

A couple of days ago I indicated on the blog that I am thinking about devoting my next book to the “Invention of the Afterlife” – that is, to the question of where the Christian doctrines of heaven and hell came from. I asked for comments (and I still welcome them) from people about what they would be interested in seeing in a book like that. Many, many thanks to everyone who has (so far!) responded to my request!

As some of you know, I have already written a *bit* about the topic in an earlier book, Jesus Interrupted. I thought it might be useful to replay what I said there, just to show where my thinking is at this point (I haven’t developed my thoughts significantly from writing that book, published in 2009) (but I expect they will develop in a big way, once I start working more diligently on the question). Here is the first half of what I said there. The second half will come tomorrow. (For those of you who keep track of such things, these two posts reprise what I posted earlier in the year, before I had any idea of writing this book.)

In some parts of Christendom today, especially the parts that I was one time associated with, the religion is all about the afterlife. On the very personal level, people are eager to experience the joys of heaven and to avoid the fires of hell. Most Christians that I meet today (I know this isn’t true of all Christians everywhere) believe that when you die, your soul goes to one place or the other.

I’ve never quite figured out all the inconsistencies of this view. On the one hand, the afterlife of the soul sounds like some kind disembodied existence, since your body stays in the grave; on the other hand, people think that there will be physical pleasure or pain in the afterlife, and that you’ll be able to recognize your grandparents. That would require having a body.

The earliest Christians, starting with Jesus, did not believe in that sort of heaven and hell, as a place that your soul goes when you die. This too is a later Christian invention.

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