The Genesis of Hell: Eternal Torment in the Consciousness of Early Christianity

The New Testament's unformed and tentative outline of what, for evildoers, might follow the judgement of God left an uncharted space on the map of Christian thought. Of early Christian eschatology Brian Daley writes:

> ... the content of eschatological teaching was usually drawn from a variety of sources: biblical and apocryphal traditions; popular, semi-Christian beliefs about the fate of the human person after death; the myths and reasoned convictions of Hellenistic philosophy; and a good deal of simple speculation. Necessarily, this Christian hope for a world yet to come was expressed in images: the 'stuff of dreams,' rather than the products of observation.[1]

So what of Hell? Hell is by no means a Christian innovation: the ancient pagan world, too, had a consciousness of a place of punishment for the wicked. The religious, poetic and philosophical writings of antiquity are replete with pictures of the underworld. So there was a rich palette—of both Graeco-Roman and Jewish origin—from which the early Christians could color their hellscapes. Yet the Hell of the Christian tradition is a far more heinous, far more gruesome place than any before imagined.

The purpose of this study is to trace and account for the evolution of the Christian Hell in the first three centuries of Christian discourse. How did the picture of Hell develop, as far as we can tell? For what rhetorical purpose were images of Hell intended? Why was it 'worse'? Our subject is, then, the cluster of ideas and images of Hell circulating in the thought-world of early Christianity: what might be termed the 'Christian consciousness' of Hell, insofar as we can discern it from (extant) discourse about Hell. For convenience in discussing visions of the afterlife in several different cultures and subcultures, I will use the Old English word 'Hell'[2] to refer to, in Bernstein's

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[1] B. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 3-4.

[2] In Old Norse, *Hel* was the name of the goddess of the infernal regions. The word 'Hell' has long been used to describe both the abode of the dead (c. 825 AD) *and* the place of torment (c. 888 AD) (*OED*). This is reflected in the AV's use of the word for both ᾅδης and γέεννα; and in translations of the Apostles' Creed. The NT of the RV attempts to clarify 'Hell' by using it only of γέεννα, a trend continued in most modern versions.

words, 'a divinely sanctioned place of (eternal) torment for the wicked.'[3] I am not proposing to show direct links between texts; rather, each piece is evidence, in its own way, of imagining Hell within the era designated. Because we are examining the *picture* and not the doctrine of Hell, writings which were designed to have a highly emotive and visual impact will be preferred as evidence—the homily, the allegory, and the apocalypse rather than the treatise. It will be necessary, however, to fit the development of Hell (where possible) into the wider schemes of Christian thought and historical change.

II

The interest of the Greeks and Romans in the fate of the dead is evident from the writings of their poets, philosophers and moralists. The Roman Epicurean Lucretius (c. 99—c. 56 BC), whose object in *De rerum naturam* was to free mankind from the terror of the gods, shows by his passionate argument *against* Hell that it must have been a widely held belief, at least in his time.[4] He was concerned that, for the conscience-stricken mind, belief in Hell produces a life that is Hell on earth. For other Graeco-Roman authors, however, it was precisely the this–worldly effect of belief in Hell that was attractive. Famously, Plato's Socrates expressed the need for some kind of Hell:

> If death were a release from everything, it would be a boon for the wicked, because by dying they would be released not only from the body but also from their own wickedness together with the soul.[5]

Could belief in Hell cause people to live better? Could it overrule their baseness and civilize them?

Plato was intrigued by the ideas of postmortem retribution. His assessment of beliefs, however, is often according to social utility rather than an assertion of a metaphysical reality (although he wouldn't have denied the metaphysical). The myth of Er, which ends his *Republic,* 'will preserve us if we take heed to it.' It will enable us to 'be friends to ourselves and to the gods, both while we remain here and when...we receive the rewards of our justice.'[6] The telling and hearing of the tale has a potentially salvific effect when it comes to the

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[3] A. E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell—Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (London: UCL Press, 1993), p. 3.

[4] Lucretius, *The Nature of the Universe* III, tr. R. E. Latham (London: Penguin, 1951), pp. 126-7.

[5] Plato, *Phaedo,* 107C, in *The Last Days of Socrates,* tr. H. Tredennick (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 170

[6] Plato, *Republic* 621C, tr. A. D. Lindsay (London: Everyman, 1992), p. 320.

