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To Hell and Back The Impossible 23-Minute Journey of Bill Wiese

by G. Richard Fisher

A leading purveyor of outlandish “Christian” experiences and fanaticism writes about one woman’s purported visit to hell: “Sensationalism fascinates, but it also breeds heresy. Authors who claim to have divine revelations should willingly accept close scrutiny.”¹

Yet this same publisher is responsible for the book *23 Minutes in Hell*, written by Bill Wiese.² The back cover introduces Wiese as “a dedicated Christian” and “a successful Realtor.” It also says he has taught and led worship, but says nothing about formal biblical training. The front cover says the book is “One man’s story about what he saw, heard, and felt in that place of torment.”

The book’s title itself is suspect. Any systematic theology based on Scripture will develop the teachings of Christ and the apostles, who spoke about the everlasting punishment of hell. One such work reminds us that, “they themselves also taught that doctrine in the most explicit and solemn manner. It is asserted affirma-



tively that future punishment is everlasting; in the negative form that it can never end; that there is in the future world an impassable gulf between the righteous and the wicked; and that there are sins which can never be forgiven ... Our Lord teaches that the punishment of the wicked is everlasting, in the same sense that the blessedness of the saints is everlasting.”³

GOING BEYOND WHAT IS WRITTEN

Wiese knows and understands clearly that he has no credible proof for all he is claiming. He says, “I did experience this torment, and you can choose to believe me or not.”⁴ The question is: Why should we? Wiese

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intolerance toward sin. Fundamentalism seems to be the only evil that Chopra allows to exist. Why can't he tolerate and love fundamentalists? Why don't they have the kingdom of God within them? So we can conclude that evil exists after all, at least in some cases for Chopra.

The Third Jesus is a truly pathetic book. There is not a shred of evidence to support a so-called "Third Jesus." This book presents nothing new, but simply conjures up a fantasy Jesus spun together by heresies from the past, then compacted together with the sticky paste of mysticism and pantheism. We also have to question the soundness of anyone who teaches, "If I sense the presence of God, then in some way I have entered God's identity and taken it as my own."⁵⁶ Chopra and his book are far removed from Christianity and the Jesus of the Bible. He in no way presents anything that even remotely resembles the true Jesus of history and the Gospels.

Endnotes:

1. Deepak Chopra, *The Third Jesus*. New York: Harmony Books, 2008, pg. 4.
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3. *Ibid.*, pg. 1.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-35.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-227.

7. *Ibid.*, pg. 3.
8. Winfried Corduan, *Pocket Guide to World Religions*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006, pg. 69.
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 71.
10. *Ibid.*, pg. 72, italics in original.
11. *The Third Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 24, bold italic in original.
12. See further, John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1999, pp. 390-417.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 443-444.
14. *The Third Jesus*, op. cit., pp. 3-4.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 7.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 8.
18. *Ibid.*, pg. 9.
19. *Ibid.* pp. 9-10, italic in original.
20. *Ibid.*, pg. 10, italics in original.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 20.
24. *Ibid.*, pg. 24, bold italic in original.
25. W.E. Vine, *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984, pg. 988.
26. Everett F. Harrison, Editor-in-chief, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1960, pg. 470.
27. *The Third Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 28.
28. *Ibid.*, pg. 30.
29. *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, op. cit., pg. 413, italics in original.
30. *The Third Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 36.
31. *Ibid.*, pg. 37.
32. *Ibid.*, pg. 29, emphasis added.
33. *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, op. cit.,

- pg. 492, italic in original.
34. *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, op. cit., pg. 1236.
35. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1976, note on Luke 17:21, pg. 1580, italics in original.
36. J.R. Dummelow, Editor, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958, pg. 762.
37. Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, pp. 272, 273, italics in original.
38. *The Third Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 40.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-139.
40. *Ibid.*, pg. 62.
41. *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, op. cit., pg. 391.
42. *The Third Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 64.
43. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, Vol. 1, pg. 333.
44. *The Third Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 130.
45. *Ibid.*, pg. 143.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.
47. *Ibid.*, pg. 132.
48. *Ibid.*, pg. 159.
49. David W. Bercot, Editor, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, pg. 419.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. *The Third Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 191.
53. *Ibid.*, pg. 224.
54. Joe Dallas, *A Strong Delusion*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1996, pp. 155, 156.
55. *The Third Jesus*, op. cit., pg. 225.
56. *Ibid.*, pg. 212.

