Hell Hath No Fury: Gender, Disability, and the Invention of Damned Bodies in Early Christian Literature
By M. R. Henning (2021)

Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity
By C. R. Moss (2019)

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Early Christians conceived of two eternal paths that lay before the individual. One was a path of darkness, the other a path of light. One led to eternal torment, and the other to eternal glorification. Interpreters of damnation and heavenly transformation in ancient Christian literature have been preoccupied with existence and assignment. Does hell exist, and who goes there? Who gets resurrected, and when will it happen? We should be grateful for two recent interpreters, Meghan Henning (University of Dayton, Ohio) and Candida Moss (University of Birmingham), who have turned our attention away from these perennial questions to a more important perspective: what happens to human bodies after death, and what does their portrayal in ancient literature tell us about Christian conceptions of human embodiment and identity? What do bodies in hellish places and resurrected states do, and why are they portrayed this way? What values about human bodies, disability, gender, and sexuality are on display? And what happens when those values are exported from an ancient historical
horizon to a contemporary one? Both Henning and Moss help us to think about hell and resurrection not just as destinations but as embodiments.

In the Introduction of her *Hell Hath No Fury: Gender, Disability, and the Invention of Damned Bodies in Early Christian Literature*, Henning recognizes the diffusion of hell-bent themes in US television, from sitcom to horror anthology – a tendency derived from the likes of Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* and ultimately early Christian paracanonical material such as *The Apocalypse of Peter* and *The Apocalypse of Paul*. Henning helpfully parses key ‘Tours of Hell’ texts for the non-specialist, relaying their date, provenance, use, textual reception, and content in a user-friendly fashion. Such texts are birthed out of tantalizing details in the New Testament itself. But although the expansion of New Testament narratives presumably involved more sensationalism than critical reflection, the stakes of getting it right were high, since ‘depictions of hell were intimately connected to one’s ideas about God’ (pp. 9–11). Methodologically speaking, Henning approaches her study informed primarily by gender studies and disability studies. She avoids solely using Thomas Laqueur’s influential ‘one-sex model’ in reading early Christian texts, in favor of an eclectic approach that acknowledges competing gender discourses even within a single text (pp. 16–17). Henning’s approach to disability is informed by the ‘cultural model of disability’. This model approaches disability as a bodily reality that is established by culturally contingent standards of normativity (pp. 18–19). In other words, disability is not innate to human bodies, but arises when cultures distinguish between normative and non-normative bodies. Henning then provides a short overview of previous scholarship – terse only because past generations of scholars have mainly grappled with the influence of Greco-Roman and Jewish literature on apocalyptic tours of hell and what these texts had to say about the concept of hell more broadly. Henning’s focus on the torture of human bodies themselves makes this book the first of its kind.

Chapter 1 provides an analysis of how ancient sources used suffering (physical pain, judicial punishment, and martyrdom) to construct gender. By focusing on how ancient readers constructed gender through punitive rhetoric, Henning illuminates the processes by which ‘deviant’ bodies are de-normalized against physical and gendered social norms. Henning first contests the explanatory power of Laqueur’s ‘one-sex model’ for all ancient views of bodily gender. She argues that a ‘two-sex model’ also exists in our ancient medical literature (Galen, the Hippocratic Corpus, Soranus, and Aristotle), which view women’s bodies not just as an inferior *version* of a man’s body, but a completely different *kind* of body that is inferior (p. 26). Henning argues that both models can be operative at the same time; men’s
bodies that deviated from the ideal could not only be viewed as effeminate, but could also be seen as exchanged for a completely different type of body altogether, an imperfect female kind (pp. 27–8). After introducing ancient medical literature and culture (pp. 29–31), Henning focuses on the construction of gender through conceptions of bodily weakness, thresholds of pain (e.g., menstruation, childbirth), and the containment and seepage of bodily fluids (pp. 31–4). She then turns her attention to how early Christians affirmed pedagogical uses of judicial torture, an attitude that culminates in the use of physical space and enslavement as a leitmotif for Christian conceptions of hell. The testing of one’s gender through suffering could be seen in the spectacle of martyrdom, where women displayed feminine beauty and motherhood simultaneously with masculine poise and composure during torture and death (p. 45). Despite the valorization of such martyrdoms, Henning shows that the literary torture of women’s bodies reinscribes judicial and enslavement cultures of bodily violence toward women to mine for ‘hidden truth’ (p. 46). Ultimately, positioning women in torture is not exceptional but was the cultural default (p. 48).

