

Whatever Happened to Hell and Going to Heaven

Why Churches Promoting “Going to Heaven” Are Soon to Disappear

Aaron Milavec*

Introduction

Most Christians are not aware that, in the past fifty years, there has been a steady erosion of the traditional Christian expectation that, immediately after death, the righteous will be welcomed into the delights of Heaven while the unrighteous will be condemned to eternal torments in Hell.¹

By way of setting the stage for this exploration, I want to begin by providing a few excerpts from a recent NPR interview moderated by Jeffrey Gross on 31 March 2020. Her special guest was Dr. Bart Ehrman, distinguished professor of religious studies at The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Gross chose to interview Dr. Ehrman due to his new book, *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife*. Gross began her interview by summarizing the shocking conclusion of his research: “Ehrman says the ideas of eternal rewards and punishments aren't found in the Old Testament [Hebrew Scriptures] or in the teachings of Jesus [Christian Scriptures].”

Most of the interview was taken up with exploring how it was that Jesus of Nazareth functioned as a Jew. Jesus did not believe that when someone dies, their immortal soul

22 continues to be conscious and alive even when it was completely detached from the body
23 that it formerly animated. Ehrman characterizes the notion of an immortal soul as a Greek
24 idea that was entirely unknown within ancient Judaism. For Jesus and his disciples,
25 accordingly, there is no heaven and no hell immediately after death because the whole
26 person had returned to ashes: "God made us from dust and unto dust we shall return"
27 (Gen 3:19 slightly modified). Only after the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day did
28 the deceased return to life so that they could be judged by the Son of Man (Matt 25:31-
29 46).

30 **Jesus never endorsed eternal punishment in hellfire**

31 More importantly, even after the Final Judgment, Dr. Ehrman makes the case that the
32 words of Jesus do not support the traditional idea that those who are found unworthy of
33 Heaven will be consigned to a permanent punishment in hellfire throughout all eternity.
34 Ehrman carefully examines the metaphors that seemingly support this classical idea of
35 "eternal punishment." Here are some of the points that Dr. Ehrman brings to our
36 attention:

37 Jesus says the future kingdom is like a fisherman who hauls in a large
38 net (Matthew 13:47-50). After sorting through the fish, he keeps the
39 good ones and throws the others out. He doesn't torture them. They just
40 die. Or the kingdom is like a person who gathers up the plants that have
41 grown in his field (Matthew 13:36-43). He keeps the good grain, but
42 tosses the weeds into a fiery furnace. These don't burn forever. They
43 are consumed by fire and then are no more.

44 Still other passages may seem to suggest that Jesus believe in hell.
45 Most notably Jesus speaks of all nations coming for the last judgment
46 (Matthew 25:31-46). Some are said to be sheep, and the others goats.
47 The (good) sheep are those who have helped those in need – the

48 hungry, the sick, the poor, the foreigner. These are welcomed into the
 49 “kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” The
 50 (wicked) goats, however, have refused to help those in need, and so are
 51 sent to “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” At first
 52 blush, that certainly sounds like the hell of popular imagination.

53 But when Jesus summarizes his point, he explains that the contrasting
 54 fates are “eternal life” and “eternal punishment.” They are not “eternal
 55 pleasure” and “eternal pain.” The opposite of life is death, not torture.
 56 So the punishment is annihilation. But why does it involve “eternal
 57 fire”? Because the fire never goes out. The flames, not the torments, go
 58 on forever. And why is the punishment called “eternal”? Because it will
 59 never end. These people will be annihilated forever. That is not pleasant
 60 to think about, but it will not hurt once it’s finished.

61 Dr. Ehrman is not the only scholar calling into question “eternal punishment” in hellfire.
 62 If you do a Google search using the search words “rethinking eternal punishment in
 63 hellfire,” you will find dozens of scholars and pastors² who are making the same sort of
 64 claims that occupy the attention of Dr. Ehrman. In 1996, for example, an official group
 65 of Anglican bishops “rejected the idea of hell as a place of fire, pitchforks and screams of
 66 unending agony, describing it instead as annihilation for all who reject the love of God.”³
 67 If you go to URL = <<https://rethinkinghell.com/>>, you will find an entire website created
 68 by Evangelical Protestants who have come to the conviction that the traditional teaching
 69 regarding eternal punishments has been arrived at through a mistaken notion of God’s
 70 vengeance. Here is how they describe themselves:

71 **Rethinking Hell** represents a global network of Christian scholars,
 72 pastors, and laypeople who have been rethinking the idea of Hell as
 73 eternal torment, in favor of a biblical alternative known as **Conditional**
 74 **Immortality**. We believe that the saved in Christ will receive the
 75 reward of immortality, while others will finally be destroyed
 76 (sometimes referred to as annihilation).

77 If you examine their line of reasoning carefully, you will quickly discover that those who
 78 embrace the annihilation of the damned have dropped the notion that the damned have

79 immortal souls which makes it impossible for them to be destroyed by fire. Hence, what
80 we will discuss shortly regarding the absence of the doctrine of an immortal soul within
81 the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures has a critical bearing on whether “eternal
82 punishment” was ever envisioned by Jesus. For those representing their biblical findings
83 in Rethinking Hell, “immortality” is not a natural function. Only those “saved in Christ
84 will receive the reward of immortality.” And this reward is given to them at the time of
85 the universal resurrection of the dead.⁴ Prior to that event, even the righteous have no
86 after-death experiences just as they had no pre-natal experiences.

87 Christian philosophers have, in many ways, taken the issue of “eternal suffering” to an
88 altogether new heights. What sort of God could come up with an arrangement whereby
89 he was willing and able to offer a superabundant grace and divine forgiveness to a select
90 few while, at the same time, he was determined to consign the masses to eternal suffering
91 in a Hell that is not designed for the conversion of sinners but is motivated by a
92 boundless appetite for divine vengeance? Would not the elect themselves, after a few
93 thousand years, be impelled to demand that God review the condition of those in Hell
94 such that those who had accepted punishment and seen the error of their ways would be
95 pardoned and that the recalcitrant would be annihilated?⁵

96 **Dr. Ehrman protects his mother from his discoveries**

97 I return now to the 2020 NPR radio interview. Near the end of the interview, Ehrman
98 makes a startling admission regarding his mother:

99 My dear elderly mother is a very good Christian, and she believes that
100 she will die and she will go to heaven and she will see her husband.

101 And so I would be crazy to say, no, Mom, actually, yeah, you're not
102 going to see him (laughter). Of course, I'm not going to--I mean, there's
103 no reason to shatter somebody's beliefs, especially if they simply are
104 providing them with hope.

105 What I find disturbing here is not the realization that Ehrman wants to protect his
106 mother's traditional belief that, after death, her soul will go to heaven and be reunited
107 with her beloved husband. Rather, I am disturbed by Ehrman's persuasion that his
108 scholarship has nothing to say to his mother and to the church she attends. Ehrman, it
109 must be remembered, was firm when he said: "I lay it out [in my book] and explain why
110 it's absolutely not the case that Jesus believed you died and your soul went to heaven or
111 hell." But when it comes to his mother and other like-minded believers, he seemingly
112 wants to allow them to continue to guide their lives by retaining what he now recognizes
113 to be false and misleading hopes. What?!? This introduces a dangerous and calculated
114 dishonesty into the very fabric of religion. No pastor could say before God, "I knew that
115 Jesus never taught that, after death, lovers separated by death would be reunited in
116 Heaven. Nonetheless, because this expectation softened the intense grief felt by separated
117 lovers, I decided to continue to teach this **because of the comfort that it brought.**"

118 When it came time to examine the classic Christian presentation of hell, Ehrman took
119 quite a different position. To begin with, he admitted that, as a youth, "I was terrified of
120 going to hell" and that this belief psychologically harmed him for many years. Thus, he
121 came to this sober conclusion:

122 And so I will never try to talk somebody out of a belief in heaven, but I
123 certainly will try to talk people out of a belief in hell because it's simply
124 wrong, and it's harmful. It does psychological damage. And when
125 people raise their children on this stuff, it can scar them for life. And so
126 I think that hell is something we need to fight against; heaven, I'm all
127 for.

128 Here again Ehrman reinforces a dangerous and calculated dishonesty. Just a moment
129 ago, he made an argument for retaining his mother's mistaken belief about Heaven
130 because of the comfort that it brings her. Now he wants to persuade Christians not to
131 believe in eternal hellfire because of the discomfort (the psychological trauma) he felt as
132 a boy. Should he not be telling us, rather, that his parents and his pastors "terrified" him
133 with the notion that God was a tyrannical maniac bent upon lavishly rewarding those who
134 are obedient and savagely punishing those who are disobedient. Hence, as a result, he
135 decided many years later to investigate this issue as a certified scholar of the New
136 Testament. What he discovered is that "it's absolutely not the case that Jesus believed
137 you died and your soul went to heaven or hell." The upshot of this investigation is that
138 what Christian churches teach about Heaven and Hell is in need of a drastic revision.
139 Ehrman might even say, "This revision may make Heaven less satisfying, but it will also
140 make Hell less frightening."

141 Meanwhile, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Ehrman's courage in revealing how, as an
142 impressionable youth, he had been (and may still be) psychologically scarred by the
143 persistent threat of hellfire. It's not enough to cancel out "eternal punishment," the very
144 notion of hellfire itself as god's inducement "to be good" has to be called into question as
145 concealing a diabolical machination. Any human parent traumatizing his/her children
146 with threats of inhumane tortures could not get the seal of approval of Jesus nor of the
147 Lady's Home Journal. Is this not a probable explanation as to why Ehrman characterizes
148 himself as an atheist? I, too, would wholeheartedly support him in his atheism if my God
149 had imitated his god. Thus, in the end, I weep for Dr. Ehrman and for all the other
150 victims of this horrendously bad theology.

151 Just think for a moment of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. The younger son appears
152 to want financial independence and the opportunity to seek his fortune. He asks his father
153 for his share of the inheritance. His father gives it to him. Then, years later, his son
154 returns. The father runs out to him and embraces him warmly. This embrace prevents the
155 returning son from falling on his knees and reciting the words he had prepared, "I am no
156 longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:19). He orders his servant to bring out a robe in
157 order to save his son from the shame of returning shabbily dressed and impoverished.
158 Then he makes preparations for a feast to which all his neighbors are invited. The father
159 knows full well that his neighbors have had nothing good to say about his younger son.
160 Yet, he anticipates that the joy of his return will be evident to those who share the feast.
161 The father calculates that they will participate in this joy and follow his lead in honoring
162 his son. Yet, not surprisingly, even his older son refuses to participate. This son bitterly
163 laments how his father has unfairly favored his younger son. The father does not contest
164 this. Rather, he assures him of his continued love and invites him to accept the gravity of
165 the present situation, "this brother of yours was dead and has come to life" (Luke 15:32). Yet,
166 the classical ministers preaching Heaven and Hell would prefer that the father had
167 responded, "Be of good cheer, my son, for when you die, God will give you an eternity of
168 joy with him in Heaven. Your brother, however, has committed an unpardonable sin.
169 When he dies, God will send him into the everlasting punishments of Hell.

170 **Love cannot happen through threat, punishment, or**
171 **demand**

172 For both Dr. Ehrman and the Anglican bishops, annihilation does, at first glance, seem to

173 be more compassionate than eternal torments. An analogy with totalitarian governments
174 that move from “torture chambers” to “death squads” shows that it is not by this move
175 that they can be considered to have arrived at a humanitarian solution. In the case of
176 God, moreover, one would expect that he would arrive at a point of maturity where he put
177 aside any need to punish those who reject him. When I was doing my graduate theology
178 at the Graduate Theological Union, I came across a narrative that dramatized this truth:

179 Just recently, the angels in Heaven witnessed Michael the Archangel
180 storming out of the throne room with a burning torch in one hand and a
181 tank of water in the other. As he passed, they asked him where he was
182 going in such a hurry. He replied, “The Lord God has commanded me
183 to burn down the mansions of Heaven and to quench the fires of Hell
184 because he is finally ready to discover those who truly love him.

185 I was never able to discover the source of this narrative. Nonetheless, the deep truth
186 within this narrative was very satisfying to me both then and now. The imaginative
187 projections of “Heaven and Hell” that I was given by the Ursuline nuns in my early
188 religious formation were spinoffs of the “the carrot and the stick” approach used by
189 traditional parents—“Spare the rod; spoil the child.” The time must come, in the life of
190 all worthy and wise parents when they graciously set aside their own designs and listen
191 deeply to the dreams that their children have set out for themselves. If this is not
192 happening in our churches relative to our Father in Heaven, then adult believers are
193 bound to suspect that the love God offers them is stifling, manipulative, and conditional.

194 A healthy relationship with God cannot thrive as long as servile obedience is required. In
195 my own experience, only a very small number of religion teachers and theologians arrive
196 at this realization. Richard Rohr, OFM, one of my former students, has happily
197 understood this all too well:

198 Richard Rohr recognizes that until Christians deal with their false
 199 notion of hell, their capacity to love and trust God is seriously
 200 compromised. Such a belief aims the whole Christian life in a fear-
 201 based direction and with a narrow win/lose worldview that only appeals
 202 to the ego. This view of hell makes God much smaller than the teaching
 203 of Jesus reveals.

204 Love cannot happen through threat, punishment, or demand. God's
 205 ways are much more subtle and true. The largely medieval notion of
 206 hell that many Christians hold to this day makes mystical union with
 207 God largely impossible and even undesirable.⁶

208 After all is said and done, the tears that I shed for Dr. Ehrman are not enough. It makes
 209 no sense for him to keep Heaven and to throw out Hell. Why not? The reason is very
 210 simple. Who, in their right mind, would even want to get close to such a god in Heaven?
 211 How could those in Heaven be at ease with an Almighty Father who doesn't hesitate to
 212 use hellfire to scare his children into remaining obedient and loving him above all others?
 213 So, Dr. Erhman, it's not enough for you to throw out Hell. The one you formerly called
 214 "god" must also go!⁷

215 **How the immortal soul crept into the belief system of the** 216 **Jesus Movement**

217 While faith in Jesus was making headway among the Hellenized populations of the
 218 former Greek Empire, many disciples of Socrates were being converted to the Gospel of
 219 Jesus Christ. For many of them, they were prepared to embrace the Jewish monotheism
 220 of Jesus because Socrates had already taught them to discard the "unbelievable" legends
 221 of the gods offered by Homer. From Tertullian (d. c. 220) onward, most of the Church
 222 Fathers were enamored by Socrates.⁸ Socrates not only taught them that God was a

223 bodiless Spirit that inhabited the entire Universe; he also assured them that God imbued
 224 humans with an “immortal soul” that sought after truth and beauty. Over a period of time,
 225 belief in the immortal soul (a) served to consolidate the notion that humans could expect
 226 an afterlife in Hades⁹ after they died and (b) served as the unintended origins of the
 227 “beatific vision” in Heaven that the medievalists so relished. Both of these developments
 228 in the afterlife will be examined shortly.

229 Augustine (d. 426), the most influential of the Latin Church Fathers, was so bold as to
 230 make startling claim that the teaching of Socrates and the teaching of Jesus are one and
 231 the same (in their essentials). The only difference, as Augustine saw it at the time of his
 232 conversion in 387, was that Jesus was able to promote the message of Socrates so as to
 233 convert the whole world whereas Socrates was content to limit the outreach of his
 234 liberating truth to only a few hundred young men living in Athens in the 6th century BCE.
 235 *De vera religione* was addressed and dedicated to Romanianus, who was Augustine’s
 236 principal student during his time of his retreat at Cassiciacum immediately before his
 237 baptism at Easter. Here is the point in his treatise where Augustine carries on an imagined
 238 dialogue with Plato (the foremost disciple of Socrates):

239 “You [Plato] have persuaded me that truth is seen not by the bodily
 240 eyes but by the pure mind, and that any soul that cleaves to the truth is
 241 thereby made happy and perfect. . . . Now if some great and divine
 242 man would arise to persuade the peoples that such things were at least
 243 to be believed if they could not grasp them [directly] with the mind. . . ,
 244 would you not judge that such a man would be worthy of divine
 245 honors?”

246 I believe that Plato would answer, “That could not be done by [a mere]
 247 man, unless the very virtue and wisdom of God . . . illumined him from
 248 the cradle not by human teaching but by personal illumination, honored
 249 him with such grace . . . that he would be able to despise what wicked

250 men desire, to suffer all that they dread, to do all that they marvel at,
 251 and so with the greatest love and authority [he] would be able to
 252 convert the human race. But it is needless to ask what honors would be
 253 due to such a man. . . . Being the bearer and instrument of the Wisdom
 254 of God for the true salvation of the human race, such a man would have
 255 gained a place all his own, a place above all humanity” (de vera
 256 religione, sec. 4).

257 Augustine artfully sets the stage. He allows Plato to describe and to admire the divine
 258 honors due to the person who was “the bearer and instrument of the Wisdom of God for
 259 the true salvation of the human race.” Then, and only then, does Augustine reveal that
 260 this has already happened:

261 “Now this very thing has come to pass. . . . From a region on the earth
 262 where the true God is worshipped [Israel] and where such a man could
 263 be born, chosen men [the Apostles] were sent throughout the entire
 264 world, and by their virtues and their words, [they] have kindled the
 265 fires of divine love. Their sound teaching has been confirmed and has
 266 left to posterity a world illuminated” (De vera religione, sec. 4).

