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Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell in Byzantine “Beneficial Tales”

JOHN WORTLEY

It is the common experience of people who indulge themselves in the less sophisticated realms of earlier Byzantine literature, hagiographical material for instance, “popular” chronicles, and the like, frequently to encounter narratives of an anecdotal nature which they distinctly remember having already read in a different context. These might appear in a different dress each time, but they are still recognizably the same (or very similar) stories, even when they occur only partially or integrated with portions of other stories. After a number of such experiences, it is impossible to resist the conviction that such anecdotes are the outcroppings of a vast and interrelated tales-tradition which, hitherto, has remained largely buried beneath the literary debris in which it is encountered. It was to investigate the full extent and dimensions of this tradition that I undertook in 1982 the compilation of a *Répertoire* designed to serve as a research tool in the hands of those who concern themselves with all types of quasi-popular literature related to the Byzantine tradition. After eighteen years and a great deal of effort, that *Répertoire* is now operable. Complete it is not and may never be, for new tales and new connections between the known ones are surfacing all the time. But, after graduating from its inception on filing cards to a simple computer program, the *Répertoire* is now freely accessible to all on the Internet, where it will continue to be updated from time to time.¹

This *Répertoire* already contains abstracts of more than a thousand units (all cross-indexed in various ways), most of which might not inappropriately be termed the παραλειπόμενα of Greek hagiography, the so-called spiritually beneficial tales (διηγήσεις ψυχοφελείς), although many of them predate the heyday of hagiography. The earliest ones were recorded toward the end of the fourth century, by which time they could have been in oral circulation for many years. Most of the major collections of tales and *apophthegmata* were complete by the beginning of the seventh century, but tales continued to appear intermittently until the eleventh century. Indeed, there seems to have been a brief revival of the tale as a literary conceit in the tenth century, but in the eleventh the great codification of monastic lore in the *Synagoge* of Paul Euergetinos seems to have capped the flow of new tales and brought the tradition to a close.² The existing tales continued nevertheless to be retold and recopied; many of them are now in print, and together they provide a rich, fascinating literature characterized by its vigorous spontaneity.

¹J. Wortley, *A Répertoire of Byzantine Beneficial Tales* (hereafter *W*), at <http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~wortley>.

²Paul Euergetinos, *Synagoge* (Venice, 1783 παρά Ἀντωνίου τῷ Βόρτολι); 6th ed., 4 vols., Athens, 1980.

As one would expect of such a literature, it also offers the reader some valuable insights into the mentality of people of little or no sophistication, of “everyday” people as far as we can tell. But this has to be qualified: most of the tales began life as the oral teaching of the monastic communities that flourished mainly in Egypt but also in Syria-Palestine and elsewhere, in the fourth to sixth centuries. True, the tales have a decidedly secular element in them from the very beginning. Even in the earliest collection of monastic lore, the late fourth-century *History of the Monks in Egypt*,³ there are stories about laypeople living in the world and very much up-against worldly problems. The proportion of such stories increases significantly with the advance of time, but the monastic element never disappears. The tales never completely detached themselves from their monastic origins but rather remained firmly wedded to them, just as many of the earlier tales first occur interspersed by their strictly monastic cousins, the *apophthegmata*. But then, this monastic connection may be an accurate reflection of contemporary conditions. Monks and monasticism were a very important element of the later Roman way of life and, far from disappearing from it, became an increasingly influential element as the monks moved into the cities and the phenomenon of the urban monastery developed. There is, moreover, little doubt that it is largely due to monastic transmission, both oral and in writing, that the tales have come down to us. Hence we have to be ever aware that, even when a tale seems to speak most directly of secular life and “how it really was,” we are hearing that tale through a monastic earphone, or viewing it through a monastic lens so to speak. In a word, everything that follows in this paper could be an indication not so much of what people “in the world” did and thought, as of what those who had abandoned the world thought one *ought* to do and think. Yet from the way in which these stories were told and retold across the centuries we can deduce that they functioned as a vigorous folklore; and we know that no people perpetuates a folklore totally inimical to its own beliefs and aspirations.

Whether they are of the desert or of the world, many of the stories are rich in *couleur locale* and can be very rewarding for scholars in many fields who take the trouble to acquaint themselves with the curious peculiarities of the genre to which the tales belong. By consulting the indices of the *Répertoire* or by operating search engines on the abstracts, one discovers that they are capable of providing a wealth of data on a variety of matters: almsgiving, baths, clothes, debt, emasculation, food, gardens, graves, Jews, magic, to name a few examples. But these are for the most part material considerations; the question this paper asks is: might the tales reveal something of what the people who told and heard the tales *thought*, and in particular what they thought about the “last things”? It is relatively easy to deduce from the dominical parables that sowers sowed, that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was infested with bandits, and that shepherds were prone to losing sheep; it is a much more difficult thing to discover the beliefs of the Palestinian farmer, the traveler, or the shepherd. However, since the tales are far more numerous than the parables and frequently more prolix, they may be a little more eloquent of their subjects’ beliefs.

We know that later Romans were obliged to “look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” Not to do so was sacrilege; Emperor Michael II was

³*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, (hereafter *HME*), ed. A.-J. Festugière, SubsHag 53 (Brussels, 1971).

said to have “attained the very acme of godlessness” precisely by “denying the resurrection to come and decrying the good things promised in the next world.”⁴ Assuming then that later Romans did expect a world to come, what exactly were they expecting? It is no exaggeration to say that the scriptures did not give them much to go on. Most of the Old Testament writers had no such expectation, while the New Testament texts are, to say the least, somewhat laconic concerning “the last things.” He who would say something about them was pretty well obliged to “make it up” from somewhere or other, either by extrapolating on the slight hints given in the scriptures or by borrowing from some other tradition (both of which the church appears to have left men free to do). It is therefore hardly surprising to discover that the tales demonstrate only a little consensus on the question of the last things and some quite amazing disparities.

Take for instance the question of whether the prayers of the living could benefit the departed. Here some tales follow the paradigm of the story of Dives and Lazarus⁵ and the answer is decidedly no, for “between us and you there is a great gulf fixed.” Thus a daughter burns her hand trying in vain to rescue her mother from the flames.⁶ Another story tells how a religious sister once fell into an ecstasy in which she was conducted by two elderly persons in white, first before the heavenly throne, then to a place of punishment. There, in a river of fire, she saw many sisters she knew. They begged her to pray for their release from their (just) punishment; which she did, but in vain. Whereupon the suffering sisters prayed her to return and warn the other sisters what awaited them if they did not amend their (shockingly) sinful lives.⁷ *Per contra*, Paul the Simple had a sinful disciple who died. Paul prayed to God and the Mother of God to show him the disciple. He saw him, carried by two figures, completely petrified and inactive. Then he had a second vision of him, released and claiming that it was due to Paul’s prayers that he was released from the chain of his sins; this was confirmed by the Mother of God.⁸ Here is an anecdote of Gregory the Great: “Once when he was traveling the paved road, he came to a deliberate halt and offered a fervent prayer to the Lord, the lover of souls, for the sins of Emperor Trajan to be forgiven. He immediately heard a voice carried to him from God saying: ‘I have heard your prayer and do grant Trajan forgiveness. But make sure you never again offer a prayer to me for the impious.’”⁹ Thus we have tales taking diametrically opposed positions on the question of whether prayers for the dead

⁴*Ioannis Skylitzae synopsis historiarum*, ed. I. Thurn, CFHB 5 (Berlin-New York, 1973), 28.3–4: τὴν μέλλουσαν ἀνάστασιν ἀθετῶν καὶ τὰ ἐκεῖθεν ἐπηγγελμένα ἀγαθὰ διασύρων (ἀνάστασιν τε τὴν μέλλουσαν καὶ τὰ ἐκεῖθεν ἀπιστῶν ἀγαθὰ: *Theophanes Continuatus*, ed. I. Bekker, CSHB (Bonn, 1838), 49.1–2, PG 109:61d.)

⁵Luke 16:19–31.

⁶W064, BHG 1322t / W065, BHG 1318f.

⁷This is a long story; W852, BHG 1322ib, *visio monialis cuiusdam*, clearly a replay of Luke 16:19–31.

⁸W626, in the *Apophthegmata patrum: collectio systematica* (hereafter *Sys*), of which no complete edition exists so far. Pelagius and John (hereafter *P&J*) provide a Latin translation of the earliest extant version (6th–7th century), PL 73:851–1052.

In “Histoires des solitaires égyptiens,” *ROL* 12 (1907) through 18 (1913), passim, F. Nau (hereafter *N*) published the Greek text of the first four hundred tales found in cod. Paris. Coislin. 126 with French translation of tales 1–215. The first of three volumes of a critical edition of *Sys* is now available: *Les Apophthegmes des Pères, Collection systématique, chapitres I–IX*, ed. J.-C. Guy and B. Flusin, SC 387 (Paris, 1993). W626 is *P&J* 10.50, *Sys* 10.72, *N599*.

⁹[Pseudo] John of Damascus (? Michael Syncellus, 761–846 ?), *de his qui in fide dormierunt*, PG 95:261d–264a.

were thought to be of any avail, even though the consensus of the church at large generally supposed that they were.

Here is another dissonance: of the stories attributed to the tenth-century bishop Paul of Monemvasia, No. 13 bears striking resemblance to No. 2 in several ways, both in content and in form. But there is also a very important difference, which almost renders it unthinkable that they are the work of the same author. In the next world as portrayed in the second tale the protagonists are a heavenly eunuch and some “black-faced ones” (αἰθίοπες).¹⁰ But the next world of No. 13 is a very different affair; only angels have to do with the heroine of that story.¹¹ The Byzantine church had no precise eschatology to be sure and, within certain limits, the individual was free to form his or her own opinions about death, judgment, heavenly rewards, and infernal punishments. Hence a great variety of beliefs sprang up concerning “the last things,” and this variety is well illustrated in the tales.

On two points, however, the tales are unanimous: first, that death is inevitable; second, that it does not necessarily come “like a thief in the night.”¹² More than a dozen tales echo the *topos* already found in Athanasios’ *Life of Antony*¹³ (which is in so many ways both radical and germane to the tales-tradition) that righteous souls, and even not-so-righteous souls if they were not beyond redemption, could have a premonition of death. Palladius (for instance) encountered a monastery of women at Antinoë, one of whose members, after sixty years in the ascetic life, was advised by the local patron saint of her impending death.¹⁴ Michael, priest of the Great Lavra of St. Sabas for more than fifty years, knew the precise day on which he would die,¹⁵ and at Isidore’s monastery in the Thebaid, not one of the thousand monks ever got sick, “but when came the translation [μετάθεσις] of each, he announced it to all, laid down and died.”¹⁶ There are many similar incidents elsewhere; nor was it only professional religious or even the righteous who were forewarned. The second narrative of Paul of Monemvasia (already mentioned) is the tale of “The man who was called to account three days before his death,” told to Paul by a friend with whom he was speaking “on the subject of the departing of the soul and of how it is called to account by unclean spirits”—as though this were a frequent topic of conversation in tenth-century Monemvasia. It is a fascinating story of a man who, by stealing a paper, had effectively cheated his mother out of a slave in the hope of money (which he never received). In a vision he is apprised that death is imminent, but he is to be allowed time for repentance and amendment of life.¹⁷

¹⁰The devil appears to Antony first as a dragon, then as a black child: τῆ φαντασίᾳ μέλας αὐτῷ φαίνεται ποῖς, *Vita Antonii*, ed. G. J. M. Bartelink, *Athanasie d’Alexandrie, Vie d’Antoine*, SC 400 (Paris, 1994), 6.1; see Bartelink’s important note on this first appearance of the black demon in monastic literature (p. 147 n. 2).

¹¹J. Wortley, *Les récits édifiants de Paul, évêque de Monembasie, et d’autres auteurs* (hereafter *PMB*) (Paris, 1987), pp. 36–41, 104–8; Eng. trans. and notes, J. Wortley, *The Spiritually Beneficial Tales of Paul, Bishop of Monembasia and of Other Authors* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1996), pp. 68–71, 108–11.

¹²1 Thess. 5:2, 2 Peter 3:10.

¹³*Vita Antonii*, 89.2

¹⁴*Historia Lausiaca* (hereafter *HL*), by Palladius, bishop of Hellenopolis, ed. E. C. Butler, *The Lausiaca History of Palladius*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1904), 3–169, chap. 60 and nn. 103–105; *W220, Synaxarium CP*, 695.35.

¹⁵G. Garitte, “Histoires édifiantes géorgiennes,” *Byzantion* 36 (1966): 396–423, no. 30, *W954*.

¹⁶*HME* 17.3

¹⁷*PMB*, no. 3, *W703, BHG* 1449f.

The evidence of the tales may seem to suggest that later Romans thought that death was reversible. This is scarcely surprising since the Gospel passage where Christ commands his disciples to continue his healing ministry includes a command to “raise the dead,”¹⁸ which the Apostle Paul (for one) is said to have obeyed.¹⁹ There are at least twenty-five tales that imply the resuscitation of the dead in one way or another. Those raised up include: eight corpses (unspecified, in one case a skull only), seven monks, three children, three maidens, two entombed (probably the same tale), one officer, one layman, one priest, one merchant, and one pagan mistress. Of those who are credited with *raising* the dead, the great majority, fourteen of them at least, are monks. There are also one bishop and three priests, one said to be *indignus*, another *ebriosus*, but it was mainly monks, and particularly holy monks at that, who were credited with the charisma of raising the dead.

However, on closer inspection, the evidence is by no means conclusive that the dead were ever resuscitated. It is significant that some reports of dead-raising are unwontedly guarded. Thus, for instance: “The word went around [ἐξῆλθε φήμη] that [Macarius the Egyptian] raised up a dead man in order to convince a heretic who refused to believe in the resurrection of the body, and this *rumour* still circulates in the desert.”²⁰ The story of Sisoës indicates both reluctance and reticence: A secular person came to Sisoës with his son, who died on the way. The father prostrated himself before this abba, leaving the boy’s corpse lying there. Thinking the child had merely failed to get up again after the act of obeisance, Sisoës commanded him to arise; which he did, and went out, alive again. Sisoës was distressed when he realized what had happened, for he did not intend to raise the dead (ἀκούσας δὲ ὁ γέρον ἐλυπήθη· οὐ γὰρ ἤθελε τοῦτο γενέσθαι). He charged everybody to keep silent concerning this matter for as long as he lived.²¹

It would appear that sometimes the fathers’ compassion got the better of their discretion. A young disciple of Gelasios was kicked to death by the cellarer for eating a fish he was set to guard; then Abba Gelasios restored the youth to life.²² Now, with respect to all the foregoing instances it would be well to recall the dominical words at the raising of Jairus’ daughter: τὸ παιδίον οὐκ ἀπέθανεν ἀλλὰ καθεύδει (Mark 5:39); in none of them was the patient unquestionably dead.