In Chapter 2, Henning analyzes the connection between the fulfillment of gender roles in life with the punishments that are given to those in hell. Particular attention is given to the punishment of those who commit sexual and marital sins (pp. 54–68), with a focus on adultery, homoeroticism, pederasty, and incest, as well as on those who ‘abuse’ body modifications such as hairstyle, make-up, and jewelry. Although the form of physical torture stays consistent throughout ancient Christian apocalypses, their connection to particular sins depends on the social structure specific to each tour of hell. One additional consistent feature is the unequal way that punishments are meted out to women actors in contrast to men. In many cases, women are the ones responsible for misleading men in sexual acts, either through their body modifications (e.g., dress, hair) or through their acts (e.g., sex work). One surprising observation is that children who have experienced pederasty or incest are still punished in the Greek Apocalypse of Ezra and the Latin Vision of Ezra (p. 68). The rest of the chapter focuses on sins arranged around the typical ancient household: parents, children, young women, enslaved persons, and especially the extended ‘household,’ namely, monarchy and clergy.

Chapter 3 turns from the connection between particular sins and their hellish punishments to ancient understandings of those punishments in the real world and their effect on the gender of the tortured. This chapter contains a rich overview of the multiplicity of ways ancient apocalypses physically brutalize human bodies (e.g., blindness, weeping, fire, worms, chattering teeth, squirting breast milk, toppling over, laceration of tongue/
lips, and having organs mixed with blood). In many ways, these effects on the human body equate the body condemned to hell as ‘bloody, leaky, weak, out-of-control, vulnerable womanly bodies’ (p. 116). Henning uses Foucault’s conception of ‘heterotopia’ to organize the spectacle of traveling through hell like a tour through a zoo and viewing bodies and torture not possible in the ‘real’ world (pp. 82–3). The transformation of real-world spaces in apocalyptic narratives of hell challenges readers’ conceptions of those same spaces. What Henning shows is that early Christian apocalypses not only cause ‘viewers’ to imagine hell through the texts, but that they are also an educational tool to bring the behavior of viewers into conformity with the ideology behind the punishment of sins. In other words, to avoid the vivid torture and distortion of their bodies through apocalyptic punishment, readers are to avoid the very behavior causing the punishments themselves. Where Henning differs from Foucault is that she understands there is a clear breakdown between the reader as subject and the tortured as object; in the apocalypses, readers’ imaginations cause them to see themselves as the object. The real and the imaginary become one.

The final chapter of the book attends to the figure of Mary, who in her tours of hell becomes a female agent of salvation, quite in contrast to the effeminized bodies of the damned around her. Henning provides a helpful overview of the development of Marian descensus/tour of hell traditions, placing these traditions within wider early Christian discourses about Jesus’ soteriological work among the dead (pp. 120–30). Henning argues that Mary occupies the roles of ‘apostle, saint, intercessor, redeemer of the damned’ (p. 119), but most especially as ‘Mother’ (pp. 131–42). More than all of this, however, Mary’s participation in the suffering of the damned, along with her teaching and leading of the other apostles, indicate that she is an ‘alter Christus in hell’ (p. 146). Mary is a hybrid figure, both defying the altered bodies stuck in torment, but also participating in their suffering; she defies and reinforces ancient conceptions of gender, pain, and suffering.

