A Brief History Of Heaven & Hell



> “I don’t believe in an afterlife. So I don’t have to spend my whole life fearing hell, or fearing heaven even more. For whatever the tortures of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be even worse.”
> –Isaac Asimov

Two Ultimate Destinations?

Much of what we make of heaven and hell exists in our own minds.As Milton famously put it in his anti-monarchical parable, “Paradise Lost” (c. 1666): “The mind is its own universe, and in itself can make a heaven of hell; a hell of heaven.”

Lurking in each of us are both angels and demons.Alexander Solzhenitsyn noted this when he said that “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”Herman Hesse addressed these antagonistic aspects of the soul–struggling with one another for primacy–in “Steppenwolf”.The same theme was used by Goethe in “Faust” and by Dostoyevski in “Crime and Punishment”.Such thinkers

recognized that there are the powers of heaven and hell within every one of us.Even as the branches of a great tree stretch up toward the beautiful sky above, its roots reach down toward the dark netherworld below.

It is also worth noting that each human life is a mixture of heaven and hell…which is simply to say: some combination of serendipity and tragedy, eudaemonia and malady, rapture and suffering, euphoria and melancholia, miracle and tribulation, bliss and despair…and everything in between.

But enough of languishing and flourishing in THIS life.What of these mythical places, which purportedly exist in a hypothetical hereafter?What determines our fate?What are we to think of good fortune vs. bad fortune?Do we have a destiny?Is it within our control to choose it?

Heaven and hell present a stark dichotomy.As pragmatic creatures, these two beguiling archetypes constitute the ultimate cosmic carrot and stick.As meaning-making machines, they afford us way to get our bearings, and stave off existential vertigo.They are reference points that help orient us in (what is otherwise) a bewildering world.

So it should come as no surprise that they make prominent appearances in most theological musings.The trick–it seems–is to play on people's anxieties while keeping their hopes up.In other words: Engender a chronic trepidation about dire consequences while fueling an eager anticipation of a glorious comeuppance.After all, everyone fancies a day of reckoning–some point in the not-too-distant future when EVERYONE–finally, at long last–gets what's coming to them.

Just deserts will make it all worthwhile in the end.And the cosmic impresario will ensure this occurs.

Manipulating people by fear (that is: engineering neurosis) and/or false hope can be quite effective.So using both–in concert–can't help but yield an extremely potent cocktail of motivation.This pre-packaged weltanschauung imbues the lives of the common-folk with a sense of purpose / direction (which is simply to say: it gives their lives meaning).Heaven provides an enticing hereafter to die (and even kill) for… furnished, as it is, with a smorgasbord of inducements: a romp with bodacious virgins, a sumptuous feast, all the milk and honey one could ever want, a chance to see grandma again, etc.Once people are convinced of such things, they will hew to the daffiest of guidelines in anticipation of some sort of fantastic pay-off…whether during "this" life or in the "next".

Thus heaven and hell constitute a stupendously effective incentivize structure.For people are both running away from one thing AND running toward another.Why? Because the former is horrible and the latter is wonderful.Hence: In the theological repertoire of most cultures, we encounter the prospect of heaven and hell as prospective destinations…in a pending hereafter.Such a binary cosmogony serves as the quintessential template for those who seek to control people en mass.

Over the ages, rulers have learned a simple lesson: Get people to believe such drastic consequences, and they'll be putty in your hands.Offer your audience the prospects of some other-worldly paradise (and a way to evade damnation), and you can get them to do LITERALLY ANYTHING–even kill themselves.

We all like to think that the righteous will eventually be rewarded for their laudable conduct and the un-righteous will eventually be punished for their iniquity; so the appeal of being judged at the end of life (and sent to an appropriate place in an after-death "life") holds tremendous appeal.The theme is ubiquitous, and has played a role in cosmologies since time immemorial.

Demagogues ALWAYS make the same promise: Everyone will eventually get what's coming to them.Just do as I say, and everything will turn out for the best.The routine is a familiar one: Convince everyone that they are in a dire existential predicament, then offer a way out.Putting a longed-for utopia at the end of the path is a nice, added touch.Just make sure nobody can verify that it actually exists.

The ancient Egyptians understood this, the ancient Persians understood this, the ancient Greeks understood this, the Romans understood this, the early Catholic clerics understood this, and the immediate successors (caliphs) to Mohammed of Mecca understood this too.They ALL employed the same gimmick: a provocative cosmology–conveyed via a compelling narrative.

Simply fashion the conditions for alternate afterlife destinations, insert them into a compelling narrative, and people will be putty in your hands.

With their eyes on the prize in the hereafter, people will earnestly participate in the game.For, insofar as our time in THIS world (i.e. the world) is treated as a test, THIS life (i.e. LIFE) is nothing more than a staging area.We're "on deck", as it were, for the REAL SHOW…which will begin just after our heart stops beating and all brain activity ceases.

What are the rules of the game?Each religion has its own rules; but the basic idea is always the same: curry favor with a cosmic game-master to earn reward and evade punishment.If he is pleased, he will grant you admission into a very good place.If he is displeased, though, he will consign you to a very bad place.Everything one does is to placate a master that yearns for validation even as he is eager for retribution.

WHO IS this master?Well, that depends.In the Torah and Koran, he is–essentially–a petulant child with superpowers.In the Gospels and Pauline letters, he is a magnanimous super-being that merely wants to be acknowledged by his subjects (though he is quick to condemn when not appeased).

The Koran is especially clear on this matter.People who are consigned to perdition (i.e. non-Muslims) are referred to as those on god's "left hand" (56:9/41, 69:25, and 90:19); while those who have secured admission to heaven are on god's "right hand". {23} The records for the damned are kept in "sijjeen" (per 83:7); while the list of the "good" people is kept in "illiyyun" (per 83:18). In other words, there is a cosmic "naughty and nice" list–kept by the Abrahamic deity–to keep track of who's going to go where. 68:16 also tells us that god will keep track of the condemned by branding them on the nose. {24}

In any case, everything one does in life is to mollify a temperamental deity who is determined to either reward or punish creatures of his own creation…according to a scheme he laid out for them.Life, then, is all about currying favor with this commandant-in-the-sky.Doing good is to secure one's place in an afterlife paradise… and thus avoid perdition.

The upshot of this, of course, is self-absorption at best (as everyone is trying to save their own hide); a rational to persecute others at worst (as everyone feels obliged to "do god't work" here on Earth).

But shall we really believe that the fundamental architecture of the cosmos is dualistic?Throughout history, there has been a consistent penchant for this Manichean worldview: all things conceived in terms of salvation vs. damnation.The ancient Egyptians posited their own version of these divergent destinations: "Aaru" (the sun-shiny field of reeds) and "Duat" (the dreary underworld) respectively.Judgement of souls was typically done by the ruler of the underworld–as with the Sumerian "Eresh-ki-gal".In ancient Egypt, the task of judging the "ka" [soul] was handled by "Osiris", a process presided over by Anubis, according to the principle of "Maat": the Justice / Harmony of the Natural Order.

For the ancient Greeks, the destinations were the serene “Elysium” (Elysian Fields) and the horrific cavern of the damned: “Tartaros”.(Meanwhile, the most exalted souls would be ushered onto the “Isles of the Blessed”.)For the ancient Norse, the destinations were the Edenic “Folk-vang[r]” (Freyja’s meadow) and the dark, frigid netherworld of myst: “Nifl-heim[r]”. {11}

Zoroastrianism uses another idiom for the two possible destinations in the afterlife: the House of Song (signifying the state of harmony achieved by good souls) and the House of Lies (signifying the state of discordance of bad souls).Manichaeism would later adopt the Realm of Light vs. Realm of Darkness motif–replete with both its Syriac and Pahlavi vernacular.

Meanwhile, a limbo is often posited.Indeed, the venue for the afterlife was not necessarily good or bad (neither reward nor punishment); it was just the neutral place that the souls of ALL people ended up after death.The **Egyptian** version was the aforementioned underworld known as **“Duat”**.A dozen other notable examples:

- The **Sumerian** (then Akkadian; Assyrian / Babylonian) version was an underworld known as **“Ir-kallu”** / “Ir-Kalla” [“Great Below”] (alternately “Arallu” / “Arali”).
- The **Greek** version was an underworld known as **“Hades”** (alternately the “Asphodel Meadows”).
- The **Vedic** version was **“Antara-bhava”**.
- The later **Hindu** version was **“Patala[m]”**; with a hall of judgement known as “Kalichi”.
- The **Chinese** version was **“Di-yu”**.
- The **Tibetan** version was **“Bardo”**.
- The **Zoroastrian** (Persian) version was a celestial trestle known as the **“Chinvat Bridge”**.
- The **Judaic** version was an underworld known as **“Sheol”**.
- The **Roman Catholic** version was **“Purgatorium”**.
- The **Shinto** (Japanese) version was **“Kakuriyo”**.
- The **Inuit** version was **“Adlivun”**.
- And the **Islamic** version is **“Araf”** (replete with a barrier: “Barzakh”).

