

A Review of George Sarris' *Heaven's Doors* By Jack Deere

Problems with Sarris' argument and methodology

1. Sarris begins not with Scripture, but with a theological argument: How could a God who is goodness and love punish his creatures with eternal torment for a temporal sin. What purpose could such punishment serve? This is the energy that drives everything he does.
2. His second step is to survey church history and find historical reasons to discredit the doctrine of eternal punishment. He wants his readers to believe that the early church held the universalist position. He blames Justinian I, emperor from 527 to 565, for putting political pressure on church leaders to spread the doctrine of eternal punishment. However, Augustine (354-430) embraced the doctrine of eternal punishment one hundred years before Justinian I came to power. Sarris dismisses Augustine by saying that he did not know Greek. After the Apostle Paul, August was most the brilliant mind in church history until Aquinas. C. S. Lewis said that his debt to Augustine was "incalculable." Augustine did not *like* Greek, but he certainly knew all the Greek and Latin words dealing with eternal punishment and used good exegesis to arrive at his conclusions. In fact the English word 'eternal' comes from the Latin *aeternus*, which is derived from *aevum*, "age, lifetime, eternity." The Latin and Greek words in this semantic group show a similar development. This summary dismissal of Augustine sets off alarms about Sarris' "scholarship" and objectivity.
3. Sarris' third step is to turn to Scripture. Basically he says that everyone in the history of the translation of the NT has gotten it all wrong. The words traditionally translated "eternal, forever, punishment, torment, unquenchable" don't mean what the lexicons say they mean. He does not cite one exegetical, modern commentator who agrees with any of his arguments or translations. He does not understand or use modern principles of lexicography. He cites old sources written before the classic works of James Barr: *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961) and *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (1968). What drives Sarris' interpretations is not a desire to let Scripture speak for itself but rather a desire to prove universalism. His work is tendentious from the beginning.

4. So Sarris uses theology, history and “exegesis” to prove that everyone is going to heaven. The problem is that he is not a theologian, a historian, or an exegete. He is locked into secondary sources, mostly dated and tendentious.
5. I believe you when you say that he is a nice guy. I would probably like him if I met him. I’m sure that he thinks he is performing a valuable service for the body of Christ. I think Paul Young believes the same thing that Sarris does, and I like Paul Young.
6. The fact that we can’t understand a doctrine is not a reason for disbelieving it. Lewis wrote a long time ago that the doctrines that are the most offensive to us are probably the doctrines that we most need, so explore them more deeply.
7. I’ve read the whole book and all the footnotes. I will comment mostly on his scriptural arguments, for that is where the matter is decided. The heart of his scriptural argument is to say that the Greek words traditionally translated by the English words, “eternal, forever, punishment, torment, unquenchable fire, etc.” don’t have their usual meanings. What he does not tell us is what Greek words in the NT do mean “eternal, forever, punishment, torment, unquenchable fire.” He can’t produce other Greek words in the NT because these are, in fact, the main words appropriate for expressing eternal punishment. The other critical thing that he can’t do is to produce a single unambiguous text that teaches God will save every creature. He can’t produce one unambiguous text that demonstrates a postmortem conversion to Christ. No one can.
8. Sarris only cites one scholarly NT Greek source. I am referring to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel. The first volume was published in German in 1933. The English translation of that volume was done in 1964. It must be used with caution for it was done in a time when scientific linguistic principles had not found their way into biblical exegesis. Sarris is not only incapable of discerning linguistic fallacies in TNDT, he can’t even read the text. Here are two examples:
 - a. On page 157 he writes, “The words translated forever, eternal or everlasting in our English Bibles are *olam* in Hebrew, and *aion* in Greek. And they actually mean ‘a *period of time – longer or shorter, past or future – the boundaries of which are concealed, obscure, unseen or unknown*’ (n. 210). They do not mean never-ending. They mean that the end is not known.”

- b. In note 210, he cites the source of that quote as TNDT 1:198-99. The sentences in that “quote” do not appear anywhere on pp. 198-99. What does appear on those pages are multiple examples of these words meaning “forever,” “eternal,” and “eternity.” The professor who wrote that article in TNDT was Hermann Sasse, who was a defender of the doctrine of eternal punishment. But Sarris won’t tell you that either because he didn’t read the whole article, didn’t understand the article, or was being deceptive. He is being deceptive whether unintentionally or intentionally, for he cites nonexistent sentences to support his doctrine. It’s no secret that the word group “forever” in any language can have metaphorical uses as in “he went on forever.” The context defines whether the word means “forever” or “a long time.”
- c. Here is the second example. In Revelation 14:11, John says that the unbelievers will be “tormented for ever and ever.” Sarris needs to change “torment” to “remedial punishment” or “discipline” and “forever” to “a long time.”
- i. On p. 217 he writes, “The term translated torment originally referred to the action of an inspector who sought to test the quality of gold and silver coins.” In support of this assertion he cites J. Schneider, from TNDT 1:562, “In *its proper sense* (my italics) it is a means of testing and proving.”
 - ii. In 1933, people still talked about words having a *proper sense*. No one who understands linguistic lexical principles does that today. We now know that meaning is not determined by a prescriptive dictionary, but by the way people use words. *Usage* violates “*proper sense*” all the time. Observe how the *OED* describes the meaning of words. The lexicographer begins with the earliest extant use of a word in English and then follows the change of meaning down to modern times. There is no *proper sense* of a word, not even *an original meaning*, for we can not be sure that the earliest example of the word is the first use of the word in English, because we only have an imperfect preservation of the English language. Much has been lost. It is worse with Greek and Hebrew, for only a small percentage of ancient Greek and Hebrew have been preserved. We don’t define words by

appealing to a “proper sense,” or “a root sense.” Nor do we speak about words “carrying the notion of...” Words don’t carry “notions” or have concepts lurking behind them. But this is how Sarris conducts his lexical discussions because he simply does not understand modern lexicography. The meaning of a word is determined by its specific usage at a particular time in a particular author. In John’s time, the word group of *basanos* meant “torment, torture,” not “remedial punishment.” This usage is indisputable.

- iii. Here is where Sarris becomes intentionally deceptive. He would have his readers believe that a scholarly, Greek, lexical source states that the *proper sense* of the *basanos* word group is “testing and proving.” Here is the quote in full from TDNT 1:562, “In its proper sense it [*basanos*] is a means of testing and proving, **though also of punishment. Finally, even this special meaning was weakened and only the general element of torment remained**” (my emphasis). Sarris cut off the first sentence at the comma and omitted the second sentence altogether. This kind of dishonesty with sources in a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation would bring a swift rejection of the student’s work. If you read Schneider’s whole article you will find out that he takes the opposite position on every single NT passage that Sarris cites. Schneider says that the *basanos* word group means “torment, torture.” It means “punishment” not remedial discipline. But the average reader of Sarris would not have a copy of TDNT to consult. The average reader does not know Greek. They would trust Sarris’ “knowledge” of Greek. After reading his whole work, I am convinced that Sarris does not know Greek, beyond the elementary knowledge of the average college student who has only had one year of Greek. I will illustrate this in each passage that I discuss. But worse than this, I find him to be dishonest in theology, history and Greek.

- d. I think of what C. S. Lewis said about the liberals, “They want to convince you that they can read in between the lines, when the evidence is that they can’t even read the lines.”

Discussion of Specific Texts

Mat. 3:12

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Sarris’ observations.

1. The real meaning of unquenchable fire is not that it keeps burning forever. The real meaning is that the fire doesn’t go out until it does what it’s intended to do. It’s not put out or quenched until its purpose is accomplished.
2. Josephus said that the fire on the altar of the Jerusalem Temple was unquenchable and always burning, although that fire had gone out and the Temple was destroyed at the time of his writing. He cites Josephus, *Jewish Wars* book 2, chapter 17, paragraph 6.

