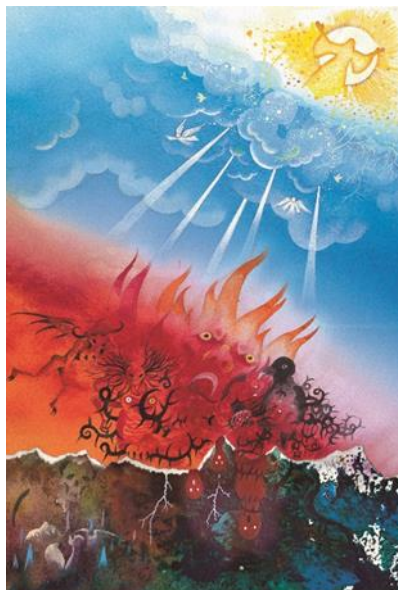


Hell, Purgatory, and More



Luke 16 depicts the beggar Lazarus and the rich man who refused him, both after death—one in heaven and the other in the netherworld. The KJV renders the latter as “hell,” but the Greek is **Hades** (the death/underworld deity in Greek myth), corresponding to the Hebrew **Sheol** in the Old Testament, i.e., “the grave.” The parable teaches that we should live uprightly and help those in need, using heaven and the netherworld (hell) as **figures**. The “heaven” and “hell” portrayed there differ greatly from common imagination: they are depicted as separate realms between which people cannot cross, yet are close enough to allow conversation.



"Scripture's terms for hell/the netherworld are Hebrew **sheol** in the Old Testament and Greek **hades** in the New. Because *sheol* can cover both the netherworld and 'hell,' the KJV translates it as **grave** when it bears the sense of the netherworld, and as **hell** when it carries a punitive sense; the Korean Revised Version likewise distinguishes '음부' and '지옥.' Meanwhile English *grave* can also mean a burial place; in such cases a different set of Hebrew words—**bei**, **qeburah**, or **qeber**—is used, and the Revised Version renders *grave* as '무덤' accordingly." 1)

The New Testament's language for hell appears at Mark 9:48–49: "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire." Revelation 19:20–21 adds: "They were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur... and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh." Fire and sulfur occur in the Old Testament as well, 2) where Yahweh employs them to afflict people **in this world**. When the New Testament speaks of hell with fire and sulfur, this seems to point to **earthly**, short-term suffering, not necessarily a literal description of a postmortem environment. "Strikingly, most mentions of hellfire occur in **Matthew**." 3)

Other passages include Matthew 13:41–42 ("the angels will collect all lawbreakers and throw them into the furnace of fire; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"), Revelation 14:10 ("he will be tormented with fire and sulfur before the holy angels and the Lamb"), and 21:8 ("their lot will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur"). Matthew's imagery borrows from **Zoroastrian** expression. "In Zoroastrianism molten metal burns away sins to purify the sinner. But the New Testament's *lake of fire* seems defective—incapable of purification—leaving the sinner to suffer forever instead of being cleansed." 4)

As noted earlier, the Christian Bible contains **very little** on heaven and hell. Even after Revelation was recognized as canonical in A.D. 397, its thin descriptions and meager logic sparked recurring internal debates about whether it should remain in the canon.

Meanwhile Zoroastrianism and Greek philosophers treated the afterlife **extensively**. When Rome made Christianity the state religion, writings outside the authorized canon were branded “**pagan**” and burned, and private possession was banned. Greek philosophical texts escaped to the Arab world; **Islam** drew on them to shape its doctrine of the afterlife and incorporated it into the Qur’an.

During the Crusades, Christians marveled at Muslim fearlessness in battle and discerned behind it a **belief in the afterlife**. Christianity then began to adopt afterlife concepts more aggressively. Although disputes over Revelation persisted even into the Reformation, practical needs helped secure its place in the canon.

In truth, up through the medieval period Christianity operated with virtually **no** developed concept of the afterlife. Today Christian teaching borrows, on one hand, ideas about the afterlife from Greek philosophers and Zoroastrianism and, on the other, from literary and visionary works by **Dante**, **Swedenborg**, and others, importing heaven, hell, **purgatory**, and **limbo**-like notions.

“Late medieval Christianity fashioned hell-imagery to control people. The **Inquisition** was launched around 1233 by Pope **Gregory IX** (1145–1241; reigned 1227–1241), and in 1254 **Innocent IV**’s bull made the persecution of heresy ‘an essential component’ of the social order of every city and realm.” 5)

"**Dante** (1265–1321), in the *Divine Comedy*, divides hell into nine circles. The first is **Limbo**, not quite hell proper; circles 2–5 form the **upper hell**, and 6–9 the **lower hell**. The ninth is the realm of Lucifer. Between lies **Purgatory**; heaven consists of ten spheres—Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Fixed Stars, Primum Mobile, and the Empyrean." 6) Dante seems to have known Islam's **seven** heavens and succeeded in outnumbering them with even more heavens and hells. The religions appear to compete to pre-assign the most compartments of the afterlife.

If heaven and hell are subdivided to this degree, people's suffering would only grow worse—those who land in different compartments would find it harder than being struck by lightning ten times in a day to meet loved ones "in the same place."

Islam regards hell as the prison of the next world. The Qur'an 22:19–22 says: "Garments of fire will be cut out for the unbelievers; scalding water poured over their heads will melt their bellies and their skins. They will be beaten with iron rods. Whenever they try, in their anguish, to escape they will be driven back and told: taste the punishment of the burning." Qur'an 4:56 adds: "Those who reject Our revelations We shall make enter the Fire; whenever their skins are burned away We shall replace them with new skins so that they may taste the punishment." The intent is to terrify by promising excruciating punishment.

Hell, in Islam, has **seven gates** (Qur'an 15:43–44). Interestingly, Dante too mentions **seven gates**. Each side borrows the other's motifs to fragment the afterlife ever further in a meaningless arms race.

"The image of hell was crucial to the interests of a power-holding Church. The intensification and everyday diffusion of hell imagery in the late Middle Ages was

a **Machiavellian contrivance**: by turning hell into an instrument of power, the Church sought to control the laity more strictly and secure obedience." 7)

"In the **12th century** Catholicism adopted the notion of **purgatory** (echoing Greek philosophy and Buddhism): an '**spiritual hot spring**' where souls are purified before entering heaven." 8) "Zoroastrians likewise hold that those neither fit for heaven nor destined for hell abide in an intermediate state, **Hamistakān**. They claim Catholic purgatory is borrowed from their idea." 9)



The churches teach that before a soul reaches its final destination (heaven or hell), it first goes to **purgatory** and remains there for a time. While there, if the family still on earth satisfies the demands of its deity (in practice: the clergy who benefit), the soul can purchase a direct ticket to heaven regardless of earthly guilt. This doctrine justified the issuance and sale of **indulgences**. "As late as **1903**, Pope **Pius X** even produced a table assigning *reductions* in purgatorial time by rank: cardinals 200 days, archbishops 100, bishops 50. Direct cash sales had by then ceased, but in the Middle Ages one could also pay by **prayer**—one's own at life's end or those

offered later by others—and prayers themselves could be **bought**.” 10)

In the early 20th century, the Church even introduced **limbo** as a distinct concept. “Do not confuse **purgatory** with **limbo**. The latter, adopted by Catholicism in the **13th century**, was affirmed by Pope **Pius X** in a **1905** decree: a place where unbaptized infants await together with Old Testament elders who died before Jesus’ ministry.” 11) More recently, Pope **Benedict XVI** effectively set this concept aside.

Catholic limbo borrows Dante’s **Limbo** (the first circle of hell) and, at papal behest, was erected cost-free by clerics armed with vigorous imagination. Another “cost-free” construction is **purgatory**—a goose that lays golden eggs. While open sale of indulgences has ended, “enhancing” the effectiveness of intercessory **prayer** still costs money; both Catholicism and Buddhism earn **vast sums** this way. Protestantism, for its part, regrets missing out on so lucrative an idea.

Established religions have deliberately encouraged writers like **Dante** and **Swedenborg**, and modern creators of films and television dramas, to render detailed images of the afterlife, presenting it as if it were real and urging believers to accept it as fact. As limbo shows, they then **lift** concepts from such fiction (e.g., Dante’s *Comedy*), dress them up as if received by divine revelation, and enshrine them as **doctrine**.

No one has truly gone to **heaven**, **purgatory**, or **hell** and returned; to pretend otherwise and compel belief is plainly **against** the teachings of Buddha and Jesus. Those who propagate such claims—if hell exists—can be sure of **eternal life there**.

Sources

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