The Conclusion to the book summarizes neatly in three pages the findings of the previous chapters. The scarlet thread running through Henning’s work is that Christian writers of hell not only receive and affirm wider cultural assumptions of bodies and gender, but transform them and modify them for their own specific theological purposes. Significantly, Henning draws our attention to the important insights historical investigations of disability can have on contemporary theory. While disability studies broadly today conceive of disability as marginal phenomena, early Christian tours of hell center the disabled, albeit to reinforce the normativity of its readers’ bodies (p. 149). A fitting Epilogue closes the book, bringing
the investigation of hellscapes to bear on contemporary issues such as the pressure on new parents to breastfeed (p. 151), the fetishization of the pain and suffering of incarcerated women's bodies in the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black* (pp. 152–3), and the expendability of people with disabilities in the COVID-19 pandemic (pp. 156–7). Henning’s Epilogue is an ethical warning to all; the weaponization of bodily norms is not merely an ancient struggle, but a reality of today’s world.

I only have one minor reservation about Henning’s book, which is a missing paratextual feature from the publisher; that is, it should have a content warning for violence, torture, and sexual abuse. The vivid maltreatment of persons on display throughout the pages is both because graphic details are a part of the ancient sources themselves, as well as Henning’s ability to portray and evoke powerful hellish mental images – no doubt drawing on her previous work on ekphrasis and visuality in the rhetoric of the Gospel of Matthew’s hell narratives. At the same time, the repeated mutilation, torture, and violence toward people – especially women – mean that readers should be forewarned at the beginning. One might respond that a person too ‘squeamish’ to handle the content of the book should steer clear; but content warnings are not only used for avoidance, but also to allow readers the chance to prepare themselves before they read.

This minor quibble notwithstanding, Henning has written a brilliant work that opens many new avenues of research for thinking about gender in early Christian discourses, the punitive use of disability, and the intersectionality between constructions of gender and disability in the ancient world. Her readable style, lucid introductions to huge bodies of ancient literature from apocalypses to medical sources, and her close attention to women in the ancient world mark this book as perhaps the critical work on hell in early Christian cultures.

Candida Moss’ *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* focuses on bodies that correspond to Henning’s hell-tortured ones: those resurrected from the dead. Moss begins in the most unlikely of places, with Jesus’ foreskin, which serves as a locus of identity and personhood, not only regarding resurrection but also about what humans value about the self. Moss’ book is fundamentally about how people define who they are now and the continuity between the self of the present and the self of the future. The self, Moss argues, has a deep connection with resurrection, especially for Christians for whom resurrection has been central to their identity. Although resurrection has been studied by scholars of Judaism, Christianity, and the classics, it is often viewed as irrational; scholars attempt to rationalize resurrection by grounding it in narratives of persecution (pp. 6–7). While much of Christian discussion
of resurrection appeals to the ‘Pauline script’ of 1 Corinthians 15, the fact is that each new generation nevertheless brings their own conceptions of resurrection and bodily perfection to the discourse (pp. 11–14). Moss’ aim is to contextualize early Christian conceptions of resurrected bodies apart from nature (ontology) and origin (literary, historical, social causes) (p. 9). The purpose of the book is to place resurrected bodies in wider discussions where identity is to be found, examine how that identity is preserved in life and death, what defines a person as ‘whole,’ and how bodies function (pp. 9–10).

In Chapter 1, Moss wrestles with a well-trodden event, but from a long-neglected perspective. The scholarly analysis of the resurrection of Jesus – and especially the evidence of his physical and material body after his death – has failed to consider the significance of what the continuity and discontinuity of Jesus’ body has to say about early Christian perceptions of resurrection. Moss argues that Christ’s wounds are not merely wounds in the gospels of Luke and John, but scars. She illuminates ancient medical conceptions of wound healing and scar tissue formation relevant to Christ’s hands and side (pp. 31–7). The reception of these passages shows the patristic consideration of bodily continuity in resurrection often ignored by contemporary New Testament scholars, but now revived by Moss’ work (p. 38).