TO HELL AND BACK

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also boxes himself in when he states, "What Scripture states is all that matters ... Examine the verses, as Acts 17:11 states, and then decide for yourself."⁵ This article intends to do just that. Wiese then lays the ground rules:

"One thing I was sure of: if what I experienced was true, then I should be able to find proof of it in the Bible. ... The Bible tells us not to add or take away anything from His Word."⁶

Then he adds, "any spiritual experience should be viewed in light of the Scriptures."⁷ However, within the

confines of his book's covers, he repeatedly violates his own ground rules. Many of his experiences have no remote relationship with what's in the Bible.

It is clear from the start of Wiese's book that Scripture will not be the ultimate court of appeal. All he offers us is his unverifiable and experiential claims. For instance, Wiese writes, "I believe Scripture indicates that currently in hell (*Sheol* or *Hades*), God does allow the demons to torment the lost souls."⁸ Wiese himself admits the idea of demons tormenting the lost in hell is suspect teaching when he writes, "This may not be absolutely conclusive in Scripture."⁹ In fact, it is absolutely absent from Scripture. So, apparently, what the Bible actually

teaches *does not* matter to Wiese. This clearly is a case of modern Gnosticism — believing one can receive private revelations of new truth — and a clear violation of Revelation 22:18-19, which forbids adding new content to the Bible. And this is only the start.

Wiese is either totally confused or not being truthful when he claims:

"I have since discovered that my story coincides with what Scripture details about hell. This is of far greater importance than what I have to say."¹⁰

Serious students of the Bible agree wholeheartedly that Scripture is more important than what any of us has to say, but something cannot be absent from Scripture, contrary to Scripture,

and coincide with Scripture all at the same time.

EVERLASTING OR TEMPORARY?

Scripture cannot support Wiese's claim to have spent 23 minutes in hell. Hell is presented everywhere in the Bible as a place where souls go but do not leave. Jesus said, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the *everlasting* fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41, emphasis added). Again Jesus says, "And these will go away into *everlasting* punishment" (Matthew 25:46, emphasis added). Revelation 14:11 is equally clear, "And the smoke of their torment ascends *forever and ever*" (emphasis added).

Hebrews 6:2 affirms that it is eternal judgment. Jude warns that some will have to experience "the blackness of darkness forever" (v. 13), and suffer "the vengeance of eternal fire" (v. 7). What Wiese proposes corresponds more with the unbiblical Roman Catholic notion of purgatory and temporary punishment. In fact, there are a few points of exact correspondence with the tradition of purgatory:

"That it is a state of suffering. ... that the suffering is from material fire. ... The departed may remain in this state of suffering for a few hours or for thousands of years."¹¹

No one mentioned in the Bible ever went to hell and returned. No one in Scripture ever prayed his way out of hell. Luke 16 militates strongly against it. In death we are either absent from the body and present with the Lord or absent from the body and separated from the Lord.

Wiese suggests that Jonah went to hell. He cites Jonah 2:6 as a proof text for someone going to hell and back.¹² But there is no evidence in Scripture that Jonah ever left the stomach of the great fish. Nothing in the text suggests Jonah died. In poetic language, he states that he is as good as dead if he does not get out of there. Jonah declares, "The earth with its bars

closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit" (Jonah 2:6). The "pit" of certain death was where he was, the fish's stomach, and this does not equate with hell. Hebrew linguists C.F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch note, "The expression is a poetical figure used to denote the danger of death, from which there is apparently no escape."¹³

Moreover, Jonah 2:1 is clear that the whole prayer is from one location, "Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly," not literal hell. Jonah calls it *sheol* (or the grave) in verse 2 and complains of the seaweed that is wrapped around him in verse 5. However, no one would suggest that there is seaweed in hell. *Sheol* has a wide range of meanings. A few expositors have suggested that Jonah had to die to be a perfect type of Christ. Yet, no "type" is perfect because all types are based on fallible, sinful humans and defective human systems. Just as Isaac — being called Abraham's only begotten son (Hebrews 11:17) — is said to be a type of Christ, but did not die when he was "offered up" on Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22). Only the fulfillment or antetype is perfect and the types or foreshadowings are merely defective shadows.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

So-called "glimpses of hell," after the Middle Ages, were stock in trade for occultist and modalist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). He wrote prolifically of his glimpses of both heaven and hell. Claiming a personal visit from the Lord Himself, Swedenborg boasted:

"He opened the sight of my spirit, and thus introduced me into the spiritual world, granting me to see the heavens and many of the wonderful things there, and also the hells, and to speak with angels and spirits, and this continually for twenty-seven years."¹⁴

Swedenborg claimed the Bible was only authoritative when it was interpreted allegorically by him and he taught salvation by faith and works.