hereafter. Plato notes that those who had suffered during their centuries of afterlife were more careful in their choice of new life; he is convinced of the value of knowledge for behaviour in the just society. The theme of retributive punishment reappears in the *Phaedo*.[7] Socrates reassures his friends of the immortality of the soul, and outlines its postmortem journey. In the land of Hades, each soul is met by its 'guardian spirit', which guides it to the place of judgement. Impure souls are shunned by the other souls, and wander aimlessly. By contrast, the souls of the pure and sober enjoy divine company and guidance. Each soul 'inhabits the place which is proper to it.'[8] Despite the differences in the two mythical descriptions, several common features mark Plato's thinking about postmortem punishment. First of all he, like Homer in the *Odyssey,* establishes a *geography* of Hell. Punishment is a place as much as a state. Second, the soul and the body are separated, and the soul is immortal. Consequently, suffering is not depicted as physical; but the possibility of eternal suffering is asserted, and even illustrated. Third, Plato has a cyclical view of time, and allows for reincarnation. Fourth, no single judge is mentioned—sins are offences against nature rather than against a divinity, which seems strangely true even of impiety to the gods. Fifth, Plato does not insist that the dramatic features of his descriptions are literally true, but he does really believe in Hell.[9] The following words of Socrates are significant:

> Of course, no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them. But that either this or something very like it is a true account of our souls and their future habitations—since we have clear evidence that the soul is immortal—this, I think, is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth risking; for the risk is a noble one. We should use such accounts to inspire ourselves with confidence; and that is why I have already drawn out my tale so long.[10]

The immortality of the soul is his foundational belief; the belief in postmortem judgement is a noble and reasonable risk worth taking. The usefulness of such a belief is clear—it inspires confidence for the philosophical life of pure thoughts and deeds.

The writings of Plutarch of Chaeronaea (c. 50 AD—c. 120 AD) make for a fascinating comparison with the New Testament and early Christian texts. With a self-conscious debt to Plato, he too attempts an analysis of divine

[7] Plato, *Phaedo,* pp. 97-183.

[8] *Ibid.,* 108B, p. 171.

[9] For a discussion of the Greeks and their myths see P. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?—an Essay on the Constitutive Imagination,* tr. P. Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[10] *Phaedo,* 113D, p. 178.

justice and postmortem punishment; and he writes perhaps only a few years after the Evangelists. In his dialogue *On the Delay of the Divine Vengeances*—'perhaps the most admired of Plutarch's philosophical writings'[11]—several interlocutors question the efficacy of punishment after death: the delay of divine punishment only encourages the wicked to imagine they are to avoid it altogether. In the discussion Plutarch asserts that the heirs of evildoers suffer punishment as a purgative measure—a kind of moral genetics.[12] He then narrates the tale of Thespesius' journey to the underworld. Plutarch sees his text itself as having the important function of helping his readers to contemplate the realm of the afterlife, and so enable the transformation of the soul while still in this world.

Greco-Roman religious beliefs did not evolve into a theological system.[13] There was no final judgement day envisaged; and there was no clear picture of a divine judge or of how such a judgement would be enacted. Zeus, the chief of the gods, did not have jurisdiction in Hades. Depictions of the afterlife serve to highlight the fear of death itself rather than the postmortem judgement. The worst punishments tend to be reserved for super-human figures rather than ordinary human beings. However, as S. G. Brandon notes, there was a growing tendency by the early Christian era to introduce a retributive and torturous character to the underworld, and to organize punishments with greater complexity and ingenuity.[14]

III

For a great deal of the Old Testament the concept of 'Hell' is lacking; instead. death and the grave are themselves a punishment. However, in the apocalyptic visions of Daniel we read of an eternal punitive separation of the righteous and the wicked following the resurrection of the dead (Dan. 12:2).

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[11] Translator's preface, 'On the Delay of the Divine Vengeances', in *Plutarch's Moralia*, tr. P. de Lacy & B. Einarson, Leob Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1959), p. 170

[12] There is a similarity here with those who ask Jesus of the man born blind: 'Who sinned, this man or his parents?' John 9:1–41.

[13] We have not space to consider Lucian of Samosata (c. 120–c. 200 AD) who wrote of the underworld from a Cynic perspective. For Lucian, religious ideas are to be judged by their usefulness in the present life.

[14] S. G. Brandon, *The Judgment of the Dead—An Historical and Comparative Study of the Idea of Post–Mortem Judgment in the Major Religions* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1967), pp. 94-5.