In each case, a netherworld serves as a holding-place for the dead.It is a place that is neither Edenic nor hellish; as the conjectured destination had neither positive nor negative connotations.It simply answered the pressing question: What happens to us after we die?

Once one posits an eternal soul that exists independently of the brain, the question naturally arises: Where does it go in the advent of corporeal death?This leads to further queries (nay, quandaries): Are there consequences in the hereafter for how one conducts oneself during one's "worldly" life?

Some explanations are more appealing than others.We all long for JUSTICE…not just for ourselves, but for EVERYONE.And an impending "Judgement Day" ensures a final settling of accounts.It is the day of reckoning that we all hope will eventually occur.But a day of reckoning is pointless without consequences AFTERWARD.A moment-of-truth is gratifying only if there are repercussions for the winners and losers (as they are dubbed in the Koran).Believing such a moment-of-truth is eventually coming–FOR EVERYONE–provides consolation for those of us who find ourselves exasperated by a flagrantly unjust world.

But a NEUTRAL place is not useful when it comes to inducements and deterrents (i.e. ways to CONTROL people). If people are to be moved, there must be CLEAR CONSEQUENCES. So when the Sumerians fancied the possibility of an afterlife paradise to which the worthy could go…IF they played their cards right…there had to be an alternative. Hence "Kur[nugia]": a dark netherworld to which the souls of the unworthy were banished after death (latter rendered "Ganzer" / "Ganzir" in Akkadian / Assyrian).Life, then, was about clamoring for admission into a desirable afterlife, thereby avoiding a dire fate in an awful place.

When we think about things in terms of incentives, we think of carrots and sticks.When we think about just deserts, we think of reward and punishment.Map this to cosmogony, and we have their ultimate instantiation: heaven and hell.Those of the Christian and Islamic traditions were not especially creative with their portrayals of these two alternate destinations in the afterlife.As Carl Sagan noted, for those in the West, "heaven is placid and fluffy; and hell is like the inside of a volcano."As we'll see, the high-octane anthropomorphism underlying such superannuated concoctions betrays the puerility of the simple minds that devised them.

The Koran's florid description of "Jannah" and its lurid description of "Jahannam" is so hokey as to be comic.Such maudlin depictions were intended for those of a primitive era.But the narrative was COMPELLING, so it worked.

Life, then, was about ensuring a course to one of two possible destinations in an alleged life after death.This binary eschatology makes no sense when we consider that good-ness–whether conceived as probity or as piety–exists on a vast spectrum of degrees.For it entails that a discrete line exists at some point on the continuum that determines salvations vs. damnation.In other words, people who are barely on one side of that threshold are assigned the same fate as as those who are close to the respective pole.

Even more inequitably, those who are barely to one side of the threshold are given one extreme fate while those directly next to them, barely to the other side, are given the other extreme fate.Permanently.In other words: The all-or-nothing consignment fails to reflect the gradations of good-ness that really exist.Nevertheless, the narrative serves a DIDACTIC purpose, as it allows for the easy-to-digest Manichean worldview.Carving of the world into a simplistic “good vs. evil” schema is SATISFYING.

Another thing to consider: Tribalism thrives off of an adversarial mentality.The tribalistic mindset is predicated on the assumption that having a foe gives us a reason to live (that is: something meaningful to LIVE FOR, and thus something to fight against).Accordingly, we can simply associate THE OTHER with “evil” and ourselves with righteousness.In doing so, the world suddenly seems to make sense.All that happens is suddenly explicable in simple terms.Everything–even the most confounding occurrences–can be understood in terms of these clear-cut categorizations. It’s all part of the grand scheme–a scheme in which WE star as the good guys; and outsiders must, ipso facto, be the bad guys.God has a grand plan; and this is all part of it.If it doesn’t make sense, then we’re just too obtuse to understand.

Anyway, it all comes to a head on the Last Day; so everything else is protracted, arduous prelude to that glorious existential climax.

The treatment of two alternate destinations in Abrahamic lore dates back to Judaic cosmogony.Each place even has angelic CHANCELLORS: “Metatron” for heaven and “Adra-Melech” for hell.The latter was based on the Canaanite (spec. Ammonite / Phoenician) god, Moloch.

In assessing the wisdom of this system of bifurcated destinies, another question arises: If the “chosen” are relegated to a gated community in the sky…while everyone else is consigned to endless torture in a fiery dungeon…how can the

former live with themselves. That is: How in heaven's name can those basking in the lavish accommodations of a celestial luxury resort enjoy themselves knowing that the rest of mankind (BILLIONS of humans, including many friends and relatives) is enduring unimaginable agony…24-7…in perpetuity?

Needless to say, for anyone with a conscience, such an "akhira" (life in a hereafter) would not be heavenly; it would be emotional anguish. (Alas, it seems there will be no more human solidarity in Jannah than there is here on Earth.)Nevertheless, True Believers proceed as if a decent person can be perfectly fine with this arrangement.

Tellingly, the Koranic depictions of the two alternate destinations in "akhira" reflect the particular environment in which the text was composed. That is to say, the graphic imagery is clearly geared to an audience of primitive desert-dwellers. This is illustrated by certain features of the afterlife destinations (encapsulated by passages like 4:13-14):

- On the one hand, there is a lush garden with flowing streams…replete with shade, a bountiful supply of milk and honey, and–of course–a coterie of nubile youth (young girls and boys) at one's beckon call, for coitus at one's pleasure. In other words, it is an OASIS…on steroids…with on-demand sex and an all-you-can-eat buffet.
- On the other hand, there is a place where thirsty souls are forced to drink boiling water…while begging the residents of heaven, in vain, to douse them with the latter's abundant supply of cool water. Instead of rivers of milk and honey, there are cauldrons of molten copper. And instead of lounging comfortably on couches / thrones, people shackled and chained. Oh, and they are being perpetually burned alive in a never-ending fire.

Behold the most extreme depictions of desirable vs. undesirable–composed in terms with which Bedouins from the Dark Ages were familiar.

But that's the "catch".Had the authors lived in rain-forests or in arctic tundras, the imagery would certainly have been very different. A Siberian vision of Paradise would most likely have incorporated saunas–rather than shaded pavilions–into its design. Indeed, denizens of arctic climes would not have craved shade as a sanctuary; they would have craved a warm hearth.

This is all relatively straight-forward. If the Koran had come from the Nordic region, its heaven would probably have involved a well-heated abode. If the authors of the Koran had lived in the Amazon, the vision of heaven would probably have been

some majestic, open meadow (Elysian Fields?) replete with ample shelter from torrential downpours. Most likely, ANY man's heaven would have involved lots of delectable food…along with on-demand sex with beautiful women.

Lo and behold: Fetching concubines and sumptuous feasts are the primary features of many afterlife paradises contrived since time immemorial.The Koran's descriptions are hardly novel.Upon surveying the myriad of versions, we discover that they are all variations on the same leitmotif–be it the Norse Valhalla or Orwell's "Sugarcandy Mountain".

The idea of a "hell" (qua worst imaginable place) naturally varies with one's environs DURING life.We all dread fire–as burning is extremely painful.It is especially natural that religions born in hot climes (e.g. deserts of the Middle East) made this worst imaginable place gruelingly HOT.So it went with Christianity and Islam.But what of conceptions of such a place in Nordic regions?Unsurprisingly, when freezing is one's biggest nemesis IN life, the worst place in the afterlife would be unbearably frigid.So it went with "Hel-heim": the hell for dishonored Vikings–for whom fire represented RELIEF (i.e. refuge from the cold).In Inuit mythology, "Adlivun" is an underworld described as a frozen wasteland.

Buddhists split the difference, making half of their hells ("Narak[a]s") excruciatingly hot and the other half excruciatingly cold (replete with an assortment of torments).The original term of this dreary venue is "Niraya" (from the Sanskrit, via Pali). {13}

Meanwhile, Vikings posited a foggy underworld ("Nifl-hel"; "Nifl-heim[r]") as an afterlife destination for the dishonored–which makes sense, since fog is one of the most dreaded phenomena of sea-farers.In ancient Chinese mythology, the ghastly "Diyu" is comprised of a macabre repertoire of medieval torture inflicted upon the damned.The Aztec "Mictlan" was populated by ferocious jaguars and ominous mountains.The Hindu "Yamapura" / "Kalichi" and the ancient Japanese "Yomi" are dreary underworlds characterized by unremitting darkness.

When it comes to positing hell, the point is to come up with a situation that is as terrifying (and agonizing) as possible…according to what the target audience conceives to be their most dreaded thing IN LIFE.

Such relativistic caricature goes for the scenario for ULTIMATE REWARD as well: What is the BEST possible situation one can fathom?Whatever that might be, let's call that "heaven".For those in arctic climes, that might involve a place where one can be warmed by a fire…just as for those in hot deserts, that might involve shaded pavilions.Lo and behold, that is exactly what we find.

