

# Basil Atkinson: A Key Figure for Twentieth-Century Evangelical Annihilationism

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## Introduction

I had learnt the doctrine [of conditional immortality] from Basil Atkinson in (I suppose) about 1934. Hitherto I had held the doctrine of unending torment, which had been particularly impressed on me by R A Torrey in *What the Bible Teaches*. The torments of the lost had occupied a considerable place in my prayers and I felt deflated when I first heard their everlastingness questioned. But I was fairly certain that Basil Atkinson was right.<sup>1</sup>

With these words John Wenham credits Basil Atkinson with teaching him annihilationism, the view that the wicked will eventually be obliterated. It is likely that Atkinson pointed other Anglican evangelical scholars in the same direction. This paper will attempt to answer three questions concerning Atkinson: Who is he? What is his case for conditionalism? And have others argued in similar fashion?

Born in 1895, Basil Atkinson gained a PhD in 1926 at Magdalene College, Cambridge. From 1925 to 1960 he served as Under-Librarian in the University Library there. He became well-known in evangelical circles as a leader of devotional Bible readings.<sup>2</sup> ‘An eccentric bachelor academic, [he] was the main adviser of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union during the years when the Inter-Varsity Fellowship was being built up and conservative Evangelicals were trying to extricate themselves from liberalism. He was the great pillar of orthodoxy. . .’<sup>3</sup>

Atkinson’s pen was not idle. He wrote *The War with Satan* (1946), a commentary on the book of Revelation, *Pocket Commentaries on the Bible on Genesis to Numbers* (1955-62), and *The Times of the Gentiles: A Brief Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (1968). He also wrote devotional books of substance, including *Is the Bible True?* (1934), *Valiant in Fight* (1937), an inspirational review of church history, and *The Christian’s Use of the Old Testament* (1952). An accomplished linguist, he wrote *Ancient Illyrian* (1931-2), *The Greek Language* (1932), and *A Theology of Prepositions* (1945).

The most important of his writings for our present purposes is his privately published *Life and Immortality: An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as They Are Revealed in the Scriptures* (1969). Wenham calls this book ‘the fruit of a lifetime of study’ and ‘a remarkable piece of sustained argument’.<sup>4</sup> Peter Toon praises *Life and Immortality* and summarizes its contents:

Atkinson used all his linguistic gifts to argue that the Bible clearly teaches (1) unconscious existence from death to the general resurrection, (2) the eternal joy of the redeemed in their glorious resurrection bodies from the resurrection and for ever, and (3) the annihilation of the ungodly after they have been raised to appear before the throne of judgement and suitably punished there. And, he insisted, the Bible does not teach the immortality of the soul. Atkinson’s arguments for the annihilation of the person after the last judgement are based

wholly on biblical exegesis: he refuses to use any arguments based upon the character of God and upon ideas of what is just or unjust punishment.<sup>5</sup>

Although he was an influential figure in the development of modern British Evangelicalism, Atkinson's importance has largely been forgotten. I propose to evaluate his case for conditionalism, paying special attention to his arguments based upon emotional appeal, theology, linguistics and hermeneutics. At the end of each section I will list subsequent conditionalists who used similar arguments.

## **Arguments That Appeal to Emotion**

Atkinson argued for annihilationism by appealing to the emotions of his readers. Although these appeals are not his best academic arguments, I suspect that they exerted a powerful effect on many. I will discuss three examples of this type of argument.

### **The Argument from Silence**

First, he employs the argument from silence. In fact, he uses it more than fifty times in the space of 112 pages of *Life and Immortality*. I will cite two examples. He combines the argument from silence with hyperbole when he comments on 2 Corinthians 5:1:

Now if the apostle had expected to be with Christ in glory in a disembodied state, could he have passed this expectation entirely over in a context such as this and fixed his whole hope on his resurrected body? 'We know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle be dissolved...', why this is exactly the place to say, '...we shall be in spirit in the presence of the Lord in heaven.' But he did not say it. The only reason can be that he knew of no such hope.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, when commenting on Psalm 21:9 ('Thou shalt make them as a fiery oven in the time of thine anger' AV) he writes:

Now does being made like a fiery oven mean being preserved and suffering in fire for ever? How does David go on? 'The Lord shall swallow them up in his wrath, and the fire shall devour them.' To swallow up can only be a figure for disappearance and the fire does to them what fire as we know it always does and what we should naturally expect it to do. There is no hint anywhere in Scripture that the eternal fire functions in substantially any other way than the fire we know, as there must have been to avoid deception, had it been the case.<sup>7</sup>

The words 'as there must have been to avoid deception' constitute inflammatory language. Unfortunately this is not the only use of such language in *Life and Immortality*.