Critique

1. His first point is simply an assertion not driven by lexicographical considerations, but by his conviction that eternal punishment is inconsistent with the divine nature. The only meaning given for *asbestos* in the standard classical Greek lexicon, *Liddell and Scott*, is “inextinguishable, unquenchable.” The same is true of the standard NT Greek lexicon by Bauer.
2. Regarding Josephus, I have the complete works of Josephus in Greek. I looked up the reference Sarris cites. It has nothing to do with the fire on the altar in the temple. He probably picked up this reference from one of his older universalist sources from the 1800’s. He either mixed up the reference or the source did.
3. The fact that the temple fire eventually went out has nothing to do with the meaning of *asbestos*. The fire was *supposed* to be inextinguishable. The fire in Mat. 3:12 is inextinguishable, i.e., eternal, because it is decreed by an eternal, omnipotent God.
4. Both of the great lexicons show usage in secular Greek of “inextinguishable fire” as a description of never ending

punishment.

5. If there is a better way or more unambiguous way of expressing eternal fire as a metaphor for eternal punishment, Sarris does not tell us.

Mat. 25:46

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” NIV

Sarris’ observations:

1. Sarris says, “Remember that *aion*, the Greek word Jesus used here, is the same word we’ve been talking about. And it’s used to refer to both the punishment of the wicked and the life of the righteous” (p. 164). Sarris claims that the true meaning of *aion* is “the age to come.”
2. Since Matthew’s Gospel was first circulated, preachers and commentators have made the point that “eternal” must have the same sense in both clauses of Mat. 25:46. Sarris replies that in the NT the same word can appear in a single context with two different meanings. Sarris uses Romans 16:25-26 to prove that this is case for *aion*. He writes, “The apostle Paul tells us of the ‘mystery hidden for long ages past (*aion*), but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal (*aion*) God.’ The word translated long ages past is the same word in the same sentence as the word translated eternal. The first use obviously refers to times that have come to an end, since the mystery that was hidden is now revealed. The second refers to God who is by nature eternal. The meaning in each instance is determined by the subject it’s referring to” n. 242.
3. Next, he claims that the word translated “punishment” was originally used of pruning trees, and in secular Greek it is always used of *remedial punishment*.
4. Thus the accurate translation of the verse is: “The wicked shall go away into the punishment of the age to come, and the righteous into the life of the age to come.” The verse does not say anything about the duration of the punishment or the life in the age to come.
5. Since the punishment of the wicked is remedial, when they have been sufficiently pruned of evil, they will enter heaven.

Critique

1. Sarris said that Greek word translated “eternal” is *aion*. It is true that *aion* can be used of past or present ages as well as of eternity. But Matthew did not use the noun *aion*. He used the adjective *aionios*, “eternal”! This is a massive, massive blunder. Sarris wants us to believe he has expertise in Greek, but this is the kind of mistake a first year college student in Greek would make. There is a significant difference in meaning between *aion* and *aionios*. These words are not interchangeable. All Sarris had to do to see this was to pick up a NT lexicon, but when you can’t tell the difference between a noun and an adjective, it is not likely that you can read a lexicon, which turns out to be true in Sarris’s case. I will illustrate.
 - a. The adjective *aionios* (“eternal”) occurs 71 times according to Bauer-Gingrich, the standard, scholarly Greek-English NT lexicon. Bauer divides the usage of *aionios* into three categories of meaning: 1. Without beginning 2. Without beginning or end 3. Without end.
 - b. 1. Without beginning. There are three uses in this category, Rom. 16:25, 2 Tim. 1:9, and Titus 1:2. In each of these texts the adjective “eternal” modifies the noun *chronos* “time” and *chronos* in all three verses is in the plural, “times” or “ages.” So Rom. 16:25 is translated like this “...according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past.” *Aionios* does not mean “age.” It is modifying *chronos*, a noun that in the plural that means “times or ages.” In 2 Tim. 1:9 and Tit. 1:2, the preposition *pro*, “before,” governs the phrase, so the translation is “before the beginning of time.” By trying to make “age” or “ages” intrinsic to the meaning of *aionios* Sarris has committed a stupefying blunder for someone who claims to know Greek better than translators of the NT.
 - c. 2. Without beginning or end. There are only two texts in this category, Rom. 16:26, “the eternal God” and Heb. 9:14, “the eternal Spirit.”
 - d. 3. Without end. The other 66 uses fall into this category. The only translation that works for *aionios* is “eternal” or “forever.” These 66 uses fall into 19 categories.
 - i. Eternal sin, Mk. 3:29. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.
 - ii. Eternal gospel, Rev. 14:6.
 - iii. Eternal dwellings (*skene*), Lu. 16:9.

- iv. Eternal dwellings (*oikan*) 2 Cor. 5:1.
 - v. What is unseen is eternal, 2 Cor. 4:18.
 - vi. Eternal honor and power, 1 Tim. 6:16.
 - vii. Eternal judgment, Heb. 6:2.
 - viii. Eternal redemption, Heb. 9:12.
 - ix. Eternal inheritance, Heb. 9:15.
 - x. Eternal covenant, Heb. 13:20
 - xi. Eternal kingdom, 2 Pet. 1:11.
 - xii. Eternal encouragement, 2 Thes. 2:16.
 - xiii. Have your slave back forever, Philemon 15. This is a beautiful picture of redemption. The slave Onesimus ran away from his master Philemon, who was also a friend of Paul. While Paul was in prison he led Onesimus to the Lord. Paul says that Onesimus ran away so that Philemon might have him back eternally, that is, Philemon and Onesimus will both be in heaven together forever.
 - xiv. Eternal salvation, Mk. 16:8 and Heb. 5:9.
 - xv. Eternal glory, 2 Cor. 4:17; 2 Tim. 2:10; and 1 Pet. 5:10.
 - xvi. Eternal punishment (*kolasis*), Mat. 25:46.
 - xvii. Eternal destruction, 2 Thes. 1:9.
 - xviii. Eternal fire, Mat. 18:8; 25:41.
 - xix. Eternal life, Mat. 19:16, 29; 25:46; Mk. 10:17,30; Lu. 10:25; 18:18, 30; John 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2,3; Ac. 13:46, 48; Rom. 2:7; 5:21; 6:22, 23; Gal. 6:8; 1 Tim. 1:16; 6:12; Tit. 1:2; 3:7; 1 John 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20; Ju. 1:21.
- e. *Aionios* never means “the age to come.” No scholarly lexicon or commentary understands *aionios* to mean anything other than “eternal” except for the 3 times it modifies *chronos* to describe the distant past. Sarris has confused the adjective with the noun and invented a meaning for the adjective that does not exist.
- f. When Matthew wants to write “eternal life,” he writes it like every other NT author writes it: *zoe aionios*. In Mat. 19:16, 29 this is what he writes. No one tries to translate *zoe aionios* as “life of the age to come.” In Mat. 25:46, he has written a perfectly balanced contrast between the fate of the righteous and the fate of the wicked. If the second *aionios* means “eternal” then the first must mean “eternal.” Sarris can’t cite one modern scholarly source to support his contention that

aionis means “the age to come.” There is absolutely no contextual reason to assign to different meanings to *aionios*.

- g. If the Lord had wanted to say that the punishment of the wicked would last for a limited or unspecified amount of time in contrast to the everlasting life of the righteous, there is a simple way of doing this in Greek. He could have used the word for time (*chronos*) and modified it with *polus*, “much” or with *ikanos*, “considerable.” It really doesn’t help Sarris’s cause much to try to smuggle “the age to come” into the translation. For the end of all the ages has come on us, making the next age the eternal state (1 Cor. 10:11).
- h. There is one modern, excellent commentator that Sarris could have gotten a little help from if only he read scholarly commentaries. R. T. France taught NT at Oxford. He died in 2012 and left behind a solid body of work. In his second commentary on Matthew (1,169 pages) he translates Mt. 25:46, “Then these people will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous ones to eternal life.” He says “eternal life” means just that, entrance into the kingdom. But “eternal punishment” does not mean “everlasting punishment.” It means punishment with “eternal consequences.” What does he mean by “everlasting consequences?” He does not say at this point (pp.966-67). In his discussion of the eternal fire in Mt. 18:8 he claims that since *ainios* (eternal) derives from *aion* (age, eternity), the eternal fire “belongs to the age to come” (p. 683). The metaphor of fire and threat of destroying body and soul supplies him with “eternal consequences,” i.e., the annihilation of the wicked person. He never comes out and says that he is an annihilationist, but he presents the arguments for annihilation with sympathy. There are at least five faults with his argument. First, it demands that the same word used twice in antithetic clauses that contrast the fates of the wicked and the righteous be used in two different senses without any contextual reason. Second, France commits the etymological fallacy. The fact that *aionis* may be derived from *aion* has nothing to do with its meaning. Meaning is determined by usage not etymology. Third, Jesus does not say that the wicked “go into eternal consequences.” He says that they “go into eternal punishment,” and “punishment” (*kolasis*) was also used of “torment, torture.” What contextual reason is there for changing a perfectly clear

