

The Grotesque Body in Early Christian Discourse

Hell, Scatology, and Metamorphosis

István Czachesz



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PREFACE

This book is largely based on my *Habilitationsschrift* at the Theological Faculty of the University of Heidelberg, defended in December 2007. My interest in the grotesque started when I came into contact with Mikhail Bakhtin's writings a decade and a half ago, and my fascination with the subject grew continuously as I worked on different areas of the New Testament and early Christianity and discovered how widespread and constitutive the grotesque representation of the human body was in ancient Christian discourse. Eventually, it came to me as a surprise that despite the ongoing interest in the grotesque in literary criticism and the never-ceasing popularity of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts in theology, exegesis, and art, no monographic treatment had been yet written on the use of the grotesque in early Christian literature. After touching on many different aspects of the subject in articles and lectures, the plan of writing this book was a natural step.

The VENI fellowship of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research enabled me to carry out much of the research. For providing me with most exciting and pleasant research environments, I am thankful to the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Groningen, the Centre for Advanced Study at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters (where I was member of the group "Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Taxonomies and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity," directed by Turid Karlsen Seim), the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Helsinki, and the Faculty of Theology at the University of Heidelberg. In Heidelberg I am especially thankful to Gerd Theissen, whose encouragement, support, and advice was invaluable in both the process of habilitation and the revision of the text for publication.

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As always, I am deeply indebted to my family for their support and understanding.

Unless noted otherwise, citations from the Bible are adapted from the *New Revised Standard Version* (Grand Rapids, 1989). When translating passages from apocryphal literature, I often adapted the text of J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M. R. James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; rev. repr., 1999).

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Some of the chapters in this book are based on studies formerly published elsewhere. I thank the publishers for giving me permission to use the texts.

Chapter 1: “The Grotesque Body in the Apocalypse of Peter,” in J. N. Bremmer and I. Czachesz (eds), *The Apocalypse of Peter* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), pp. 108–126.

Chapter 2: “Torture and Punishment in the Visio Pauli,” in J. N. Bremmer and I. Czachesz (eds), *The Visio Pauli and the Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 130–143.

Chapter 4: “The Bride of the Demon. Narrative Strategies of Self-definition in the Acts of Thomas,” in J. N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), pp. 36–52.

Chapter 5: “Who Is Deviant? Entering the Story-world of the Acts of Peter,” in J. N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), pp. 84–96.

Chapter 6: “Whatever Goes into the Mouth...,” in J. N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), pp. 56–69.

Chapter 8: “Speaking Asses in the Acts of Thomas,” in G. H. van Kooten and J. T. A. G. M. van Ruiten (eds), *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 275–85.

Chapter 10: “Metamorphosis and Mind: Cognitive Explorations of the Grotesque in Early Christian Literature,” in T. Karlsen Seim and J. Økland (eds), *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 207–30.

INTRODUCTION

The influence of Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) on contemporary cultural studies cannot be overestimated.¹ While he was exploring the carnivalesque origins of the polyphonic novel, Bakhtin re-discovered the theme of the grotesque for cultural studies. Whereas in his monograph on François Rabelais (*ca.* 1494–1553) Bakhtin mainly focused on the carnival of the Middle Ages,² he also called attention to the grotesque images in Graeco-Roman sources.³ In his footsteps, the subject of the grotesque has become popular in contemporary literary criticism, and has been applied to ancient literature.⁴

One of the themes that captivated both Rabelais and Bakhtin was the paradoxical, grotesque nature of the underworld in Western literary tradition. Not only literary critics find hell a fascinating subject of study. The themes of Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic literature continue to capture the imagination of Western readers, including academics and the broad public alike. Given this interest in the grotesque as well as in the genesis of the Christian underworld, a study of the grotesque in hell is a much-needed and timely endeavor. The literary use of the grotesque in early Christianity, however, is not restricted to the underworld. In this book, I integrate the subjects of hell, scatology, and metamorphosis into a unified treatment of the *grotesque body*, and invite classical literature, apocalyptic sources, and narrative texts into the discussion.

