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**The Purpose of Hell:
Control of Communities Through Apocalyptic Literature**

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation (summa or magna) cum laude
and
for Graduation with Honors from the Department of Humanities (if pertinent)

University of Louisville

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Introduction

Ancient Greek culture viewed time as cyclical, with events and lives repeating themselves.¹ However, with the development of Christianity time came to be understood as linear and unrepeating.² This unrepeating, linear understanding of time is also reflected in early Christians' understandings of their bodies and their souls: there is only one, unique life given to each person.³ With this understanding that lives were not able to be repeated, Christians became more aware of how they were living their life in order to successfully enter into the Kingdom of Heaven after the second coming of Christ. Those who lived their lives as Christians would be resurrected when Jesus Christ made his second coming, while those who did not had a different fate. The growing concern with where one would be after death is reflected in a genre of literature known as Tours of Hell. Visions of the afterlife showed Christians what both Heaven and Hell contained, from rivers of honey and milk to rivers of fire.⁴

Literature depicting Hell in late antique Christianity reveals more than the theological concern for one's eternal soul, revealing the underlying values and morals of the growing society. Borrowing from Roman, Greek, and Jewish culture, Christians were seeking to set themselves apart while also grappling with their past around them. Through visions of Hell, apocalyptic literature in late antique Christian society exhibits the control exercised over parishioners, specifically control over their bodies and their wealth. The moral laws from Greek, Roman, and Jewish influences is evident through early Christian literature, which dictate the ways in which people are regulated by Christianity in Late Antiquity. Traditions surrounding the afterlife and Hell not only reflect society's oversight over bodies and wealth but were also used as a method of control.

¹ Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, 205.

² Bernstein, 205.

³ Bernstein, 205.

⁴ Apocalypse of Paul, v.25-26, 31.

My research will answer questions of what the afterlife was imagined to look like through early history, how these images were influenced by the society and culture of the time, and what was cause for society to “damn” a soul to punishment. Examining primary sources such as the New Testament and other non-canonical Christian literature, as well as secondary sources to provide historical and social context, I argue that these questions are largely answered through the context of the community. Those who stepped outside of or actively harmed the community were subject to punishment in the afterlife in the minds of early Christians. Through literary descriptions of the punishments, early Christian writers used fear as a deterrent from behavior that they believed would negatively impact the social order of the community. I examine these punishments through the lens of Hellenistic, Roman, and Jewish culture, tying the method of punishment to the social and moral rules of these cultures.

The first chapter will provide the reader with a historic overview of the development of Christian Hell. Beginning with Homer’s *Odyssey* and Hesiod’s *Theogony*, I analyze the origins and purposes of afterlife in ancient Greek religious traditions. I also introduce concepts of neutral death and moral death, using Plato’s *Phaedo* to discuss the development of moral death in ancient Greece. The first chapter also introduces the concept of Sheol, or the Jewish afterlife, and the motifs connected to Sheol that later appear in early Christian forms of afterlife. Moving forward, I analyze the forms of Hell and afterlife found in the New Testament, using language and the concepts introduced earlier in the chapter to allow the reader to build a better understanding of how Hell and the afterlife was imagined in the minds of early Christians. Lastly, the first chapter introduces the non-canonical Apocalypses of Peter and Paul to further show the development of ideas of Hell. These documents will be the primary focus of the next two chapters as they reveal a more detailed understanding of Hell.

The second chapter discusses the punishments found in the Apocalypse of Peter and the Apocalypse of Paul related to sexual sins. Through this chapter, I analyze the feelings early Christians had about sex and gender. Looking at both apocalypses, as well as the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the writings of St. Jerome, I argue that the primary motivation behind the damnation of these crimes revolves around the welfare and social order of the community and the Christian household. I also contend that early Christian communities were based around Roman, Greek, and Jewish moral and social codes, and later continued to develop their own morality.

The third chapter continues to discuss the importance of early Christian communities through financial sins found in the Apocalypse of Peter and the Apocalypse of Paul. I argue that the welfare of the society and loyalty to the community is tied to the most vulnerable members: orphans and widows. I contend through the punishments found in the Apocalypses of Peter and Paul, as well as the New Testament and Jewish Apocrypha, that those who harmed early Christian communities, both from within and from the outside, were found worthy of damnation in the afterlife.

By identifying actions as worthy of condemnation, apocalyptic literature that shows visions of Hell and the punishments found there deters early Christians from actions that were viewed as harmful to the community. The complex tortures and the threat of being removed from God and goodness for eternity was used as a method of control to motivate early Christians to follow the laws and social order set by both tradition and the circumstances of being a new religious community in the Roman Empire.

Chapter One: Influences

Early Christian ideas of Hell did not develop in a vacuum but surrounded by the influences of the religious traditions of the cultures around them. The influence of Greek, Roman, and Jewish traditions of the afterlife seep into the afterlives of early Christianity. The New Testament contains several different mentions of punishment in the afterlife, through the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, to Revelation. These mentions of Hell contain influences from the Greek Hades, the Jewish Sheol, and the Jewish Gehenna.

Ancient Greek Afterlives

Ancient Greek ideas of the afterlife contain both ideas of neutral death and moral death. Alan Bernstein describes neutral death as “embracing all the dead in nearly the same conditions, chiefly marked by strict separation from the living.”⁵ Literature like Homer’s *Odyssey*, written in the 8th century BCE, shows how there is a barrier between the living and the dead that cannot be fully crossed. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus travels with his men to the Underworld, or the land of the dead, to speak with a blind seer, Teiresias, so that he can learn his future. To do so, Odysseus makes an extremely difficult and dangerous journey and must make certain sacrifices in order to communicate with the souls of the dead.⁶ As he makes this sacrifice, the souls of other fallen soldiers and heroes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* come and speak to Odysseus, as well. This moment shows that the soul lives on after death, but in a different state removed from the living. Odysseus also sees in the distance figures such as Tityos, Tantalus, and Sisyphus being punished for their crimes committed during their lives.⁷ These figures are separated from other souls in their afterlife, as they are being eternally punished while other souls, regardless of class, status, or pride, remain in a neutral state.

⁵ Bernstein, 21.

⁶ Bernstein, 25.

⁷ Bernstein, 33.

