



The Beast Acheron, from Margaret of York's *Visions of Tondal*. Illustrated by Simon Marmion. John Paul Getty Museum. Ms 30, fol. 17.

“What Every Medievalist Should Know About Hell”

Eileen Gardiner

University of Bristol
Centre for Medieval Studies
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I particularly liked the idea of “What Every Medievalist Should Know.” I spent some years as a commissioning editor for engineering books and was in charge of a series called “What Every Engineer Should Know,” but I promise you Hell is much more interesting than fiber optics or flexible circuits.

I don’t come here thinking there could possibly be a medievalist who doesn’t already know a great deal about hell. Medieval hell was pretty much hell’s highpoint. So, what I’d like to do this afternoon, while noting some peculiarities about medieval hell and about belief in hell in the medieval period, is to put medieval hell into a broader context. What was hell before this period? What was going on at the same time beyond Europe? And what happened to hell after the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment?

Medievalists are familiar with Dante’s *Inferno* from Italy (Fig. 1) as well as Hel, both the goddess and the place, from Scandinavian mythology (Fig. 2). Medieval writers

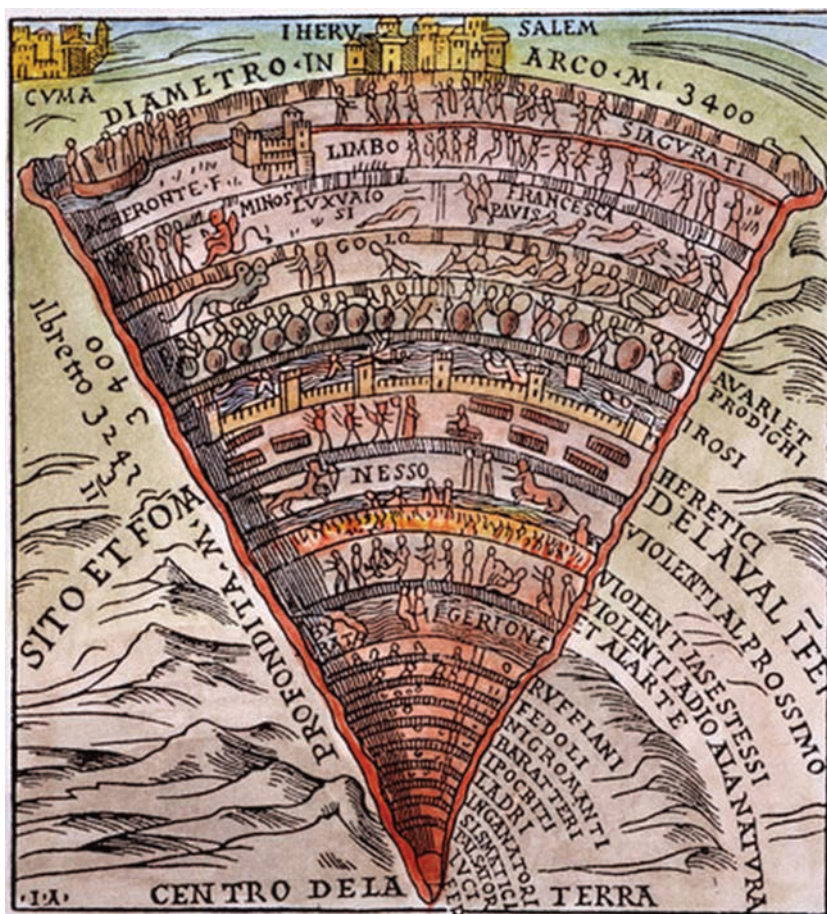


Fig. 1. Dante’s *Inferno*. Woodcut from *Divine Comedy*. Venice: Pietro da Figino, c. 1520.

across Europe, from Gregory the Great to Venerable Bede, from Valerius of Bierzo to Otloh of St Emmeram, were drawn to visions of hell, copying them into histories and chronicles, primarily as warnings for the living. Medieval painters and sculptors left us with graphic reminders. (Fig. 3) Even as citizens of the modern world, we can’t escape



Fig. 2. Hel in Hel. *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson*. Danish Royal Library, Copenhagen, SÁM 66, 96r. 1765–66.

A less familiar underworld developed under the influence of the mystery religions. It transformed the dark warehouse where shades were treated even-handedly into an afterlife comprising punishment for the wicked, reincarnation for purged sinners, and a resting place among the blessed for the good.

references to the fiery underworld whether it's cartoons commenting on current affairs or (Fig. 3) comic-book action heros who claim hell as their spawning ground.

But what came before the medieval idea of hell?

Homer sent his hero Ulysses to the land of the dead and Vergil sent Aeneas there as well.¹ This type of underworld, a place for heroic adventures, is found even earlier in ancient Near Eastern texts like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.²



Fig. 3. By Kaamran Hafeez, writer Al Batt, Barron's. December 2013.

1. Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 19–106; Eileen Gardiner, *Greek & Roman Hells: Visions Tours and Descriptions of the Infernal Otherworld* (New York: Italica Press, 2019), xxi–xxiii, 1–7.

2. Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2003); Eileen Gardiner, *Ancient Near Eastern Hell: Visions Tours and Descriptions of the Infernal Otherworld*, 2 ed. (New York: Italica Press, 2013), 1–4.



Fig. 4. Dark Horse Comics. Mike Mignola, Duncan Fegredo and Dave Stewart. 2019.

Zoroastrian texts⁴ from ancient Persia are keen on the punishment of the wicked, who fall from the Chinvat Bridge (Fig. 6) into gruesome punishments (*notice here the hellmouth, which will come up again later*), but their true focus is on the Final Judgment, when hell will be dissolved and those in hell will presumably join the blessed.

What we know about these early beliefs come from a handful of texts that can span thousands of years. Sometimes these texts are impossible to date accurately. For instance, the

In Egyptian religions (Fig. 5), a notion of re-incarnation similar to the late ancient notion was paramount, but it also included the possibility of annihilation for the truly wicked,³ something that also appears in some Greek and Roman texts.



Fig. 5. Egyptian Judgment of the Dead by Weighing Their Hearts. Temple of Deir el-Medina, Egypt. 1550-1080 BCE.