### **The Use of Emotively Charged Language**

This is the second way in which Atkinson makes emotional appeals to his readers – by using emotively charged language. He paints eternal conscious punishment in terrible colours when he comments on the words in Hannah's song 'the wicked shall be silent in darkness':

This truth leaves no room whatever for the shrieks and groans of the damned nor for the lurid light of the torturing flames nor the red hot floor of hell, on which we have read of infants crawling. And if ever it could be conceivably true that they so crawl, would they do it in silence?<sup>8</sup>

Atkinson combines inflammatory language with the argument from silence when he discusses the resurrection of the dead in the gospels:

We now turn to Luke 14:14. Here we find the Lord telling those who entertain the poor and those who cannot entertain them in return that it will be recompensed them in the resurrection of the just. Notice that there is no word about recompense at death. If, as the Lord here distinctly states, recompense does not come till resurrection, it follows that the departed, if they are alive, have not got perfect satisfaction and fulfilment. This is a dangerous and unscriptural doctrine. But difficulty vanishes if we believe the teaching of Scripture that the dead are sleeping in their graves.<sup>9</sup>

### **Implying Guilt by Association**

Atkinson's third appeal to emotion is to imply guilt by association. This is rare, but at least once he does so in combination with the argument from silence. At the end of his remarks on Job 14:12 he writes:

No hint is given in this passage in Job or anywhere else in Scripture that the dead are alive in an invisible world. It is a matter of great thankfulness that most Evangelicals who believe that they are have been able to resist successfully the errors that arise from such a belief, yet there is no doubt that it makes easier the road to prayers for the dead, to spiritualism, to Mariolatry, and saint worship and to purgatory.<sup>10</sup>

### **Evaluation**

How are we to assess these arguments that appeal to the readers' emotions? First, let me state that I have no interest in judging Atkinson's motives. I do not accuse him of attempting to manipulate his readers. Rather, I think he was passionate in his commitment to soul-sleep and annihilationism, and that his passion got the better of him at times.

Moreover, such passionate conviction is not to be despised, because: 'Theology is one of the most human of disciplines. We seek to communicate the deepest convictions of our hearts.' Therefore 'emotion is not entirely irrelevant to theological discussion'.<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding, Atkinson's appeals to emotion are what logicians call irrelevant arguments. These are arguments whose 'premises are *logically irrelevant* to, and therefore incapable of establishing the truth of, their conclusions' (italics in original).<sup>12</sup>

The repeated appeal to the argument from silence does not disprove traditionalism. In fact, this argument is a species of the fallacy of the *argumentum ad ignorantiam*. This fallacy 'is committed whenever it is argued that a proposition is... false because it has not been proved true'.<sup>13</sup> It is insufficient for Atkinson to point out that many biblical passages do not mention eternal punishment. Instead, he must answer the arguments from Scripture put forth by those who espouse eternal punishment. This he fails to do. His argument, therefore, is not logically persuasive. Nevertheless, it creates an emotional atmosphere in which the reader is encouraged to embrace conditionalism.

Arguing by using emotively charged language is likewise unconvincing. This is a variety of the *argumentum ad populum*. It is 'the attempt to win popular assent to a conclusion by arousing the feelings and enthusiasms of the multitude'.<sup>14</sup> Atkinson may succeed in this, but it does not constitute evidence for annihilationism or against traditionalism.

The argument for guilt by association in opposing eternal conscious punishment is easily answered by a counter-argument. Indeed, almost no evangelical Protestants believe in prayers for the dead, spiritualism, Mariolatry, saint worship or purgatory. Atkinson's claim, therefore, that belief in eternal punishment leads to such abuses is not substantiated by experience. Instead, it is falsified.

Actually, he weakens his case by appealing so strongly to his readers' emotions. Those who disagree with him will be put off by such devices. Any persuaded by these arguments are persuaded for the wrong reasons. Conviction based chiefly on emotion may not stand the test of logical argument.

Contemporary annihilationists, such as John Wenham, Edward Fudge and Clark Pinnock, also make strong appeals to their readers' emotions.<sup>15</sup>

## Arguments Based on Systematic Theology

Atkinson also employs arguments based on systematics. He argues for his position from the perspectives of the doctrines of Christ and the last things.<sup>16</sup> Let us examine his arguments.

### An Argument from Christology

He makes a case for conditionalism from Christology. Specifically, he argues that in death 'the Lord Jesus suffered the very punishment due to sinners'.<sup>17</sup> What is the nature of this punishment? It 'cannot under any circumstances be eternal conscious suffering or misery, for he never suffered this and it is impossible that he could have'.<sup>18</sup> What did he suffer, then? 'Christ himself slept during his three days in the grave, as do the majority of his people. (A few will be alive at his coming.)'<sup>19</sup>

If we enquire as to the meaning of this sleeping in the grave, Atkinson explains: 'The soul of Christ, that is himself, the whole Man, was in *sh'ol*, that is, the grave, but he was not left there. After three days he rose again.'<sup>20</sup> Does Christ's being in the grave mean that he did not survive death? Atkinson answers affirmatively when he discusses 1 Corinthians 15. 'We may also notice that the whole of the apostle's teaching in this chapter is based upon the *resurrection* of Christ and not a word said about, much less based upon, the survival of Christ between death and resurrection' (italics in original).<sup>21</sup>

In fact, 'we have in history at the centre of our faith an open example and illustration of the punishment of sin. The Lord Jesus bore our sins in his own body on the tree (1 Pet 2:24)'. Specifically, the punishment for sin involves suffering followed by extinction, as Jesus' example demonstrates:

Now at the time of his passion the Lord Jesus underwent a period of increasing excruciating agony culminating in death. The suffering lasted some hours. There is no reason why we should not take this as the model and example of the final punishment of sin.<sup>22</sup>

Actually, this punishment precedes *the final* punishment for sin which is annihilation, as he goes on to explain: 'Thus the facts of the suffering and death of Christ Jesus prove conclusively that the punishment of sin is death in its natural sense of the deprivation of life.'<sup>23</sup>

Atkinson, therefore, holds that nothing of Jesus' humanity survived death until his resurrection. His human nature experienced death, that is, the deprivation of life. In other words, Jesus' humanity suffered extinction in death. I will give him the benefit of the doubt and conclude that he held that Jesus' deity did not suffer extinction.