The trajectory is here plotted for intertestamental Jewish eschatology, whose influence is certainly felt in the New Testament. This influence did not wane in the first decades of the Christian era, while the fledgling movement still maintained a close (if uneasy) link to its Jewish heritage. The translation of Hebrew terms and ideas into Greek within Hellenized Judaism meant a further complicated and inexact cross–fertilization of images. For example, the Greek word ᾅδης as the name of the god of the shadowy realm of the dead. It refers metonymically to that kingdom. The translators of the LXX felt that this term well matched the Hebrew word שְׁאוֹל. In the intertestamental period, ᾅδης became the temporary abode for the dead between death and the general resurrection at the end of the age. ᾅδης was also used synonymously with 'death' (Wis. 1: 12-16; 16: 13; Ps. Sol. 16:2); and ᾅδης is personified as the guardian of the pre-resurrection dead (I Enoch 51:3; 4 Ezra 4:42; 7:32). ᾅδης was not confused with the place of eternal punishment of the wicked after the judgement; however, the separation of the righteous and the wicked *was* held to have taken place. In I Enoch 22, Enoch is shown four 'hollow places' into which the dead are classified. While the righteous are refreshed by sipping from a spring of water, the wicked are held in detention for the judgement day. In 4 Ezra 7:75-101 the wicked are portrayed as mournful in anticipation of their destiny of doom, and so undergo a kind of preliminary punishment. In the Jewish literature of the New Testament period, ᾅδης has on occasion become the site for the beginnings of the eternal punishment of the wicked. In *Jannes and Jambres* the Egyptian magician Jannes returns from ᾅδης to warn his brother of the fires of the underworld. In *The Apocalypse of Zephaniah,* ᾅδης is a punitive, fiery place. However, at the same time, the older conception of ᾅδης as the abode of the dead survives.[15]

Gehenna (γέεννα) is the other relevant term found in the Jewish literature. This idea developed from the 'Ge–Hinnom' of Jeremiah 19:2-13. Originally the mass grave for victims of sacrifice and executed criminals, Jeremiah reconfigures it as the venue of the Lord's punishment.[16] It may have became a place for the incineration of municipal waste, although L. R. Bailey disputes this claim.[17] Bailey further suggests that this valley was also regarded as the location of an entrance to the underworld, which might explain how the name of the valley came to be applied to the underworld itself.[18] γέεννα was

[15] Cf. *The Testament of Abraham* 8:9, 19:7.

[16] See also Jer 31:40.

[17] L. R. Bailey, 'Gehenna—The Topography of Hell', *BA* 49/3 (1986) p. 189.

[18] L. R. Bailey, *ibid.*, pp. 187–191.

commonly characterized by the paradoxical images of fire and darkness. The 1st century Jewish historian Josephus notes that the ascetic sect of the Essenes believed it to be a 'murky and tempestuous dungeon, big with never-ending punishments.'[19]

The tradition of Jewish apocalypticism was continued in tone, style and form within Christianity; and also remained a force within rabbinic Judaism. What Bauckham calls the 'early Jewish visions of Hell' were thus a major source for the Christian imagination regarding postmortem punishment.[20] These visions used a narrative form to map Hell. From an early date, cosmic tour apocalypses such as *I Enoch* depicted the fate of the dead. A tour of the torments of the wicked began to be included, when the belief in their immediate punishment emerged. This can be observed in *The Apocalypse of Elijah.*

The *Book of Enoch* may date to as early as the third century BC[21], and was widely known in the years immediately preceding and during the early Christian era.[22] Its influence on Patristic literature can be seen in a wide range of authors, from the Epistle of Barnabas[23] to Irenaeus[24] and Tertullian.[25] It is a compilation of five versions of the same tale by several authors. Enoch, as one who, according to Genesis 5:24, never died, is a more–than–suitable narrator for an otherworldly vision. Each of the five cosmological tours has some reference to the fate of the evil dead. Significantly, the wicked are not in Hell, but rather suffer in anticipation of their future punishment. As Bauckham notes, while there is in *Enoch* an emphasis on the horrors of Hell, a description of the torture of the wicked is not possible, because it is not a present reality.[26] The 'tour of hell' sub-genre, given a thorough treatment by Himmelfarb, almost certainly included a number of works that are no longer extant.[27]

The development of 'tours of hell' as a part of apocalyptic writing was linked to gradually growing belief in the immediate punishment of the wicked.

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[19] *Jewish Wars,* 2.155.

[20] R. Bauckham, 'Early Jewish Visions of Hell', *JTS* 41 (1990) pp. 355-85.

[21] A. E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell,* p. 180.

[22] It is, of course, quoted by Jude (Jude 14); and it held canonical status with the earlier Fathers and the Apologists. See R. H. Charles (ed), *The Book of Enoch* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), p. ix.

[23] In *Early Christian Writings,* tr. M. Staniforth (London: Penguin, 1968), 4:3; 16:5.

[24] *Adv. Her.*. 1.10.1; 1.15.6; iv.16.2; iv.36.4.

[25] *De Cultu Femina* 1.2; *De Idol.* pp. iv, ix.

[26] R. Bauckham, 'Early Jewish Visions of Hell', p. 362.

[27] M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell—An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 137, 144.

Was this just evidence of the influence of Hellenism? This was the argument of A. Dieterich in 1913, who saw in the tours merely an adoption of 'Orphic' ideas into Jewish apocalypticism. There is no doubt that the Jewish writers and compilers of apocalypses freely imported from Greco-Roman[28] and even Egyptian[29] sources. However. Himmelfarb argues along with Bauckham that the tours of Hell were moulded predominantly from within the Jewish apocalyptic tradition. They may have borrowed the idea of an immediate punishment and the depiction of the actual punishments in detail, but these were significantly reshaped for use in a new context.