clause? Fourth, as shown above the usage of *aionios* always means either “without beginning or end” or “without end” except in the three instances where it modifies “age, time.” *Aionis* by itself never means “the age to come.” Fifth, Jesus knew how to say, “the age to come.” In Greek it is *o aion mallon*, (cf. Mat. 12:32). So if Jesus meant, “punishment in the age to come” why didn’t he say it? If Jesus had wanted to say punishment that lasts for a “sufficient time,” he could have said, *ikanos chronos*, or punishment that lasts “for a long time” would have been *polus chronos*. My point is that if he did not want to say “eternal” punishment, he had idiomatic ways in Greek to express all kinds of punishment. It is possible, that the metaphors of fire and destruction could mean that the wicked are annihilated if that were the only way that hell is described in the NT, but the other texts that describe hell support not annihilation but conscious, eternal, suffering.

2. I have already shown that Sarris’ second point, that *aionis* has two different meanings in back to back verses (Rom. 16:25-26), is wrong. He is still confusing the adjective (eternal/*aionios*) with noun (age/*chronos*). But in this section, he reveals that he does not even have the vocabulary to speak about syntax. He concludes, “The meaning in each instance is determined by the subject it’s referring to.” Adjectives do not have “subjects” that they “refer to.” They have nouns that they modify. They may also be used as adverbs like the accusative case in certain contexts.
3. The first problem with Sarris’ explanation of punishment is his presuppositional bias against “just punishment.” Since in his view God’s mercy will prevail over all punishment, he has to conclude that all punishment is ultimately “remedial.” But in Scripture some punishment is not corrective, but retributive. For example, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God has God made man” (Gen. 9:6). Murder is a crime against man, but far worse, it is a sin against God. Capital punishment does not improve the man. It kills him. And secular Greek is filled with examples that are retributive not remedial. There is simply no legitimate methodological escape from the lexical corner into which Sarris’ has painted himself.
 - a. Sarris commits the etymological fallacy regarding *kolasis*, the Greek word translated “punishment.” He asserts, “It was originally used to mean pruning trees to make them grow

better.” He maintains “that in all Greek literature outside the Bible, it’s never used for anything but remedial punishment” (167-68). Sarris has not read all Greek literature outside of the Bible. The lexicons don’t even contain all the Greek literature, and Sarris can’t read classical Greek. He is dependent on the unreliable William Barclay for the preceding observation. Regarding the pruning element in *kolasis*, it is true that Theophrastus used the word *kolasis* of pruning an almond tree in the fourth or third century BC in his work *de Causis Plantarum*. But that has nothing to do with the meaning of the word 300 years later in Matthew. For example, King George I called St. Paul’s Cathedral *awful* and *artificial*. In the early 18th century *awful* meant awe-inspiring, and *artificial* meant a work of art. But 300 years later, when someone calls Obama an “awful” president, they are not saying that he is awe-inspiring. *Kolasis* is not always remedial. In fact, right after n. 244 where Sarris cites Barclay maintaining that *kolasis* is always remedial, he 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. So let’s do a quick scan of the three most important Greek-English works to test Sarris’ claims.

- b. The *kolasis* word group in the standard scholarly Greek-English lexicons:
 - i. Liddell and Scott, the lexicon of classical Greek.
 1. LS cites line 1172 of Euripides’ play *Helen* (412 B.C.E) where Theoklymenos says, “I have rebuked myself many times; for do we not *punish* evil men with death?” This is Euripides version of the Trojan War, and the killings are not remedial. They are vindictive or retributive.
 2. LS also list usages of this word group in the classical period for both corrective and retributive punishment. The context determines which sense is appropriate.
 3. Sarris’ statement that “in all Greek literature outside the Bible, it’s never used for anything but remedial punishment” (167-68), is simply false.
 - ii. Bauer-Gingrich is the standard, scholarly the lexicon of the NT and early Christian literature.

1. Both for the verb (*kolazo*) and the noun (*kolasis*) this lexicon lists numerous examples from Greek literature around the time of the NT, both before and after (LXX, OT Apocrypha, Josephus, Philo, NT Apocrypha, 1 Clement, 2 Clement, etc.) where the word group is used of secular retributive punishment, torture, the martyrdom of Jesus, divine retribution, eternal punishment.
 2. Bauer does not cite one example that he would define as remedial punishment.
- iii. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament 10 vols. (TDNT), ed. Gerhard Kittel.
1. J. Schneider, 3:816, cites both remedial and retributive uses of this word group in the NT and in secular Greek.
 2. He cites Mt. 25:46 as an example of eternal punishment, and he cites a parallel to Mt. 25:46 in Greek from Josephus *Wars of the Jews* 2, 163 (3:816, n. 2). He does this in a footnote, and does not translate the Greek. Here is a literal translation of Josephus. “Every soul, they [the Pharisees] maintain, is immortal, but only the soul of the good passes into another body, but the soul of the wicked suffers eternal (*aidion*, not *aionios*) punishment (*kolazo*). Not only is this an example of retributive justice, it is also an indisputable example of this word group being used of eternal punishment, which Sarris maintains never happens in all secular Greek. In another place (p. 287, n. 242) Sarris states that in Josephus *aidion* always means “eternal.” So here is *kolasis* not only being used of retributive punishment but of eternal punishment.
- c. The NT writers do talk about the value of corrective pain. They use the noun *paideia* (“discipline, correction, child training”) and the verb *paideuo* (“to instruct, bring up, to correct) when they want to stress God’s painful correction of his children. The author of Hebrews even used “scourge” (*mastigoo*) to describe God’s painful correction (11:6).

- d. No modern translation of Mat. 25:46 comes close to Sarris' rendering.
- e. Sarris simply does not provide a convincing way around Mat. 25:41, 46 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' ...then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."
- f. Sarris is asking his readers to believe that his Greek and theological skills are superior to those of all the modern translators of the NT. These scholars are professors of NT Greek in major universities and seminaries in the English-speaking world.

Rev. 14:9-11

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name."

Rev. 19:20

But the beast was captured and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur.

Rev. 20:10

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Rev. 21:8

But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.

Sarris' observations:

1. Sarris cites Rev. 21:8, alludes to Rev. 19:20 and 20:10, and leaves Rev. 14:9-11 untouched.
2. This is how Sarris explains these passages. After quoting Rev. 21:8, he writes, "That definitely sounds like something horrendous beyond description in the English translations. But the words in their original language give a much different picture of what the purpose of the Lake of Fire really is. The word translated sulfur originally referred to fire from heaven. It's connected with sulfur because it was used in pagan religious rites for purification. Pre-Roman civilizations used it as a medicine, a fumigant, a bleaching agent and in incense. And the Romans used sulfur or fumes from its combustion as an insecticide, and to purify a sick room to cleanse its air of evil. The term translated torment originally referred to the action of an inspector who sought to test the quality of gold and silver coins. In its proper sense it is a means of testing and proving. For the apostle John who authored the book of Revelation, and for his readers in the ancient world, the Lake of Fire was not a place of unending torture. It was not a place with no purpose other than to inflict pain. It was a refiner's fire. Its purpose was to purify and cleanse from evil in the age to come. God is good. His punishments have a good purpose" (p. 217). 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."

Critique

1. Sarris wants us to believe that sulfur is a good thing because it had beneficial uses in the secular world. But we are not in the secular world. We are in the world of the Bible. And the way we determine what a word in the Bible means is how the Bible uses the word. For example, the word *God* has a different meaning in the Bible than it does in the world of Greek mythology or philosophy. So what does the Bible say about "sulfur?"