267 “If Plato and the rest of them [the other disciples of Socrates] . . . would
 268 come to life again and notice that the churches are full and the temples
 269 are empty, and that the human race was being called away from the
 270 desire for temporal and transient goods to spiritual and intellectual
 271 goods and to eternal life, they would surely say: “That is what we dared
 272 not preach to the people. We preferred to yield to popular custom
 273 rather than to bring the people over to our way of thinking and living”

274 Augustine, in effect, testifies that Plato would have applauded the feats of Jesus;
 275 meanwhile, he would have admitted that his own disciples “dared not preach to the
 276 people” at large. Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples, on the other hand, trusted in God
 277 and enabled the doctrine known to Socrates (with some small modifications) to illuminate
 278 the entire world. Augustine wrote this very positive endorsement of the Socratic
 279 doctrine, not merely as a ploy to attract Platonists (like Romanianus), but because he was
 280 entirely convinced, due to his own experience, that Jesus of Nazareth provided the world

281 with a doctrine that differed little from Socrates and Plato. Thus it was that Augustine
 282 lost sight of Jesus' mission to herald "his Father's coming to earth to establish his
 283 Kingdom" in favor of anticipating an "eternal life in heaven for the immortal soul after
 284 death."

285 Richard Tarnas, author of the acclaimed, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, wrote of
 286 Augustine's ardor for Plato: "... It was Augustine's formulation of Christian Platonism
 287 that was to permeate virtually all of medieval Christian thought in the West. So
 288 enthusiastic was the Christian integration of the Greek spirit that Socrates and Plato were
 289 frequently regarded as divinely inspired pre-Christian saints ..."¹⁰

290 **How I grew up trying to save my soul from hellfire**

291 As it turned out, I was raised as a Roman Catholic who was indoctrinated as a Neo-
 292 Platonist by my early religion teachers. When I was ten years old, I attended Holy Cross
 293 Grade School that was situated just a short ten-minute walk from my father's home in
 294 Euclid, OH, a suburb of Cleveland. Here, in the third grade, the Ursuline nuns gave me
 295 the Baltimore Catechism¹¹ that was to become the orthodox guide to my ongoing
 296 religious instruction. Just a week ago, I went back and found my copy of the Baltimore
 297 Catechism and was astonished to discover how many Socratic doctrines have been
 298 blended with the teachings of Jesus. Here you can discover them for yourself:

299 1. Q. Who made the world?

300 A. God made the world.

301 2. Q. Who is God?

302 A. God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things.

303 3. Q. What is man?

304 A. Man is a creature composed of body and soul, and made to the image and
305 likeness of God.

306 4. Q. Is this likeness in the body or in the soul?

307 A. This likeness is chiefly in the soul.

308 5. Q. How is the soul like to God?

309 A. The soul is like God because it is a spirit that will never die, and has
310 understanding and free will.

311 6. Q. Why did God make you?

312 A. God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and
313 to be happy with Him forever in the next.

314 7. Q. Of which must we take more care, our soul or our body?

315 A. We must take more care of our soul than of our body.

316 8. Q. Why must we take more care of our soul than of our body?

317 A. We must take more care of our soul than of our body, because in losing our
318 soul we lose God and everlasting happiness.

319 9. Q. What must we do to save our souls?

320 A. To save our souls we must worship God by faith, hope, and charity; that is, we
321 must believe in Him, hope in Him, and love Him with all our heart.

322 When I read the Baltimore Catechism today, I immediately realize how strangely
323 unbiblical the underlined segments are. In point of fact, none of the Gospel stories
324 presents Jesus as teaching his disciples that their bodies will only last a short time--one

325 hundred years tops--but that their spiritual souls would last for an eternity. Nor does Jesus
326 ever say to anyone, "Care for your precious soul; it's worth much more than your body."
327 Moreover, Jesus never understands his teaching mission to be about "saving souls."¹²
328 Nor does the entire New Testament tell us that our everlasting happiness consists in
329 shedding our mortal bodies at the time of our death such that our souls might rise up into
330 Heaven in order to live with God and the Angels and Saints forever and ever.

331 **How and when I first learned that Jesus never endorsed** 332 **an immortal soul**

333 In my first year of graduate studies at the Graduate Theological Union; I was required to
334 read Oscar Cullmann's *Immortality of the Soul or the Resurrection of the Dead?* (1956).
335 I was shocked and dumbfounded by what I discovered. Giving my religious instruction
336 under the guidance of the Ursuline nuns followed by four years learning from the
337 Marianist Brothers at St. Joseph High School, it never entered my mind that Jesus did not
338 believe that every person had an immortal soul that survived the death of the body. After
339 a single reading, however, I suddenly realized that Jesus never endorsed the immortality
340 of the soul. I suffered a crisis of faith--I realized that my Catholic upbringing had been
341 contaminated by dubious unbiblical ideas that originated with Socrates.

342

343 I felt betrayed. The sweet Ursuline nuns who taught me for five years using the
344 Baltimore Catechism had misled me. They taught me that the Baltimore Catechism had
345 an "*imprimatur*" that assured readers that everything it contained was in harmony with
346 the Catholic faith. They had assured me that the successor of Peter, the Pope in Rome,

347 was our divinely appointed watchman who faithfully passed on the teachings of Jesus. I
348 remember very clearly that the nuns assured me that, should any pope ever get confused
349 and set his mind upon teaching a false doctrine, God would intervene by paralyzing or
350 even killing him so that he could not proceed. Thus, in my mind, I had imagined that
351 everything the sweet Ursuline nuns had been teaching me was backed up by the
352 infallibility of the Pope. Only gradually and painfully did I realize that even very kind
353 and good people could get disorientated or could be brainwashed and, as a result, they
354 could end up teaching innocent children foolish doctrines that had nothing to do with
355 Jesus Christ.¹³ I came to realize that God would never step in and paralyze wayward
356 popes. What kind of cruel Father would act in this way? In fact, I had to come to grips
357 with the realization that my Church had endorsed other doctrinal errors¹⁴ as well. For the
358 first time in my life, I lost my smug certainty that papal infallibility was far more
359 important than the biblical infallibility claimed by Protestants. I suddenly realized that I
360 could learn some very important truths from Protestants like Oscar Cullmann. All my
361 life I had relied upon Catholics teaching Catholic doctrines. Now, however, at the
362 Graduate Theological Union, I realized that Oscar Cullmann had discovered a very
363 serious flaw in Christianity that not even the Pope and all his Jesuit advisors had been
364 able to uncover.

365

366 Cullmann gave his Ingersoll Lecture on the Immortality of Man in 1955. The thesis of
367 his lecture was that there was no biblical evidence supporting the immortality of human
368 souls, and that this doctrine had nothing in common with the Christian hope in the
369 resurrection of the body. His lecture was initially published as a pamphlet in French.

370 Book-length publications in all the European languages quickly followed. At the time
371 Prof. Cullmann was a full professor of theology at the University of Basel and at the
372 Sorbonne in Paris. He himself acknowledged that "no other publication of mine has
373 provoked such enthusiasm or such violent hostility."¹⁵ Given my own personal turmoil at
374 reading Cullmann's thesis, I completely understood the "violent hostility" that was
375 visited upon him.

376

377 Socrates was regarded by the civil authorities as a "troublemaker." He was publicly tried
378 and convicted of having "corrupted the youth of Athens" due to his critic attitude toward
379 the popular religious notions of his day. As punishment, Socrates was required by the
380 court to take his own life by drinking poison. Jesus was also regarded by the temple
381 authorities as a "troublemaker." He, too, trained his disciples to take a critic attitude
382 toward the popular religious notions of his day. He was privately tried by the Sanhedrin
383 and convicted of having disrupted the temple operations. As punishment, Jesus was
384 handed over to Pilate as a threat to Roman rule by virtue of his laying claim to being
385 "King of the Jews." He was crucified by the Romans on the basis of these trumped-up
386 charges.

387

388 But here is where the parallels end. As Plato narrates it, Socrates faced his impending
389 death with the utmost tranquility. Surrounded by his grieving disciples, he encouraged
390 them not to lament his death. Socrates explained to them that the poison hemlock would
391 destroy the life in his body but it would not in any way disturb his immortal soul. Thus,
392 following his death, Socrates anticipated that his soul would ascend into the celestial

393 world where he would have the satisfaction of continuing his search for truth among the
 394 deceased philosophers who died before him. In this setting, Socrates assured his
 395 disciples that his life mission would continue unabated in a place beyond the reach of the
 396 nervous civil authorities of Athens. In fact, Socrates made the bold claim that, only
 397 after death, would the task of discovering the truth become easy and natural because
 398 everything would be illuminated by “the light of truth”:

399 It has been proved to us by experience that if we would have pure [i.e.,
 400 certain and unchanging] knowledge of anything we must be quit of the
 401 body. . . . If while in company with the body, the soul cannot have pure
 402 knowledge, one or two things follows—either [pure] knowledge is not
 403 to be attained at all, or, if at all, [pure knowledge can be attained only]
 404 after death. For then, and not till then, the soul will be parted from the
 405 body and exist in herself alone. In this present life, I reckon that we
 406 make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least
 407 possible intercourse or communion with the body, and are not surfeited
 408 with the bodily nature [which is unreliable because it is continually
 409 changing], but keep ourselves pure until the hour when God himself is
 410 pleased to release us. And thus having got rid of the foolishness of the
 411 body we shall be pure and hold converse with the pure, and know of
 412 ourselves the clear light everywhere, which is no other than the light of
 413 truth (Phaedo, 1022).¹⁶

414 **Jesus never imagined that truth could only be securely**
 415 **discovered when the soul was freed of its body**

416 Jesus, in contrast, was never presented in the canonical Gospels as looking forward to the
 417 time after death when his soul would be free of his body and able to discover the truth in
 418 Heaven. In fact, had Jesus believed this, he would have been promoting a life after death
 419 in Heaven. The simple truth is that, once the medievalists had become enamored with
 420 “going to Heaven,” they simultaneously rerouted the message of Jesus so as to place him

421 in sync with Socrates. This is why my early Catholic training emphasized that the whole
 422 purpose of my life on earth was to know, love, and serve God such that, when I die, I
 423 could find perfect happiness with him in Heaven. Thus, the expectation of Socrates as
 424 expressed in the Phaedo became the foundation for the Baltimore Catechism. Instead of
 425 saying “keep ourselves pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us,”
 426 my Catechism was training me to “keep myself free from grave sins until the hour when
 427 God himself is pleased to release me [separating my soul from my body].” Instead of
 428 saying with Socrates that after death, “we shall be pure and hold converse with the pure,
 429 and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere, which is no other than the light of
 430 truth,” my Catechism was training me to anticipate going to Heaven where “we shall be
 431 holy and hold converse with the saints, and we shall see God face to face, are made like
 432 unto Him in glory, and enjoy eternal happiness.”¹⁷ Here are the appropriate Catechism
 433 questions:

434 411. Q. Why does Christ judge men immediately after death?

435 A. Christ judges men immediately after death to reward or punish them
 436 according to their deeds.

437 412. Q. What are the rewards or punishments appointed for men's souls
 438 after the Particular Judgment?

439 A. The rewards or punishments appointed for men's souls after the
 440 Particular Judgment are Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell.

441 413. Q. What is Hell?

442 A. Hell is a state to which the wicked are condemned, and in which
 443 they are deprived of the sight of God for all eternity, and are in dreadful
 444 torments.

445 414. Q. What is Purgatory?

446 A. Purgatory is a state in which those suffer for a time who die guilty of
 447 venial sins, or without having satisfied for the punishment due to their

448 sins.

449 420. Q. What is Heaven?

450 A. Heaven is the state of everlasting life in which we see God face to
451 face, are made like unto Him in glory, and enjoy eternal happiness.

452

453 Unlike Socrates, Jesus never explains to his disciples that he has an immortal soul that
454 insures his continued existence on the other side of death. Rather, Jesus was rooted in the
455 conviction that God, his Father, was preparing to come to earth to raise the dead on the
456 Last Day and then to set up his Kingdom on earth. This was the “good news” that Jesus
457 had tirelessly preached to God’s beloved people, the Jews. Jesus wanted to be here on
458 earth when God arrived. At the Passover that his disciples had celebrated on the night of
459 his arrest, Jesus reassured his disciples saying, “I have longed to celebrate this Passover
460 with you.” Jesus even went so far as to make a vow “that from now on I will not drink of
461 the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes” (Luke 22:18). This was the holy
462 night when, many years earlier, God heard the cries of his suffering people, and he came
463 down to earth to liberate them from their Egyptian taskmasters. This was the night when
464 the blood of the yearling lambs provided the Jews protection against the Angel of Death.
465 The Egyptians, needless to say, had no such protection, and, when they rose from their
466 sleep the following morning, they were greeted with the horror of discovering that all
467 first-born males were incapable of opening their eyes and crying lustily for their mothers’
468 milk. They were victims of the Angel of Death, every one of them.

469

470 After the Passover, Jesus retired to the Mount of Olives where over ten thousands
471 pilgrims recited the concluding psalms and often spent the whole night peacefully

472 sleeping in the dry open air. Jesus, however, was in no mood for sleep. Judas, one of the
473 twelve, had departed early from the Passover and had not returned. This did not bode
474 well. As long as Jesus was shielded by the crowds of Jerusalem during the day, he was
475 immune from arbitrary arrest. At night, however, he was vulnerable. Here in the Garden
476 of Olives, Jesus hoped to blend in with the other pilgrims. If Judas would betray his
477 identity and his favorite place to sleep, however, the end of his mission might unravel
478 swiftly. So Jesus was anxious for his life and for the lives of his chosen disciples as well.
479 Like a nervous mother, he was not going to be able to sleep before Judas came home. So,
480 as the night wore on and his anxiety grew, he began to pray. Gone is the naïve assurance
481 that his prophetic mission was somehow so essential that his God would shield him from
482 his powerful enemies. Even the inevitability of the coming of God upon the clouds to
483 establish his reign on earth was of little comfort. God would come when God would
484 come. The death of one prophet would not serve to either hurry him up or to slow him
485 down. As the early Evangelists tell it, Jesus was so thoroughly gripped by fear that he
486 actually “sweat blood” while he urgently prayed to his Father that he would rescue him
487 from drinking from the “cup of suffering” that was all-to-quickly overtaking him. “Then
488 an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed
489 more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the
490 ground” (Luke 22:43-44).

491

492 Jesus, unlike Socrates, never tells his disciples that his immortal soul is beyond the reach
493 of his tormentors. Jesus, as he is presented in the Gospels, knew himself to be absolutely
494 vulnerable. Sure, he could escape and hide out back in Capernaum, but every Jew knew

495 that someone called to be a prophet could never expect to fulfill his mission while in
496 hiding from the crowds. So Jesus sweat blood because he was contemplating the real
497 possibility that Judas might have sold him out and that he was already part of an
498 attachment of temple police expecting to identify and arrest him. Once arrested, he was
499 certain that he would never again be able to move freely. He would be caged up in a
500 fortress as was John the Baptist before his death. The chief priests would see to that.
501 They were power brokers and they did not hesitate to employ brutal means to silence
502 trouble makers. If necessary, they would call upon the Romans to crucify him as an
503 insurrectionist (as in Luke 3:2, 23:25, 37-38). Romans had perfected the art of
504 crucifixion by way of terrorizing the whole Jewish population. Once a trouble-maker was
505 scourged and once nailed to wooden beams in a public place, the unfortunate victim
506 would go screaming to his death on an instrument of torture designed to intensify and
507 prolong the suffering and humiliation of its trapped victim. The victim was forced to
508 puke, piss, and shit in plain sight of everyone. Onlookers were encouraged to jeer and
509 abuse victims verbally. Supporters were forced to watch but never allowed to speak or to
510 interfere with the abusive words and deeds that tormented the naked, bruised, and
511 humiliated victim.

512 **Socratic nonsense introduced into the Pulpit**

513 **Commentary**

514 In Mark and Matthew, Jesus is presented as praying while being tormented on a Roman
515 cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Both Gospels deliberately
516 present these words in both Hebrew and in Greek. Why so? To ensure that Hebrew-

517 speaking Jews would immediately recognize that Jesus' prayer repeats the words of
 518 David's well-known prayer (namely, Ps 22 = Ps 21 LXX). Once they made this link, then
 519 they would know that David's words that begin with the terrible feeling of being
 520 "forsaken by God," eventually arrives at a point wherein the one abandoned discovers a
 521 heartfelt reliance upon divine vindication.¹⁸ In the ears of Gentiles, however, "why have
 522 you forsaken me?" would most likely come across as a complaint against God because he
 523 has not stepped in and protected his beloved son from this Roman barbarism. Luke,
 524 accordingly, drops these words entirely. He cannot bring himself to communicate such a
 525 misplaced message to Gentiles. Hence, in its place, Luke presents Jesus as praying two
 526 totally new and different prayers: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they
 527 are doing [οὐ γὰρ οἴδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν]" (Luke 23:34) and, just before his last breath,
 528 "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit [παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου]" (Luke 23:46
 529 = Acts 7:59). The first prayer demonstrates Jesus' compassion toward his persecutors:
 530 "pray for *your persecutors*; ... *do good* to those who hate you" (Luke 6:28). The second
 531 prayer demonstrates Jesus' gratitude to his God. Luke presents Jesus as intentionally
 532 returning his breath [πνεῦμά μου] to his Father: "The Lord gives [me my first breath
 533 when I was just born] and the Lord takes away [my final breath when I die]" (Job 1:21).¹⁹
 534
 535 When I examine my Pulpit Commentary²⁰, I discover a very Socratic interpretation of
 536 Luke 23:46. By examining this, one can detect how Protestant commentators came to the
 537 conclusion that Jesus had an immortal soul. Here is their judgment:

538 This commending his spirit [πνεῦμά] to his Father has been accurately termed his
 539 entrance greeting to heaven. This placing his spirit as a trust in the Father's hands

540 is, as Stier phrases it, an expression of the profoundest and most blessed repose
541 after toil. . . . Doctrinally it is a saying of vast importance; for it emphatically
542 asserts that the soul will exist apart from the body in the hands of God. This at
543 least is its proper home.²¹

544

545 This is pure Socratic nonsense. How so?

546 1. On linguistic grounds alone, the Greek term πνεῦμά refers to breath, to spirit, or
547 to wind. One has to decide from its context, what is meant because the Greek
548 uses exactly the same word for all three. That being said, πνεῦμά is hardly ever
549 chosen to designate the Socratic “soul.” Within Greek circles, the term “soul”
550 underwent an evolution. The Greek term ψυχή was most commonly used to
551 designate the Socratic “soul.” Hence, the Pulpit Commentary is on thin ice as
552 soon as the Greek text of Luke 23:46 is examined.

