

Response to
“A Review of George Sarris’ *Heaven’s Doors* by Jack Deere”
By George W. Sarris

- 1.) The first thing I would mention relates to the tone of Jack Deere’s comments. Throughout his critique, he is arrogant, condescending and demeaning. While that may be consistent with the tone of a “scholar” interacting with another scholar, it is definitely not consistent with how a Christian gentleman should interact with another Christian with whom he disagrees. He clearly seems to be trying to intimidate [my friend] and me.
- 2.) He begins by saying that it is inappropriate for me to begin with a “theological argument” instead of Scripture. First of all, I didn’t begin with a “theological argument,” I began with legitimate questions. Why is that inappropriate? My concern (as clearly expressed in the book) began with questions to which I wanted to find answers.
- 3.) He continues by saying that it is also inappropriate for me to begin with an historical survey to “*find historical reasons to discredit the doctrine of eternal punishment.*” Interestingly, he actually demonstrates a lack of knowledge about the Early Church and its beliefs (which is actually made clearer in his later section on *Evidence from Church History.*) In point of fact, the dominant view within the Early Church was that God would ultimately restore all of His creation. Deere’s lack of knowledge of Church history also comes through when he states categorically that after the Apostle Paul, Augustine was the “*most brilliant mind in church history until Aquinas.*” That is clearly not correct. After Paul, Origen was the most brilliant mind, followed by many others who were brilliant thinkers and writers – Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and others that he is apparently completely unaware of.
- 4.) Throughout the critique, Deere faults me for not being a Greek scholar, but completely overlooks and attempts to deny the fact that Augustine barely knew Greek – as confirmed by Augustine himself, and by other scholars. Deere then points to the Latin term for “eternal” which developed into the English term as if that somehow shows that Augustine knew Greek. Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and the other early Church leaders I mention who denied the eternity of hell were closer in time to Jesus and the Apostles, and they clearly knew Greek far better than Augustine, Deere or any modern scholar. Greek was their native tongue.
- 5.) His basic method of refutation is to quote extensively from “modern scholars” and lexicons who disagree with the scholars and lexicons from which I quote. Scholars often differ with other scholars, and it is easy to say that the “current” or “favored” group has the correct answers and all other scholars are incorrect. Deere generally appeals to his authorities without looking personally at how the words he discusses are actually used in context within Scripture.

He also tends to attack me personally because I’m not a professional theologian, historian or exegete. He even appeals to a comment by CS Lewis to suggest that we should never question a doctrine we find offensive. *Ad hominem* attacks and appeals to authority are not the tools of a serious scholar who is seeking to discover the truth.

6.) He states categorically that I cannot cite “*one single unambiguous text that teaches God will save every creature.*” I actually cite several texts that I believe do just that, although of course not everyone will agree. For example,

I Corinthians 15:22 – *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.*

Philippians 2:9-11 – *For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

I Timothy 2:3-6 - *This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*

Revelation 5:13 - *“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever.’”*

Interestingly, one of the main points of my book is to show that the texts typically said to unambiguously teach endless punishment in fact do not.

7.) Deere does point out an error in my book, which I have now corrected (print on-demand is wonderful in that regard). When I quote *aion* as meaning “*a period of time – longer or shorter, past or future – the boundaries of which are concealed, obscure, unseen or unknown,*” I incorrectly cited TDNT, pp. 198-199. The quote actually comes from p. 141 of *History of Opinions on the Scriptural Doctrine of Retribution*, by Edward Beecher, and the citation should have been, Beecher, p. 141, cf. also TDNT. That citation was inadvertently dropped in the final manuscript.

However, the sense is communicated in the TDNT. “*Only in the light of the context can it be said whether aion means “eternity” in the strict sense or simply ‘remote’ or ‘extended’ or ‘uninterrupted time.’*” I also mention in that endnote that “*The Dictionary of New Testament Theology explains that ...one can only consider the designation of ‘antiquity’ or the ‘far future’ as the essential NT use of the word. - J. Guhrt, Time, aion, The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol. 3, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1971, 1978, fourth printing October 1979, p. 829.*”

8.) Deere makes a big deal about the phrases “proper sense” or “carrying the notion of” as used by scholars in different eras as if that completely negates the clear meaning of what they are intending to say. He explains that words need to be understood as they are used in context – a point which I make in my book and clearly agree with. In fact, I quote several passages of Scripture to show how the meaning of *aion* does *not* refer to endless. Deere, however, doesn’t do that. He only says it should be done, and then quotes the lexicons.