Hesiod's *Theogony*, composed in the 7th century BCE, is another early example of literature depicting the afterlife, although his tale describes the foundation laid by the gods of Ancient Greece. In this tale, Zeus, the king of the gods, defeats his father, the Titan Kronos. Doing so allows him to imprison Kronos and other Titans in Tartarus, a prison made specifically to imprison the enemies of the gods. Tartarus is the place that is most removed from the world of the living, separated by bronze walls and a vast amount of distance. Bernstein states, "So deep are its confines that even if a man entered, he would not reach the bottom for a year, but would be tossed and wracked by dark storms that terrify even the gods."⁸ Hesiod's tale reaffirms the authority of the gods, as well as cementing support for monarchy through the rise of Zeus and the gods. The defeat of the Titans, while a statement against authoritarianist government, shows that the rule of the gods should not be questioned. The use of Tartarus as a place of death separate from God would continue through early Christian literature.

The concept of moral death develops later within ancient Greek religious traditions. Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, believed that the human soul is immortal and that the afterlife reflects the deeds and preparation of the soul while it was living.⁹ Plato states in his work, *Phaedo*, "For if death were an escape from everything, it would be a boon to the wicked, for when they die they would be freed from the body and from their wickedness together with their souls."¹⁰ Plato separates the dead throughout the ancient Greek Underworld, between Tartarus, the Acheron, the rivers Cocytus and Pyriphlegethon, and reincarnation. The good and holy are reincarnated and are freed from the Underworld, while the morally neutral are both punished and rewarded for their deeds in the Acherusian Lake.¹¹ The rivers Cocytus and Pyriphlegethon carry sinners such as murderers and those

⁸ Bernstein, 37.

⁹ Bernstein, 54.

¹⁰ Plato, *Phaedo*, 107c.

¹¹ Bernstein, 55.

who offend their parents, while other offenders suffer in Tartarus. These souls within the rivers had a chance at redemption, while other souls in Tartarus were made to suffer eternally.¹² The river Pyriphlegethon flows through a large fire and into a large body of water filled with muddy and boiling water.¹³ This motif of rivers of fire and boiling water is repeated through Mediterranean versions of Hell and continues into Christian traditions.

Ancient Jewish Afterlives

The ancient Jewish traditions of Sheol separate the dead from the living in a very final manner. The dead were considered unclean by the ancient Jews, so there was no relationship between them and the living.¹⁴ While the word is often translated as Hell, it is also translated as “the grave” or “the pit.”¹⁵ Martha Himmelfarb states in her book, *Tours of Hell*, “Ancient Israel imagined the dwelling place of the dead as an inhospitable land.”¹⁶ Specifically, Sheol was imagined to be dark and damp, a bog within a pit.¹⁷ The swampy terrain of Sheol is replicated through apocalyptic literature about Hell, often combining the fire motifs found in Hades and Gehenna. However, Sheol differs from Christian afterlives in that it is a neutral afterlife containing all the dead. Alan Bernstein states, “Sheol combines the righteous and the wicked... it is morally neutral.”¹⁸ Throughout the Old Testament, the word “Sheol” is synonymous with death and a state of being separated from God.¹⁹ However, the Old Testament also shows that God holds power over who and when goes to Sheol and who can return from it.²⁰

¹² Bernstein, 55.

¹³ Bernstein, 55.

¹⁴ Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell*, Firsted, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993, 40.

¹⁵ Turner, 40.

¹⁶ Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983, 106.

¹⁷ Himmelfarb, 107.

¹⁸ Bernstein, 139.

¹⁹ Bernstein, 142.

²⁰ Bernstein, 146.

New Testament Discussions of Afterlife

The term used to describe a place of punishment in Mark, Matthew, and Revelation is the Greek word “geennan” or “Gehenna.” Gehenna is the Greek iteration of Ge-Hinnom, referring to a physical valley that is located west of Ancient Jerusalem. Using this location as the center of punishment in the afterlife dates to Jewish tradition beginning with the Prophet Jeremiah, who made sure that the valley was associated with death after the Jewish people sacrificed humans to the god, Baal.²¹ This valley had become a disposal site for garbage and the bodies of dead criminals during the lifetime of Jesus, with fires constantly burning in order to burn the waste.²² The images of eternal fire and burning filth continue through early Christianity and push early Christians to avoid this afterlife through correct action.

The amount of time spent in Hell is not always agreed upon through late antiquity. Some early Christians believed that eventually everyone would be saved through universal salvation, while others believed that the suffering and tortures of Hell would be eternal.²³ The Gospel of Mark states,

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into Hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.²⁴

This verse shows that the Gospel of Mark supports the belief that the punishment in Hell would be eternal. The “unquenchable fire” that Mark refers to is drawn from Gehenna and the fires that were kept lit in the valley. By threatening sinners, Mark creates an incentive meant to drive early Christians to follow Christian laws and tenements closely.

²¹ Bernstein, 168.

²² Kyratas, 284.

²³ Bernstein, 207.

²⁴ Mark 9:43-48 NRSV. I will use this verse later to discuss sex and sexual acts in Late Antiquity and how hands, feet, and eyes are all connected to sex organs.

In Matthew, the punishment enacted on those who do not follow Christian tenements is defined explicitly as eternal with the Greek word, *aionion*. The gospel states “Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire [*pyr aionion*] prepared for the devil and his angels.’”²⁵ Matthew frames this eternal fire as a form of justice, specifically regarding how a person addresses the poor and the needy through their lifetime.²⁶

In the gospels of Matthew and Mark, this eternal punishment is reserved for those who offend Jesus and God, as well as those who offend the innocent believers. Mark viewed the believers as synonymous with innocent children. The Gospel states, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”²⁷ Matthew identified the innocent believers as “the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted.”²⁸ This change from uplifting the innocent believers as children to the meek broadens the definition of who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven and who will be thrown into Gehenna. The innocence of children is often related to a virginal purity. Matthew broadens the innocent believers to allow the persecuted, the poor, and the meek, adding elements of wealth and social standing into his definition. The equation to the poor and the innocent as the believers creates a standard for what early Christian communities are meant to look like, meaning that those who offended the community were worthy of eternal punishment.

The Gospel of Luke refers to the place of punishment in the afterlife as Hades, using the Greek word for the Underworld and the word that Greek-speaking Jews used to translate the Hebrew term, Sheol.²⁹ Luke recounts a parable given by Jesus about Lazarus, a poor man covered in

²⁵ Matthew 25:41 NRSV

²⁶ Bernstein, 233.

²⁷ Mark 9:42 NRSV

²⁸ Bernstein, 230.