Surely, any MEDIEVAL depiction of hell would have involved some kind of MEDIEVAL torture. That's why there's no electrocution in "Jahannam" (though, presumably, the Creator of the Universe had been aware of electricity–and its ability to impose agonizing shock–even in the 7th century).Meanwhile–as we'd expect–the desert-dwelling story-tellers of the Middle East conceived of hell as extremely hot (fire everywhere) while the Norse conceived of hell as extremely cold (made of ice). {11}

There are other features that might elicit amusement from those with modern sensibilities.According to the Koran, both heaven and hell have GATES. {15} Why the need for gates? Security, perhaps? To keep certain people IN (hell) and OUT (of heaven)? Does the astral realm need ramparts? If a condemned soul were to breach the gates of hell, where, exactly, would he go? Is hell an actual PLACE? How does any of this make sense?

As it turns out, the notion of gates was nothing new.In Sumerian mythology, the entrance to the netherworld had seven gates–through which a soul needed to pass. ("Neti" was the gatekeeper.)And recall that there are GUARDS. {19} Is this ALSO merely figurative? Were it not for the sentinels at the entrance to heaven, could unauthorized souls GET IN? How? Where would they come from? How would they get there?

Recall that the Koran tells us that hell has (seven) gates.But then again, 101:9 tells us that hell is a bottomless pit–referred to as "Hawiyah". Why, then, does it need gates? Or walls? Or chains with shackles?(In most interpretations, rather than hell BEING an abyss, hell HAS WITHIN IT an abyss.)Is there really a concern about the damned ESCAPING from hell?

The conclusion is inescapable: In the Koran, heaven and hell are treated as a literal places.

What, then, are we to think of the architecture of these celestial venues?According to the Koran, heaven and hell actually NEIGHBOR each other (ref. 57:13); and are, indeed, separated by a wall. A FIGURATIVE wall? Is this all mere symbolism? This seems unlikely once we take into account the nature of the descriptions.

It stands to reason that the layout of these places would involve WALLS.Yet in 7:44-53, the denizens of the two destinations have a (somewhat demented) conversation with each other–replete with an M.C. {10} Even if taken metaphorically, the proposal is rather silly.(For the matter of taking the text allegorically vs. literally, see Appendix 3.)It seems that even celestial venues are subject to the same logistical considerations (what with partitions, acoustics, etc.) as earthly venues.

Thus we have what is essentially a crude screenplay, replete with bugaboos (conveyed via the kind of contrived set-pieces familiar to anyone who's seen a campy horror movie) and enticements (conveyed in terms reminiscent of any adolescent boy's latest wet dream). Film at 11.

Are such caricatures really supposed to help us fashion a spiritual dimension to our lives?Taken as parable, does this somehow inform us spiritually?Why the emphasis on physical pleasure and pain?Shall spirituality really occur within an incentive structure governed by a choice between the macabre and the salacious?Shall we be motivated by an aversion to agony and an affinity for prurience?

And one can't help but wonder: Why the lurid details of hellfire and the oddly-specific descriptions of the emoluments in Paradise?

Yet for many, such maudlin artifice is largely beside the point. Artificial or not, it is the belief in (amazing) carrots and (horrific) sticks that compels people to behave in a certain way (according to some sacred code, whatever it might happen to be). Whether it is the pursuit of a celestial luxury resort or the evasion of a subterranean, torture chamber, the effect is the same: the dictation of conduct. For once people are convinced that there is a certain (possible) destination "at the end of the line", they will structure their lives accordingly.

The entire scheme may be sophomoric in conception (from the lascivious to the macabre), yet it is its simplistic design that makes it so appealing to so many.While it is all rather disturbing to those of us who deign to be genuinely spiritual, it is irresistible to anyone who is existentially disoriented and searching in desperation for something to hold onto. {14}

The Koranic scheme of incentives and disincentives is especially risible; but–regardless of the culture or the branding–it's all a matter of strategic fabrication.Undeterred by the puerility of the narrative, True Believers will conduct themselves in whatever seems necessary to secure the (alleged) rewards and avoid the (alleged) punishments that god holds in store for them.

We might contrast this rigamarole to the treatment of the hereafter in the Baha'i Faith (itself a derivative of Islam), in which traditional descriptions of hell and heaven are considered entirely symbolic of spiritual conditions.(Heaven = closeness to god; hell = remoteness from god).As it so happens, this is similar to the conceptions found in both liberal Judaic and Christian brands of religiosity.

Indeed, level-headed Christians and Muslims embrace this (eminently reasonable) treatment of heaven and hell, yet tend not to admit that–in doing so–they are eschewing the "original intent" of their holy books.

Instead of ridiculously menacing, the more sensible Muslims find the Koranic depiction of hell simply ridiculous.By the same token: Instead of alluring, they find the Koranic depiction of heaven simply ridiculous.The same goes for sensible Christians vis a vis the phantasmagorical musings in the Book of Revelation.

Yet bereft of its cosmic carrots and sticks, the "rapture" vs. "fire and brimstone" narrative falls flat.Indeed, if the telos were merely communion with the divine (presumably, in some way a function of probity), then not only is this eschatology rendered utterly superfluous; secular (non-dogma-based) spirituality ends up making perfect sense.In other words: Without a raison d'être, this crude dogmatic edifice collapses…and one is left with: Be a good person (no neurosis, no delusion required).

In the final analysis, we find that–after we've put away our fanciful speculations about where this is all may be going–a more estimable teleological perspective comes into focus: It's not about what becomes of us; it's about what we become.



A Cosmic Seraglio?

The notion of a celestial paradise, presided over by the god(s), dates back to archaic Sumer.Sumerian myth placed the sacred grove (associated with “Abzu”) at Eridu.The Sumerian term “Edin” was used for a verdant meadow in which a pristine, life-giving stream flowed.(That was over a thousand years prior to the composition of Abrahamic lore.)The stream was associated with the magical “Hubur” (river of the Netherworld; river of Creation).In this grove was a Tree of Life. {5}

According to Sumerian lore, the primeval man and woman, Enki and Nin-hursag, dwelled there.It was a place of fecundity and tranquility…until…things went awry due to the misdeeds of men.(This might sound familiar.)

In Persian myth, the term for a garden paradise was “[a]Pari-Daeza”.The hero, Jamshid saves the world by making a sacred garden on a mountain [“hursag” / “kur”] of cedars–replete with a Tree of Life (“Gaokerena”) and a life-giving river.

The iconography of a Tree of Life can also be found in archaic Urartu as well as in ancient Turkic / Mongol communities; and even early Judaism employed the idiom as “Etz Chaim”.Taoist lore tells of a Tree of Life that bares magical fruit (a peach of immortality).Ancient Norse lore tells of “Yggdrasil”.And in Mohammedan lore, the tree in Paradise is referred to as the “Sidrat al-Muntaha” [Lote Tree].That was likely a spin-off of antecedent tales of heavenly trees.Notably: In the Book of Revelation, we

read about “the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (2:7).Later: “In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits…every month.The leaves of the tree were for healing the nations” (22:2).Evidently, heaven even has streets!

It is likely that the portrayal of walls, gates, streets, gardens, etc. are based on the ideation of a heavenly Jerusalem (qua City of God), whereby paradise is more a CITY than a pastoral landscape.For the peculiar specificity of these descriptions, see Appendix 3.

The leitmotif of a walled garden–lush and idyllic–to which worthy souls were spirited in the after-life seems to have transcended culture.In ancient Persian (i.e. Zoroastrian) theology, the venue was known as “pari-daeza” [“walled garden”; based on the Old Avestan “paridayda”].That was derived from the Old Assyrian “pardesu”, which was rendered “pardaysa” in Aramaic.“Paradise” was rendered “paradeisos” in Koine Greek; and, later, “firdaus” in Classical Arabic.

Judaic lore posits “Gan Eden”…which would eventually be the basis for many conceptions of the Christian heaven–a pastoral venue where the lion lay with the lamb amongst budding flowers flowing streams of milk and honey.

Tales also emerged of the blissful gardens of “Erytheia” in ancient Greek myth.In Norse mythology, “Glasislundr” / “Glasir” was Old Norse for “Gleaming Grove”–a verdant grove located in the realm of Asgard, outside the doors of Valhalla.In the Prose Edda, it was described as “the most beautiful place among gods and men”, with trees bearing golden red leaves.

And later still, Renaissance Europeans posited “Arcadia”: a haven of pastoral bliss. (The etymology was based on the verdant Greek province by the same name.)Other versions included Shangri La (based on the Mongol settlement in China) and the luxurious panacea known as “Cockaigne”, popular amongst the peasantry.Such utopian visions infused medieval folklore.

Meanwhile, ancient sailors used to speculate about the **“Fiddler’s Green”**: a wonderful place where great sailors went after they “passed on”.The general theme of a DESIRABLE hereafter (for those who are worthy) has been standard in theologies around the world.Indeed, many ancient civilizations tended to posit otherworldly paradises.

The **Sumerian** paradise was associated with the land of “Dilmun” and a “hursag” [mountain] known as **“Mashu”** [twins].It was portrayed alternately as a verdant cedar forest or a bejeweled garden-of-the-gods.(Note: the Sumerian term “Edin” meant meadow.) It was a mythic place visited by such deities as Enki and Enlil.