3. James F. Romano, *Death, Burial and Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*, Carnegie Series on Egypt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Eileen Gardiner, *Egyptian Hell: Visions Tours and Descriptions of the Infernal Otherworld*, 2 ed. (New York: Italica Press, 2013), ix–xvii.

4. Eileen Gardiner, *Zoroastrian Hell: Visions Tours and Descriptions of the Infernal Otherworld*, 2 ed. (New York: Italica Press, 2013), ix–xvi; Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).



Fig. 6. Zoroastrian Chinvat Bridge. Sogdian Sa-pao Wirkak's Sarcophagus in Hsi-an, China. 580.

Zoroastrian *Book of Arda Viraf*⁵ survives in copies dating from ninth century, but we believe the text itself is at least as old as sixth century. What remains is a late version of something that we know existed for much longer, and we can't know how closely these texts re-

semble prior versions. Beliefs about the afterlife, the otherworld, about so-called hell, were extremely fluid, and are sometimes hard to pin down, changing from text to text, from time to time, and place to place.

But what do we find in the Bible?⁶

Medievalists might be most interested in biblical notions of hell, which we'd *assume* were the direct ancestors of the ideas found in European medieval texts. But there are great differences between the Jewish and early-Christian ideas about hell, cryptically alluded to in the Bible, and the highly developed, speculative underworld of medieval imaginations.

First, we find fundamental differences between the eschatological ideas revealed in

5. Destur Hoshangji Jamaspjii Asa, *The Book of Arda Viraf: The Pahlavi Text*, trans. Martin Haug and E. W. West (Bombay: Government Central Book Depot, 1872), 315–16. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/zor/sbe23/sbe2327.htm>, accessed 27 October 2013. *Arda Wiraz Manag: The Iranian Divina Commedia*, ed. and trans. Fereydun Vahman, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series 53 (London: Curzon Press, 1986). <http://www.avesta.org/mp/viraf.html> and <https://archive.org/details/bookofardaviraf00haug>, accessed 30 October 2013. Eileen Gardiner, *Zoroastrian Hell*, 2nd ed. (New York: Italica Press, 2013), 3–35.

6. For the original research on this topic, see Eileen Gardiner, "Heaven, Hell and Purgatory," in *The Handbook of Medieval Culture: A Compendium of Critical Topics*, ed. by Albrecht Classen. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 653–73; idem, "Hell. Medieval Times and Reformation Era," in *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. by Carolyn Muessig (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

the Old Testament (i.e. the Hebrew Bible) and those of the medieval period. While only select Old Testament books deal with eschatological ideas at all, they focus on the afterlife in terms of an apocalypse. They are social texts, interested in the fate of nations and of peoples, in the fate of the Jewish community. They're not moral texts interested in the judgment of souls at death and the fate of the individual in the afterlife — ideas that permeate medieval otherworld literature. The Old Testament mentions fire, but it is always in the context of burning unbelievers, burning the other. These Apocalyptic notions are linked to Jewish ideas about its time and its history, manifested as an expectation of a future age radically discontinuous with the present when the fortunes and lost status of the Jewish people will be restored, and not necessarily in an otherworld.

For a moment, I'd like to consider the word *hell* in the Bible? First we have the words "Hades" and "Tartarus" translated into Latin as *inferno* and into English as *hell*. Both these words derive from Greek mythology and clearly refer to an underworld. (Fig. 7) Hades, similar to the Hebrew concept of "Sheol," is a gray, lifeless land of the dead, but



Fig. 7. Aeneas and Dido Sacrifice to the Gods in Hades. Vatican Vergil. Vatican Apostolic Library, Vat. Lat. 3225, fol. 46v. Rome, 4th C.

without punishment. Like "hell," the word "Hades" designated both the underworld and its ruler, the god of death himself. (Fig. 8) Tartarus, on the other hand, appears only once in the Bible, in the New Testament, and is the legendary place of punishment for the Greek chthonic gods, the Titans. But the biblical word most frequently translated into *inferno* and *hell* is the word *Gehenna*. Both the Old and New Testaments speak of *Gehenna*, and it became synonymous



Fig. 8. Persephone Supervising the Titan Sisyphus Pushing His Rock in Tartarus. Attic Greek black-figure amphora. State Collections of Antiquities, Munich. Vulci, Etruria (central Italy), c. 530 BCE. Photo, Bibi Saint-Pol.

with “hell.” But *Gehenna* is actually something totally different.

Those who took part in June’s conference on “Re-Imagining the Bible in the Middle Ages” will not doubt recall Ilya Dines talk about the little animal of the Old Testament, the *shafan sela*⁷ (Fig. 9), which by the time of the Greek Septuagint in the third to second century BCE, had been transformed, actually translated, into the *chirogrillus* or grunting pig. (Fig. 10) Throughout the Middle Ages this word was translated into hare,

hedge-

hog,

squirrel, porcupine or some generic dog-like creature — all because outside the natural habitat of the *shafan sela* — both the animal and its name were unknown.



Fig. 9. Shafan Sela.



Fig. 10. Shefan Sela as transformed into chirogrillus, hare, hedgehog, squirrel, porcupine and generic dog-like creature.

7. A version of his talk was published in *Science Translated: Latin and Vernacular Translations of Scientific Treatises in Medieval Europe* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2008), 73–89.

What happened to *chirogrillus* also happened to *Gehenna*. Those unfamiliar with the place or its nature, translated the word *Gehenna* as *hell*, so that when we hear or read the word *Gehenna*, we visualize something like this. (Fig. 11), whereas *Gehenna* was



Fig. 11. Imaginary *Gehenna*. *Fallen Angels in Hell* by John Martin. c. 1841. Tate Britain.

the Valley of Hinnom and looked more like this. (Fig. 12) It was a valley outside Jerusalem (Fig. 13) long associated with ritual sacrifice — particularly with Moloch and child sacrifice⁸ by the kings of Judah. It was a cursed place, and although it was sometimes specifically associated with fire,⁹ judgment, punishment and burial, it was not an otherworld location.