553 2. The Pulpit Commentary wants Jesus’ final words to become “his entrance
554 greeting to heaven.” The only problem is that Jesus is not going anywhere near
555 heaven just yet. According to Luke-Acts, Jesus will not enter into heaven until 43
556 days later.

557 3. The Pulpit Commentary declares that Luke’s description has “**doctrinal**
558 **importance**” for it demonstrates that Jesus “emphatically asserts that the soul
559 [πνεῦμά] will exist apart from the body in the hands of God.” What the
560 Commentary overlooks here is the fact that Jesus never taught anything like this.
561 So, the Commentary wants us to believe that Jesus, just before his final breath,
562 suddenly remembers that he had forgotten to teach a very important doctrine on

563 the existence of the immortal soul, and so he reveals with a loud voice his
 564 intention to transfer his soul into the protective hands of his Father. The only
 565 problem is that all his male disciples have fled and have hidden themselves.
 566 Jesus' doctrinal teaching is thus seemingly entirely lost upon them. In the one
 567 Gospel where John stays with the women, nothing is said regarding Luke 23:46.

568 4. "Your slave is in your hands," Abram said to his wife. "Do with her whatever you
 569 think best" (Gen 16:6). The phrase "in your hands" figures frequently in the bible
 570 (e.g. Josh 9:25, 2 K 10:24, Job 2:6, Jer 26:14, Dan 2:38) and the metaphor has a
 571 large play in the English language as well. The expression, "I place my life in
 572 your hands" fits well here. This is a metaphor. No one thinks that "my life" (or
 573 "my soul" for that matter) somehow escapes my body and settles "in your hands."
 574 The Pulpit Commentary thus commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness—it
 575 treats a metaphor as an actual event.

576 5. Mark's Gospel tells us that "Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last" (Mark
 577 15:37 and par.). Ἐξέπνευσε is the Greek word used here that literally means "he
 578 breathed out" and, since the verb is in the Aorist Indicative, this signals that a
 579 single, one-time event is being specified, thus, "his final breath" is clearly
 580 implied. The Greek language is used, but the Jewish anthropology is clearly
 581 signified. If the inspired evangelists had written, "Jesus gave a loud cry and his
 582 soul departed from his body [ἡ ψυχή του αναχώρησε από το σώμα του]," then the
 583 Pulpit Commentary would be vindicated. As things stand, however, the
 584 Commentary is completely off the mark.

585 Yet, in truth, I cannot be too hard on these biblical scholars. They were undoubtedly

586 trained to see Jesus through a Socratic lens, much as I had been for the initial thirty-two
 587 years of my life. But I have come to see the error in my former ways.

588 In the short term, it might have appeared that Cullmann's thesis had won the day. Fifty
 589 years later, however, the vast majority of Christian scholars have largely overlooked
 590 Cullmann's thesis and, more importantly, Christian pastors continue to imagine that their
 591 task is to preach that Jesus paid the price for our sins on the cross such that, when we die,
 592 our souls will go to Heaven to be with Jesus and his Mother for all eternity.²² Beware!
 593 The Greek hoax lives on!

594 **The notion of “soul” had a history of development**

595 As an overview, I repeat the summary presented in the Stanford Encyclopedia of
 596 Philosophy (2009):

597 From comparatively humble Homeric beginnings, the word ‘soul’
 598 undergoes quite remarkable semantic expansion in sixth and fifth
 599 century usage. By the end of the fifth century — the time of Socrates’
 600 death — soul is standardly thought and spoken of, for instance, as the
 601 distinguishing mark of living things, as something that is the subject of
 602 emotional states and that is responsible for planning and practical
 603 thinking, and also as the bearer of such virtues as courage and justice.
 604 Coming to philosophical theory, we first trace a development towards
 605 comprehensive articulation of a very broad conception of soul,
 606 according to which the soul is not only responsible for mental or
 607 psychological functions like thought, perception and desire, and is the
 608 bearer of moral qualities, but in some way or other accounts for all the
 609 vital functions that any living organism performs.²³

610 Socrates was especially noteworthy in so far as he displayed a considerable talent for
 611 distinguishing between true and false ideas. He was a master of dialogical inquiry. Most
 612 often, he would begin by taking a rudimentary idea from one of his disciples and then he

613 would artfully draw out its consequences in a back-and-forth exchange with his disciples.
 614 And, in the end, he would bring his disciples to the point where they arrived at the
 615 conviction that one line of thinking was manifestly true while its alternatives were
 616 manifestly flawed.

617 **Does Socrates condemn us to an eternity of total**
 618 **isolation?**

619 While Socrates may have been able to demonstrate that the soul does have some innate
 620 mathematical ideas at birth, there was still the question of whether disembodied souls
 621 enjoy lives of thought and intelligence after death:

622 Moreover, apart from the question of immortality or otherwise, there is
 623 the further question whether the soul, if it does have some form of
 624 existence after the person has died, “still possesses some power and
 625 wisdom” (Phaedo, 70b; cf. 76c). Answering both questions, Socrates
 626 says not only that the soul is immortal, but also that it contemplates
 627 truths after its separation from the body at the time of death. Needless
 628 to say, none of the four main lines of argument that Socrates avails
 629 himself of succeeds (a) in establishing the immortality of the soul, or
 630 (b) in demonstrating that disembodied souls enjoy lives of thought and
 631 intelligence [during those periods when they live independent of human
 632 bodies after death].²⁴

633 Even if Socrates were successful in demonstrating that every human has a soul, there was
 634 still grave uncertainty as to whether disembodied souls would be able to communicate
 635 with each other after death. On earth, we communicate with each other exclusively due
 636 to our body’s ability to touch, to see, to hear, and to speak. Take away our ability to
 637 touch, to see, to hear, and to speak, one arrives at a state of complete and total isolation.
 638 Socrates presupposed that he would be able communicate with the souls of other dead

639 philosophers after his death. Judging from our current situation, however, souls after
640 death would be doomed to exist in complete and total isolation. At best, one might
641 expect some fleeting dreams. Even after receiving a dream, however, one could never
642 have any way to communicate the content of a dream to anyone else. And, since we
643 cannot transmit our dreams soul to soul on earth, it remains extremely unlikely that we
644 will be able to do so in the afterlife.

645 What remains then? One would possibly remember past experiences of being loved; yet,
646 even this would be painful since the joy of presence would be replaced with the pain of
647 absence. On earth, recalling moments of giving and receiving love were always welcome
648 because they opened up the possibility of having further contact with ones Beloved.
649 Take that hope of future contact away, and one is left with the ugly prospect of living in
650 total isolation for an eternity of time. Furthermore, for someone who is an artist, a
651 musician, a cabinet maker, an isolated soul might relish imagining future creating. Yet,
652 truth to tell, on earth, thinking about novel artistic productions holds our attention
653 because our imagination releases creative juices and anticipates the joy of sharing it. In
654 an afterlife without hands, without ears, without eyes, creative thinking itself would be
655 entirely useless since we could never anticipate any artistic realization.

656 Superb competitive athletes who suffer an unfortunate accident and end up as paraplegics
657 find no satisfaction in recalling past performances or in anticipating future performances
658 (that will never come). Having been brutally deprived of what they passionately aspired
659 to do and to become, their spirits slowly die in the anguish of extended inactivity. In so
660 many instances, paraplegics end up seeking death as a release from the daily sense of
661 purposelessness and the humiliation of having others feed them and clean the shit from

662 their body. Does the death of the body, then, make every one of us mute and blind
663 paraplegics that languish perpetually for millions of years? I certainly hope not. This
664 would foster a hellish condition²⁵ and, if it would be enforced for an eternity due to the
665 immortality of the soul, this would result in billions of souls crying out, “Spare us, O
666 Lord!”

667 I bring forward these sobering thoughts, not because I have some hidden agenda to
668 discredit Socrates. Far from it. Due to my Catholic upbringing using the Baltimore
669 Catechism, I was very comfortable with imagining that Jesus very much endorsed nearly
670 all aspects of the Socratic doctrine of immortal souls. But now I am not comfortable
671 there anymore. Why so? Because I find my salvation with Jesus and not with Socrates.
672 I continue to admire Socrates, but, in the end, I cannot serve two masters. Having elected
673 to serve the Father of Jesus, I can now afford to be critical of how, for nearly 1800 years,
674 Catholicism has been presenting Jesus as a hidden disciple of Socrates.²⁶ Now, at this
675 late period of my life—I am now 82--I want to come clean. I want to realign myself with
676 Jesus of Nazareth and to risk my soul by openly abandoning Socrates. I also want to go
677 on record for advocating to all Catholics that a return to Jesus requires a long and careful
678 reexamination of how the faith of Jesus has been compromised by uncritically embracing
679 a Jesus dressed in Socratic undergarments.

680 My most worthy companion in this near-death enterprise of mine is N.T. Wright, “one of
681 the world’s top biblical scholars, a prolific author, and the Bishop of Durham for the
682 Church of England.” If I was able to find a Roman Catholic bishop with the biblical and
683 theological competence coupled with the ability to gently and persuasively present his
684 message to the people, I would have chosen him. But I have not. Complain to God about

685 this, but don't blame me. In fact, it may be very humbling for some Catholics to discover
 686 that an Anglican bishop has a message critical for the future of authentic Catholic
 687 renewal.

688 **An introduction to Bishop N.T. Wright**

689 Allow me to introduce Bishop Wright by offering a brief preview of how he approaches
 690 Christians like myself who firmly believed in Jesus as being a Christian with Socratic
 691 undergarments.²⁷ Here are four citations from his masterpiece, *Surprised by Hope*
 692 (2008):

693 Mention salvation, and almost all Western Christians assume that you
 694 mean going to heaven when you die [a Socratic notion]. But a
 695 moment's thought, in the light of all we have said so far, reveals that
 696 this simply cannot be right. . . .(194)

697 If God's good creation—of the world, of life as we know it, of our
 698 glorious and remarkable bodies, brains, and bloodstreams—really is
 699 good, and if God wants to reaffirm that goodness in a wonderful act of
 700 new creation at the last [Rev 20], then to see the death of the body and
 701 the escape of the soul as salvation [as did Socrates] is not simply
 702 slightly off course. . . . It is totally and utterly wrong. . . . The whole of
 703 the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, speaks out against such
 704 nonsense. (194)

705 Applied to the mission of the church, this means that we must work in
 706 the present for the advanced signs of that's eventual state of affairs . . .
 707 when his kingdom has come and his will is done "on earth as in
 708 heaven." This [mission] will of course be radically different from the
 709 kind of work we would engage in if our sole task was to save souls for
 710 a disembodied heaven [as Socrates would have us do] or simply to help
 711 people enjoy a fulfilling relationship with God as though that were the
 712 end of the matter. (211)

713 For many conservative Christians today, belief in Jesus's bodily
 714 resurrection is all about God's supernatural action in the world,
 715 legitimizing an upstairs-downstairs view of reality—a dualism in other

716 words—in which the supernatural is the real world and the natural, the
717 this-worldly, is secondary and largely irrelevant [much as how Socrates
718 thought of the distinction between spiritual and material realities].
719 (220)

720 In his book, N.T. Wright has eighteen references to Plato and Platonism. What Bishop
721 Wright does not do, however, is to show how bishops from Tertullian to Augustine were
722 first and foremost persuaded by Socrates and then, when coming into the church, they
723 were additionally converted to the Jesus movement. In their eyes, however, there was a
724 significant continuity between the teachings of Socrates and the teachings of Jesus. In
725 those few areas where there was an incompatibility, Socrates was reworked in order to fit
726 what they understood as the worldview of Jesus. Likewise, Bishop Wright does not fault
727 Platonism for having overlooked weaknesses within the Socratic worldview itself. More
728 especially Socrates came to understand the spiritual soul as immortal only as a late stage
729 in his development and his demonstrations of that “immortality” are weak or nonexistent.
730 More importantly, while Socrates was able to demonstrate the pre-existence of the soul
731 with some success, he was unable to bring forth any compelling demonstrations of (a) the
732 ability of the soul to have superior advantages of discovering the truth without the body
733 or (b) the possibility of soul-to-soul communication after death when seeing, hearing,
734 speaking, and touching were rigorously impossible. My contribution to Bishop Wright’s
735 masterpiece is thus to demonstrate to Christians that, even for Socrates, his doctrine of
736 the soul was a work in progress and that, even to this day, Christian scholars are largely
737 unaware of the seemingly insurmountable soft spots in explaining how the soul
738 communicates after death.

739 **How the mission of Jesus in Hades grew after his death**

740 While the Platonist entering the church during the second and third centuries brought
741 their confidence that they had an “immortal soul,” they were also brought with them their
742 notion that, following death, the souls of those departed entered into a place called
743 Hades.²⁸ Hades was the mythical abode of the dead—a borrowing from Hellenistic
744 culture—and should be understood as quite distinct from what the medievalists later
745 identified as “hell.” The original intent of “he was not abandoned to Hades [εἰς Ἅιδην]”
746 in a sermon in Acts (2:31) was to reinforce the reality of the death of Jesus prior to his
747 resurrection. Hades is the Greek god assigned to guard the underworld. Hades refers to
748 the guardian of the gates as well as to the place itself. Hades has no role in judging or
749 punishing those who have died; rather, his role is limited to guarding the gates such that
750 the dead cannot return to the land of the living. From the Greek perspective, the souls of
751 all the dead went to Hades. In Greek literature, Hades is normally presented as dark,
752 damp, joyless place. In medieval Christian thought, Hades gets transformed into the
753 place where the damned are awaiting the final judgment. Instead of Hades, Satan is in
754 charge and the fallen angels find their delight in tormenting the damned. In this paper, I
755 will use “hell” to designate this latter development within Christian circles.

756 In my Baltimore Catechism, I was introduced to the second century Socratic belief that
757 Jesus visited Hades following his death on the cross.

758 85. Q. Where did Christ's soul go after His death?

759 A. After Christ's death His soul descended into hell.

760 You can notice here that Hades is translated as “hell.” This caused lots of
761 misunderstanding because Christians, as a whole, are taught that only sinners are sent to
762 hell. The use of the phrase “descended into hell” is appropriate, however, because

763 second-century Greeks thought of Hades as the underworld. For everyone who dies,
764 therefore, their body slowly rots in a tomb, and their soul “descends” into the underworld.
765 But why would Jesus go to Hades? Various reasons were brought forward. I present
766 them here in chronological order.

767 **Phase #1: Jesus preaches to those drowned at the time of Noah**

768 Within ancient Judaism, the living had no contact with the dead; hence, in principal,
769 Jesus would have had no possibility of preaching to those who drowned at the time of
770 Noah’s flood. Secondly, within Judaism, those drowned in the distant past were dead,
771 buried, and eaten by fish in the sea while awaiting the resurrection of the dead and the
772 final judgment. By the opening of the second century, some sectors of the Jesus
773 movement went even further and explored new ways to extend the benefits of Jesus’
774 preaching to those who had already died. In these scenarios, Jesus’ death afforded the
775 occasion for him to be able to offer his message to those who had died and were abiding
776 in Hades awaiting the general resurrection of the dead on the last day. In 1 Peter,
777 however, one finds the phrase “Christ also suffered for sins” (3:18) being used in
778 connection with the explanation that “he was put to death in the flesh . . . and made a
779 proclamation to the spirits in prison [ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν]” (3:18f). The phrase “spirits
780 in prison” appears to refer to the spirits or shadows imprisoned in the underworld that
781 was often identified as “Hades.” In Acts 2:23, Peter says that Christ “was not abandoned
782 by God in Hades [οὔτε ἐγκατελείφθη εἰς Ἄιδην].” In Acts, Peter says nothing about
783 Jesus preaching in Hades. In 1 Peter, however, those to whom he preached are expressly
784 identified as those who “did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah,

785 during the building of the ark” (3:20). The suffering and death of Jesus thus afforded him
786 access to Hades wherein he “made a proclamation” of the Good News to those who
787 drowned at the time of Noah’s flood. The implied meaning here appears to be that those
788 who died in the flood without the benefit of a prophet’s warning were now permitted to
789 benefit from their ability to hear and respond to the Jewish prophet Jesus who has just
790 died and who was well disposed toward Gentiles.

791 **Phase #2: Jesus preaches to all Israelites who died before him**

792 Justin Martyr (d. 165 C.E.) makes reference of Jesus’ mission to those who had died. In
793 this case, however, it is not the sinners of Noah’s generation who are recipients of the
794 Good News but the Jews who had died prior to the coming of Jesus: “The Lord God
795 remembered his dead people of Israel who lay in their graves, and he descended to preach
796 to them his salvation” (*Dial.* 72.4). The intent here appears to be that the good news of
797 the soon-to-arrive Kingdom of God was being shared with the hundreds of thousands of
798 those Jews from Abraham to John the Baptist. Even though they are admittedly dead,
799 “laying in their graves,” they receive the message of God’s future salvation intended for
800 those “sleeping” in hope. Here again the presumption is that Jesus died and, as a result,
801 he had an opportunity to preach the Good News to those who had died prior to his three
802 years of preaching to the Jews living in Galilee. Justin Martyr is thus strongly influenced
803 with the Greek perspective on the condition of the dead but he retains the Jewish notion
804 that the dead “lay in their graves” (as opposed to having their souls gathered in Hades)²⁹.