He, then, seeks to bolster his case for conditionalism by arguing that Jesus in his death suffered the pains of hell, namely annihilation. Does Atkinson succeed? He does not. Instead, his argument from Christology for annihilationism must be deemed a failure. As I have written elsewhere, this argument fails miserably because it contradicts Chalcedonian orthodoxy by jeopardizing the inseparability of Christ's natures in the incarnation. According to this view Christ's natures did separate because his humanity ceased to exist when he died. Presumably Christ's resurrection constituted a second incarnation.<sup>24</sup>

LeRoy Edwin Froom and Edward Fudge also argue for conditionalism based on the premise that Christ's humanity was annihilated in death.<sup>25</sup>

### **An Argument from Eschatology**

Atkinson employs another argument from systematic theology for annihilationism, an argument from corporate eschatology. At the very end of *Life and Immortality* he appeals to the text most often claimed by universalists as proof for their position, 1 Corinthians 15:28: 'When he has done this [when the Father has put everything under the Son], then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all' (NIV). He is not persuaded of universalism by this text: 'Universalists have looked to this text (for want of a more definite passage), but it will not sustain their theory.'<sup>26</sup>

Rather, he appeals to 1 Corinthians 15:28 because he regards it as incompatible with traditionalism:

As long as we hold that the wicked live for ever in conscious misery in hell and especially if we hold what seems to be the most terrible aspect of that view, that they continue for ever to sin in hell, this word of the apostle raises grave difficulties. While sinners live and continue to sin, how can God be all in all?<sup>27</sup>

Although traditionalism cannot accommodate a straightforward reading of the verse, conditionalism handles it with ease:

But when we come to realize the teaching of the Bible that the devil, sin, death, wicked men, and all suffering will be exterminated for ever out of God's creation in the lake of fire, the apostle's statement lights up with golden glory and it is easy to see that on that great day and for all the eternity that follows it GOD will be ALL IN ALL.<sup>28</sup>

Annihilationism, therefore, unlike traditionalism, demonstrates fidelity to the Scriptures because it holds to the absolute elimination of evil from God's new creation. Is Atkinson correct in making this claim? He is not. As I have argued elsewhere, the key question is what God deems compatible with his being 'all in all'.<sup>29</sup> And this question is answered loudly and clearly by the Bible's last three chapters (especially by Revelation 20:10, 14; 21:8; 22:14-15), where God's final victory does not involve the eradication of evil beings from his universe. Rather, it means that he reigns for all eternity over the righteous (on the new earth) and the wicked (in hell). Subsequent conditionalists, including L E Froom and John Stott, also argue for annihilationism based on 1 Corinthians 15:28.<sup>30</sup>

## Arguments Based on Linguistics

As I mentioned earlier, Atkinson was an accomplished linguist who wrote a Greek grammar. Accordingly, he employed linguistic arguments in support of annihilationism in *Life and Immortality*. We will investigate three.

### An Argument Based on Old Testament Precedent

Atkinson is to be commended for his careful work on both the Old and New Testaments. *Life and Immortality* is replete with references to Hebrew and Greek words. Furthermore, he correctly regards the Old Testament as the most important source for understanding the New. Notwithstanding these virtues, his work is to be criticized for claiming that the Old Testament meaning of words and concepts is determinative for understanding their New Testament counterparts.

Atkinson explicitly enunciates this principle in two places. First, after discussing the meaning of *nepes* in the Old Testament, he begins to discuss ψυχη in the New.

When dealing with important Greek words in the New Testament, especially the great theological terms, we need always to bear in mind that the Greek words do not bear the particular meanings which they may have had in heathenism, but always those of their original Hebrew equivalents in the Old Testament, where the ideas originated.<sup>31</sup>

Later, when writing about the grave, he writes:

The significant original words are *sh'ol* in Hebrew and *haidees* in Greek. As they occur in the Bible they correspond exactly in meaning. *Haidees* was the word used in Greek mythology for the underworld or abode of the dead and it is quite likely as a result of this that so many have sought to retain this meaning for it in the New Testament and to transfer the meaning back to Hebrew *sh'ol*. The Greek word however in the New Testament is as always governed by the meaning of the Hebrew in the Old. Both mean the abode of the dead, but not at all in the sense of heathen mythology.<sup>32</sup>

How does Atkinson employ this linguistic principle in his exegesis of the New Testament? Two examples will show that he uses it to explain texts which are difficult for conditionalists to handle. First, with regard to the undying worm and unquenchable fire of Mark 9:43 and 48, he correctly points out that in this passage Jesus quotes Isaiah 66:24. He then contends that according to Isaiah: 'In the fire we see eternal destruction and in the worm the suffering that precedes it.' If one protests that Jesus is using Isaiah's words to speak of unceasing suffering in hell, Atkinson has a ready reply. 'Can we extract any other meaning from the evangelist's words after finding that they are a direct quotation from the prophet without breaking the unity of the Old and New Testaments?'<sup>33</sup>

Atkinson's exegesis here is problematic on a number of counts, not the least of which is his understanding of Isaiah 66:24.<sup>34</sup> But I want to stay focused on Atkinson's principle that the Old Testament significance of words is definitive for their counterparts in the New. May we look at a second example of this principle before evaluating it.