In the late twelfth or early thirteenth-century, without any evidence, archaeological or otherwise, *Gehenna* became confused with a garbage dump. In the Hebrew Bible, the use of the words *Gehenna* or *Hades* — never designated eternal punishment for humanity after death by fire or

any other means. These same words, however — *Hades* and *Gehenna* — were re-purposed in the New Testament, where they're associated with fire.¹⁰ They refer to a place



Fig. 12. Actual *Gehenna*. The Valley of Hinnom.

8. 2 Chron. 28.3, 33.6.

9. Jer 7.31–32, 19:5–6, 32.35; 2 Kings 23:10.

10. Matt. 5:22, 18:9; Mark 9:43–48; James 3:6; Rev. 20:13–14.

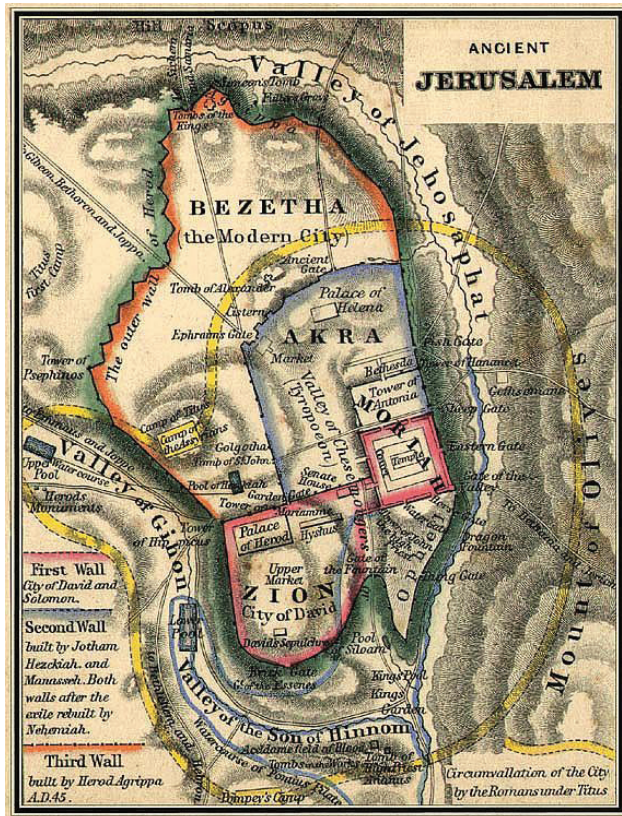


Fig. 13. Location of the Valley of Hinnom (Gihon), southwest of Jerusalem.

fied concept of hell in the New Testament.

The Latin word *inferno* presents another problem. Like *Hades*, it means simply *underworld* or even the land of the dead. In English it has been transformed into something completely otherwise. Since 1928, it signifies a raging fire. (Fig. 14) Now in most minds it has nothing to do with anything below the surface of the earth.

below — an underworld — into which things might be cast.¹¹ They're associated with death¹² and with judgment.¹³ And finally, "Hades" is associated with gates¹⁴ and keys,¹⁵ while "Gehenna" is once associated with children.¹⁶

Despite approximately twenty-two occurrences of these words in the New Testament, the references are so brief and so cryptic, that while projecting an ominous, yet vague, warning, it's impossible to uncover any clear, uni-



Fig. 14. *The Towering Inferno*.

11. Matt. 5:29–30, 11:23, 18:9; Mark 9:43–48; Luke 10:15, 12:5, 16:22–23; 2 Pet. 2:4; Rev. 20:13–14.
12. Acts 2:24–27, 31; Rev. 1:18, 6:8, 20:13–14.
13. Matt. 23:33, 2 Peter 2:4.
14. Matt. 16:18.
15. Rev. 1:8.
16. Matt. 23:15

Even in the New Testament there's scarce evidence of a concern for the fate of the individual soul, a concern that dominates medieval ideas about the otherworld. (Fig. 15) Only in the parable of Dives and Lazarus is hell described as a place where individual sinners are punished for moral failings. The Parable is from Luke 16: 19–31:

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.”



Fig. 15. The Rich Man (Dives) and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19–31). *Codex Aureus Epternacensis* (Golden Gospels), fol 78r. 1035–40. German National Museum, Nürnberg.

Abraham turns a deaf ear to the rich man's requests for mercy. This story appears only in Luke, and it actually derives from an Egyptian folktale that came into Talmudic literature during the first century CE.¹⁷ Even in the New Testament this story of otherworld punishment for moral failings is an anomaly.

Christianity is a syncretistic religion, and other sources, including the mystery religions and Gnosticism, probably had proportionately greater influence on developing notions of hell than did the Bible.

17. Gardiner, “Heaven, Hell and Purgatory,” 656; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 1124–36.

What about these developing Christian beliefs?

Is there any evidence for belief in hell among the early Christians or in the period of the First Seven Councils roughly the period from Constantine to Charlemagne?¹⁸

Neither the original Nicene Creed of 325 nor the Niceno-Constantinople Creed of 381 mention hell. The Apostles' Creed or *Symbolum Apostolorum* (Fig. 16), which is probably no earlier than the second half of the fourth century states that Christ "descendit ad inferos" meaning simply "underworld." That phrase was translated mostly as "descended to the dead" and only occasionally as "descended into hell." It is a euphemism for "died," just as "departed" or "passed on." It becomes, however, linked to the Christian narrative of the "harrowing of hell," which is not included in any of the Creeds.

But, it is found in texts as early as the second century and most notably in the fourth-century *Gospel of Nicodemus*.¹⁹ Here we find Christ entering the underworld to free the dead, not only the noble ancients or those stained by original sin, but also those that "sat in the deep darkness of our transgressions and in the shadow of



Fig. 16. The Apostles' Creed. *Somme des vices et des vertus* by Guillaume Péruault. Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, ms. 924, fol. 150v. 14th century.

18. For a discussion of belief, see Eileen Gardiner, "Heavens and Hells," in *The Routledge Companion to Death and Dying*, ed. by Christopher Moreman (Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2017), 249–50.

19. Gardiner, "Heaven, Hell and Purgatory," 654; Felix Scheidweiler, "The Gospel of Nicodemus: Acts of Pilate and Christ's Descent into Hell," in *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings*, 1, ed. by Wilhelm Schneemelcher, Robert McLachlan Wilson, revised ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 501–502.