805 Clement of Alexandria (d. 215 C.E.) further extended the mission to the dead. In his way
806 of thinking, Jesus preached his Good News to the righteous Jews in Hades (as just noted),

807 but then, by way of extending the mission to the dead, Clement tells us that the Apostles,
808 following their own deaths, descended into Hades where they preached to the pagan
809 philosophers who had lived righteous lives (*Strom.* VI, 6:45, 5). Thus, 1 Peter, Justin
810 Martyr, and Clement of Alexander form something of progressive stepping stones
811 whereby the efficacy of Jesus' prophetic message was gradually understood to have
812 reached backward in time to liberate progressively larger groups of those righteous
813 persons who had died without the saving benefit of have heard the Good News preached
814 by Jesus. What is evident here is that Jesus is not able to preach to the dead by virtue of
815 his divinity. If this were the case, then the Apostles would not be able to preach to the
816 dead philosophers.

817 **Phase #3: Jesus completes a commando raid that binds the gate-keeper Hades and**
818 **extends Jesus' preaching all the way back to Adam**



The
third-
century
Gospel of

823 *Bartholomew* offers the first instance wherein Jesus' foray into Hades was fully
824 dramatized. The Gospel portrays the "King of Glory" as menacingly descending the stairs
825 of a thousand steps into the underworld. Hades, the god of the underworld, is depicted as
826 trembling uncontrollably as he descends. Having arrived, Jesus "shattered the iron bars"
827 of the gates of Hades and then grabs the god Hades³⁰ himself and pummeled him "with a
828 hundred blows and bound him with fetters that cannot be loosed" (19). Here now, the
829 *Gospel of Bartholomew* dramatizes the commando rescue operation undertaken by Jesus
830 in order to save "Adam and all the patriarchs" (9). When Jesus meets Adam, Jesus
831 specifically says to him, "I was hung upon the cross for your sake and for the sake of
832 your children" (22).

833 Jesus' death could be here understood, not as a penal substitution for the sin of Adam, but
834 as the necessary means for gaining access to the underworld.³¹ Hades is the pagan god
835 assigned to guard the underworld. Hades has no role in judging or punishing those who
836 have died; rather, his role is limited to guarding the gates so as to prevent the dead from
837 returning to the land of the living. By destroying the gates and the gate-keeper, Jesus
838 shows that he now has divine powers that enable him to violently bind Hades and to
839 replace his administration over those who have died. The *Gospel of Bartholomew* marks a
840 high point in so far as the efficacy of Jesus' preaching gets extended backward all the
841 way to Adam. This would imply that those who did not hear the Good News during their
842 lifetime would now be given the opportunity, never the less, to hear it in the afterlife,
843 either from Jesus himself or from his disciples. With this fabulous mission in mind, the
844 phrase, "he descended into Hades," was added to the Apostles' Creed during the fourth
845 century.

846 What is plain to observe is that the *Gospel of Bartholomew* firmly centers the efficacy of
847 Jesus upon his “presence” and upon his preaching mission—“that I might come down on
848 earth to heal the sin of the ignorant and give to men the truth of God” (sec. 65). Secondly,
849 the *Gospel of Bartholomew* knows nothing of inherited sin or of the Gates of Paradise
850 being permanently closed due to the sin of Adam. In line with the other Church Fathers, it
851 was the Gates of Hades that needed to be broken down in order for God’s plan of
852 liberation to take place. Phase #1 and #2 presume that those who accept the good news of
853 Jesus will remain in Hades until the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day. Now,
854 however, **Jesus takes the souls of the righteous with him into Heaven.** Thirdly, the
855 *Gospel of Bartholomew* has an interest in narrating how the Fall of the Angels in
856 heaven³² led directly to the Fall of Adam in his earthly paradise. Once God created Adam
857 “in the image and likeness of God,” the Creator commands the angels to worship Adam
858 (sec. 51-58). Those angels who disobeyed this direct order were expelled from heaven to
859 earth where they became the sworn enemies of Adam and his race. The stage was thus
860 being set to interpret the serpent in Gen 2-3 as one of the fallen race of angels who were
861 intent upon wrecking their revenge upon Adam and his race. The stage is also being set
862 to put the fallen angels in charge of the administration of Hades.

863 *The Medieval Synthesis of Thomas Aquinas*

864 Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), along with other medieval theologians, attempted to
865 consolidate and to harmonize the diverse traditions of the first ten centuries. According to
866 Aquinas, Jesus descends into the underworld, not to bind Hades and to break the bars of
867 those imprisoned there, but to gather the elect and to lead them into the gates of heaven

868 that have been opened due to his atoning death on the cross. The underworld, at this
869 point, is still being understood as the abode of all the dead, both the righteous and the
870 sinners. **Now, however, fire torments are introduced.** Thus the Hades of the *Gospel of*
871 *Bartholomew* has now been transformed in the hell of the medievalist theologians. The
872 souls of those who will be damned at the Final Judgment are already in torment. The
873 souls of those destined to be saved by Jesus' experience only a temporal punishment
874 calculated to purify them from their former sins. Fire for them is purgatorial and, in due
875 course, later centuries will make a clear distinction *in place* between those in purgatory
876 and those in hell. This need not concern us here. For our purposes, we need only to note
877 that Jesus' descent into Hades/hell has come full circle. Jesus comes not just to preach to
878 the generation of the flood as in 1 Peter. Nor does Jesus mount a commando raid to break
879 down the gates of Hades. Rather, Jesus' death opens the Gates of Heaven, and his descent
880 into hell is specifically to take those who have lived righteously and to carry them up,
881 with him, into Heaven, where they too get a foretaste of the delights that God has in store
882 for those who love him. Here then are the broad lines whereby the second-century
883 domain of Hades gets slowly turned into the place where the damned are eternally
884 tortured in fire.

885 **Reflections on the Expansion of Jesus' Preaching**

886 **Mission in Hades**

887 1. The Gospels never present Jesus as making any inquiries regarding an afterlife in
888 Hades. In the case of Lazarus who was raised to life after four days in the tomb
889 (John 11:1–44) and in the case of Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter raised to life

890 nearly a full day after her death (Mark 5:21-43 et al.), Jesus makes no attempt to
891 prompt those brought back to life to talk about their experiences in Hades. If
892 Jesus had a firm belief in an immortal soul, then he would have used these
893 occasions to confirm what he believed. The same thing, needless to say, pertains
894 to the followers of Jesus. None of his disciples asks him about his experiences
895 during those three days when he was dead. The reason for this is that neither Jesus
896 nor those with him expected any experience whatsoever after death. They
897 believed that "God made us from dust and unto dust we shall return" (Gen 3:19
898 slightly modified).

899 2. What is noteworthy is that the Gospels tell us that "Jesus died" in precisely the
900 same way that other men and women died. Moreover, the oldest creed known to
901 us, the Apostles' Creed says simply, "He [Jesus] was crucified, died, and was
902 buried." Neither the Gospels nor the Creed remarks that Jesus exhibited super
903 powers (namely, an immortal soul or a divine nature) that made it impossible to
904 destroy him completely. Likewise, he suffered and died due to the inhuman
905 brutality of a Roman crucifixion. "Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last"
906 (Mark 15:37 and par.). Ἐξέπνευσε is the Greek term that literally means "he
907 breathed out" and, since the verb is in the Aorist Indicative, this signals that a
908 single, one-time event is being specified, thus, "his final breath" is clearly implied
909 by the original Greek text. It is noteworthy that none of the details surrounding
910 the death of Jesus in the Gospels enforces the idea that his immortal soul survived
911 the crucifixion and that his soul descended into Hades.

912 3. If the Gospels had said, "he descended into Hades," that would imply that Hades,

913 the god of the Underworld, actually existed and that Jesus needed to have been
914 buried with two coins in his mouth. Why so? So that he could pay the boatman,
915 Charon. For the dead were conducted, according to Greek legends, to the
916 underworld of Hades by Hermes; but the way was barred, according to popular
917 accounts, by the marshy river Styx. Across this river, Charon ferried all who had
918 received at descent burial, and coins were placed in the mouths of corpses to pay
919 the fare. Yet, the Gospels never draw our attention to anything like this. We
920 must assume, therefore, that Jesus had no coins and thus, he had no way to pass
921 over the river Styx. In sum, we have firm reason to conclude that Jesus NEVER
922 descended into Hades.

923 4. In the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus ascends *alone* into heaven and waits, at the right
924 hand of God, for the signal from his Father that it is time for him to return.
925 According to Acts, Jesus had been “appearing to them during forty days and
926 speaking about the kingdom of God.” During this period, Jesus never reminds his
927 disciples that they have immortal souls that will enable them to join him in
928 Heaven after they die. Furthermore, Acts never imagines that Jesus himself has to
929 die in order to enter heaven. Far from it. Acts tell us, “as they were watching, he
930 was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). No one thought
931 that Jesus had powers of levitation. Hence, he needed a “cloud” that would lift him
932 up and carry him away. For the biblical writers, “clouds” functioned as sky-taxis.³³
933 Ever the Lord God, it would seem, needed to rely upon such clouds when he
934 travelled from heaven to earth (Ps. 18:9; 104:3; Isa. 19:1; Dan. 7:13; Nah. 1:3; 1
935 Thess. 4:17). This demonstrates to us (a) that the biblical writers thought that clouds

936 were quite solid and (b) that they could easily serve to transport Jesus to heaven.
937 More importantly, this use of a cloud-taxi tacitly presupposes that Jesus had a body
938 that weighed between 160-180 pounds and that he was not self-propelled (like
939 Superman) or skilled in levitation. The Greeks thought that souls of the dead could
940 move about without any need for sky-taxis. But this was so because they were
941 persuaded that the soul was spiritual and weightless.

942 5. The *Gospel of Bartholomew* makes a case for imagining that nearly a billion souls
943 of the righteous ascended with Jesus into heaven. In Aquinas, all the souls of the
944 righteous, from Adam on forward, are carried by the resurrected Jesus into heaven
945 where they will immediately enjoy the Beatific Vision. When Jesus returns at the
946 end times, all of these same saints will come to earth with him,³⁴ their bodies will
947 then be resurrected from the grave, and both the living and the dead will be
948 judged at the final judgment. However, because a story has been repeated for a
949 long time (1800 years) and because it has been credited as true by Thomas
950 Aquinas (the medieval genius) does not thereby serve to offer us proof positive
951 that it is true and that God wants us to credit it as true. The absence of the
952 doctrine of the immortal soul in the teachings of Jesus plus the doubtful ability of
953 Socrates to convince us that “immortal souls” can continue to exist independent of
954 the body and to be able to achieve soul-to-soul communications in the afterlife are
955 just the starters. Noticing how the Gospels never present Jesus as concerned
956 about Hades and how second and third century stories freely conflate the
957 achievements of Jesus in Hades further erodes our confidence. Thus, I must
958 conclude that the Gospels offer no evidence that Jesus entered into Hades. All the

959 imaginative stories of how Jesus preached in Hades are thus fanciful inventions
960 fueled by pious imaginations. As in the case of Dr. Ehrman considered above, we
961 can allow that such stories provided some measure of emotional comfort to early
962 Christians; yet, we are primarily bound to consider whether such stories are true.
963 And to this we must consider that they had have no merit in the worldview of
964 Jesus; hence, they will have no merit among Christians like N.T. Wright who
965 wishes to return to the original faith and hope of Jesus. These stories must be
966 abandoned in the same way that the immortal soul needs to be abandoned.

967 The Russian Orthodox archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev (b. 1966) takes his belief that Christ
968 descended into hell as a conqueror as his point of departure for concluding that (a) this
969 renders Hades as a place where God is emphatically present and (b) this teaching of
970 Jesus reveals God's providential plan to make salvation available to the billion souls that
971 had already died prior to Jesus.³⁵ Such an imaginative reconstruction serves to remove
972 the seeming injustice of God in sending Jesus so late in human history. This
973 reconstruction also removes the seemingly arbitrary construction of requiring repentance
974 prior to death. Would not the souls in Hades have the ability to reflect upon their lives
975 and, in many cases, to come to a point of conversion? Would this reflection on their
976 lives not be facilitated by the preaching of Jesus and his Apostles? And, if God
977 enthusiastically rejoices at the post-death-conversions prompted by the preaching of
978 Jesus, would it not be safe to presume that those who preached in the name of Jesus in
979 Hades continued to do so long after Jesus had left them? If I still believed that the
980 mission of Jesus and the mission of his church was to save souls from an eternity of
981 hellfire, I would accept Hilarion Alfeyev's reflections as bringing the "Good News"

982 back into the menacing Christian doctrines of hell. Maybe this is the message that would
983 have prevented Dr. Ehrman from being traumatized as a young boy.

984 **When and why did the resurrection of the dead first take**
985 **root in Judaism?**

986 The long Jewish tradition had nothing to do with rewards and punishments that were to
987 be delivered after death. Nor did the Jewish tradition ever take the position that Yahweh,
988 who is the author of life, was very stingy when he only gave humans sixty to a hundred
989 years of life and, as a result, nothing less than eternal life was required. Furthermore, the
990 notion of a resurrection of the dead occupies only a thin slice of Judaism that emerged a
991 mere 150 years before the birth of Jesus.

992 For Abraham (c. 1800 B.C.E.), for instance, there was no expectation of life after death.
993 What attracted Abraham was the possibility that his children would form a great nation
994 (Gen 12:1-3). Again and again, this is the promise that attracted Abraham to choose
995 Yahweh for his God (Gen 15:1-21, 17:1-8).

996 Even after Yahweh liberated his people after they suffered 400 years of slavery in Egypt,
997 and he made a new covenant with Israel, the expectation was that, if Israel trusted in
998 Yahweh alone and abided by his commandments, then Israel was assured of those
999 blessings important at the time because Israel was a small tribe surrounded by hostile
1000 neighbors. Listen to the blessings that Yahweh promised his people:

1001 If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all
1002 his commandments that I am commanding you today, the LORD your
1003 God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these

1004 blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the
1005 LORD your God: Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you
1006 be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your
1007 ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle
1008 and the issue of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your
1009 kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed
1010 shall you be when you go out. The LORD will cause your enemies who
1011 rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against
1012 you one way, and flee before you seven ways. All the peoples of the
1013 earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they
1014 shall be afraid of you. (Deut 28:1-4, 6-7, 10 NRSV)

1015 Nothing is mentioned here about rewards in Heaven which are prepared for those who keep
1016 Yahweh's commandments. No threats are made against the enemies of Israel that Yahweh
1017 will punish them in Hell for an eternity.

1018 A covenant is the standard solemn "contract" in the ancient world. Powerful men were
1019 making contracts with each other. Tribes were making such contracts with their allies and
1020 with their gods. At the end of a contract, one affixes the blessings attached to fulfilling the
1021 contract. Then one affixes the curses attached to a failure to meet the conditions of the
1022 contract. In the case of Israel's covenant with Yahweh, here are the curses attached to
1023 noncompliance:

1024 But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing
1025 all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you
1026 today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you:
1027 Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field.
1028 Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be
1029 the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your
1030 cattle and the issue of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come
1031 in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. The LORD will send upon
1032 you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do,
1033 until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of
1034 your deeds, because you have forsaken me. The sky over your head
1035 shall be bronze, and the earth under you iron. The LORD will change
1036 the rain of your land into powder, and only dust shall come down upon
1037 you from the sky until you are destroyed. The LORD will cause you to

1038 be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out against them one
1039 way and flee before them seven ways. You shall become an object of
1040 horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. (Deut 28:15-20, 23-25 NRSV)

1041 Notice that nothing is said of any life after death. Notice that nothing is said of the
1042 resurrection. Notice that nothing is said about going to Heaven or being cast down into
1043 Hell.

1044 The first Jewish appeal to the resurrection of the dead came as an offshoot of the
1045 Maccabean Revolt.³⁶ In brief, Alexander the Great (d. 323 B.C.E.) created a great
1046 empire. Territories that were conquered were expected to give tribute and to participate
1047 actively in Greek culture. A gymnasium was built in Jerusalem (1 Macc 1:14). In order
1048 to gain favor with the Greeks, some Jews began to conceal their circumcision and to join
1049 in Greek festivals. King Antiochus decreed that in the name of unity, “all should give up
1050 their particular customs” (1 Macc 1:41). Altars were built in Jerusalem to honor Zeus,
1051 Athena, and Dionysus. Rites to Olympian Zeus, including temple prostitution, were
1052 introduced into the Jerusalem temple itself (2 Macc 6:2). Seven brothers and their
1053 mother were arrested for their non-compliance. Antiochus cruelly tortured the sons, one
1054 by one (7:1-42). Each son remains steadfast and “to cherish the hope that God gives of
1055 being raised again by him” (7:14). The logic here is that “the Lord God is watching over
1056 us” (7:6) and, because we have willingly surrendered our lives in order to adhere to our
1057 ancestral laws, God will return us to our life in the future. “But for you [Antiochus] their
1058 will be no resurrection to life” (7:14). Notice here that the seven brothers never say that
1059 they will go to Heaven and that Antiochus would be sent to Hades. Notice also that
1060 “resurrection to life” implies resuming their life on earth.