One of the most difficult texts for conditionalist interpreters is Revelation 20:10: ‘And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever’ (NIV).

How does Atkinson explain this passage? By twice appealing to his principle that Old Testament precedent determines the meaning of New Testament texts:

We have already found the annihilation of the devil foretold in Ezekiel 28:19 and here we see the fulfilment. This lake of fire is the everlasting fire prepared for his destruction (Matt 25:41). . . Many have used this verse and Revelation 14:10 to sustain the view of eternal conscious misery for the wicked in hell. This verse is clearly connected with Revelation 14:10, which gives us the clue to its interpretation. There we read of the smoke of the torment going up for ever and ever and we saw from the Old Testament passages on which the words are based that the torment ends in everlasting destruction. The meaning here must clearly be the same, or we should have an intolerable inconsistency. Here it is expressed by the verb instead of the noun. To be tormented for ever and ever means the same thing as the smoke going up for ever and ever, that the torment culminates in everlasting destruction.<sup>35</sup>

An evaluation of Atkinson’s claim that the meaning of Old Testament words and concepts is determinative for interpreting their New Testament counterparts is in order. First, it is important to note that the Bible itself does not teach this principle. Atkinson assumes that it is self-evident, but that is not the case.

Second, the Bible sometimes contradicts this principle. I will cite a few examples. The existence of Old Testament type and New Testament anti-type, and of *sensus plenior*, prove the principle false.<sup>36</sup> One of the most sustained uses of Old Testament texts is that found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Would anyone claim that the way the writer to the Hebrews uses the Old Testament consistently verifies Atkinson’s principle? On the contrary, Hebrews frequently expands the meanings of Old Testament concepts when it regards them as earthly precursors of heavenly realities.

Edward Fudge is one conditionalist who argues along very similar lines to Atkinson, and in my estimation equally unconvincingly.<sup>37</sup>

### **An Argument Concerning the Meaning of αἰώνιος**

It is common for contemporary annihilationists to claim that used in biblical passages concerning judgement αἰώνιος refers to eternal results rather than eternal existence.<sup>38</sup> That is, eternal punishment means that the wicked suffer extermination with no possibility of remedy, their destruction is once and for all time. This argument can be traced back to Atkinson, although the source may be earlier still.<sup>39</sup>

Atkinson expounds the theory behind this meaning for αἰώνιος in his comments on Matthew 25:46:

‘And these shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal.’ Many have relied on this phrase to support the idea of the everlasting conscious suffering of the wicked, reading it as if it said, ‘everlasting punishing’. This is not the meaning of the word. When the adjective *aionios* meaning ‘everlasting’ is used in Greek with nouns of *action* it has reference to the *result* of the action, not the process. Thus the phrase ‘everlasting punishment’ is comparable to ‘everlasting redemption’ and ‘everlasting salvation’, both Scriptural phrases.

No one supposes that we are being redeemed or being saved forever. We were redeemed and saved once for all by Christ with eternal results. In the same way the lost will not be passing through a process of punishment for ever but will be punished once and for all with eternal results. On the other hand the noun 'life' is not a noun of action, but a noun expressing a state. Thus the life itself is eternal. (*italics in original*)<sup>40</sup>

Atkinson applies this principle at appropriate places in *Life and Immortality*. So, for example:

The apostle Jude tells us (Jude 7) that the fire which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrha [*sic*] was eternal fire. It soon burnt itself out, but it was everlasting in accomplishing a destruction from which the cities have never recovered nor ever will. It was everlasting in its *results*. Such will be the fire that destroys the wicked. (*italics in original*)<sup>41</sup>

Guillebaud, Atkinson, Fromm and Fudge form a chorus and sing this argument in unison.<sup>42</sup> How are we to respond to their claims? A full answer lies beyond the scope of this paper; here I will make only a few points. First, none of these writers cites a single authority on linguistics for his argument. In fact, none of them even defines 'noun of action'. I suspect that 'noun of action' is a category contrived for the sake of this argument. Until I see some solid linguistic work supporting it, I will regard the argument as unproved.

Second, Atkinson creates a false disjunction when he asserts that 'eternal' used with nouns of action refers to the result of the action, not the action itself. Atkinson correctly says that Scripture speaks of 'everlasting redemption' and 'everlasting salvation'; these expressions occur in Hebrews 9:12 and 5:9 respectively. He errs, however, when he says: 'No one supposes that we are being redeemed or being saved forever. We were redeemed and saved once for all by Christ with eternal results.'<sup>43</sup> Although it is true that Jesus saves once for all, this does not preclude his also saving as a process. This latter idea is taught in Hebrews 7: 'Because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them' (vv 24-5 NIV).