IV

The New Testament authors show comparatively little interest in picturing the fate of the damned.[30] There is no detailed picture given of Hell, nor a 'tour' of Hell; rather, a cluster of various words and images is used, combining to give a presentation 'neither uniform nor tidy.'[31] The New Testament writers freely adopted and adapted the mythological vocabulary of the contemporary Hellenic and Jewish worlds. We have seen how the word ᾅδης had several connotations in the Jewish literature. This unsystematic use of terminology is reflected in the New Testament. ᾅδης is the abode of all the dead in Acts 2:27,31, in the manner of שְׁאוֹל. Revelation 20:18 picks up the traditional apocalyptic usage of 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra; and the personification of ἁδης is found in Revelation 6:8. In 1 Corinthians 15:54-55, Paul uses the term (the only time he does) in scoffing at death's impotence. ᾅδης has gates which are a metonym for the demonic forces that threaten, but do not overcome the church (Matt. 16:18).[32]

In New Testament usage γέεννα is the standard term for the place of punishment, gathering up the various associations of the Jewish mythological background. It is described as a place of unquenchable fire (Matt. 5:22,

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[28] *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 92-6, 107-8, 119.

[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 79,81,93,4,111.

[30] The New Testament doctrine of Hell could of course be treated at much greater length: for example, see D. Powys, *Hell: A Hard Look at a Hard Question* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997); E. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Houston: Providential Press, 1982).

[31] J. Lunde, 'Heaven and Hell', in J. Green & S. McKnight (eds.), *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 1992), p. 309.

[32] J. Marcus, 'The Gates of Hades and the Keys of the Kingdom', *CBQ* 50 (1988), pp. 443–455.

Mk. 9:43), of never-ending corruption (Mk. 9:48), and of darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12, 13:42, Lk. 13:28). In James 3:5, the forest-fire that the tongue starts emanates from γέεννα. Jesus concludes the parable of the talents with the casting of the unprofitable servant into 'outer darkness' (Matt. 25:30); and goes on to speak of the 'everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels' (Matt. 25:41). γέεννα is the idea behind the 'lake of fire', the location of the 'second death' in Revelation 20:14–15. No more details than these are given: the word is used with the assumption that the idea of γέεννα was common parlance.

A third relevant term for the punishments of the afterlife is a *hapax legamenon*[33]— ταρταρώσας in 2 Peter 2:4, a participle built on the name 'Tartaros', with its Graeco-Roman background.[34] The angels were 'tartarized'. By alluding to the overthrow of the Titans, Peter is able to explain the power of the Almighty to imprison the angels and thus to carry out his salvific purposes. A closely related image is that of ἄβυσσον (*abyss*)—contrasted to heaven in Romans 10:6-7, from which demonic forces are released in Revelation 9:1-2. Eventually, the 'ancient serpent' Satan is imprisoned in the abyss for the millennium (Rev. 20:1-3).

Imagery of Hell in the New Testament of course extends beyond the use of these terms. The Matthean Jesus teaches of fire and outer darkness, and of weeping and gnashing of teeth (22: 13; 25:30). Jesus evokes the graphic image of the 'undying worm' of Isaiah 66:24 in Mark 9:48. The judgement of the nations that Jesus describes in Matthew 25:31-46 involves the dividing of the 'sheep' and 'goats'. The fate of those who did not recognise Christ is the 'eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' (25:41). Jesus' parables of separation in Matthew center around recognition of the true Messiah of Israel—the 'bridegroom', the 'master', the 'Son of Man'. The idea of exclusion from the Kingdom is expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 15:23 and in Galatians 5:22.

What the usage of these words and images demonstrates is that New Testament teaching about Hell, while asserting in vehement terms its reality, provides nothing like a direct or comprehensive description of its topography or its inhabitants. Rather, relationship to Christ the judge is the central motif.

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[33] There are three enigmatic uses in the LXX: Job 40:13, 41:23(4), Prov 30:16.

[34] A parallel passage, Jude 6, contains the same notion of the imprisonment of the angels until the judgement day. The reference to the ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν in 1 Peter 3:19 is notoriously obscure; but the verse suggests a similar primeval imprisonment of super–human beings to whom Jesus preached.

Paul shows little *spatial* interest in Hell at all; his framework is more relational and temporal. 2 Thessalonians 1:9, which describes the fate of the unrighteous as 'shut out from the presence of the Lord...', is 'still fundamentally a relational description'.[35] In Ephesians 4:9, Christ descends εἰς τὰ κατώτερα τῆς γῆς—'into the depths of the earth'; but the details of this cosmology remain vague.[36] The apocalyptic imagery of torture in Revelation refers to the terrestrial effects of God's wrath. The task of describing Hell itself remained for the next generation of Christian writers.

