

I have been interested in the early Christian texts that describe tours or visions of heaven and hell for a long time – I suppose since, when in graduate school, I first heard about the Apocalypse of Peter, which I have described on the blog before. That’s not the sort of text we would have been reading at Moody Bible Institute. (!) But its description of the torments in hell – brief, yet lurid accounts of what will happen to people for all eternity, depending on what their characteristic sin was — hooked me right away: blasphemers, seductresses, adulterers, and people who lend money out at interest all get distinctive and rather ghastly eternal torments, specified for their crimes, (as if a person only commits one of them!).

I didn’t realize at the time that we have several other accounts from Christian authors of the first few centuries; nor did I know, uneducated as I was, that it is one of the oldest tropes in literature, with examples in Gilgamesh, Homer, Plato, and on into Virgil and Lucian of Samosata (two of whom I had never heard of before...) and some Jewish texts. How I regret, to this day, not receiving a serious education in the liberal arts. But hey, I *did* learn about evangelism, Christian apologetics, and exorcism!!

In any event, over time I realized there are a number of Christian descriptions of the afterlife. Our earliest author Paul himself says ...

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