Ten more notable heavens from ancient times:

- Ancient (Zoroastrian) **Persians** posited the walled garden known as “pairi-daeza” [alt. **“Firdows”**; “Paradise”].
- Ancient **Egyptians** posited **“Sekhet-Aaru”** [reed fields].
- Ancient **Greeks** posited **“Elysium”** (a.k.a. the “Elysian Fields”).
- Ancient **Chinese** posited **“Tian”** [heavenly realm].
- Ancient (Shinto) **Japanese** posited **“Takama-ga-hara”**.
- Ancient **Altaic / Turkic** peoples posited **“Uch-mag”**. (alt. “Uçmag”).
- Ancient **Norse** posited **“Asgard”** (esp. its great hall, Valhalla); alternately conceived as “Folkvangr”. Also note the celestial home of the Vanir, “Vana-heim[r]” {25}
- Ancient **Celts** posited a land of eternal youth and endless abundance known as **“Annwyn”** (alt. the “Otherworld”).
- Ancient **Irish** posited the Edenic **“Tir Na Nog”**, a place of eternal youth.
- And the **Aztecs** posited the thirteen heavens–the principal of which was **“Tlalocan”**.

Thus the motif of an afterlife Paradise goes back to the Bronze Age. To this day, practitioners of **Wicca** still posit the **“Summerland”**.

The Anglicized “heaven” is based on Anglo-Saxon precursors, which all alluded to the heavens qua SKY. (Such a semiotic conflation is commonplace–as with “Tian” in ancient Chinese theology.)The etymology is comprised of a smattering: The Old English term for the heavens was “heofon” (which–once Christianized–came to connote “the place where god dwells”). Old Saxon was “heban” / “hemmel” / “himil”. And Old Norse was “himinn”.

Here are a dozen more versions of paradise that abide in the present era:

- **Hindus** posit the “Svargas”; alternately **“Vaikuntha”**
- **Jains** posit the “Deva-lokas”, most notably: **“Siddha-sila”**
- **Theravada Buddhists** posit **“Tavatimsa”** (alternately “Tushita”; “Brahma-loka”)
- **Pure Land Buddhists** posit **“Sukha-vati”** (i.e. Pure Land)

- **Mahayana Buddhists** posit the **“Dhyanas”**
- **Chinese Buddhists** posit **“Shambala”**
- **Zoroastrians** posit **“Frashokereti”**
- **Jews** posit the terrestrial **“Olam Haba”** (alternately: a celestial version of “Gan Eden”)
- **Kabbalists** posit the celestial **“Shamayim”** [from the Aramaic, “sh[a]may[in]”] {1}
- **Syriac Christians** posit the realm of “naheere” [light]: **“sh[a]may[in]”**
- **Nicene Christians** posit a terrestrial Kingdom Come: **“Paradeisos”** / “Ouranos” [Koine Greek]
- **Muslims** posit **“Jannah”** (alt. “Firdaws”, from the Persian “pairi-daeza”)

All of these otherworldly realms offer their own assortment of enticements.In every case, the portrayal is of a magical wonderland to which one is whisked after dying.When the authors of the Koran wrote about Jannah, they were merely re-branding an old leitmotif…though in a comically puerile manner.

Upon surveying the depiction of an afterlife paradise across cultures, we will notice that the accoutrements of the venue are adjusted according to that for which the target audience might be longing.Shaded pavilions held special appeal for Arabians, who sought reprieve from the scorching sun.The Norse “Valhalla”, meanwhile, was a great hall with a hearth to keep people warm and cozy from the frigid weather outside.Vikings were not worried about finding shade…any more than Bedouins were worried about having a source of heat. Being protected from the harsh elements meant different things to different people; so fantasies varied accordingly.

Some depict a celestial place that serves as the abode of the gods—as with Mount Olympus in Greek mythology, Asgard in Norse mythology, and Saudharma-kalpa in Jain mythology. (There’s also **X** Lok[a] in Hindu mythology; where X = Bhu[var] / Svarga / Indra / Mahar / Go / Radha-Krishna / Jana / Tapar / Brahma / Satya / Vaikuntha.) I explore the many variations of this in my essays on “Mythemes”; where I note that such an abode oftentimes thought to be at the peak of a special mountain.

If one wants to witness a description of the average adolescent male’s daydream, look no further than the Koran’s portrayal of heaven.It is precisely what one thinks one might want if one doesn’t put much much thought into it.To the flowing streams of milk and honey, it adds fetching young girls (and boys), as well as comfy couches

and–as with the Norse Valhalla–a sumptuous feast.The appeal is relatively straight-forward.The same psychical mechanism is at play as the one depicted in Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights".

Designed for interminable tedium, Jannah demonstrates a staggering lack of imagination. Indeed, it's what the most simple-minded people might fantasize about in moments of carefree reverie. The Koran's portrayal of Jannah is as daft as it is overwrought.Its features are reminiscent of any daydreaming adolescent. {5}

Being a venue of rewards for the chosen, Jannah is alternately known as the "Garden of Pleasure" or "Garden of Eternity"; and is also referred to as Eden and Firdaus.Some variation on "gardens beneath which rivers flow" is mentioned over three dozen times throughout the Koran–presumably because TWO dozen repetitions of this trope was deemed inadequate. {2}Rainbows and daffodils and fountains of maple syrup would have been a nice touch as well, but there were only so many ideas floating around the Middle East at the time.

We are told of a bacchanal–replete with angelic concubines, comfy couches, sumptuous feasts, and shaded pavilions.The coterie of "houri" are wide-eyed and large-breasted.The feasts include an endless supply of wine.And the shaded pavilions are furnished with couches that have been upholstered in resplendent fabrics.No kidding.If one were to have designed an astral paradise as a horny teenager, this is roughly what one would have contrived.(Had it been today's millennials instead of medieval Bedouins concocting this paradise, there would have been video games and and endless supply of Doritos rather than brocade fabrics and an endless supply of grapes.)

The inclusion of wine in this celestial bacchanalia is rather befuddling, as 5:90-91 informs us that alcohol is a contrivance of Satan. It is quite peculiar that the work of the devil is rendered a key feature of heaven. The exemption seems to come from the fact that the wine in Paradise is non-intoxicating. But is this because the substance of the wine is somehow altered or because our post-death physiologies are magically rendered immune to intoxication? (No matter; there are rivers of both milk and honey to drink as well.)

41:31 notifies us that in heaven, we will be able to have anything our hearts' desire, and be provided whatever we request…constantly…forever. Does this sound like a worthwhile existence? No progress, nothing to which one might aspire, nothing the

learn, nothing to improve, no need for endeavor.PLUS: no novelty, no adventure, not aspiration.There would be no wondering about; no wondering if.What is putatively sublime would eventually be insipid.

The initial titillation would soon degenerate into an unbearable tedium.All the luxury would become mundane.Ecstasy would steadily turn into banality.The sex would eventually lose its novelty.Coitus with angelic concubines would become a matter of routine rather than of delight.The euphoria would slip into monotony.(Imagine a day-long orgasm.After an hour, it would cease to confer rapture, and start to become wearisome.)

One might wonder how this (putatively) omniscient super-being is able to design anything worthy of the name “heaven” when he doesn’t PERSONALLY know what it’s like to fall in love, to have an epiphany, or to experience satisfaction after accomplishing a difficult feat (that is: achieving a sought-after goal after having overcome substantial obstacles).Endeavor is the existential ballast of all human life.An existence without aspiration is bereft of humanity.

Note that heaven has GATES.(Why, exactly, is anyone’s guess.)In the Book of Revelation, we read: “The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it.The Lamb is its light.And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day; there shall be no night there” (21:23-25).So the gates are THERE, but not to serve the normal purpose; as they are always OPEN.They’re there for decorative purposes only.Likewise, in the Koran, we are notified of gates in 15:43-44 and 39:71-73.(The gates are made of pearls, by the way.See Appendix 3.)

Intriguingly, the Koran even announces that heaven is protected by guards. (Yes, the pearly gates have BOUNCERS.) {19}

According to the Koran, there are seven layers to heaven (or seven heavens, configured in layers). {17} Bukhari’s Hadith even populates each layer with different figures, according to themes–a motif that originated in Sumerian cosmology. {3}This can also be found in Judaic / Kabbalistic, Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist cosmology.

It is unclear what it meant by numerous “heavens”–that is: whether it means that “the heavens” (qua outer-space) have seven layers or that HEAVEN (qua after-death Paradise) is comprised of seven layers.In any case, the Hadith assign each layer a

name: Jannat an-Na’im [Garden of Delights], Jannat al-Khuld [Garden of Immortality], Ma’wa [Refuge], Al-Muqam al-Amin [Place of Trust], Dar as-Salam [House of Peace], Dar al-Muaqaamah [House of Permanence], and “Adn” [the celestial version of Eden].