1061 Roughly 180 years later, Jesus of Nazareth is calling disciples and circulating in the

1062 synagogues of Galilee. The synagogue is most probably an offshoot of the Maccabean
 1063 Revolt. Prior to the Pharisees and their synagogues, the sacrificial system within the
 1064 temple served to centralize worship, governance, and interpretations of Torah under the
 1065 direction of the Aaronide priests. When these same priests capitulated to Greek
 1066 universalism, the Maccabean revolt occurred (167 B.C.E.). Following in the footsteps of
 1067 this revolt, the Pharisees challenged the leadership of the temple priests by taking steps to
 1068 decentralize Jewish worship. According to the Pharisees, each and every Jew had the
 1069 right, even the obligation, to directly contact God in their homes, in their shops, in their
 1070 synagogues.

1071 This was a truly a revolutionary step, for nowhere in the Pentateuch is
 1072 prayer obligatory. Although prayer may indeed have been as old as
 1073 Israel, it had never been required by law. The Pharisees were therefore
 1074 once again going off on a highly original tack when they made
 1075 mandatory the saying of the **Shema**--"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our
 1076 God, the Lord is one"--in the morning and evening, and when they
 1077 introduced the recitation of the prayer now called the **Amidah** or
 1078 **Shemoneh Esreh** as the prayer par excellence, when they required
 1079 each individual to utter benedictions before meals, after meals, and on
 1080 other occasions. . . .³⁷

1081 In addition, the Pharisees emphasized that every young man should find a teacher so that
 1082 he could learn to read and to interpret the Torah for himself. Prior to this era, the priests
 1083 were regarded as the official interpreters of Torah. Now, however, the Pharisees are
 1084 deliberately ignoring the priests. This explains why Jesus was able to present himself as a
 1085 teacher in the synagogues and why his disciples learned from him how to interpret and to
 1086 live Torah. Needless to say, the Pharisees promoted the resurrection. This probably
 1087 explains why Jesus never takes time to explain the expectation of the resurrection when
 1088 addressing his disciples and the crowds anxious to hear him while he is in Galilee.³⁸ If

1089 Jesus had been born a hundred years earlier, faith in the Resurrection would have been
1090 very thin and the revolutionary aspects of the local synagogues not sufficiently
1091 established. If Jesus had been born a hundred years later, the Temple would have been
1092 destroyed and more than 200,000 Jews would have been killed in the process. Jerusalem
1093 has been colonized by Romans. Most Jews would be living outside Palestine. Jesus
1094 would not be able to gather large crowds or to make a circuit of the synagogues as
1095 detailed in the Synoptics. In brief, Jesus shows up in history at just the right moment.

1096 When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, the issue to the resurrection comes up as a controversial
1097 question only because the temple priests did not believe in a resurrection. “The same day
1098 some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a
1099 question’ (Matt 22:23 and par.). Some Jews may have limited this resurrection to the
1100 martyrs. Others may have envisioned that a resurrection of all the righteous Jews would
1101 take place prior to the Messianic Kingdom. Still others may have expected a universal
1102 resurrection of all those who had lived, the good and the bad, covering all the nations on
1103 the face of the earth. For those who expected that Yahweh would come to establish a
1104 universal Kingdom that covered the whole earth, it might have been seen as just that
1105 Yahweh would allow the just of all earlier periods to enter the universal Kingdom. In the
1106 Book of Revelation, both these positions are advocated: first a selective resurrection prior
1107 to the Messianic Kingdom (Rev 20:4-5); then a universal resurrection prior to the
1108 universal Kingdom (Rev 20:5).

1109 Notice that the resurrection is always presented as a blessing that occurs on the face of
1110 the earth. No one was thinking that those who were raised should be taken up to Heaven.
1111 There were only a few individuals in Heaven. These were those persons whom God had

1112 chosen to give a leading role in his future plans for his Kingdom: Elijah and Jesus. One
1113 has to wait until the end of the first century before one can imagine in the Book of
1114 Revelation that 144,000 souls of the martyrs had taken their place in Heaven under the
1115 altar calling to God to bring vengeance upon those who killed them. At the resurrection,
1116 these souls would all return to earth in order to be reunited with their bodies. No one
1117 expected to spend eternity with God in Heaven. No one expected eternal life involved
1118 only souls in Heaven. Everyone assumed that humans find their blessings on the face of
1119 the earth. This is especially true of the Book of Revelation which insists that God
1120 himself is getting ready to make his dwelling place AMONG HIS PEOPLE; hence, on
1121 the earth. When he arrives on his throne, we hear a loud voice declaring, "See, the home
1122 of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and
1123 God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more;
1124 mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev 21:3-4). In brief, God arrives on earth,
1125 and he immediately sets himself to healing his people.

1126 As I see it, the principal inducement to bring the souls of the righteous to Heaven comes
1127 from Socrates. Not even the Greeks imagined that humans could live on Mount
1128 Olympus, the abode of the gods. Even for the Greeks, therefore, there is a separation
1129 between the realm of the gods and the realm of humans. For Socrates, however, his
1130 doctrine of the immortality of the souls and his presupposition that souls experience a
1131 supreme advantage when they are separated from their bodies led him to suppose that
1132 death gave humans a supreme advantage because it made possible entry into the "light of
1133 truth." When this is understood, then it becomes clear that Christianity abandoned the
1134 Jewish faith that God blesses us on earth when it borrowed from and later became

1135 entirely enamored by the faith of Socrates. I deliberately speak of the “faith of Socrates”
1136 because Socrates had no firm and irrefutable evidence that the soul after death continues
1137 to have its powers and that soul-to-soul communication is somehow possible after death
1138 (despite the clear evidence during our lives that this is impossible). This issue needs
1139 further examination. I have contented myself with showing that experts in the field of
1140 Socratic doctrine have exhibited the soft spots of Platonic theories.

1141 **The second-century transformation of Hades into a place** 1142 **designed for tormenting souls**

1143 In the second and third century, Christian and Jewish literature describing Hades³⁹ took
1144 an ugly turn. Up to this point, there was no enforced suffering for those who had died
1145 and took their place in Hades; now, however, those in Hades were being actively
1146 tortured. Up to this point, Hades was largely cold and dark; now, however, eternal fires
1147 caused extreme discomfort. Up to this point, Hades never harmed a single soul; now,
1148 however, Satan and his devils have moved in and their purpose is to continually torment
1149 the damned. Up to this point, the focus was on the saving hope that Jesus brought to the
1150 souls of those who had died without the benefit of a prophet. Now, however, the focus
1151 was on the horrendous pain that the Lord God would bring upon the souls of his enemies
1152 (both human and angelic).

1153 Sample text #1: According to the *Testament of Isaac*, a second century Christianized text,
1154 the patriarch Isaac, shortly before his death, is given a tour of Hell and Heaven by an
1155 angel who takes on the appearance of Abraham. Here is a selection where the souls of

1156 the dead are tormented:

1157 He [the angel] led me on and brought me to a fiery river [in Hades]. . . .
 1158 And I saw a host of souls submerged in it, and those who were in that
 1159 river cried out and wept aloud, and there was a great commotion and
 1160 much groaning. But it is a discerning fire that does not touch the
 1161 righteous, yet burns up sinners and boils them in the stench that
 1162 surrounds them. . . . I said to the angel, “My eyes cannot endure it; for
 1163 how long must these torments go on?” He said to me, “Until the
 1164 merciful God has pity.” (9:1-3).

1165 Notice the presumption operating here is that the souls of the righteous are mixed in with
 1166 the souls of sinners. The former are not touched by the river of fire; the later are horribly
 1167 burnt up. For still others, the fire is intended for their conversion: “They [each of the
 1168 600,000 angelic tormentors] spend a year tormenting a man for every hour that he spends
 1169 sinning—if he did not repent, that is, before he [his soul] went forth from the body”
 1170 (*Testament of Isaac* 8:14). In the end, “God has pity” (9:3). Thus, in this early vision of
 1171 Hell, God is merciful and he will accordingly assign an end to the sufferings of each
 1172 person. Later visions of Hell know nothing of this. Thus the *Testament of Isaac* illustrates
 1173 how the “fiery river” is experienced differently by three classes of persons: (a)
 1174 unrepentant sinners are burned up; (b) the righteous are untouched; (c) the rest repent
 1175 after a period of suffering. Thus, in this text one gets a very early version of hell, heaven,
 1176 and purgatory existing in the same place. The climax of this text is also very revealing:
 1177 the soul of Isaac is taken up into Heaven to await the time when the thousand-year reign
 1178 of “our Savior Jesus Christ” will commence. The assumption here is that the soul of Isaac
 1179 never finds fulfillment in Heaven. Rather, the soul of Isaac is awaiting the resurrection of
 1180 the dead and the thousand-year reign of the Messiah. This harmonizes well with
 1181 Mathew’s Gospel where Jesus speaks of how “many will come from east and west and will
 1182 eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 8:11).⁴⁰

1183 The text of Matt 8:11 is very insightful. It first of all reminds us that, in the coming
 1184 kingdom, there will be eating with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The kingdom accordingly
 1185 is a feast for Jews. We Gentiles are the outsiders (from the east and the west) who will
 1186 join the insiders. Those welcoming us into the eschatological feast will be Jews—
 1187 Abraham, Isaac, Jesus of Nazareth, and Paul of Tarsus. Jesus, accordingly, was not
 1188 creating a new religious movement; he was extending and transforming Judaism. This
 1189 helps explain why it is that the Testament of Isaac reaches out primarily to Jews.
 1190 Likewise, in Phase 2 above, Jesus outreach in Hades is reserved to Jews. Secondly, this
 1191 feast takes place on earth and not in Heaven. Souls in Heaven would be incapable of
 1192 eating. Matthew wrote his Gospel using Mark as his first draft. Mark always uses
 1193 “Kingdom of God” whereas Matthew, in almost all cases, edits Mark to read “Kingdom
 1194 of Heaven.” Today we retain this habit when we say, “Heaven forbid!” or “Heaven help
 1195 us.” “Kingdom of Heaven”=“Kingdom of God” just as “Heaven help us.”=“God help
 1196 us.”

1197 Sample text #2: According to the Apocalypse of Peter, another second century Christian
 1198 text, Peter is given a tour of hell. Here is a sample of what he witnessed:

1199 25 And I saw the murderers and them that were consenting to them cast
 1200 into a strait place full of evil, creeping things, and smitten by those
 1201 beasts, and so turning themselves about in that torment. And upon them
 1202 were set worms like clouds of darkness. And the souls of them that
 1203 were murdered stood and looked upon the torment of those murderers
 1204 and said: “O God, righteous is thy judgement.” . . . 27 And other men
 1205 and women were being burned up to their middle and cast down in a
 1206 dark place and scourged by evil spirits, and having their entrails
 1207 devoured by worms that rested not. And these were they that had
 1208 persecuted the righteous and delivered them up. 28 And near to them
 1209 again were women and men gnawing their lips and in torment, and
 1210 having iron heated in the fire set against their eyes. And these were they

1211 that did blaspheme and speak evil of the way of righteousness. 29 And
 1212 over against these were yet others, men and women, gnawing their
 1213 tongues and having flaming fire in their mouths. And these were the
 1214 false witnesses. (Apocalypse of Peter 25, 27-29)

1215 Here again the souls of the righteous are mixed in with the souls of sinners. The “souls of
 1216 them that were murdered” not only watch their killers being “smitten” [torn apart?] by
 1217 worms [maggots?], they also address God saying, “Righteous is thy judgement.”
 1218 Accordingly the victims fully endorse the measure of vengeance that God inflicts upon
 1219 those who harmed them.

1220 The logic here would seem to be that Christians are required to “love their enemies”
 1221 (Matt 5:43-48 and par.); God, however, is not bound by this restriction. In fact,
 1222 Christians can afford to be non-retaliatory precisely because they rely upon the Lord God
 1223 to secure a full measure of retaliation. In the second-century Book of Revelation, for
 1224 example, John the Apostle is given a tour of heaven where he is shown how the souls of
 1225 144,000 martyrs (12,000 out of each of the twelve tribes of Israel) are restlessly awaiting
 1226 divine retaliation when they cry out, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be
 1227 before you judge and avenge our blood? (Rev 6:10). In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is being
 1228 presented as praying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing [οὐ
 1229 γὰρ οἴδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν]” (Luke 23:34) while, at an earlier point, Jesus made it quite clear
 1230 that the temple priests were the “wicked tenants” who knew precisely what they were
 1231 doing when they deliberately killed “the beloved son” (Luke 20:14 and par.). The
 1232 Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen is a thinly disguised metaphor revealing the long-
 1233 standing murderous intentions of the priests. The climax is the following: “What then
 1234 will the owner of the vineyard [the God of Israel] do to them? He will come and destroy
 1235 those tenants! (Luke 20:15-16) As a result of this, most Christian commentators have

1236 agreed among themselves that the destruction of Jerusalem in 66-70 was the prophetic
 1237 completion of Jesus' words. Notice that Jesus does not threaten the temple priests with
 1238 eternal hellfire. Jesus threat takes place in real time on the face of the earth.

1239 All in all, sensitive pastors want to play down the horrors of God's vengeance on the
 1240 grounds that "God is Love" (1 John 4:8; 1 Cor 13:4-8). Other pastors believe that the
 1241 texts above demonstrate that God alone has the right and the power to use retributive
 1242 violence to achieve his glorious ends. For still others, they believe that the tortures of hell
 1243 are absolutely required in order to demonstrate that those who escape the consequences
 1244 of their sins while on earth will receive a full measure of retributive justice in hell. On
 1245 the other hand, some pastors would be ready to join me in calling into question the very
 1246 notion that pain and suffering can somehow make right former sins. Thus I say:

1247 Our Father does not condone torture.⁴¹ Any literature that paints our
 1248 Father as setting up internment camps and torture routines for certain
 1249 classes of dead persons is not to be trusted. By its very nature, this
 1250 literature demeans our God. No religion that preaches that life on this
 1251 earth is a preparation for the afterlife in hell or heaven is to be trusted.
 1252 No religion that teaches that humans have an immortal soul is to be
 1253 trusted. Our Father in Heaven has not designed secret detention centers
 1254 for the damned. We have been told a pack of lies. The Testament of
 1255 Isaac lies when it says that the Patriarch Isaac visited Hell and Heaven
 1256 with an angel. The Apocalypse of Peter lied when it presented Peter as
 1257 witnessing Christians as having flaming tongues due to their false
 1258 witnessing. The Book of Revelation lies when it presents Jesus, "the
 1259 Lamb" (Rev 5:6, 12), as complicitly involved in authorizing "Death
 1260 and Hades . . . to kill one fourth of the earth with sword, famine, and
 1261 pestilence" (Rev 6:8). Once again I say, "Our Father does not condone
 1262 torture for any reason whatsoever"; hence, anyone who received
 1263 visions of torture in Hades was deceived by false revelations. All the
 1264 canonized Saints of the Church were likewise deceived when they
 1265 reported their visions of hell.⁴²

1266 **Jesus' Central Message: God's Kingdom Is Coming to**

1267 **Us—Get Ready for his Arrival**

1268 According to the Synoptics, the coming kingdom was the central metaphor dominating

1269 Jesus' public ministry:

1270 The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the
1271 Kingdom of God. Of this there can be no doubt and today no scholar
1272 does, in fact, doubt it. Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the
1273 Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves a function in
1274 relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it.⁴³

1275 In Matthew's Gospel, for instance, Jesus' public ministry is summarized by saying that
1276 "he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Gospel of the
1277 *kingdom*. . ." (Matt 4:23 and par.). And again, when Jesus is presented as anticipating the
1278 future, it is summarized in these terms: "This Gospel of the *kingdom* will be preached
1279 throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come"
1280 (Matt 24:14). The "end" referred to here is the passing of this present era in order to
1281 make way for the new era of the Kingdom of God.

1282 Heralding the kingdom did not bring the kingdom into existence. Heralding the kingdom
1283 served to prepare God's people to get ready for God's arrival. Most of Jesus' parables are
1284 really metaphors of getting ready. For the women, Jesus tells the parable of how ten
1285 virgins, friends of the bride, kept their lamps burning as they awaited the arrival of the
1286 groom with his buddies who, it seems, completely lost track of time and arrive after
1287 midnight (Matt 25:1-13). For the men, Jesus tells the parable of how the male servants
1288 need to keep busy (literally, "keep their loins gird") while their master is away at a
1289 wedding feast and could arrive home at any moment. When the master returns, he
1290 surprises those who are ready by girding himself, setting a table, and waiting personally

1291 on his faithful servants (Luke 12:35-40). Parables such as this emphasize that God was
1292 coming to gather Israel into his kingdom (the feast), that the moment of his arrival is
1293 uncertain, that he will arrive in the dead of night (when evil is afoot), and that those
1294 awaiting him needed to keep busy (about their Father's business) until then.

1295 The first Passover marked the night when God entered into history to liberate his people;
1296 thus, for most Jews, there was the anticipation that God's final entrance into history might
1297 well overtake them as they celebrated Passover "again this year." In this spirit, therefore,
1298 Jesus said to his disciples, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you" (Luke
1299 22:15), and after drinking the cup, he said "From now on I will not drink of the fruit of
1300 the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18). Jesus went to his death,
1301 tragically, without seeing the kingdom that he had so ardently preached and longed for.