It is already clear that not many of the supposed raisings from the dead were rewards for piety, presumably because the greater good would indeed be to remain undisturbed. Some of the raisings serve an overtly worldly purpose. Theodoret of Cyrrhus (for instance) tells how Abba Palladius, finding the corpse of a merchant at his door, urged the dead young man to explain, whereupon the corpse sat up, looked around, and pointed to the murderer, who was found to have a bloody dagger in his possession.²³ And this:

¹⁸Matt. 10:8: νεκροὺς ἐγείρετε, cf. νεκροὶ ἐγείρονται Matt. 11:5 and Luke 7:22, also the dominical examples of the raising of Lazarus (John 11) and of the Widow of Nain’s son (Luke 7:11–17).

¹⁹Acts 20:9.

²⁰HL 17.11, ed. Butler, p. 46, 17–19, and Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 13.14.1–2.

²¹W444, *Apophthegmata patrum, Collectio alphabetica* (hereafter *A/B*), ed. and trans. J.-B. Cotelier (1686), PG 65:71–440: Sisoës 18.

²²W405, *A/B* Gelasius 3.

²³W866, Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus, Φιλόθεος Ἱστορία / *Historia religiosa* (hereafter *HR*), ed. with French trans. P. Canivet and A. Leroy-Molinghen, *Histoire des moines de Syrie*, 2 vols. SC 234, 259 (Paris,

Macarius the Egyptian was one of seven monks who once went to work on the harvest. Among the gleaners there was a widow who was weeping all the time because her husband had died in possession of a sum of money (entrusted to him) which was now lost. She and her children were in danger of being sold into slavery if the money was not paid over. So Macarius and the brothers prayed at her husband's grave, asking him where the money might be. "In my house, at the foot of the bed," came the dead man's answer. Macarius told him to sleep on until the day of resurrection. The money was found and repaid; the children (who had apparently already been enslaved) were set free.²⁴

There is a third story, very similar to this one, in which the dead person (a girl in this case) not only speaks, but appears—alive: Abba Spyridon had a virgin daughter who shared her father's piety. A friend of the family committed an object of great value to her. In order to ensure its safety, she hid it in the ground. A little later she died, then came the one who had committed the object to her care. Unable to find the girl, he came to her father . . . who went to his daughter's tomb. He prayed God to show him the promised resurrection ahead of time, and he was not disappointed. The daughter immediately appeared, alive, to her father, indicated the place where the object was lying, and then disappeared.²⁵

Although the persons in these instances appear undoubtedly to be dead, it could not be argued that the dead were *restored* to life; merely that communication was established with them for a brief moment (and a specific purpose), something that may present fewer problems for those who "look for the resurrection of the dead" than for those who do not. Hence here there are no pejorative connotations such as Saul incurred when he had recourse to the Witch of Endor in order to converse with the deceased Samuel (1 Sam. 28).

Although not always so blatant or as worldly as the cases mentioned so far, most of the supposed raisings-from-the-dead serve some kind of practical purpose. This, however, might not be so in the well-known story of the abba who resurrected a departed brother in order to bid him farewell: "Abba Peter, priest of the Lavra of our holy father Saint Sabas, told us that when Hagiodoulos was higoumen of the Lavra of the blessed Gerasimos, one of the brethren there died without the elder knowing of it. When the precentor struck the wood[-en signal] for all the brethren to mourn together and send the dead man on his way, the elder came and saw the body of the brother lying in the church. He grieved at not having been able to take leave of him before he died. Going up to the bier, he said to the dead man: 'Rise up and greet me, brother,' and the dead man rose up and greeted him. Then the elder said to him: 'Take your rest now until the Son of God shall come and raise you up again.'"²⁶ This anecdote is cited verbatim in order

1977–79), 7, 1–3. See also Euergetinos, *Synagoge* 1.10.34–36 and cf. Chaucer, "The Prioress' Tale." In Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 2.28–30, a priest of Isis raises a dead man to accuse his murderer. Intimation by a dream is more common, e.g., *ibid.*, 8.8 and 9.31.

²⁴W426, A/B Macarius the Egyptian 7, PG 65:265AC.

²⁵W449, A/B Spyridon 2, PG 65 417D–420A = Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 1.12, PG 67:104–5.

²⁶W257, John Moschus, *Pratum spirituale* (hereafter *PS*) ed. J. P. Migne (after Fronto Ducaeus and J.-B. Cotelier) with the Latin trans. of Ambrose Traversari (1346–1439), PG 87:2851–3112: chap. 11. A very similar narrative is found elsewhere, among the string of tales appended to the longer (unpublished) version of *The Life of Saint Marcian the Oeconomus of Constantinople*, BHG 1033c,d. The present writer is responsible for all translations in this article.

to illustrate some of the difficulties arising when beneficial tales are used as evidence of beliefs. The Bollandists, who first clearly distinguished a separate genre of the *narratio animae utilis*, have also from time to time attempted a definition of it. Hippolyte Delehaye said the tales were “nouvelles destinées à mettre en lumière une doctrine religieuse,”²⁷ a particularly apt definition given the double meaning of the epithet *religieux*. Quoting this definition, François Halkin went further: “Sans attache nette avec aucun pays ni aucune époque déterminée [les récits] laissent dans un anonymat sans relief les personnages fictifs dont ils rapportent les exploits.”²⁸ Elsewhere the same scholar said that διηγήσεις ψυχοφελείς are “des sortes de paraboles développées dont les héros ne sont pas toujours imaginaires . . . qui incarnent pour ainsi dire en un exemple frappant, voire paradoxal, un enseignement théorique difficile et transcendant.”²⁹ Here surely is a salutary warning that we are no more to take the *circumstances* of a tale “for real” than we should take the scenery and trappings in the theater: we should rather look for that “enseignement théorique difficile et transcendant” which is the real point of the story: in this case, probably that Christian φιλαδελφία is stronger than death. Whether the corpse was actually resuscitated is rather beside the point.

Since, however, the later Romans looked for the resurrection of the dead, it is scarcely surprising that they thought it possible for the dead to be seen by or to communicate with the living, and there is no lack of evidence that this was so. Abba Pambo (for instance) said he saw two deceased rich brothers-become-monks, both standing before God in Paradise (this was to settle an argument about whether the ascetic one or the hospitable brother would be greater in the Kingdom).³⁰ A recurring *topos* in later stories concerns a person who has either departed this life under some sort of ecclesiastical ban or been marooned in life by the death of the person who had banned him. Since it was held that only he who bound could loose—this is the usual interpretation of the famous “Petrine clause”³¹ in the tales—one or the other of the two has to return from the dead and set matters to rights.³² Such is the curious tale *de arca martyris* concerning one who dies a martyr’s death but who remains excommunicate at the time of his execution. He is accorded a decent burial in a church, but his coffin removes itself from the church each time the deacon cries: “All the catechumens withdraw”—until the excommunication is finally lifted by a posthumous reconciliation.³³ Monks and martyrs have no monopoly of this *topos*: there is the charming “lay version” concerning two brothers, one of whom died while they were at enmity with each other. The survivor was sent to a centurion at Constantinople who

²⁷H. Delehaye, “Un groupe de récits ‘utiles à l’âme,’” in *Mélanges Bidez* (Brussels, 1934), 257.

²⁸F. Halkin, “La vision de Kaioumos et le sort éternel de Philentolos Olympiou (*BHG* 1322w),” *AB* 63 (1945): 56.

²⁹*Recherches et documents d’hagiographie byzantine*, SubsHag 51 (Brussels, 1971), 261, 303.

³⁰W185, *HL* 14: Paësios and Isaias.

³¹καὶ ὁ ἐὰν δήσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς κτλ. Matt. 16:19.

³²W001, *BHG* 1322e, *de vindicta diaconi et presbyteri seu miraculo CP. patrato, a Niceta Chartoularis*, W005, *BHG* 1322ea, *de diacono quem presbyter ligaverat*, and W706, *PMB06*, *BHG* 1449g, *de sacerdote a divinis suspenso* are of this order.

³³W039, *BHG* 1449s, *de monacho excommunicato et martyre*, W040, *de arca martyris* (a): *BHG* 1322u.ua (summary in Michael Glykas, *Annales*, ed. I. Bekker, CSHB (Bonn, 1836), 524.15–525.8) (b): *BHG* 1322v = Anastasios the Sinaite, ed. F. Nau, “Le texte grec du moine Anastase sur les saints pères du Sinai” [1–40 + appendix], *OC* 2 (1902): 58–89, and “Le texte grec des récits utiles à l’âme d’Anastase (le Sinaïte),” *OC* 3 (1903): 56–75, tale no. 54.

at first denied that he had any ability to be of assistance. But, finally, he took the surviving brother to the Great Church by night. The doors opened at his prayers; the dead brother appeared, and a reconciliation was effected. A subsidiary point of this story—not by any means uncommon in this monastic literature—is that not only monks are holy men.³⁴

The tales provide examples of deceased persons appearing to the living when the departed is in need of something, for example, a decent burial in the case of the grazer (βοσκός) of Skopelos; a long-overdue new church for St. Julian, or a meeting with a sixth-century pope of Alexandria—requested by Pope Leo the Great.³⁵ There are also cases of the dead appearing in order to repay debts, as in the story of an officer (μαγιστριανός, *agens in rebus*) on imperial service who, finding a dead man lying naked, clothed him with one of his own garments. Later he damaged a foot; amputation seemed to be necessary as the foot was turning black. The doctors planned to operate the following morning but, by night, one came who, by anointing and exercising the foot, restored it to health. The healer was none other than the naked cadaver whom the officer had covered, still wearing the garment he had donated. The man had been sent by Christ to reward the officer for his charity.³⁶ (The western legend of St. Martin of Tours and his cloak is one of several manifestations of this *topos*.)

There are even stories which indicate that the dead were capable of communicating with the living in writing, on occasion. This is not so surprising as it may seem, for at least eighteen stories mention the use of writing in one way or another, clear signs of a literate society. Thus the fine story of Synesius' conversion, too long unfortunately to cite verbatim: A bishop persuaded a pagan philosopher to be baptized, but the latter doubted very much whether there was such a thing as eternal life and whether alms really are a loan to God, repaid a hundredfold. ("He that hath pity on the poor lendeth unto the Lord and that which he hath given will he repay unto him again"³⁷ is a recurrent theme of the tales.) In spite of his doubts, he gave the bishop three hundred pounds of gold as "a loan to God," for which he demanded a receipt. When he died, at his own request he was buried with this receipt in his hand. Later, he summoned the bishop to his tomb to take the receipt; it was endorsed: "sum repaid one hundredfold"—and also that he had attained eternal life.³⁸

It was axiomatic and scripturally attested that Christ would "come again . . . to judge both the quick and the dead." Of the second coming there is very little, indeed almost nothing, in the literature we are examining. Concerning the last judgment the Gospel gives a very clear lead in the narrative of the Sheep and the Goats,³⁹ yet this is rarely

³⁴W051, BHG 1318y, *de duobus fratribus post alterius mortem reconciliatis*; this may be an abbreviation of a longer tale, for the visitors *enter* (chap. 5) εἰς τὰς ἐξωτέρας πύλας, but in leaving are said only to pass through τὰς ἐνδοτέρας.

³⁵W301 PS 084; W335, PS 146, BHG 1440km, *de Eulogio Alexandrino et ecclesia Juliani*; W337, PS 148, BHG 982e, *visio Theodori episcopi*.

³⁶N038, W528, BHG 1445x, *de magistriano et cadavere nudo*, P&J 11.2.

³⁷δανίζει Θεῷ ὁ ἐλεῶν πτωχόν, κατὰ δὲ τὸ δόμα αὐτοῦ ἀνταπαδώσει αὐτῷ, Prov. 19:17.

³⁸W049, BHG 1322r etc. and BHG 1442, PS 195, *de Synesio et Evagrino*. On the conversion of Synesios, see Evagrius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 1.C.15, ed. J. Bidez and L. Parmentier (London, 1898), p. 25; *Synaxarium CP*, 774.42–776, and George the Monk, *Chronicon*, ed. de Boor, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1904), 2:676.12–678.15.

³⁹Matt. 25:31–46.

followed in the tales. This may be because it implies a final and general judgment at the end of time, toward which the consensus of the church at large was already tending by the end of the fourth century. The tales, however, generally opt for an immediate and individual judgment, the Gospel model for which would be the the story of Dives and Lazarus,⁴⁰ well supplied with a surprisingly rich variety of detail. One tale even suggests a two-tier arbitration, that is, for monks and laymen: An unsatisfactory monk whose mother dies has a vision of her being taken to the judgment μετὰ τῶν κρινομένων. She is amazed that he who had “gone to save his soul” should have been selected for judgment too: καὶ σὺ εἰς τὸν τόπον τοῦτον ἐλθεῖν κατακρίθης;⁴¹ On the other hand, Abba Silvanus had a curious vision of the judgment, one of the few that *does* echo the λόγιον of the Sheep and the Goats. He saw many monks going to perdition while many secular persons were entering the Kingdom—a further reminder that monks have no monopoly on holiness.⁴² Another important exception and a curious one is the narrative *de sorte animarum visio presbyteri Patmensis* in which Abba John of Patmos tells the long story of one who related how he came to be a monk. He was a priest; not sinful, but negligent. He fell sick and was twenty days without food. Two men dressed in white came and took him before the court of the twelve apostles, Peter presiding.⁴³ He was ordered to witness the sufferings of the damned. This was followed by a vision of the saints; there he saw the Mother of God praying to God (a pillar of flame) to have mercy on the world, and also many angels. His companion told him that he could be with the blessed if he followed the directions of Abba Philip and became a monk, which he did.⁴⁴

Usually in the tales the judgment is not portrayed as a final hearing, but as a dispute immediately following death. The feuding protagonists are the forces of light and darkness respectively: the question at stake is whether the departing soul will be borne aloft by the angels or swept down to the lower regions by demons. The earliest intimation of such a confrontation is in a vision of Antony the Great whose *Life* by Athanasios is, as already stated, an integral part of the tales-tradition: “A whole year long I prayed for the place of the righteous and of the sinners to be revealed to me.⁴⁵ I saw a great giant, high as the clouds, black and with his hands stretched up toward heaven, and below him there was a lake the size of the sea. And I saw souls, flying like birds. Those who flew free of his hands and head were saved, while those who were struck by his hands were falling into the lake. Then a voice came to me saying: “Those you see flying up are the souls of the righteous; they are saved in Paradise. But the others, the ones being led off down to Hades, are they who followed the desires of the flesh and bore grudges.”⁴⁶ The black

⁴⁰Luke 16:19–31.

⁴¹Sys. 3.38, *P&J* 3.20, probably a very old tale as it is attributed to Pachomios, *Oeuvres*, ed. L. T. Lefort, 2 vols., CSCO 160 (Louvain, 1956), 1:28–29.

⁴²W445, *A/B* Silvanus 2.

⁴³Presumably inspired by the saying: “When the Son of Man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28; cf. Luke 22:30), but the discrepancies are obvious.

⁴⁴W880, *BHG* 1322zi; see also *HME* 8.33.

⁴⁵Thus Macarius the Egyptian (the Great) of Scete: “Then [the power of God] begins to reveal before the heart the afflictions of those who are being punished and many other things . . .” Letter 1.13, ed. P. Géhin, “Le dossier macarien de l’*Atheniensis* gr. 2492,” *Recherches augustiniennes* 31 (1999): 89–147, p. 107, 79–86.

⁴⁶*HL* 21.16–17, shorter version in *Vita Antonii*, 66.

giant is scarcely ever mentioned again in the tales.⁴⁷ In fact this whole vision seems to be a remnant of a different tradition (as yet unrecognized) in which the ascending souls have no strength but their own to evade the captor and to fail to do so is to be cast into a watery (not a fiery) hell.

It is, however, a second vision of Antony that furnishes what became the usual scenario: a vision in which he felt himself being taken out of the body and up into the air by “some guides” (ὁδηγούμενον ὑπό τινων). Then he saw some “bitter and cruel ones” (πικροὺς καὶ δεινοὺς τινας) standing in the air and endeavoring to prevent him from mounting up. When “the guides” withstood them, those others asked them whether he was their subject. They wanted an account of him from his birth, but Antony’s guides (οἱ τὸν Ἀντώνιον ὁδηγοῦντες) refused, saying to them: “The Lord has written off the period from his birth, but you may demand an account of [his life] from the time when he became a monk and dedicated himself to God.” Since they accused him but could get no conviction, the way was made clear and without impediment for him [to ascend].⁴⁸ Although this experience concerns only Antony’s *monastic* life, all the elements of many subsequent visions of the last judgment are here.

As noted above, rarely in the tales is the judgment portrayed as a board of inquiry or tribunal but rather as a verbal or physical tussle or tug-of-war between the forces of light and the powers of darkness; a struggle that takes place, not at some indeterminate time in the future, but promptly at the hour of death, even around the deathbed of the *agonisant*. Thus a resuscitated *taxeotes* recalled how black-faced-ones (αἰθίοπες) and others clad in white had battled for possession of him, the latter finally wrestling him from the hands of the former so that (in this case) he could return to the body and repent; black versus white.⁴⁹ The demons are frequently referred to as αἰθίοπες, especially the ones associated with πορνεία.⁵⁰ Angels are invariably clothed in white, sometimes with faces shining like the sun, occasionally said to be eunuchs or imperial officers. Thus a man granted three days for repentance and amendment of life says to his confessor: “Are you blind and could not see that imperial personage and the illustrious men who accompanied him? Nor the black-faced-ones who were standing at the door? . . . That eunuch who was speaking with me just now, whose face was brighter than the sun and whose clothing glistened like light? When he came here with his illustrious terrifying men, there came some evil-looking black-faced-ones with eyes like fire and they stood at the door. They were accusing me, saying what I had done and what I had left undone.”⁵¹

It should be noted in passing that the angels did not *always* show up at the moment of death; it was not worth their while if the state of the departing soul was thought to be hopeless. Thus a monk standing at the gates of a rich man who was dying saw the arrival of black horses with black riders carrying fiery wands. The riders went in and the patient began to cry out: “Lord, help me and be merciful to me.” The riders said: “Now the sun is going down, you remember God. Why did you not seek him when it was first rising? There is not the slightest bit of help or comfort for you now,” and off they went, unop-

⁴⁷ But see “The Life of Abba Theodosios the Solitary,” W290, PS 066.

⁴⁸ *Vita Antonii*, 65.2–5.

⁴⁹ W010, BHG 1318, 1318a, Anastasios the Sinaite tale A40.

⁵⁰ See Guy, *Les Apophtegmes des Pères*, 1:244–45 n.1.

⁵¹ PMB 03, W703, BHG 1449f.

posed, with his wretched soul.⁵² That, however, is an exceptional case; generally the angels *do* appear and a genuine *discussio* or altercation occurs. Sometimes a pair of scales is introduced to settle the argument. Such is the case in the vision of a doctor who had attended a repentant thief on his deathbed at the Sampson hospital in Constantinople during the reign of Maurice (582–602). He saw black-faced-ones who cast accusations against the deceased thief in one of the scales while two angels loaded his tear-soaked kerchief onto the other scale—and thus gained his soul.⁵³ Scales also appear in the tale of the sister of Daniel of Scete: she went astray, was reclaimed, and then died. Daniel subsequently had a dream of a *δορυφόρος* and his company trying to take her soul, but a ruler (*ἄρχων*—a rare reference to a judge) summoned the angel of repentance to give evidence. First this angel read out all her sins and her sufferings. Then he presented her tears and the blood from her feet (when she followed Daniel back into the desert bare-foot) in a receptacle. These were weighed against her sins and found to be heavier. In spite of the demons' complaints, she was assigned a place of light in the mansions of the saints.⁵⁴

These two instances of the use of scales are of particular interest here. Scales are mentioned from time to time in the Judaic tradition; Nebuchadnezzar had been “weighed in the balance and found wanting” (Dan. 5:27); Job prays: “Let me be weighed in an even balance” (Job 31:6); and there is the enigmatic mention in Psalm 61:10; but there is no suggestion of the use of scales at a final judgment, nor is there in the Gospels. *Per contra*, scales figure very prominently in the ancient Egyptian religion as a means of testing the departed soul when it comes into the judgment hall of Osiris. There too is Horus “who leads the deceased into the presence of Osiris and makes an appeal to his father that the deceased may be allowed to enjoy the benefits enjoyed by all who are ‘true of voice’ and justified in the judgement.”⁵⁵ The female deity Maat would also be there: “During the trial of the deceased soul, Maat was always present. In some drawings her feather sat on top the scales to guarantee fairness, and the heart of the deceased was always weighed on the balance against the feather. If the heart were found to balance perfectly with truth and justice—being neither too heavy nor too light for it—the dead person was held to have passed the first test and to be nearing immortality.”⁵⁶ Wallis Budge (whose words these are) long since opined that Christians of Coptic expression used their Egyptian religious traditions to fill in the vacuums in their Judaeo-Christian beliefs, and he provided at least one striking example of them appropriating Egyptian notions of what they (wrongly) supposed to be hell. He concluded: “How far the Copts reproduced unconsciously the views which had been held by their ancestors for thousands of years cannot be said, but even after allowance has been made for this possibility, there remains still to be explained the large number of beliefs and views which seem to

⁵²W029, *BHG* 1322hi, *Sys* 20.14, *N492*, *de morte divitis*, ed. A. Amante, *Didaskaleion* 1 (1912): 535.

⁵³W863, *BHG* 1450m, *de latrone converso* [bis], Anastasios the Sinaite, D02, *In Ps. vi*, PG 89:1112A–1116B.

⁵⁴W467, Daniel of Scete [unnumbered] *BHG* 2102e, *de sorore Danielis*; fuller Syriac text ed. and trans. S. P. Brock, *AB* 113 (1995): 270–80 gives *discussio* between the *archon* and the black-faced-one. W482, ed. Th. Nissen, “Unbekannte Erzählungen aus dem Pratum Spirituale,” *BZ* 38 (1938): 351–76, no. 4, *BHG* 1440r, *de moniali paenitenti* and W961, *BHG* 1438r, cod. Athen. 513, fol. 198rv, *de moniali meretrice*, are essentially the same story.

⁵⁵E. A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Ideas of the Future Life* (London, 1899), 72.

⁵⁶R. A. Armour, *Gods and Myths in Ancient Egypt* (Cairo 1986), 164.

have been the peculiar product of the Egyptian Christian imagination.”⁵⁷ There are aspects of the tales-tradition (the judgment by scales being one of them) that might well derive from traditional Egyptian beliefs, but there are others that apparently cannot.

The deathbed confrontation of eunuchs/angels and αἰθίοπες/demons is an obvious example. Is this a “peculiar product of the Egyptian Christian imagination” or might it derive from a dualistic (Mesopotamian?) source rather than an Egyptian one?⁵⁸ Consider the tale of two brothers who once agreed to become monks. They lived apart for several years until one of them fell ill. In an ecstasy, he saw angels trying to take him and his brother to heaven, but opposing demons stood in the way (καὶ ἀπήνησαν ἡμῖν αἱ ἀντικείμεναι δυνάμεις, ἄπειροι τῷ πλήθει καὶ φοβεραὶ τῷ εἶδει). These could not prevail, for: “Great is the assurance which purity confers,” one of the angels was heard to remark (μεγάλη παρρησία ἡ ἀγνεία).⁵⁹ It is a clear case of darkness versus light, flesh versus spirit, πορνεία versus ἀγνεία, and so forth. Hence the angels usually do get possession of the soul of the departed in the case of the truly righteous and, once free of the black-faced-ones, joyfully bear it aloft. This is witnessed to over and over again by those who claim to have seen the souls of the righteous being carried to heaven by choirs of angels.⁶⁰

In some instances, certain souls whose righteousness is somewhat questionable only escape the black-faced-ones by the skin of their teeth. This is usually the case when a particular virtue is held to atone for shortcomings in other departments, echoing Christ’s words to “the woman which was a sinner”: “Her sins which are many are forgiven; for she loved much.”⁶¹ There is something of this in the story of a woman whose daughter had been wronged by Emperor Zeno (474–491). She was always imprecating the Mother of God to avenge her; the Holy Mother appeared to her and said she would like to oblige her, but “[Zeno’s] right hand prevents me.” The explanation of this is that the emperor in question was given to great acts of mercy, that is, to generous almsgiving (ἦν γὰρ ἐλεήμων πάνυ).⁶²

The lesson here is clearly that almsgiving can “cover a multitude of sins.”⁶³ We learn from the following story that the fear of death was a powerful incentive to almsgiving.

There was a rich man in Alexandria who fell ill and, fearing death, he took thirty pounds in gold and gave it to the poor. Then he recovered and regretted what he had done. He

⁵⁷Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Ideas*, 110–15. Athanasios portrays Antony having to stipulate very forcibly that his corpse is *not* to be subject to the Egyptian tradition of embalming (*Vita Antonii*, chap. 90), which gives some indication of the extent to which Christians were engulfed by pagan practices and beliefs.

⁵⁸It is certainly not to be found in the Gospels: witness the λόγτον of the Great Net: “at the end of the world the angels shall come forth and sever the wicked from among the just and shall cast them into the furnace of fire”: Matt. 13:49.

⁵⁹W630, N622, Sys 11.62, P&J 11.24a, cited here from Euergetinos, *Synagoge*, 1.10.2.

⁶⁰Antony the Great saw the soul of Amoun the Nitriote carried to heaven by a great crowd, *Vita Antonii*, chap. 60, Pachomios saw angels taking away the soul of Silvanus, *Paralipomena de SS. Pachomio et Theodoro*, chaps. 4, 13, ed. F. Halkin, *Le Corpus Athénien de Saint Pachôme*, Cahiers d’Orientalisme 2 (Geneva, 1982), 76–78; Benedict saw the soul of Germanus, bishop of Capua, *Dialogues Grégoire le Grand*, ed. A. de Vogüé, trans. Paul Antin, 3 vols. *Sources chrétiennes*, nos. 251, 260, 265 (Paris, 1978–1980), 2.35.3, vol. 1, p. 238; other examples are numerous.

⁶¹Luke 7:37 and 47.

⁶²W351, PS 175, BHG 1322, *de Zenone imperatore*.

⁶³1 Peter 4:8 says ἀγάπη καλύπτει πλήθος ἁμαρτιῶν, suggesting that the ambiguity that attaches to our word *charity* is no new thing.

had a devout friend with whom he shared his regrets. The other replied: “You ought to be glad that you presented that money to Christ.” The first man was not convinced, so he continued: “Look, here are thirty pounds” (for he too was rich). “Come now to the church of St. Menas, declare: ‘It is not I, but this man here who has performed the vow’ and take the money.” He made the declaration when they came to St. Menas’—and took the money. But just as he was coming out of the door he died. They told the original owner of the pieces of gold to take what was his, but he said: “By the Lord, I will do no such thing, for from the moment I gave them to Christ they are his; let them be given to the poor.”⁶⁴

That almsgiving, plus confession to a priest, are the surest way of escaping the clutches of the demons is the main point of a vision of Macarius the Egyptian. He sees angels descending and ascending bearing human souls, which grimy beings endeavour to snatch down. At the control post (τελώνιον) of sexual sin (πορνεία) the angels are challenged for a soul they carry; they call the man’s guardian angel to witness that, sinner though he be, he did make a full confession to a priest before death; hence he is allowed through. Then comes a eunuch of whom the demons say: “He did many wicked things from his youth up, things unbecoming of him as a Christian and as a eunuch: fornication, adultery, and defiling himself with those who work the sin of Sodom,” but by almsgiving and confession he has gained admittance. A pious soul comes next and is joyfully received into heaven, and lastly a steward who has strangled himself: he is led off to hell.⁶⁵

Some sins could be compensated for by good words, but not all. This is demonstrated by the story *de eleemosynario fornicatore*: There was a man who was equally given both to almsgiving and to πορνεία (which usually means any kind of illicit sexual activity, in thought, word, or deed) right to the day of his death. A dispute arose concerning his fate and, when prayer was made, it was revealed to a solitary (ἔγκλειστος) in a vision that the man was saved from hell but barred from heaven. So let no man say: “Even though I am a lecherous man, my salvation is assured because I give alms.” (κἂν πορνεύσω, ποιῶ ἐλεημοσύνην καὶ σώζομαι).⁶⁶ Presumably this man could have saved his soul by adding confession to a priest to his almsgiving, but then he would have had to refrain from his disorderly life in order to validate his confession. The point here appears to be not that the sin of πορνεία was in itself inexcusable, but that his persistence in it rendered it so.

If the worst came to the worst and the demons made off with a soul, the situation was still not entirely without hope. The beneficent presence of the female deity Maat at the trial of the departed Egyptian has already been noted; the Mother of God is frequently portrayed as intercessor for the deceased Christian in some tales. These for the most part deal with cases where a person, once condemned, is sent back to earth and given a second chance. Thus Anna of Constantinople, standing in a place where there was “much weeping and wailing and ceaseless gnashing of teeth,” prayed to the all-holy Mother of God: “Have mercy on me and deliver me from this gloomy predicament so that I might escape and repent in sincerity.” Then she was informed that the Mother of

⁶⁴W531, N047, *Johannes Monachus*, “*Liber de Miraculis*,” ed. M. Huber, *Sammlung mittellateinischer Texte* 7 (Heidelberg, 1913), no. 17, George the Monk, *Chronicon*, 4.231, ed. de Boor, 678.16–683.2, PG 110:841A.

⁶⁵W719, *BHG* 999n, *A/B Macarius the Egyptian* 2, PG 34:224–29, *de angelo custode*, bis.

⁶⁶W062 *BHG* 1322y, *de eleemosynario fornicatore sub Germano patriarcha*. There is a Cypriot version of this tale, W504, *BHG* 1322w, *de Philentolo fornicatore*, and yet a third version, *BHG* 1322xd, cod. Vat. S. Petri C 149, fols. 253v–255, which I have not yet seen.

God had acceded to her request; she was to return to her body in order to repent in sincerity and make peace with her brothers. In two months' time she would be summoned again, which indeed she was.⁶⁷

Clerical negligence could account for one's escape from the pit. In the *Dialogues* (a portion of which consists of Latin διηγήσεις ψυχοφελείς), Gregory the Great tells of a priest named Severus who, when summoned to attend a dying man, finished pruning his vine before going; meanwhile the man died. As the priest wept before the corpse, it revived. The man told how fearful (*taetri*) men, with insupportable fire issuing from their mouths and nostrils, took him; and how these were then stopped by a fine-looking youth (*pulchrae visionis iuvenis*) who said: "Take him back, for Severus is weeping." Thus the man gained seven days for repentance; on the eighth day he died in peace and joy.⁶⁸

Failing some such intervention, the condemned soul was doomed to hell. In the tales, Hell is usually portrayed as a river (or lake, Rev. 20:14) of fire. The Gospels refer to "an outer darkness" and also to "a furnace of fire," in both of which "there is lamentation and gnashing of teeth,"⁶⁹ thus in a sense combining the two Jewish "hells" of Gehenna and Sheol. The same conflation is found in some of the tales, as (for instance) in the Tale of the Burnt Hand. There a daughter sees her mother in a dark, gloomy house, up to her neck in the fire.⁷⁰ In another story, hell is seen as "a dark and noisome place of fire" in which notorious heretics are being tormented.⁷¹ Elsewhere a priest of Patmos has a vision of naked men and women in a river of fire, including emperors and empresses who ruled badly and sinfully,⁷² while, for the Monophysites, there was Emperor Marcian hanging on hooks of fire in the midst of the flames, prey to suffering.⁷³ In the *Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* (probably of gnostic origin) a resuscitated pagan girl describes her experiences of hell and of a most foul black man who took her into the pit where there was a stench and wheel of fire with souls hanging on it⁷⁴—and so it goes on.

Yet, grim though the subject may be of the sufferings of the damned, John Moschos has preserved a story that relieves it with a rare shaft of humor. An elder living near the city of Antinoë had a very undiligent monk among his disciples, one who never improved in spite of much exhortation. Then the younger man died, whereupon the elder prayed to have the state of that man's soul revealed to him. What he saw was a river of fire and the brother up to his neck in it. "Did I not warn you?" he asked him. "Yes," came the reply, "and it is thanks to you that my head is not suffering." "What do you mean?" asked the monk. "It is because of your prayers," the other replied, "that I am standing on the head of a bishop."⁷⁵

⁶⁷ W713, PMB 13, BHG 1449k, *de mortua ad vitam revocata*, 10th century, W644, "The Vision of Romanus Lekapenos" is another good example of the Virgin's intervention, also one of a tale embodied in a late chronicle, *Theophanes Continuatus*, 4.4, CSHB, 33:438.20–444.14; PG 109:456c–457c.

⁶⁸ W390, Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, 1.12.1–3, 6th century, Italy.

⁶⁹ Matt. 8:12, 13:42 and 50.

⁷⁰ W064, BHG 1322t, Sys 18.35, Euergetinos, *Synagoge*, 1.9.3 (pp. 140–42), *de filia boni patris et malae matris*.

⁷¹ W267, PS 026, BHG 1450zv, *de Theophane nestoriano converso*.

⁷² W880, BHG 1322zi, *de sorte animarum visio presbyteri Patmensis*.

⁷³ W804, John Rufus, bishop of Maïouma, *Plerophoriai* (hereafter *Pl*), ed. F. Nau, with French trans. *PO* (Paris, 1912), 8:1–161, no. 27, the vision of Peter the *scholarios*.

⁷⁴ W928, *Acts of Thomas*, Act 7:55–57.

⁷⁵ W279, PS 044, W279.

The tales have far less to tell us about the joys of the blessed than of the discomforts of the damned. Visions of heaven are fairly rare; here is the testimony of Abba Athanasios.

One day, this black thought [λογισμός] came into my mind: what difference does it make whether we fight the fight or not? I fell as though into a trance and one came who said to me: "Follow me." He led me into a place filled with light and stood me before a door the appearance of which was beyond description. We were hearing what sounded like an innumerable multitude within, singing hymns to God. When we knocked, somebody inside heard us and cried: "What do you want?" My guide replied: "We want to come in." The other answered, saying to me: "Nobody comes in here who lives negligently [ὁ ἐν ἀμελείᾳ ζῶν]. If you want to come in, go and fight the fight, holding nothing in the vain world to be of any account."⁷⁶

Another monk had a vision in which he saw heaven as a great city (no doubt inspired by Rev. 21) in which the people were wearing different kinds of clothes and had diverse faces. He talked first to a man who had known great poverty and severe sickness in life (he was a leper, λελωβημένος), all of which he had borne with great patience. *His* reward was gorgeous raiment. Then he spoke to a slightly less well dressed monk who had been faithful to the end; third, to a man wearing simpler raiment who had been honestly and decently married; finally, to two persons in fairly clean garments who had lived very sinful lives, but who repented at the end and, by confession, were received into the city.⁷⁷

The clothing theme (cf. Rev. 6:11) is taken up in the tale of Sozomen who gave his garment to a poor man whom he found as he went around the squares of Constantinople (mid-4th century.) Subsequently he had a dream of a most beautiful paradise, in which there were men with golden chests that contained all the rich clothing he was going to receive as his reward for the garment he had just given to Christ, a hundredfold.⁷⁸

Apart from the reference to "Abram's bosom" (Luke 16:22) and the invitation: "Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34), the Gospels have little to say about heaven. However, given Jesus' words to the repentant thief: σήμερον μετ' ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ (Luke 23:43), it is hardly surprising that heaven is often portrayed as a paradise in the original sense of the word: as a beautiful garden (Old Persian, *pairidaeza*, a park or enclosure.) When some brothers prayed that they might see to what degree their colleague Paul had attained (εἰς ποῖα μέτρα ἔφθασε), they were granted a vision of him in a garden of great variety and charm (παράδεισον ποικίλον καὶ πάντερπνον).⁷⁹ The daughter of an upright father but of a most disorderly mother was taken first to see her late father. She was led "to a great plain of paradise where there were trees of such variety and beauty defying description, abounding in all kinds of fruit."⁸⁰ Some even succeeded in bringing back souvenirs of paradise. Thus Patermouthios said that he had been corporally transported to paradise where he had seen the saints and where he had tasted the fruits, of which he brought back with him a huge fig. This object was greatly venerated, and the mere fragrance of it was capable of curing disorders.⁸¹ Euphrosynos, the despised and lowly cook

⁷⁶ W326, PS 130; W958 (cod. Paris. grec. 1596, pp. 475–76 is the same story, different persons).

⁷⁷ W920, BHG 1322k, cod. Paris Supp. grec. 1319, fols. 42v–49, *de coronis electorum*.

⁷⁸ W925, BHG 1322s, *de Sozomeno eleemosynario*.

⁷⁹ W045 BHG 2363, *Paulus monachus hypotacticus*.

⁸⁰ W064, BHG 1322t, Sys 18.35, Euergetinos, *Synagoge*, 1.9.3 (pp. 140–42), *de filia boni patris et malae matris*.

⁸¹ W158, HME 10.21–23.

of a monastery, was seen by a monk (in a dream) to be in charge of a garden of delights, from which he gave the monk a wondrous apple. The following morning the monk found the apple in bed with him; it healed many who partook of it.⁸² Beyond that, the tales do not have much to tell about heaven.

What of those who went neither to heaven nor to hell? That such there were believed to be has already been illustrated by the story *de eleemosynario fornicatore*, of whom it was attested by a vision that he was saved from hell (by his almsgiving) but barred from heaven by his continued wantonness. The notion that there might be a “middle state” between heaven and hell, a limbo, is borne out by the following tale.

There was an elder who was richly endowed with the gift of being able to see into men's hearts [διορατικὸς πᾶντι], and there was, living in secular society, a virtuous Hebrew, a man of mercy and hospitality, possessed of many great virtues. The elder became aware of the Hebrew's good works, so he went to him, exhorting and teaching him from the holy scriptures in the hope of persuading him to be baptized. When his coreligionists, the malicious Jews, his wife and children, realized that, after being exhorted at great length, he was almost ready to deny [their beliefs], they cut him off from the exhortations of the elder and the worthy path. Denied his spoil, the great elder retired into his own monastery. Some considerable time later, the elder visited the Hebrew and found him unbelieving and not accepting even a little of the elder's teaching, but rather bitterly objecting to it, after the manner of his unruly and stiff-necked race. Again the elder withdrew, then a third time he tried again, accomplishing nothing. This elder held to the ancient belief, frequently confirmed by divine revelation: that the good works and deeds of the unbaptized are destructive; that the unbaptized who perform such good works are sent to the fire. It now came about, according to the disposition of God, that the Hebrew died. When the great elder heard of this he wrestled in his spirit with the question of what had become of the Hebrew; to where had he been assigned and what had become of his good works? He prayed to God about this, and the Hebrew was revealed to him, sitting at a richly laid table—but blind. Taking him by the hand [the elder] said to him: “Have you any idea what is before you on the richly laid table lying close to you? I am the monk who used to urge you to be baptized. Even though you resisted me then, now you have the chance to be [baptized,] to see and to delight in these good things. If you are willing, I will call upon God who will restore you to life in the body. I will then baptize you and, with the light [of baptism], you will delight in everything, remaining so forever.” The other replied: “What, and have to die again?” When he had been informed by the elder that he could not inherit immortality without tasting of death he said to him: “Let me be as I am. I cannot taste death again, a second time. The memory [of my death] and the unforgettable bitterness [of it] are with me still.” And that was how the elder's question was answered.⁸³

The elder's question is not really answered: the Jew's undoubtedly virtuous behavior cannot prevail against his refusal to become a Christian. For “works done before the grace of Christ and the Inspiration of his Spirit are not pleasant to God . . . we doubt not that they have the nature of sin,” as certain Anglican divines would state the traditional position in the thirteenth of the (Thirty-nine) Articles of 1562. Rather was the elder's dilemma resolved by the notion of a third alternative, where righteous Jews and charitable

⁸² W036, BHG 628c, *de Euphrosyno coquo*.

⁸³ W006, BHG 1317t, *de Hebraeo qui noluit reviviscere et baptizari*, ed. P. Canart, *Byzantion* 36 (1966): 22–23, followed by some very apposite comments and reference to a similar passage in *The Life of Saint Basil Junior*.

sinners could dwell, neither feeling the pains of hell nor enjoying the delights of paradise, a rather gray area not unlike the Hebrew Sheol.

What then is to be concluded from all this? First, that the διηγήσεις ψυχοφελείς do have some things to tell us about the later Romans' beliefs concerning the last things: the kind of hell they feared, the sort of heaven they hoped for, and a process by which they would attain the one or the other, but these beliefs are to be apprehended by attending to the scenarios of the stories rather than to their direct statements. Most of what the stories have to teach is to be found in the reports of visions which, acutely subjective though they undoubtedly be, insofar as they manifest a degree of consensus, might reasonably be thought to reflect commonly held opinions. Taking the relatively sparse statements about "the last things" in the scriptures (especially in the Gospels) as their starting point, the stories fill in details and supplementary matter of various kinds. If (as we suspect) here is some indication of pre-Christian Egyptian influence in this supplementary matter, this is not to be wondered at since the ancient Egyptians' religion focused largely on the fate of the dead and possessed a highly developed eschatology. And here there may be a clue to resolving a question that has perplexed the present writer for many years: where do the roots of this eremitic folkore lie? Several other tales-traditions have been investigated, but other than in a very few exceptional cases, little or no connection with the διηγήσεις ψυχοφελείς has come to light so far. That is until the resemblances with Egyptian religious lore began to appear (compare, e.g., the τελώνια with the forty-two "negative questions" of Maat).⁸⁴ The next stage of inquiry will be diligently to examine that lore to see how many other apparent points of contact with the Christian tales there are.

Yet if some influence from the religion of Osiris is to be suspected in the tales, it is neither the only nor perhaps the strongest. This is borne out by the almost complete absence of a supreme, almighty judge in the eschatology of the tales, in spite of the scriptural attestations that Christ will come *to judge* on the one hand and the predominance of Osiris as judge in the Egyptian tradition. Instead, there is this tussle of angels versus demons which decides the ultimate fate of the soul, these and those being empowered by the extent to which the deceased was sinful or righteous in life. The tales seem to suggest that it is to *them* that the keys of the kingdom of heaven (and hell) are given, which is scarcely compatible with Christian doctrine. Maybe this too will turn out to be a "peculiar product of the Egyptian Christian imagination" *pace* Wallis Budge, but maybe not; only time will tell.

University of Manitoba

⁸⁴E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead* (repr. New York, 1960), 313–18 et passim.