In any case, the Koran explains that the lowest level is equipped with LAMPS for our protection (in keeping with the Persian astronomy antedating the new-fangled theology), per 41:12. Moreover, heaven has pathways (per 51:7). These numerous pathways IN heaven mustn’t be confused with the singular “Straight Path” TO heaven.

Meanwhile, the Koran specifies that the “Gardens” of which heaven is comprised are those of Eden itself. {18} So does this mean that heaven is here on Earth, as Jehovah’s Witnesses believe? Or is heaven simply a NEW Eden (i.e. a CELESTIAL one)?

Apparently, un-bridled hedonism is the selling-point of this (purported) after-death life. This is ironic, as heaven is thereby the epitome of may of the things that were deemed sinful DURING life. Presumably, everything in heaven is automatically rendered halal.

So why is the hereafter for “the chosen” tailored in this way?To put it crudely (though accurately): It’s all about nookie (and the satiation of other animal appetites). {20} And, remember, the Koran (15:48) informs us that nobody ever gets tired–or needs sleep–in heaven.This is a common theme.The otherworld in Welsh/Celtic mythology (“Annwyn”) is portrayed as a world of delights where there is no disease is and food is forever plentiful (as attested in the “Mabinogion” from the 12th century).It is considered the land of eternal youth…where there is, yes, plenty of great sex.

We encounter the same assurances in the New Testament.The Book of Revelation tells us that those who are saved “shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of water.And god will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (7:16-17).Marvelous.As with John of Patmos, the Koran’s authors had a keen sense of what motivated MEN (i.e. the target audience for their message). In this way, the early Mohammedans–as with Pauline / Nicene Christians–could be said to have been savvy Machiavellians.

We all operate within an incentive structure. To wit: We tend to do what we're incentivized to do (and, conversely, avoid doing what we're dis-incentivized to do). Among other things, charismatic leaders master the art of constructing incentive structures in a way that best suits their purposes. Those who are especially shrewd do so with staggering aplomb.

Of this, we might ask: Does the Creator of the Universe really need to BRIBE his creation with such enticements in order to promote piety? This seems to be a case of existential extortion. This seems to give us clues has to who REALLY authored the Koran.For human leaders would not hesitate to resort to such bribery–farcical as the payment may be (ref. 26:180). This indicates the nature of the Koran's authorship.

Couple the (eminently enticing) prospect of endless carnal indulgence with the (just as enticing) prospect of paramount glory (garnered from fighting for a divinely-ordained cause)…and one has quite a bundle of tasty carrots. It is no wonder, then, that the earliest impresarios of Islam were so astoundingly successful at promulgating their new-fangled cult throughout Asia Minor.

The retinue of sultry vixens is elaborated upon in the Hadith. The minimum number of "houri" (72) comes from the Hadith, not the Koran.And it's AT LEAST 72 "houri"; many more if you've been EXTRA pious. All that we find in the Koranic passages listed above is that they are "wide-eyed" (also "large, beautiful eyes"), that they are fair, virgin, and large-breasted, and that some of the servants at one's disposal are "young [handsome] boys" (a.k.a. "ghulam"; ref. 56:17). Marvelous. {4}

The notion of voluptuous, angelic concubines in the hereafter is lifted directly from ancient Persian myths of paradise (from the Old Iranian, "pari-dayda", meaning a seraglio (walled-in garden).The "houri" were likely inspired by a romanticized version of the "peri" / "pari" from Zoroastrian theology.The (Palmyrene) Syriac term "huriyya" is an adaptation of the Pahlavi.And that's where the authors of the Koran got the idea for "h[o]ur[i]".

A cheeky hypothesis has been put forth that "houri" was a mistranslation from the Syriac (in which the "Recitations" were originally composed) of a similar term for "white raisins"–as they are "served", "as fair as pearls", and "of perpetual freshness".However, the theory does not hold water, as raisins cannot be "gazelle-eyed" / "wide-eyed" with a "modest gaze"; nor can they be said to have large

breasts (78:33); nor can they be described as “companions of equal age” to whom a man can be wed.Aside from the fact that one can’t fuck a raison, it is quite clear that “houri” comes from the angelic being of the EXACT SAME NAME in Persian theology.

The Koran specifies that the houris are a reward for what the chosen had DONE during life (ref. 56:24).Yet Surah 44 refers to it as the “Maqam al-Amin”, which means “place of the faithful”.So was it their deeds or their Faith that gained them admittance?This seems unclear.We might note, though, that the “houri” are not provided ONLY for sex.These everlasting youths will go around with flagons and cups of libations which cause neither headaches nor intoxication.

Think about it: When a man (for we are talking about MEN) becomes thoroughly convinced that he has a choice between sex with an entourage of buxom maidens vs. burning in eternal fire, the decision is not a difficult one to make. If securing the former option requires doing even the most outlandish things…every waking hour… for the duration of one’s life…then one will only be too eager to oblige.

And, by the way, gay men are going to hell–a disclaimer confirmed by 26:165-166 (though refuted by the fact that some of the “houri” are said to be pretty, young boys; per 56:17).

Pitting the promise of getting laid against the threat of excruciating agony is as straight-forward an ultimatum as an ultimatum can possibly be. In a way, the devising of such an ultimatum is a stroke of genius. For it would compel ANY man–assuming he was thoroughly convinced of its veracity–to undertake even the most asinine enterprise.(Bear in mind that the Koran is explicitly addressed to men.)

The Koranic incentive structure is largely a matter of re-tooling the sales pitch that originated in earlier Abrahamic lore: cosmic carrots vs. cosmic sticks. Suffice to say, the earliest impresarios of the religion used a marketing campaign that was guaranteed to entice prospective converts. (Really? My own harem?AND my very own set of golden bracelets?)One can only imagine the world-weary Bedouin men listening to the early proselytizers: “All that…plus an endless supply of WINE?Sweet! Count me in.”One imagines that if the Koran were written today, the authors would have thrown in a luxury sports car of one’s choice…and maybe even a free Sony Playstation.

In the Koran, Jannah is comprised of what is dubbed gardens of Pleasure / Delights / Bliss. {21} This makes perfect sense, as Koranic salvation is not about transcendence; it is all about the slaking of primal urges. {16}25:16 even goes so

far as to notify the (male) audience that those in heaven can have “whatever they wish”. Really? Is THAT what heaven is all about: getting anything you want?It would seem that the eternal satiation of unbridled gluttony is not the highest state of being for sentient creatures.Surely, there is a mort exalted spiritual existence than an unlimited supply of cheap gratification; but one would never know it by reading about Jannah.

And so it goes: Sign up, and you can get all the nookie you can handle…and all the sumptuous dining you could ever want…plus lots of jewelry. It’s a marketing campaign that any frat-boy could appreciate: In the hereafter, fuck and feast to your heart’s content…while wearing really nice attire. (It’s almost as if the authors were inspired by watching tacky beer commercials.)Supplicants are thus rewarded for a lifetime of ritualized groveling.Because of having engaged in a routine of daily truckling, they are worthy of admission into this fantastical cosmic seraglio.

Of course, heaven–as depicted in the Koran–would be an excruciatingly boring place. Presumably (and this is, indeed, a presumption), one can only do so much fucking and feasting before it starts to become, well, rather mundane. This seems to conflate constant titillation with chronic tedium; as each invariably becomes the other.An existence without aspiration, without striving (or overcoming), without either productivity or creativity, would be an utterly pointless existence indeed. Yet THIS is the existence all Muslims are promised after they die.(For the matter of reconciling sanctity with lasciviousness, see Appendix 2.)

Eligibility in the Abrahamic religions primarily has to do with proper worship and following the rules.To gain admission into this exclusive luxury resort, one need only stay in the good graces of the cosmic overlord–a pathologically vindictive super-being that demands to be appeased.

Leading to the hereafter (“akhira”) is a Straight Path [“Sirat al-Mustaqim”].To get there, one need only follow instructions during “this” life (“dunya”).But what, exactly, is THERE?We might take pause and review the logistics of Koranic heaven.A few minutes’ thought reveals the book’s depiction of heaven to be peculiarly frivolous (not to mention, comically puerile).

In an ironic sense, the Koran’s depiction of heaven is a crude caricature of itself.That is to say, to simply describe what the Koran says about the afterlife is to find oneself providing a caricature.(Is it possible to caricature a caricature?)

The layout of this luxury-resort-in-the-sky is rather simple: eight gates and eight spaces, each one decorated with brocade.

The elect will dwell amidst thornless “Lote” trees, in the shade of acacia and pavilions.One will spend eternity strolling through gardens of abundant fruit, with rivers flowing beneath; lounging on couches upholstered in well-woven cloth (situated so that residents can sit facing each other); and feasting at exquisite banquets.

Each resident will be provided with robes, golden bracelets, and perfumes.

The authors of the Koran admonish us to refrain from being driven by some of our basest desires; yet then proffer a teleos that behooves us to be motivated by our basest desires.It is a case of theological hypocrisy (or duplicity).That the authors also saw fit to throw in plenty of shade (and lush vegetation to boot) hints at the provincial concerns of their target audience.

The celestial luxury resort that is Jannah is primarily based on the license to indulge in earthly pleasures…forever.In other words, the hereafter is predicated on an infatuation with the spoils of “dunya”–an irony lost on many Muslims who extol the former whilst decrying the latter.The vision appeals to our basest instincts; so it has purchase on the minds of supplicants.Per the Koran, the after-death life (“akhira”) exists to satisfy two primal cravings: hunger/thirst and carnal desire.These are two appetites that, according to the Koran, we will continue to have–but won’t actually need–in the hereafter.Heaven, then, is about satiating these yearnings, constantly, without end.To qualify for this spectacular prize, one need only follow orders.

There are some problems with this proposal.Let’s look at two of the most glaring.

First: The eternal urge to eat / drink.This is a peculiar thing for immortal beings to have.Will we become hungry in heaven?Denizens of Jannah will not need to eat to survive; so when–nay, HOW–would they become famished?After all, we enjoy eating most when we are in a state of hunger.Other than merely tantalizing our taste-buds, the satisfaction derived from eating is the temporary slaking of a nagging esurience…which must arise again and again…just as much of the satisfaction derived from drinking is the temporary quenching of thirst.If it’s delicious, then all-the-better.

So, we might wonder: In heaven, is hunger / thirst artificially-induced at various increments?Presumably, there is no defecation / urination in paradise; so all the food consumed doesn't actually go anywhere…or, for that matter, do anything.People just drink and eat because it's yummy.Digestion is not part of the picture…nor is nutrition.It's all just about the sensation of taste.

Other questions arise: Do we get to drink and eat whatever we want?I love Nacho Cheese-flavored Doritos.Does that mean I get to chow down on an endless supply of them, constantly, for eternity…without ever having to worry about my health?And do I get to make myself hungry whenever I wish?

Second: Libidinal drives.This is addressed via the provision of a coterie of angelic beings with optimized female anatomies.Thus at one's disposal are busty angelic courtesans with which to engage in on-demand coitus for all eternity.Jannah is not so much a place of serenity as it is a crucible of hedonism.The cosmic seraglio, then, is more like a cosmic bordello.

But "houri" are not HUMAN partners; they exist merely to serve men's carnal appetites.This is strange, as one of the nominal virtues of sex is the fact that one is sharing the experience with another human being. {8}

Visions of frolicking through a sunlit meadow as harps play.We are invited to fantasize about a place where daffodils grow as far as the eye can see, where rainbows form without rain, where trees are made of lollipops, and where waterfalls of pink lemonade flow into lagoons lined with gumdrops.(Plus lots of hot girls eager to perform fellatio on command.)It would seem that one can only live a life of picnics and blowjobs for so long before things became somewhat tedious.Nothing to wonder about; nothing to aspire to.Just endless gratification.No adventure to embark upon; no challenge to meet.Just eternal repose.Hence a life bereft of all that makes makes life worth living.

In any case, that the highest spiritual state-of-being is characterized by primal appetites (both hunger and horniness) seems, at best, cheap.That it doesn't even involve sex with another PERSON makes it even more petty…unless, that is, we assume sex to ONLY be about bringing the man to orgasm.(No word yet on what FEMALES get in heaven: hot angelic studs or magical vibrators.)In Jannah, sex is clearly not to create offspring; so it is purely for idle pleasure.In other words, it is not

about bonding with another human, but simply about “getting off”.Do the houri experience pleasure too?After all, a hallmark of great sex is the gratification derived from satisfying one’s partner. {8}

Generally speaking, we might ask: Is the ultimate state-of-being simply a matter of physically satisfying oneself?And doing so with such superficial delights?(In discussing what it’s like in heaven, the Koran says NOTHING about agape or arete…or experiencing the sublime…or achieving one-ness with the universe…or bonding with other human beings.)The concept of communing with the divine is never discussed.For determining who qualifies, the whole matter at hand is obeisance.Obeying commands (“hukm”) is the sole condition for gaining access to Jannah.

This inquiry can be broadened.One might wonder: Would a “life” in the Koranic hereafter really be worth it?For it would be an existence without the unexpected, without uncertainty, without striving.In Jannah, there are no surprises, no mysteries, and no new achievements.Just the same stuff in perpetuity.Prospects for adventure or for progress would be utterly pointless.Thus, the very substrate of our humanity would be stripped away–leaving only slothful men surrounded by a retinue of busty concubines and lots of succulent fruit.

Is this metaphorical?No–as the Koran makes quite clear: On Judgement Day, we [the saved] “will be returned to our former state even if by then we are decayed bones”. {22}Heaven involves a LITERAL (corporeal) resurrection (“mi’ad”) and a PHYSICAL (bodily) existence in a paradise wherein PHYSICAL (earthly) pleasures await.

When assessing Jannah, we find a place in which human existence is bereft of endeavor.It is a place where there is nothing to overcome, nothing to learn, nothing to explore.And, worst of all, there is nothing to shoot for.There is no hunger but plenty of food; there is not thirst but plenty of drink; there is no fatigue but plenty of couches on which to lounge; there is not oppressive heat but plenty of shade.

Without anything to which one might aspire, one need only spend one’s days fucking and eating, basking in the gratification that one has “made it” (whilst also basking in the idea that the majority of mankind is being tortured in the meantime). {6}

Not coincidentally, on offer are precisely the exotic emoluments for which many 7th century desert wanderers would have pined: shade, comfy furniture, plenty of meat and fruit to eat, lots of wine, fancy attire, bling, and hot chicks at one’s beacon call.

It’s like spending eternity in a cheesy hip-hop music video. (Some things never change.) “All this can be yours too…IF, that is, you play your cards right.” The emphasis on shade (e.g. 4:57) is especially telling, as the authors were obviously not thinking of what would have appealed to, say, Nordic Muslims (i.e. a sanctuary from the COLD–defined primarily by warmth, not refuge from oppressive heat).

Even if the Koran’s authors only intended all this as a captivating metaphor, it amounts to nothing more than shameless propaganda. The refrain is familiar: “Buy what we’re selling, and we’ll make all your wildest fantasies come true.”

But Jannah was hardly sold as just a metaphor. Islam–like most religions–metastasized by preying on the credulity of the (already extremely superstitious) target audience–many of them lost and desperately looking for something to hold onto. As usual, the “trick” was to engender just the right combination of false hope, false certainty, false pride, and–most importantly–paranoia.

What, exactly, does BEING IN heaven entail?Might this heavenly state involve some kind of communion with the divine? Hardly. Fucking concubines and lounging on couches while feasting on an endless supply of scrumptious fruit is not exactly what transcendence is about–though it does sound like a very fun weekend.

A contrast may serve to illustrate the point.What Buddhists call “nirvana” (what Hindus call “moksha” and Jain’s call “siddha-sila”) involves MOVING BEYOND earthly pleasures; NOT further immersing oneself in them.They are a matter of liberation, not submission.They are functions of empowerment, not of subordination.

What we are inclined to call “heaven”, then, is not a destination; it is a condition to seek in this–the only–life.What sort of condition might that be?In Eastern thought, it is one of liberation.Yet even in the Abrahamic tradition, we might think of it in the same way.Even in the Gospel of John we read: “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also.And wherever I go you will know, and you will known the way” (14:2-4).

That is, enlightened conceptions of salvation involve an emancipation from worldly cravings.Such a state is a matter of NOT taking gluttony to the extreme–as we find in the Koranic portrayal.Rather, it is a liberation from the very things of which the Koranic heaven is the quintessence.In other words, the Koranic heaven is a place of gluttony rather than a release from animal appetites. {8}

Jannah is essentially a luxury resort in the sky; which is simply to say that it is a physical place–replete with upholstered furniture and snazzy architecture of the sort medieval Arabian minds would have dreamt up.It is a venue for endless earthly indulgence (rather than a state of genuine transcendence).Gluttony as the telos of human existence: this is an integral part of the Koranic narrative; as it is a key selling point for the promulgation of the Faith.For in the Koran's instrumentalism-based morality, we are to be driven by the pursuit of PLEASURE–especially CARNAL pleasures.Telling, there is no level of heaven called "Dar al-Ilm" or "Dar al-Hikma".This makes sense, as the target audience was not seeking Enlightenment (what is dubbed "prajna" in the East, or "arete" by the Greeks).Bedouins were seeking to eat, drink, and get laid.Preferably in the shade.If one had been seeking to use oratory to lure Arabian men in the Dark Ages, the Koran's depiction of Jannah is roughly what one would have composed.

And so DURING life, worshipping–paying tribute to / submitting to–the Abrahamic deity is effectively a means to this end: worldly pleasures in an other-worldly realm.Islamic eschatology effectively renders probity a function of a man's libido. (Once they are fixated on wide-eyed, buxom "houri" ready to guzzle seaman upon request, it is rather quixotic to expect men to devote prodigious amounts of mental energy cultivating probity.)

In a nutshell, the depiction of heaven in Islam's holy book is all about securing self-satisfaction.Obeying the book's vaunted protagonist–in order to appease him–is done toward this ultimate goal.That is to say, glorifying the Abrahamic deity is all about self-interest.

Such comically supernal descriptions betray the puerile mentality behind the Koran's composition. A celestial luxury resort has all the sophistication of a teen's fantasy. It's based sheerly on gluttony; and has all the spiritual profundity of a cheap comic book. (It might be noted that at no point does the Koranic depiction of heaven involve what the Greeks called "arete" / "phronesis" or Buddhists dubbed "prajna".)

When we contrast the Koranic heaven with the conceptions of heaven found in the Eastern spiritual traditions (e.g. nirvana, moksha, and siddha-sila), we see that it is a LITERAL PLACE…not some heightened "state of being" defined by connected-ness with the divine.When, in Ancient China, heaven was equated with the divine ("Tai Di"), and thus with the source of morality, as "Tian", carnal pleasures were not

involved; nor was complimentary jewelry.Such ideas stand in stark juxtaposition to the orgy of gluttony that is Jannah (a physical destination that is effectively a celestial luxury resort).

Supplication is a sop to the cosmic overlord–swallowed hook, line, and sinker by anxious male supplicants convinced that a lifetime of groveling will pay off in the end.And so we are given visions of celestial bordello–a coterie of curvy concubines replete with a panoply of enticing amenities: a sumptuous buffet, rivers of milk and honey, nice attire, shaded pavilions, satin couches, AND one's very own golden bracelets. (!)

Therein lies the rub.The depiction for ANY people is simply designed to entice–based on the exigencies of the time and place.Be it a warm hearth (Valhalla) or a shaded pavilion (Jannah), we are enticed by a tantalizing vision that for which we've longed all our lives.This is a reminder that the touting of heaven is the ultimate scheme for controlling people en masse: keep them cowed and subservient DURING life by convincing them that it will all yield dividends AFTER life.

In the heaven depicted in the Koran, there is nothing more to look forward to but another day of relaxing…punctuated by bouts of gluttony…lounging on couches in shaded pavilions, banging angelic concubines, sipping milk and honey…even as one knows that–elsewhere–billions of well-meaning people are enduring unmitigated agony for all eternity.(Thanks, but no thanks.I think that would kill my appetite.)

So what might a more sophisticated conception of "heaven" involve?Intelligent notions of the ULTIMATE STATE-OF-BEING can be found around the world.It is usually thought to involve some kind of transcendence–bliss through liberation rather than through subjugation.Such a state can only be achieved through some kind of enlightenment–that is: emancipation from the anxieties endemic to a frivolous worldly existence.

Hindus and Buddhists referred to this exalted state as "nirvana" / "[vi]moksha" / "[vi]mukti": getting past the illusory "maya" of the material world; and subsequently a liberation from "samsara" / anxiety).The Japanese referred to this condition as "satori".The Greeks referred to such liberation as "ataraxia".Others simply call it "transcendence".

The Stoics–followed by Kant and Schopenhauer–held that the only unconditional good is a good WILL.This requires that one free oneself from the petty preoccupations of quotidian life.Schopenhauer dubbed this ultimate state-of-being the life of the “aesthete”–whereby one brings oneself into alignment with the cosmic Will (the Vedic “rta”).

This all seems to be much more worthwhile than the comic bordello depicted in the Koran (though, I’ll admit, a little sex doesn’t hurt).I’ll take “moksha” any day; god can keep his golden bracelets.



A COSMIC PENAL COLONY?

“**All the meanness, all the revenge, all the selfishness, all the cruelty, all the hatred, all the infamy of which the heart of man is capable, grew, blossomed, and bore fruit in this one word: Hell.”** —Robert Ingersoll (“The Great Infidels” lecture)

A place of punishment in the afterlife goes back as far as the Egyptian Book of the Dead.Since time immemorial, those in power have known the utility of having a foreboding cosmic bugbear to keep people in line.It boils down to control via fear.The ULTIMATE bugaboo is the hell depicted by John of Patmos; and later by the authors of the Koran.

The notion of a bleak place to which the unrighteous are consigned became known in Abrahamic lore pursuant to the featuring of **“Ge-Hinnom”** in **Abrahamic lore** [Valley of Hinnom; rendered “Gehanna” in Syriac].The moniker referred to a ditch on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Its etymology indicates that it was correlated with the Valley of the Son of Hinnom (typically rendered “Gei Ben Hinnom”): a dark, dreary place associated with death and decay.(Note that “Ge-hinnom” is not to be confused with “Sheol”, the Ancient Hebrew term referring to the land of the dead.)

The threat of hellfire made its first appearance in the New Testament.The Gospel writers invoked the threat of hell with the repeated used of the phrase “the wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8:12, 13:41-42/50, 22:14, and 25:30; as well as Luke 13:23-30).The use of hellfire as a scare-tactic is invoked numerous times (Matthew 7:19, 10:28, 18:8-9, and 25:41; Luke 3:9/17, 10:10-15, and 12:5; as well as John 15:6). Christians spoke of “Golgot[h]a”–a bleak location on the outskirts of Jerusalem that was associated with death (and was subsequently designated as the place where the Romans performed their crucifixions). This likely corresponded to the Valley of Hinnom (alt. rendered “Gehenna”), which made its way into Christian lore as a bleak place of punishment for the wicked. More lurid depictions were provided in the Book of Revelation–replete with hellfire (alternately rendered a bottomless pit and a lake of fire), lots of fire and brimstone, and the gnashing of teeth.

“Ge-Hinnom” was also the basis for the Classical Arabic “Jahannam” used in Islamic theology.In fact, the only thing that is truly original about the Koranic depiction of hell is the level of absurdity: women carrying firewood for the flames that will burn their husbands, trees bearing poisonous fruit, shackles and chains to prevent inmates from escaping, etc.In later centuries, Islamic writers even concocted an adjunct to the domain of hellfire: a special section that was FREEZING instead of unbearably hot, dubbed “Zamhareer” (a part that, for some reason, god did not see fit to mention in the Koran).

Descriptions of hell in both Christian and Islamic lore were intended to terrify the audience.Yet the ploy back-fires when it comes to most modern audiences.Those of us who have reached a level of maturity beyond that of an adolescent invariably find such cartoonish descriptions silly, not scary.We are not threatened by such puerile depictions, we are amused by them.

Those who defend all this silliness by insisting that it was meant to be taken figuratively are only deluding themselves.The treatment of hell and heaven by the authors of the Koran (and Hadith) was clearly NOT intended to be merely symbolic.It was excruciatingly literal–right down to every gratuitous specification.Extraneous details like the name of the captain of the guard and precise length of the chains do not facilitate the alleged metaphor; so such information is clearly not intended metaphorically.(For more on this point, see Appendix 3.)

In any case, distance from divinity needn't involve burning; nor does it require guards, boiling water, and poisonous fruit.If conveyed metaphorically, being separated from the divine would not resemble a torture chamber, as it does in the Koran.Nor would a metaphor for being disconnected from the divine incorporate crude depictions of medieval torture.The concept of alienation does not involve penal measures.

YET…virtually every culture in the world has some conception of hell (that is: a place of perdition to which unworthy souls are consigned after worldly death) going all the way back to the **Sumerian "Kur-nugia"**.Here are twenty more:

- **Akkadians / Assyrians** had **"Ershetu"** / "Irshitu" / "Ershet-la-Tari" (wherein was located Eresh-kigal's palace: "Ganzer" / "Ganzir")
- **Vedic** lore had the Vedic **"Narak[a]s"** (from the Sanskrit, "Niraya")
- **Jains** had the **"Nar[a]ka-loka"**
- Later **Hindus** and **Chinese Buddhists** had **"Yama-pur[a]"** (the abode of Yama)
- **Mahayana Buddhists** had **"Avici"** (the worst of the 16 hells)
- Theravada (esp. **Siamese**) Buddhists had **"Mahanorok"**
- **Persians** (Zoroastrians) had **"Grestako"** [House of the Lie]
- **Turkic** peoples had **"Tam-ag"** / "Tam-uk"
- **Mongols** had **"Kasyrgan"**
- Ancient **Greeks** had **"Tartaros"** [alt. "Tartarus"; deep place]
- **Celts** had **"Uffern"** / "Anaon"
- Ancient **Norse** had **"Hel-heim[r]"** / "Nifl-hel" / "Nifl-heim[r]" (simply rendered "Hel")
- Ancient **Slavic** peoples had **"Peklo"**
- **Ancient Chinese** had the lowest levels of **"Di-yu"**
- Ancient (**Shinto**) Japanese had **"Yomi"**
- **Japanese Buddhists** posited **"Ji-go-ku"** (ref. the "Ojo-yoshu")
- **Aztecs** had **"Mictlan"**

- **Mayans** had **“Xibalba”**; “Metnal”
- Guanche (**Berbers**) had **“Echeyde”**
- **Muslims** have **“Jahannam”**

The archetype is roughly the same in every case: A realm of torment for those who have been consigned to perdition.It has many versions–from the **Angolan “Kalunga”** to the Nicene Christian lake of fire (famously portrayed by John of Patmos).Even in Judaic lore, there were vague references to such places as “Topet(h)” [place of fire] and “Neshiyyah” [oblivion].