²⁹ Bernstein, 239.

sores, and a rich man, clothed in “purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.”³⁰ Lazarus starved outside the rich man’s gates every day, longing for the feasts from the rich man’s table. Eventually, both men die and are taken to two different afterlives. Lazarus is carried up by angels to join Abraham in Heaven, while the rich man is taken to suffer in Hades.³¹ The rich man begs for mercy from Abraham and for Lazarus to sooth the burning flames around him, but Abraham denies him. Abraham states, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.”³² The rich man then begs Abraham to send Lazarus to minister to his father and brothers so that they can be spared the tortures the rich man was experiencing. Abraham once again refuses the rich man, claiming that if his brothers and father cannot listen to the prophets and Moses, then they would not believe after Lazarus’s rise from the dead.³³

In this parable, Jesus uses Abraham as the arbitrator of justice for both Lazarus and the rich man. This parable emphasizes the Jewish influence over Christian ideas of Hell by employing Abraham as the main authority. Abraham uses Jewish law to assert his denial of the rich man’s requests, that death is the final deadline, and the dead cannot cross back into the land of the living.³⁴ Alan Bernstein states, “By stressing the finality of death, Abraham... emphasizes the authority and regularity of the Jewish tradition as compared to the more haphazard appearances of the dead in the larger Mediterranean culture.”³⁵ By focusing on the finality of death, Luke affirms the Jewish tradition of Sheol over the Greek tradition of Hades.

³⁰ Luke 16:19 NRSV.

³¹ Luke 16:22-23 NRSV.

³² Luke 16:25 NRSV.

³³ Luke 16:31 NRSV.

³⁴ Luke 16:26 NRSV. This parable will be referenced later in to discuss the perception of the wealthy versus the poor.

³⁵ Bernstein, 242.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus from the gospel of Luke also reflect Greek lessons of the afterlife, as well. This parable shows the confrontation between the offender and the victim in the afterlife, an idea reflected in Plato's *Phaedo*. Bernstein states, "Plato allowed victims comfort on the banks of the Acherusian Lake and the authority to forgive or not to forgive their offenders."³⁶ In the parable, the rich man's complacency and ignorance of Lazarus's suffering leads to his own suffering in Hell, enticing others to act differently toward the poor in order to avoid the rich man's fate. The separation of the good from the wicked moves away from Jewish ideas of Sheol and toward other Mediterranean traditions of the afterlife.³⁷³⁸

Paul of Tarsus is attributed to more than half of the current canonical books of the New Testament, making him an extremely influential figure throughout Christianity. His writings and letters are some of the earliest Christian documents, but he never solidifies a clear idea of Hell.³⁹ What he does do in his epistles is issue a warning to those who persecute Christians. In the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul states "[the persecutors] displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus, they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last."⁴⁰ This declaration shows that those who oppose Christianity and actively persecute its followers will be met with God's anger. Given Paul's past as Saul, a man who led persecution efforts against Christians, his opposition to the victimization of Christians shows that there is redemption from one's sins and God's wrath, so long as one turns toward Christianity during their lifetime.

³⁶ Bernstein, 244.

³⁷ Bernstein, 245.

³⁸ I will not be focusing on the Gospel of John, which developed separately from the other three Synoptic Gospels. John has no concept of Hell beyond the idea of "mere death," which is the idea that non-Christians simply die at the end of their life and will not be resurrected at the second coming of Jesus.

³⁹ Bernstein, 208.

⁴⁰ 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16 NRSV.

In his first letter to the city of Corinth, Paul admonishes the city for failing to follow the laws of Christianity. He states,

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.⁴¹

This chapter shows that Paul opposes Plato’s belief that the human soul is immortal, but instead, can only live on eternally through Jesus. He states, “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”⁴² Adam, or the first man, represents the human race and the human condition of sin, while Jesus represents eternal life. This epistle shows that the souls of Christians will live on through Christ, while non-Christian souls will die. There is no afterlife for the punished, only death.

The Book of Revelation is known as the last book of the canonical Christian Bible to modern Christians, detailing a vision given to the apostle John about the end of days from a figure thought to be Jesus Christ.⁴³ John writes about the second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the world as humans know it through a procession of events. Despite these catastrophic events that plague the world, John states that there will still be those who do not repent. He states,

The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire; they were scorched by the fierce heat, but they cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory. The fifth angel pured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness; people gnawed their tongues in agony, and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, and they did not repent of their deeds.⁴⁴

At the end of the long war that rages between Satan and God during this time, Satan is thrown into a “lake of fire and sulfur” along with the beast and the false prophet.⁴⁵ Those whose name is not read from the Book of Life, and therefore will not join God in everlasting life, are also thrown into

⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 NRSV.

⁴² 1 Corinthians 15:22 NRSV.

⁴³ Bernstein, 253.

⁴⁴ Revelation 16:8-11.

⁴⁵ Revelation 20:10.

the lake of fire.⁴⁶ The Greek translation of Revelation refers to the Devil's torture in the lake of fire as eternal, specifically using the Greek word *aionon*.⁴⁷ The eternal aspect of this lake of fire resembles the fires of Gehenna and the eternal suffering mentioned in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew.

The lake of fire in Revelation is separate from Hades, which is made synonymous with death. John begins the letter with the messenger introducing himself and stating, "I have the keys of Death and of Hades."⁴⁸ Later, after Satan is thrown into the lake of fire, John states, "Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire."⁴⁹ This act is the subsequent end of death, leaving all persons in either Paradise with God or in the lake of fire to be tortured eternally along with the Devil and those who denied God. This apocalyptic vision is a warning to both Christians and non-Christians about the second coming of Christ, which early Christians believed to be imminent. By stressing the tortures that came along with denying God and showing that there would be no relief from the sufferings of the lake of fire, this letter seeks to push people toward Christianity and reaffirm the convictions of those who were already part of that community.

Late Antique Apocalyptic Literature

Non-canonical Christian literature from late antiquity also reveals how early Christians perceived Hell and who would face punishment after death. The Apocalypse of Peter and the Apocalypse of Paul are two documents that are not included in the canonical texts of the Christian Bible but were popular in early Christian communities.⁵⁰ These documents are a part of a genre

⁴⁶ Revelation 20:15.

⁴⁷ Bernstein, 258.

⁴⁸ Revelation 1:18.

⁴⁹ Revelation 20:14.