What were images of Hell in the New Testament used *for?* What is their rhetorical effect? First, we discover passages in which Hell appears as a final pronouncement of judgement upon those for whom it is too late. These are akin to the denunciations of the nations in the Old Testament. Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:1-26 is an example of this use of Hell. For Matthew's Christian readers, these strong words would have been a powerful vindication of their break with national Israel, while being at the same time a stern warning against presumption and hypocrisy.

Second, Hell appears as an assurance to the suffering faithful of their future vindication. The images of the abyss in Revelation ultimately assert the power of God over the depraved beasts that spring from its depths (Rev. 9:1, 2; 20:1, 3). The people of the Lamb, who are destined for the New Jerusalem, are contrasted to the people of the Beast, who will be consigned to the lake of fire and sulfur. The terrifying scene of the separation of the sheep and the goats depicted in Matthew 25:31-46 likewise illustrates the symmetry of the outcomes of judgement: if some—the righteous—are to inherit the kingdom, then the unrighteous should expect the opposite fate. The vindication of some means the visiting of just vengeance upon others.

Third, Hell is used as a warning for believers against apostasy and heresy. In Matthew 24:45-51, the unfaithful slave, who is depicted as flagrantly disregarding the imminent return of the Master, is destined for the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Likewise, 2 Peter 2:1-4, while not directly threatening false prophets with 'en-Tartarment', implies that they will share that fate with the fallen angels.

The New Testament, then, offers very little elaboration of the idea of Hell as a physical place. The New Testament writers appeal to a rich and varied Hellenized-Judaic mythology that was a pre-existing facet of the cultural

[35] P. G. Bolt, 'Plutarch's *Delay of the Divine Vengeance* and Pauline Eschatology', (MA Hons diss., Macquarie University, 1994,) p. 276.

[36] M. Barth, *Ephesians 4–6*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 433.

imagination, without themselves casting such a myth. Rather, primitive Christian hope was decisively focused on Christ's return and the general resurrection, cosmic in scope and oriented towards the future. The myth of Hell itself featured little in this eschatology.

V

Bernstein reflects scholarly overstatement of the diversity of the New Testament accounts in speaking of 'different views of punishment after death reflecting different religious sensibilities.'[37] While there is vagueness, it is too much to say there is 'variation'. More dramatically, the Christian consciousness was in fact exposed to a wide variety of influences in the years *following* the composition of the New Testament documents. The historico-cultural conditions under which the stripling movement slowly grew were themselves regionally diversified, while being united under a bureaucratic Roman hegemony that promoted Hellenism.[38] For Christianity, competing belief systems such as Judaism, Gnosticism, Platonism and even paganism readily provided sources for theological reflection and refinement. Radical attempts to purge Christianity of external influences, such as Marcion's reaction to Judaism, were largely unsuccessful. Despite the victory of orthodoxy in the long run, the first centuries of Christianity were noted for the proliferation of divergent doctrines. Of course, the continual process of self-definition against the counterweights of heresy and other religions was formative for orthodox Christianity.

More specifically, eschatology in the Patristic era was exposed to the changing historical circumstances of the period. The most obvious of these circumstances was the delay of the *parousia,* which necessitated a rewiring of Christian eschatology. The *present* state of the dead now needed an explanation.[39] It is not surprising that at least some Christians felt the need for an immediate separation of the righteous and the wicked *postmortem,* and so the emphasis was taken away from the division at the judgement day. Robert Doyle notes three other factors at play in the formation of patristic eschatology: adventism, moralism and gnosticism.[40] Adventism, with its reassertion of a

[37] *The Formation of Hell,* p. 269.

[38] See R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire, A.D.100-400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); and R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[39] D. Lotz, 'Heaven and Hell in the Christian Tradition', *Religion in Life* 48 (1979), p. 80.

[40] R. C. Doyle, *Eschatology and the Shape of Christian Belief* (Carlisle: Paternoster,

literal and imminent parousia, is attributed to Cerinthus (c.100) and Papias (c. 60-130), and also Montanus. The moralism of writers like Tertullian and Chrysostom on the other hand, treated the various themes of eschatology in isolation from biblical salvation–history, and reinforced a simple message of postmortem rewards and punishments.

The temperate writings of the Apostolic Fathers do not go much beyond the New Testament in their talk about eternal punishment. The writings of the Greek-speaking Christian writers of the first half of the second century are largely influenced by the literature of biblical and post–biblical Judaism.[41] For example, the *First Letter of Clement,* composed around 96 AD, does not have the tone of crisis that marks apocalyptic writing.