The word “grotesque” did not exist in Antiquity. The expression was coined from the Italian *grotto* in the fifteenth century when Nero’s *Domus Aurea* was excavated in Rome. The walls of this palace were decorated with “graceful fantasies, anatomical impossibilities, extraordinary excrescences, human heads and torsos.”⁵ In spite of the recent popularity of the notion of the grotesque in the humanities, it is not easy to give a short definition of the concept. To start with a concise definition, I suggest to use the term *grotesque* to designate the combination of two components:

a playful, attention grabbing, and often humorous component, on one hand, and a confusing, repulsive, and often fearful component, on the other hand.⁶ In many (but not all) of its appearances, the grotesque can be aptly described as “laughing in pain.”⁷

In his *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin coined the term *grotesque realism* to identify a peculiar aesthetic concept of the human body, which he found in Rabelais and traced back to folk culture.⁸ According to Bakhtin, the grotesque representation of the body is “all-popular, festive, and utopian.”⁹ The grotesque body is cosmic and collective (all-popular), not separated by clear boundaries from the rest of the world. It is not closed and completed, growing beyond its own contours.¹⁰ The grotesque representation of the body focuses on the apertures, convexities, and offshoots: the mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, and the nose. Those bodily phenomena are emphasized in which the body exceeds its limits, such as copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, agony, eating, drinking, and defecation. The body is “never finished, always creating and being created.”¹¹ Consequently, the grotesque image of the body often shows two bodies in one: one giving birth and dying, the other conceived and born. The same purpose is served by the representation of bodies in the immediate proximity of birth or death. The grotesque image of the body reflects “a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth, and becoming.”¹²

A particular interpretation of the directions of “upward” and “downward,” according to Bakhtin, underlies the grotesque image of the body.¹³ These two directions represent heaven and earth, respectively. These cosmic aspects, however, are connected to the respective parts of the body. To the upper part belong the face and the head, to the lower part the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks. The grotesque humor degrades and materializes. By degradation, it brings things down to the earth, an element that swallows and gives birth at the same time. It is concerned with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs, digging a “bodily grave for a new birth.” “To degrade,” Bakhtin concludes, “is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better.”

In this monograph I argue that the rhetorical appeal of first- and second-century Christian literature was greatly enhanced by the creation of a powerful discourse about the grotesque human body in the domains of moral control, social interaction, and Christology. In the chapters to come I will invite the reader to a journey in the grotesque universe of the

early Christians. Our tour of the grotesque will take us to the underworld, we will make acquaintance with plebeian humor (especially subjects related with metabolism), and watch distorted bodies as displayed in early Christian texts and in the cultural environment of emergent Christianity. The underworld has traditionally been a place filled with unusual creatures as well as strange forms of cruelty. Torture and cruel death were parts of everyday reality for many people. Scatological humor (together with other obscene topics) was one of the main resources of the comedy, and especially of the more popular *mimus*. In the expectations of the modern reader, early Christianity is rarely if ever associated with humor, not to speak of its plebeian variety, and the images of cruelty and distortion in Christian thought are mostly associated with the “dark” Middle Ages. My purpose is to show where those images originated and how they were mobilized to create a cognitively appealing and rhetorically convincing Christian discourse (or rather a range of discourses) already at the very beginnings of Christianity. Different aspects of the grotesque in early Christianity will be examined in each chapter, typically in the context of representative texts and their literary parallels. The bulk of the monograph deals with the first to early third centuries CE, with additional perspectives on late antiquity and beyond.

Although no systematic treatment of the grotesque existed in antiquity, representations of the underworld, scatological humor, and images of the distorted body were three major arenas that were well known for their effect of generating horror and ridicule simultaneously. A survey of early Christian literature in the selected timeframe reveals three main uses of the grotesque: to depict hell, to mock enemies, and to reason about the divine. These three uses of the grotesque will be addressed, one after another, in the three main parts of the book. In [Part I](#), the dark and fearful side of the grotesque will be discussed, surveying simultaneously ludicrous and horrifying images of the underworld and demonic powers. In [Part II](#), I will show how Christians domesticated the grotesque as a rhetorical tool, which could be used to mock and ridicule their adversaries. Instead of evoking the horrors of the underworld, many second-century Christians drew on ancient comedy and *mimus*, where scatology (that is, humor playing with expressions of metabolism) was the most elementary way of eliciting laughter. [Part III](#) will show the bright side of the grotesque, analyzing strange, surprising, or humorous images that appear in the sphere of the divine.