⁵⁰ Bernstein, 282, 292

known as the Tours of Hell, in which the narrator is shown visions of the afterlife and who is being tortured for what crimes.⁵¹

The Apocalypse of Peter was written in the second century and found in 1866 in Egypt⁵². The authorship of the document is unknown but often attributed to Peter the Apostle. This document contains influences from both Greek Hades, Jewish Sheol, and Jewish Gehenna. Peter begins his journey with the other eleven disciples of Jesus praying with him when two angels appear. These angels and Jesus show the disciples a glimpse of Heaven before showing them Hell. Peter states, “and over against that place I saw another, squalid, and it was the place of punishment.”⁵³ The apostles are shown the suffering and torment of Hell. Peter goes into detail about these punishments, including what the suffering are being punished for.

The Apocalypse of Paul follows a similar pattern as the Apocalypse of Peter. Paul experiences a vision of angels showing him the afterlife, first beginning with different layers of Heaven. Eventually, an angel says to Paul “Come and follow me, and I will show thee the souls of the impious and sinners.”⁵⁴ Paul is brought to a place where “there was no light..., but darkness and sorrow and sadness.”⁵⁵ The Greek influence on the Apocalypse of Paul is most evident through his use of the term “Tartaruchian.”⁵⁶ The angels that enact the punishments and tortures upon those in Hell are given the moniker “Tartaruchian angels,” or angels from Tartarus. Tartarus is the deepest part of the Underworld in ancient Greek religious traditions. This pit was used as a prison for the enemies of the gods, and eventually was used in literature as a place of atonement for human souls, as well.⁵⁷ By using this terminology, Paul creates an image in the minds of early Christians that shows

⁵¹ I will be focusing on these two documents specifically because the Apocalypse of Peter is one of the earliest Tours of Hell written while the Apocalypse of Paul is considered to be a more developed version of the earlier document.

⁵² Bernstein, 282.

⁵³ Apocalypse of Peter, 20.

⁵⁴ Apocalypse of Paul, 31.

⁵⁵ Apocalypse of Paul, 31.

⁵⁶ Apocalypse of Paul, 34.

⁵⁷ Bernstein, 55.

suffering completely removed from God and goodness. This simultaneously creates motivation for early Christians to follow the laws and tenements of Christianity in order to distance themselves from the damned and bring themselves closer to God.

Conclusion

These early Christian documents show the influences of the past and the surrounding morals of their environment. They reveal what early Christians considered to be damaging to the success of the community and how society vilified certain actions and traits. These documents also express a need to control early Christians and non-Christians through fear tactics and threats of eternal tortures. The politics of gender and class permeate through these documents, both explicitly and implicitly. Through this phenomenon, early Christian literature about Hell shows the concern about how to control the members of the forming community through their bodies and their wealth.

Chapter Two: Gender and Sex

In Late Antique Christianity the household held a significant amount of importance. From the way that children were raised to the treatment of parents, the household order was paramount. This importance is reflected in apocalyptic literature as stepping outside of this order was considered a punishable offense. The loss of a young woman's virginity, the act of adultery, and homoerotic behavior all threaten the household. The roles within the Christian household were rigid and breaking out of these roles jeopardized the control society had through this rigid structure. The household's structure allowed for the control of women and men through their bodies and their actions.

Abortion and Infanticide

The ancient world placed the responsibility of parenting primarily on the mother. The father would act as the head of the household while the nurturing of infants fell upon the woman.⁵⁸ Infant mortality was high and pregnancies were dangerous, but having children was essential to the socio-economic success of a family. Due to the importance of children, the act of abortion, although practiced, was not viewed favorably.⁵⁹ The Apocalypse of Peter states

I saw another strait place into which the fore and the filth of those who were being punished ran down and became there as it were a lake: and there sat women having gore up to their necks, and over against them sat many children who were born to them out of due time, crying; and there came forth from them sparks of fire and smote the women in the eyes: and these were the accursed who conceived and caused abortion.⁶⁰

Peter punishes these women with fire and filth, following a similar punishment as adulterers rather than murderers, who were punished with snakes and darkness.⁶¹ This shows that Peter

⁵⁸ Henning, 69.

⁵⁹ Henning, 69.

⁶⁰ Apocalypse of Peter, v.25.

⁶¹ Apocalypse of Peter, v. 24.

considers this crime to be closer to a sex crime than murder. However, the punishment is similar to the river Pyriphlegethon in ancient Greek traditions of the Underworld, which flows into a lake of boiling and muddy water. Following Plato's tradition, Peter shows a confrontation between the victims, or the children, and the offenders, or the women. By presenting the women with the souls of their dead children, the torture is both physical and psychological.

The Apocalypse of Paul punishes both women and men for abortion and infanticide. Paul states "these are women who defiled the image of God when bringing forth infants out of the womb, and these are the men who lay with them."⁶² By punishing both men and women for abortion and infanticide, Paul gives both mothers and fathers dual responsibility for the well-being of their children. This reflects the idea that men are responsible for their household and are meant to maintain the order of the home, while still placing the mothers in the role of the nurturer. Paul also places the souls of the infants in the scene, specifically with the "angels of Tartarus who were set over the punishments."⁶³ These infants were taken to a "place of mercy" while their parents suffered eternally.

Paul sees the souls of the parents tied to "an obelisk of fire, and beasts tearing them in pieces, and they were not allowed to say, Lord have pity on us!"⁶⁴ This obelisk of fire represents a different method of torture shown with fire involving sexually sadistic penetration.⁶⁵ This once again shows that abortion was seen as a sexual crime. The phallic nature of the obelisk coupled with the beasts penetrating the souls with their teeth combines similar notions of fire as a purifying force with the effeminate action of being penetrated.

⁶² Apocalypse of Paul, v.40.

⁶³ Apocalypse of Paul, v.40.

⁶⁴ Apocalypse of Paul, v.40.

⁶⁵ Henning, 95.

The souls being tortured are so damned that the fire cannot burn away their sins, even in their weakened, passive state.

Virginity and Women in Late Antique Literature

Apocalyptic literature focused on women in Late Antiquity often centered on the suffering and destruction of the physical body. Roman and Byzantine culture viewed women's bodies as not only weak and leaking, but also as an object to control. Patricia Cox Miller states that, "the woman's body becomes a 'blank page' to be written by men, and its 'fearful power to articulate itself' is allowed only the channels of ephemeral virginity or pornographic carnality."⁶⁶ Men used literature to enact their fantasies upon women, showing them as either virginal and pure or as harlots and unclean. Apocalyptic literature allowed men to freely express violence against women. These violent depictions of unclean women being tortured reflect the attempt to control women and the sexuality of women in Late Antiquity.