9.) He states that my reference to Josephus, *War of the Jews*, Book II, Chapter 17, paragraph 6 has nothing to do with the fire on the altar of the Temple. If Deere had read the preceding paragraph 5, he would have known that the comment definitely did refer to the Temple in Jerusalem –

“5. Upon this the men of power, with the high-priests, as also all the part of the multitude that were desirous of peace, took courage, and seized upon the upper city [Mount Sion]; for the seditious part had the lower city, and the temple in their power; so they made use of stones and slings perpetually against one another, and threw darts continually on both sides; and sometimes it happened that they made incursions by troops, and fought it out hand to hand, while the seditious were superior in boldness, but the king’s soldiers in skill. These last strove chiefly to gain the temple, and to drive those out of it who profaned it; as did the seditious, with Eleazar, besides what they had already, labour to gain the upper city. Thus were there perpetual slaughters on both sides for seven days time; but neither side would yield up the parts they had seized on.

6. Now the next day was the festival of Xylophory, upon which the custom was for every one to bring wood for the altar (that there might never be a want of fuel for that fire which was unquenchable, and always burning). . .”

10.) Deere’s critique of my comments on Matthew 25:46 is long, condescending and clearly meant to intimidate. The main argument is that while the noun *aion* may refer to a finite period of time, the adjective *aionios* always means “eternal.” That statement in itself should be suspect. An adjective deduced from a noun cannot mean the opposite of what the noun means. If *aion* means “age” – which it does – then no adjective deduced from it can mean “ageless.” That would be like saying that “storm” means severe, inclement weather, but a “stormy” day refers to a calm, beautiful day characterized by sun, no wind, and no clouds.

In fact, *aionios* does *not* always mean eternal. In the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament that Jesus and the Apostles used when they quoted from the OT, the adjective *aionios* is used 110 times where it regularly refers to things that have or will pass away. In Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, for example, the statutes related to the sacrificial system are said to be *aionios* statutes. They were never intended to last forever. They were designed by God to eventually pass away when the sacrificial system was abolished and superseded by the New Covenant in Christ. And the NIV translators correctly translate the *aionios* ordinances as “lasting” ordinances.

Deere also completely overlooks the fact that the plural form of the Greek word *aion* is used several times in the New Testament. Paul tells his readers in Corinth about a wisdom of *this* age in contrast to the wisdom of God which He decreed *before* the ages. Later in the same book he talks of those on whom the *end* of the ages has come. In Ephesians he tells us about the ages *to come*. And in his letter to the Colossian Christians, Paul speaks of the mystery that has been kept hidden “*for ages . . . but is now disclosed to the saints.*”

It’s clear from these passages that there is a present age. There are past ages. And there are future ages. It’s also clear that the ages have a beginning and an end. There is a time before the

ages, and there is an end of the ages. To translate the plurals “to the forevers” would negate the very concept of an endless period of time.

Deere then follows his regular method of attacking me personally, quoting lexicons and making categorical statements such as, “*The only translation that works for aionios is 'eternal' or 'forever.'*” He refers to 66 uses which fall into 19 categories that he got from one of his lexicons to support that statement. Interestingly, I actually quote several of those verses to show how they in fact do *not* necessarily mean “forever.”

I should also point out here that David Konstan – Professor of Classics at New York University and Professor Emeritus of Classics and Comparative Literature at Brown University, former President of the American Philological Association and fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; and Ilaria Ramelli – Professor of Theology and Bishop Kevin Britt endowed Chair in Dogmatics/Christology at the Graduate School of Theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary of the Thomas Aquinas University; Onassis Senior Visiting Professor of Greek Thought and Church History at Harvard and Boston University; and Visiting Research Fellow at Oxford University – who together authored what is probably the most recent scholarly work on the subject, *Terms for Eternity: Aionios and Aidios in Classical and Christian Texts* – have both read my book and said that my analysis is sound.

11.) Deere argues with one modern scholarly commentary by R.T. France to address issues relating to Annihilation which has nothing to do with my book or my position.

12.) Deere faults me as “*someone who doesn’t even have the vocabulary to speak about syntax,*” and then says that “*Adjectives do not have ‘subjects’ that they ‘refer to.’ They have nouns that they modify.*” What’s the difference? I may not be using the vocabulary of an English teacher, but I’m not writing as an English teacher. I’m writing to normal people who clearly understand what I mean.

