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Weeping and Bad Hair: the Bodily Suffering of Early Christian Hell as a Threat to Masculinity

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1. Introduction: Early Christian Hell, Early Christian Bodies, Punishment, and “Disability” Now and Then

Lennard J. Davis has argued that disability studies can play a critical role in contemporary identity politics because disability “is an identity that interrogates and can help transform the very idea of identity. Disability, by the unstable nature of its category, asks us to redefine the very nature of identity and of ‘belonging’ to an identity group.”¹ As Davis contends, disability forces us to rethink not only our cultural construction of disability as such, but also late twentieth century identity politics as a whole, challenging the notion that “identity” always equates to an exclusive group with a particular set of political concerns.² Davis concludes that the future of disability studies lies in a cultural paradigm shift that escapes the dichotomy of normal-abnormal, and a “concept of the subject, of character and personality, that derives its strength from knowledge of where identity has been but more where it is going.”³ Davis here issues a challenge that forces us to think seriously about the way that we do work as scholars of disability studies, as disability rights activists, and as participants in a fading cultural episteme. I begin here with Davis’ challenge because as a historian of early Christianity who works on disability

¹ Lennard J. Davis, “Identity Politics, Disability, and Culture,” in Handbook of Disability Studies, ed. Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001), 535-545, at 544, discusses the way in which the representation of disability and identity politics are intertwined, forecasting a cultural paradigm shift in the way we think not only about disability, but identity politics as well.
² As Davis, “Identity Politics, Disability and Culture,” 536-37, notes, this is one of the reasons that he identity community in the United States has been slow to recognize disability, because “disability is seen in some sense as 'spoiling' the neatness of categories of oppression, or victim and victimizer.”
³ Davis, “Identity Politics, Disability and Culture,” 544.
and gender it is easy to find oneself enmeshed in the identity politics of the twentieth century as they are read back upon antiquity. And yet even as we take to heart Davis’ call for us to lean into a future beyond this “paradigm shift,” our work here is part of the ongoing effort to attend to the intersection between multiple identity categories. In this way we hope to contribute to the knowledge “of where identity has been,” specifically focusing on the history of scholarship of early Christianity, and the history of gender and the body in antiquity.

This paper will use the conceptions of gendered bodily suffering found in the ancient medical corpus (Hippocrates, Galen and inscriptions), martyrdom literature, and the Roman judicial rhetoric of punitive suffering to read apocalyptic depictions of bodily suffering as "effeminizing" punishments, which in turn utilize masculinity and bodily normativity to police behavior, equating early Christian ethical norms with masculinity and bodily "health." First, we will situate our study within the history of early Christianity, explaining the historical relevance of the bodies we find in hell, and provide an overview of the relevant primary texts within the early Christian apocalypses. Next, we will highlight the different types of bodies that are found in those early Christian apocalypses, including the hanging punishments, the weeping of the saints and sinners, and the frightening hair of the punishing angels. After looking at the range of bodies that we find in the early Christian apocalypses, we will consider the intersection between suffering bodies and gender in antiquity. This section will treat briefly the way in which Christians are interacting with Greek and Roman notions of the body in these texts, and the relevant theoretical works on gender and bodily suffering in the ancient world. Finally, we will apply the theoretical reflections and historical evidence that we have
synthesized thus far to selected images of the body from the early Christian apocalypses. In this final section of the paper we will show how masculinity and ancient notions of bodily normativity worked in concert to mark sin in early Christian hell, in turn creating an ancient Christian culture of bodily normativity. As we will see, these early Christian texts expanded the existing frameworks of bodily suffering as a disciplinary performance, focusing on the non-normative body as a punitive spectacle and pedagogical object. The conclusions of the paper will offer directions for thinking about the intersections of gender, bodily suffering, and disability in Hell and ancient Christianity at large.


In many ways hell, and in particular the hell of the early Christian apocalypses, might seem like an odd choice for an investigation about masculinity and disability in antiquity. We could have looked to any of a number of places in the corpus of ancient Christian literature to find suffering bodies that tell us something about the intersection between gender, the body, and early Christian ethics. In fact, much of the scholarly reflection upon these subjects has analyzed the fascinating depictions of martyrs, whose suffering is valorized, or the slave bodies whose physical torment is directly correlated to their social marginalization. As these studies have demonstrated, gender and bodily suffering are

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inextricably linked in the ancient world. The ancient Christian bodies of martyrs and slaves represented public performances of Greek and Roman gender expectations, enacting, re-enacting, and in some cases re-working what defines an ideal “body.” Here, we hope to build upon these studies, and broaden our understanding of ancient Christian conceptions of bodily suffering and gender, expanding the conversation beyond redemptive suffering and the “real bodies” of the martyrs to include the “imagined bodies” in hell. Despite the resurgence of interest in apocalyptic literature in the last twenty years, there has been very little research on the depiction of the suffering body in these texts, either because they depict imaginary spaces that are removed from “real bodies,” or because they occur in apocryphal books, which much of Jewish and Christian tradition views as peripheral literature. As historians of antiquity who study gender, the

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6 Castelli, _Martyrdom and Memory_, 33-68, 104-33, discusses martyrdom as both performance and spectacle, and the relationship of these performances to societal gender norms, reminding readers that the bodies of the martyrs “produced meaning.”; Cobb, _Dying to be Men_, 92-123, analyzes the extent to which the female martyrs performed masculinity and femininity; Candida R. Moss, “Blood Ties: Martyrdom, Motherhood, and Family in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,” in _Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches_, ed. by Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway, and James A. Kellhoffer (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2010), pp. 189-205; esp.197, 198-204, connects the conversations about gender performance in the martyrdom Acta to scholarship on family and gender roles, arguing for the need to be attentive to the way that early Christians were attempting to modify existing models of family or produce novel ones through these performances.