Fig. 17. Christ's Descent *ad infernos*. The Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of New York. Spain, 13th century.

After that what questions did Christians pose about this hell?

Before the medieval flowering of hell descriptions, two major questions surfaced for the churchmen and scholastics (roughly 1100–1700): First, where was it? (Fig. 18) At the centre of the universe, which would be the centre of the earth, (Fig. 19) or was it below the universe. And, a second question, what was the nature of its fire? The earliest form of punishment associated with hell was fire, and lively

death of our sins.” But notice, no punishment.

The Harrowing of Hell would lead us in another interesting direction, so we’ll come back to hell and the Creeds: Only the Pseudo-Athanasian Creed or *Quicumque Vult*, of the late fifth or early sixth century, while again mentioning Christ’s descent into the underworld, specifically includes the notion of an afterlife punishment, claiming that those who do evil will go “in ignem aeternum” (into eternal fire), although it does not specifically equate the *infernos* with this place of eternal fire. Here’s the beginning.



Fig. 18. Hell at Centre of Universe. *L'Image du monde* by Gautier de Metz. British Library Royal 19 A IX, fol. 149. Bruges, 1464.



Fig. 19. Hell at Bottom of the Universe. The Neville Hornby Hours. British Library Egerton, 2781, fol. 1v. London, 2nd quarter 14th C.

speculation considered how this fire, which was everlasting and did not consume what it burned, might be different from earthly fire. Even some who believed that hell and earthly fire were identical, credited hellfire with a special nature in the otherworld, confirming the perception that it was everlasting and did not consume, but attributing its special nature to the otherworld environment and not the fire itself.

Previous to the scholastics, Tertullian (160–220 CE), particularly in his *Treatise on the Soul* and *Five Books against Marcion*, makes note of hell's darkness, of thirst as a form of punishment, and of the presence of a hell

mouth, but he focused on the fire that does not consume but burns eternally. Origen (c. 145–ca. 254), proposed²⁰ a punishing fire that does not pre-exist in the underworld but is tied to the individual: a self-generating fire fueled by one's own sins. This fire punishes without destroying or harming the resurrected body. Augustine (354–430) argues that the bodies of the damned will be punished eternally but not consumed by fire. He also says that the worm (*vermis*) will torment the body in hell, although he resists defining the nature of the worm.²¹

And when we finally arrive at the scholastics, they repeated these concerns. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), for instance, mirrored Augustine's speculations. In his *Summa Theologica*,²² he examined the nature of the fire in hell, but he did not maintain that fire was the only source of punishment there. He acknowledged the punishment inflicted

20. *On First Principles* 2.10.3–4.

21. *City of God* 21.2 and *On Christian Doctrine* 1.19–21

22. *Questions* 97–99.

by the worm, although he asserted that the worm was immaterial. While reflecting notions from beyond the Bible, these minds are thinking in terms of metaphors. Immaterial monsters, self-generating punishment. It's important to remember throughout this, that hell descriptions, with no epistemic certainty, rely completely on metaphor.

While theologians, philosophers and scholastics were thinking and writing in metaphors, the more creative sorts were actually running with these metaphors, imagining the place and its torments in even greater detail with richer ideas permeating and stoking the medieval imagination. In earlier works like the *Apocalypse of Peter*²³ from the mid-second century, fire remained the predominant form of punishment, but with the sixth-century *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great (540?–604), treacherously narrow bridges make an appearance.²⁴ You'll remember them from Zoroastrian Hell, but they'll also be a familiar motif from Romance literature. Fiends grab at souls trying to cross bridges and attempting to tip the souls into the stinking rivers below where ferocious beasts wait with their maws open wide for falling prey.

Gregory really marks the beginning of descriptions of hell and its torments — either created new or borrowed from other sources — that went far beyond the vague references in the Bible. By the twelfth century, hell had grown into multi-layered landscapes, which we'll recognize from Dante. Here fiery punishments alternate with icy ones. Rivers, mountains and lakes formed part of hell's natural environment, while furnaces, ovens, grills and mills provided constructed places of torture. Hell was no longer a place of lethargic souls pining away in darkness. It wasn't even just a place of fire. It was now inhabited by vicious creatures, small as insects or large as monsters, who were equipped with every imaginable means of inflicting unending torture, anything from their own sharp teeth and claws to knives, awls, axes, spears and saws, ropes and chains.

23. Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924; reprint, 1955), 504–21; “The Apocalypse of Peter,” translated by Andrew Rutherford, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Allan Menzies, Vol. 9. 5th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1921), 141–47; Eileen Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante* (New York: Italica Press, 1989), 1–12

24. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, trans. by Odo John Zimmerman (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), 237–41; Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, 47–51.

These ideas were represented over and over again in manuscripts, sculpture, and painting. (Fig. 20) For instance, this eleventh-century tympanum at Conques. (Fig. 21)



Fig. 20. Hell. Tympanum of Sainte Foy Abbey Church. Conques, Aveyron, France. End of the 11th Century.

And this thirteenth-century mosaic from Florence. Closer to home, the parish church of St. Thomas in Salisbury displayed this on its chancel arch for the contemplation



Fig. 21. Inferno. Coppo di Marcovaldo, 1260–70. Florence, Baptistry of San Giovanni. Photo by Giuseppe Marzulli.

of its congregation. (Fig. 22) It's believed that this fifteenth-century German painting was for the Council Chamber of the Cologne City Hall. (Fig. 23) *The twenty-first century could use more public art like this where for elected officials gather.*

How do we arrive at such a complex, multi-layered hell, where sinners are segregated according to the nature and severity of their sins? Where punishment is no longer just fire? How do we arrive at the idea of an afterlife that is no longer at the end of time as a punishment for those who



Fig. 22. Doom Painting. St. Thomas Church. Salisbury, 1470–1500.

thwarted and oppressed our people? The focus has shifted from the Final Judgment at the end of the world to the Particular Judgment of each human at death and an afterlife that coexists with earthly life. There's not time to answer all of these questions, but we'll make a start.

First of all, might these new ideas be coming from someplace else?