ALL KINDS OF REASONS

There can, of course, be explanations for these claims of journeys to hell. Some might be outright fabrication. Some might stem from the desire for attention and/or profit. Some might be delusionary thinking, sleep loss, or a near-death episode, which can trigger processes within the brain. Recent brain and sleep studies have shown that there are abnormal dream states that are so vivid that they seem real.

Genuine clinical death is not always simple to determine. Last year, a news article reported a "dead" man waking up under an autopsy knife:

"A Venezuelan man who had been declared dead woke up in the morgue in excruciating pain after medical examiners began their autopsy. Carlos Camejo, 33, was declared dead after a highway accident and taken to the morgue, where examiners began an autopsy only to realize something was amiss when he started bleeding. They quickly sought to stitch up the incision on his face. 'I woke up because the pain was unbearable,' Camejo said, according to a report on Friday in leading local newspaper El Universal. His grieving wife turned up at the morgue to identify her husband's body only to find him moved into a corridor — and alive."¹⁵

NOT A CONSIDERATION

It certainly never occurred to Jews in the Intertestamental Period to suggest anyone could go to hell and then leave. One Jewish document, from around 160 B.C., said that "as the spirit leaves the body ... if it is one of those who have shown scorn and have not kept the way of the Most High ... such spirit shall ... wander about in torment, ever grieving and sad ... they will consider the torment laid up for themselves in the last days (2 Esdras 7:78ff)."¹⁶ The consistent affirmation of Intertestamental Jews was that in hell they were ever grieving.

The teaching of hell as an eternal and permanent place was the accepted view into the time of Herod the Great and Jesus. No one could go to the other side without really dying and leaving their body, and once departed they could not come back. On that, all were agreed. However, by the time of Christ's ministry there were differing schools of thought as to the duration of hell and possible extinction to follow. While no one left hell, some could suffer less time before annihilation. Jesus entered this mix and sorted it out and set them all straight. To this, historian Alfred Edersheim adds, "the question arises about the precise meaning of the words which Christ used. It is, indeed, maintained that the terms *αἰώνιος* and kindred expressions always refer to eternity in the strict sense."¹⁷

Likewise, Jesus' consistent teaching was that a stay in hell was not of short duration leading to heaven or extinction, but eternal and one of conscious torment. There are degrees of punishment in hell, but there is no question as to the permanency of hell. Perhaps the first notions of purgatory came out of this confusion. Jesus used terms like "eternal" and "forever" for both heaven and hell, so we can be sure both places are of the same duration.

Edersheim also informs us about the School of Hillel:

"In regard to sinners of Israel and of the Gentiles it teaches indeed, that they are tormented in Gehenna for twelve months, after which their bodies and souls are burnt up and scattered as dust under the feet of the righteous; but it significantly excepts from this number certain classes of transgressors 'who go down to Gehinnom and are punished there to ages of ages.' ... However, therefore, the School of Hillel might accentuate the mercy of God, or limit the number of those who would suffer Eternal Punishment, it did teach Eternal Punishment in the case of some. ... the doctrine of Eternal

Punishment was that held in the days of our Lord, however it may afterwards have been modified."¹⁸

The Jewish schools of Jesus' time all agreed on the eternity of punishment, though some thought that in certain instances some sinners might be annihilated eventually because of the mercy of God. Yet the outcome was still eternal. Jesus taught the eternity of punishment with no interruptions. In every case, however, no one ever suggested one could leave Gehenna or make trips back and forth.

JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

Wiese says he experienced some kind of translocation of his body for 23 minutes and was taken into hell on Nov. 23, 1998. He later described it as an out of body experience.¹⁹ In his initial telling of his purported trip to hell, it is not immediately clear that he is talking of an out of body experience:

"There was nothing unusual about that night. Annette and I headed home around 11:00 p.m., and we fell into bed shortly before midnight, unaware that my life was about to be changed forever by an event I still find hard to explain. Suddenly, at 3:00 a.m. on the 23rd, without any notice, I found myself being hurled through the air, and then was falling to the ground, completely out of control. I landed in what appeared to be a prison cell. The walls of the cell were made out of rough-hewn stone and had a door made of what appeared to be thick, metal bars. I was completely naked, which added to the vulnerability of a captive. This was not a dream — I was actually in this strange place. Fully awake and cognizant, I had no idea what had happened, how I had traveled, or why I was there until it was shown to me and explained later during my journey."²⁰

There is an old saying: "The devil is in the details." And there are prob-

lems in the details of Wiese's story. Wiese continues the story of his trip on that November night:

"The very first thing I noticed was the temperature. It was hot — far beyond any possibility of sustaining life. It was so hot that I wondered, *Why am I still alive? How could I survive such intense heat?* My flesh should disintegrate from off my body at any moment. The reality was that it didn't. This wasn't a nightmare; it was real. The severity of this heat had the effect of taking every ounce of strength out of me. I wasn't yet fully aware of it — but I had fallen into hell."²¹

Wiese claims to know exactly where hell is:

"I believe the scripture states that presently it is in the center of the earth. ... I sensed it to be approximately thirty-seven hundred miles deep. It was as if my senses were keener or more aware than normal."²²

While there are some who think hell (*hades*) is located in the center of the earth, it is nevertheless a view never clearly presented in Scripture — despite Wiese's claim to the contrary that, "I believe Scripture is clear and speaks for itself."²³

Take careful note that Wiese knew the exact location because he "sensed" it. This contradicts Wiese's earlier claim that the Scripture is of far more importance than what he says. Of course, the diameter of the earth is 7,926 miles, meaning its exact center would be 3,963 miles. It might be that Wiese is merely applying basic geography to his "approximately thirty-seven hundred miles deep" claim.

As noted earlier, it has been observed that the idea of demons tormenting the occupants of hell cannot be supported from the Bible. This does not deter Wiese as he tells of fierce demonic creatures that crushed his head:

"One of those demonic creatures grabbed me and carried me back

into the cell. It threw me on the floor and another creature quickly grabbed my head and began to crush it. Then all four of the creatures were on top of me, each grabbing a leg or an arm as if I were lifeless prey."²⁴

Perhaps Wiese thinks this description is needed to frighten people into making a decision. But when people discover the unbiblical nature of all of this, they are likely to respond with skepticism or ridicule. Unbiblical means cannot produce biblical outcomes. If what Jesus had to say is not enough, it is safe to say Wiese can't improve on it.

TWISTED TEXTS AND MISSING CONTEXTS

Wiese misuses the Bible throughout his book. He constantly mistakes earthly scenes and earthly judgments for descriptions of the afterlife. He writes, "I was catapulted out of my bed into the very pit of hell. My point of arrival was a cell."²⁵ Describing the cell in hell, he then quotes Isaiah 24:22, "And they shall be gathered together, as prisoners are gathered in the pit, and shall be shut up in the prison."²⁶ However, the context of Isaiah 24:22 leads one to conclude that the passage is not about hell:

- "Behold, the LORD makes the earth empty" (v. 1).
- "The land shall be entirely emptied" (v. 3).
- "The earth mourns and fades away" (v. 4).
- "The earth is also defiled under its inhabitants" (v. 5).
- "Therefore the curse has devoured the earth ... therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned" (v. 6).
- "The city of confusion is broken down; every house is shut up, so that none may go in" (v. 10).
- "The mirth of the land is gone" (v. 11).
- "In the city desolation is left" (v. 12).

- "... in the midst of the land among the people" (v. 13).
- "Fear and the pit and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth" (v. 17).
- "The earth is violently broken, the earth is split open, the earth is shaken exceedingly" (v.19).
- "The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard" (v. 20).
- "And on the earth" (v. 21).

This chapter clearly speaks of earthly judgments. The literal fulfillment of Isaiah 24 will occur on earth. Yes, hell is a reality taught in Scripture, but not here.