Chapter 2 focuses on the curious case of resurrected amputation in Mark 9. Moss begins the chapter by exploring ancient conceptions of the integrity of the self despite partial change (as considered in the Ship of Theseus and Chrysippus’ Growing Argument), and the idea that although human persons were constantly in flux, as long as the general form of the body was preserved the person was still that same person (pp. 41–5). Due to the relative rarity of amputation today, it is difficult for interpreters to imagine literal amputation (pp. 54–5). As a result of this, Moss highlights that scholarship has largely understood the amputation of limbs and organs in Mark 9 to be metaphoric and punitive (p. 46). The problem with this understanding, however, is that we have sparse evidence in Roman antiquity for punitive amputation (pp. 47–9). But a non-figurative reading of Mark is likely, especially given the common use of amputation in the ancient world. Amputation could more likely be from battle or even from auto-amputation in the face of oppression (e.g., cutting out one’s own tongue), both of which were viewed as a result of virtue and courage (pp. 49–51). Even in medical and therapeutic understandings of amputation, it is viewed as an act of self-preservation (p. 53). Thus, in its ancient context, readers would have understood Mark 9 as referring to literal amputation. Moss argues that Mark uses disability as a foil for bodily wholeness; it is
better to enter into the kingdom disabled than to be ‘whole’ but damned to Gehenna (p. 56–8). Mark 9 suggests that impairment is not just a reality of the present life, but also of the future one. This reality is hinted at in his reference to being ‘one-eyed,’ or as Moss argues, someone who is born with one eye such as a cyclops, as opposed to being someone who is ‘missing’ an eye that was once there (pp. 61–2).

In Chapter 3, Moss turns to the issue of functionality and how ancient writers conceive of the purpose of non-functioning body parts. The chapter centers on Mark 12 and the question by the Sadducees about marriage in the resurrection; Jesus responds that there is no marriage in heaven. If there is no marriage, then what is the point of human genitalia? Using the Aristotelian notions of telos and eudaimonia, Moss frames a non-functioning body part as an obstacle to human flourishing (p. 71). Here, Moss analyzes early Christian discussions about resurrection in the work of Irenaeus, Pseudo-Justin, Tertullian, and Athenagoras (pp. 73–85). For Irenaeus, resurrected bodies are healed and become functional, but for Pseudo-Justin, who draws on the example of the mule, the lack of functionality for some body parts does not mean they become useless, only that their purpose is different than normally understood (p. 77). Tertullian, by comparison, is deeply concerned with the function of resurrected bodies. He thinks that the function of body parts will cease, but that they are nevertheless still valuable (p. 78); they still have a purpose, for example, the teeth to guard the tongue and the genitals for filtering natural fluids. Athenagoras thinks that the continuity of organ functionality is important; otherwise, the person is not the same person when they are raised from the dead (p. 83). As for the function of body parts once used for procreation, the elimination of passions invalidates the necessity for fluids such as semen, menstrual blood, and even childbirth (pp. 84–5). In their struggle to preserve the continuity of the body and reconcile it with future functionality, theologians like Tertullian preserve continuity at the cost of functionality, despite an inherent connection between the two (p. 87). Moss’ discussion in this chapter highlights how ancient Christian theologians did not take for granted the continuity of a person’s bodily functionality after resurrection. Rather, the consistency and function of future bodies were important theological loci for human identity.

