INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, while on a trip to Italy, George Bardanes, metropolitan of Kerkyra (d. ca. 1240), had an informal exchange about the soul's fate after death with Fra Bartolomeo, a Franciscan who asked about Byzantine beliefs.[1] Bardanes responded that, because the Last Judgment had not occurred and Christ had not separated the righteous from the sinners, the souls of the departed had not yet received their final and eternal recompense. Rather, they resided in temporary locations, where they experienced a foretaste of their punishments or their rewards of various kinds, allocated presumably according to their conduct in life.

Bardanes's response reflects a desire for an efficiently structured and morally logical afterlife, but it leaves many issues unresolved. How and, just as importantly, by whom are souls assigned their provisional locations and respective ordeals or delights? Is this decision final or revocable? How does one's soul get to its interim assignment? Are these physical locations, spiritual states, or both? What do they look like? What is the purpose of praying for the dead? In short, what did the Byzantines believe happened to the soul after death and until the final resurrection and Last Judgment?

In contemporary scholarship, the period from death to the Last Judgment is conventionally called the intermediate state, a designation that I use throughout this book for the sake of clarity. It is significant that the Byzantines do not have one single term for this but many (see Part I). What is clear, however, even from Bardanes's succinct reply, is that this intermediate state is different for

different people: the righteous enjoy blessings, the sinners suffer punishments, and in both cases they do so in various degrees. Where a soul ends up depends obviously on one's conduct in life, but most often this fate comes only after a judgment of sorts, which is sometimes a quick, but more often a complicated and lengthy part of a journey.

This book is concerned primarily with the provisional judgment and the ensuing intermediate state, a process that precedes the Resurrection of the Dead, the Last Judgment, and related events. My decision to exclude these moments was a methodological one – many sources differentiate between them and the intermediate state, thereby allowing scholars to legitimately investigate them independently – but also one born of necessity. The literary, liturgical, and visual material on the Last Judgment is so vast that it merits a separate study. In fact, the expanse of the evidence is such that, in my mind, it would be imprudent for a single scholar to tackle it.[2] This is not to say that the Last Judgment is utterly absent from this book. Sometimes its overtones are preemptively heard during the intermediate state, so much so that the one can be imagined as the extension of the other.[3]

From the outset it should be said that, for all their reputed and professed preoccupation with the afterlife, the Byzantines never produced a systematic theology on the postmortem fate of the soul. Or, rather, they did so only in the fifteenth century, under duress at the Council of Ferrara-Florence, whose goal was the union of the Byzantine and Latin Churches. One of the main reasons for this late date is the relatively meager and sometimes contradictory information that the Bible provides on the matter. In neither the Old nor the New Testament do we find a fully developed description of the afterlife. In the Old Testament the term most often connected with the afterlife is *sheol*, which the Septuagint almost invariably translates as Hades.[4] It appears there more than sixty times.[5] Although never exactly defined, sheol is usually understood to be the underworld, to which the departed descend, leading a shadowy and even unconscious existence,[6] essentially cut off from God.[7] It is a land of perpetual darkness.[8] It is the destiny of both the righteous and sinners, and there is no elaborate journey to get there.[9] In contrast to Byzantine thought, the soul's arrival at sheol is not the result of any sort of judgment.[10] Sheol conforms with the covenant of curses and blessings between God and Israel.[11] God delivers punishments or bestows favors depending on Israel's fidelity, but only in this life. The book of Proverbs, for example, indicates clearly that God rewards the just and punishes the wicked during their lifetimes; after death, all go to sheol.[12] That the dead continue to exist in sheol is evident from the necromancy that was practiced in Israel.[13]

