

HOW THE PROBLEMATIC MODERN EXPRESSION OF THE CONCEPT OF HELL
DEVELOPED FROM ANCIENT SOURCE: HELL, AND ETERNAL PUNISHMENT
IN THE PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT FROM THE CONCEPT OF
SHEOL THROUGH THE EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE TO THE PRESENT

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Ronald M. Rountree

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To Beth and to Marty, you have been with me through all of life; fulfilled times of triumph, contentment, joy, and even the depths of *sheol*, including, but not limited to, maggots, chickies, and jackals. Thank you for everything. I love you.

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FOREWARD

Few topics arouse hope, suspicion, and guilt as much as the primacy and theological immediacy of hellish punishment found in Western society. Recent historical worldview usually includes the assumption that each individual has one life and that the choices in life have eternal implications. The overwhelming supposition, among those who believe in a very real Hell, is that Hell involves eternal torture: the potential of an embodied eternal penance, a fiery chastening of the soul that must be prevented in the earthly realm of the here and now. Hell is said to promulgate a mixture of burning flesh and pain that inspires one to repent, convert, or at the very least, commit to Jesus in order to obtain some form of basic soul protection.

John Lennon, however, challenged popular Western notions of the afterlife in his 1971 hit “Imagine”:

Imagine there's no heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us only sky. (v. 1-4)

Despite Lennon's heartfelt desire, Pew Research Center reveals that 59% of Americans still believe in a literal Hell—“a place where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished” (Webster). The number of people who believe in a hell drops to 27% for people who claim to be unaffiliated with a specific religion. The percentages increase to an 82% belief in Hell for those who claim to be Protestant and Evangelical. The percentage increases in the American South, resulting in

a Christian-infused conservative culture where nearly nine out of ten people believe in a literal Hell. In summary, the majority of American Protestant Christians regard belief in the possibility of eternal punishment in Hell to be an essential plank in the platform of faith.

PREFACE

Investigation begins in Chapter 1 with an inquiry of the primary etymological and hermeneutical foundations of ancient written sources that develop into the concept later called “hell.” Then, Chapter 2 continues with exposition of the relatively recent importance of a punishing Hell, scrutinizing some of the popular leaders in the development of modern notions of hell from the adaptations that begin in earnest in the European Renaissance. Finally, Chapter 3 finishes with an examination of some of the more influential works that have promulgated variations of hell, which contrast with the initial intent and authenticity.

Ancient contextual frames of reference and primary sources provide the best means of interpreting the terms that later become translated as “hell.” This thesis investigates the relevant word values in cultural context. For immediate purposes, however, “hell” could be in quotes each time it is used in modern context since the ideas behind the word, and the word itself, did not exist until the fourteenth century.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the original languages and the subsequent modifications of eternal worldview through artistic expression, thus demonstrating the way that the modern problematic concept of Hell adapts the original context of the documents and languages found in ancient religious and secular sources.

The modern place of eternal punishment, Hell, is not found in the Christian Scriptures. The concept of a punishing Hell emerged from misinterpretations and theological wish fulfillment changed the original intent and context of ancient terms into a modern place of fire and brimstone. The evolving myth of a literal Hell began as an imaginative and powerful construct in the early fourteenth century. The Protestant Reformation, and the following Great Awakening movement, finished the foundations that eventually became the horrible abode of endless torture, a place to which bad or unfaithful people go when they die, Hell.