- a. Gen. 19:24. God rained down *burning sulfur* on Sodom and Gomorrah. He wiped these two cities off the face of the earth, not for their remedial good, but for the good of the earth because “their sin was so grievous” (18:20). No one that I know of in all the history of OT scholarship has ever called this punishment remedial. And this first use of *burning sulfur* controls all the rest of its scriptural uses.
- b. Dt. 29:23. If the Israelites leave God, he promises to turn their land into “a *burning* waste of salt and *sulfur*” like he did Sodom and Gomorrah. All of God’s judgments on his wicked people are meant to serve as warnings to later generations, but there is no sense that the judgment on the wicked generation is remedial.
- c. Job 18:15. God will scatter *burning sulfur* over the tent of the wicked.
- d. Ps. 11:6. God rains *burning sulfur* on the wicked.
- e. Isa. 30:33. God will bring a stream of *burning sulfur* on the Assyrian king.
- f. Isa. 34:9. God will turn Edom’s dust into *burning sulfur*.
- g. Ezk. 38:22. God will pour down *burning sulfur* on Gog. This is an end time passage anticipating the use of *burning sulfur* in Revelation.
- h. 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. The usage of the Bible will not support that sense. Any remedial notion has to be imported from outside the text of Scripture and based on prior theological convictions. But this exactly how we should not do theology. Theology should be based on clear scriptural statements.
- i. Luke 17:29. The first reference to fire and sulfur in the NT is by Jesus when he tells his disciples that his coming will bring unexpected judgment on the earth like the fire and sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah. This first reference controls the rest of the uses of *burning sulfur*.
- j. Rev. 9:17-18. Fire, smoke and sulfur come out of the mouths of the apocalyptic horses and kill a third of mankind. There is no

- suggestion in the text that anything about this judgment is purifying to the wicked it kills.
- k. Rev. 14:19. *Burning sulfur* is part of the eternal torment of the wicked.
 - l. Rev. 19:20. The beast and false prophet are thrown into the lake of *burning sulfur*.
 - m. Rev. 20:10. The devil is thrown into the lake of *burning sulfur* and will be tormented eternally with the beast and false prophet.
 - n. Rev. 21:8. The wicked are thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, which is the second death.
 - o. Conclusion: There are 7 uses of sulfur in the OT and 7 in the NT, 14 total uses. Sulfur in the Bible does not fumigate, drive insects away, serve medicinal purposes or purify in any way. The sulfur in the Bible is always burning sulfur. It always destroys the wicked. And then it torments the wicked angels and humans for all eternity.
2. Sarris asserts that the words for torment in Rev. 14:11 and 20:10 mean “to test” and “to prove.” This word group is comprised of three words. The first is a verb, *basanizo*: to torment, to torture. The next two are nouns, *basanismos*: torment or torture and *basanos*: torment or torture.
- a. According to Bauer, these three words were widely used in literature around the time of the NT. They can be found in the LXX, Apocrypha, Philo, Josephus, Papias, 1 Clement, 2 Clement and many others. In all these texts Bauer lists the meaning of this word group first to be “torture, torment,” and then “severe physical or mental pain.” I read each reference, and only one time did the verb at this time in its history denote testing or purifying. This reference occurred in Maximus Tyrius, Greek rhetorician and philosopher in the late II AD. By then, it no longer meant to test or purify. He used it in a metaphor of refining, “to torture the gold.” At least that is how Bauer understands this singular use of the verb in so late a period.
 - b. ***Basanizo***: to torture, torment
 - i. Mt. 8:6 a disease tormenting the centurion’s son
 - ii. Mt. 8:29 (Mark 5:7; Lu. 8:28) legion asks Jesus if he has come to torture them before their time.
 - iii. Mt. 14:24 (cf. Mark 6:48) storm waves striking the boat or tormenting the rowers.

- iv. 2 Pet. 2:8 Lot's righteous soul was tormented by the wicked deeds of the people of Sodom
 - v. Rev. 9:5. The apocalyptic locusts whose sting tormented humans for 5 months.
 - vi. Rev. 11:10. The two witnesses were given power to torment the earth with any plague they wanted. They tormented the earth for 3 ½ years.
 - vii. Rev. 12:2. The woman with a crown of 12 stars is pregnant and cries out in pain as she is about to give birth.
 - viii. Rev. 14:10. The wicked are tormented with burning sulfur.
 - ix. Rev. 14:11. The smoke of their torment rises forever.
 - x. Rev. 20:10. The devil, the beast and the false prophet are tormented forever in the lake of burning sulfur.
- c. **Basanismos:** torture, torment
- i. Rev. 9:5. The agony from the sting of the locusts.
 - ii. Rev. 14:11. The smoke of their torment of the wicked rises forever.
 - iii. Rev. 18:7 Babylon will be given as much torture as the luxury she gave herself. This is a retributive formula.
 - iv. Rev. 18:10. When the kings of the earth see the torment of Babylon they will be terrified.
 - v. Rev. 18:15. The merchants of the earth will be terrified at Babylon's torment.
- d. **Basanos:** torture, torment
- i. Mt. 4:24. Jesus healed all those in severe pain.
 - ii. Lu. 16:23. The rich man in Hades is in torment.
 - iii. Lu. 16:28. The rich man calls Hades a place of torment.
- e. **Conclusion:** Not one NT use of this group means "to test" or "to prove." What Sarris is attempting to do is wipe out a whole body of evidence by appealing to a hypothetical "original" meaning that never appears in the NT. This is willful ignorance, or he simply has no idea of how to do a word study.
3. The Greek phrase translated "for ever and ever" in Rev. 14:11 and 20:10 is made from the double use the noun *aion*. In 14:11 the Greek phrase is *eis aionas aionon*. In 20:11 phrase has the definite articles *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, the articles don't change the meaning of the phrase. Sarris would like to translate this phrase "to the age of

ages.” This is a mistranslation, for the nouns are plural. So the translation he wants should be “to the ages of the ages.” That is a possible translation. Sarris never tells us what “to the age of ages” means. The phrase could also be translated “to the eternity of eternities.” But what you can’t do with this phrase is to escape the incontrovertible conclusion that it always means “eternity” in its 18 occurrences in the NT. Sarris doesn’t even attempt a word study of this group. He just makes an assertion that it can’t mean “for ever and ever.”

a. In Revelation

- i. 1:6, “and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power *for ever and ever*.”
- ii. 1:18, “...I (Jesus) am alive *for ever and ever*...”
- iii. 4:9, “to him who sits on the throne and who lives *for ever and ever*.”
- iv. I’m not going to write out portions of the remaining verses because they are all undebatable. I will simply list the remaining references in Revelation. They are: 5:13; 7:12; 10:5; 11:15; 15:7; 22:5.
- v. The three references that claim the punishment is for eternity are 14:11; 19:3; and 20:10. Sarris says that *eis tous aionas tou aionon* only means for a long time in these three texts. But Sarris offers no exegetical or linguistic reason for not taking this phrase in the normal Johannine sense. Meanings are determined by usage, not by a priori theological convictions that haven’t been or can’t be proved by normal, historical, grammatical exegesis. John has shown us how he unambiguously expresses “for eternity.” Sarris doesn’t even consider this evidence.

b. Other NT uses of *eis tous aionas ton aionon*.

- i. Gal. 1:5, “to whom be glory for ever and ever.”
- ii. All of the following are doxological praise for God. Eph. 3:21; Phil. 4:20; 1 Tim. 1:17; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 1:8; 13:21; 1 Pet. 4:11; and 1 Pet. 5:11. The double use of *aion* always unequivocally means “for ever and ever.” No translator or commentator translates “to the ages of the ages.”

- c. A comparison of Rev. 4:8 with 14:11 also argues for the eternity of the punishment in the latter.
- i. Rev. 4:8 says this of the four living creatures: “Day and night they never stop saying, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’” *Day and night* is common figure of speech (a merism) in Scripture for “unceasing.” Every commentator takes this to be endless, eternal praise to God from the four living creatures. Here is a literal translation of the introductory clause: *They have no rest day and night...*
 - ii. Back to Rev. 14:11. John uses the exact same Greek words of 4:8 to say of the followers of the beast: *They have no rest day and night*. John’s Greek is the simplest of all the NT authors, but he is unsurpassed in the beauty of his literary skill. He uses the exact same words, the exact same figure to say that while God receives eternal praise, those who rejected the infinite, eternal sacrifice of his Son receive eternal torment.