7 Although there has not much attention to the role of the body in these texts, there have been many important works on the historical development of the genre of the “tour of hell” and concept of early Christian hell. See especially Martha Himmelfarb, _Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature_ (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); Richard Bauckham, _The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses_ (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Jan N. Bremmer, _The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife: The 1995 Read-Tuckwell Lectures at the University of Bristol_ (New York: Routledge, 2002); Tobias Nicklas, et al. eds., _Other Worlds and their Relation to this World_ (Boston: Brill, 2010).


9 Christl M. Maier, _Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel_ (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), studies the interrelationship gender, space, and the metaphorical language of the city personified in the Hebrew Bible. Maier, 22-25, draws upon Paula M. Cocoy, _Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis_ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), and situates historical critical readings of Zion amidst the theoretical tension between “the body as material reality,” and “the
disability, and apocalyptic literature have shown, however, the distance between “imagined bodies” and “real bodies” is short indeed.

Yet, we are not simply turning to the hell of the early Christian apocalypses because they represent “understudied” literature when it comes to questions of masculinity and the body. Rather, these apocalypses that describe hell in vivid and grotesque detail are an important object of study because of the influence that they had on ancient Christian discussions about ethics. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.), a theologian and bishop in North Africa, was leery of the hell of the early Christian apocalypses because he believed that their vision of punishment was too lenient, offering a temporary respite for the damned. His concern that sinners not be provided a way out demonstrates the high

body as sociocultural artifact.” Her conclusions preserve this tension, urging readers to eschew simple readings of gendered metaphors that would disconnect discursive practices about the body from actual bodies. Describing the body of Daughter Zion in Lamentations, Maier argues “Her broken body is a site of destruction that simultaneously represents the loss of the city space (perceived space), the collapse of the traditional Zion theology (conceived space), and the painful survival of a few inhabitants (lived space)(214).”

J. Albert Harrill, Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 2ff. for discussion about the way in which Christian texts “promote the literary imagination about slaves and the ideology of mastery.” See also Jennifer Glancy, Corporeal Knowledge, 131-56, for the argument that early Christian slave holding practices created a culture of bodily control, influencing early Christian ideology. Glancy, 156, argues that this has been overlooked in the history of scholarship because “the identification of slaves as bodies has historically interfered with the ability of scholars, more interested in the life of the soul, to acknowledge the impact of slavery on the structures and beliefs of early Christianity.”

As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, “Representation and its Discontents: The Uneasy Home of Disability in Literature and Film,” in Handbook of Disability Studies ed. Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001), 195-218, show, even a derisive or comedic representation of disability in literature or film can tell us something about cultural attitudes toward “real” disabled bodies, and even play a role in disability rights advocacy as “transgressive resignifications.”

As Adela Yarbro Collins, Crisis and Catharsis: the Power of the Apocalypse (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 160, argues, the book of Revelation used “symbols and artful plots” to make “feelings which were probably latent, vague, complex, and ambiguous explicit, conscious, and simple.” Collins suggests that by evoking emotions the imagery of the apocalypse was intended to have a cathartic effect on the real bodies of the audience. And as Greg Carey, Ultimate Things: An Introduction to Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 147-78, notes, several of the Jewish apocalypses are written as a response to the tragedy of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E., using the imaginary spaces of the apocalypse to make sense out of a new, devastating, spatial reality.

value he saw in visions of the afterlife. Augustine believed that the torment of hell was a powerful motivator for his audience, and he was keen to keep it that way. As Peter Brown has argued, “[Augustine] gave his questioners little room to maneuver. He frequently warned them that there was no easy way by which hardened or negligent sinners might enter heaven.”

But when we open our gaze to depictions of the afterlife beyond Augustine and his interlocutors, or trace the reception history of the apocalypses Augustine engaged (which Brown does not do), we see that it is not simply Augustine’s reaction to the variables of history that codified Christian ideas about damnation. John Chrysostom (347-407 C.E.), theologian and archbishop of Constantinople, quips “If only it were possible to preach like this always and continually speak about Hell...I know what I say is painful, but I cannot tell you how great a benefit it contains,” revealing a prioritization of teaching about hell that seems to be more about pedagogy and ethics than economics. The descriptions of hell’s torments often carried some explicit instruction regarding one’s earthly behavior, punishing specific individual sins for the benefit of hell’s onlookers, with the set of sins and punishments changing in each hell, to suit the context of the audience and author. The catechetical function of images of punitive bodily suffering

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15 Brown, The Ransom of the Soul, 63, depicts Augustine as resistant to imaginations of the afterlife that allowed clemency for those that could attain it through economic means.
16 Despite Augustine’s North African context, the popularity of the tours of hell in late antique Africa, and Augustine’s direct engagement with those texts, Brown, The Ransom of the Soul, 57-82, 83-114, does not include the Apocalypse of Peter, or the critical scholarship on the apocalypses, or their ancient readership in his discussion. Although Brown, 113-, 139-41 does discuss the Visio Pauli, he classifies this as a "post-imperial phenomenon" and does not engage any of the critical scholarship on early Christian apocalypses here. What is more, when Brown The Ransom of the Soul, 63-65 does discuss Augustine’s interlocutors in the debate about the afterlife, he completely ignores the hypothesis proposed by Richard Bauckham in The Fate of the Dead, 147-59.
17 John Chrysostom Laz. 2.3.
seems to have been widely accepted, making its way into early Christian Good Friday liturgies, a practice that continued well into the fifth century C.E.\textsuperscript{18} Even after falling into disuse in liturgy, these apocalyptic tours of hell continued to capture the imagination, inviting Dante, a key medieval reader of the Apocalypse of Paul, to re-imagine hell’s torments for a new generation of readers in his \textit{Inferno}.\textsuperscript{19} As Piero Camporessi has observed, Dante’s hell transformed the ancient vision of hell as a vast “region” into a “project of architectural engineering,” that reflected “the Italian urban landscape of the age of the city-states.”\textsuperscript{20} Through Dante’s wide readership and cultural impact these “painful cities” and the bodies that inhabit them have had an influence on our contemporary understandings of suffering bodies.\textsuperscript{21}