The fascinating allegorical tract *The Shepherd of Hermas,* completed around 140 AD, is an encouragement to repentance for the church at Rome. Incorporating five allegorical 'visions', twelve paraenetic 'mandates', and ten 'similitudes', the Shepherd is adamant that 'the heathen and sinners' will be burned like dry branches in 'the world to come' *(Similitude* 4.2-4). However, he is little concerned to offer more tangible descriptions of this world. The most significant of the Apologists, Justin Martyr, is more expressive. The conviction of the future punishment of the wicked is itself, for him, a distinctive feature of Christian belief *(Second Apology* 1). The delay of the judgement is because the number of the righteous is as yet incomplete *(First Apology* 28, 45; *Dialogue with Trypho* 39). However, Justin also asserts a provisional separation of the just and the wicked prior to the resurrection *(Dialogue with Trypho* 5). Eventually, sinners will receive back their same bodies in order to undergo physical torment in the company of Satan and the demons in Gehenna, described by Justin as everlasting fire *(First Apology* 12; 17; 28; 52; 57; *Second Apology* If; 7f, *Dialogue with Trypho* 45).

The influence of Jewish apocalyptic thought was apparently very strong in the second century. This may not be surprising given the likelihood of a high proportion of Jewish Christians in the churches at this stage.[42] The narratives, pseudo–apocalyptic letters, apocalypses and apocryphal acts and gospels that proliferate during the period owe their symbolic and dramatic features to the world of Jewish apocalypticism.[43] Some works, such as *IV Ezra* and the *Ascension of Isaiah* are Jewish works that have been Christianized.

1999), pp. 58-61.

[41] B. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church,* p. 9.

[42] R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity,* p. 16.

[43] B. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church,* p. 7.

These works are, as we have already stated, largely dramatic and symbolic, in contrast to the treatises of the professional theologians or apologists. They have a highly visual style. The most significant and fulsome early description of the horrors of Hell occurs in the *Apocalypse of Peter,* which was most likely composed in Syria c. 135 AD This 'tour of hell' achieved, it seems, a rapid and widespread popularity. The Codex Claromontanus even grants it canonical status. Elliot writes:

> ...it is clear that the book was popular and widespread in use in the early centuries of Christianity and hovered on the edges of canonical scripture.[44]

Citations from Clement of Alexandria,[45] Methodius,[46] Macarius,[47] Theophilus of Antioch[48] and a fourth century Latin homily testify to the influence of the work on the Christian horizon. M. R. James traced the influence of the work in Christian descriptions of Hell down to the time of Dante.[49] As we have seen, A. Dieterich claimed an Orphic origin for all 'tours', including the imagery of the *Apocalypse of Peter.*[50] While the imagery and themes of the work possible have 'Orphic' roots, the pattern of *lex talionis*—the punishment fitting the crime—is distinctively Jewish. The influences on the work are eclectic: it draws on 2 Peter, 4 Ezra and Matthew, but also imports from Greek and oriental mythology.[51]

Talking to his disciples, 'Jesus' sets the fiery scene: the atmosphere is of flame and darkness. The waters of the sea will become coals of fire. The stars will melt and the heavens disintegrate. The angels that punish the guilty wear dark clothing 'in accordance with the air of the place' (21). Next we view the punishments: blasphemers are hanged by their tongues; those who deny righteousness are kindled in a 'flaming mire' (23); women who have adorned themselves for adultery are hanged by their neck and hair; their male co–adulterers are hanged by the loins (or feet); murderers and their accomplices are set upon by worms, as their victims watch. The gross fate of abortionists is typical:

> ...I saw another gorge wherein the discharge and excrement of those who were in

[44] J. Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 591.
[45] *Eclogae* 41.1-2; 48.1, cited in J.Elliot, *ibid.*, pp. 592–5.
[46] *Symposium* 2.6 cited in J. Elliot, *ibid.*, pp. 592–5.
[47] *Apocritica* 4.6.7 cited in J. Elliot, *ibid.* pp. 592–5.
[48] *ad Autlycum* 2.19 cited in J. Elliot, *ibid.*, pp. 592–5.
[49] J. Elliot, *ibid.*, p. 594.
[50] A. Dieterich, *Nekyia: Beitrage zur Erklarung der neuentdecken Petrusapokalypse* (Leipzig: 1913).
[51] D. Fiensy, *'Lex Talionis* in the *Apocalypse of Peter'*, HTR 76 (1983), pp. 255–8.