While sheol is the final destination for the souls in the Old Testament, there are some exceptions. Some texts, such as Psalm 29 (30):4, offer the possibility of deliverance.[14] There are also two cases of bodily ascension into heaven, Enoch in Genesis 5:24[15] and Elijah in 4 Kingdoms 2:11. In addition we find

scattered mentions of a general resurrection.[16] The least ancient books of the Hebrew scriptures, as well as deuterocanonical texts, develop a conception of the afterlife that is different from sheol. For example, Daniel 12:2, a passage that likely dates to the second century BCE, includes a clear reference to the resurrection: "And many of those who sleep on the flat of the earth will arise, some to everlasting life but others to shame and others to dispersion and everlasting contempt."[17] This verse describes an actual rising of some of the dead, likely the most virtuous and the most wicked, who are described as "asleep," something that implies an intermediate state of the souls.[18] More interestingly, the passage relates a judgment that rewards some of the righteous and punishes some of the wicked in the afterlife.[19] Further, the idea of resurrection and judgment is evidently at odds with the conception of sheol, inasmuch as sheol is turned into a place of temporary residence.[20]

Similar to the Old, the New Testament is a collection of books of different genres, written in varying contexts, and for distinct audiences. As a result, it does not communicate a systematic theology regarding death and the afterlife in general, let alone the intermediate state.[21] Furthermore, the New Testament is concerned primarily with the *Parousia*, Christ's Second Coming, and the ensuing general resurrection and Last Judgment.[22] Consequently, there is little on what happens to the souls of the departed before the Last Judgment, an issue complicated by the expectation of Christ's imminent return, especially in Paul.[23] As a result, with very few exceptions, it is difficult to identify with certainty passages that refer to an intermediate state of souls.[24]

The parable of the rich man and Lazaros in Luke 16:19–31 is the most explicit description of the soul's fate in the New Testament.[25] After death the soul of the rich man and the soul of Lazaros have different fates: The latter's is carried by angels to Abraham's bosom; the rich man is buried and finds himself in Hades. Although no judgment is mentioned, it is certainly implied. Abraham's response to the rich man's plea suggests that, based on their conduct, each got what he deserved. That this parable refers to the intermediate state is evident in that the rich man's siblings are still alive.[26]

Beyond this, the New Testament includes little about the provisional judgment and the intermediate state. In 1 Corinthians 15, especially in verses 35–58, Paul writes that both the living and the dead will be resurrected at Christ's Second Coming, a comment that implies an intermediate state. What Paul thought this state was like remains unclear.[27] Romans 2:5–11 clarifies that this will be an individual judgment according to one's deeds (see also 2 Corinthians 5:10). However, in Philippians 1:18–26, Paul writes that he desires death so he can be with Christ,[28] and in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 he claims that there will be a house in heaven, immediately after one's death. But if one can be with Christ immediately after his or her death, then what is the purpose of the Parousia?[29]

To this biblical ambiguity we must attribute the general evasiveness on the topic on the part of the early Church fathers, the other source of theological authority in Byzantium. John Chrysostom (d. 407), for example, wrote four discourses on the parable of the rich man and Lazaros but his main concern is charity, not the geography of the afterlife.[30] The writings of Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) contain sporadic information but nothing that could be construed as a systematic exposition of the topic (discussed in Part I). So, too, the afterlife of the soul never came under the purview of the great Church councils. This silence allowed for, and likely stimulated, the variety of schemata that constitute the focus of this book.

The following study is divided into two parts. The first investigates evidence from such sources as hagiography, theological treatises, and apocryphal texts. I argue that Early Christian and, consequently, Byzantine perceptions of the fate of the soul are a bricolage of various biblical, Late Antique, and earlier pagan traditions. I maintain, however, that Christian notions were influenced primarily by Jewish apocryphal texts. These contain many motifs that would become standard in Christianity, including a personal judgment by angels and demons, and an intermediate resting place for the souls.

Although my focus is on the evidence after the ninth century, I trace the origins of the Middle and Late Byzantine concepts of the afterlife to Late Antiquity. Even the most cursory overview of Late Antique sources testifies to the continuous coexistence of various ideas. I argue that the persistence of many concepts is due to their didactic potential. Early Christian authors wanted to paint an image of the afterlife so frightening as to inspire their audience to repent and to dedicate themselves to a virtuous life. Unrestrained by conciliar decrees and with little guidance from Scripture, they were able to pick and choose whatever story suited their purpose. For these same reasons, they felt free to add, subtract, and merge elements from different traditions, or even ignore them altogether, to create the vision of the afterlife they considered to be most effective.