Some expositors also see future references to the end of time and the reign of Messiah in His Kingdom (v. 23), but none suggests that it is anything other than an earthly scene. Dr. Harry Ironside writes:

"... a careful study of both passages would seem to make it clear that they refer primarily to the land of Palestine in the darkest period of the great tribulation yet to come, and not only to that land but to the prophetic earth as a whole. ... But at least in the early part of the chapter, it is not the world as such that is in view but the land of Israel which the prophet sees as empty and desolate because of the terrible experiences through which the covenant people will pass in the last days. ... When the Lord arises to shake terribly the earth, those signs in the heaven to which Christ referred will be followed by the appearing of the glorified Son of Man accompanied by His heavenly saints descending to take over the government of this world and to bring in the long-awaited age of righteousness."²⁷

Wiese also makes a similar mistake when he calls Lamentations 3:6-11 a reference to hell.²⁸ When Jeremiah wrote Lamentations, he was not in hell. He was alive on earth. God would not send Jeremiah to hell

anyway, because he was a righteous prophet. Jeremiah, in writing Lamentations, told of his agony as he looked at the literal rubble of his destroyed city and demolished temple. The book begins, "How lonely sits the city that was full of people!"

Jeremiah is lamenting the death and destruction all around him inflicted by the Babylonians. Rather than consult his experience, Wiese should have consulted a Bible teacher or some good commentaries. One such teacher writes, "The Book of Lamentations is the Book of Tears. It is a memorial dirge about the destruction and humiliation of Jerusalem."²⁹ The great British expositor, G. Campbell Morgan, agrees that Lamentations "describes the desolation of the city."³⁰

WIGGLE ROOM

Wiese waits until the end of his book to cover his tracks and grudgingly admits that what he says about the verses he uses may be suspect:

"I believe many of these verses that describe punishment of the rebellious on the earth are also revealing clues of what is entailed in hell's sufferings. However, if these verses are pertaining only to the suffering those without God will experience on the earth, then how much more severe will it be in hell? I leave it for you to come to your own conclusions."³¹

Wiese's statement is unacceptable on two points. First, many who suffered in earthly judgments were righteous and innocent. So Wiese is misreading what he labels "clues." When speaking to issues of salvation and eternal consequences, the Bible does not speak in riddles or clues. And second, a legitimate Bible teacher could not, in good conscience, tell others, "Maybe the Bible means this, but on the other hand it may mean that, so I will just leave it up to you to try to figure it out." It was said of the post-exilic teachers in Israel, "So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense,

and helped them to understand the reading" (Nehemiah 8:8). The Ethiopian eunuch longed for someone to help him understand the Scripture and Phillip taught him with understanding (Acts 8:30-37). The book of Proverbs repeatedly urges us to get wisdom and understanding (Proverbs 1). Reading books such as *23 Minutes in Hell* could leave one not only biblically illiterate, but far worse, biblically confused. Publications such as this could be the making of a new Gnostic cult.

A VISIT FROM THE SAVIOR

Another wild and unscriptural assertion — but one familiar to those within the Word-Faith arena — is Wiese's story about Jesus coming to visit him in hell:

"Continuing up, it seemed as if about thirty seconds had passed, when suddenly, a burst of light invaded the entire tunnel. The light was so brilliant, a pure, white light such as I had never seen. It was so bright that I could not see the face of the one who was before me, but I instantly knew who He was. I said, 'Jesus,' and He said 'I AM,' and I fell at his feet. It was as if I died. It seemed as if only a few moments had passed when I regained my awareness. I was still at His feet. ... As soon as He appeared, He restored an awareness to my mind that I was a Christian."³²

A number of Scripture verses militate against this assertion. What is identified as the present heavenly session of Jesus is a very important doctrine for the believer. Christ is seated in the heavenly places as our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16). If Jesus left that position we would have no Mediator. Hebrews 7:25 assures us of one thing and it is that Jesus "always lives to make intercession" for us. Then we have the firm assurance that Jesus will remain in heaven until He returns. As the Apostle Peter shares the Gospel on Pentecost, he speaks to his audience about the day of Christ's return. Concerning our Lord, he

clearly and firmly says, "whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). Jesus remains in heaven until the time of His return. He is not making trips to hell or anywhere else. F.F. Bruce writes:

"Jesus, their Messiah, invested with this holy office by God Himself, had been received up into the divine presence, and would remain there until the consummation of all that the prophets, from earliest days, had foretold."³³