In 1919, Professor Miguel Asín Palacios²⁵ tried to identify the origins of Dante's *Commedia* in Islamic literature, specifically in Muhammad's *Night Journey*. But outside this work and about 700 words scattered throughout in the English translation of the Koran, there is not much of an Islamic hell literature. The possibility of a Muslim source is overshadowed by the long tradition of otherworld journeys, voyages and visions already part of Christian literature. We'll concentrate on them for a moment.

Counting only those that are detailed enough to provide a substantial visual picture, about 70 visions of hell

survive from the early-Christian period until 1500. Often written as a dream or a vision, they may also be described as a physical journey.²⁶ Today we might call them out-of-body or near-death experiences. Quite early on, with the "Vision of Furseus" (Fig. 24) from Bede's *Historia* (c. 731),²⁷ the so-called visionary appears to have made an actual physical journey, because he returns from the otherworld marked by his pun-

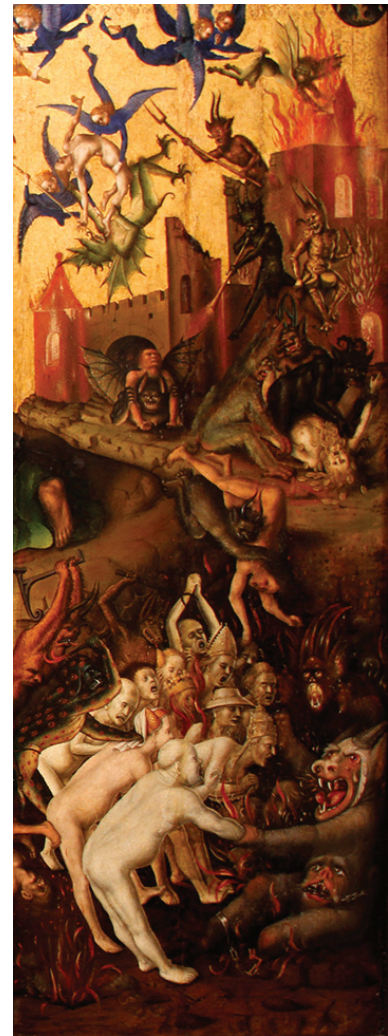


Fig. 23. *The Last Judgment* by Stefan Lochner. Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne. German, c. 1435. Photo by José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro.

25. M. Palacios Asín, and Julián Ribera, *La Escatología Musulmana En La Divina Comedia: Discurso Leído En El Acto De Su Recepción* (Madrid: Real Academia española, 1919).

26. Eileen Gardiner, "Visions and Journeys," in *Dante in Context*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Baranski and Lino Pertile and (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 341–53.

27. Bertram Colgrave, and R. A. B. Mynors, ed., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 268–77; Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, 51–55.

ishment. A devil grabs a sinner and throws him at Furseus whose shoulder and jaw are scarred by burn marks for the rest of his life.

These otherworld tales were quite popular, recorded and spread in manuscript, translated, picked up in chronicles and histories where they were included among the marvels of the times. They provide a backdrop for compelling hero narratives, where an individual, often a flawed character, enters an unknown realm and battles demons and monsters to return a better and wiser person. Often the person is a

monk, perhaps already holy, but not holy enough. Later we encounter laymen, — and they do all seem to be men — some of them particularly wicked, who undergo a conversion in the otherworld, but essentially this originates as a monastic literature, with lessons for monks and nuns about keeping to the straight and narrow.

For instance, from 824 we have the *Vision of Wetti*,²⁸ a monk of Reichenau (Fig. 25). It's obsessed with clerical failings particularly failings of a sexual nature. Wetti tells us that his angel guide mentioned most sins just once, but “again and again the angel introduced



Fig. 24. St. Furseus Protected by Three Angels While Attacked by Devils. *Vie des saintes*. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des manuscrits. Français 412, fol. 211r. 1285.



Fig. 25. Angel Leads Wetti to the Mountain Surrounded by Fire. *Vita patrum*. Morgan Library MS M.626, f. 120v. Naples, 1350–75.

28. A prose version from that same year by Heito was recomposed thirteen years later in verse by Walahfrid of Strabo. David A. Traill, *Walahfrid Strabo's Visio Wettini: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Bern and Frankfurt/M: Lang, 1974); Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, 65–79.

a discussion of the sin of sodomy...five times and more [he said] that it should be avoided."

There can also be a political side to these visions often calling to task the rich and mighty for abusing their power and amassing great fortunes through extortion and plunder.²⁹ (*Some things never change!*) Also from the mid-ninth century, *The Vision of Charles the Fat*³⁰ (Fig. 26) blends the moral and the political when Charles meets in hell many of his former acquaintances — bishops, princes and counsellors, as well as his uncle, his own father and his cousin. They're in hell for either advocating or participating in war. Here the geography is not very clearly distinguished. Everything appears to take place on one plain as Charles ventures past those undergoing the worst torments until meeting those who've already moved beyond punishment. He is in hell, but this



Fig. 26. Seal of Charles the Fat. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. 11th C.

hell is not a place of eternal punishment. Here souls proceed along a path of punishment, penance and purgation. The text encourages the living to offer masses, prayers, psalms, alms, and vigils to move these souls along on the road to heaven.

Purgatory wasn't born until the mid-twelfth century,³¹ but in truth it was only born by slicing off a piece of what had previously been considered hell. Before Purgatory became a separate place, a place apart, only those sent to the pit of hell were sent there forever. Others could work their way up, or be helped along, and finally attain at least the outer reaches of heaven.

29. Wetti's Vision, see Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, 71.

30. Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, 129–33. Charles lost his throne to his cousin Arnulf, and this vision was written after the fact apparently to justify the collapse of Charles's rule by claiming that in the otherworld he had been advised to give up his throne to his cousin.

31. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).



Fig. 27. Tundale at Dinner. Margaret of York's *Visions of Tondal*. Illustrated by Simon Marmion. John Paul Getty Museum. Ms 30, fol. 7. 1474.