Whereas in this book I proceed from Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body, the complex phenomenon of the grotesque invites the use of

more than just one methodological approach. Throughout the book I will analyze the literary patterns, intertextual networks, and historical contexts of the grotesque. In addition to these perspectives, my main concern will be with the psychological features of the grotesque in its three uses in early Christian discourse. In the exploration of the psychological dimension of the grotesque, I will employ different psychological models: depth-psychology, social-psychology, and cognitive psychology. In [Chapter 4](#), concluding the [first part](#) of the book, I will rely on depth-psychological insights to investigate how grotesque representations of demonic powers reflect internal processes of the human psyche. In [Chapter 5](#), I will employ social psychology, particularly labeling theory, to understand how early Christians utilized the grotesque to confront their adversaries. Finally, in the [third part](#) of the book I will introduce cognitive psychological models to examine the mental representation and embodied aspects of grotesque imagery.

After these preliminary considerations we can now sketch the following itinerary for the journey ahead of us. The book begins with the analysis of the image of the human body in hell, focusing especially on the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Ancient tours of hell provide an important source of the grotesque. In [Chapter 1](#), I will argue that the *Apocalypse of Peter* differs from its Greek and Jewish parallels as well as from the Book of Revelation in creating representations of the human to serve as moral allegories and using the image of the grotesque body to deal with death and the projected apocalyptic future. In [Chapter 2](#), I will analyze the underworld of the *Apocalypse of Paul* (or *Visio Pauli*) and inquire further about the sources of grotesque body imagery in the underworld. In addition to surveying literary sources, I will address yet another exciting question: how far did the images of tortures and distorted bodies in early Christian literature mirror the juridical practice of the Roman Empire? In [Chapter 3](#), I will compare the *Apocalypse of Peter* with the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and ask about the connection between visions of morality and the structure of hell. I will argue that both the overall image of hell and the particular punishments in the *Apocalypse of Peter* are based on the location of sins in different members. In the final chapter of [Part I](#), I will turn to the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* and pay special attention to demonology, which is yet another source of the early Christian notion of the grotesque. This writing presents demonic figures that attack people and penetrate their minds and bodies, using grotesque imagery to describe processes of the human psyche.

In [Chapter 5](#), which opens [Part II](#) of the book, I will investigate the function of grotesque themes in social rhetoric. In the agonistic rhetoric of early Christians, the grotesque appears in challenge–response games and deviance labeling, especially with the aim of ridiculing and humiliating adversaries. After so much torture and cruelty in the first half of the book, [Chapter 6](#) will take us to a lighter subject. In this chapter, I will deal with another strategy employing the grotesque to ridicule enemies. The use of obscene themes and scatological motifs was inspired by classical comedy and the popular *mimus* and formed an important part of the Christian rhetorical repertoire.

[Part III](#) of the book, dedicated to the bright side of the grotesque, opens with a chapter about the polymorphic appearances of Christ, who is depicted in many early Christian sources as being able to change his form suddenly and assume the most surprising shapes. In [Chapter 7](#), I will argue that the Christian notion of polymorphy originated in Hellenistic religions and was intimately related to the quick success of the figure of Christ, who did not have a canonical appearance. In [Chapter 8](#), I will deal with the widespread motif of speaking and otherwise intelligent animals in early Christian sources. The chapter concentrates especially on the asses of the *Acts of Thomas*, a theme with a particularly rich intertextual halo. This chapter starts to develop the argument, spelled out in more detail in the rest of the book, that the structure of the human mind constrains how literary, historical, and religious trajectories combined to yield the early Christian concept of the grotesque. Building on the conclusions of the preceding two chapters, the cognitive explanation of the grotesque is further elaborated in [Chapter 9](#), which analyzes metamorphosis traditions in Christian discourse and its ancient parallels. The narrative of Christ's death and resurrection will be interpreted against this theoretical framework. [Chapter 10](#) considers a wealth of new insights from cognitive science and cognitive neuroscience in order to understand how the human mind deals with the various forms and shapes of the grotesque body. In the Epilogue, I will address aspects of history and cognition, considering social-historical factors that contributed to the emergence and spread of the grotesque in early Christianity.