1302 The Acts of the Apostles makes it clear that the proclamation of the kingdom continued
1303 to form the central agenda of the early church. Philip, one of the Seven ordained by the
1304 Twelve, is presented as reaching out to the Samaritans in these terms: "he preached Good
1305 News about the *kingdom* of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12). Likewise,
1306 Luke characterized the mission of Paul in these same terms: "he entered the synagogue
1307 and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the *kingdom* of God"
1308 (Acts 19:8). The whole of Acts closes with this summary of Paul's final mission to the
1309 Romans: "he [Paul] lived there [in Rome] for two whole years . . . preaching the *kingdom*
1310 of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered" (Acts
1311 28:31). In sum, what Luke presents to us is that, at the time of his writing of Acts, the
1312 proclamation of the coming kingdom of God was the Good News that formed the focal
1313 message of Jesus and his early disciples. Furthermore, Luke also makes plain that at the

1314 time when Jesus' importance in the drama of salvation was being expanded, Jesus' role
1315 was always integrated within and subordinated to God's kingdom.⁴⁴

1316 Once this is accepted, then it becomes crystal clear that **Jesus never, never, never**
1317 **anticipated a mass exodus from earth in order to spend an eternity in Heaven.** This
1318 is not the good news preached by Jesus. It is the good news of Socrates that enabled him
1319 to imagine that drinking the hemlock would liberate his soul and enable him to enter into
1320 "a better place." The issue with Socrates is thus not merely whether the soul is immortal
1321 and whether it retains its powers after separating from the body. Rather, the issue is that
1322 the philosophy/theology of Socrates was able to totally subvert the arrival of God's
1323 Kingdom on earth preached by Jesus and the Jewish prophets. I close then with the
1324 decisive perspective of Bishop N.T. Wright:

1325 Mention salvation, and almost all Western Christians assume that you
1326 mean going to heaven when you die. But a moment's thought, in the
1327 light of all we have said so far, reveals that this simply cannot be right. .
1328 . . If God's good creation—of the world, of life as we know it, or our
1329 glorious and remarkable bodies, brains, and bloodstreams—really is
1330 good . . . , then to see the death of the body and the escape of the soul
1331 as salvation is not simply slightly off course, in need of a few subtle
1332 alterations and modifications. It is totally and utterly wrong!

1333 As we have seen, the whole of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation,
1334 speaks out against such nonsense. It is, however, what most Western
1335 Christians, including most Bible Christians of whatever sort, actually
1336 believe. This is a serious state of affairs [and my intention is to join
1337 with others in correcting it].⁴⁵

1338 I admire what Bishop Wright has done by way of showing that the salvation of God does
1339 not entail "going to heaven" after death. Nor can salvation be defined exclusively as
1340 achieving a reconciliation with God. Rather, our ultimate salvation consists in assisting
1341 God to establish his kingdom on earth. This will be the time when the new heaven

1342 descends in order to kiss the new earth. Of this marriage, Bishop Wright says as follows:

1343 Of the first-century believers who accepted Jesus as Messiah, many
 1344 were convinced that the world would be transformed in their own
 1345 lifetimes. This inauguration, however, was far from complete and
 1346 required the active participation of God's people practicing social
 1347 justice, nonviolence and forgiveness to become fulfilled, Wright said.

1348 Once the kingdom is complete, he said, the bodily resurrection will
 1349 follow with a fully restored creation here on earth. "What we are doing
 1350 at the moment is building for the kingdom," Wright explained. Indeed,
 1351 doing God's kingdom work has come to be known in Judaism as *tikkun*
 1352 *olam*, or "repairing the world." This Hebrew phrase is a "close cousin"
 1353 to the ancient beliefs embraced by Jesus and his followers, Wright said.

1354 **What would happen if we returned to the faith of Jesus?**

1355 Here are some of the advantages of standing with N.T. Wright:

1356 • Death would again be perceived as the natural and divinely ordained end of a
 1357 human life. There would no longer be any reason for sugarcoating death by
 1358 pretending (a) that the deceased "go to a better place," (b) that the deceased are
 1359 reunited "with their friends and relatives," or (c) that the deceased are supremely
 1360 happy "when embraced by God for all eternity." In its place, we can again tell
 1361 ourselves and our children the truth—that each of us was created by a loving God
 1362 who offers everyone a unique opportunity for discovering true love, true purpose,
 1363 and true self-transcendence while living for a limited time on earth. "What good
 1364 that I can do or any kindness I can show; let me do it now, for I shall pass this
 1365 way only once."⁴⁶

1366 • After death, breathing and all forms of communicating cease. Intimate friends
 1367 and lovers spontaneously experience intense grief at the death of a Beloved. This

1368 may lead to spontaneously (a) “sensing her presence,” (b) “hearing her call my
1369 name in the middle of the night,” or (c) “sitting up and telling me things I could
1370 never have known before.”⁴⁷ I myself have known such hallucinations over a
1371 period of sixty years following the early death of my mother. To this very day, I
1372 cherish these hallucinations because they form a significant part of the grieving
1373 process that consolidates the enduring love-bond I have with my mother. But to
1374 insinuate that such hallucinations offer irrefutable evidence for the ongoing life of
1375 my mother in Heaven is to commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.⁴⁸ When
1376 I fell hopelessly in love for the first time, I felt this pain of being separated from
1377 my Beloved by four hundred miles. I knew then that my mother didn’t have to be
1378 in Heaven for me to feel the pain of her absence. From that point onward, I knew
1379 that the pain of loss is a physical and psychological response to the hole in my
1380 heart—it has nothing to do with Heaven.

1381 • Jesus and his disciples did not imagine that, after death, there was the immediate
1382 judgment of the soul and that, on the basis of this judgment, the soul would
1383 immediately be either taken to Heaven to be supremely happy or taken to Hell to
1384 be eternally tormented. Growing up in a Jewish setting, Jesus had no idea that an
1385 “immortal soul” was necessary for explaining how a human body could be living,
1386 feeling, thinking (prior to and after death). The Gospels never present Jesus or
1387 anyone else as making inquiries regarding an afterlife based upon the existence of
1388 immortal souls. In the case of Lazarus who was raised to life following four days
1389 in the tomb (John 11:1–44) and in the case of Jairus’ twelve-year-old daughter
1390 raised to life nearly a full day after her death (Mark 5:21–43 et al.), Jesus makes

1391 no attempt to have the one raised up to talk about their experiences in the afterlife.
1392 If Jesus had a firm belief in an afterlife or in an immortal soul, these occasions
1393 would have presented themselves as “teachable moments.” Jesus himself was
1394 raised after three days in the tomb. No one asks him about his experiences during
1395 those three days. The reason for this is that neither Jesus nor those around him
1396 expected any experiences whatsoever after death. “Whether *you can observe a*
1397 *thing* or not depends on the *theory* which *you* use.”⁴⁹

1398 • Socrates was anticipating having soulful conversations with dead philosophers in
1399 the world to come. The medievalists were anticipating being able to see God
1400 face-to-face in a “beatific vision” that revealed all the mysteries of God. Both of
1401 these beliefs are intimately tied to the presumption that the spiritual soul survives
1402 death and that it retains the power to think/judge/feel. But I’m a primitive camper
1403 and an avid canoeist. Nothing gets my juices going like exploring a pristine creek
1404 while river bass race along the keel of my canoe. Nothing beats starting a
1405 cooking fire with just two-matches after a fierce thunderstorm. Nothing beats the
1406 taste of steamed vegetables followed by singing around the campfire. Nothing
1407 beats being blown away by ten thousand stars of the Milky Way Galaxy with an
1408 occasional meteor shower while cozy inside my sleeping bag. Nothing beats
1409 having an adventuresome and warm-hearted lady-friend to share these
1410 experiences with me.⁵⁰ These experiences do not have to be proven for I know
1411 them first-hand. In contrast, no one can demonstrate that Socrates had soulful
1412 conversations with dead philosophers following his forced suicide. No one can
1413 demonstrate that the saints find supreme happiness when experiencing the

1414 “beatific vision.” No one can demonstrate that, following his death, Jesus’ soul
 1415 descended into Hades. Everything depends upon the immortality of the soul. But
 1416 not even Socrates was able to satisfactorily demonstrate that the soul was
 1417 immortal. Hence, I feel more secure in standing with Jesus and setting aside these
 1418 mistaken beliefs. Meeting those I love in Heaven was for thirty years a wonderful
 1419 and exciting possibility offered to me by my God. But now that I have had the
 1420 chance to investigate this issue as detailed above, I have set aside my former
 1421 beliefs. Meeting those I love in Heaven now strikes me as a metaphysical
 1422 impossibility. Hence, this holds no attraction for me. I count my former
 1423 attraction to this belief as an empty fantasy established by my childhood
 1424 indoctrination. I lament all the time and attention that I wasted in praying for the
 1425 souls in Purgatory. I lament all the poorly informed choices I made because I
 1426 firmly believed that my short life on earth was preparing me for an eternity in
 1427 Heaven. I lament the fact that the Jesuits did not investigate these issues fairly
 1428 and honestly such that the Ursuline Sisters would have taught me about the
 1429 Kingdom of God preached by Jesus rather than the doctrine of the immortal soul
 1430 as preached by Socrates.

1431 • Wright brings us back to the point of not expecting Jesus to give his disciples
 1432 either fine details or dogmatic certainty regarding the afterlife:

1433 Jesus simply did not say very much about the future life; he was, after
 1434 all, primarily concerned to announce that God’s kingdom was coming
 1435 “on earth as in heaven.” He gave (as we have seen) no fresh teaching
 1436 on the question of the resurrection apart from dark hints that it was
 1437 going to happen, and happen soon, to one person ahead of everyone
 1438 else; for the rest, he was content to reinforce the normal Jewish
 1439 picture.⁵¹

1440 The two parables that appear to address this question [of the afterlife]
1441 directly are, we should remember, parables, not actual descriptions of
1442 the afterlife. They use stock imagery from ancient Judaism, such as
1443 “Abraham’s bosom,” not to teach about what happens after death but to
1444 insist on justice and mercy within the present life.⁵²

1445 The apocalyptic literature that has come down to use is filled with diverse signs of
1446 the end times, diverse descriptions of how events will unfold, diverse narratives of
1447 the new world to come. It is accordingly senseless to expect to know the fine
1448 details of God’s future from these incompatible sources. We will never have
1449 dogmatic certainty in this domain, nor do we really need it. “Eye has not seen nor
1450 ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared
1451 for those who love him” (I Cor 2:9). All that is needful is our efforts NOW to
1452 safeguard the earth and to establish peaceful and just social structures and loving
1453 relationships everywhere (in our families, in our churches, in our towns and cities,
1454 in our world) in preparation for God’s arrival. When the Lord returns, then the
1455 holy ones will be raised to life in a fully redeemed earth environment. Maranatha!

1456 • It is quite possible that Wright underestimates the cognitive and emotional
1457 backlash that Christians will experience once they discover that the infallibility of
1458 the bible and the infallibility of the pope have both failed to protect believers from
1459 the tragic distortions that were wrongfully introduced into Christianity along with
1460 the Socratic notion of an immortal soul. It will not be easy for Christians to let go
1461 of all accumulated errors used to sugar-coat the stark reality of Jesus’ notion of
1462 death. It will not be easy for Christians to let go of the unsubstantiated belief that,
1463 immediately after dying, each individual soul breaks free of its body and passed
1464 through a divine judgment that results in eternal torments in Hell or eternal joy

1465 surrounded by the saints in Heaven. Bishop N.T. Wright, however, has reasons to
1466 be optimistic. Why so? (a) The fear of hellfire has, for many generations, been
1467 massively overplayed, and it has resulted in toxic images of God as recounted by
1468 Dr. Ehrman; (b) Our planet Earth remains the marvelous playground divinely
1469 designed for human habitation—both now and in the world to come; (c) Jesus was
1470 taken up into Heaven where God is keeping him for his eventual return to us here
1471 on earth; (d) Nowhere in the bible does “going to Heaven” get named as our
1472 ultimate goal⁵³; and (e) The Lord’s prayer invites us be steadfast in calling upon
1473 our Father to let “his kingdom come on earth.”⁵⁴

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1475 **A Personal Post-Script by the Author [an optional**
1476 **closing to stimulate discussion online]**


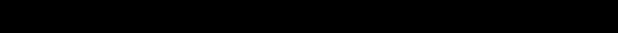
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1478 One could say that the whole purpose of this article is to explore how and why Christians
1479 might want to consider returning to the theology of Jesus and to let go of the Socratic
1480 theology that has been mistakenly overlaid onto Jesus. At the moment, nearly everyone
1481 thinks that they know and follow the faith of Jesus whereas, in fact, they have never
1482 investigated their doubts and have simply taken for granted that their beloved parents,
1483 pastors, and theologians have passed on to them the infallible “faith in Jesus” found in the
1484 bible and certified by the popes. There is nothing shameful in this. It is perfectly normal
1485 for a child to embrace the theological worldview presented by his/her trusted religious
1486 teachers. This is why I have acknowledged that my beloved and caring Ursuline Sisters
1487 taught me the Socratic Christianity that they themselves embraced using the Baltimore

1488 Catechism. Once one has assimilated a given theology, everything that one reads and
1489 hears and imagines gets interpreted and reinforced within that framework. It was
1490 perfectly natural for me, consequently, to trust that my prayers and sacrifices for the
1491 benefit of the souls in Purgatory had the effect of liberating these “poor souls” and
1492 sending them on their way to Heaven. This is what I imagined that Jesus was doing when
1493 he descended into Hades. Now, two thousand years later, here I was, a boy of twelve,
1494 able to continue his mission of liberation with activities that were approved by the pope
1495 and well within my capabilities. My efforts on behalf of the “poor souls” reinforced my
1496 faith in the power of prayer and my faith in myself as empowered to help those who
1497 could not help themselves. I deliberately choose this example, because I fully expect
1498 many Protestant Christians to insist that my actions were “pure superstition” because they
1499 are nowhere authorized in their bible. It is so easy to spot the errors in what others
1500 believe. It requires an act of courage to spot the errors in your own personal belief
1501 system. Why so? Because for many years you have relied on your assimilated
1502 theological worldview, and, during that time, you have felt secure in allowing your faith
1503 and your reading of the bible to guide you on your way. Just as my faith was justified and
1504 strengthened in my taking care of the “poor souls,” so it is that your own faith is justified
1505 and strengthened when you put it into action. While you may be very critical of my
1506 actions, please be aware that my mentor, Michael Polanyi, taught me that “every belief
1507 works in the eyes of the believer.”

1508 So do your own research. Don’t take my own research as the final word. Follow your
1509 own leads. I may not have gotten everything just right. Correct and improve on what I
1510 have done. Overturn it, if necessary.

1511 It took many acts of courage on my part to acknowledge the flaws within my Socratic
1512 Catholic upbringing. In most instances it was painful to do so. At one point I remember
1513 myself thinking, “So the popes have made some serious errors. Nonetheless, the Blessed
1514 Virgin Mary chose to appear to Catholic children in Fatima. This makes plain that, from
1515 her vantage point, the Catholic Church is most worth saving.” I have since entirely given
1516 up this rash conjecture. I make reference to it now because, in the face of doubts, it
1517 illustrates how my natural tendency was to find some authority, some beloved guide,
1518 some text in the bible, some trusted book that will circumvent my doubts saying, “Hold
1519 on to the faith that has been given you and never doubt it.” Someone I consulted even
1520 said to me, “Doubts come from the Devil.” Such a generalization is another fake solution.
1521 Sometimes doubts are the quiet guidance of the Holy Spirit. Think of all those Christians
1522 who had to entertain doubts regarding their former pagan religious convictions in order to
1523 embrace the faith of Jesus. Think of all those Catholics who had to entertain doubts
1524 regarding the efficacy of witchcraft trials before they were able to defy those zealots who
1525 earnestly wanted to continue them. Think of the roughly 200,000 Catholic priests who
1526 had to entertain doubts regarding the necessity and the holiness of celibacy for their
1527 calling when they knew, in their heart of hearts, that God was also calling them to marital
1528 intimacy. Think of Martin Luther who was faithful to his God and to his troubled
1529 conscience when he posted 96 theses that he was willing to publicly debate. Do not be
1530 afraid! God be with you as you move forward. . . . “Too live is to change; to grow
1531 perfect is to have changed often” ~John Henry Newman

1532 P.S.: If you wish to contact me or to post your own reflections on this article, please go 
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1540

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1718 **Endnotes**

*In preparing this article, I owe special thanks to Dr. Barbara Crostini, Lecturer in Ecclesiastical History and Cultural Studies, Newman Institute, Uppsala, Sweden. She provided me with a host of insights that enabled me to present a more accurate and more readable text.

¹ Catholics would want to add here that, God in his mercy and justice, assigns many souls to Purgatory, the place where lukewarm Christians are perfected and prepared for eventual inclusion among the saints of Heaven. For an historical portrait of how Purgatory developed, see LeGoff. For a theological justification for Purgatory, see Ratzinger.

² Even Pope Francis appears to believe that eternal punishment is not part of the message of Jesus. Here is the report:

Eugenio Scalfari, an avowed atheist who has struck up an intellectual friendship with Francis, met the Pope recently and wrote up a long story that included a question-and-answer section at the end. According to Mr Scalfari's article in Thursday's 'La Repubblica', he asked the Pope where "bad souls" go [after death] and where they are punished:

Mr Scalfari quoted the Pope as saying: "They are not punished. Those who repent obtain God's forgiveness and take their place among the ranks of those who contemplate him [in Heaven for all eternity], but those who do not repent and cannot be forgiven disappear. A Hell doesn't exist, the disappearance of sinning

souls exists." [My hunch is that Pope Francis used the straight-forward language of "disappear" and "disappearance" instead of the technical term "annihilation."] URL = <<https://www.independent.ie/world-news/europe/vatican-pours-cold-water-over-report-of-no-hellfire-36761182.html>>

³ Source URL = <<https://apnews.com/article/611c8aa8904dde105806f6c05485f995>>

⁴ Unfortunately everyone in this group thinks in terms of the universal resurrection of the dead. In so doing, they forget that a selective resurrection provides an attractive alternative. In the Jewish texts that first proposed resurrection, only those martyred for the faith are offered resurrection on the Last Day (see 2 Macc 7:9, 11, 14, 29; 12:39-45; Rev 20:4-5; Ratzinger (1988) 181-214). In the mid-first-century Didache, this resurrection is expanded to include all of God's "holy ones" that have been perfected in the Way of Life. For details here, see Milavec (2003) 659-670, 821-837.