IT SOUNDS TOO FAMILIAR

Those familiar with this genus of books will recognize similarities between Wiese's account and the crass literalism of Mary Baxter. Baxter's own purported trip to hell was detailed in her 1993 book, *A Divine Revelation of Hell*.³⁴ And one of the books that Wiese lists in his bibliography is Baxter's.³⁵

In his chapter "Confirmations," Wiese discloses what he calls "A Divine Connection," which was his encounter with "a woman who had also seen hell."³⁶ From Wiese's description, and the subtitle he used, this "woman" appears to be Mary Baxter, yet she goes unnamed.³⁷ This anonymity on Wiese's part is curious, in that the "woman" is said to have written a book, has produced audio media of her testimony, and keeps a busy speaking schedule. Privacy is not an issue, so the exclusion of a name raises a red flag.

One can wonder whether Wiese's editors at Charisma House left the woman anonymous because of the publisher's dislike of Baxter's book. The quote cited at the beginning of this article ("Sensationalism fascinates, but it also breeds heresy. Authors who claim to have divine revelations should willingly accept close scrutiny."³⁸), and which appeared in *Charisma* magazine, was directed at Baxter and her book. To identify this "woman" as Baxter — who is now being cited by Wiese to confirm his own testimony in a *Charisma*-pub-

lished book — would be another example of *Charisma's* ongoing hypocrisy.

Or one could conclude that Wiese used Baxter's book as a primary source and, as such, preferred to keep her in the shadows. In a few places Wiese's account closely parallels Baxter's. He speaks of the odors of hell and a "foul stench"³⁹ which emanated from the beasts and creatures there. By his account:

"It was absolutely disgusting, foul, and rotten. It was, by far, the most putrid smells I have ever encountered. If you could take every rotten thing you can imagine, such as an open sewer, rotten meat, spoiled eggs, sour milk, dead rotting animal flesh, and sulphur, and magnify it a thousand times, you might come close."⁴⁰

In Baxter's account, we find recorded a hell with "burning and decaying flesh mingled with the smells of offal, stale garbage and mold."⁴¹

Wiese also claims to have met giant creatures that were composites of animals and humans, although neither:

"Each giant beast resembled a reptile in appearance, but took on human form. Their arms and legs were unequal in length, out of proportion — without symmetry. The first one had bumps and scales all over its grotesque body. ... The second beast was taller and thinner, with long arms and razor-sharp fins that covered its body. Protruding from its hands were claws that were nearly a foot long."⁴²

Wiese continues:

"These demonic creatures were all sizes and shapes. Some of them had four legs and were the size of bears. Others stood upright and were about the size of gorillas. They were all terribly grotesque and disfigured. It looked as though their flesh had been decomposing and all their

limbs were twisted and out of proportion. ... There were also gigantic rats and huge spiders at least three feet wide and two or three feet high. I also saw snakes and worms, ranging from small to enormously large."⁴³

In contrast, Baxter describes creatures that are a mix of grizzly-bear-size beings with bat heads and other monsters with smooth skin, large ears, and a tail.⁴⁴ Baxter also writes Satan has a queen who can change into various animals or into a human.⁴⁵

One could conclude that because Wiese and others who claim visits to hell come back with the same description they are simply just confirming one another's account. And by drawing attention to — even with qualification — some of these individuals, that's exactly what Wiese suggests as well.⁴⁶ However, in Baxter's case, for the handful of similarities to Wiese, she reports many more delusions — such as hell being shaped like a human body,⁴⁷ and that hell is occupied by witches who sit in rocking chairs.⁴⁸ Yet because Wiese's novel revelations are also unbiblical, it is more likely that Wiese did some creative borrowing from Baxter and others.

Wiese writes, "There are others who were taken to hell or have had a glimpse of hell on their deathbed."⁴⁹ However, he claims ignorance of these individuals and their reports — at least until after his own experience.⁵⁰ Referring to these other visionaries is another demonstration where Wiese circumvents dependency on the Bible alone, and appeals to the flimsy, subjective confirmation of the unorthodox and unproven claims of others.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, one account specifically mentioned by Wiese by name is Richard Eby's book *Caught Up into Paradise*, in which Eby claims to have visited hell for a few minutes. Eby's account has come under many a critical review. After giving the standard fare of foul odors, Eby actually claims that hell is cold and a place

where one never gets warm.⁵¹ In the hell described by Eby, demons dance to heavy metal and punk music.⁵² Wiese may claim that he neither endorses nor condemns these books, but by citing them he gives them credibility.