Notes

1. Cf. A. Simons, "Creating New Images of Bakhtin," *Studies in East European Thought* 49.4 (1997), pp. 305–17.

2. M. M. Bakhtin, *Творчество Франсуа Рабле и народная культура средневековья и ренессанса* (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1965); English translation: M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (trans. H. Iswolsky; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984). Cf. R. M. Berrong, *Rabelais and Bakhtin: Popular Culture in Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).
3. E.g., R. B. Branham, *Bakhtin and the Classics* (Rethinking Theory; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001); idem, *The Bakhtin Circle and Ancient Narrative* (Ancient Narrative, 3; Groningen: Barkhuis: Groningen University Library, 2005); C. Platter, *Aristophanes and the Carnival of Genres* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).
4. E.g., M. J. Meyer (ed.), *Literature and the Grotesque* (Rodopi Perspectives on Modern Literature, 15; Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1995); A. K. Robertson, *The Grotesque Interface: Deformity, Debasement, Dissolution* (Frankfurt am Main; Madrid: Vervuert; Iberoamericana, 1996); B. Cohen (ed.), *Not the Classical Ideal: Athens and the Construction of the Other in Greek Art* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2000).
5. Robertson, *The Grotesque Interface*, p. 10.
6. C. Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2004), s.v., gives the following definition of the grotesque: “characterized by bizarre distortions, especially in the exaggerated or abnormal depiction of human features. The literature of the grotesque involves freakish caricatures of people’s appearance and behaviour, as in the novels of Dickens.” The element of the ludicrous is recognized by the online *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000–2011), s.v., meaning B3: “Ludicrous from incongruity; fantastically absurd.”
7. Cf. R. A. Ciancio, “Laughing in Pain with Nathanael West,” in Meyer (ed.), *Literature and the Grotesque*, pp. 1–20.
8. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 18.
9. Bakhtin, *Творчество Франсуа Рабле*, p. 24: “всенародный, праздничный, утопический”; idem, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 19.
10. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 26.
11. Bakhtin, *Творчество Франсуа Рабле*, p. 24, “вечно неготовое, вечно творимое и творящее тело.” The English translation omits “being created” without any good reason.
12. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 24.
13. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 19–22.

Part I

HELL

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Chapter 1

GROTESQUE BODIES IN THE CHRISTIAN UNDERWORLD

“Didymon the flute-player, on being convicted of adultery, was hanged by his namesake.” This ancient Greek joke is quoted as an example of a *chreia* in Aelius Theon’s *Progymnasmata*.¹ It makes use of at least two correspondences. On one hand, two different meanings of the word δίδυμος are involved. First, it is the flute player’s name, meaning “twin brother” (as with Jesus’ disciple “Thomas called Didymus”);² the second half of the joke evokes the plural of the word in the meaning of “testicles.”³ On the other hand, the flute player’s punishment corresponds to the sin that he committed. Beyond these primary and obvious sources of humor, the anecdote implies several other levels of meaning. For example, it can be interpreted in the framework of widespread associations of flute players with gaiety: “[*aulos*] was an instrument that produced bawdy music and deformed the face and so was not proper for free women, or even citizen men. Plato (*Republic* I.399d) banned it from his ideal city, and according to Aristotle (*Politics* 1341), citizens could listen to it, but should not learn to play it for it was not considered a ‘moral’ instrument.”⁴ Our text adds an unexpected twist to the popular image of flute players: whereas in most literary references they appear as instruments or objects of ecstasy and lust,⁵ the Didymon joke characterizes its protagonist as the originator of sexual transgression. Thus the text confirms as well as generates prejudice.

The point involved in the punishment itself, the comical position of hanging upside down from one’s testicles, affects the listener in a different way. Whereas the puns and intertextual references generate satisfaction, the indication of the punishment brings about a certain ambivalent inconvenience, rather than relief. Although it can be seen as humorous, it is better called grotesque. The image of the human body evoked in the joke is surprising, distorted, and disturbing.⁶

The sorrowful fate of Didymon is not unparalleled in Jewish and Christian literature, where it normally belongs to the scenario of hell. In Jewish *Apocalypses*, men and women are often hanged by their genitals or nipples.⁷ In these sources, however, the punishment is meant dead earnest rather than humorous. Hanging by the genitals also appears as a punishment for adultery in the underworld of Lucian's *True Story*. Cinyras, one of Lucian's traveling companions, abducts the wife of another member of the crew. The adulterer is whipped with mallow, bound by the genitals, and taken off to the abode of the wicked, where he is later seen "wreathed in smoke and suspended by the testicles."⁸ Comparing the occurrences of the same motif in Lucian's hell and the Jewish *Apocalypses* shows that whereas the former exploited the humorous aspects of grotesque body images, the latter used them to horrify the readers.