⁵ My purpose in this essay is not to review how Christian philosophers have seen that the whole notion of Hell is incompatible with the character of God (irrespective of what the bible scholars like Dr. Ehrman have decided). For interested readers, I would invite looking at Talbott (2021) for an excellent review of recent philosophical arguments for and against eternal punishments. For those who enjoy John Dominic Crossan, they may prefer to read his in-depth analysis of how the various books of the bible where "the radicality of peace through nonviolent justice is repeatedly affirmed and then negated by the normalcy of peace gained through violent victory" (Crossan [2015] 238). My own thoughts allow me to notice that neither "righteous violence" nor "merciful forgiveness" taken alone can suffice to heal a society ripped apart by patterns of strife. How is it that God never comes up with a solution like that in South Africa wherein a society is healed by virtue of allowing that criminal and racially motivated acts could be confessed in open courts in front of the surviving victims by way of gaining immunity from prosecution? For this option, see Moltmann.

⁶ Source URL = <<https://store.cac.org/products/hell-no-cd>>.

⁷ Throughout history, there have always been instances wherein atheism became a necessary and justified virtue. Here are three illustrations: #1 Abraham openly challenged God's plan to punish Sodom and Gomorrah saying, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen 18:26). In response, God altered his plan and deliberately chose to make a covenant with Abraham (whereas, he failed to do so with Noah because he never made any objection to God's plan to flood the whole world); #2 The early Christians were blackballed as "atheists" because they denied the existence of the "unethical" gods sanctioned by the Roman Empire; #3 Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) wrote: "When it is said that what God wishes is just, and that what he does not wish is unjust, we must not understand that if God wished anything improper it would be just, simply because He wished it. For if God wished to lie, we must not conclude that it is right to lie, but rather that He is not God (Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, II, X). For a

discussion of how “religion and unbelief [functioned] as two sides of the same coin” in ancient Athens as well as in modern society, go to Martinez (2020) 313. Socrates was accused of being an atheist because he refused to believe in the approved gods of Athens. In reality, however, Socrates believed in other gods unknown by the city council (see n.9). Seen in this light, Socrates and Jesus come out as “spiritual brothers”—both critiqued the status quo by affirming some images of God while categorically renouncing other images as godless.

⁸ For those who are historically minded and who want a detailed picture of how the Church Fathers gradually integrated the immortal soul into the teachings of Jesus, see the exceptional and very readable dissertation of Toews (2011). For an overview of current challenges of the doctrine of the soul in Catholic theology, see Heino Sonnemans (1987).

⁹ See Berens (2016) for a brief portrait of how, even for the Greeks, the ideas surrounding Hades were in flux.

¹⁰ Taras, p. 103.

¹¹ McGuire, ed. (1942). Since its 1885 debut, the *Baltimore Catechism* commissioned by the Third Council of Bishops in *Baltimore* has instructed generations of *Catholic* faithful. The Ursuline Sisters gave me the Baltimore Catechism No.2, an edition that had questions for study at the end of each chapter and some simple illustrations. A catechism is a summary of the principles of Christian religion and articles of the faith. The Baltimore Catechism specifically was the de facto standard Catholic school text in the United States from 1885 to the late 1960s. For a free download, go to URL = <<https://archive.org/details/baltimorecatechi14552gut>>

¹² There are a few places where some English translations of the Greek speak about “losing your soul.” Mark 8:36 comes to mind. Jesus says, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his own soul [καὶ ζῆμιωθῆναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ]?” This comes in the context of Jesus talking about the cost of following him. The way of Jesus can be a dangerous undertaking—you could get crucified (Mk 8:34). If you don’t follow him, on the other hand, you could get filthy rich (“gain the whole world”) but, alas, you would at the same time “lose your soul” in the process. In Socratic circles, it was common to hear Socrates urging his disciples “to save their souls” and “to give preference to protecting their souls.” Such admonitions within Socratic circles served to affirm the importance of living an examined life and freeing oneself from the false opinions of the multitudes. The Baltimore Catechism talks about “saving one’s soul” in the sense of “saving one’s soul from eternal hellfire.” When carefully examined, the Baltimore Catechism uses its metaphors to convey an idiosyncratic meaning that is far removed from what one finds in the Socratic dialogues and in Mark 8:36. Moreover, the Socratic use of these metaphors provides no help when it comes time to interpret Mark 8:36. Think of the metaphor, “Be wise as serpents” (Matt 10:16). Since we live in a society which does not associate “serpents” with “wisdom,” we are at a loss for what this

might mean. Does the wisdom of snakes lie in their powers to blend in with their environment but, when cornered, they strike like lightning? Does their wisdom lie in their powers to remain vigilant even though they eat sparingly? Does their wisdom lie in their ability to regain their youth by sloughing off their skins? Socrates and the Baltimore Catechism are of no use in helping us decide. The snake in the Chinese Zodiac symbolizes “the most mysterious and also the wisest [personality]. They don’t allow others to know about them that much and they usually keep things to themselves.” Thus, Chinese Christians might be prone to think they have a ready-made interpretation of Mark 8:36; yet, in their wisdom, they might not want to imagine that Jesus used a metaphor when communicating with Jews that was imported from China. The same caution applies to American Christians who would be tempted to interpret “losing your soul” based on their reading of the Socratic-inspired Baltimore Catechism.

¹³ I am going into details of how it is that I felt betrayed when realizing that good people (my Ursuline teachers) and even the popes could be persuaded to accept many Socratic doctrines that were not endorsed by the bible. Thus, I am inviting my readers to accept their own moments in their faith life when a certain cognitive dissonance cuts them off from certain doctrines that they had believed for their entire lives. My article opens by examining how this took shape in Dr. Ehrman’s life. My article will extend this to include other “seekers” who end up reformulating their faith in God and their understanding of salvation.

¹⁴ Milavec (2007) 1-22 and Milavec (2020).

¹⁵ Source URL = <<https://www.religion-online.org/book/immortality-of-the-soul-or-resurrection-of-the-dead/>>.

¹⁶ Talbott (2021).

¹⁷ Baltimore Catechism, Q.420.

¹⁸ Messianic Jews, such as Eitan Bar (2017), imagine that G-d inspired David to write Ps 22 by way of preparing the Jewish people to receive a suffering messiah. This view is maintained because Bar and his followers uphold a notion of “divine inspiration” that leaves little room for the thoughts and experiences of David. More liberal Christians, on the other hand, uphold a notion of “divine inspiration” that allows them to notice that Ps 22 was used as a template for narrating Jesus’ passion: thus Ps 22:7 inspired Matt 27:39 and Mark 15:29; Ps 22:7 inspired Matt 27:31, Mark 15:20 and Luke 22:63; Ps 22:8 appears word-for-word in Matthew 27:43, etc. Bates (2015) finds “evidence that the earliest church did show awareness of the narrative progression of the psalm toward ultimate rescue” (p. 129 n. 28). For a discussion on how Christians might retain their reading of Ps 22 while allowing that Jewish scholars have legitimately taken a different view, see Milavec (2007) 122-141, 173-181.

¹⁹ Despite Job’s immense loss and suffering in losing everything, including his children

and livestock, he rightly praised God as “he fell to the ground in worship” (Job 1:20). He then said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD” (verse 21, NASB). Basically, Job is saying that he came into the world with nothing and will leave the same way when he dies (cf. Ecclesiastes 5:15). All that he ever had was a gift, and God is sovereign when it comes to his gift-giving.

²⁰ The *Pulpit Commentary* is a homiletic commentary on the Bible created during the nineteenth century under the direction of Rev. Joseph S. Exell and Henry Donald Maurice Spence-Jones. It consists of 23 volumes with 22,000 pages and 95,000 entries, and was written over a 30-year period with 100 contributors.

²¹ These same sentiments are offered in Gill's *Commentary on the Entire Bible*: “This shows, that his spirit, or soul, belonged to God, the Father of spirits, and now returned to him that gave it; that it was immortal, and died not with the body, and was capable of existing in a separate state from it, and went immediately to heaven; all which is true of the souls of all believers in Christ” (<https://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/23-46.htm>). Needless to say, Gill's speculations are not universal. I myself would have been inclined to applaud everything that Gill was saying because I was systematically misled by my inability to separate out those things that Socrates had contributed to my beliefs. Now, however, that I join with those who wish to return to a Jewish reading of the Gospels, I am no longer inclined to assume that Jesus thinks and speaks like a Platonist.

²² Cullmann was not the only theologian challenging the existence of immortal souls as part of Christianity. Thanks to a website prepared by Bryan W. Ball, PhD, (URL = <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2011/05/the-immortality-of-the-soul>) I was able to discover some evidence for the existence of scholars and pastors who challenged the notion of “immortal souls” in more recent times. Here are a few samples:

Henry Layton (1622–1705) was a minor British philosopher, theological writer, and contemporary of John Locke. Layton is remembered for his anonymous authorship of a series of pamphlets, printed between 1692 and 1704, on the question of the immortality of the soul, a doctrine which he rejected. He started writing on the topic in 1691 with short treatise of fifteen sheets, which was circulated in manuscript. A year's correspondence with a nearby minister ended in his expanding his pamphlet. After a succession of such dialogues over a period of twelve years, his study had grown to fifty pages. Ultimately, he printed it at his own expense as *A Search after Souls*. His pamphlets continued till the year before his death, restating his position that soul is a function of body, a view which he defended on physiological and scriptural grounds.

Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) made his mark on science due to his innovative experiments with electricity. As a minister, however, his passion was to return Christianity to its "primitive" or "pure" form by eliminating the "corruptions"

which had accumulated over the centuries. The fourth part of the *Institutes, An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, he argued that the notion of an “immortal soul” was “originally a doctrine of Oriental philosophy” that in later centuries spread into “the Western part of the world.” He used the Scriptures to demonstrate that Jesus and his followers never imagined that they had “souls” insuring their survival after death.

Anglican Archbishop William Temple (1881-1944), in his article, “The Idea of Immortality in Relation to Religion and Ethics,” in *The Congregational Quarterly* X (1932), 17 called for a radical re-evaluation of the traditional doctrine of eternal torment in hell. Temple was a contemporary of the influential Oxford Old Testament scholar H. Wheeler Robinson, who in 1911 published a work with similar sentiments under the title *The Christian Doctrine of Man*.

²³ Talbott (2021).

²⁴ Talbott (2021).

²⁵ When I first wrote these lines, I was tempted to remove them because I had the intuition that my thoughts of “total isolation” were perhaps too extreme. But then, just before submitting my article for publication, I found that Christian Platonists in the 7th century were having reservations just like my own. Anastasius of Sinai, for example, in his *Questions and Answers* makes the case that the souls of sinners are inactive after death. Anastasius reminds his readers that when they are hit over the head they can lose their mind and that the impairment or loss of other sense organs can have analogous consequences. On the basis of these experiences, Athanasius makes his conclusion: “Therefore also when it, that is, the soul, is separated from the whole body it cannot do any of the things it did through the parts of the body, not speak, not remember, not discern, not desire, not think, not be angry, not see.” Krausmuller (2015) comments as follows: “The meaning of this passage is evident: since death entails the loss of all organs of the body the soul must fall into a coma-like state from which it will only awaken at the resurrection.” John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor, who were also deeply influenced by Platonic ideas, came to parallel conclusions. The souls in Hades feel no torments and feel no bliss. They are in a state of ‘inactivity’ (ἀργία). They could not communicate with others. They could not appeal to God for mercy. They have no awareness of the living who were well-disposed toward them. Thus, I have changed nothing in my text. My hunches have been confirmed. They do not even feel despair at their condition (as would be the case for a blind and deaf paraplegics).

²⁶ Even Thomas Aquinas regarded the notion of a soul detached from its body as an anomaly. See Guevin (2012) and Matarazzo (2017) 56-59.

²⁷ For the purposes of this essay, I want to limit myself to how N.T. Wright has reconfigured salvation when “immortal souls” and “going to heaven” no longer exist as

possibilities. Brandon L. Rickabaugh (2018), for example, argues that Wright can realign Christianity to the faith of Jesus quite easily without needing to jettison the soul. Needless to say, given the scope of his reconstruction, Dr. N.T. Wright has had critics regarding his interpretation of Paul. See, for example, D. Campbell (2016). For those interested in discovering how difficult it is for N.T. Wright to please both biblical and theological experts at the same time, see M. Michielin (2008).

²⁸ In order to make our analysis in this small place possible, I'm going to limit my study to those instances where "Hades" comes into play. When the intertestamental texts are examined more closely, other terms also come into play. Jesus, for example, frequently speaks of "Gehenna"—the ever-burning garbage pit on the edge of Jerusalem—when he wants to reference the end-time fires (Matt 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33; Mark 9:43,45,47; Luke 12:5; and James 3:6). This is not to be confused with Hades or Sheol, the place that Jesus visits following his death. The reader will notice that, in the narratives examined here, fires and punishment are totally absent from Hades. For grasping how "Hades" itself had a complex history within Greek culture, see Berens and Bernstein. For sorting out the vocabulary, see Bedore. Caution: Bedore simplifies the issue of vocabulary and his analysis is untrustworthy because he does not come to grips with how all these terms were in flux. He thus concludes: "The soul of man lives on after physical death and will always remain in a conscious state of being. The unsaved go to Sheol/Hades to await their resurrection unto condemnation while the redeemed go to heaven to await their resurrection unto life (see Jn. 5:25-29)." Bedore demonstrates how informed scholars can take the medieval synthesis and project it back into early Church texts. The descent into Hades texts that I use in this essay thus enable the reader to critique the static notions of Bedore and authors like him. For a dynamic reading of afterlife texts and experiences within their historical contexts, see the excellent treatment of LeGoff.

²⁹ Notice that in Hades there is no tormenting of lost souls nor is there any "beatific vision" for the elect. This will be introduced later. It is quite possible that, at this early period, the Church Fathers were gradually introducing the notion of the Greek immortal souls that allowed some prospect that there would be some degree of awareness after death. Justin Martyr does not raise the problem presented as to how the soul of Jesus could "preach" to those buried in graves scattered all over Palestine.

³⁰ The *Gospel of Bartholomew* represents the first time that Jesus uses violence and openly confronts the Greek god Hades. In the former accounts, Jesus gains access to Hades by virtue of the fact that he died, and Hades is the place of the dead. The activity of the god Hades is passed over in silence. This violent confrontation with the god Hades is also unusual in so far as Christians had the reputation of being "atheists"—since they vigorously denied the existence of all the Greek and Roman gods. In the Book of Revelation, the god Hades is associated with Death (Rev 6:8) who rides the pale green horse and spreads death on one-fourth of the earth. At the final judgment, however, Jesus, the Lamb, sits next to "the Lord God Almighty" (Rev 3:21, 4:8, 5:13, 7:10) on the

“great white throne” where both Death and Hades are judged and thrown into “the lake of fire” (Rev 20:13-15). In contrast, the Gospel of Bartholomew depicts Jesus as entering into the very domain of Hades much earlier and as binding him in a single hand-to-hand combat. After 19 September 2020, young people can play the award-winning video game, “Hades.” **Hades** is a rogue-like dungeon crawler in which you defy the god of the dead as you hack and slash your way out of the Underworld of Greek myth. URL = <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDdjYzMfSpk>>

³¹ Thomas Aquinas not only presents Jesus as descending into hell to rescue the righteous; he also has Jesus achieving on the cross those infinite merits that were required as the universal atonement for all sins, from Adam’s first sin to the last sin on earth at the end of time. Even relative to the Jews, Aquinas says: “The holy fathers [of Israel], by doing works of justice, merited to enter the heavenly kingdom [only] through faith in Christ’s passion . . .” (III 49, 5, ad 1). The deliverance of the Jewish patriarchs, consequently, was not due to their assimilation of the faith of Abraham or to their lifelong fidelity to God; rather, it is “through faith and charity [that they] were united to Christ’s passion” (III 52, 7). Jesus’ death, consequently, provided a store of merits that was purported to reach backward in time and to atone for all Jewish sins. This line of thinking tacitly affirmed the absolute bankruptcy of Judaism—no one could be saved due to the faith of Abraham or the Torah of Moses. Jesus alone provided the atoning death that enabled the Father to forgive Jewish sins as well as Christian sins. For a critique of this wide-spread misconception, see Milavec (2016a) and (2016b).

According to the medieval tradition, the “gates of heaven” were permanently closed following the sin of Adam (*Summa Theologica* II-II 164, 2). This enforces the logic of Anselm pertaining to the universality of sin (both original and actual sins) and the utter inability of anyone to atone for even the least of these sins. But then salvation arrives: “The gate of heaven’s kingdom is thrown open to us through Christ’s passion” (III 49, 5). Here, again, Aquinas notes that not even the Jewish patriarchs who were sinless were able to enter into heaven: “The holy fathers were detained in hell (prior to his descent into hell) for the reason that, owing to our first parent’s sin, the approach to the life of glory was not open” (III 52, 5).

³² Genesis does not narrate the creation of the angels, nor does it narrate that the Fall of the Angels led to the Fall of Adam. Had some angels not refused to worship Adam as the first-born Son of God, then there would be no reason to think of the serpent in Gen 2-3 as a fallen angel. In my Baltimore Catechism, I first learned about the Fall of the Angels. It was presented as follows:

Q 38. Did all the angels remain good and happy?

A. All the angels did not remain good and happy; many of them sinned [unspecified] and were cast into hell, and these are called devils or bad angels.