Mat. 10:28 (Luke 12:5)

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Sarris’ observations:

1. The word rendered “hell” is *gehenna*. In Jesus day it was a place where garbage was burned. The bodies of criminals were also burned here. So *gehenna* refers to a temporal shameful punishment, not to the torment of the immaterial part of man in the afterlife. The real purpose of the fire of *gehenna* is to purify.
2. He notes that the word rendered “soul” can also mean “life” (149). From this he argues that: “There is more to your life than just your physical existence. Your reputation and purpose for living, your desires and emotions, your thoughts and ideas are all part of your life or soul. Those things cannot be taken away by men, even if those men are able to put an end to your physical existence. That has been seen countless times when people have died for an important cause. Their ideas, desires and purposes in life often carry great influence far beyond their deaths. But God is far greater than any human being. He

is able to completely destroy both the soul and the body in the Gehenna fires. He can bring a complete end not only to someone's physical life, but also to their reputations, goals, desires and purposes. That, too, has been seen countless times in history when evil men have died and the truth about the kind of people they really were comes to light."

Critique

1. Jesus describes *gehenna* as a place of torment "where the fire never goes out" (Mark 9:45) and "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). In Mat. 18:8-9 Jesus calls the fire "eternal."
2. The "burning garbage dump" interpretation of *gehenna* might be true, but it has no ancient support. No one knows for sure how *gehenna* came to be identified as the place where the wicked suffer fiery torments after death or after the last judgment. See *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, vol. 1:514-15. See also R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 202. France writes, "Hell (geenna) will be referred to again in 5:29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33 as the place of the final destruction of the wicked; *its use in this sense is well attested in Jewish apocalyptic literature* (my italics).
3. Eric, this is the standard scholarly view of Gehenna in the great, modern commentaries on the Gospels. No modern English translation follows Sarris' retranlations of the Greek text. The modern commentators and translators are professors who teach Greek and Hebrew in graduate schools. Sarris does not interact with this body of scholarly literature. I read all his footnotes. For the most part, he cites unscholarly, out of date, and error-filled sources. For example, Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 1887; and W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 1940. These are the kinds of books that a college student buys to find hidden meanings in Greek words, and then that student learns Greek in seminary and throws these books away. In a similar vein, Sarris cites extensively from William Barclay's NT commentaries. Barclay, a prolific author, was a professor at Glasgow and died in 1978. His commentaries were immensely popular bringing out "local color" and "hidden meanings" from the Greek text. No scholar cites Barclay because his commentaries are not scholarly. He did not understand modern lexicographical principles. Regarding his exegetical skill, he said,

- “Nowhere does the NT identify Jesus with God” (*A Spiritual Autobiography*, p. 50). Even liberal exegetes claim that the NT teaches the deity of Jesus. They don’t believe that teaching and claim that the followers of Jesus invented those claims. But it is indisputable that the NT teaches the deity of Jesus, but Barclay is not a skilled enough interpreter to see that. He is also a universalist. In footnote 211, p. 282, Sarris cites “scholar” Johann Schleusner to prove that “eternal” does not always mean “forever.” Schleusner was a German professor. In 1792, he wrote a Lexicon of NT Greek translating the Greek words into Latin. Today, the standard NT Greek-English Lexicon is based on the fifth edition of Walter Bauer’s *Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch*, 1958. It was translated into English by Gingrich and Danker, who criticized Schleusner’s lexicon for needlessly multiplying definitions and not being scientific. If you look at footnote 211, you will find out that Sarris did not even read Schleusner. He is citing Schleusner from an 1847 article in *The Universalist Quarterly*. This is where much of his “research” comes from, old universalist literature that did not have the benefit of using modern linguist, exegetical principles, and was never the product of first rate scholarship.
4. The whole point of Mat. 10:28 and Luke 12:5 turn on the body-soul contrast, which Sarris ruins. The Greek word for “soul” may denote a number of things according to the contexts in which it is used. But when it is contrasted with the body it means “the essential, immaterial self that lives on after the body dies.” R. T. France, *Matthew*, cites R. H. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology*, pp. 87-160, who gives multiple examples of the literary use of the body-soul dichotomy. C. S. Keener, *Matthew*, pp. 326-27, n. 40, also gives multiple examples of this contrast between body and soul all across Greek, Roman, Jewish and biblical literature. I know Craig Keener. He, Wayne Grudem and I gave lectures at ETS for years. We had dinner on Friday nights. He is a careful scholar and a specialist in NT backgrounds. What is so disturbing about Sarris is that he completely ignores outstanding contemporary scholarship.
 5. Sarris’ offers a definition of soul that cannot be found in any standard Greek lexicon nor in any exegetical commentary modern or old, and a definition that does not work in this context. He claims that soul means “your reputation and purpose for living, your desires and emotions, your thoughts and ideas.” He claims that these things can’t be taken away by man, but of course they can. If they couldn’t, we

- would have no novels or plays. College professors have stolen all of these things from their naïve students. In the context of Mat. 10:17ff, Jesus is preparing his apostles for the loss of their lives not their reputations or thoughts. So don't fear man, he can only kill your body. But fear the One who can destroy body and soul in hell.
6. You could use this verse for the annihilation viewpoint, but Sarris won't do that because he is a universalist. Sarris is not explaining Mat. 10:28. He is explaining it away.

Mat. 26:24, Mark 14:21

The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

Sarris' observations.

1. Sarris simply retranslates the text. “The Son of Man indeed goes, as it has been written concerning him, but woe to that man (Judas) through whom the Son of Man is delivered up! It would be good for Him (the Son of Man) if that man (Judas) had not been born” (P. 219).

Critique

1. Sarris has to explain this verse away. The only reason that Jesus can say it would have been better for Judas if he not been born is because he is destined to spend eternity in hell. This saying of Jesus topples the annihilation and universalist positions.
2. The only way of escape for Sarris is to make “for him” refer back to Jesus instead of “that man.” This interpretation is unnatural, but worse, it is nonsensical. What advantage would accrue to Jesus if Judas has not been born? Would Jesus be spared the cross? Would Judas' absence from history cancel out the prophecies of Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53? Would it cancel out the prophecy of Psalm 41:9, so that Jesus would have no betrayer? Sarris is happy to do the grammatical shuffle and then exit the discussion. He does not tell us in what sense Judas not being born would have been better for Jesus. For there is no sense in which Judas never having been born would have benefited Jesus. He would have still gone to the cross, and he would have still

- had a betrayer because as Jesus says in this verse, the Scripture had to be fulfilled.
3. Davies and Allison, in their massive, three volume commentary on Matthew (3:463), point out that the form of Mt. 26:24 follows the same form as Mt. 11:20-24:
 - a. Mt. 26:24
 - i. Address: “Woe to that man”
 - ii. Crime: “Through whom the Son of Man is betrayed”
 - iii. Prophecy of punishment: “It would have been better...”
 - b. Mt. 11:20-24
 - i. Address: “Woe Korazin, Bethsaida...”
 - ii. Crime: “Did not repent.”
 - iii. Prophecy: “You will go down to the depths...”
 4. They (ibid.) also point out that the form, “Woe to the one who has done this or that; it would have been better if he had never been born,” is a traditional curse form. Both Clement 46:8 (between 80-140 AD) and the Shepherd of Hermas, *Vis.* 4.2 (90-150 AD) use this exact form.
 5. Lastly, they (ibid.) also point out that use of *that man* is traditional in curses or bans. For example, Lev. 17:4, 9; 20:3, 4, 6; Deut. 17:5, etc.
 6. I recently read through the pseudoepigraphal book of I Enoch. In the second division of the book, *The Parables*, usually dated to the first century B.C., I found an exact parallel to Mt. 26:24. In Enoch 38:2, Enoch describes the separation of the righteous and the evil in the final judgment. Of the unrighteous people he states, **“It would have been better for them, had they never been born”** (my emphasis). No Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic translation has been found for this section of the book. It is in Ethiopic. This shows how widespread the use of this curse formula was and that it predated Matthew.
 7. Conclusion: Sarris’ translation is to be rejected because it leaves Judas unpunished though Jesus called him a devil (John 6:70) and the son of destruction whom he lost (John 17:12). Sarris’ interpretation leads to nonsense. And the form Jesus used to prophesy judgment was one he used Mt. 11:20-24 and one also in use by others as early as the first century B.C.
 8. One final point, Sarris maintains that the Greek states that “It would be good for him...” not “better for him.” The Greek word *kalos* means “good, useful, beautiful...” In conditional clauses it also means “better” when the apodosis is introduced with a comparative particle like *mallon*. It also means “better” in conditional sentences when the

