After a prologue citing St Anthony the Great on the unchanging goodness of God, Archbishop Lazar Puhalo launches Gehenna with a clear purpose statement:

The intent of this volume is to examine the actual Orthodox doctrine about the nature of hell, and touch upon the nature of the heavenly kingdom which is spoken of as the reward of the faithful. The intention is to free Orthodox people from those ideas of hell which make God himself immoral, which attribute to Him the serious sins of savage cruelty, vengeance and malice. The responsibility for our tragedy and the recompense for our free choice to follow Christ, ignore or renounce Him, lies with us, not with God (p 3).

In chapter 1, “Intent: Roots of the Problem,” Vladika Lazar initially problematizes the doctrine of hell, identifying the roots of the difficulty in confusion regarding the biblical texts, literalism around metaphorical imagery, imported errors (from Western theology to Zoroastrianism) and especially from the idolatry of folk religion.

Biblically, he unpacks the issues involved in the conflation of hades with gehenna (hell) and paradise with heaven. Further, he hints at the common misidentification of heaven and hell as two places or destinations. Rather, according to the Orthodox tradition, God Himself is the holy fire of divine love—light and warmth to those who love Him, pain and destruction to those who oppose Him—yet, one and the same fire (6-7).

In chapter 2, “Roots of Idolatry: Literalism, Fantasy and Idolatry,” Puhalo delves deeper into the idea that heaven and hell are not two destinations, but rather, two conditions, states of being or perceptions of the same experience of the sight of Christ in His uncreated light, divinity and glory. That is, Christ Himself is the consuming fire, encountered variously according to one’s internal state.
The role of the Church then, is to prepare the faithful for the vision of Christ’s glory when “every eye shall see him.” The author laments at this point at how Orthodox believers have so frequently abandoned that vision for lesser, toxic images of God and reduce Christian faith to self-serving hell-avoidance techniques. While retaining the possibility that some might forever suffer the torments of the conscience for rejecting perfect love in this life (p 17), he cites Dr Alexandre Kalomiros to show how the Last Judgment is nothing but the radiance of the love of God, experienced as heaven or hell according to our own free response to or rejection of that love.

Assigning retribution to God, however, is treated as a tragic blasphemy, the fruit of which is to create atheists en masse.

In chapter 3, Vladika Lazar discusses “Gehenna: the place, the fire and the worm,” addressing these questions:

1. *The “location” of Gehenna (Hell): Is anyone there yet?* In which he critiques errant teachings that confuse hades and hell and imagine it as a “place” under the earth where demons drag souls for punishment. He then turns for help to St Mark of Ephesus (1392-1444), who will figure prominently throughout this book.

2. *What is the “fire” of hell and what “burns” the wicked?* In this section, Puhalo's mastery of the Church Fathers shines as he deftly draws from St Basil the Great and Isaac of Nineveh at length and in context. These historic teachers taught that the torments of hell are really the mind accused by the conscience as it simultaneously beholds but cannot share in the love of Christ. Is this condition irrevocable? Permanent? Or could one yet turn? Lazars resists treating this mystery as doctrine: “We have not been informed about this and have no right to speculate about it. The matter is resolved only in the love and ekonomia of God” (p 26).

3. *Is anyone in hell (or heaven) as a soul alone and before the Resurrection?* Again, rather than speaking from his own authority, the author allows Mark of Ephesus a five-page response to the question. He points out that ultimately, the soul awaits its reunion with the body through resurrection at the Final Judgment. Thus, the souls of the righteous are not yet in the perfect enjoyment of the “life of the age to come,” nor have the wicked already entered the torments of gehenna, since they yet await the final day. In that narrower sense, no one can yet be in gehenna since it cannot exist yet as a destination prior to the Last Day.

And yet elsewhere, Archbishop Lazar rightly speaks of hell in other ways, as an existential reality within ... as in ‘the kingdom of hell is within you,’ just as the kingdom of heaven already has an internal ‘now’ dimension.

We create our own hell in our own hearts already in this life. If we do not struggle to quench the fires of hell in our hearts before we depart this life, we take our own fires of our own hell with us when we depart into the next life. The River of Fire is not poured forth for the sake of burning, because the Fire is the presence of the love and glory of Christ Jesus. It is hell only to those who
have taken their own hell with them in their hearts; it is paradise to those who, through the struggle of genuine repentance, have quenched the fire of hell in their own hearts (conversation, Jan. 17, 2014).