Moss begins Chapter 4 by discussing ancient conceptions of aesthetics, particularly the relationship between an ideal body and soul, and its necessary connection to beauty (pp. 90–1). Beauty is not just sense-preceptory, but socially determined. It is connected to class, virtue, health, and nature. Moss argues that beauty is context heavy and almost always performative, based on a particular setting. What is appropriate in one place may not be
in another. But more than that, while beauty may be a sign of the natural, it is not naturally occurring; in other words, beauty costs money. The rhetoric of body modification masks the underlying economic and social privilege that allows cosmetic and textile modification. Clothing is not ancillary to a person's identity, however, but a part of shaping it. Building on this understanding of aesthetic beauty and clothing, Moss turns to the Book of Revelation and starts with the white robes given to the martyrs in Revelation 6. After a thorough and user-friendly tour through scholarly perspectives on the white robes, Moss settles on the expensive nature of white robes among the Roman elite (p. 104). She distinguishes between those who are given expensive white robes and those who must wash their robes to make them white (pp. 108–9). In the resurrection, there are thus two tiers of resurrected bodies – those who inherit costly garments and those who must work to make their garments costly. Moss then analyzes the wounds received by those who received the mark of the beast in Revelation 17 (p. 109). She argues how these also continue to reinforce social structures and stigma toward the lower classes, as wounds visually and smell-wise denoted a non-elite context. The irony of Revelation is that despite critiquing the exploitation of resources and human lives of the Roman Empire, it nevertheless perpetuates the social hierarchies of the established elite into the resurrection and the eschaton.

Moss’ conclusion, like Henning’s, takes us to the contemporary world where constructions of the resurrection continue to perpetuate ideals about class and ability. Moss presses us to understand resurrection not just as an ancient Christian theological pastime, but as present discourse today in our art, media, and use of technology. Every discussion about glorified, perfected, resurrected, and even transhumanist bodies involve values about our identity as human beings.

Some readers of the book might criticize its primary focus on Greco-Roman sources for comparison (there are some Jewish sources analyzed, e.g., Philo of Alexandria, Josephus), but given the scope of the book I think the relative paucity of Jewish sources encourages further research on Moss’ conclusions within second Temple Jewish literature and the rabbis. In Chapter 1, Moss argues that the Fourth Evangelist views Jesus’ scars from the crucifixion as marks of virtue, and that his marks are closer to those of Roman valor than Paul’s beleaguered body (p. 32). Although John valorizes Jesus’ scars, his scars would have simultaneously been understood as slavish and punitive in the same way as Paul’s own scars in 2 Corinthians 11. The purpose of those scars for Paul may be the same as for Jesus in the Fourth Evangelist, to overturn the accepted stigma of such body modifications and infuse them with theological significance. In Chapter 2, Moss
argues rightly that Mark understands disability as a natural part of the bodies of the resurrected (p. 63). She could have gone further to say that bodily nature and normativity in the eschaton is not singularly defined by one bodily ideal, but solely by each person’s ‘closing’ physical condition on earth, whether it be with one hand, leg, or eye. By extension, no body in the new age is _para physin_ (against nature), since all bodies are natural bodies. Disability as an oppressive social force is not possible in Mark’s future resurrection, because there is no single bodily norm against which all are compared. Each person becomes their own bodily norm. These minor points in no way undermine what is a critical book in New Testament studies, both in relation to the study of the resurrection, but also disability in the ancient world. Moss manages to balance an incredibly readable style with erudite and up-to-date engagements with the latest literature that scholars of the New Testament, early Christianity, and classics will all find helpful. The book is a spectacular culmination of over a decade of critical research into early Christian bodies and bodily practices.

Moss’ and Henning’s books are a wonderful diptych that both stand on their own, and yet also illuminate one another. They are historically attentive, theologically rich, and ethically challenging; a rare combination that all of us in the field strive to achieve. Aside from being topically complementary, both books together demonstrate the fruitful insights that arise when scholars go beyond comparative analyses of hell and resurrection. While it is necessary to understand the influence of Greco-Roman myths and culture on early Christian constructions of the afterlife, Moss’ and Henning’s books show us that it is equally important to pay attention to ancient conceptions of embodiment. Our fields must go beyond abstract conceptions of persons and recontextualize their bodies in ancient discourses about body, power, gender, and disability. An emphasis on reclaiming ancient conceptions of embodiment has been happening in the field of classics since the 1990s, and although there are a growing number of studies with this focus in the fields of New Testament and early Christianity, Moss’ and Henning’s work proves to us that there is still much more to be done.