I conclude that Atkinson's argument based on the word 'eternal' used with nouns of action suffers from a lack of linguistic research and appears to be supported by a selective use of the evidence.

### **An Argument for a Special Meaning of $\epsilon\kappa\epsilon\iota$**

Although Atkinson usually handles the Bible responsibly, he occasionally engages in arbitrary exegesis. His treatment of 'the weeping and gnashing of teeth' in Matthew 24:51 is an example:

Four times in the Gospel of Matthew we are told that on the day of judgement there will be 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). The first, second and fourth of these passages speak of 'the outer darkness' and continue immediately, '*there* (Greek *etei*) will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'. Those who believe in the eternal conscious existence of the lost believe that this weeping will be heard for ever in the outer darkness, which they rightly identify with hell. If however we look at the third passage (Matt 24:51), we shall see that no place is mentioned. 'There' means 'on that occasion'. It is at the throne of judgement, as the real nature of the wicked is revealed to them in all hideousness, in despair and misery because of what they have lost and missed, as they hear the sentence, perhaps through the temporary suffering, which, as we shall see, precedes their destruction, that the weeping and gnashing of teeth are heard.<sup>44</sup>

On the contrary, the expression ‘εκει εσται ο κλαυθμος και ο βρυγμος των οδοντων’ (‘there there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’) is exactly the same in the four texts cited above. And according to Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker (2) (p 239) εκει is an adverb of place in its every occurrence in the New Testament. In fact, Atkinson’s rendering of εκει in Matthew 24:51 as ‘on that occasion’, in an attempt to avoid the idea of hell as a place, is arbitrary and unsupported by any lexicon. I know of no conditionalist who followed him in this.

## Arguments Based on Hermeneutics

### A Literal Hermeneutic Is To Be Preferred

On the first page of the introduction to *Life and Immortality*, and frequently thereafter, Atkinson shows his preference for a literal hermeneutic. ‘In the book I seek to prove that throughout the Bible the terms “life” and “death” are used and to be understood in their natural, normal and elemental meaning.’<sup>45</sup> Repeatedly Atkinson expresses his preference for words’ ‘simple ordinary meaning... the literal simple meaning’, ‘the natural and ordinary meaning’, the ‘simple sense and natural meaning’, and ‘their natural meaning’.<sup>46</sup>

Atkinson charges those who depart from the simple sense with ‘making of Scripture an unintelligible Chinese puzzle’. Instead, he asks: ‘Is it not better and easier and safer and happier to believe God’s Word exactly as it stands?’<sup>47</sup> At times he rejects his opponents’ views because they are not stated in plain language in Scripture. For example, he studies the common sense of ‘death’ in the Bible and finds it to mean cessation of existence. He insists, therefore, that it is a simple matter to understand the biblical expression ‘the second death’. Since words carry their ordinary meaning, ‘the second death’ also indicates termination of existence:

Unless therefore the Bible gives us a definition of the second death in which it shows the term to have a special meaning, we surely have no right to read into the word anything different from its natural and ordinary meaning... The lake of fire is... defined as the second death.<sup>48</sup>

However Atkinson follows his own principles of exegesis inconsistently. His interpretation of numerous texts which are difficult for annihilationism to accommodate is hardly natural and ordinary. A few examples will suffice.

He claims that, although many have understood the lake of fire to mean eternal conscious punishment, ‘an intelligent, even a quick reading of Revelation 20:14 and 21:8 will show us that... the lake of fire is there defined as the second death. The punishment of sin is thus cessation of life.’<sup>49</sup>

On the contrary, when I apply an ordinary hermeneutic to Revelation 20:10 where we read ‘the devil... was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur...’ and ‘will be tormented day and night for ever and ever’, I conclude that the devil’s punishment in hell will never end. And when I read four verses later of wicked human beings being ‘thrown into the lake of fire’, I understand, unless the plain and simple sense deceives me, that humans too will suffer in hell endlessly.

Indeed, Atkinson's exegesis of disputed texts is often not literal. Another example is his treatment of the fire and smoke of Revelation 14:10-11. There we read concerning the idolater of the last days: 'He will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever.'

How does Atkinson understand the fire and the smoke? He fails to comment on the burning sulphur of Revelation 14:10 in *Life and Immortality*, but he does interpret it in his commentary on Revelation, *The War with Satan*:

'He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone...' This will happen on the day of judgement at the end of the world. But what does it mean? Later in the Book we are told of a lake of fire and brimstone, but it is a picture of something. It is a picture of the second death... But this does seem to mean that those who worship the beast will on the day of judgement be consumed in flames or placed alive in flames in order to perish.<sup>50</sup>

So, according to Atkinson, the burning sulphur of Revelation 14:10 will consume the wicked so that they exist no more. How, then, are we to understand the smoke of their torment that 'rises for ever and ever'? Atkinson answers in *Life and Immortality*:

We notice that the smoke of the torment goes up for ever and ever. This is the second good reason why the torment here cannot be eternal suffering in hell. The ascent of the smoke shows that the *stroke* of judgement is over... The torment is the suffering that like that of the Lord Jesus had its climax in death. The ascent of the smoke for *ever and ever* proves the judgement to be eternal destruction. (*italics in original*)<sup>51</sup>