THE BIBLE'S ASSURANCES VS. WIESE'S CLAIMS

Romans 8:29-30 assures all believers that they are predestined to glorification, and Romans 8:1 assures all believers that they cannot, in any way, suffer hell, punishment, judgment, or the wrath of God. First Thessalonians 5:9 gives us the comfort that, "God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." With such promises, God cannot violate His own Word and subject one of His own to hell and torment — even for only 23 minutes. Wiese needs to show us in Scripture where the punishments of hell can be imposed on a believer for short periods.

CONTRADICTIONS AND MORE CONTRADICTIONS

The more Wiese writes, the more his story unravels. It was unclear at first that Wiese was claiming an out of body experience. Initially he reported that he "fell into bed shortly before midnight"⁵³ and then was "catapulted out of [his] bed" and into hell.⁵⁴ Later, upon returning from hell, he reports that he was above his house and able to see his body.⁵⁵ What is completely contradictory from his original claim of being catapulted into hell from his bedroom (i.e., "out of my bed") was where his body was when he returned from hell. Upon his return he says:

"I could see through the roof. As I looked into the *living room* I was startled to see my body lying on the *living room floor*."⁵⁶

The inquiring mind will want to know who dragged his body out of the bedroom and into the living room. His spirit left his natural body from his bed, he claimed. Wiese says he left his body through some kind of OBE

while sleeping alongside his wife. Upon his return, Wiese reports his wife being awakened by screams coming from the living room.⁵⁷ The book has his wife's report agreeing with his own account of his return, but does not explain how the body got from the bedroom to the living room.

Wiese also reports what he calls a second "tour" of hell,⁵⁸ but only as an observer. We again have to ask where in the Bible one would ever find the concept of a brief trip to hell to just observe. These new Gnostic categories are so clearly unscriptural they cannot be of God. Thus, we may properly conclude that they stem either from: 1) a deluded imagination or hallucinations; 2) intentional fabrication; 3) plagiarism from other such books; 4) drug inducement; 5) demonic deceptions; or a combination of the above.

There is no doubt that Wiese has absorbed a lot of study material and books about hell — including bizarre and unhealthy claims of visits there. His bibliography is a melting pot of the good, the bad, and the ugly, with a listing of 41 books, as well as audiovisual materials. He claims he discovered it all after he wrote his book. Only he knows for sure. Whatever the answer, we know he did not get these things from Scripture.

RECAPPING WITH SOME INEVITABLE CONCLUSIONS

Wiese completely fails his own test and violates his own ground rules. There is not a shred of evidence anywhere in Scripture that there is the possibility of short visits or temporary stays in hell.

Church Father Cyprian (c. A.D. 250) reminded us that "the pain of punishment will then be without the fruit of penitence."⁵⁹ Cyprian's point is that there is no getting out and no way to alter one's eternal destiny. Earlier, Barnabas echoed the universal belief of the Church, saying, "It is the way of eternal death with punishment."⁶⁰ Polycarp (c. A.D. 130) spoke of "that fire which is eternal."⁶¹ Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 160) said of the lost one, "He goes to the everlasting punishment of

fire."⁶² Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180) spoke of the "eternal fire."⁶³ Clement of Alexandria was no less emphatic in A.D. 195, stating, "they are punished with the endless vengeance of quenchless fire. Since they do not die, it is impossible for them to have an end put to their misery."⁶⁴ Of eternal punishment, Tertullian (c. A.D. 197) said, "For it is not merely long-enduring; rather, it is everlasting."⁶⁵ Hippolytus (c. A.D. 205) affirmed that God would "leave them to remain in the flame of torment."⁶⁶

This is the universal testimony of the Church and its apologists borne from a deep knowledge of the text of Scripture.

Wiese is misleading and disingenuous by listing statements about hell from mainline evangelicals and even historic creeds. The presumed appearance given is that all of these agree with Wiese's premise: that people can visit hell temporarily. Those quoted believe in the truth of hell as an eternal place as presented in the Bible. Wiese's flights of fancy are far removed from the sober biblical positions of those that he often quotes. Knowing that some will be aware of this fact, Wiese offers a paltry disclaimer about the liberty he took in using the quotes:

"However, it is very likely that many of them would have an incredulous opinion about God taking someone there for an experience such as the one I had. And I would agree, for I too have been skeptical of such 'experiences' in the past. Yet the fact remains that this did occur to me, and Scripture supports that such an experience could take place."⁶⁷

This remark is beyond the height of conjecture. To write "Scripture supports that such an experience could take place" is completely false.