Jerome, a founding father of Christianity born in the fifth century, perpetuated the violent depictions of women by creating an impossible standard for women. When women fell short, they fell from God, which allowed for men to veil their violent fantasies behind the guise of punishing the wicked. In his letter to Eustochium, Jerome argues that the requirements of virginity are beyond the physical level, and that even impure thoughts can lead to the loss of virginity. Jerome views the virgin woman as the most pious and holy human body, while any woman who has defiled herself through the loss of her virginity has spoiled and condemned herself. He quotes Matthew 5:28, stating,

'Whosoever looks on a woman,' the Lord says, 'to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. Matthew 5:28. So that virginity may be lost

⁶⁶ Patricia Cox Miller, "The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): pp. 21-45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.0.0133>, 44.

even by a thought. Such are evil virgins, virgins in the flesh, not in the spirit; foolish virgins, who, having no oil, are shut out by the Bridegroom.⁶⁷

In this quote, the Bridegroom is another name for Jesus, who is often referred to as the groom of the Church throughout the New Testament. By committing any form of sexualized act outside of marriage, either physically or mentally, a woman can separate herself from Jesus and thus damn herself through her thoughts.⁶⁸ Jerome holds women to a higher standard of piousness than he does to men, creating an impossible ideal that women cannot easily achieve. Creating this standard condones the violence perpetuated against women that cannot meet it, both in the real world and in the afterlife.

The Apocalypse of Paul punishes young women for their loss of virginity by clothing them in black and wrapping burning chains around their necks.⁶⁹ He states that they will suffer “unceasingly” for defiling their bodies.⁷⁰ The black clothing was often associated with mourning in Late Antiquity, as well as prostitutes and adulteresses.⁷¹ The black coverings in the Apocalypse of Paul are a form of identification pinpointing these women as impious and “loose.” The young women are led into darkness by four angels holding the chains wrapped around their necks, the darkness making the women effectively blind. Blindness and darkness are often associated with punishments as a form of failure. Henning states, “Physical blindness is the eternal artifact of spiritual blindness.”⁷² The black clothing combined with the darkness symbolizes a break from light and God. The young women have failed in maintaining their purity and defiled themselves outside of what God and their society deemed appropriate. Because of their failure, they lose the light of

⁶⁷ Jerome, Letter 22 to Eustochium, par. 5, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001022.htm>

⁶⁸ Jerome, par. 6.

⁶⁹ Apocalypse of Paul, v.39

⁷⁰ Apocalypse of Paul, v.39.

⁷¹ Henning, 112.

⁷² Henning, 89.

God, unable to redeem themselves from this fall from grace. This punishment is a warning to young women, showing that there is no redemption after being defiled.

Adultery

Late Antique visions of Hell often reference the sin of sexual impiety, as early Christians restructured the way they viewed bodies with the second coming of Jesus Christ in mind. This transition can be seen from the Apocalypse of Peter to the Apocalypse of Paul. The Apocalypse of Peter follows Roman moral codes where women held the responsibility of sexual sin more than men. The blame in the crime of adultery fell upon the woman, who could be punished with enslavement or prostitution, while the man would be punished for the theft of another man's property.⁷³ While late antique apocalyptic literature punishes both men and women for adulterous actions, the blame often centers on the women as the perpetrators of this crime. This blame on women further emphasizes the place of women in the Late Antique Christian world as subservient bodies meant to stay pure to God and the men who controlled them. Christian culture reduced women to their bodies and if those bodies did not perform in the way that men wanted, they were punished both in reality and in their afterlife.

In the Apocalypse of Peter, the punishment for adultery hangs women and men over a pit of "mire that bubbled up."⁷⁴ The Greek words used for this punishment are "*borborou flegoménou*," meaning burning filth, similar to Gehenna's burning trash. Women were hung by their hair with their feet in the mire while the men were hung by their feet with their heads in the mire. In Late Antiquity, hands and feet were a common euphemism for genitalia.⁷⁵ By hanging men from their

⁷³ Henning, 58.

⁷⁴ "Apocalypse of Peter, v.23

⁷⁵ Harold W. Attridge, "The Gospel According to Mark" in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (eds. Wayne A. Meeks et al.; New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 1742.

feet and placing women's feet in the mire, this document both symbolically and literally punishes the offending people through their sex organs.

The women are insinuated to be the instigators of the adultery by being listed before the men. Meghan Henning states, "Adulterous women are punished first, in keeping with their primary responsibility for the adulterous encounter."⁷⁶ Women took responsibility for self-control and piety in Roman moral codes, and their actions and bodies were regarded as the catalyst for temptation. The Apocalypse of Peter insinuates that these women being tortured have decorated themselves for the sole purpose of attracting a sexual partner. The verse states, "and these were they who adorned themselves for adultery."⁷⁷ 1 Peter 3:3 commands women to obey their husbands and to "not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing."⁷⁸ By stating that the women being tortured had "adorned themselves," The Apocalypse of Peter reinforces the place of women in Late Antiquity, specifically to be subservient to one's husband.

If a woman is not following her husband's command and allowing her "adornment [to] be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit," then her soul is condemned according to the Apocalypse of Peter.⁷⁹ The act of beautification was seen as a woman taking control over her body and the way she was perceived, making her the sexual aggressor as opposed to the subservient role she is meant to play within Roman and early Christian society.⁸⁰ Because women that adorn themselves have taken control over their bodies, they are likened to prostitutes for tempting the men around them into sexual sin and thus "dragging men down to hell with her."⁸¹

⁷⁶ Henning, 56.

⁷⁷ Apocalypse of Peter, v. 23.

⁷⁸ 1 Peter 3:3 NRSV.

⁷⁹ 1 Peter 4:4 NRSV.

⁸⁰ Henning, 59.

⁸¹ Henning, 59.