Atkinson, therefore, teaches that Revelation 14:10-11 means that the wicked will be annihilated by the burning sulphur and that consequently the smoke bearing witness to that annihilation will rise for ever. Is this straightforward interpretation of the imagery? Hardly. If, as Atkinson insists, the fire is to be taken in its ordinary sense denoting consumption, then what are we to label the sense given to the smoke? Surely not ordinary. How can smoke continue to rise after the fire's fuel is consumed? Does not the imagery convey the idea of everlasting burning witnessed to by the ever rising smoke? Indeed, the popular dictum, 'where there's smoke, there's fire', holds true here. John uses an earthly picture of a fire burning and giving off smoke to describe the torments of hell as everlasting. Atkinson's interpretation, although followed by succeeding conditionalists, must be labelled as an evasion of the text and not a literal exegesis.<sup>52</sup>

### **Critique**

The fundamental problem with Atkinson's advocacy of an 'ordinary' hermeneutic is that he never defines his terms, he never says what he means by 'literal' interpretation. Vern Poythress has helpfully explored some of the problems arising from a lack of precise definition of literal interpretation.<sup>53</sup> If by 'literal' Atkinson means grammatical historical interpretation, then he does not consistently employ the hermeneutic that he espouses. In fact, he is especially guilty of departing from his hermeneutic when he deals with the texts upon which the traditional doctrine of hell has been based.

This raises issues of the interrelation of exegesis and systematic theology that go beyond the purposes of this paper. I will say only that Atkinson's example confirms the theses of McCartney and Clayton that: 'A person's systematic theology forms the grid for his or her interpretation of biblical texts...' and that one reason why someone chooses a particular

method of interpretation is ‘its fruitfulness and the degree to which it produces results in harmony with previous results’.<sup>54</sup>

### **Appeal to the *Analogia Fidei***

At least since the time of Augustine, Christian theologians have appealed to the *analogia fidei* when interpreting Scripture.<sup>55</sup> This is the idea, grounded in a commitment to the Bible’s doctrinal unity, that the teaching of any passage must be understood in the light of the teaching of all of Scripture. Atkinson makes frequent appeal to the analogy of faith in *Life and Immortality*.

The background for this appeal is his dedication to the authority of the Scriptures, as enunciated on the first page of his book:

We shall not turn to human speculation or wishful thinking nor to doctrines held on the authority of any church, however ancient or widespread they may be. The true believer will not be satisfied to take his faith or doctrine from any other source but God’s Word.<sup>56</sup>

Atkinson is to be commended for this, as well as for his express commitment to the coherence of biblical teaching. ‘No one who believes that the Scriptures are God’s Word written can believe that they can be inconsistent with themselves.’<sup>57</sup>

How does Atkinson employ the *analogia fidei*? In part he uses it to handle passages which he finds difficult to integrate with his theological commitment to soul sleep and annihilationism. We shall examine three examples.

In his study of the word *s’ol* Atkinson considers Job 21:13 ‘a neutral reference’, that is, one which could be taken to fit his theology or to contradict it. I think that *s’ol* in this verse means ‘the grave’ and therefore fits his view, but that is beside the point. We are interested in Atkinson’s methodology, in his reasons for reaching his conclusions. Here is his explanation:

In Job 21:13 there is what we might call a neutral reference. In isolation *sh’ol* might here be a lower world of ghosts or shades. We have however noted several passages in which *sh’ol* could not have this meaning, but must mean the grave. This shows how hasty conclusions from isolated texts can lead into error. All that Scripture says on a given subject must be taken together and compared.<sup>58</sup>

Atkinson’s explanation contains both truth and error. It is true that theologians must take into account ‘all that Scripture says on a given subject’. It is false, however, to deduce from this the principle that biblical words must always have the same meaning, or that the full teaching on a particular subject is given in every place. The first error, to think that words always have the same sense, is the prescriptive fallacy. The second, to insist that each occurrence of a concept carries the sum of the Bible’s teachings on that subject, is an example of the linguistic fallacy of illegitimate totality transfer put to the service of theology.<sup>59</sup>

I cite a second instance of Atkinson’s abuse of the analogy of faith. When he approaches the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, he admits: ‘We now reach the strongest figurative language about the grave (*haidees*) to be found in the whole Bible.’ How, then, will he handle the difficulties this parable poses for his theology? In two ways. First, by misrepresenting his opponents, claiming they take the parable literally. Second, by appealing to the rule of faith:

Many have seen in this parable a literal description of the world to come and have rushed to the conclusion that it teaches the survival of the 'soul' or spirit after death, forgetting that if it does so it contradicts the consistent teaching of all the rest of Scripture. However, if we study the parable in detail, we shall see that it is utterly impossible to regard it as literal teaching about the world to come.<sup>60</sup>

Of course the parable does not offer literal teaching about the world to come. It offers parabolic teaching about it! And that teaching contradicts Atkinson's commitment to soul sleep. Consequently, he resorts to forced explanations. His interpretation, for example, of the fire mentioned in the parable as signifying 'the loss of life' is unconvincing, when the parable connects the fire with 'agony' (v 24).