> torment ran down, and became a lake there, and women sat there up to their necks in that filth, and over against them many children born out of due time sat crying; and from them went forth rays of fire and smote the women in the eyes; and these were those who conceived out of wedlock and caused abortion. (26)

Psychological torment comes from the juxtaposition of sinners with other sinners, with their co–sinners, or with their victims. Those who slay their children have devouring beasts emanating from their breasts. Persecutors are devoured by a worm that never sleeps; slanderers have their tongues gnawed; liars have their lips cut off; the rich who neglected charitable works roll upon sharp gravel-stones; apostates are roasted over the fire; homosexuals are continually cast over a great precipice. Disobedient children, fornicating girls, unruly servants, hypocrites and sorcerers receive their painful dues. Like the Tityus of old, the disobedient are pecked by flesh–devouring birds. In particular, crimes against the martyrs receive vengeance. In response to cries of mercy, the angel Tartarouchos (or Tatirokos), whose name derives from 'Tartarus', will chide the guilty for repenting too late.

The *Apocalypse of Peter* goes a long way beyond the New Testament in what it asserts about Hell, as Bernstein observes.[52] Its analysis of sins by type and elaboration of appropriate punishments is an innovation. The fires of γέεννα are given a frightening specificity. The hanging of various sinners is a gruesome invention. Further, the thought in Revelation that the victims of persecution may view the enactment of divine judgement is expanded. Indeed, the writer has the angel Ezrael bringing living children and maidens to observe the tormented. While in pagan Hells the repetitive physical tortures are reserved for super humans like Sisyphus or Tantalus, the *Apocalypse of Peter* shows ordinary men and women suffering in the same way. Like Er and Aridaeus, Peter is enjoined to relate what he has seen to the world.

How would readers have responded to such a text? The repulsive hellscape of this text is designed to maximize adherence to the norms of Christian community life. Whereas Plutarch enjoined good citizenship, the *Apocalypse of Peter* urges obedient and faithful membership of the church. The sheer physicality of the descriptions is allowed by the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. Most chilling of all is perhaps the motif of the observing righteous, delighting in the great justice of God as the reprobate beneath them writhe. This voyeurism is allowed by the text itself by means of the literary device of the vision. Would the readers, who lived in such violent and difficult times, and who suffered the injustice of persecution, have reacted with the distaste

[52] J. Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, p. 595.

and alarm that modern readers do? Are these torments that far removed from that which was presented as public entertainment at the Circuses of the Empire, or from what was performed on the martyrs? Was asceticism, with its severe treatment of the body, an attempt to enact in the present, the Hell of this (kind of) vision (in order to avoid it)? We can speculate: however, the evident popularity of this text means that some strange comfort was drawn from it by its readers, just as believers in the Middle Ages somehow surrounded themselves with the depictions of the damned.

In some variant manuscripts of the *Apocalypse of Peter,* and in the Second Prophecy of the *Sibylline Oracles* which is derived from the same text, there is an eyelet of hope. It is suggested that the cries of the damned for release are occasionally granted when the righteous intercede. From such a hint—the desire to soften what is a very harsh theology—arises the doctrine of purgatory, and other ways of making gentler the hammer blows of God against the wicked. The *Apocalypse of Paul* is equally lurid, but allows for some intermittent relief for the sufferers, namely that Paul himself wins for them a Sabbath rest! First attested in the fourth century (c. 388 AD), it is likely that the date of composition was earlier, perhaps mid-third century is Elliot's conjecture. Though of orthodox belief, the author displays an interest in asceticism.[53] Again, on a popular level, this work is thought to have had a wide influence, particularly in the Western church and into the Middle Ages. Translations have been found in Armenian, Slavonic, Anglo-Saxon and Irish.

Beginning with Paul's enigmatic vision in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, the *Apocalypse of Paul* is framed by the miraculous discovery of the main part of the vision itself in a house in Tarsus. Guided by an angel (reminiscent of Aeneas' Sybilline guide) Paul is given a complete tour of the bureaucracy of the underworld. A tripartite afterlife is presented, with each division having two parts. The blessed are in two ranks, which differ by a factor of seven according to virtue. Likewise, the damned form two ranks of greater and lesser torments. In between, but nearer to the blessed, are the repentant, also in two groups: those worthy of joining the elect before the Last Judgement, and those who must wait. As in Homer's *Odyssey* the journey to Hell transverses the ocean that girdles the earth. In a fiery river swim those guilty of lukewarm or double–minded faith. They are immersed according to the kind of sin they have committed: up to the navel for hypocritical taking of Communion, for example. A key development from the *Apocalypse of Peter,* as Bernstein notes, is that these sins reflect the institutionalization of the church: hypocritical

[53] A. E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell,* p. 288.

