic net with an appeal to non-human objects being "apollumi" (Moo, "Paul on Hell," 105). However, there is a basic difference between a human agent and non-human object when the noun 'destruction' is applied, and Moo does not seem to recognize this crucial distinction.

³⁴ Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Black, 1972), 261.

³⁵ Best, *Thessalonians*, 262.

³⁶ Ben Witherington, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 196.

³⁷ Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 196.

³⁸ C.f. Rom. 6:21-23.

illustrates the important fact that fresh research must be done, and that many commentators have simply assumed the "party line," to use a colloquial and possibly offensive term.³⁹ Operating with rationalistic and uncritical tradition as their guide, of course "annihilation" cannot be in any of these texts. When one adopts the widest possible semantic range as a heuristic device, then it makes sense that traditionalists would opt for less persuasive and compelling reasons to reject annihilationism. Indeed, it seems that Moo, Best, Malherbe and Green are operating with certain prejudices against annihilationism, and this paper has already undercut much of their attempts to dismiss annihilationism.

As representative, I shall use Charles Wanamaker's otherwise fine commentary as my main interlocutor. Wanamaker sees ὄλεθρον as concerning "a more metaphorical meaning...[and] the phrase 'eternal destruction' should probably be taken in a metaphorical manner as indicating the severity of the punishment awaiting the enemies of God."⁴⁰ He also makes the curious and unsubstantiated statement, "...there is no evidence in Paul (or the rest of the New Testament) for a concept of final annihilation of the godless..."⁴¹ This is simply fallacious, and since Wanamaker has deflected the burden of proof to annihilationists, allow me to shoulder it for a moment.⁴²

Brief Excursus on "Destruction in Paul"

Paul's chief lexicon, as described earlier, involves the language of "death," "destruction," and "perishing" as his operative language. Moo essential concedes this in his brief survey

³⁹ Frankly, I believe their offense is not justified, as it appears none of the major commentators have done fresh research on their own, but have simply "copied" and "pasted" the same thoughts, resulting in a scholarly 'echo chamber.'

⁴⁰ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 228-229.

⁴¹ Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 229.

⁴² Deflecting the burden of proof is a prominent method used by traditionalists in order to avoid the argument. See Jerry Walls, "A Hell and Purgatory Response," in *Four Views on Hell*, 97.

of Paul's language, though he does so unwittingly.⁴³ For instance, Paul uses an explicit contrast between "those who are perishing" (ἀπολλυμένοις) and "those who are being liberated" (σφζομένοις) in 1 Cor. 1:18, suggesting that the fate of the wicked is not "metaphorical," but natural in the most normal sense of the word.⁴⁴ Paul also alludes to a story in the Old Testament where serpents "killed" (ἀπόλλυντο) rebellious Israelites in 1 Cor. 10:9-10 and there is no hint that this language of destruction refers to metaphors or images: these people died, to use Wanamaker's language, "a physical sense."⁴⁵ Paul also says that the "end" (τέλος) of the wicked is "destruction" (ἀπόλεια) in Philippians 3:19. In any normative sense of language, one understands that the teleological outcome of a life apart from Christ is "destruction." Words mean things, and adopting wider semantic ranges without justification reveals a devastating weakness built into traditionalist presuppositions. To quote Ronnie Demler at length:

The burden lies squarely on traditionalists to show that a multitude of passages must be interpreted figuratively or spiritually and that their equivocal answers to the above questions are genuinely motivated by careful exegesis and not a pre-commitment to a particular theological tradition.

*I think it's going to be a tough sell.*⁴⁶

Paul's language is clear and consistent, and should not require one to "spiritualize" the actuality of the real world: we live in a physical creation, and to "spiritualize" normal language is more the hallmark of American evangelical hermeneutics than a robust

⁴³ Moo, "Paul on Hell," 92-93.

⁴⁴ See also a similar parallel in 2 Cor. 2:15.

⁴⁵ Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 228.