Women in Late Antiquity were objects for men to control, but also viewed as vessels of desire that were responsible for leading men toward temptation.⁸²

Evolving from the earlier Apocalypse of Peter, the Apocalypse of Paul punishes adulterers equally regardless of gender. Paul places “men and women with very black faces” in a fiery pit, suffering endlessly for the crimes of fornication and adultery.⁸³ Later on he states that he sees men and women that had committed adultery with prostitutes “hanging by their eyebrows and their hair” immersed in a fiery river.⁸⁴ Romans viewed the eyes as the catalyst for sin, and by hanging men by their eyebrows, Paul is punishing them through the organ that began the process of sin.⁸⁵ Paul moves away from the idea that women are primarily responsible for adultery and toward the idea that men are responsible for their own self-control and their household.⁸⁶

Paul’s punishment for adultery is comparable to the Apocalypse of Peter by placing both men and women in “a pit of fire,” similar to Peter who hangs adulterers over “mire that bubbled up.”⁸⁷ The fire and burning that are found in both Paul and Peter is a recurring theme of punishments through apocalyptic literature about Hell. Fire is often used as a form of punishment in Late Antiquity in both the afterlife and in the world of the living. In Roman judicial proceedings, being burned alive was a possible punishment for criminals and was a common form of torture.⁸⁸ Fire was also used as a form of medicine in the ancient world, often prescribed to women who were understood to be colder than men.⁸⁹ The fire was meant to purify the body and was the last resort of

⁸² Miller, 25.

⁸³ Apocalypse of Paul, 38.

⁸⁴ Apocalypse of Paul, v. 39.

⁸⁵ Henning, 61.

⁸⁶ Henning, 61.

⁸⁷ Apocalypse of Paul, 38. Apocalypse of Peter, 23.

⁸⁸ Henning, 94-95.

⁸⁹ Henning, 95.

treatment.⁹⁰ However, in the context of Hell, the fire is unable to purify the bodies of the people suffering there because of their status as condemned.

The status of unholy bodies was often meant to be feminized so that the violence perpetuated against them was more palatable to those reading. The punishments used suggest that the feminization of damned bodies was a trend, following the observation of Cox-Miller that the women in literature were either used as a purity standard or as an object to perpetuate violence against.

Homoeroticism

Homoerotic activity was also a punishable offense in Late Antique visions of Hell; however, the punishment and placement in text is separate from other sexual sins. The Apocalypse of Peter states that both men and women were being “hurled down from a great cliff” and made to climb back up to repeat the action.⁹¹ These people were those “who defiled their bodies acting as women; and the women who were with them were those who lay with one another as a man with a woman.”⁹² Homoeroticism was seen as a break from the patriarchal and natural order of Late Antique society as it meant that men had to assume a more effeminate role while women masculinized themselves.⁹³ The act of penetration was seen as the role of the dominant and the masculine, while being penetrated was a submissive, feminized role. Looking at the language Peter uses, only the man who assumes the “feminine” position of being penetrated is being punished, while both women in a partnership are punished. By “acting as women,” the man who assumes the

⁹⁰ Henning, 95.

⁹¹ Apocalypse of Peter, v.31.

⁹² Apocalypse of Peter, v.31.

⁹³ Henning, 64.

“submissive” role in a male-male partnership has not only disrupted the natural order, but has made himself female.

The punishment for homoeroticism is similar to the punishment of Sisyphus, who declared himself to be cleverer than Zeus, the king of the Greek gods. His punishment for his hubris was to repeatedly push a large boulder up a hill only to find himself at the bottom again.⁹⁴ Similar to the Apocalypse of Peter, Sisyphus is being punished for a reversal of roles, placing himself higher than a god. The image of the punished falling over the cliff is meant to remind readers of the act of toppling over. This image, common in the ancient world, was meant to symbolize toppling over, but bending over, assuming a weaker, feminine position.⁹⁵ Henning gives the example of the Eurymedon vase, which shows a Persian soldier bending over while a Greek man comes up behind him with his erect penis.⁹⁶ By toppling over the cliff, the punished souls in the Apocalypse of Peter are meant to reflect a similar image of bending over in a weak, effeminate stance.

The Apocalypse of Paul punishes homoerotic behavior with fire, similar to other sexual sins. He states,

And I saw other men and women covered with dust, and their countenance was like blood, and they were in a pit of pitch and sulphur and running down into a fiery river, and I asked: Sir, who are these? And he said to me: These are they who committed the iniquity of Sodom and Gomorrah, the male with the male, for which reason they unceasingly pay the penalties.⁹⁷

The tale of Sodom and Gomorrah is one often associated with homoerotic behavior as two cities were destroyed for their wickedness. Two angels disguised as men entered the city of Sodom to stay with Lot, the nephew of Abraham.⁹⁸ While there, the men of the city surrounded Lot's house and demanded that the two men be brought out. Lot offered his virgin daughters to the men, instead, in

⁹⁴ Henning, 106.

⁹⁵ Henning, 106.

⁹⁶ Henning, 106.

⁹⁷ Apocalypse of Paul, v.39.

⁹⁸ Genesis 19:1 NRSV.

an attempt to protect the men who were his guests.⁹⁹ However, the men of the city insisted on bringing out the angels, and were blinded as a result of them storming Lot's home.¹⁰⁰ The angels urged Lot and his family to leave the city, and God destroyed the city the next day.¹⁰¹ Genesis states that "the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire," mirroring the punishments applied to the souls in the Apocalypse of Paul.¹⁰²

Paul focuses the crime of homoeroticism on the male-male partnerships while still punishing both men and women. This focus reflects the Roman ideal of what a household should look like and how same-sex relationships pull away from this tradition.¹⁰³ Henning states that this focus "reflects the view that a departure from male dominance will cause the Roman household order to crumble."¹⁰⁴ The rules of the Christian household evolved over the course of Late Antiquity, moving away from the idea that women were responsible for chastity and purity, as seen in the Apocalypse of Peter, toward the idea that men needed to be the dominant leader of the household and reflect Christian piety.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

The control exhibited through bodies and gender permeates through Late Antique apocalyptic literature. By stepping outside of the confines of the household, the damned souls in the Apocalypse of Peter and the Apocalypse of Paul have opened themselves up to eternal punishment in Hell. The nature of how early Christians understood the body, specifically the gendered body, seeps into these punishments as women are punished more often than men and men are feminized

⁹⁹ Genesis 19:4-8 NRSV.

¹⁰⁰ Genesis 19:9-11 NRSV.

¹⁰¹ Genesis 19:15-24 NRSV.

¹⁰² Genesis 19:24 NRSV.

¹⁰³ Henning, 65.

¹⁰⁴ Henning, 65.

¹⁰⁵ Henning, 54.

through their punishments. The household allows for society to maintain control over the family unit, and when people subvert the roles assigned to them, they are punished harshly.

Chapter Three: Community

In early Christianity, the community in which Christians gathered was of utmost importance. In different parts of the Roman Empire, Christianity was sporadically persecuted against, leading Christians to band together out of necessity. This bond was reinforced by literature, as the New Testament demands the loyalty of Christians and apocalyptic literature condemns those who abandon or betray the community.

Early Christians were faced with the problem of differentiating themselves from both Judaism and paganism, and so loyalty to the community was important as the religion grew. The Christian community was tied together through a monotheistic belief in one deity, God, and the teachings of Jesus Christ, whatever those teachings were. While the nature of God and Jesus and what rules to follow were highly debated, each community of Christians had its own definition of what it meant to be a Christian. Apocalyptic literature in Late Antiquity wanted to be sure that Christians would not stray from their community, and the punishments delivered to those who fell short or turned away from the spiritual guidelines set by the society were a form of control exercised over early Christians. One way to ensure this loyalty was by tying the community together financially, making the wealthy duty bound to care for the poor.

Care of Orphans and Widows

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus identifies those that will enter into Paradise as the poor and the meek. He states at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven... Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”¹⁰⁶ Later, when a young man asks him how to enter eternal life, Jesus tells him to sell his possessions and give

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 5:3-5 NRSV.

the money to the poor.¹⁰⁷ He says to his disciples after the young man leaves, “Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”¹⁰⁸ This passage shows that the care of the poor is necessary in order to enter the Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Matthew. The care of the community was important to early Christians as it was commanded by God and abandoning another for one’s own gain was considered a sin worthy of punishment. As referenced earlier, the Gospel of Luke tells the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, showing the consequences of the rich man’s apathy to Lazarus’s suffering. The care of the poor and other financially unstable persons in Late Antique Christianity fell upon the community.

The specific people that Late Antique apocalyptic literature often references are orphans and widows. Orphans and widows were the people in the ancient world who would have lost any means of financial gain and often rely on others to help them survive.¹⁰⁹ In the ancient world, orphans were defined as children who had lost at least one parent, often the father.¹¹⁰ Widows and orphans were associated with one another because the loss of the father figure of the household left the rest of the family unit vulnerable. J.T. Fitzgerald states in his article, “orphans are thus viewed as a prime example of those who are quintessentially weak, among those most likely to be oppressed, and thus among those most in need of protection.”¹¹¹ Psalms 68 established God as the “father of orphans and protectors of widows.”¹¹² Within the Jewish tradition, God is the protector and caretaker of widows and orphans, which continues into early Christian traditions. The book of James states, “religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 19:21 NRSV.

¹⁰⁸ Matthew 19:24 NRSV.

¹⁰⁹ J.T. Fitzgerald, “Orphans in Mediterranean Antiquity and Early Christianity,” *Acta Theologica* 23, no. 1 (2016): p. 29, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v23i1s.2>, 34.

¹¹⁰ Fitzgerald, 30.

¹¹¹ Fitzgerald, 34.

¹¹² Psalms 69:5 NRSV.

their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”¹¹³ While not all early Christians had access to the Epistle of James, the letter shows that wealth and the poor were something that early Christians concerned themselves with.

The Apocalypse of Peter defines people who deny care to orphans and widows as people who “despised the commandment of God.”¹¹⁴ The punishment for their apathy towards the poor and placing their wealth above the care of the community is described as “a certain other place there were pebbles sharper than swords or any spit, red-hot, and women and men in tattered and filthy raiment rolled about on them in punishment.”¹¹⁵

The Apocalypse of Paul mentions the care of orphans and widows multiple times. One of the first is in reference to a bishop who “did not perform well his episcopate.”¹¹⁶ Not only has the bishop underperformed in his role, but he “did not do just judgement, and did not pity widows and orphans.”¹¹⁷ For his crime, angels pushed him into a fire while beating him with stones. Stoning was one of the most common forms of capital punishment in the ancient world where the offender was executed by a crowd of people throwing stones.¹¹⁸ This punishment allowed for the community to partake in the execution of justice, showing that it was not just a court that condemned the offender, but the society itself.¹¹⁹ The Hebrew Bible prescribes this penalty for crimes such as adultery, rape, idolatry, blasphemy, and sorcery.¹²⁰ These crimes were all against the wellness of the community, and so the community was the executor of the punishment. The bishop in the Apocalypse of Paul had

¹¹³ James 1:27 NRSV.

¹¹⁴ Apocalypse of Peter, v.29.

¹¹⁵ Apocalypse of Peter, v.29

¹¹⁶ Apocalypse of Paul, v.35.

¹¹⁷ Apocalypse of Paul, v.35.

¹¹⁸ Sanaz Alasti, “Comparative Study of Stoning Punishment in the Religions of Islam and Judaism,” *Justice Policy Journal*, 2007, http://www.cjci.org/uploads/cjci/documents/comparative_study_0.pdf, 5.

¹¹⁹ Alasti, 5.

¹²⁰ Alasti, 12.

effectively abandoned his community by denying care to orphans and widows, as well as ignoring his responsibilities as bishop, and thus was punished by a communal form of suffering in the afterlife.

Another mention of orphans and widows in the Apocalypse of Paul punishes those who appear to follow Christian tenements and laws but fell to the temptations of the world. Paul states,

These are they who seem to give up the world for God, putting on our garb, but the impediments of the world made them wretched, not maintaining agapoe, and they did not pity widows and orphans: they did not receive the stranger and the pilgrim, nor did they offer the oblations, and they did not pity their neighbour. Moreover their prayer did not even on one day ascend pure to the Lord God, but many impediments of the world detained them, and they were not able to do right in the sight of God, and the angels enclosed them in the place of punishments.¹²¹

For their punishment, Paul states that angels with fiery horns restrained them and closed off their air ways. They were clothed in rags that were full of pitch and sulfur with dragons around their necks, shoulders, and feet.¹²² Dragons in Late Antique Christianity are often associated with Satan, with Revelation telling the story of the archangel Michael defeating Satan. Revelation states, “The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.”¹²³ By associating the punished with dragons, the Apocalypse of Paul removes the offending souls from holiness and God as much as he can. This threat to be removed completely from God creates fear as a motivating factor to care for the community and those within it.

The Apocalypse of Paul continues stating that those who harm orphans and widows and “did not hope in the Lord” were placed naked in ice and snow with their hands and feet cut with worms eating them.¹²⁴ The use of worms as a form of punishment stems back to the Hebrew Bible in Isaiah, stating, “And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have

¹²¹ Apocalypse of Paul, v.40.

¹²² Apocalypse of Paul, v.40.

¹²³ Revelation 12:9 NRSV.

¹²⁴ Apocalypse of Paul, v.39.

rebelled against me, for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”¹²⁵ Martha Himmelfarb states that worms are “easily associated with the grave,” and that the appearance of worms in Christian apocalyptic literature could very likely stem from their use in the Hebrew Bible.¹²⁶

Later Jewish Apocrypha states, “For when a man is dead, he shall inherit creeping things, beasts, and worms.”¹²⁷ The tradition of worms in ancient Jewish culture is not well defined, but later sources from Late Antiquity and the Medieval world show the process of a second burial after decomposition. Eric M. Meyers argues that Jewish communities in Late Antiquity believed the first burial and the decomposition of the body was a form of atonement that occurred after death, and the transportation of the decomposed body to Palestine and the second reburial was necessary for rebirth.¹²⁸ This tradition assumes that the atonement ends with the second reburial, while in Isaiah, the worm, or the decomposition, is eternal. This shows the differences theologically between Jewish and Christian communities in Late Antiquity, but also shows the shared history of decomposition and worms as atonement, both temporary and unending.

The use of worms as punishment is also found in the Apocalypse of Peter, stating that those who persecuted the righteous were beaten by evil spirits and “their inwards were eaten by restless worms.”¹²⁹ Rather than using worms to torment those who abandoned orphans and widows, Peter uses them to punish those who harm the Christian community as a whole. This use of worms is similar to Isaiah, bringing back the worm that never dies to punish those who have rebelled against God. Through the punishments involving worms, a progression can be identified through Isaiah,

¹²⁵ Isaiah 66:24 NRSV.

¹²⁶ Himmelfarb, 116-121.

¹²⁷ Ecclesiasticus (Sira) 10:11 BST.

¹²⁸ Eric M. Meyers, “Chapter IV: The Theology of Secondary Burials Burials,” in *Jewish Ossuaries: Reburial and Rebirth: Secondary Burials in Their Ancient Near Eastern Setting*. (Rome, : Biblical Institute Press, 1971), pp. 71-92, 80-83.

¹²⁹ Apocalypse of Peter, v.26.

Peter, and Paul of God becoming the community, which must include the marginalized. Therefore, whoever was not taking care of the marginalized was not taking care of their community, which was an affront to God. This punishment reinforces the commandments of the New Testament to take care of the orphans and widows in one's community and establishes control over the use of finances in Christian communities.

Interest on Interest

The wealth and finances of Christians was brought under scrutiny in Late Antique apocalyptic literature. If the wealth of an individual was abused, that was cause for eternal suffering. The care of the community was often reliant on the finances of the individual and the willingness of that individual to share their wealth with the poorer members of the community. Beyond the death of the father figure in a household, one of the common causes of destitution in Late Antiquity was defaulting on a loan with high interest.¹³⁰ By the fourth century, the Church would write an interest ban for Christian communities, calling it a mortal sin.¹³¹ Nathan Mladin states that patristic church fathers in Late Antiquity condemned taking interest as a form of theft. He states, “[Church fathers] saw usury as a form of robbery and violence towards the poor.”¹³² Late Antique Christian communities did not have a formal ban against taking interest but had the history of Jewish Law that prompted them to deem it as a sinful practice. Leviticus states,

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance or provide them food at a profit.¹³³

¹³⁰ Jared Rubin, “Social Insurance, Commitment, and the Origin of Law: Interest Bans in Early Christianity,” *The Journal of Law and Economics* 52, no. 4 (2009): pp. 761-786, <https://doi.org/10.1086/595796>, 764.

¹³¹ Rubin, 764.

¹³² Nathan Mladin, “Forgive Us Our Debts’: Lending, Borrowing and Debt Forgiveness in Christian Perspective,” *Financing Prosperity by Dealing with Debt*, 2022, pp. 35-47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv28m3h1h.8>, 41.

¹³³ Leviticus 25:35-37 NRSV.

The taking of excess interest harmed not only the individual, but the larger community. By creating financial hardship on another, the community was duty bound to care for that person. Jared Rubin states, “Throughout the first few Christian centuries, a safety net against impoverishment was increasingly provided by the Church.”¹³⁴ Therefore, taking excess interest on another Christian was not only stealing from the individual, but was also taking finances away from the rest of the community.

Apocalyptic literature deters early Christians from taking excess interest by punishing the souls of those who have. The Apocalypse of Peter punishes “usurers and those who take interest on interest” by placing them in a lake filled with pitch, blood, and “mire bubbling up.”¹³⁵ The Apocalypse of Paul punishes souls for the same crime by placing men and women in a pit and being consumed by worms.¹³⁶ While these two punishments have different origins, as shown previously, the result is the same: a complete, eternal removal from God. The threat of being removed from God was meant to motivate early Christians into correct action to benefit the community.

Conclusion

The communal bond in early Christianity had to be strong in order to survive and prosper as a new minority religion. These bonds were reinforced by tying the community together financially. The care of the poor was already important to ancient societies, but early Christian communities directly connected the care of the marginalized to the welfare of the community and the commandment of God. Apocalyptic literature further solidified this bond by threatening eternal punishment for those whose actions would endanger the social order.

¹³⁴ Rubin, 763.

¹³⁵ Apocalypse of Peter, v.30

¹³⁶ Apocalypse of Paul, v.37

Conclusion

Early Christians used apocalyptic literature in order to influence the actions of the community for the benefit of society. In their attempt to control the members of early Christian communities, the authors of apocalyptic literature reveal what they found to be detrimental to the welfare and the social order of their society. Visions of Hell were used to influence and control the actions of early Christians and motivate correct behaviors through fear of eternal torture.

The literature surrounding Christian Hell in Late Antiquity has been largely influenced by the historical and social context of Greek, Roman, and Jewish theology and culture. Traditions of Hades, Sheol, and Gehenna pervade through early Christian ideas of Hell. The fate of the souls who early Christians considered to be damned was influenced by the moral codes and traditions of their past.

The moral codes of these cultures were used to create a new idea of morality that was used to preserve the social order in early Christian communities. Ideas of Hell were used to control the actions of early Christians through the physical body and finances. By threatening the individual with torture and total removal from God, apocalyptic literature reinforces the bonds that tied early Christian communities together.

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