I have been discussing the “universalistic” strand in parts of Christianity in the early centuries, which said that ultimately, everyone will be saved. This was very much a minority opinion. Most Christians continued to think that non-believers would be damned, forever, to some very nasty torments that would never end.

In fact, in many circles, more and more people came to be subject to the fires of eternity in the Christian imagination. In the fourth and fifth centuries, with a massive influx of converts there also came large numbers of less-than-devoted souls. And the blessings and punishments of eternity almost inevitably came to be modified as a result. By the end of the fourth century, when Christianity was well on the road to becoming the dominant religion of the empire, some Christian writers started to maintain that heaven was not the destination of all members of the church, or hell the fate reserved only for those outside of it. On the contrary, Christian sinners too could be subject to the eternal wrath of God. Especially to be wary were Christian leaders who did not practice what they preached.

The most popular and influential portrayal of the realms of the blessed and the damned comes to us in a book called ...

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