13.) Deere doesn’t like the fact that I quote William Barclay who he considers “*unreliable*” when I discuss remedial punishment, and apparently did not read the full quote from TDNT that he references regarding inscriptions from Phrygian and Lydian monuments of the imperial period. Deere says, “[Sarris] cites an inscription listed in TDNT 3:814-15, where a pagan deity punishes (*kolasis*) an offender with death and even his family with death. This is not remedial punishment.” However, he fails to reference the rest of the actual quote which clearly shows the relationship to remedial punishment – “*The sinner can win back the grace of the deity only by open confession of his guilt. In this way alone can he be liberated from sickness and misfortune.*” As I mention in that section of my book, these inscriptions make it clear that the punishments they refer to include the possibility of restoration if a sinner humbly confesses his guilt.

Once again, he goes to his authorities as proof that my authorities are wrong. He claims that I am asking my readers to believe that my Greek and theological skills are superior to those of all modern translators of the NT. I do nothing of the sort. I’m simply sharing what I have found from other scholars, and then, unlike Deere, actually show how the words are used in context in the Scriptures to support what I’ve said.

14.) In his discussion of my position on the Lake of Fire, Deere states, “*Sarris asserts that ‘for ever and ever’ means a long time or age of the ages. He never says what the ‘ages of the ages’ might mean, only that it can’t mean ‘forever.’*” That is exactly the point. The Greek phrase could equally well be translated as “*down through the ages*” or “*for all ages*” or “*ages upon ages.*” If *aion* by itself means an eternity, then what sense would there be in the double formula, “*eternities of eternities?*” None, except that it doesn’t mean forever.

Deere takes great issue with my explanation of *burning sulfur* as a means of purifying and cleansing evil. He states that the first use of the term in Scripture controls all the rest of its uses, and then refers to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as the first, and thus controlling use. “*Summary of OT use. Burning sulfur appears in all three divisions of the Hebrew Bible, in the Law, in the Prophets and in the Writings. From the beginning of the Hebrew Bible to the end, burning sulfur is the judgment of God on the wicked with no hint that these judgments are in any sense remedial to the wicked.*”

What he doesn’t seem to understand is that God’s rain of burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah and elsewhere was to purify the land of sin. Purification results in the destruction of what is impure. But that doesn’t mean that there is no desire for restoration of the people who were destroyed. Apparently, Deere is unaware of Ezekiel’s comment that God “*will restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters and of Samaria and her daughters, and your fortunes along with them . . . And your sisters, Sodom with her daughters and Samaria with her daughters, will return to what they were before, and you and your daughters will return to what you were before.*”

15.) Deere again misses the forest for the trees as he goes to his authorities to say that my explanation of the Greek words for “*torment*” is unsound. The word certainly involves pain, but even torture is not simply meant to sadistically inflict pain. Torturers inflict pain in order to bring about a change in a person’s actions or attitudes. Diodorus and Origen, who knew Greek far better than Deere or any modern scholar, explained clearly the purpose of God’s “*torment*” of sinners –

“*For the wicked, also, there are punishments, not perpetual, however, lest the immortality prepared for them should become a disadvantage; but they are to be **tormented** for a certain brief period . . . according to the amount of malice in their works. “They shall, therefore, suffer punishment for a brief space; but immortal blessedness, having no end, awaits them. . . . the punishments to be inflicted for heinous and manifold sins are far more surpassed by the magnitude of mercy. The resurrection, therefore, is regarded as a blessing, not only to the good, but also to the evil.” - Diodorus*

“*. . . seeking to ascertain what might be the inference from the heavenly Jerusalem belonging to the lot of Benjamin and the valley of Ennom, we find a certain confirmation of what is said regarding the place of punishment, intended for the purification of such souls as are to be **purified by torments**, agreeably to the saying: ‘The Lord cometh like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap: and He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and of gold.’” - Origen*

Deere also completely overlooks a major section in my book where I outline three major purposes of punishment revealed in Scripture. He may have read my book in its entirety, as he states several times, but it's obvious that he didn't read it with an open mind, and certainly didn't understand it.

16.) In Deere's discussion of my observations about *Gehenna*, he attacks the character and scholarly credentials of Martin Vincent, W.E. Vine, William Barclay and Johann Schleusner, but doesn't show how what they said is wrong.

17.) Deere faults my discussion of the meaning of "soul" by saying that my "*definition*" of the word is not found in any standard Greek lexicon nor any exegetical commentary, young or old. I never claimed that my comments were a "*definition*" of the word, and he completely misunderstands my observation that a person's "*reputation and purpose for living, your desires and emotions, your thoughts and ideas*" cannot be taken away by man. I wasn't in any way saying that people can't "*steal*" ideas from others, as he suggests. I was pointing out that the things I listed can't be stopped by earthly powers. Adolf Hitler could kill Dietrich Bonhoeffer's body, but he was unable to prevent Bonhoeffer's reputation, purpose for living, thoughts and ideas from spreading. In contrast, God was able not only to end the life of Hitler, He was able to put an end to his reputation, ideas, desires, etc.