Because of its wide readership in antiquity and its later influence on Dante, the Apocalypse of Paul is one of the two most important Christian depictions of hell. Likely written around 400 C.E.,\textsuperscript{22} the Apocalypse of Paul marks an important shift in the tours of hell, focusing on the punishments of sinners within the Christian community who fail to

\begin{footnotesize}
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    \item \textsuperscript{18} Sozomen \textit{Hist. eccl.} 7.19.9, details the practice of some Palestinian churches, which read the Apocalypse of Peter every year on Good Friday, while fasting in memory of the Passion.
    \item \textsuperscript{19} For discussion of the thematic similarities between Dante’s \textit{Divine Comedy} and the Apocalypse of Paul, see Tamás Adamik, “The Apocalypse of Paul and Fantastic Literature,” in \textit{The Visio Pauli and the Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul} (ed. Jan N. Bremmer and István Czachesz; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 144–57.
    \item \textsuperscript{21} See Katheryn Gin Lum, \textit{Damned Nation: Hell in America from the Revolution to Reconstruction} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), for discussion of the influence of preaching about damnation in the United States from the Revolution to post-Civil war reflections.
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live out the ethical norms and expectations of their assigned social or political role.\(^{23}\) In addition to the impression it made on Dante, the Apocalypse of Paul also represented what Anthony Hilhorst has called a "living text," whose many versions in at least nine languages "captivated the Christian imagination for over a millennium."\(^{24}\) In addition to the Apocalypse of Paul, the Apocalypse of Peter also played a crucial role in the development of early Christian imaginations of the afterlife. The Apocalypse of Peter was likely written during the second century C.E., and was the basis for many of the later tours of hell, including the Apocalypse of Paul.\(^{25}\) We also find Christian visions of hell in some of the apocalypses that are typically grouped as Jewish texts like the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, or 2 Enoch.\(^{26}\) Although these texts may have originated as Jewish apocalypses, their preservation by Christians has resulted in depictions of the afterlife

that look much like the Christian ones that developed around the same time. Finally, we also find scenes of eternal torment in hell outside of the apocalyptic genre, as in the Acts of Thomas, which contains a young woman relating her journey to hell to the apostle Thomas after she has been caught in adultery, murdered, and brought back to life by the apostle.  

3. The Torments of Hell: A Disciplinary Regime or Bodies Beyond Control?

The specific torments and types of bodies we find in these early Christian hellscapes are wide ranging, and tailored to the specific sins that are being punished. In many cases we find the sinners who are punished in hell weeping uncontrollably, lamenting their fate in a way that is visible to the tourists who find them there. The righteous onlookers in these tours of hell also weep, depicting hell as a space that evokes this outward emotional response from every body, regardless of its ethical status. Some of the bodies that we find in early Christian tours of hell are undergoing a torment that fits the ancient standard of *lex talionis*, the idea that the punishment should “fit the crime” in measure and intensity. These “measure for measure punishments,” as they are also called, sometimes involve hanging by the offending body part, immersion in fire up to the offending body part.

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28 In Apoc. Pet. 3, the “sinners” weep “in great distress and sorrow” as they are separated from the righteous on the Day of Judgment and in Apoc. Paul 38, those who committed adultery are weeping over their eternal fate.
29 In Apoc. Pet. 3, the righteous onlookers, the angels, and Peter also weep at the sight of the “sinners” who weep, mirroring the desired emotional response of the readers, who are intended to repent. Likewise, in Apoc. Paul 43, both the righteous and the unrighteous weep at the torments, and in both textual versions of 2 Enoch 40:12, Enoch weeps at the sight of punishment. See Henning, *Educating Early Christians*, 186-88 for a discussion of the rhetorical function of the “weeping.”
part, asphyxiation, or tantalization. For instance, in the Apoc. Pet. 7, we find those who have committed a sin of speech hanging by their tongues in the place of eternal fire:

Then will men and women come to the place prepared for them. By their tongues with which they have blasphemed the way of righteousness will they be hung up.

There is spread out for them unquenchable fire...

This is the first punishment that Peter sees after all of the general punishments of the “evil creatures and sinners” on the Day of Judgment (described in Apoc. Pet. 6), here making an explicit connection between the sin of blasphemy and the punishment of hanging by the tongue, the body part “with which they” sinned. Not only do these punishments follow the ancient legal standard of *lex talionis*, they also recall the real torture that ancient persons experienced as a part of the ancient judicial process. Thus, the concept of hell as a prison with “adamantine bars” was a metaphor that linked the early Christian reflections on judgment and eternal punishment to the familiar juridical and disciplinary spaces of the Roman world.

In addition to mirroring contemporary ideas about punitive suffering from the Roman judicial context, the punishments of early Christian hell also mirror the bodily suffering of persons with disabilities. Blindness is a punishment in the Apocalypse of Peter 12, the Apocalypse of Paul 40, and the Apocalypse of Zephaniah 10. In the Apocalypse of

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30 See 68-105 for a summary of the various kinds of measure for measure punishments that occur in the apocalyptic tours of hell, including charts that summarize the correlation between specific sins and punishments.
32 The image of hades or hell as a prison was very prevalent in the ancient world. Examples of this motif include but are not limited to Virgil’s depiction of Tartarus’ screeching gate that is protected by columns of solid adamantine (*Aen.* 6.550-560), Plutarch, *Sera* 564F-565F in which Erinys imprisons souls who are “past all healing,” the “gates of Hades” in Matt 16, the adamantine bars of hell in Apoc. Pet. 4, and the “prison of the underworld” in Apoc. Paul 18.
Zephaniah this image of bodily disability is invoked as a consequence of an intellectual sin:

And also I saw some blind ones crying out. And I was amazed when I saw all these works of God. I said “Who are these?” He said to me, “These are the catechumens who heard the word of God, but they were not perfected in the work which they heard.” And I said to him, “Then do they not have repentance here?” He said, “Yes,” I said “How long?” He said to me, “Until the day when the Lord will judge” (Apoc. Zeph. 10).

In the Apoc. Zeph. 10, the blind bodies of the unperfected catechumens are not merely a metaphor for misunderstanding, as in other ancient texts. Instead blindness is a punishment that is exacted on real bodies. Likewise, in other places in the early Christian apocalypses we find sinners with lacerated or amputated limbs, mirroring the large number of ancient persons who lived without the use of one of their limbs. But beyond simply mirroring the familiar bodies of the disabled in the real world, the bodies of those who are punished in hell accomplish something else. By threatening disability as a punishment, the bodies that we find in hell intensify and reinforce the ancient idea that

33 There are countless examples of this theme in ancient literature. A particularly salient example is recorded in an inscription from the Asclepion at Epidaurus, in which a woman named Ambrosia who was blind in one eye ridicules the cures at the sanctuary, and is only healed after she repents by offering a silver pig at the sanctuary as a memorial of her ignorance. See stele A4 in Lynn R. LiDonnici, *The Epidaurian Miracle Inscriptions: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995). For a succinct summary of other ancient texts that link blindness and ignorance see Chad Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts: The Use of Physical Features in Characterization* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 73-81.

34 Meghan Henning, “Metaphorical, Punitive, and Pedagogical Blindness in Hell,” *Studia Patristica* (forthcoming 2017), discusses the way in which hell’s punishments in Apoc. Pet., Apoc. Zeph., and Apoc. Paul intensify and codify the culturally available concepts of blindness as a punishment for sin. Elsewhere in Apoc. Zeph. 10, the reader learns that bodies in hell are very much like real bodies on earth: “And I saw others with their hair on them. I said, “Then there is hair and body in this place?” He said, “Yes, the Lord gives body and hair to them as he desires.”

35 As Candida R. Moss, “The Righteous Amputees: Salvation and the Sinful Body in Mark 9,” lecture at Yale Divinity School, September 25, 2014, has noted, amputation was not as anomalous in the ancient world as it is in our own.
bodily difference was a punishment for sin. In the Apoc. Paul 39, for instance, Paul finds those who harmed widows and the poor “with lacerated hands and feet (or with hands and feet cut off) and naked in a place of ice and snow, and worms consumed them.”

Still other bodies that we find in hell challenge ancient concepts of bodily normativity in ways that might seem strange to the contemporary reader as mechanisms of torture. As in the example above, there are several texts that describe unceasing consumption by worms (Acts of Thom. 56, Apoc. Pet. 9, Apoc. Paul 39, 42), chattering teeth (Apoc. Paul 42), and the description of the ugly angels who carry off the souls of the ungodly that frighten Zephaniah with their “eyes that were mixed with blood” and “hair that was loose like the hair of women” (Apoc. Zeph. 4.4-5). Bodies that are eaten by worms, teeth that chatter, and the unkempt hair of a punishing angel might seem undesirable to the contemporary reader, but do not seem to be on par with the hanging punishments, or immersion in a river of fire. As Martha Himmelfarb rightly cautions, each of these punishments “has its own history,” and Himmelfarb’s work tracing the history of each of these distinctive punishments is still foundational in that regard. What we hope to add here is an awareness of the way that those distinctive punishments were likely interpreted by early and late antique Christians once they were assembled together into the early Christian hellscapes of the apocalypses. In order to understand how each of these different images would constitute punitive suffering for an ancient audience we need to gain a clearer concept of the way in which suffering bodies intersected with ancient concepts of gender and the body.

36 For other instances of limb amputation or laceration see Apoc. Pet. 9; Apoc. Pet. 11; and Apoc. Paul 40.
37 The different kinds of suffering bodies that we survey here are by no means exhaustive, for the most part leaving out the body of the tourist, the angelic bodies, or the heavenly bodies due to the constraints of time and space.
38 Himmelfarb, Tours of Hell, 82.
4. Gender and Bodily Suffering in the Ancient World: Medicine, Judicial Punishment, and Martyrdom

As we might expect, ancient concepts of the body operated on a hierarchical understanding of gender, in which the superior body was the male body. Men’s bodies were characterized as strong, hot, dry, and compact, or impervious to penetration, whereas women had bodies that were weak, cold, moist, and porous. One of the most frequently cited works on gender and the body, Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex*, contends that ancient thinkers operated on a “one-sex” model, in which gender was not a binary, but a continuum. Laqueur primarily bases this theory on Aristotle’s assertion that women are incomplete males whose bodies have simply never reached the level of heat, dryness, or solidity that characterize masculinity. After starting with Aristotle, Laqueur reads Galen’s medical treatises as manuals designed to protect and preserve masculinity by maintaining heat, dryness, and compactness, so that male bodies do not become cold, moist, or porous. The major asset of Laqueur’s work is that it offers an explanatory model of the ancient body that is sufficiently different from our contemporary model, but simple enough to apply broadly to other ancient literature. As a result, Laqueur’s “one-

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39 As Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 119, argues, this is distinct from contemporary gender hierarchies in the functional way that Aristotle conceived of gender: “It is not so much that the female is inferior as that the inferior is female.”


41 Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 28, “But he [Aristotle] also insisted that the distinguishing characteristic of maleness was immaterial, and as a naturalist, chipped away at the organic distinctions between the sexes so that what emerges is an account in which one flesh could be ranked, ordered, and distinguished as particular circumstances required.” (cf. Aristotle *Historia animalium*, 1.9.491b26ff and 4.8.533al-3 and *Economics*, 2.3.1343b25-1344a8)


43 In her corrective to Laqueur, Helen King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence* (New York: Ashgate, 2013), 13-15, cites the simplicity and accessibility of Laqueur’s argument as part of the reason for its influence across disciplines. King, 8, also notes that Laqueur’s own initial position was more nuanced than those who appropriated it, and his own later arguments: “I agree with an
sex” model has been extremely influential among scholars of early Christianity as a way to explain early Christian ideas about bodies that achieve salvation or glorification by becoming “more male.”

Nevertheless, Helen King and others have demonstrated that “claims for the dominance of the ‘one-sex’ model fail to account for the complexity of the classical world.” In particular, reading more widely into the works of Galen or the Hippocratic corpus reveals that a more complex “two-sex” concept of the body was operative in antiquity and late antiquity. The Hippocratic corpus sees woman, not as an incomplete male, but as a radically different, inferior body. And even for Aristotle and Galen, the fundamental “perfection” or “completeness” of the male body lies not in the physical form of genitalia, but in its heat and dryness. One of the major things that Laqueur’s assertion found in the preface to *Making Sex*, one which is at odds with Laqueur’s subsequent work and its reception; in his words, ‘the startling conclusions that a two-sex and a one-sex model [have] always been available to those who thought about difference.’

44 Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 32-33, explains Hippocrates and Galen through then lens of Aristotle and Laqueur, “Much of Galen’s hygienic and therapeutic method reads like a training manual designed to maintain the right degree of heat, dryness, and compactness for the masculinization of the young man’s body and to keep it from slipping down the precarious slope to femininity”; and again, Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior* (Louisville: West Minster John Knox, 2006), 84, introduces the one-sex model, arguing that “In this system, any change that would be construed as salvific must be understood as a movement higher on the spectral hierarchy. Thus, women may experience salvation as a movement upward into masculinity, but men who experience a movement downward into femininity (and both kinds of movement are noted in ancient texts) are not understood by that to experience an improvement in state or status.” Martin’s work on the body and gender and the body in early Christianity was highly influential, maximizing the impact of Laqueur’s thinking on the sub-discipline. See for instance, the work of Stephanie L. Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Martyr Texts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. Notable exceptions to this trend include Chris L. de Wet, *Preaching Bondage: John Chrysostom and the Discourse of Slavery in Early Christianity*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015; and Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch*, 304, n.5.

45 King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial*, 25; See also Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 357-8.

46 King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial*, 44, notes that this error of Laqueur’s is in part because of his partial reading of the Hippocratic corpus, ignoring the *Gynaikeia* treatises that demonstrate a “two-sex” understanding of the body.

47 *The One-Sex Body on Trial*, 44-45, citing Hippocrates *Diseases of Women* 1.62 and 1.1, summarizes “Women are like unprocessed fleece, men like a closely woven garment, and if someone were to put fleece and garment in the same damp place for the same length of time, it is the fleece that would draw up more moisture.”
emphasis on the “one-sex” model obscures is the importance of blood flow for both Hippocratic and Aristotelian concepts of gender. Leslie Dean-Jones argues

Menstrual blood is the linchpin of both the Hippocratic and the Aristotelian theories on how women differed from men. Whether a woman was healthy, diseased, pregnant, or nursing, in Classical Greece her body was defined in terms of blood-hydraulics. In both the medical literature and in Aristotle’s “one-sex” model, the female body is inferior to the male body, and that inferiority is integrally linked to the flow of blood. The female body is naturally cooler than the male, which equates to poor blood flow, and greater susceptibility to imbalance (and thus disease and bodily suffering) than the male body. The centrality of blood flow influences the entire economy of the body, extending to “every part of the flesh: men are firm and hard, women are wet and spongy. In terms of the texture of their bodies as a whole, men are like woven cloth, women are like fleece.” While these outward signifiers seem to posit a simple mechanism for identifying, caring for, and preserving male bodies, the outward signs of gender were understood to reflect a more complicated economy of the body. In some ways this understanding of gender allowed for bodies to change, performing the ideal of the impervious male body to a greater or lesser extent, and at the same time, it relied upon

48 King, The One-Sex Body on Trial, 46, argues contra Laqueur, Making Sex, 35, 37, and 105, “Not being aware of the Gynaikeia tradition, Laqueur plays down the pre-modern importance of menstruation in defining what it is to be female, replacing this with his focus on inside/outside organs.”

49 Dean-Jones, Women’s Bodies in Classical Greek Science, 225.

50 King, The One-Sex Body on Trial, 48, citing Hippocrates Diseases of Women 1.1. See also, Meghan Henning, “Paralysis and Sexuality in Medical Literature and the Acts of Peter,” Journal of Late Antiquity. 8.2 (2015) 306-21, for further discussion of the intersection between blood flow and gender in antiquity and late antiquity.

51 Flemming, Medicine and the Making of Roman Women, 369-70. See also Teresa M. Shaw, The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 64-78, who discusses the ways in which ancient medical texts reflected broader cultural ideas about gender and the body.
the hierarchical dualism in which “men and women were perceived as ‘opposites’ in a very real manner.”

As we turn to thinking about masculinity and the suffering body in early Christianity, we will attempt to keep this nuanced understanding of gender and the ancient body at the forefront. Much of the recent scholarship on masculinity in early Christianity has demonstrated that early Christian literature does reflect and engage in the ongoing struggle to attain and preserve that ideal male body, however diverse the ancient understanding of male might have been. On the whole the suffering body represented a failure to attain normative masculinity. But in a culture that used punitive suffering to reinforce those bodily norms and “make men” out of women and slaves, the suffering body is a complicated site that simultaneously symbolizes power and powerlessness. Chris L. de Wet argues that John Chrysostom’s preaching on slavery reflects this tension:

To Chrysostom, Christian identity was founded in being scourged, not flinging the whip. Public and spectacularly violent punishment reflected the degradation of Roman society—a society founded on the brutality of slavery. The harsh punishment of slaves further destabilized masculinity, hence Chrysostom’s strict measures to regulate and redistribute the means of punishment.

Like the suffering imposed upon the Christian slave, the suffering bodies we find in early Christian hell were part of the culture of surveillance, the pervasive power of domination.

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53 See Maud W. Gleason, Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 160-62, on the way in which that ideal was somewhat malleable especially over time. Chris de Wet, Preaching Bondage, 174-83, describes the way that the different ideals of Roman masculinity, or “masculinities,” shaped slaveholding discourse.
54 de Wet, Preaching Bondage, 218.
meant to ensure productivity and good behavior. As we observed at the outset, disability and cultural expressions of bodily difference often confound categories, so that bodies that are marked as “other” expose the operative bodily norms. And so, it is through the suffering bodies of ancient Christian hell that we are able to examine the intersection between masculinity and bodily normativity in early Christianity.

We can see these concepts of gendered bodily suffering at work in the descriptions of the bodies that we find in judicial and martyrdom literature. In the Roman world, martyrdom and judicial punishment served as a kind of public spectacle, a violent performance of imperial power. Here, as in the early Christian depictions of hell, the body is used as a tableau for representing the punitive consequences for particular action or inaction, expressing these consequences in ways that were intended to deter any body in the empire. The early Christian martyrdom accounts certainly played with this framework and resisted the narrative of the empire through their vindication of the martyrs as bodies that suffered righteously. Yet, even in acts of textual resistance those accounts participated in performances of gendered bodily suffering, placing the suffering body on display, and drawing attention to the complex ways in which it participated in the ancient gender economy.

55 de Wet, Preaching Bondage, 199, argues that the Chrestico panopticon collapses the divine and the master, and thus robs the slave of his last bit of agency: “although Chrysostom sees this move as giving the slave agency, the Chrestico panopticon and the interiorization of surveillance rob the slave of the last strand of agency he or she may have had in psychological or spiritual terms, increasing the slave’s carceral state and creating a powerful spiritual carcerality with no means of escape.”

56 Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory, 33-68, 104-33; David Frankfurter, “Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze,” JECS 17.2 (2009), 215-245, 238-240.


The spectacle of violence in the judicial context is perhaps the most important for our own study of punitive bodily suffering. As Brent D. Shaw has argued, the fear of being involved in a public display of physical torture was “embedded in the conscience of the ordinary people” in antiquity. For early Christians, Shaw argues, this fear became manifest in the belief in a “final court,” an idea that came to look more and more like the judicial proceedings of the Roman world as the early Church Fathers interpreted New Testament notions of divine judgment.\(^5^9\) Just as the Roman punishments served as theatrically staged events that provided public entertainment and incited fear, the Christian visions of eternal torment were crafted to provide their own kind of haunting spectacle.\(^6^0\) Likewise, David Frankfurter examines eroticized voyeurism across “Roman spectacle culture” including martyrdom and apocalyptic eschatology. Here, Frankfurter argues that in early Christian depictions of hell “the graphic scenes of the suffering of the unrighteous also provided audiences with a safely set-off context for fantasizing aggression.”\(^6^1\) Whereas martyrdom literature sanctifies the violence by villainizing the Roman as aggressor, the apocalyptic judgment scenes are justified as “appropriate” punishments for the sinful victims.\(^6^2\) Within each context gender and bodily suffering act as props in the punitive spectacle, helping to draw the audience’s eye to particularly horrifying or confounding elements of the drama.

\(^5^9\) Shaw, “Judicial Nightmares and Christian Memory,” 556, states that “The relationship between the Christian and his or her God came to be configured as a judicial one.” Shaw cites Tertullian and Ambrose as prime examples of church Fathers who employed the topos of the judicial nightmare in their own descriptions of divine judgment.

\(^6^0\) The pedagogical value of these spectacles of torture is part of what contributes to the positive view of punishment in early Christian thought. Harrill, “Exegetical Torture and Truth,” 22, argues that Origen’s “sanctification of violence extends to a positive view of punishment generally.” Harrill connects the metaphorical language of dissecting a text to the real bodies of the household slaves of Origen’s readers. As Harrill argues, this is a “live metaphor.” For these early Christian masters, torture of the slave body was often punitive, and pedagogical for the onlookers as well as for the slave himself.