clergy and crooked bishops will also be punished here. The worst of all the punishments in this Hell are for denying specific aspects of Christian teaching: the incarnation, the virgin birth, the Eucharist. Those who deny the resurrection are frozen *and* consumed by an enormous two–headed worm. Several times, Paul sighs at what he sees and is rebuked for his presumption to more compassion than the Almighty. Eventually, however, he is met by the archangel Michael who urges the damned to repentance and pleas for mercy. These Christ hears, and descends. With a possible allusion to 1 Peter 3:18-19, Christ speaks to the imprisoned and tormented. He agrees to allow the damned a day of refreshment, on account of his love for Michael, the angels, and Paul, and because of the prayers and offerings of the living. In addition his own goodness is a motivation for some small remission of the sentence. This is almost a tacit admission by the author of the difficulty of maintaining a theodicy in tandem with such a severe Hell. He so dramatically presents Christ's power over even the damned in Hell that the question naturally arises from the lost themselves, 'what need had we to be born into the world?' (44) If Christ can dim the fires of hell for a day, then why not show a more unilateral mercy? And do not these punishments, so meticulously arranged and enacted, eventually pay for the crimes that deserved them? By the fourth century, Hell had taken root in the Christian homiletic and imaginative tradition. Tertullian's apologetic and polemical works include the display of the tortures of Hell as a spectacle before the righteous. John Chrysostom, in his epistolary harangue of the apostate Theodorus, provides a not atypical example of the picturing of Hell in Christian rhetoric:

> For when you hear of fire, do not suppose the fire in that world to be like this: for fire in this world burns up and makes away with anything which it takes hold of; but that fire is continually burning those who have once been seized by it, and never ceases: therefore also is it called unquenchable. For those also who have sinned must put on immortality, not for honor, but to have a constant supply of material for that punishment to work upon; and how terrible this is, speech could never depict, but from the experience of little things it is possible to form some slight notion of these great ones. For if you should ever be in a bath which has been heated more than it ought to be, think then, I pray you, on the fire of hell.[54]

The horror in particular emanates from the suggestion that present–world pain is magnified in the afterlife. By pleading that 'speech could never depict' the full terrors of Hell, Chrysostom depicts by speech the full terrors of Hell;

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[54] *Ad Theodorum Lapsum*, 1.10, in P. Schaff, (ed.), *The Post-Nicene and Nicen Fathers*, I.9 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1889), p. 157.

it leaves you speechless, he says (!). He appeals to his hearers/readers to imagine Hell from everyday experiences such as an overheated bath. The sheer physicality of Hell is its most terrifying feature. The resurrection of the damned is so that their punishment can be exacted in the body.

VI

We have observed throughout this study the growing vehemence and elaborate detail in the Christian picture of Hell. In the early Christian period, Hell became more terrifying, more painful and more grotesque than it ever had before. What accounts for this disturbing trend?

First, particular Christian doctrines shaped thinking about Hell. For example, the resurrection of the dead meant that Hell would be experienced bodily in a more emphatic way than in the Greco-Roman Hades. The Last Judgement was to be a decisive event enacted by Christ. Sin was now not just a breaking of moral law, but a personal rebellion against Almighty God; the bleak Christian Hell reflects the extremity of divine wrath.

Second, Judith Perkins has noted a distinct 'turn to the suffering body' as self in early Christian self-descriptions.[55] That is, early Christian discourse was fixated with the prospect of physical suffering, whether in martyrdom or in ascetic practices. A parallel to the detailed and gruesome physical descriptions of Hell can be found in the accounts of the martyrs.[56] Furthermore, this discursive strategy was key to the success of Christianity: suffering was depicted as a triumph. Strangely, Perkins makes no mention of Hell at all; yet as Tertullian and the *Apocalypse of Peter* demonstrate, visions of Hell explain and display the triumph of the suffering over the perpetrators.[57]

Third, Christian visions of Hell are (in part) designed to bolster allegiance to the community by showing the dire consequences of apostasy. The intended readers of the various texts were largely the faithful or the wavering, but not the outsiders. In the context of the twin threats of heresy and persecution, images of Hell were designed (negatively) to reinforce the benefits of remaining within the fold.

Fourth, the delay of the *parousia* increased interest in the immediate fate of the dead, and removed the emphasis from the Last Judgement.

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[55] J. Perkins, *The Suffering Self—Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[56] For example, the *Passio Perpetuae*.

[57] Further, see M. Foucault, 'Christianity and Confession', in *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1997), pp. 199-236.

Fifth, the development of a doctrine of purgatory, while intending to sweeten the bitter pill, ironically tended to promote a fixation on the bureaucratic intricacies of punishment in the afterlife, and procedures to ameliorate them in the present by ascetic practices. In Jerome, for example, we see that contemplation of Hell may have a purgative effect in itself. This was the path that orthodox Catholic thought eventually took, via Augustine.

The myth of Hell has had an evolution and a prominence quite different to (but not separate from) the Church's doctrine of Hell. It emerged in the fragile early centuries of the Christian community, and reflects the complex circumstances of the time more than the teaching of the New Testament. If our study of Hell's history has taught us anything, it is that Christians have since very early days appealed to Hell and depicted Hell in ways quite unknown in the witness of their own Scriptures, and have at times drawn a perverse comfort from the imagined spectacle of the suffering of others.

MICHAEL JENSEN
Oxford