18.) Deere faults my interpretation of the phrase about Judas by again going to his commentators and lexicons, but doesn't deal with the substance of what I said. The fact is that the comment can be translated as I suggest, and I actually quote some translations that do so.

19.) Deere comes back to the issue of the meaning of *aion*. He even acknowledges that "*All the lexicons and commentaries acknowledge that aion can denote an age/epoch, the world, a lifetime, or eternity,*" which actually confirms what I have said. He states categorically that "*No one with any knowledge of Greek syntax would propose to translate the plural (aionas) 'to the forevers.'*" That is exactly what I was pointing out! If *aion* always means eternity, why would there be a plural? Answer – *aion* doesn't mean eternity in the strict sense.

20.) Deere believes that I have made a fatal mistake in acknowledging that the chains which hold the angels who left their first estate in Jude 6 are "*unequivocally eternal,*" even though the text specifically says they will hold their prisoners *until* judgment. The chains may certainly be eternal in the strict sense, but that has nothing to do with whether or not one is held or released by them. Deere rewrites the text to say that the angels are chained eternally before and after judgment. The text does not say they are chained, released, and then rechained. It says they are chained *until* the judgment.

21.) In his conclusion, Deere finds it disconcerting that I "*disrespect*" my opponents. I find that clearly hypocritical in light of his continual flow of disparaging, disrespectful and demeaning comments regarding me personally and what I have written. He refers to Augustine, Jonathan Edwards and J.I. Packer.

With regard to Augustine, I said, "*The most brilliant and influential theologian after Origen was Aurelius Augustinus, known to us as St. Augustine.*" That is hardly a disrespectful comment. I

quote Augustine to show where I disagree with him and point out his influence on the doctrine of eternal conscious punishment, but I never mocked him – as Deere repeatedly did with regard to me.

My comment about Jonathan Edwards was similar. “*For example, consider the words of one of the best known preachers and theologians of Protestant church history, Jonathan Edwards. His sermons began the First Great Awakening in America in the 1730s and 40s, and he is widely considered to be one of the greatest thinkers America has produced.*” I never mocked Edwards. I simply quoted one of his sermons on hell.

I did read the article by J.I. Packer on Universalism in *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*. Contrary to what Deere says, Packer did *not* address the arguments of classic universalism, which I espouse. He addressed the arguments of modern universalists which are quite different from the arguments I present in my book.

22.) Deere’s *Evidence from Church History* is extremely shallow. Concerning my statement that a belief in ultimate restoration was the dominant position of the Church before Augustine, Deere says he is “*certain this is not true.*” To support his claim, he refers to the debates in Britain between E.B. Pusey and F.W. Farrar, and then states, “*No less a church historian than R. Albert Mohler, Jr., claims that Origen was the first major challenge to the patristic consensus (my emphasis) that hell is eternal . . .*” Augustine was born 170 years after Origen, so how does that even relate to what Deere is *certain* is not true?

The debates between Pusey and Farrar are interesting. I quote from one of Farrar’s works where he refutes Pusey. But, they are clearly not definitive in determining anything about the Early Church beliefs, and the comment by Mohler is incorrect – there was no consensus before Origen.

Ilaria Ramelli, in her 950 page scholarly work, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Brill 2013), shows that the main Patristic supporters before Origen were Bardaisan and Clement of Alexandria, and after Origen the main supporters included “*Didymus, St. Anthony, St. Pamphilus Martyr, Methodius, St. Macrina, St. Gregory of Nyssa (and probably the two other Cappadocians), St. Evagrius Ponticus, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, St. John of Jerusalem, Rufinus, St. Jerome and St. Augustine (at least initially), Cassian, St. Isaac of Nineveh, St. John of Dalyatha, Ps. Dionysius the Areopagite, probably St. Maximus the Confessor, up to John the Scot Eriugena.*”

23.) In his section on *Theological Considerations*, Deere states that, “*The major argument against the doctrine of conscious, eternal punishment has been from the beginning of the argument that it is inconsistent for a good and loving God to punish man eternally for his temporal sins.*” His refutation consists of a quote by Augustine, followed by Deere’s comment that “*Surely Augustine is right.*”

Then he launches into a sermon about his beliefs and ends with his personal testimony.

24.) Deere's *Postscript* consists on another personal attack on me and my "*unexcelled hubris*," followed by his concern for the purity and doctrine of the Church as the return of the Lord draws nearer.

25.) At the very end, Deere references John 17:3, and says, "*Eternal life is to know God. For three hours Jesus did not know God.*" But, Jesus is God!