comparison is implied as it is in Mt. 26:24 and Mk. 14:21. Bauer illustrates this in his discussion of *kalos* and cites a number of examples of *kalos* meaning better without any comparative particle in apodosis. See p. 400, 3. c. Compare Rom. 14:21; 1 Cor. 7:8, 26b. For an explanation of the syntax Bauer cites the standard Greek grammar of Blass-Debrunner (358.1; 360.1; 409.3). All the modern classic commentaries are aware of the syntax and translate *kalos* as “better.” Compare the magisterial commentaries on Matthew by R. T. France (1169 pages), Davies and Allison (3 vols.), and Craig Keener (1040 pages). One of the greatest NT scholars of modern times, C. E. B. Cranfield, also drew attention to use of *kalos* as a comparative (“better”) in unfilled (contrary to fact) conditional sentences in his commentary on Mark (Mark 14:21, p.424, 3rd edition, 1966). This is another illustration of Sarris’ lack of knowledge of basic Greek grammar and syntax and his consistent avoidance of the great exegetical commentaries.

The meaning of Greek *aion*.

Sarris’ observations

1. Sarris claims that this word means “a period of time – longer or shorter, past or future – the boundaries of which are concealed, obscure, unseen or unknown” (n. 210 TDNT 1:198-99).
“They do not mean never-ending. They mean that the end is not known” (P. 157).
2. Sarris asks, “What about God? Doesn’t He exist outside of time? Isn’t He the eternal God? Doesn’t He exist from everlasting to everlasting?
Absolutely. God is truly eternal. He did not have a beginning. Nor will He have an end. However, when speaking of God, the term translated forever or everlasting or eternal takes its meaning from Him. The praises in the Psalms tell of His greatness not because the word used necessarily meant eternal or never-ending, but because He is the eternal, never-ending God. In the New Testament, “the word *aion* always carries the notion of time, and not eternity” (n. 227). P. 161.

Critique

1. I have already shown above under **Problems 8. c.** that the “quote” does not exist in TDNT 1:198-99 and that these pages contain multiple examples of this word meaning “eternity.” The article actually says the opposite of what Sarris states.
2. Sarris’ assertion that “the word *aion* always carries the notion of time, and not eternity” is from Vincent’s *Word Studies* 4:59. Sarris’s use of Vincent (1887) and other outdated, error-filled sources like Vine’s *Word Studies* (1940) and Barclay’s commentaries demonstrate that he understands nothing about contemporary scholarly study of the NT. No scholar attempts to produce a lexicon or theological dictionary on his own today. There is simply too much data for one person to control. The great lexical works today have editors. No great exegete today attempts to write commentaries on every book in the NT. They specialize, at most, in a few books. Sarris even cites *Strong’s Concordance* (1890) as lexical source for the meaning of “woe.” No one with a theological and exegetical education cites a 130-year-old concordance on the King James Bible as a source of meaning for Greek or Hebrew words.
3. Sarris’ assertion that “the word *aion* always carries the notion of time, and not eternity” is absurd logically and absurd according to the usage of *aion*. If *aion* always has the “notion” of time, by what lexical process did it ever come to mean “timeless?” If all the NT words that are usually translated “eternity, eternal, or forever” essentially “carry notions” of time, the time to come, a long time, an unspecified future time, then how did we ever come to find out that the God of the NT is eternal? Regarding the usage of *aion*, before the NT was ever written, the classical Greek philosophers held lively discussions over time (*chronos*) versus eternity (*aion*). Plato said that God, whom he called Father, made time (*chronos*) as “a moveable image of Eternity” (*aion*), *Timaeus* 37 D. So *aion* was used in classical Greek philosophy the same way it was used in the NT. It could refer to a “lifetime, a long space of time, an age/epoch, and eternity.” See *Liddell and Scott*, p. 45.
4. Sarris’ assertion that *aion* only means “eternal or eternity” when it refers to God is disingenuous in another way. In the strictest sense, only the Trinity is eternal, without beginning or end. So God, his attributes and his purposes are without beginning or end. Everything and everyone else has a beginning. *Aion* can mean without end when

- it refers God's works begun in time, God's children and their praise of God in heaven or of God's punishment of the wicked.
5. All the lexicons and commentaries acknowledge that *aion* can denote an age/epoch, the world, a lifetime, or eternity. For example, TDNT 1:198-202 devotes three and a half pages to the NT use of *aion* in texts where it can only denote eternity. Hermann Sasse who wrote the TNDT article states, "In order to bring out more fully the stricter concept of eternity, religious usage generally prefers the plural... Also designed to emphasize the concept of eternity is the twofold use of the term in the formula *eis ton aiwa tou aionos* (Hebrews 1:8, Ps. 44:6 [in the LXX]" p.199.
 6. Here is a brief survey of the use of *aion* in the NT where it denotes "eternal" or "eternity."
 - a. *Eis tous aionas*.
 - i. Luke 1:32-33, "...The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob *forever*; his kingdom will never end." Sarris retranslates the text, "He shall reign over the house of Jacob to the ages." He cites Strong's Concordance for this translation! Sarris argues that Christ's kingdom does come to an end because when Christ has subdued all his enemies he will be made subject to God (1 Cor. 1:24-28). Secondly he says that since *aion* is in the plural (*aionas*) "to translate the phrase "to the forevers" would negate the very concept of a period of endless time" (p. 163).
 - ii. Sarris says that Jesus' kingdom ends. Gabriel says, "his kingdom will never end." So whom should we believe? Sarris doesn't even bother to cite the last clause of Luke 1:33 which states that "his kingdom shall never end." The fact that Jesus submits himself and all that he has conquered to his Father at the end of time does not mean that he no longer rules his kingdom. In the new creation both the Father and Christ set on thrones and their servants reign forever and ever (Rev. 22:3-5). No person who knows how to exegete cites Strong's as an authority for a translation. Strong's is a concordance for the King James Bible, and the KJB translates the verse, "he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever..." No one with any knowledge of Greek syntax would propose to translate the plural (*aionas*) "to the forevers." This

suggestion is like raising a cloud of dust and then complaining that you can't see. This betrays an abysmal ignorance of Greek syntax and lexical principles. Sarris is so convinced that the “real meaning” of *aion* is “age” that he is willfully blind to any other possibilities. All the lexicons and commentaries demonstrate that *aion* has multiple uses. Here the preposition *eis* governs the phrase. It takes the accusative case and turns the phrase into an adverbial accusative “forever.” The plural “emphasizes the idea of eternity” (TNDT 1:199). The advanced grammar, Blass/Debrunner also points this out for this specific verse (par. 141).

- b. Other examples of *eis tous aionas* that can only mean “forever, without end” are: Eph. 3:11; Rev. 22:5 and the doxologies, Rom. 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 16:27; 2 Cor. 11:31; Gal. 1:5; Eph. 3:21; Phil. 4:20; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 13:8, 21; 1Pet. 4:11; 5:11; 2 Pet. 3:18; Rev. 1:6, 18; 4:9, 10; 5:13; 7:12; 10:6; 15:7.

Jude 6

And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.