In 1149, just as Purgatory is beginning to take shape, the *Vision of Tundale*³² was recorded in Latin by an Irish monk named Marcus from Cashel in Tipperary. (Fig. 27)

For visions of this time, Tundale's is a lengthy one (over 10,000 words), and it was enormously popular. It was translated into at least thirteen languages and copies exist in hundreds of manuscripts. The visionary, Tundale, is a perfect hero, straight from the pages of romance. He was "a youth of a noble race with a cheerful face and an elegant manner. He was carefully brought up, well-

dressed, and high-minded, not ill-trained in the military arts, skillful, friendly and jovial." And like all good heroes, he has his flaws: He disregarded the eternal salvation of his soul.

Marcus sets up Tundale's story as a novelist would. This young fellow travels from Tipperary to Cork to visit a friend, who happened to own him money for some horses. After a few days, Tundale is ready to return home, and he asks his friend about the money. Well, the friend is short of cash just now, and Tundale flies into a rage. But he's

32. For a study of this vision, see my forthcoming "The Vision of Tnugdál," in *Imagining the Medieval Afterlife*, ed. by Richard Matthew Pollard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). See also Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, 149–95; Jean-Michel Picard, and Yolande de Pontfarcy, *The Vision of Tnugdál* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1989); *Visio Tnugdali: Lateinisch und Altdeutsch*, ed. by Albrecht Wagner (Erlangen: A. Deichert, 1882).

a good-natured fellow down deep, so when his friend begs him to stay for dinner, he's mollified and sits down in peace. As soon as he starts to eat, however, (Fig. 28) he has a stroke and after crying out, he sinks to the ground. His "whole body grew rigid." And so, begins Tundale's journey to the otherworld. He's seized by devils, but his guardian angel intervenes and leads him down through eight levels of the underworld,



Fig. 28. Tundale Lays as if Dead. *Tondolus der Ritter*. Speyer: Johann and Konrad Hist, 1488.

where specific sinners are punished in their own mini hells: murderers, traitors, the proud, the greedy, robbers and thieves, gluttons and fornicators, fornicators again and especially monks, and fornicators yet again! They eventually arrive down at the lowest hell, the pit of hell, where they find the Prince of Shadows. (Fig. 29) At this point



Fig. 29. Lucifer, the Prince of Hell. Margaret of York's *Visions of Tondal*. Illustrated by Simon Marmion. John Paul Getty Museum. Ms 30, fol. 30v. 1474.

Tundale's guide tells him, "All who you saw above wait for the judgment of God, but those who are below in the depths are already judged." So, as in the *Vision of Charles the Fat*, until Tundale arrives at the pit of hell, all the souls that he has seen are actually in a proto-purgatory, a place from which they might emerge after sufficient punishment, penance and purgation and after enough prayers from their living friends. However, one of the important ideas promulgated in this vision is the importance of Divine Mercy but I will come back to that in a moment.

The *Vision of Tundale* works as an emblematic otherworld vision. It includes many of features found in similar works, but here they're fashioned with greater skill and vividness. Many of these features concern vision literature more than hell, so I'll just mention in passing the punishment of the visionary, the role of the guide, and encounters with familiar or famous people. But other aspects are pertinent to our understanding of the development of the idea of hell between the Gospels and the *Divine Comedy* and beyond.

First, is this focus on Divine Mercy, which I mentioned before. Before hell became an eternal destination from which no one escaped, prayers, masses, almsgiving, and good works could benefit those in hell moving them upward toward heaven. Instead the *Vision of Tundale* emphasizes again and again the role of Divine Mercy in redemption. It's not just your punishment or the help of your friends that will get you out of hell — it is divine mercy tempered with divine justice. The Guide reemphasizes this point many times as he and Tundale cross the otherworld landscape.

Where does this idea comes from, because it's certainly not typical for the period either in vision literature or elsewhere. For an answer we turn to Marcus, our author. Although he was from Tipperary, he actually wrote down the *Vision of Tundale* while in Regensburg in eastern Bavaria. His journey took him through Clairvaux as part of the entourage accompanying St. Malachy who in 1148 was hurrying to meet the pope. Malachy, however, died at Clairvaux, and there is evidence that before Marcus contin-

ued on to Regensburg, he delayed at Clairvaux to help Bernard compose his “Life of St. Malachy.”³³

I think we can look to some similarities between the *Vision of Tundale*’s teachings on the nature of grace and free choice and Bernard’s *De gratia et libero arbitrio* of 1128.³⁴ For Bernard all initiative must be ascribed to grace, but individual free choice — that is, voluntary consent — must receive it. Voluntary consent is a habit of the soul that combines both reason and will. So, although the driving force of salvation is from God, the free and reasoning soul must condition itself to receive this grace. This same idea is continually reinforced by Tundale’s guide: God is just, and God is merciful, but you have to be prepared to accept grace.

Bernard does not always clearly expound his theology of grace, which has long been acknowledged as precursor to the thought of Luther and other reformers, but here I think we can see Marcus distilling Bernard’s thought for a more general audience,³⁵ and in particular for the community of nuns at the Abbey of St. Paul in Regensburg, for whom he recorded this vision.

The second remarkable feature of the *Vision of Tundale* is the structuring of hell (and heaven too) as a multi-layered, segmented place. *Segmented* being a term of art used to describe these hells. Here sinners are punished gruesomely in a way that particularly fits their sins, and although this is not unique to this vision, it’s an early and particularly well-developed example. And while visions like the *Vision of Charles the Fat* give the sense of passing through a landscape of punishment, none that I can identify up to this point provide that sense of descent deeper and deeper into the pit of hell as

33. H. J. Lawlor, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Life of St. Malachy of Armagh* (London: Knowledge, 1920); Robert T. Meyer and Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Life and Death of Saint Malachy, the Irishman* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1978).

34. Bernard of Clairvaux, Bernard McGinn, and R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Treatises III: On Grace and Free Choice, And, in Praise of the New Knighthood* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 3–111.

35. Brian Patrick McGuire, “Bernard’s Life and Works: A Review,” in idem, ed., *A Companion to Bernard of Clairvaux* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 36; see also Bernhard Lohse, “Luther und Bernhard von Clairvaux,” in *Bernhard von Clairvaux: Rezeption und Wirkung*, ed. by Kasper Elm (Wiesbaden: Harrossowitz, 1994), 271–301. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Treatises III*, 14–18.

we will see centuries later in Dante's *Inferno* where Lucifer sits at the very bottom, devouring souls. (Fig. 30)

I'm inclined to think that Marcus, when he finally reached Regensburg may have been exposed to eastern influences. *Why do I say that?*

Here is a map of identified descriptions of hell (Fig. 31). You can see where it extends, and this is based solely on secondary literature in

English and translations into English. There certainly may be a lot of texts outside Europe that I'm completely unaware of.