Chapter 4, “Heaven: Material or Noetic,” talks about the problem of visualizing or speaking of heaven with the pictures or language of this world, for our conceptions are only figures of the ineffable. The Fathers treat heaven as noetic, rather than material. Even with the resurrection of an incorruptible body, which one would imagine has some authentically bodily properties, the visions of the future state are just that: visions which mustn’t be interpreted crassly, as if the New Jerusalem were actually a giant cube or it’s gates fashioned from the offerings of supersized oysters.

In chapter 5, Vladika addresses “The Nature of Judgment.” He distinguishes between “partial judgment” (not “particular judgment”) and “final judgment.” The former refers to a process whereby the soul faces the reality of the gospel and comes to acknowledgement of its own moral condition by means of the conscience. How the process works and what the soul exactly sees is a mystery not yet revealed (although 1 Cor. 3 might shed light on it). In any case, this partial judgment consists of the assignment of the soul to the state proper to itself, according to the judgment of one’s own conscience.

Sections follow on the nature of God’s judgment and the judgment of the person. Again, Puhalo’s knowledge of the Fathers impresses as he draws from an impressive spectrum of historic theologians, including Ambrose of Milan, Irenaeus of Lyons, Titus of Bostra, Justin the Philosopher and St John of Damascus, Isaac of Nineveh, Basil the Great, Andrew of Crete, Cyril of Jerusalem, St Aphraat, Gregory the Theologian, Abba Dorotheos, Gregory of Nyssa and Ephraim. The parade of such weighty teachers leaves a powerful impression, but he saves the bottom line criteria for judgment to the Saviour Himself, who declared,

I assure you, most solemnly I tell you, he that listens to my words and believes on Him that sent Me, possesses eternal life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed already from death to life (Jn. 5:24).

Chapter 6 brings us to “The Last Judgment: A Historical Survey.” This chapter is more complex and provides a correlation between the correct understanding of Scripture and correct iconography. Without giving away the whole chapter, certain facts emerge early on:

(1) Most icons of the Last Judgment have two elements: separation of the sheep and goats, and the river of fire flowing from the feet of Christ.
(2) In the icons of the Deesis (the intercession of the Theotokos and John the Forerunner) the fiery wheels of Daniel 7 are present at the feet of Christ.
(3) In the traditional, canonical icons, there is no hint of psychostasia (soul stations, toll houses, etc.), psychopomps (soul guides of Greek or Egyptian
mythology) or scenes of “weighing the soul” (Manichean and Egyptian notions).

(4) Later icons erred in re-interpreting the “Ladder of Divine Ascent” as the trials awaiting departed souls, wrenching the imagery from its original context of our struggle in this present life.

The rest of the chapter lays out a history of eschatological iconography (pagan, Orthodox and heretical), the fruit of a five-year study by the Archbishop, and includes photographs illustrating each.

In the current edition of Puhalo’s Gehenna, he has helpfully added four important appendices by spiritual colleagues of Archbishop Lazar that actually make up 90 pages of the book:

Appendix 1: “Paradise and Hell According to the Orthodox Tradition” by Protopresbyter George Metallinos.


Appendix 3: “Heaven and Hell in the Afterlife According to the Bible,” by Peter Chopelas.


That these articles are collected in one volume and rich in Patristic source material demonstrates a certain consensus among at least one stream of Orthodox thought. Of course, others among the Orthodox embrace a more ominous eschatology (and as Puhalo would say, destructive, Western or pagan) while others (such as St Silouan the Athonite, David Bentley Hart or Fr. Alvin Kimel) are quite bold universalists after the pattern of Gregory of Nyssa. Nevertheless, surely attentive theologians in all these camps would benefit from the extensive primary research represented here and will likely find the iconographic study most revealing.

In my view, Archbishop Lazar’s book is a must-read for those looking for a resource that gathers and presents the mind of the Fathers on issues of eschatology. True to his calling, the author has triggered new questions and issued fresh challenges rather than locking down certitudes. In the realm of eschatology, a humility that bows before these mysteries is more appropriate than “answers” about a place and time we’ve not yet been and has only be revealed in images limited by human language and imagination.

Puhalo’s Gehenna did give me an appetite for more. In particular, his study warrants a deeper look into Gregory and Macrina’s On the Soul and the Resurrection, an under-read classic requires further commentary, particularly where they propose
alternative viewpoints to that of St Mark of Ephesus. To what degree does their unabashed universal hope challenge the party line—or should it be invoked far more often to define it?

Further, I would also be interested in more exploration and discussion around John Chrysostom’s use of hell rhetoric (a rhetoric he is skilled in and openly admits to) in his homilies as over against his more universal tones in the liturgy (particularly the Paschal Homily), where it appears his essential theology shines through and trumps the harsher tones of judgment in some of his stormier sermons.