

the impenitent be eternal conscious torment, "for ever and ever," or will it be a total annihilation of their being? The former has to be described as traditional orthodoxy Do I hold it, however? Well, emotionally, I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain My question must be -- and is -- not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say? ... We need to survey the biblical material afresh and to open our minds, not just our hearts, to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilation, and that the doctrine of eternal conscious torture has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture. There are four arguments; they relate to language, imagery, justice and universalism.

First, language. Jesus himself told us not to be afraid of those who kill the body and cannot kill the soul. "Rather," he continued, "be afraid of the One [God] who can destroy both soul and body in hell." ... If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, the extinction of being It would seem strange ... if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and it is difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing The immortality -- and therefore indestructibility -- of the soul is a Greek not a biblical concept Only God possesses immortality in himself ... "annihilation" is not quite the same as "conditional immortality." According to the latter, nobody survives death except those to whom God gives life (they are therefore immortal by grace, not by nature), whereas according to the former, everybody survives death and will even be resurrected, but the impenitent will finally be destroyed.

Second, imagery. The main function of fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction The fire itself is termed "eternal" and "unquenchable," but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible.