

Otherworldly matters

Beliefs in the afterlife evolved from humble origins in the Hebrew Bible to flamboyant Christian visions of it

By Tibor Krausz

TO THOSE of us unburdened by belief in Jesus Christ, a popular Christian concept of heaven would seem to be nothing short of being like hell. There the souls of believers are, singing endless hosannas to the Almighty. And they do this reverently for all eternity.

If that's what heaven is like, you might as well fancy your chances in hell.

Then again, it's not as if we had a choice in the matter, seeing as unbelievers are presumed to be destined straight for hell. Awaiting us there, we're told, will be an eternity of torments, the varieties of which have been described at length by Christian exegetes, theologians, mystics, clerics and artists who lavished graphic detail on the creative forms of medieval torture that would befall unredeemed sinners.

Left unexplained in such tracts of forewarning is how incorporeal souls freed from the confines of the physical world can be tormented by forms of torture devised for flesh-and-blood bodies with functioning nervous systems. Heaven, by contrast, has been portrayed as a delightful garden party of sorts in scenic settings with verdant meadows, gurgling brooks and blooming orchards. Commonly, depictions of heaven have been far more anodyne than the lurid descriptions of hell. In the end, though, that counts for little since, going by the available evidence, hell no more exists than heaven.

Be that as it may, the presumed states of affairs in the afterlife as per normative Christian beliefs would have been news to the ancient Hebrews, out of whose religion Christianity sprang. The authors of the Hebrew Bible saw the afterlife, which they called Sheol, as a gloomy netherworld where dead people languished as listless shades. Alternatively they posited that death was the end of us. Once we die, Job laments (7:7-10), we will be "no more" and that will be that. To these authors the survival of the nation of Israel mattered far more than the fate of individual Israelites after death.

Rhapsodic Christian notions of heaven and hell would have come as a surprise to Jesus too.

In the Gospels, Jesus is rather tight-lipped about the nature of the hereafter beyond promising "eternal life" for the saved and "eternal punishment" for the damned (Matthew 25:46). Yet his promise of an everlasting life to his followers set the stage for ecstatic flights of fancy by believers who wanted to divine their lot in heaven while crowing over the endless agonies of their enemies in hell, including stiff-necked Jews who refused to accept Jesus as their savior.

The unknown author of the 2nd century Christian text "The Apocalypse of Peter," which purports to be an eyewitness account of the great beyond by one of Jesus's disciples, provides a case in point. This early Christian describes heaven as a paradisiacal landscape populated by angelic figures who sing the praises of God. The author then contrasts this Edenic idyll with the tribulations in hell where the damned are tortured horribly in ways befitting their crimes—some of which would seem to be mere misdemeanors, if that. For the "crime" of lending money at an interest, for instance, people are condemned to spend eternity knee-deep in a bubbling swamp of gore and ordure.

It's not the allure of heaven but the dread of hell that is meant to get wayward souls in line. The author of the non-canonical text "is not so much scaring the hell out of people as scaring people out of hell," Bart D. Ehrman, an American biblical scholar, observes in his book, *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife*.

In his sweeping treatise Ehrman, who is a specialist in early Christianity at the University of North Carolina, traces the evolving concepts of heaven and hell from their inchoate stirrings in the Hebrew Bible to their apotheosis in Christian theology.

Visions of heaven and hell for the dead were pagan in origin. They are absent from

the Hebrew Bible, whose authors didn't seem to believe in an undying soul. Instead, these authors spoke of what they called "nephesh," a breath-like life force that animated people and animals, departing them at death. It was Hellenistic Platonism, which postulated the immortality of the soul and an otherworldly system of postmortem justice for deeds committed by people while alive, that gave rise to the idea of heaven and hell as respective spheres of rewards and punishments.

Or so Ehrman argues and he is right to a point. Plato had a lion's share of refining and popularizing a moralistic view of the hereafter, but the ancient Greeks' concept of the hellish underworld Hades and the idyllic realm of Elysium, where select souls lived happily ever after, predated Plato by centuries. Ehrman acknowledges this at one point, but spends little time exploring the how and why of Platonism's formative influence in its contemporary milieu.

Therein lies a problem with his book. In parts it reads like a grab bag of ancient texts whose passages on the afterlife the scholar details at length but does so without much of an overarching thesis or proper context. This Greek text said this, that Roman text said that.

Ehrman shuns Ancient Egypt, which is a peculiar omission since the pharaohs and their subjects geared their entire earthly existence towards their anticipated fortunes in the afterlife. Just as dubiously, he credits the 1st century BCE Roman philosopher Lucretius with the invention of atomism whereas it was the Greek philosopher Democritus who had proposed several centuries earlier that all matter was made of infinitesimal, indivisible and imperishable atomos. By Lucretius' time atomism had long been a staple of Epicurean philosophy, to which school of thought he himself belonged.

Ehrman is on firmer ground when he comes into his element with Second Temple traditions and early Christian texts.

Jewish apocalypticism, which appeared in the books of 1 Enoch and Daniel from the 2nd century BCE, came to the fore in the post-biblical period and proved revolutionary in religious thought by attesting to a divine plan of perfecting the world according to an eschatological design. When the time came, the thinking went, the dead would be resurrected, the righteous would be rewarded and the wicked would be punished. Peace and justice would finally reign supreme on earth as God had always intended.

This idea of redemptive justice in a recreated world likely emerged, Ehrman argues, from the biblical belief that God would one day restore the nation of Israel to its former glory by resurrecting it from its ashes. “If God can ‘raise from the dead’ the nation as a whole, it is not a huge leap to think he could do the same for the individuals who inhabit the nation, who have suffered not national destruction but personal death,” he writes.

Yet until the Day of Judgement, it was widely thought, the dead would stay in limbo, neither in heaven nor in hell but in an insentient state, until God chose to raise them by breathing life back into their reconstituted bodies. This was a reasonable supposition with scriptural backing. If God once made Adam from nothing but dust, what could stop him from remaking dead people from the dust into which they had turned?

This view, however, gave way to another, which was propagated in the Fourth Book of Maccabees in the 1st century CE. It proved far more comforting to Jews contemplating their otherworldly prospects: they would be judged right away upon death and sent either to heaven or hell, there to await the day of resurrection. The righteous had nothing to fear, for they would be ensconced in heaven above rather than a dusty grave underground.

Better yet, the wicked would earn their just deserts in hell as payment for their evil deeds — a thought that could be just as comforting. “The difference from Plato

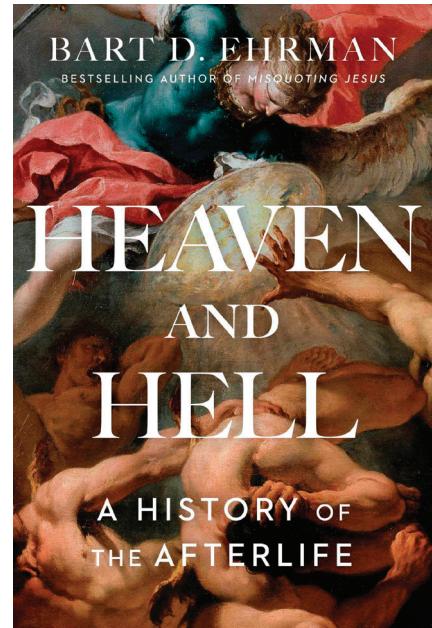
[in 4 Maccabees] is that these Jewish souls are not inherently immortal; they are given immortality as a gift from God,” Ehrman explains.

In the turbulent 1st century Jews continued to have differing views of the afterworld. The ascetic Essenes believed, like Platonists, that souls were immortal and death liberated them from their corporeal vessels. The elitist Sadducees rejected that idea, considering death to be the final curtain for both body and soul, in which they were in agreement with Greco-Roman Epicureans. The populist Pharisees held a middle ground by placing their faith in a future resurrection when the dead were gloriously restored to life.

Jesus and his disciples, who were all Jewish, ascribed to this latter belief (despite Jesus’s dim view of the Pharisees), according to Ehrman, who parses certain passages in the earliest known Gospels (Mark and Matthew) to reach this conclusion. Jesus taught that the righteous would be bodily resurrected and allowed entry into an imminent “Kingdom of God” where eternal life awaited.

Sinners, meanwhile, would be annihilated for good by fire in Gehenna, a ravine near Jerusalem’s historic heart which was believed to have been forsaken by God as an abomination because it was where children had once been sacrificed to the Canaanite deity Moloch by being burned to death. “[A] close reading of Jesus’s words shows that in fact he had no idea of torment for sinners after death,” Ehrman writes.

This may seem surprising to anyone familiar with Christianity’s elaborate visions of heaven and hell, yet those visions were still in the future when Jesus reportedly walked the earth in the early 1st century. Taking their cue from his teachings about an undefined “Kingdom of Heaven” that lay in store for them, later Christians began filling in the blanks about the nature of this blissful realm as they imagined it — especially as



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Jesus’s promised Kingdom of God on earth failed to materialize.

Along the way, believers turned Satan, a minor character from the Book of Job, into the Prince of Hell whose demonic minions dished out horrific punishments to the wicked in the underworld. At the same time, they continued to speculate on the bodily form in which the dead would emerge from their graves after their resurrection. Would they spring forth in perfected physical bodies or would they materialize as spiritually reconstituted angelic manifestations?

It was all fantasy but a highly potent kind. Nearly two millennia on, untold millions still believe that when they die they will wind up either in heaven or hell before they are resurrected at the End of Days. Ehrman isn’t among them. Once a born-again evangelical, he is now a self-professed agnostic. “My sense is that this life is all there is,” Ehrman notes.

The scholar clearly knows far too much about how ideas of heaven and hell changed over time to place much faith in them. ■