⁴⁶ Ronnie Demler, "Sic et Non: Traditionalism's Scandal" in *A Consuming Passion: Essays on Hell and Immortality in Honor of Edward Fudge* (Ed. Christopher M. Date and Ron Highfield: Eugene: Pickwick, 2015), 278. The entire essay is life-changing, soul changing even.

understanding of biblical words and their ancient meanings.⁴⁷ For example, Douglas Moo simply asserts, "The words need not mean "destruction" in the sense of "extinction."⁴⁸ As has been shown, there is no reason to adopt Moo's (and others) wider semantic range unless he gives sufficient reason regarding the nature of this language when applied to human agents. Wanamaker also disconnects destruction into two senses (metaphorical *or* literal/physical)⁴⁹ without justification: one can see how both meanings can be applied to a single text, and to separate the two allows many to simply divide and divorce a biblical text from its meaning. Because the language utilized in the LXX is dominantly in favor of the physical or literal destruction of people or nations, Wanamaker's and those who utilize his arguments like Douglas Moo are unjustified and unwarranted in their conclusions.⁵⁰

End Excursus

Having established a "physical" or "literal" reading of ὄλεθρον in the LXX and in Paul outside of this text, the debate then becomes about how the adjective αἰώνιον functions in relation to ὄλεθρον. Space prevents me from offering a survey of αἰώνιον but allow me a few words on it. To reduce the meaning of αἰώνιον to being mere of "time"—that is, of eternity—is not helpful and misses the complexities of the term. While incorrectly denying that ὄλεθρον means "annihilation," Ernest Best does state quite correctly "the

⁴⁷ For instance, one can see a person saying she was "spiritually numb," but this ignores the somatic reality of a relationship with God, especially of the mind. Paul does not view such things as "spiritual," but actual.

⁴⁸ Moo, "Paul on Hell," 105.

⁴⁹ Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 228.

⁵⁰ This also applies to the aforementioned scholars who have followed Wanamaker. If one wanted to include the broader New Testament (and Wanamaker does mistakenly allude to the New Testament as not having this concept of annihilation), one could point to the myriad of texts in the New Testament: c.f. Matt. 7:13; 10:28; John 3:16-17; 2 Peter 2:4-14; 3:7, 16.

Jew was not interested in metaphysical infinitude."⁵¹ In the Old Testament, ὄλεθρον has itself an end in sight: the eradication of enemies or empires. The human person cannot withstand the total fury of the creator God, and so ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον likely denotes a punishment that has a quality of divinity, that is, it comes from God. To stress "metaphysical infinitude" is a modern play on words that Paul would've frowned upon. Thus the phrase ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον could be translated in a more colloquial manner as "final destruction." One can also state that an "eternal" death from which the wicked are never raised or remembered is indeed "eternal." Witherington states that "the word eternal indicates the finality of the outcome," citing and agreeing with the late and great F.F. Bruce.⁵² The battle imagery forces us to consider the broader nationalist themes found in the Old Testament, where ancient warriors or the Divine King lay waste to people, cities and nations.

This reading of ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον finds support in the prepositional phrase that follows: "from the face of the Lord." Modern translations (for example, the NIV) insert the phrase "and shut out from" before the preposition ἀπό; there is not word here to support this rendering, and the preposition simply means "from." This "eternal destruction" is "from" God. Stanley Porter offers three basic meanings of ἀπό:⁵³

- Locative (movement away from)
- Temporal (time from which)
- Instrumental (causal, agentive)

⁵¹ Best, *Thessalonians*, 262.

⁵² Witherington, *Thessalonians*, 196 n.59.

⁵³ Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 146-147.