\(^6^2\) Ibid, 239.
5. Masculinity and Marking Sin: Hell’s Torments as Effeminizing Punishments

As we discussed above, many of hell’s inhabitants weep, including both the righteous and unrighteous. In the Apocalypse of Peter 3, Peter sees the separation of the righteous and the sinners on the last day. Those who see the spectacle of punishment are moved to tears as they see the sinners weeping in sorrow:

We saw how the sinners wept in great distress and sorrow, until all who saw it with their eyes wept, whether righteous, or angels or himself also. And I asked him and said, ‘Lord, allow me to speak thy word concerning these sinners: “It were better for them that they had not been created.” And the Saviour answered and said “O Peter, why speakest thou thus, ‘that to not have been created were better for them?”’ Thou resistest God. Thou wouldest not have more compassion than he for his image, for he has created them and has brought them forth when they were not. And since thou hast seen the lamentation which sinners shall encounter in the last days, therefore thy heart is saddened; but I will show thee their works in which they have sinned against the Most High.

At the sight of the sinners weeping in hell the Saviour and Peter are both moved to tears. Throughout this passage the narrator and the Saviour interpret these tears as a sign of sadness. More than simply sadness, in the context of the ancient court weeping was one of the signs of guilt, alongside other gestures of subservience and bodily weakness such as blushing and sweating. Playing upon the culturally prevalent fears of judicial torture, these tears were likely part of an attempt to emotionally move the audience, inciting the

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63 Shaw, “Judicial Nightmares and Christian Memory,” 544, argues that the body language of “blushing, sweating, shuffling, bowing, scraping, and weeping” was widely recognized as a behavioral symptom of guilt, elicited by judicial rituals.
fear of divine judgment and encouraging repentance. But in addition to inviting the audience to weep and repent their own sins, these weeping bodies represent compromised male bodies that are overcome with emotion in a characteristically female way. And in martyrdom narratives the weeping of a family member could serve as an effeminate foil for the martyr’s own performance of the strong, unmoving, masculine ideal. In the Apocalypse of Peter, then, early Christian hell is depicted as a space in which everybody weeps, and thus a space in which normative masculine bodies are made more effeminate.

Another way in which the normative masculine body is compromised in hell is through bodily torment. Through these tortures the bodies of the sinful are marked as both abnormal and female, so that the non-normative female body becomes the signifier of punishment. In many ways the types of bodily punishments one finds in hell mirror the judicial punishments of the Roman world. Those who had judicial nightmares might fear imprisonment, hanging, beheading, being thrown to wild beasts, crucifixion, or burning alive. Of these punishments, all but crucifixion occur in the early Christian visions of hell, while hanging, wild beasts, and burning figure highly as mechanisms of torture. In the Apocalypse of Peter 9, those who bore false testimony against the martyrs have their lips cut off as “fire enters into their mouths and their entrails,” and the rich are cast upon

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64 Shaw, “Judicial Nightmares and Christian Memory,” 539, notes that the judicial process was designed to “induce fear” so that those watching would become “mentally overwhelmed.” See also, Henning Educating Early Christians, 186-88.

65 This is one way in which early Christian hell parallels the Greek and Roman depictions of Hades, in which we also find tearful scenes between loved ones (Odysseus weeps with compassion at the sight of his unburied friend Elpenor Od.11.55, and Anchises is overcome with tears when he sees his son Virgil Aeneid 6.688-689).

66 Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 100-102, argues that Perpetua, for example, is masculinized through the effusive displays of her father. By way of contrast to her father’s leaky, effeminate body, Perpetua’s own emotional distance and silence is a model of masculine self-control.

a stone pillar of fire to suffer unceasing torment. In the Apocalypse of Paul 31-37 Paul sees a variety of sinners, all immersed in the river of fire with the fire reaching up to different places on their bodies. The deacon who ate up the offerings and committed fornication is seen wading up to his knees in fire: “And his hands were stretched out and bloody, and worms came out of his mouth and from his nostrils and he was groaning and weeping and crying” (Apoc. Paul 36). Similarly, in Acts of Thomas 56, those who have committed adultery are in a pit welling up with mire and worms.

In each of these passages fire and worms penetrate the suffering bodies of the damned. In some cases another form of bodily deformity accompanies this, and in other cases the bodies of the sinners are literally enveloped or consumed by fire or worms. The sinful body is abnormal, dysfunctional, weak, penetrable, porous, and leaky. In short, the unrighteous have become disabled and female in hell.

In addition to the emasculated bodies of the unrighteous, hell also contains angelic bodies that are also depicted as abnormal. There are different groups of angels in hell, most of whom carry out the punishments or serve as administrators, or guards. The Apocalypse of Zephaniah describes the ugly angels who carried off the souls of the ungodly: “Their eyes were mixed with blood. Their hair was loose like the hair of women, and fiery scourges were in their hands. When I saw them I was afraid.” The eyes mixed with blood and the effeminate hair of these ungodly angels is a horrifying sight to Zephaniah. Eyes mixed with blood would signal a sick or abnormal body to the

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68 Himmelfarb, Tours of Hell, 108-110 describes the way that fire imagery made its way into visions of hell, largely because of fire’s association with earthly places of punishment. Compare the phallic pillar of fire in Apoc. Pet. 9 with the observations of Frankfurter, “Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze,” 224, who notes that the sado-erotic phallic imagery of the sword was commonplace in female martyrdoms.
69 Contrast the horrifying hair of this passage with the heavenly hair of Elijah in Apoc. Pet. 15: “like the rainbow in the water was his hair.”
ancient audience, and might also play upon prevalent theories of vision that associated the health of the eyes with ethical conduct.\(^{70}\) Loose hair is explicitly identified in this text as an undesirable female trait, as is a common trope in the ancient world, perhaps made more horrifying by virtue of the fact that it is found upon punishing angels who are expected to project strength and masculinity.\(^{71}\) Despite the fact that modern thinking of the afterlife imagines souls moving about as distinct from bodies, this passage reinforces that ideas about the body still held sway in conceiving the afterlife. And while we might assume that gender does not play a large role in defining the spaces of the afterlife, it is obvious here that even the angels, who do not have an earthly body, are still defined by the ancient standards of bodily normativity and masculinity.\(^{72}\)