In the Middle Byzantine period, by contrast, there is a marked tendency to systematize. The comprehensiveness of these texts was consonant with so-called encyclopedic trends in ninth- and tenth-century Byzantine culture, especially in the intellectual milieu of the imperial court. This habit is particularly evident in texts such as the tenth-century *Life of Basil the Younger*, which contains the most complete account of a soul's fate after death. The pertinent vision of the afterlife is a synthesis of various Late Antique theologies, narratives, and traditions going back to the Old Testament and early Jewish noncanonical literature. *Basil the Younger* belongs to a series of texts, including the *Life of Andrew the Fool* and the *Life of Niphon*, dating to the tenth and early eleventh centuries, that exhibit an intense interest in eschatology. Taken together they provide a *summa* of what was believed about the afterlife, heaven and hell, the end of times, and the Last Judgment.

It is during the same period that we first encounter a significant number of images dealing with death and the postmortem fate of the soul. These include the separation of the soul from the body and the provisional judgment in the form of the weighing of deeds, but more often they include the soul in paradise or in Hades. As with texts, there is little standardization. Hades, for example, can be a dark, solitary cave, a furnace with many compartments, or a menacing and greedy pagan figure who grabs sinners' souls. Although these are almost invariably individual scenes, mostly in manuscripts, and are associated with a text, they are not mere illustrations of the written word. Rather, they interpret and comment on the text's meaning, and often they impart subtle theological points that require a serious engagement from the viewer. It is significant, for example, that in scenes of Hades as a cave the soul is always next to, but not in a fire.

The final chapter of Part I deals with the Byzantine response to the Latin concept of purgatory, primarily in the context of the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1445). Forced to define their own views on the afterlife in light of the more systematic theology of their Catholic counterparts, the Byzantines, and specifically Mark Eugenikos, the bishop of Ephesos (d. 1445), drew up a far more methodical account of the Orthodox Church's belief on these matters. Eugenikos argued that both the righteous and sinners pass into an intermediate state after death, where they await their full rewards or punishments after Christ's Second Coming. The righteous, for their part, move freely about and, when needed, may involve themselves in earthly affairs. And while sinners agonize over their fate and suffer from the memory of their sins, they are not subjected to external punishments. Interestingly, Eugenikos omits any mention of the provisional judgment, fearing, perhaps, that it may appear too similar to the purgatory of his Western colleagues.

The second part of this study examines church services centered on the dead, including the funeral, commemorative rites, and the remembrance of the dead at the Divine Liturgy. Despite some general structural similarities, the soul's fate in the funeral services is depicted very differently than it is in the nonliturgical sources examined in Part I. In liturgical texts, Christ becomes the sole agent of the provisional judgment. I argue that this shift is due to the fact that funeral services turn almost exclusively to biblical sources for language and thus avoid the details present in apocryphal and related texts. Furthermore, the focus is not on the journey of the soul, but on the deceased, his or her salvation, and the community's role in effecting this salvation.

The central theological question underlying all these services concerns the effect of the prayers of the living on the souls of the departed. Praying for the dead had ancient roots in Christianity, and the intricate system of commemorations found in Byzantium indicates the enduring importance of the practice. Paradoxically, perhaps, the benefits of these prayers were not always

clear: Did they offer just some relief to the souls or could they effect a change in status and a transfer from Hades to paradise? Two exceptional services, the *akolouthia eis psychorragounta* ("Service for He Who Is at the Point of Death"), a liturgical service meant to be read and sung on one's behalf shortly before death, and the Late Byzantine *akolouthia tou nekrosimou euchelaiou* ("Service of the Funeral Unction"), claim explicitly that the prayers of the living and the intercessions of the Mother of God and other saints will result in souls being called back from Hades. The theological quandary here is evident. If it is possible for somebody who was justly condemned to Hades to be saved through prayers and intercessions, then what is the point of living a virtuous life? And if it is not, then what is the rationale for any of the services for the dead? Again, the theology behind this was not systematized until Ferrara-Florence, where the Byzantines allowed for the possibility that some souls (those who did not repent fully or whose sins were minor) could move from Hades to paradise.