A similar punishment is found in the first Christian description of hell, which is contained in the *Apocalypse of Peter* (*ApPt*), where it occurs in the euphemistic variant of "hanged by the feet" (Ethiopic: "thighs").⁹ This punishment is far from being the only example of grotesque imagery in the *ApPt*. In this early Christian apocalyptic source, images of the grotesque body fill the infernal landscape. In this chapter, I will undertake a literary analysis of the grotesque body in the *ApPt*, asking about the connection between sins and punishments, the relation of the punishments with each other and the overall structure of hell, as well as the relation of the description of hell to the narrative frame of the text. In [Chapter 2](#), I will return to this writing as I investigate the sources of the punishments in the *ApPt* and the *Apocalypse of Paul* (*Visio Pauli*), including the question of whether they can reflect the actual sufferings of Christians, or punishments used otherwise in the ancient world.

Sins and Punishments

The *Apocalypse of Peter* was written in the first half of the second century.¹⁰ The text has been preserved in two different versions: the Greek text of the *Apocalypse* was excavated in Upper Egypt in 1886–87, near the city of Akhmim;¹¹ the Ethiopic text, which is longer than the Greek, was published in 1910 and soon thereafter identified as a witness of the *Apocalypse of Peter*.¹² For the interpretation of the text I will proceed from the longer version, following the practice of contemporary scholarship.¹³

The narrative frame, constituting the first major division of the extant text of the *ApPt*, is contained in the Ethiopic text (E).¹⁴ On the Mount of Olives, the disciples approach Jesus and ask him to tell them about the signs of the last days and the end of the world. Most of Jesus' answer (chs 1–2 E) echoes eschatological passages from Matthew 24.¹⁵ In the next part of the Ethiopic text (chs 3–6 E), Jesus shows Peter “in his right hand...and on the palm of his right” everything that shall be fulfilled on the last day: resurrection, Jesus' coming with glory on the clouds, and the final judgment. This is followed by the second main unit, dealing with sins and punishments. In this part of the book, the Ethiopic (chs 7–13 E) and the Akhmim text (chs 31–4 A) run basically in parallel, the Ethiopic version being somewhat longer. The third main unit deals with the fate of the righteous, largely resembling the synoptic transfiguration scene.¹⁶ This section is found at the end of the Ethiopic version (chs 14–7 E), but it is placed before the description of hell in the Akhmim text (chs 1–20 A).

After this quick overview of the composition of the extant parts of the book, let us take stock of the sins and punishments found in the *ApPt*.¹⁷

First of all, we can observe that the punishments of the *ApPt* present a distorted picture of the whole body. The head is in the mud; hair is used to hang up women by it; eyes are burned; there is a burning flame in the mouth; people bite their tongues and are hanged up by them. Innards are eaten by worms; flames burn people waist-high; men are hanged up by their thighs – a euphemism for genitals.¹⁸ Legs are also involved when the rich ones dance on sharp pebbles. The whole body is dressed in rags, roasted on flames, and often hanged upside down. These images can be compared with the appearance of the righteous (as well as of Moses and Elijah in the Akhmim text), where many of the body parts (hair, faces, shoulders, also clothing) are described as beautiful and harmonic (6–20 A; 15–6 E). The beautiful bodies of the saints are contrasted with the distorted bodies of the condemned.