Fig. 30. Lucifer in the Pit of Hell. From Dante's *Inferno*. Venice: Petrus de Plasiis, 1491.



Regensburg sits on the Danube River, and the northern branch of the trade routes from the East travelled through the Black Sea and up the Danube through and past Regensburg. It was an early Roman castrum well connected by Roman roads as we can see on Fig. 31. Map of Hell Descriptions, <http://www.hell-on-line.org/Map.html>

the Peutinger Map. (Fig. 32) It is at the edge of the empire. Travellers and merchants of various kinds had been coming through Regensburg for centuries. In fact, Marcus was in Regensburg to join the Scots Monastery there, the Abbey of St. James, which was



Fig. 32. Regio (Regensburg). From Peutinger's Tabula. <http://peutinger.atlantides.org/map-a/>

a hub along the pilgrimage route to the Holy Land probably through both Constantinople and Venice. Compared with Biblical notions of hell, Asian religious traditions offered a highly complex and distinctive hell landscape.

Buddhist hell³⁶ was conceived as a series of eight hells. (Fig. 33) In these texts, they're described as stacked one above the other. Each hell has sixteen secondary hells, four at each of the four gates of the great hells — or 136 hells in total. Tibetan traditions add another eight major hells, layering eight cold hells above the eight standard hot hells, all having sixteen secondary hells — or 272 hells. Here they're shown side-by-side. (Fig. 34) Jainism had seven hells. And you can see here how they're stack one above the other, each with a little entryway as seen on the left. (Fig. 35) Hinduism also had a well-developed, segmented notion of hell, but the surviving texts from this tradition that I've identified are not as early as those above.³⁷ This image shows how each punishment is paired to the offense, with the offense above and the punishment below. (Fig. 36)

36. Daigan Matsunaga, and Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Concept of Hell* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1972); Bryan J. Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld: Buddhist Popular Narratives of Death and the Afterlife in Tibet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Eileen Gardiner, *Buddhist Hell: Visions, Tours and Descriptions of the Infernal Otherworld* (New York: Italica Press, 2012).

37. W. Norman Brown, "The Rigvedic Equivalent for Hell," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 61 (June 1941): 76–80; Eileen Gardiner, *Hindu Hell: Visions, Tours and Descriptions of the Infernal Otherworld*, 2nd ed. (New York: Italica Press, 2013).



Fig. 33. Eight Buddhist Hells: From *The Precious Record Transmitted to Men to Move Them*. c. 1000 CE..

This literature is rich, sometimes funny, and often freakishly scary. As early as the 10th century, Chinese texts describe hell as a relentless bureaucratic nightmare, with long



Fig. 34. Tibetan Hell: Hot (left) and Cold (right).

hallways and endless offices. Papers passing from desk to desk, and the dead waiting in corridors for decisions while bowing officials scurry back and forth. (A scenario familiar from academia!)

A Buddhist/Taoist tale from 921, (which may require a trigger warning!) describes a monk who reaches a level of piety that allows him



Fig. 35. Seven Jain Hells. Cloth painting. Jain temple in Gujarat c. 1613.



Fig. 36. Hindu Naraka: Punishment (below) Fits the Crime (above). Anant Shivaji Desai, Ravi Varma Press. Before 1945.

to peer into the otherworld, but he can't see his dead mother anywhere. The monk journeys there to find her, travelling ever deeper and deeper, asking everyone he meets if they know where she is. Down and down he goes, describing each place that he sees — the landscape and the punishments — until he finds her starving body in the seventh compound where chained around with waist she's clamped to an iron bed by 49 nails. Blood is gushing from every pore and flames are darting from her mouth. He offers to change places with her, but the guardians of hell won't allow it. He returns to the Buddha, who is so impressed by the monk's devotion that he goes down to hell himself and dissolves it. (*Think here: Harrowing of Hell!*)

In the west, **after** *Tundale*, texts describe multiple and various hell landscapes. Different punishments tied to specific sins have their own special location. We even find western depictions of segmented and layered hells like this illustration by the Abbess Herrard of Landsberg (Fig. 37), or this 12th century Psalter from Oxford (Fig. 38), in contrast to a single undifferentiated Hellmouth, into which all souls were cast (Fig. 39).

Without specific textual evidence, it's impossible to connect Eastern & Western notions of hell, but it's clear that hell is not peculiarly Christian or Western. In fact, one of the most surprising things about the otherworld in eastern religious traditions that hold to reincarnation and a cyclical rather than linear notion of time, is just how detailed, long and complicated their hell is. Our Western assumptions are that reincarnation is a matter of gone



Fig. 37. Christian Segmented Hells. Herrad of Landsberg, *Hortus deliciarum*. 1180. Manuscript destroyed.



Fig. 38. Christian Segmented Hells. Psalter. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 835, fol. 30v. Oxford, 1st quarter 13th C..

today and back tomorrow, but in fact sinners, even minor sinners — for instance, people who throw broken pottery shards over the fence into their neighbor's garden — spend almost an eternity in hell. In the eighth cold hell as described in the Buddhist *Sutra on the Eighteen Hells* (from the second century ce) sinners are repeatedly split in two, crushed and ground. And this punishment goes on for longer than the time it takes to remove all the mustard seeds from a mound that equals

5,242,880 quarts if you removed just 1 seed every 100 years. That's a very long time. Perhaps an eternity.

Why might medieval Westerners be interested in eastern notions of hell? Probably because they told good stories with fantastic details. As with Eastern descriptions of hell, Western ones were written down to warn people, force them, and especially monks and nuns, onto the straight and narrow. Make them reflect on good and evil, right and wrong and the consequences for choosing the wrong alternative. The more vivid and convincing the tale, the more likely to fulfil its role.



Fig. 39. Christian Hellmouth. Apocalypse de S. Jean. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des manuscrits. Français 13096, fol. 86r. Belgium, ca. 1313.