Porter includes the text under discussion in the "locative" category, thus the preposition serves to move the wicked "away from" God. However, ἀπό more likely belongs in the instrumental category for three reasons: first, there is no qualifying phrase to suggest separation or displacement regarding ὄλεθρον: "exclusion" is not the operative translation of the term. The Old Testament Intertexts do not seem to support this reading, as we have seen. Second, it ignores the fact that Christ is the one who appears and is the agent by which this ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον comes from; Christ is the source or cause of it. Third and finally, the idea of being punished "away from" God is at odds with the concept of a destructive judgment that comes *from* God, who initiates the eschatological apocalypse. The preposition ἀπό occurs quite often in the LXX as modifying the noun πρόσωπον ("presence"), and the syntactical genitival construction of the phrase ἀπό προσώπου suggests that Paul is following a standard grammatical convention. The phrase occurs many times in the LXX, especially in Isaiah 2:10, 19 and 21. Most agree that Paul is partially citing Isaiah 2:10, 19 and 21⁵⁴ where those of the house of Jacob (2:5) are trying to hide from the coming apocalyptic God. The phrase ἀπό προσώπου τοῦ φόβου κυρίου καὶ ἀπό τῆς δόξης τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ occurs similarly in each of these three verses, and in 2:10 they are "hiding" (κρύπτεσθε) from the presence of God, who is apocalyptically imminent. The imagery concerns a God enthroned returning in power and glory, and they are fleeing his presence by rushing into the rocks.

Thus, the preposition fulfills an "instrumental" or "causal" function as the coming presence of God results in the punishment of eternal destruction of the wicked. In Isaiah 2, it is the people of Israel: in 2 Thess 1:9, it is the oppressors of God's people. So while

⁵⁴ See the discussion in Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 229 and F.F. Bruce, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 152.

there is "movement" in this text, it is God who is returning, not the wicked. Thus the text is talking about an "eternal destruction that comes *from* the presence of the Lord." The apocalyptic Christ returning to destroy his enemies comports succinctly with the Old Testament, where God intervenes in history, toppling governments or protecting individuals who dare oppress the innocent. As it was written in 1 Thess. 5:3, the "sudden destruction" is "inescapable" (ἐκφύγωσιν). So while the oppressors may flee, they cannot escape the apocalyptic God. God, as the ultimate source of life and light, can remove life or give it as a gift (c.f. Rom. 6:23). The parallels one can draw between eternal life and eternal destruction suggest destruction is the cessation of life, of one's total namesake and one's entire reality. In a word, destruction here is a final and irrevocable death that continues in a state of non-life forever. As Daniel G. Reid helpfully notes, "it makes good sense to understand ὄλεθρον as "destruction" (a stronger English word than "ruin") and to see it as an event, not an ongoing process."⁵⁵ Destruction, as seen in Paul, is the literal and physical end of the human person and/or the nationalistic kingdom, whether metaphorical entities such as otherworldly powers, whether literal kingdoms or nations, or even individuals who adamantly refuse to participate in the redemptive plan of God in salvation-history. Their final death, at the hand of God's sword results in corpses for all to see (Third-Isaiah 66:24), is where all flesh can witness the final and terrible judgment of God. Nowhere in any of Paul's Intertexts does God eternally torment or torture human beings or corporate entities (for example, the 'powers' and ultimately death are destroyed

⁵⁵ Daniel G. Reid, "2 Thessalonians 1:9: "Separated from" or "Destruction from" the Presence of the Lord?" A paper read at the November 2001 meeting of the Pauline Studies Group at the Evangelical Theological Society National Meeting in Colorado Springs, Colorado. 15. Originally cited in Moo, "Paul on Hell," 105 n.37. Dr. Reid kindly sent me his paper, which I found very compelling.

in 1 Cor. 15:24-26). This is common in Second Temple Judaism broadly conceived.⁵⁶

God does not seem to gloat over people's prolonged sufferings. Rather, he acts in a decisive and instantaneous manner, removing the gift of life that only he can give.

In summation, punitive details involving an eternal existence of pain and suffering are not present in this text, and the meaning is relatively clear: the finality of destruction comes *from* God. God comes in "flaming fire," meeting out punishment against the oppressors of Christ's people in Paul's community, and this punishment is of a final and destructive result, or even an "event." I conclude with the now-deceased E. Earle Ellis who states, "The Bible presents man totally as a temporal creature whom God relates to, in both salvation and judgment, totally in time and history, this age and the age to come."⁵⁷ More could be said, but Ellis has rightly brought things to their necessary end. A brief note on Divine violence before my conclusion.