Perhaps the most germane example for thinking about issues of masculinity and disability is one of the less obvious in terms of how it emasculates the sinner. In the Apocalypse of Paul 42, Paul sees those who deny the resurrection in a place of extreme cold and snow that will never become warm:

\(^{70}\) See Polemo 1.1.158 F quoted in in Gleason, *Makim Men*, 62, who describes the importance of straight eyelids, and unmoving pupils for conveying masculinity. If these traits are absent Polemo says “you may be sure that this is the profile of someone who is really feminine, even though you might find him among real men.” For a thorough discussion of the philosophical theories of vision in the ancient world, the prominence of the “extramission” theory of vision in which the eye was thought to emit light, and the influence of these theories upon Second Temple Jewish and early Christian literature, see Candida R. Moss, “Blurred Vision and Ethical Confusion: The Rhetorical Function of Matthew 6:22-23,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (2011), 757-776.

\(^{71}\) There are a plethora of ancient sources that describe long hair as a feminine, and thus, undesirable trait. Most notable in the early Christian context are Paul’s discussion of head coverings (1 Cor 11:2-16) and the exegetical tradition that follows him (Tertullian *De virginibus velandis*; and Acts Thomas 56, in which women who don’t wear head coverings are hung by their hair), the locusts of Rev 9:8-9 which have “hair like a woman,” and Perpetua’s request for a hairpin because it was unfitting for a martyr to die with disorderly hair (*Martyrdom of Perpetua* 20.4-5). As Maria Doerrler, “‘Hair!’: Remnants of Ascetic Exegesis in Augustine of Hippo’s *De Opere Monacharum*,” *JECS* 22.1 (2014), 79-111, at 101, n. 72, has noted, there was also a “polyvalence of hair in late ancient discourses,” as evidenced in the writings of Clement of Alexandria who was able to criticize Romans for their ornate hair in the same breath that he praises the “barbarians” who whore long hair without adornment (*Pedagoge* 3.3 [PG 8.589B]).

\(^{72}\) This is a different view of angels than the one we find in Tertullian, *De virg. vel.* 10, who argues that the celibacy of male asceticism places one in an “angelic state.”
And I looked from the north towards the west and I saw there the worm that never
rests, and in that place there was gnashing of teeth. Now the worm was a cubit in
size and it had two heads. And I saw there men and women in the cold and
gnashing of teeth.

Here the text combines the eternal punishment tropes of gnashing of teeth and the worm
that never dies with a third element: extreme cold. Remember that in ancient medicine
women’s bodies were thought to be colder and have poorer blood flow, making them
more susceptible to bodily dysfunction or illness. In the Apoc. Paul 42 those who deny
the resurrection are exposed to extreme cold, literally making their bodies function like
those of women so that they exhibit female traits like the loss of bodily control. Here in
the early Christian imagination of hell the loss of control of one’s body is not simply a
metaphor for sin, it becomes a part of the judicial mechanism for policing sin, implicitly
reinforcing the scaffolding of gendered notions of the body.

Hell

After our brief journey through early Christian hell, it might be tempting to exonerate
ourselves, celebrating the differences between the ancient punitive model of justice and
our own world, hopefully looking for all of the ways in which Davis’s paradigm shift
beyond the dichotomy of normal/abnormal is already afoot. And yet, Davis reminds us
that if we are to truly move beyond identity politics we have to do so with eyes wide

73 The worm that never dies is found in Isaiah 66: 24. The gnashing of teeth as a reference to emotional
distress is found throughout the LXX: Job 16:9; Ps 34:16; 36:12; 111:10; Lam 2:16. “Weeping and
The persistent use of this phrase in Matthew influenced the early Christian apocalypses in which we find
different interpretations of those who weep and gnash their teeth in the places of eternal punishment.
Although in Matthew, this phrase is often connected with Gehenna and fiery punishment, not cold. See
open, taking stock of the ways in which our own identity politics are bound up in not only Western notions of democracy and “rights based” approaches to advocacy, but also conceptions of the body that are grounded to some extent in the same hierarchies and binaries of the ancient world. And with this in mind we take seriously the ancient technologies of the body and judicial rhetoric that are, to be sure, distinct from our own, but also not totally remote.

In the early Christian apocalypses it is abundantly clear that punishment was important to early Christians. The punishments themselves deformed, dismembered, and emasculated those who were punished, using the cultural fear of one’s body becoming female and abnormal as a mechanism for deterring unethical behavior. Apart from reinforcing ethical norms, even the saints who were observing the punishments and the angels who carried out the punishments were othered, and made less male by gazing upon sinners in torment. There is something about the very place of punishment itself that challenges the normative male body. In this way, gender categories and bodily normativity are used in the apocalypses, not only to imagine future punishment, but to further ostracize the other. As a spectacle that was intended to draw in audiences and emotionally move them, early Christian hell did not simply trade upon Greek and Roman cultural conceptions of the perfect male body. The hell of the early Christian apocalypses engendered their own discourse of bodily conformity that had a wide reaching influence, equating the strong, impervious, hard, dry, hot, self-controlled, male body with ethical superiority.


Maria Doerfler, “‘Hair!’: Remnants of Ascetic Exegesis in Augustine of Hippo’s De Opere Monacharum.” JECS 22.1 (2014), 79-111.
Maier, Christl M. *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.