Which raises this question: did people believe these descriptions of hell?³⁸ Authors were, no doubt, afraid their audiences would question them. They employed a range of devices to support the truth claims of these visions. They rooted them in specific times and places, sometimes associating the vision with other contemporary events like the election of a pope or the death of a king. They specified how they heard about the vision, often insisting that it was directly from the visionary. Authors described the scars that visionaries returned with, and more importantly how the otherworld experience would abruptly and dramatically change a visionary's life. Laymen join monasteries, like the boy Alberic who joins Monte Cassino.³⁹ Monks become ascetic hermits, like Drythelm from Bede's *Historia*.⁴⁰ Tundale takes up the life of a pilgrim

38. For a discussion of belief, see Gardiner, "Heavens and Hells," 245–55.

39. Inguanez, Mauro, ed., "La Visione di Alberico," Introduction by Antonio Mirra. *Miscellanea Casinense* 11(1931–32): 33–103; Jean Marchand, *L'autre monde au Moyen Age, Poèmes et récits de la vieille France* 17 (Paris: Boccard, 1940), 117–83.

40. Colgrave, and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 488–98; Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, 57–63.

and spends the rest of his days teaching and preaching. All of this was written down in an effort to make the vision, and the reality of the otherworld, more convincing.

Which also begs the question of how strongly people believed in not only the vision but in the otherworld itself. In closing the report of his vision, Barontus,⁴¹ a seventh-century monk of the monastery of Saint-Cyran at Longoret (between Poitiers and Bourges) asks his brothers: “Who is it, dear brothers, I ask, who has such an iron mind that these threatened punishments do not terrify him when the devils can snatch so quickly any sinner leaving his body and drag him to hell? ... Who is so alienated from faith that he does not believe this meaning?” If everyone believed in hell, would these constant reminders have been necessary?

And after the Medieval period, what became of hell?

Why did this literary tradition come to an end with Dante’s *Commedia*? Of course, that was the highpoint of this tradition. It would be hard to imagine surpassing it. But occasionally afterwards, there might be a vision of the otherworld, like Hans Christian Andersen’s story of “The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf,”⁴² a lesson for vain little girls. (Fig. 40) Little Inger went to hell because she trod on a loaf of bread rather than get her shoes dirty. The story doesn’t end well, because unlike medieval visionaries, Inger doesn’t



Fig. 40. The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf. From *Fairy Tales from Hans Christian Andersen*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1914. Illustration by Dugald Stewart Walker.

41. Maria Pia Ciccarese, *Visioni dell’Aldilà in Occidente* (Florence: Nardini Editore, 1987), 236–75.

42. A translation of Hans Christian Andersen’s “Pigen, som traadte paa Brødet” by Jean Hersholt from http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheGirlWhoTrodOnTheLoaf_e.html, accessed 30 April 2005, originally published in *The Complete Andersen*, translated by Jean Hersholt with hand-colored illustrations by Fritz Kredel (New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1949), 438–41.



Fig. 41. *Heroine of Hell*. Directed by Nietzsche Keene. 1996.

get to come back and have a second chance. The 1996 film, *Heroine of Hell* about the breakup of a romantic relationship (Fig. 41) was based, oddly enough on *The Vision of Tundale*. History Channel's 2010 *Gates of Hell*, explored the topic of hell in a quasi-historical, quasi-lurid TV production. (Fig. 42) Here, I got to talk about St Patrick's Purgatory, a legendary cave entrance to hell, a pilgrimage site since perhaps the 5th century, which has been the subject of literary treatment by authors from Marie de France⁴³ to Seamus Heaney.⁴⁴



Fig. 42. *Gates of Hell*. History Channel, 2010.
<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3d9dp0>

In science fiction — where flawed heroes struggle for redemption in an alien world — we find probably the closest contemporary analogy to medieval hell visions. But otherwise these stories of visits to the otherworld have practically disappeared. They were after all, essentially a monastic litera-



Fig. 43. Monk Fighting off Devils with a Club. Raymund of Peñafort, *Decretals of Gregory IX*. British Library, Royal 10 E IV, fol. 247. French, last quarter of 13th/first quarter 14th C.

ture (Fig. 43), and even though these tales were copied into manuscript compendia of anything from religious treatises to saints' lives and even romances, logically with

43. Michael J. Curley, ed. *Saint Patrick's Purgatory. A Poem by Marie de France* (Binghampton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993).

44. Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1995).



Fig. 44. Evangelical Preacher, Billy Graham. https://beyondthelies.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/billy_graham_1951.jpg.

saved and the damned became pre-selected. Only in the hellfire and damnation sermons of evangelical preachers (Fig. 44) was the fate of individuals — and their moral choices — important. In the United States, where belief in hell hovers around 65%,⁴⁵ churches can rent a kit and put on a production of Hell House aimed at converting or terrifying audiences into belief in damnation and hellfire. Otherwise now

45. This data is always changing, but according to surveys dating from between 1994 and 2014 — from organizations like [Pew](#), [Gallup](#), [Harris](#), [Beliefnet](#), [LifeWay Research](#), the [Baylor University Department of Sociology](#) and the [Roper Center for Public Opinion](#) — American belief in heaven and hell hovers around 76% and 65% respectively, with considerable variation depending on education level, gender and political and religious affiliation. Earlier surveys, from 1991 and 1993, from the [International Social Survey Program](#) and the [National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago](#), compared these beliefs in the United States against those in several European nations and found only Northern Ireland to have comparable levels. Other countries, from Italy to Norway, showed on the average 22.4% as opposed to 63.1% (US) belief in heaven and 12.8% as opposed to 49.6% (US) belief in hell.

the dissolution of the monasteries and the end of monasticism, they petered out.

Protestant notions of hell and damnation didn't fit with medieval ideas of prayers, masses and alms-giving to help the souls of the dead. Once again the



Fig. 45. Angel of the Eternal Gospel, Worshipers, and the Fall of Babylon. Beatus of Liébana, *Las Huelgas Apocalypse*. Morgan Library MS M.429, fol. 113v. Spain, 1220.

as long as people believe that they belong to the right group, they confidently await the rapture into the next world or the return of right order to this one, returning us once again to the days of apocalyptic expectation. (Fig. 45)