5. The Politics of Passivism and Eternal Punishment

I wish to explore a resulting topic in this section, especially that of the role of Divine violence. What is unique is that Paul does not tell those Christians in Thessalonica to pay back their evil. Rather, Christ is the one who "keeps the record books" of sin and persecution, not Christians.⁵⁸ This follows the Pauline principle of non-retaliation (c.f. Rom. 12-14), and the belief that God is the only just one who can exact justice. The participants in 2 Thess. 1:9 are encouraged by these words of vengeance, but they

⁵⁶ Reid, "2 Thess. 1:9," 7-9. See also David Instone-Brewer, "Eternal Punishment in First-Century Jewish Thought," in *A Consuming Passion: Essays on Hell and Immortality in Honor of Edward Fudge* (Ed. Christopher M. Date and Ron Highfield: Cascade: Pickwick, 2015), 215-244.

⁵⁷ E. Earle Ellis, "New Testament Teaching on Hell," in *Rethinking Hell: Readings in Evangelical Conditionalism* (ed. Christopher M. Date, Gregory G. Stump & Joshua W. Anderson; Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 131.

⁵⁸ Eschatological punishment or judgment in the Old Testament also follows the pattern of destruction, not torment.

themselves are not to take up the sword: that belongs only to Christ and to God.⁵⁹ The word for vengeance (ἐκδίκησις) is not entirely common in the New Testament, and it only occurs three times in Paul:⁶⁰ in the two other instances aside from 2 Thess. 1:8, Christians are exhorted to avoid violence, and in 2 Cor. 7:11 it is said that the Corinthians are “pure” of this, and this is morally laudatory behavior. As we saw in Proverbs 1:26-27, Wisdom (or the wise person) exhorts God to “destroy” her enemies, and she herself is non-violent in this approach. The cataclysmic nature of God’s wrath, resulting in a final and irrevocable destruction, means that—to paraphrase the words of the now-deceased Lord Eddard Stark—that the [righteous] king should be the one to swing the sword.⁶¹ This is not the place to discuss the ethics of the human means of capital punishment, but it offers us three prospects for the Christian life:

First, ultimate vengeance is to be done by the Divine so as to preserve the ethics of justice. God is just, and free from darkness. Second, to reduce “destruction” to merely individualistic or spiritual concepts is to miss out of the earthy and corporate nature of God’s creation, and God’s action against evil: God has dirt under his fingernails, after all. Nations and Empires are not exempt, then, nor now. Third and finally, the prospect of encouragement: not that we desire vengeance, but that we know that Christ is righteous and his ways are just, and that no one is excluded from God’s justice.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, my thanks to you for sticking this out! In summarizing the extent of this complex and interesting text, we have shown that a conscious state of torment does not

⁵⁹ See for instance Preston Sprinkle, *Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013), esp. 195-215, 205.

⁶⁰ Rom. 12:19; 2 Cor. 7:11, 2 Thess. 1:8. Other texts in the New Testament include Luke 18:7-8; 21:22; Acts 7:24; Heb. 10:30 and 1 Peter 2:14.

⁶¹ *Game of Thrones*, episode 1.

flow naturally from this text—or in that matter, from the totality of any of Paul's surviving writings. We have also shown that the LXX is extremely relevant to this discussion, and that the political and national themes therein are vibrantly centered for Paul. It can be said that 2 Thess. 1:9 does not offer marginal support for the doctrine of eternal conscious torment. Contrary to the widespread assumptions about eternal torment in Paul's surviving epistles, one can scarcely find any reference to it. As Douglas Moo has perhaps unwittingly admitted, the most common words that Paul uses include "death, die," and "perish, destroy," "destruction."⁶² All annihilationists concur.

Thus, any argument that suggests a doctrine of eternal conscious misery in this text—and within the larger New Testament canon—should be immediately suspect, and any misapplied proof text from Paul should be heavily scrutinized—when this is done, these alleged proof texts will be like the wicked on that great and terrible day of judgment, nowhere to be found.

⁶² Moo, "Paul on Hell," 93.