The word translated “everlasting” in Jude 6 is *aidios*. It is only used two times in the NT. Sarris maintains that this word is “unequivocal” in its meaning of “eternal” (287, n. 242). It definitely means “eternal” in its only other NT use (God’s eternal power in Rom. 1:20). Using Sarris’ own definition of *aidios* this one verse overturns Sarris’ universalism. It will do him no good to say that the chains are removed at judgment day for the chains are, to quote Sarris, “unequivocally eternal.” The angels are chained eternally before and after the judgment, in addition to any other penalties imposed on them. Augustine pointed out long ago that the universalists cannot logically limit the stream of God’s mercy to the human realm. If God saves all humans because of his love, he must save all angels because of his love for all his creatures (*City of God* 21:17). This one verse then is sufficient to overturn all of Sarris’s arguments.

Conclusion

I have read all of Sarris' book. I disagree with all his explanations of Scriptural texts. Before he ever came to those texts, he had already embraced universalism on the ground that eternal punishment was inconsistent with a good and loving God. His theological conviction forced him to disrespect Scripture with the most tortured "interpretations," which are mostly just his assertions of meaning. I have cited enough examples from his book to show his lack of knowledge of Greek and his faulty methodology.

Another disconcerting aspect of his book is that he disrespects the works of his opponents. For example, he cites Augustine and Jonathan Edwards to mock them, but he doesn't interact with their arguments, which are actually well thought out Scriptural responses to universalism. He gives no evidence of actually having read Augustine or Edwards. He claims to have read *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (edited by Christopher W. Morgan & Robert A. Peterson). Of the nine scholars who contributed articles to this volume Sarris alleges, "Unfortunately, they did not deal with, or even seem to be aware of, most of the key Biblical issues related to the subject" (p. 254, n. 5). This is incredible. The only way Sarris could have made that statement is not to have read the book at all. I read the book. They deal with all the main issues of universalism. In his article on "Universalism" Packer cites arguments from modern, scholarly universalists: C. H. Dodd, J. A. T. Robinson, Nels Ferre, John Hick, Thomas Talbott, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Hans Kung and John MacQuarrie, none of whom Sarris gives any evidence of having read. Packer demonstrates extensive knowledge of modern universalism. Sarris demonstrates no scholarly knowledge of exegesis, theology or church history. He shows a total absence of knowledge of the scholarly commentaries.

Why has eternal punishment been the dominant view for the last 2000 years? Sarris says it is because the translators of the NT don't know Greek and the orthodox theologians aren't even aware of the arguments for universalism. And in days of Justinian 1, the church used the doctrine of eternal punishment for political purposes. So why do the majority believe in eternal punishment? They are ignorant of Greek, biased theologically and driven by impure motives. This is exactly how a fundamentalist treats his opponents.

The Evidence from Church History

Even before the NT period, Jewish writers debated the nature of the final punishment. Some believed in universalism, some believed in annihilation of the wicked, and some believed in conscious, eternal torment. This debate continued right into the beginning of church history. Sarris says that the majority of the church believed in universalism before Augustine. I am certain this is not true.

In the 1870's the debate between the universalists and those who believed in eternal punishment was carried on in Britain between E. B. Pusey and Frederic William Farrar. Pusey was the Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford. When I was a first year student at Dallas Seminary, Pusey's *Commentary on the Minor Prophets* was still being sold in the campus bookstore nearly a hundred years after his death. He also studied the Church Fathers and edited the *Library of the Fathers*, translations of the Church Fathers. Farrar was educated at Cambridge and eventually became the Dean of Canterbury. Both cite witnesses from the early history of the church to support their positions. Pusey is more thorough, citing extensive quotes whereas Farrar often summarizes quotes. Pusey cites multiple quotes from 57 church leaders before Augustine's writings declaring their belief in eternal punishment. 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 (*Hell Under Fire*). From what I can tell Sarris is not only not a scholar of church history, he is not reader of church history. He cites unscholarly, dated universalist readings of church history and completely ignores modern church history scholarship.

Theological Considerations

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. Universalists claim that no good purpose is served by such punishment.

Augustine replied that no "law ever regulated the duration of the punishment by the duration of the offence punished...Nor is there any one who would suppose that the pains of punishment should occupy as short a duration as the offence; or that murder, adultery, sacrilege, or any other crime, should be measured, not by the enormity of the injury or wickedness, but by the length of time spent in its perpetration" (*City of God* 21:11). Surely Augustine is

right. It is the nature of the sin that determines the nature of the punishment. Is there a sin, then, that deserves eternal punishment?

The following syllogism argues that there is a sin that deserves eternal punishment, and I don't know how to escape its logic.

The Son of God died an eternal death for the sins of humanity.

All humanity has committed an eternal sin in their contribution to the death of Jesus.

Therefore, eternal punishment is a just punishment for all humanity.

The punishment for sin is not simply death. It is the second death, which is conscious, eternal suffering in the lake of fire where those who reject the grace of God bear the wrath of God forever (Rev. 14:9-11; 20:10-15). The punishment for sin is to be cursed, which is to be forever banished from God and his goodness (Mat. 25:41, 46). People who go to hell have spent their whole lives preparing for it by choosing to live apart from God's grace and holding his love, wrath and justice in contempt. As C. S. Lewis said they are the people who refused in their lifetime to say to God, "Thy will be done." So God says to them at the end of their lives, "Thy will be done." Hell is essentially the consummation of a life lived independently of God.

The greatest suffering, the greatest pain in the world is not the suffering of the wicked in hell. It is the suffering of God who provided grace to man to escape hell and live in ecstasy with God forever. All of the suffering of all humanity in all earthly history combined with all the suffering of all the souls in hell for all eternity would be less than a drop compared to the ocean of suffering that God bore to provide heaven for his children. Consider the suffering of God in purchasing the redemption of his people.

Gal. 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

The body of the man was not accursed because it was hung on a tree. The curse of God had caused the man's death because he spurned God, so the body of the man was hung on tree as a sign of his cursed death (Dt. 21:23; see Peter Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 285-86). The curse is described in detail in Dt. 27-28. It is a divine, judicial pronouncement that

removes a person or people from the presence of God and from his blessing and releases a destructive power in their life that carries them into irredeemable ruin. In the NT “to be cursed” means to be thrown in the eternal lake of fire (Mt. 25:41).

Jesus did not become a “curse offering.” He became a curse, a curse in our place. He actually became separated from God’s presence, God’s protection and God’s blessing. And all the forces of hell were loosed on him (Luke 22:23—where the power of darkness reigns over the circumstances of Jesus’ death but not over his heart; and John 14:30—where Jesus says the prince of this world is coming, apparently to supervise the tortuous death of the Son of God).

2 Cor. 5:21

God made him who had [lit. “knew”] no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That God made his Son to be sin sounds so incredible that some have tried to translate the phrase “God made him...to be a sin offering.” But the word *hamartia* (sin) requires the preposition *peri* before it to mean “sin offering” (see C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:382). There is no other way to translate this clause than “to be sin for us.” I will draw out the implications of Jesus becoming sin shortly.

Mt. 27:45-46

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” —which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus’ own testimony is that on the cross, God has abandoned and banished Jesus from the presence of God. This sounds so unbelievably harsh that some have tried to make this a victory cry. The words are the first verse of Psalm 22, a psalm that eventually ends in victory. Jesus will leave the cross with cry of victory, but here he is lamenting the greatest pain ever experienced by anyone.

John 19:28

Later, knowing that all was now completed, and that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.”

Thirst was one of the most grueling torments of crucifixion. However, John never uses “thirst” in his writings of mere physical thirst. It includes physical thirst but he transforms it into a metaphor where “thirst” means to lack eternal life. Jesus told the woman at the well that if she drank his water she would never thirst again because his water would become “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-15; so also 6:35; 7:37-38; and Rev. 7:16-17). In his lyrical style John is using a metaphor to say that on the cross Jesus lacks eternal life.

Rom. 3:25-26

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

The phrase “a sacrifice of atonement” is the NIV’s translation of a single Greek word, *hilasterion*. In the margin the NIV translators acknowledge that it can be “a gift which turns aside the wrath of God.” The KJV, NASB and ESV all translate “a propitiation.” The OED shows the first use of “propitiation” in English in 1388 in Wycliffe’s translation of Lev. 25:9, “The Day of Propitiation.” They define it as “an act or prayer that appeases God’s anger.” The English word is obsolete now except in theological circles.