I offer a third instance of Atkinson's abuse of the *analogia fidei*. Jesus' words to the dying thief, 'Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43 AV), constitute a challenge to the doctrine of soul sleep. Atkinson admits this:

As they [the words] stand they strongly imply, if they do not require, the survival both of the Lord Jesus and of the thief in a disembodied state after their death and their presence together in Paradise on that day, and in this sense they are very often taken, with every excuse in the case of those who do not know the original, although they contradict everything that the Bible has to say elsewhere on the subject.<sup>61</sup>

At the end of the quotation Atkinson offers his two solutions to the problem this passage poses for his theology. He appeals to the *analogia fidei* to insist that Luke 23 cannot mean what many have assumed. Because the Bible's teachings cohere, and because Atkinson has established that the Bible teaches soul sleep, this passage cannot possibly teach the survival of souls in an intermediate state. There is no intermediate state. No text, therefore, can contradict 'everything that the Bible has to say elsewhere on the subject'.

Atkinson's second solution to the problem posed by Jesus' words to the dying thief is to appeal to the Greek:

When however we look into the original we find that, although the words can quite well be translated as they are in our version [the AV], they can be translated even more agreeably to the Greek, 'Verily, I say unto thee today, Thou shalt be with me in Paradise'.<sup>62</sup>

I suspect that this punctuation fits far 'more agreeably' with Atkinson's theology than it does with the Greek. Indeed, I have not been able to find a single translation that follows this punctuation.<sup>63</sup>

## **Evaluation**

We studied two hermeneutical arguments that Atkinson used to make his case for conditional immortality and annihilationism. His contention that a literal hermeneutic is preferable was examined and found to be naive. In practice much of his exegesis is not 'ordinary'. Rather, he seems to use various methods of interpreting texts that he finds difficult to correlate with his theology.

I also criticized Atkinson's appeal to the *analogia fidei* to handle texts that he could not easily integrate with his beliefs. The difficulty does not lie with Atkinson's appeal to the rule of faith. All conservative theologians do so. The problem lies with his timing for making such an appeal. He invokes the analogy of faith before he treats difficult texts, thereby prejudicing

his exegesis. Instead, we should honestly grapple with biblical passages, being open to God's changing our theologies. Only after exploring the options should we appeal to the *analogia fidei*. That is, such an appeal must not keep us from honest exegetical investigation, but must rather follow that pursuit.

## Conclusion

I have briefly surveyed Basil Atkinson's career and examined his case for conditionalism. I admitted that his arguments appealing to emotion influenced many, but these arguments considered rationally are fallacious and therefore lack cogency.

His arguments from systematic theology fare no better. His argument from Christology, where he contends that Christ was annihilated on the cross, contradicts Chalcedonian orthodoxy because it implies that our Lord's natures were separated at death.

A second theological argument, this time from eschatology, also proved unconvincing. Although conditionalism claims to be better able to accommodate 1 Corinthians 15:28 than traditionalism, the claim is not substantiated because it founders on the last two chapters of the Bible. There the end indeed involves God's being 'all in all'. This, however, does not consist of evil beings' banishment into non-existence, but their banishment from the new heavens and new earth.

Neither were Atkinson's arguments based on linguistics compelling. His claim that the meaning of Old Testament concepts is determinative for their New Testament counterparts is itself not biblical, but instead runs counter to the way the New Testament sometimes treats the Old. The argument that *αὐωνίος* used with nouns of action refers to the results of the action, not its process, is contrived. It constitutes special pleading to avoid the symmetry between eternal life and eternal punishment in texts such as Matthew 25:46. The same is true of his claim that *ἐκεῖ* means 'on that occasion' in Matthew 24:51. This claim is arbitrary, and therefore not persuasive.

Finally, I critiqued Atkinson's hermeneutical arguments. His claim that he follows a 'literal' hermeneutic was marred by a lack of definition of terms and, more importantly, by his inconsistency in applying his 'natural' hermeneutic to difficult texts. He uses the *analogia fidei* as a device to correlate problem passages with his theology. The result is a tortured exegesis of these passages.

I rejoice in the overall godly influence that Basil Atkinson exerted on his disciples. He showed them that one could think and be an evangelical Christian. His exemplary life and solid writings strengthened them in their faith. The one serious exception is his case for conditionalism. I lament that, with all the good, this too was bequeathed to his theological heirs.

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Endnotes:

- 1) John Wenham 'The Case for Conditional Immortality' *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* Nigel M de S Cameron ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1992) p 163
- 2) Edward Fudge *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Houston: Providential Press 1982) p 407
- 3) John Wenham 'The Case for Conditional Immortality' *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* Nigel M de S Cameron ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1992) pp 162-3 n 3
- 4) John Wenham *The Enigma of Evil: Can We Believe in the Goodness of God?* (Zondervan 1985) p 40
- 5) Peter Toon *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview* (New York: Thomas Nelson 1986) p 177
- 6) Basil Atkinson *Life and Immortality: An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as They Are Revealed in the Scriptures* (privately published 1969) p 64. Further references to this book are given as *Life and Immortality*.
- 7) *Life and Immortality* p 93
- 8) *Life and Immortality* p 98
- 9) *Life and Immortality* pp 60-61
- 10) *Life and Immortality* p 39
- 11) John Frame *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed 1987) pp 289-90
- 12) Irving M Copi *Introduction to Logic* 2nd ed (New York: Macmillan 1961) p 53
- 13) Copi pp 57-8
- 14) Copi p 60
- 15) See John Wenham 'The Case for Conditional Immortality' *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* Nigel M de S Cameron ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1992) pp 187-90; Edward Fudge *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Houston: Providential Press 1982) pp 195, 411-22; Clark Pinnock *Four Views on Hell* William Crockett ed (Zondervan 1992) pp 163-6.
- 16) Atkinson's main theological argument is based upon anthropology, specifically upon the immortality of the soul. Like many succeeding annihilationists, he is convinced that traditionalism is largely attributable to the uncritical assumption by the mainstream of Christian theology of the pagan belief in the immortality of the soul. I am passing over this argument because I deem it greatly overrated and have dealt with it in 'A Traditionalist Response to John Stott's Arguments for Annihilationism' *JETS* 37/4 December 1994 pp 567-8
- 17) *Life and Immortality* p 86
- 18) *Life and Immortality* p 103

- 19) *Life and Immortality* p 40
- 20) *Life and Immortality* p 57
- 21) *Life and Immortality* pp 62-3. This is consistent with Atkinson's anthropological monism; he denies that human beings have immaterial parts that separate from the body at death. Instead, the whole person dies.
- 22) *Life and Immortality* p 103
- 23) *Life and Immortality* p 103
- 24) See my article 'The Hermeneutics of Annihilationism: The Theological Method of Edward Fudge' *Presbyterion* 21:1 Spring 1995 pp 25-7, and John W Cooper *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* (Eerdmans 1989) pp 142-5.
- 25) LeRoy Edwin Froom *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1965-6) vol 1 pp 377-83; Edward Fudge *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Houston: Providential Press 1982) pp 228-34
- 26) *Life and Immortality* p 112
- 27) *Life and Immortality* p 112
- 28) *Life and Immortality* p 112
- 29) 'A Traditionalist Response to John Stott's Arguments for Annihilationism' *JETS* 37/4 December 1994 pp 565-7
- 30) LeRoy Edwin Froom *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1965-6) vol 1 pp 23-5, 269, 301-2, 413-14, 518-19, and David L Edwards and John Stott *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Intervarsity 1988) p 319
- 31) *Life and Immortality* p 11
- 32) *Life and Immortality* pp 42-3
- 33) *Life and Immortality* p 110
- 34) See my exposition of this text in *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Presbyterian and Reformed 1995) pp 29-32, where I argue that it teaches eternal punishment.
- 35) *Life and Immortality* pp 111-112
- 36) See McCartney and Clayton *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Bridgepoint 1994) pp 153-60.
- 37) See Edward Fudge *The Fire That Consumes. A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Houston: Providential Press 1982) pp 295-301 and my critique 'The Hermeneutics of Annihilationism: The Theological Method of Edward Fudge' *Presbyterion* 21:1 Spring 1995 pp 18-22 especially pp 20-21.

- 38) LeRoy Edwin Froom *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1965-6) vol 1 pp 224, 288-91, 294-5, 441-3; Fudge pp 44-50
- 39) Already in 1941 Harold E Guillebaud taught the same thing in *The Righteous Judge* pp 7-11: 'The sense of permanence is an essential part of the meaning of "eternal", as much in its application to judgement and punishment as in its other uses. But the permanence seems to be attached to the results of the acts or processes themselves.' Since Atkinson wrote the foreword to Guillebaud's book (p iii), I do not know if one of them taught it to the other, or if one or both of them learned it from an earlier source. Fudge (p 48 n 31) traces this argument back to Petavel (1892).
- 40) *Life and Immortality* p 101
- 41) *Life and Immortality* p 107
- 42) Guillebaud *The Righteous Judge* pp 7-11; LeRoy Edwin Froom *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1965-6) vol 1 pp 441-2; Edward Fudge *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Houston: Providential Press 1982) pp 44-8
- 43) *Life and Immortality* p 101
- 44) *Life and Immortality* p 100
- 45) *Life and Immortality* p iii
- 46) *Life and Immortality* pp 37, 84, 90, 99
- 47) *Life and Immortality* pp 30, 40
- 48) *Life and Immortality* p 83
- 49) *Life and Immortality* p 83
- 50) Basil Atkinson *The War with Satan* (London: Protestant Truth Society 1940) p 124
- 51) *Life and Immortality* p 108
- 52) See Edward Fudge *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Houston: Providential Press 1982) pp 298-9; John Stott *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Intervarsity 1988) p 318.
- 53) 'What Is Literal Interpretation?' *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Zondervan 1987) pp 78-86
- 54) McCartney and Clayton *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Bridgepoint 1994) p 66
- 55) *On Christian Doctrine* 3:2
- 56) *Life and Immortality* p 1
- 57) *Life and Immortality* p 1
- 58) *Life and Immortality* p 45

- 59) See Silva *Biblical Words* pp 25-7.
- 60) *Life and Immortality* p 49
- 61) *Life and Immortality* p 74
- 62) *Life and Immortality* p 74
- 63) I thank Alan Gomes of Talbot School of Theology for pointing out that the Jehovah's Witnesses' interlinear, *The Emphatic Diglott*, contains this punctuation.