The *akolouthia eis psychorragounta* is of particular interest because its kanon was depicted three times, once in manuscript illumination and twice in monumental painting. On the most basic level, the iconography of the kanon is meant to illustrate its contents. Although the iconography is derivative and based primarily on the isolated images discussed in Part I, the earlier motifs are combined into a coherent narrative about the postmortem adventures of the soul. This visual clarity contrasts with the sometimes muddled assertions of the kanon. Clarifications provided by the iconography also amplify visually the content of the kanon, whose text and illustrations were likely used as a contemplative and penitential exercise by those still living.

This study does not purport to offer the last word on so large, ambiguous, and obscure a topic as life after death in the Byzantine Middle Ages. Byzantine conceptions of the afterlife are very complex, even more so if one takes into consideration the fragmentary nature of the evidence, the lack of good primary editions, and texts that are nearly impossible to date with any accuracy. When dealing with this material one often longs for an answer that is as straightforward and devoid of embellishment as that of Bardanes. But then, like life, death and the afterlife in Byzantium were never an uncomplicated affair.

PART I

THEOLOGIES

ONE

THE INVENTION OF TRADITIONS: JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN APOCRYPHA

JEWISH APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

The traditional understanding of sheol, which was simple and unadorned, is eschewed by Jewish apocalyptic literature, which tends to revel in detailed descriptions of the afterlife of souls.[1] Many elements found in these texts would become standard in Christianity, including a provisional judgment, an intermediate state in which the souls await the Last Judgment, and a hope for the punishment of the wicked and the reward of the righteous.

The most important Jewish apocalypse is *1 Enoch*, which, along with Daniel, has been characterized as the formative document of Jewish apocalyptic tradition.[2] *1 Enoch* is a compilation of distinct works composed from the third century BCE to the first century CE.[3] Each layer of *1 Enoch* recounts revelations made by angels to Enoch, a Biblical patriarch whom God "took" in Genesis 5:24. The first part and oldest part (chs. 1–36, dating to the late third or early second century BCE), known as the *Book of Watchers*, includes in its twenty-second chapter a description of the temporary residences of the souls – deep pits (κοιλώματα) in which human spirits (πνεύματα) await the final day of judgment.[4] Souls are separated according to their righteousness and various degrees of wickedness, and rewarded or punished accordingly.[5] Such a separation implies some sort of provisional judgment that determines which souls go where. Enoch also sees the fiery prison of the fallen angels (19, 21) for whom he had tried to intercede unsuccessfully (13, 15), as well as a valley reserved for

those who are eternally accursed (27:2) – both places being precursors of the Christian conception of hell.

A detailed account of a provisional judgment, along with a description of an intermediate state is provided by a later text, the fragmentary *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, composed likely in Egypt sometime between the first century BCE and the first century CE.[6] An angel escorts Zephaniah's soul and shows him how angels write down in manuscripts the good deeds and the sins of men (3). Zephaniah sees angels who are repulsive in appearance carrying off the souls of the ungodly (4). A terrifying demon sets up court and presents Zephaniah a scroll on which all his sins are recorded. The text, lacunose at this point, likely included the description of a corresponding scroll with Zephaniah's good deeds held by the angel Heremiel.[7] Zephaniah is eventually vindicated (6–7). He mentions the weighing of one's good and bad deeds on a balance (8), then visits the place where Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Enoch, Elijah, and David reside (9), and sees the souls of the ungodly being tormented at the bottom of Hades (10). Saints intercede on behalf of the damned (11). The expected final judgment (10, 12) signals an intermediate state of the souls.[8]