In secular Greek *hilasterion* was used of a gift or an act by a human that turned away a god’s wrath. The wrath of the gods in the ancient Greek world was often capricious, uncontrolled and vindictive, and the gift that turned away their wrath was often nothing more than a bribe.

This is the word that Paul chose to interpret the meaning of the cross of Jesus for his Greek readers. Every Greek reader knew exactly what *hilasterion* meant. Jesus’s death on the cross was the sacrifice that turned away the wrath of God from man’s sin against God.

God's wrath is not irrational anger. It is his steady, controlled hatred of evil. He cannot condone evil. He must punish it. No one can escape his wrath by observing the Law. The theme of Romans is that the power of God for salvation is found in the cross of Jesus not in man's ability to obey God and that this salvation is appropriated through faith in Jesus (Rom. 1:16-17). In the cross of Jesus both the righteousness and wrath of God are revealed (Rom. 1:17-18). Wrath is the other side of love, for God hates what hurts his creatures and nothing is more destructive than sin. The infinite depth of God's love, righteousness and wrath is revealed in the cross. See C. E. B. Cranfield's discussion of Rom. 1:16-18 and 3:21-26 in his magisterial *Romans*.

Now we are in a position to understand Jesus' horror in Gethsemane.

Mark 14:32-36

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

All the commentators point out that the Greek words used for the mental anguish of Jesus in this passage portray Jesus "in the grip of a shuddering horror...from which there was no escaping and in which He saw no help and no comfort" (Cranfield, *Mark*, 431). To paraphrase Barth, the bill for the sin of humanity was being presented to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (ibid. 432).

Jesus was not recoiling from a painful, shameful physical death. He was recoiling from the horror of drinking the cup of God's wrath against sin.

On April 3, 33 A.D., from noon until three in the afternoon, God blotted out the sun, and he turned the Light of the world over to darkness. The Father and the Spirit abandoned the Son, who became a curse. Jesus said that eternal life is to know God (John 17:3). While Jesus was under the curse, God withdrew from him and Jesus no longer knew God, that is, for the first time in all eternity, the Son he no longer had an experience of his Father or

of the Holy Spirit. The Father placed the sin of the world—past, present and future—on his Son. Jesus became sin. He thirsted for eternal life. He felt the shame and the guilt of every sin that had ever been or ever would be committed. He learned what it felt like to be a murderer, a child abuser, a rapist, a self-righteous religious leader and on and on. Jesus absorbed the infinite wrath of God against sin. And because the one being sacrificed was infinite he was able to drink the cup of God's wrath down to the last drop. But nothing hurt worse than losing the experience of the love of his Father and of the Spirit. And it was an infinite, eternal hurt because the Son is both eternal and infinite. And the pain it caused the Father and the Spirit to abandon and crush the Son (Isa. 53:10) was eternal and infinite. And no finite being will ever have more than a shallow, theoretical understanding of that eternal suffering. How this great separation within the Trinity happened and what the pain was really like for God will be hidden forever in the abyss of divine love.

All on his own, Jesus paid the bill in full for the sin of humanity. In those three dark hours, he paid the price of the second death, the price of eternal death.

The separation in the Trinity lasted for three of earth's hours, but that separation has eternal effect because the Trinity is eternal.

At the end of those three hours, the Son of God looked out on a universe from which every trace of God had vanished, and proclaimed, "It is finished." He spoke not of his life or of his ministry, but of his work of paying for humanity's sin and bearing the wrath of God. And then he sang the song of Scripture to the Father he could no longer feel, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Ps. 31:5). And in those words is the victory cry of the cross.

Why did God endure this infinite pain? Because he loves the people he created. That is half the answer. The other half the answer is that God loves his people righteously. In Gethsemane, in effect, Jesus asked his Father, "Is it possible to love people righteously without me bearing your righteous wrath."

That question has been forever answered in the cross.

So I conclude:

My sin caused an eternal death.

The fact that I committed this willful sin in time does not mitigate its eternal magnitude.

Eternal separation from God is a just punishment for me.

But on December 18, 1965, at 2:00 AM, God found this fatherless boy in the bedroom of a friend on the Eastside of Ft. Worth. For the first time, I heard that Jesus died on the cross for me, and that if I would trust him to forgive me and give me a new life, he would come into my heart and never leave me. In the darkness of that bleak December night, I believed in the Light of the world and escaped eternal darkness by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said that he is the only way to God (John 14:6). The only salvation that the NT knows about is salvation through faith in Jesus. The Bible knows of no conversion after death. Faith is only possible in this life. So our eternal future is decided in this life. In the next life, there is no faith, only knowledge of the truth, but there is judgment, and that judgment is not remedial.

What purpose does eternal punishment serve? It serves both the righteousness and the love of God. Everyone deserves eternal punishment for their role in punishing an eternal Person. Because God is love, he will not force anyone to love him, for love to be love must be chosen freely. Hell is the only option for the people who reject his righteous, eternal love.

Universalists and annihilationists express revulsion at the thought of a single human suffering in an eternal hell. An eternal hell offends their conviction about the nature of God's love. Man's suffering rather than God's suffering determines their theology. Had they began with the love that moved God to crush his own Son on their behalf they might have been more moved by the justice of God in punishing those who spurn that love.

Maybe I'm wrong in this belief, but I think my argument is strong enough that it deserves a refutation.

Postscript

You wrote that the book was “thoughtful, courageous and humble.” I can’t speak to “courageous.” The book is not thoughtful. It is shallow. It is like a person attempting to write about quantum physics, but he doesn’t even know algebra. It is not humble by any definition of humble. Sarris has scant knowledge of Greek, no knowledge of Greek syntax and absolutely no understanding of lexicography. And yet, he wants us believe on his word that all the translations of the NT by real NT scholars and professors of Greek have gotten it all wrong. This is not pride. It is unexcelled hubris.

As the church grows older and the return of the Lord draws nearer, the purity and doctrine of the church will grow weaker not stronger (1 Tim. 4:1-5 and 2 Tim. 3:1-5). Doctrines of demons will find their way into the church. In the end, the Lord will have to rescue his church.

I look for more conservative evangelicals to reject Christian doctrines that reason can’t reconcile with the nature of a good and loving God. The first point of attack will continue to be what it has always been: human suffering. Open theism gets rid of the problem of suffering by getting rid of God’s omniscience. Universalists get rid of eternal suffering by getting rid of God’s eternal justice and demeaning the eternal suffering of Jesus on the cross. I think the next doctrine to be denied will be substitutionary atonement. Liberals have always called the doctrine barbaric. Now some conservatives are denying the doctrine by saying that “God is no cosmic child abuser.” Paul refused to accommodate the mysteries of the faith to finite reason. He knew the cross would always be a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, and now it’s becoming a stumbling block to some who would call themselves conserve evangelicals.

John 17:3.

Jesus' sacrifice

1. John 17:3, Eternal life is to know God. For three hours Jesus did not know God.
2. 2 Cor. 5:21
3. Gal. 3:13 with Mt. 5:41

Important texts

1. Heb. 9:27
2. John 3:36
3. Jude 5-7, 13

Comments

1. This is not scholarly exegesis. This is the kind of survey I would expect from my second year Hebrew students.
2. There is a way in Greek to say unambiguously “a long time.”
3. When you have retranslate every single text and take the most unnatural interpretations of those texts to support your position, it is time to find a new position.

Theology**Substitutionary Atonement**

1. John 17:3, to know God is eternal life. For three hours on the cross, Jesus had no experience of the God the Father of the Holy Spirit. For those three hours, he did not know God.
2. 2 Cor. 5:21
3. Lev. 16 goat bearing sin.
4. Adam and Eve expelled for one sin.

Augustine**J. Edwards**

1. Edwards knew that the eternal group could sometimes specify a long time, not eternity. But he also pointed out that *eis tous aionion tou aionas* could only be used of eternity.

Conclusion

Close with Lewis’ eternal splendors vs. immortal horrors

List of all passages that teach eternal punishment.

1. Mat. 3:12

2. Mat. 5:22
3. Mat. 5:29-30
4. Mat. 10:28
5. Mat. 18:8-9
6. Mat. 25:41, 46
7. Mat. 26:24