First Thessalonians 5:21 instructs believers to test all things and hold fast to that which is good. We only have one test and that is the test of Scripture. Here Wiese fails miserably. He must believe that saying some-

thing over and over makes it true as he insists his claims can be shown to be scriptural. They are not. The concept of a short-term visit to hell, where one is punished briefly, cannot be found in Scripture.

To use a biblical phrase, Wiese's claims have been "weighed and found wanting." Wiese says we can choose to believe him or not. We choose not to believe him or that his book, *23 Minutes in Hell*, has any basis in the Bible.

Endnotes:

1. Chris Maxwell, "Controversial Topics," *Charisma*, April 1995, pg. 85.
2. Bill Wiese, *23 Minutes in Hell*. Lake Mary, Fla.: Charisma House, 2006.
3. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, Vol. III, pp. 874-875, 877.
4. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pg. 131.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., pg. 81.
7. Ibid., pg. 98.
8. Ibid., pg. 130, italics in original.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., pg. xvii.
11. *Systematic Theology*, op. cit., Vol. III, pg. 749.
12. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pg. 117.
13. C.F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *A Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Vol. X, 1984, pg. 400.
14. Swedenborg cited in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1999, pg. 442.
15. "'Dead' man wakes up under autopsy knife," Reuters news article, Sept. 17, 2007.
16. Merrill Tenney, General Editor, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, Vol. 3, pg. 115, ellipses in original.
17. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Vol. 2, pp. 794-795.
18. Ibid., pg. 792.
19. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pg. 45.
20. Ibid., pg. xv.
21. Ibid., pg. xvi, italics in original.
22. Ibid., pg. 107.
23. Ibid., pg. 108.
24. Ibid., pp. 13-14.
25. Ibid., pg. 2.
26. Ibid., italic in original.
27. H.A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Prophet Isaiah*. New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1952, pp. 140, 141, 147.

28. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pg. 132.
29. Keith E. Knauss, *Travelogues In Truth*. Liberty, N.Y.: Days of Decision Publications, 1968, pg. 62.
30. G. Campbell Morgan in *The Analyzed Bible*. Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1964, pg. 239.
31. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pg. 135.
32. Ibid., pg. 31, italics in original.
33. F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1955, pg. 91.
34. See further, "Mary Baxter's Vision of Hell - Divine Revelation or Deluded Ranting?," *The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 1, 14-16.
35. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pg. 165.
36. Ibid., pg. 58.
37. In response to an inquiry, on Dec. 21, 2007, Wiese confirmed to PFO director Kurt Goedelman that the unnamed woman is Baxter.
38. The book review goes on to state, "Read Baxter's book as she suggests, with the Bible in hand. Do not immediately canonize the vision. Weigh carefully her every word." (Chris Maxwell, *Charisma*, April 1995, pg. 85.)
39. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pg. 7.
40. Ibid.
41. Mary K. Baxter, *A Divine Revelation of Hell*. New Kensington, Pa.: Whitaker House, 1993, pg. 78.
42. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pp. 3-4.
43. Ibid., pp. 29-30.
44. *A Divine Revelation of Hell*, op. cit., pg. 40.
45. Ibid., pg. 179.
46. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pp. 58-59, 97-99.
47. *A Divine Revelation of Hell*, op. cit., pg. 34.
48. Ibid., pp. 84-85.
49. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pg. 97.
50. Ibid.
51. See further, William M. Alnor, *Heaven Can't Wait*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1996, pg. 48.
52. Ibid.
53. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pg. xv.
54. Ibid., pg. 2.
55. Ibid., pp. 44-45.
56. Ibid., emphasis added.
57. Ibid., pg. 46.
58. Ibid., pg. 56.
59. David W. Bercot, Editor, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, pg. 298.
60. Ibid., pg. 242.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., pg. 243.
64. Ibid., pg. 244.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid., pg. 245.
67. *23 Minutes in Hell*, op. cit., pg. 87.