These ideas about the afterlife are not original, or even particular, to Judaism.[9] Many motifs, including a judicial process after death, a dangerous journey through gates guarded by terrifying creatures, an examination of records, and the weighing of deeds, are present in Egypt through the Roman period.[10] The Homeric Hades also has many similarities with sheol. In time, the Greeks developed notions of punishment and reward in the afterlife, seen most notably in the Orphic traditions and in Plato's *Gorgias* and the *Republic*. At the end of the latter text, for example, Socrates recounts the myth of Er, in which the souls of the dead are subject to judgment based on the scrutiny of the records that the souls carry with them (10.614–10.621). Such concepts continued through the Hellenistic and Roman periods; a work like the *Book of Watchers* is the product of a thoroughly Hellenized context.[11] Other ideas in Judaism may be the result of influences from the Ancient Near East and Persia.[12] However, the mechanics of such exchanges between the Jews and surrounding peoples are difficult to trace.[13]

Antecedents notwithstanding, the Jewish apocalyptic adaptation and reformulation of these concepts were the primary influence on Early Christian and, consequentially, Byzantine beliefs.[14] *1 Enoch* is quoted in the epistle to Jude (1:14–15, with an allusion to Enochic material in v. 6). Other New Testament authors, including Mark, Matthew, and Paul, seem to be familiar with it. The text was also known to some apologists, such as Justin and Athenagoras, and to other Church fathers, such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Epiphanios.[15] Furthermore, some Jewish apocrypha circulated much later. *1 Enoch* was used by Christian and Byzantine chronographers, especially George the Synkellos (d. after 810), who included some extracts in his work.[16] The

Apocalypse of Zephaniah is mentioned by later sources, including the so-called Stichometry of patriarch Nikephoros I (d. 828), a catalogue of works appended to his chronography.[17]

SETTING THE STAGE: THE APOCALYPSE OF PAUL

Early Christian apocalyptic texts draw heavily from these Jewish antecedents.[18] All the traditions of the provisional judgment and the intermediate state are seminally contained by the third- or fourth-century *Apocalypse of Paul*, upon which later authors would elaborate.[19] The apocalypse was written in Greek, likely in Egypt, and was translated into several languages, including Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and Ethiopic. Its vision of the afterlife was very influential, particularly in the West. In fact, the Latin translation (*L1*) is the closest to the original; the surviving Greek is an abbreviated version.[20]

The *Apocalypse of Paul* elaborates on the apostle's heavenly journey mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12:2.[21] The text's main goal is evident at the beginning: Avoid sin and repent. So the Lord instructs Paul to tell his people to repent (3). Paul sees angels bringing to God "the deeds of men, whatever each did from morning till evening, whether good or evil" at the end of the day (7).[22] As Paul ascends with an angel who serves as his guide, he notices various beings under the firmament:

> I saw in the same place power, and there was there oblivion which deceives and draws down to itself the hearts of men, and the spirit of detraction [slander], and the spirit of fornication, and the spirit of madness [wrath], and the spirit of insolence, and there were there the princes of vices (11).[23]

Paul also sees some terrifying angels, those dispatched to the souls of the sinners at the time of death (11), and other angels whose faces shine like the sun. The latter wear golden girdles and carry awards (βραβεῖα). They are dispatched to the souls of the righteous (12).[24] When Paul expresses his desire to see how both the sinners and the righteous leave the world, his angelic guide obliges, starting with the soul of a righteous person:

> And behold, all his deeds stand in front of him at the time of his need. And both benevolent and wicked angels came to his side. And the wicked ones found no place in him, but the benevolent angels took possession of the soul of the righteous man and said to it, "Know the body from which you exited, because you should again return to it at the day of resurrection, so you can receive what God promised the righteous" (14).[25]

In the Greek version the soul immediately ascends to the place prepared for the righteous. In the Latin, however, the soul's guardian angel joins the benevolent angels. They all advise the soul to be courageous. Their upward journey