

Toward the end of this post I will be asking for your opinions and ideas. So I hope you get that far!

Now that I have sent my manuscript on The Triumph of Christianity off to my editor, and before she gets back to me for revisions and edits, I am turning my thoughts to the next book. The reality is that I am not 100% certain what it will be. That still has to be worked out, negotiated, and approved by the publisher. I'm committed to Simon & Schuster for this next book, as well as Triumph (we originally negotiated a two-book deal), so that part is set. But in our contract deal, the next book was more or less called a "player to be named later." Now it is time to figure out what it will be.

I do have a strong preference, and hope to sell the publisher on the idea. So far they are receptive. But we'll see.

I started out with a vague idea, that has now evolved into a bona-fide concept. My original idea was that I was interested in exploring in a book where the Christian notion of hell as a place of eternal torment came from. In my head I was calling the book "The History of Hell." The short story on the notion: the idea of hell did not come from the Old Testament, where there is little sense of eternal punishment for those opposed to God. The most common view in the Hebrew Bible is that everyone who dies goes to a place called "Sheol," a kind of shadowy place for departed souls, good and wicked.

Some authors of the Hebrew Bible deny even that much of an afterlife. The books of Job and Ecclesiastes directly indicate that the end of life is the end of the story: no post-mortem existence.

The New Testament suggests a variety of ideas about punishment after death. Jesus speaks about people going to Gehenna - a reference to the refuse heap outside of Jerusalem where trash was burned. There was always a fire going. People who were opposed to God would go there, to the never ending fire. And so later in the book of Revelation we learn that everyone who will not inherit the eternal kingdom of God will be cast (along with the Devil and everything opposed to God) into the eternal "lake of fire." It won't be pleasant. For eternity.

On the other hand, Jesus speaks of people rejected from the kingdom being "cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth." That too is very bad. Here though it is not a place of awful light/fire but a realm of darkness.

My sense is that nowhere in the Bible is the common Christian view laid out, that a person dies and then their soul goes to heaven or hell. For the authorities of the Bible - Jesus, his followers, Paul, and the other NT writers who speak about such things - the afterlife was to be a physical event, in the body. The idea that the body and soul could somehow be separated is only rarely suggested in the Bible.

But Christians today think of heaven and hell as places that your soul, not your body, goes. At the same time, they think that there will be physical punishment. How can there be physical punishment without a physical entity (the body)? My sense is that people somehow think that the current body dies but then a person is given some other kind of corresponding body (looking like this one) (at which age?) for eternal rewards or punishments. But where did the idea of the soul leaving the body for reward or punishment come from?

That was what I was planning to deal with in my book. A few weeks ago I talked with my editor about it, and she was excited about the possibility. But she thought - and as soon as she mentioned it, I agreed - that a focus on hell is not only too negative but also too narrow. Why not make it about heaven and hell both, the entire afterlife? About where the idea of afterlife came from. Are there roots in other ancient thought? For example in ancient Greek and Roman philosophers and literary texts? In other religious traditions? Does it emerge from the popular imagination? Where and when and why?

And my editor suggested a better tentative title: "The Invention of the Afterlife." I loved it. Still love it. I think this is what I want to do next.

I have started accumulating bibliography: books on the views of the afterlife in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and other religious traditions both ancient and modern. Books on Near Death Experiences (there are tons of these!) to start reflecting on how many modern people think about such things. And ... well, books on other related things.

So here is what I would like from you: ideas! What would you most like a book like that to cover? What issues? What developments? What beliefs? What practices? What questions? What ... ever? What would you be most interested in with a book like this? What would make you want to buy it? To read it? To refer it to others?

I've never posed this kind of question to readers of the blog before. But I'd be interested in your thoughts and ideas. So let me have them!

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