³³ The biblical writers see clouds as God’s swift chariot (cf. also Ps. 18:9; 104:3; Isa.

19:1; Dan. 7:13; Nah. 1:3; 1 Thess. 4:17). If we stop to reflect on this, we can imagine that people who never had the opportunity to fly in an airplane as it passed near or through clouds might easily be persuaded that clouds appear quite substantial and easily able to transport their passengers. When meeting with Moses on Mount Sinai, God uses a cloud to hide himself from Moses, lest he see his face and die (Exod 33:19-20). The assumption here is that God uses a cloud to travel from his throne in heaven to Mount Sinai. Cloaked in the same cloud, God hides his face. Likewise, when Jesus' return is mentioned elsewhere, he is presenting as making use of cloud-transport (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27; 1 Thess. 4:17; Rev. 1:7). This is also evident in the transfiguration when after seeing Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah, "suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear" (Matt 17:5-6). The bright cloud is undoubtedly for the transport and concealment of the "Father" who acknowledges his "Son" in a parallel to the baptismal revelation. The disciples are overcome with "fear" not because of the content of the message but because they sense the presence of the "Father" who delivers the message.

³⁴ The *Roman Catechism* created after the Council of Trent endorsed the Thomistic perspective saying, "Christ the Lord descended into hell that, having seized the spoils of the devils, he might conduct into heaven those holy fathers and other pious souls liberated from prison" (1.6.q.6). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* repeats the message of Trent placing an emphasis upon the fact that "the Gospel was preached even to the dead" (sec. 632 & 634 following 1 P 4:6). This event is interpreted in universal and eschatological terms: "This is the last phase of Jesus' messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all [dead] men [women] of all times and places . . ." (sec. 634). The implication here appears to be that when Christ returns on the Last Day, he will come with all the prophets, the holy Jews, the enlightened philosophers that he has liberated from Hades immediately after he died on the cross.

³⁵ Hilarion (2009).

³⁶ Nickelsburg offers a persuasive analysis based upon known texts being analyzed. Most readers of the bible wrongly project the "going to Heaven" paradigm throughout the entire bible. It is rare to find scholars taking notice that faith in a limited resurrection only occurs around 150 B.C.E. For a popular article detailing how the resurrection of the dead emerged and expanded within Judaism, see URL = <<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-resurrection-of-the-dead/>>.

³⁷ Rivkin (1971) 58.

³⁸ When one examines the Synoptics, one discovers how easily Jesus and others make reference to resurrection without having to explain it (Matt 14:2; 16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:19; 26:32; 27:53; 28:6).

³⁹ The changes I describe here are not unique to Christian literature. Nor was it unknown that religious movements within Hellenized society created a Heaven and Hell that served to motivate its adherents. For example, “The mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis, among other esoteric cults, claimed that adherents would enjoy a heavenly immortality, while those outside the cult would sink into the gloom of Hades.” See Zaleski.

⁴⁰ For further reflections, see URL = <https://readingacts.com/2017/07/12/testament-of-isaac/>

⁴¹ The violence attributed to God in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures presents a supreme obstacle for choosing and loving Yahweh. For an in-depth exposition of this biblical problem, see Crossan (2015). More especially, the classical atonement theories argue that the Father of Jesus had closed the gates of heaven and was unwilling to open them again only after his only-begotten Son was brutally butchered on the cross. This doctrine manifests the love of Jesus for us, but, at the same time, the Father of Jesus is presented as a barbaric monster. So, there is no way around this. the notion that forgiveness for the guilty must be achieved at the price of torturing the innocent runs the risk of supporting a very dubious and unbiblical notion of divine justice. Accordingly, Stephen Finlan (2005) 97 notes quite pointedly: “It does us no good to perceive Jesus as heroic if we are forced to view God as sadistic.” For a detailed examination of this problem, see Milavec (2007) 57-83 and Milavec (2016b). Edward Schillebeeckx,(2008) 729, in equally telling terms, concludes his study of the topic of suffering by saying, “First of all, we must say that we are not redeemed thanks to the death of Jesus but despite it.”

⁴² All the so-called “visions of hell” are deceptions. How so? The souls of the departed are entirely invisible. Hence, there is nothing to be seen. Socratic “souls” cannot feel fire; hence, they cannot be tormented by what we now know as fire. Furthermore, the departed souls have no mouths; hence, they are not able to scream. For a sample of the deceptions of the Saints, see URL = < <https://www.churchpop.com/2015/10/28/5-saints-who-had-terrifying-visions-of-hell/>>

⁴³ Perrin (1967) 54. Edward Schillebeeckx (2009) is entirely in harmony with the Protestant Norma Perrin here.

⁴⁴ In Acts 19:8, for instance, only the kingdom preaching is mentioned. In Acts 8:12 & 28:31, the kingdom preaching is named first and, only then, “teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.” A detailed analysis of the sermons in Acts would also show this same relationship, but it is beyond the scope of this book to work this all out. For a detailed and highly readable study of how the expectation of God’s coming as Savior gets gradually overlayed with the saving acts of the Messiah, see John A.T. Robinson, *Jesus and his Coming* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979).

⁴⁵ Wright (2008) 194. Some may object that Wright is too certain and too passionate to be reliable. As regards to certainty, I calculate that there is 98% certainty that Jesus did

not factor in “an immortal soul” into his vision of God’s future. Wright never considers the possibility that Jesus should have factored in “an immortal soul” even if Jesus himself did not. My research into the uncertainty of the immortality of Socratic “souls” and the very low probability that “disembodied souls” have the potential for communicating with each other demonstrates that an afterlife built around an immortal soul is very hazardous. As for the passionate certainty in Wright’s voice, I would argue that this is entirely necessary and entirely justified. But this needs to be taken up in another paper. Meanwhile, for those who wish to experience the passionate certainty of Wright, I would suggest these three online lectures: (1) “N. T. Wright on the Future of the World” (2020) URL = <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWNKp3jYyRo>; (2) “N. T. Wright on the Messiah and the People of God” (2020) URL = https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMyenQv_IYA; (3) “The Jesus We Never Knew” (2016) URL = <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbFxrLt97w>.

⁴⁶ This is my personal guide for living that I have used for over sixty years. It is a variation on the words of Etienne de Grellet, a Quaker missionary. I consider this to be a superior formulation of the double-love-commandments of Jesus (Matt 22:34-40).

⁴⁷ When someone is predisposed by a history of believing in immortal souls, it is only natural that, with the least provocation, one can easily come to the firm conclusion that “I am hearing her call my name in the middle of the night.” This frequently happens for me. My darling wife, Elena, sometimes goes abroad in order to take care of her business. During these periods, I am keenly aware of her absence in the house; I am missing her. Then, suddenly and without any clear provocations, I wake up “hearing her call my name in the middle of the night.” I don’t have to confirm who is calling me. I immediately recognize her voice. Now, if I had the strong belief that, in the sleeping state, the soul breaks loose from its attachment with the body and travels a thousand miles to lovingly call my name in the middle of the night, then I would know that “it was true”--my beloved was trying to contact me. Since I don’t have the slightest attraction toward imagining detached souls, I take a few breaths and just delight in the fact that my whole body is anticipating the return of my beloved at a time when she will call my name in the middle of the night as she lies next to me in bed. Even when persons are long dead (my mother, for instance, who died when I was only eight), my “hearing her call my name in the middle of the night” brings with it a sheer thrill of delight. My mother loved me (past tense), but my bodily memory still knows and feels that she loves me. So, I don’t have to overlay this experience with the thought that my mother is somehow alive in Heaven and knows what I am doing and that she has her reasons for calling out my name in the middle of the night. This would be, for me, an ungrounded superstition. See the following two notes for more details.

⁴⁸ “We commit the **fallacy of misplaced concreteness**, according to [Alfred North] Whitehead, by mistaking abstractions, beliefs or mental constructs for physical or ‘concrete’ reality” (URL = <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=%22fallacy+of+misplaced+concreteness%22>). Here is an example: Ever since I can

remember, I have had reoccurring dreams that, by tilting forward, I could cause my body to slowly lift off into the air. I recall, with great vividness, those moments when my levitation took me close to high-voltage transmission lines, and I had to change direction so as to avoid them. When I shared this with my students, I asked them to speculate as to the meaning of these reoccurring dreams. Aruna, one of my Indian students, told us, “This is evidence that your soul had an earlier reincarnated as a Yogi who had the powers of levitation.” All my Western students were puzzled at this explanation. My three Indian students, however, agreed with Aruna. Slowly we recovered the presuppositions that supported Aruna’s analysis: (a) the presupposition [or the fact?] that everyone had passed through hundreds of former reincarnations; (b) the presupposition [or the fact?] that many Indians were able to remember vivid details from their former lives; and (c) the presupposition [or the fact?] that it was quite normal for gifted Yogis to be able to levitate. Put all these suppositions together, and Aruna’s analysis makes perfect sense. This demonstrates that judgments arrived at within one cultural milieu can sound completely nonsensical within a foreign milieu. One student told us, “Strange that we should be discussing this. Just last night I had a dream that I was levitating all over the place and floating around on and off of different buildings.”

⁴⁹ This astute observation by Albert Einstein enabled him to explain how theories in physics enable the physicist to notice certain things and, at the same time, to be perfectly “blind” to other things in the physical world. Aristotle, for example, assumed that the Earth was a sphere that stood motionless in the center of the universe and that, all over the planet, heavy objects, when released, move toward this center because “dense earth-matter moves toward its natural place.” Once Copernicus postulated that the Earth was one of seven planets that moves in a circular motion around the sun, he abandoned Aristotle’s notion of “natural place.” Galileo, Kepler, and Newton expanded upon the insights of Copernicus, and they gradually developed the hypothesis that every object in the Universe is attracted to every other object with a force equal to the product of the masses divided by the square of the distance between them. This hypothesis enabled physicists to explain how and why heavy objects fall toward the center of the earth even when the earth is travelling at 18,000 mph around the sun. To their astonishment, this hypothesis served to explain how and why the moon orbited the earth. If the gravitational force did not reach out to the moon, it would immediately travel in a straight line at a uniform velocity and escape into outer space. The slow and progressive confirmation of “gravitational forces” within our solar system eventually led astrophysicists to assume that Newton’s laws of gravitation applied universally throughout the universe. This is admittedly a radical assumption—one might even say it is a “leap of faith.” The truly remarkable phenomenon, however, is that both the earth and the moon take notice of each other and are drawn toward each other by a tangible force. This “action at a distance” has no satisfactory explanation; hence, not a few physicists want to find an alternative theory that removes this “mysterious element” from gravitational phenomenon. Some attractive alternatives have been proposed, but we don’t have the time to explain them here. It suffices to notice that new theories replace old theories in physics even though the new

theories admittedly still have “lose ends” that they cannot explain. Furthermore, working scientists put their faith in Newton’s laws of gravitation even after it is discovered that there are certified instances when the theory breaks down (e.g., as an object approaches the speed of light).

In the field of religion, theology decides what can and what cannot be “seen” in the sense of “being taken into account.” For example, the insertion of “spiritual souls” allows one to explain how the essence of a person can remain intact even after the death/destruction of the body. Being “spiritual,” it follows that they must be immortal (since they can never unravel or fall apart). If there is going to be punishment in the afterlife, therefore, a special “fire” has to be active that is capable of punishing without destroying. Earth fires always burn out eventually. Eternal punishment, therefore, requires “eternal fires” that burn without the need to add additional fuel. In the end, one can write a whole essay about the nature of the “fires” in Hades without ever having been there and without any indication that Hades actually exists. Jesus makes no mention of fire in Hades; hence, within his theological horizon, he was “blind” to such things. Jesus was also “blind” to an afterlife in Heaven or in Hell. For him, there could be no “afterlife” to speak of until after the resurrection. When some Christians embraced the “immortal soul” and the “afterlife speculations” of Socrates during the second century, they had no choice but to concern themselves with this afterlife. For the first time, it became possible to ask, “Where was the soul of Jesus following his death on the cross?” Their answer: “His soul was in Hades.” Then they could ask, “What was Jesus doing when he was in Hades for three days?” Without the Socratic theories, these questions could not even arise. This explains why none of the Gospels make any reference to Jesus’ visitation of Hades. In the second century, however, the theology of Socratic Christians had changed. Hence, they now could notice what no one had seen earlier. Now, for the first time, speculations could arise regarding the activities of Jesus in Hades. Thus it is true for religious knowers: “Whether *you can observe a thing* or not depends on the *theology* which *you* use.”

Here is another example: Anyone who understands (a) that the atmospheric gasses surrounding our Earth thin out as one increases in elevation and (b) that, with the reduction in air pressure, the perceived temperature falls at approximately 5 degrees Fahrenheit for every thousand feet, knows that the writer of Acts was entirely oblivious of this. If he were aware of this phenomenon, then he would never have allowed that “Jesus . . . has been taken up from you into heaven [on a cloud]” (Acts 1:11). For this to have happened, Jesus would first suffer from oxygen deprivation. At the same time, Jesus would also suffer from dropping temperatures. This is why those who climb Mt. Everest (29,000 ft. elevation) have to protect themselves from the thinning air and the sub-zero temperatures. For the writer of Acts and for his readers at the time as well, these dangers were entirely non-existent because they had no understanding of the Earth’s atmosphere that would have made such hazards apparent. Nor did they have mountain climbers or sufficiently tall mountains to make these effects apparent to them. Mt. Sinai

is 7500 feet above sea level. If Moses had climbed to the top, he would have noted that the temperature was noticeably cooler (by 38 degrees).

When I hiked 7.2 miles down into the Grand Canyon from the North rim, I began at 6 p.m. and arrived at 8:35 p.m. As I moved, I distinctly noticed that the air became warmer. Since the sun was setting, you might ordinarily think that the temperature should become cooler. True, the temperature at the rim was falling. But, for every 1000 feet I descended, I was gaining five degrees in temperature (which exceeded the cooling effect due to the setting of the sun). For the last three miles, the heat was stifling. I stripped down to my swim suit. I was covered with sweat. At the banks of the Colorado River, I had descended 5500 feet below my starting point, and the air temperature was 28 degrees higher due to the elevation effect. From this experience, I can safely suggest that Moses did not go to the top of Mt. Sinai in a single day. Given that he was 80 years old at the time, I would be surprised if he went up more than two thousand feet. A temperature change of 10 degrees could be seen as normal, especial because he was a slow climber. When I descended into the Canyon, I was quite fit and 32 years old. I was also descending on a well-worn switch-back trail that made my progress even easier. This thought experiment was done by way of illustrating why the temperature effect and the change of air pressure went unnoticed during the entire biblical period. Thus, it was entirely normal that no one was worried about Jesus when he was taken up on a cloud into heaven (Acts 1:11). When these texts are read today by informed readers, it is only natural that concerns about Jesus' safety will arise.

⁵⁰ I share these things from my own "bucket list" but way of demonstrating how MUCH it pleases me to have a God who created a planet of such wonder and beauty. For hundreds of years, Christians have been trying to muster sufficient enthusiasm for the face-to-face "beatific vision" of God. Kyle Strobel (2121), an Evangelical Protestant, provides an excellent example of this. As far as I am concerned; however, he and others like him have failed miserably. Three points: #1 How could the beatific vision as a disembodied soul ever compare to taking delight in a canoe trip with my soulmate? The fact that so few medievalists ever thought of "canoe trips" and "soulmates" as giving joy and excitement says much about the limited scope of their life experiences. They were taught (mistakenly) that Paul spoke of the beatific vision when he said, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard" (1 Cor 2:9). See Wright (2008), 194-200. #2 If Adam was enjoying the presence of God day after day in the Garden of Eden and, despite this, he ultimately felt the longing for a suitable "helpmate" like himself, what does this say about the potential limitations of an eternity dazzled by the presence of God? See Milavec (2016), 6-8. #3 Life in Heaven is designed for angels and not for humans. See Boteach (2012), Hiestand (2018) and Moltmann (2009) 238-247.

⁵¹ Wright (2008) 177.

⁵² Wright (2008) 176.

⁵³ If you do a Google search on “going to heaven,” you will discover hundreds of websites designed to prove that the core of the Christian message is centered on “going to heaven” or “going to hell.” There are a few notable exceptions, however. Here is a remarkably simple and compelling exploration of the bible prepared by two pastors: Andy Burnett and Erik Jones. Here is a Roman Catholic exception offered by the National Catholic Reporter that goes “completely outside the box”: [Amy Morris-Young](#). Amy uses her experiences to completely sanitize the classical images of heaven and hell. To do this, she retains the notion of the immortal soul, but she embraces karma and reincarnation as a necessary part of her spiritual journey.

⁵⁴ The Greek language differs from English insofar as Greek, by inflecting the ending of verbs, can distinguish whether an action is to be done once or many times. The aorist tense is reserved for such "one-time" events. Linguistically, therefore, just as the calling for the sanctification of the name and the arrival of the kingdom are one-time events, so, too, the asking for the loaf using the aorist imperative presupposes it will be given only once (Brown [1961] 197 with a caution by Meier [1994] 362 n.38). All six petitions of the Lord's Prayer are framed in the aorist imperative. All six, therefore, anticipate a one-time fulfillment. The kingdom comes once. The loaf is given once. Our debt is forgiven once. We are preserved from failing "in the trial" once. As the reorientation of Christians takes root along the lines of N.T. Wright, Christians will again realize the eschatological power of the Lord's Prayer, and this prayer will again be used in the way Jesus had intended it. The Hail Mary, in contrast, will need to be revised or dropped entirely, because it is orientated toward “the hour of our death” and thereby reveals the medieval concern for “going to heaven”—something entirely absent from the spirituality of Jesus.