The whole body is at the same time dissected. As the Ethiopic text writes of the fallen maidens, “Their flesh will be torn in pieces.” Whereas hell is described as a horrendous place in general, and the entire body is subjected to punishment, most of the time, typically by immersion or hanging, we can also observe a focus on particular members of the body in each case. Can we identify an underlying logic that determines how different sins are connected to particular punishments and body parts? According to the most widespread view, the underlying logic of sins and punishments in the *ApPt* can be compared to the law of retribution

Sin	Punishment
Blaspheming the way of righteousness. (22 A; 7.1–2 E)	Hanged from the tongue, fire.
Turning away from righteousness. (23; 7.3–4)	Pool of burning mud.
Women who beautified themselves for adultery. (24a; 7.5–6)	Hanged from the hair over bubbling mud.
Men who committed adultery with those women. (24b; 7.7–8)	Hanged from the legs, head in the mud, crying, “We did not believe that we would come to this place.”
Murderers and their accessories. (25; 7.9–11)	Tormented by reptiles and insects, their victims watching them and saying, “O God, righteous is thy judgment.”
Women who conceived children outside marriage ¹⁹ and procured abortion. (26; 8.1–4)	Sit in a pool of discharge and excrement, with eyes burned by flames coming from their children.
Infanticide. (8.5–10 E)	Flesh-eating animals come forth from the mothers’ rotten milk and torment the parents.
Persecuting and giving over the righteous ones. (27; 9.1–2)	Sit in a dark place, burned waist-high, tortured by evil spirits, innards eaten by worms.
Blaspheming and speaking ill of the way of righteousness. (28; 9.3)	Biting one’s lips, getting fiery rods in the eyes.
False witnesses. (29; 9.4)	Biting one’s tongue, having burning flames in the mouth.
Those who trusted their riches, did not have mercy on the orphans and widows, and were ignorant of God’s commandments. (30; 9.5–7)	Wearing rags and driven (dancing) on sharp and fiery stones.
Lending money and taking interest on the interest. (31; 10.1)	Standing in a pool of blood, pus and bubbling mud.
Men behaving like women, women having intercourse with each other. (32; 10.2–4) ²⁰	Endlessly throwing themselves into an abyss.
Those who made idols in place of God. (33a; 10.5–6)	Standing in a place filled with great fire.
??? (33b A) ²¹	Man and women hitting each other with fiery rods.
Those who abandoned the ways of God. (34; 10.7)	Burned, turned around and roasted.
Those who did not obey their parents. (11.1–5 E)	Slip down from a fiery place repeatedly. ²² Hanged and tormented by flesh-eating birds.

(*lex talionis*) in the Torah.²³ The famous principle of *talion* is read in Exodus 21: “You are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, bruise for bruise.”²⁴ However, if we take a closer look at the tortures, we find that the order of sins and punishment in the *ApPt* is similar to but not quite identical with the *lex talionis*. The principle of measure for measure retribution is realized in its proper sense only in two cases in the *ApPt*: (1) the persecutors of Christianity are burned on fire and eaten by worms; (2) victims are watching their murderers being eaten by reptiles and insects. Even in these passages some interpretation is required to clearly identify the principle of *talion*.

It is possible to tweak the principle of *talion* so that it explains more sins and punishments in the text.²⁵ In a more general sense, the principle of *talion* means that some punishment is fitting the crime or commensurate with it. Yet the logic of the *ApPt* seems to be more rigid and not too concerned with actual legal hermeneutics. As it explains so little in our text, it is better to abandon the concept of *talion* altogether. Instead of proceeding from the eye-for-an-eye principle of the Pentateuch (and other ancient traditions), I suggest that the punishments of the *ApPt* follow a principle that is formulated in a well-known passage of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:29–30):

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of body than for your whole body to go into hell.

The concept behind this utterance is that certain crimes are committed by certain parts of the body. The idea occurs also in rabbinical Judaism: “Those bodily members which commit transgression are punished in Gehenna more than the rest of the members.”²⁶ In the hell of the *ApPt*, as well, the members that committed specific sins are often punished rather than the whole body: blasphemy is connected with the tongue and lips, false witness with the tongue and mouth, adultery with women’s hair and men’s genitals. In the Torah, the person as a whole is made responsible for his or her deeds, and pays with the body part hurt in other people. In the Sermon on the Mount and the *ApPt*, individual members of the body get out of control, cause people sin, and therefore have to be punished. Where does this idea come from? What kind of anthropological concept does it imply? I will elaborate on these questions in more detail in the

final part of this chapter, especially because they provide important clues about the history of composition of the text.

The Grotesque Image of Hell

The contrast between heaven and hell is particularly suggested by the head-downward position of bodies. Such an image of the body also occurs in the New Testament. Judas – who evidently has a Satanic character in the Lukan writings²⁷ – “falls head downwards,” “his body bursts open,” and “all his intestines spill out” (Acts 1:18). Apart from that case, hanging head downwards is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible,²⁸ but it appears in the *Acts of Peter*, where Peter is hanged on the cross head downwards. Here, however, it is interpreted as the symbol of heavenly, rather than infernal, realities.²⁹ In the *ApPt*, in contrast, the upside-down position of the body expresses the idea of hell as the realm of a negative reality. This is meant in the sense of “being the opposite” rather than “the place of non-being.” Whereas in Jewish Scriptures the underworld is populated by shadows in the stage of half- or non-existence,³⁰ in the *ApPt* the inhabitants of hell are as active as they were in their existence in this world. The hell in our text is as real as the present world, the world below being a grotesque variation of the world as we know it.

Ridiculing the rich and mighty of this world is also found in references to hell in Jewish Scriptures. The shadows of Sheol are mocking the king of Babylon at his arrival:³¹

You have also become weak, as we are; You have become like us. All your pomp has been brought down to the grave, along with the noise of your harps; maggots are spread out beneath you and worms cover you... Is this the man who shook the earth, and made kingdoms tremble, the man who made the world desert, who overthrew its cities and would not let his captives go home?

Ridiculing the rich in the underworld is also found in Greek authors. Lucian dedicates a great part of his *Menippus* to describing the post-mortem fate of the rich. When they die, Menippus reports after returning from Hades, Tyche takes back their costumes into which she dressed them in their earthly lives (chs 12, 16). Later Menippus describes Hades as the opposite of earthly reality, a social utopia:³²

But you would have laughed much more heartily, I think, if you had seen our kings and satraps reduced to poverty there, and either selling salt fish on account of their neediness, or teaching the alphabet, and getting abused and hit over the head by all comers, like the meanest

of slaves. In fact, when I saw Philip of Macedon, I could not control my laughter. He was pointed out to me in a corner, cobbling worn-out sandals for pay. Many others, too, could be seen begging at the cross-roads – your Xerxes, I mean, and Dariuses, Polycrateses.

Lucian's concept of post-mortem fate parallels the story of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus in Luke's Gospel.³³ After both of them die, angels carry the beggar to Abraham's bosom, whereas the rich man goes to Hades and is tortured with fire. When he cries to Abraham, Abraham replies to him: "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things. But now he is comforted here, and you are in agony."³⁴ One is reminded of this passage when reading about the unmerciful rich people in the *ApPt*, who enjoyed all luxury in their lives, but are condemned to wearing rags and being dragged on fiery pebbles in the underworld. The latter punishment is certainly grotesque, but not ridiculous in the same way as Lucian's underworld. Lucian depicts the rich in situations in which we find the poor of this world; Luke gives the rich man a stock punishment, as it were; the *ApPt*, notwithstanding, creates a sophisticated and absurd punishment, where the rich actually continue what they did in their earlier life. They neither beg nor do humiliating jobs, nor sit in mud or excrement. As a grotesque imitation of their earthly luxury and festivals, they wear filthy rags and dance on fiery stones,³⁵ eternally driven by demons and tormenting angels.

The medieval idea of the dance of death is anticipated in this picture. In scenes depicting the dance of death or *danse macabre*, a series of characters representing members of different social classes and groups are shown dancing with a figure representing death.³⁶ The dance of death communicated relentless criticism against all strata of society.³⁷

What the Greek authors and the Christian texts have in common is the sorrowful post-mortem fate of the rich of this world. There are, however, major differences between the two literary traditions. Lucian, on one hand, selects well-known earthly rulers to display them in inferior situations. He does not condemn their earlier behavior, and ridicules them without the slightest interest in moral issues, with the only purpose of raising laughter among his readership. He displays lofty irony at the pride of the rich of this world. This is a social utopia with hardly any serious social considerations. The passages in Luke and the *ApPt*, on the other hand, do not picture any known people in hell. They do not take an interest in the characters themselves, but rather in their moral qualities, especially as measured against the background of Jewish and Christian

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