The lake-of-fire leitmotif actually began in ancient Egyptian mythology about the dire fate of the unworthy in **“Duat”**–as explicated in the Book of the Dead, the Book of Gates, the Book of Caverns, the Book of Am-Duat, and The Book of the Two Ways [of “Rosetau”] from the Coffin Texts.Thus the lake of fire described in the “Book of Revelation” was simply an adaptation of an old theme.It was then adopted by Roman Catholicism in its fire-and-brimstone approach to theology–a theme eventually taken up by Dante in his “Divine Comedy”…and then by the American Puritans.

In most instances, we are treated to premonitions of a luridly macabre punishment for people with a karmic deficit.In many versions, “inmates” are tortured over and over and over for all eternity–usually by burning in fire or being immersed in cauldrons of boiling fluid.In Judaic lore, there is the **“Duda-El”** [cauldron of god].With the Mongol version of hell **“Kasyrgan”**, the damned are thrown into a cauldron of boiling tar. {13}The idea of stewing in a cauldron of boiling fluid was first found in the Mahayana Buddhist version of perdition, **“Avici”**–a leitmotif duplicated in ancient Mongolian theology.

Judaic lore continued this macabre scheme in the Book of Enoch, which spoke of damned souls being cast into a fiery abyss (but not until the Day of Judgement).This was a (literal) physical ordeal, as the relevant passages speak of the condemned being BOUND.In Judaic lore, there was the so-called **“Be’er Shachat[h]”** [“pit of impurity / impiety”].The motif of a bottomless pit is echoed in the Koran: **“Hawiyah”**…which begs the question: Why does Jahannam need gates?

The Christian instantiation of hell was likely derived from the Greek **“Tartaros”** [deep place].This is unsurprising, as the New Testament was originally composed in Koine Greek.We even encounter this Greek lexeme for hell in the Second letter of

Peter (2:4).This was a clerical oversight that reveals the origin of the motif.(The same passage specified that those consigned to perdition will be put into “chains of darkness”.)Fire was added to this grim milieu so as to make it all the more terrifying.

Unsurprisingly, much of the Koranic–and the subsequent Islamic–conception of hell was probably cribbed from Zoroastrian theology about **“Grestako”**, a horrific cave of unending darkness.Grestako was a venue for the eternal torments inflicted upon the damned, including the eating of putrid stuff like bile and rotten fruit.And, yes, the Persian hell is GATED and has GUARDS–earthly features repeated in the Koranic depiction of Jahannam. {19}

Tellingly, the notion of nefarious apparitions, djinn, was also appropriated from Persian lore (“jaini”).The meme was first adapted by the Nabataeans, who posited the Syriac “ginnaye” (as good spirits), from which the Arabic term was derived.Meanwhile, Canaanites used the Semitic “J-N-N” to indicated something hidden–which explains why “jinn” was the term used for spirits in Aramaic.Pursuant to the Mohammedan movement, the superstition was incorporated into the revamped Abrahamic theology.(It is even used as the title for Surah 72.) The positing of nefarious spirits (demons) is commonplace across cultures–from the Ancient Greek “daimon” to the Vedic “sura”. In Persian lore, there were the “daeva”. In Turkic / Mongol lore, there were the “Çor” (generally known as the “Abasi”). In the Abrahamic tradition, this ideation dates back to the Judaic “shedim” / “se’irim”…later rendered “mazzikim” in Mishnaic lore.

The primary sentiment behind hell is vengeance.Rather than responding to moral / spiritual delinquency with lamentation, there is only punishment.This was hardly an idiom for the tragic consequences of impiety.It was retributive in nature.In light of this, one might ask oneself: If he existed, would the Creator of the Universe really be in the business of operating torture chambers?

In Nicene Christian and Islamic cosmogony, the Creator of the Universe decided to create a race of beings with the idea that he would torture those who failed to acknowledge his existence and devote their lives to paying him tribute.What makes this rather deranged is that–according to the Koran–everyone is PRE-SELECTED FROM BIRTH for whether or not they will be damned or saved.Such pre-destination means that one’s ultimate destination in the hereafter is a foregone conclusion.(For more on this, see Appendix 1.)

The punitive nature of the Koran's protagonist infuses the entire book.The terms for "punish[ment]" ("adhaba[n]" / "adhabu[n]" and "rij'za") occur roughly four-hundred times throughout the book.The key, it seems, was not only to condemn a large fraction of mankind, but to make the punitive measures as terrifying as possible. Throughout the book, there is a creepy preoccupation with forcing boiling water down people's throats (so that it will burn them from the inside)…even as flames burn off their skin from the outside…over and over and over again…forever (22:19).

Such lurid exposition is an indication that an infinitely beneficent super-being might NOT be the author of the Koran. The book is unapologetically inconsistent on this fundamental point. For its protagonist's peculiar relish of the macabre is at odds with that protagonist's alleged benevolent nature. Infinitely merciful? Brimming with compassion?Hardly.

Rather than a super-being characterized by beneficence, the Koran's protagonist is a temperamental, pathologically vindictive despot.In 6:30 and 6:49, god notifies us that he will torment–TORMENT–us for one reason: for not believing in this particular creed. In other words: People will be punished not for being iniquitous, but explicitly for the crime of not thinking that the Koran is what it says it is.

As portrayed in the Koran, the Abrahamic deity is not only NOT BOTHERED BY a cosmic torture chamber being populated with billions of sentient beings; he REVELS in it.Nay: He DEMANDS it. The Koran's protagonist is unabashed about the fact that he RELISHES the agony that these unfortunate souls will endure for the crime of displeasing him.

Suffice to say, a benevolent entity would not only be disinclined to sanction this deranged cosmic scheme.Quite the contrary, such a being would be constitutionally incapable of such malice.Moral beings tend not to include unrelenting sadism in their repertoire.(For further discussion of this matter, see Appendix 4.)

What is the primary purpose of the Koran, then? The book announces itself, above all, as a WARNING. In fact, god instructs his messenger ("Mu-H-M-D") to announce that he is NOTHING BUT a "warner" (as in 46:9).A warner of WHAT, exactly?The horrific punishment in store for anyone who defaults on the enumerated obligations.The portrayal of said punishment is quite revealing about the psychology of the Koran's authors.

The Koran actually assigns hell (“Jahannam”) four alternate monikers: Saqar, Sijjeen, Ladha, and Zaqqum.Make no mistake: The purpose of “Jahannam” is TORTURE. {12} That is, it exists as a venue to torment those who are on the “bad” list–each of whom is pre-selected (again: see Appendix 1.)That certain people–including the the author of the present essay–are PRE-ORDAINED for such torment entails that the Creator of the Universe is–quite literally–a psychopath. Indeed, once we take into account pre-destination, it is almost as if–upon seeing hell being populated–the Koran’s protagonist were GLOATING.

Is Hell, then, just an unfortunate place that non-Muslims wind up…to god’s great disappointment? No. On the contrary, he eagerly awaits the punishment of those he condemns. Passages like 7:179, 11:119, and 38:85 inform us that god actually WANTS to fill hell. That is, he wants to fill it up as much as possible. Such an agenda is not exactly indicative of profound mercy.

Is god disappointed at the horrific fate of the condemned…reluctantly letting each of them go? No. He CELEBRATES the agony of the damned–eagerly DRIVING them into the blaze (as we’re told in 4:115).In 2:126, god says that “I will force him to the punishment of the fire.” In 67:6, god explains that he “PREPARED” hell. That is: He explicitly designed hell as an “evil destination” for those who have displeased him. {9}

Thus: When it comes to large portions of mankind being damned for all eternity, there is no remorse involved. There is no reluctance. There is only vengeance. This cosmic penal colony is EXPRESSLY DESIGNED to inflict the maximum amount of physical pain in its inmates.In fact, the Koran’s protagonist is surprisingly open about the fact that he wants to HUMILIATE the condemned.That he is unapologetically vengeful is revealed by 69:30-32 when he says of the non-Muslim: “Seize him and shackle him, then drive him into Hellfire, then insert him into a chain that is seventy cubits long!” (Why hell requires long chains is anyone’s guess.) In 44:47-48, god commands: “Seize him and drag him into the midst of the Hellfire; then pour over his head from the torment of scalding water.”

On the other hand, 78:24-26 notifies us that the damned will be forced to drink COLD fluid. Does this mean the swallowing regimen alternates between hot and cold servings? How does this work?As if to make things even more confusing, the Hadith posit a counter-point to Jahannam’s hellfire: a horribly frigid pit called “Zamhareer”.

But wait; there's more. Those who are sentenced to eternal punishment, we are told, will have "shackles around their necks" and "be dragged into boiling water" and "filled with flames". Gadzooks!

As if this weren't clear enough, the Koran's protagonist announces that he "will put shackles on the neck of those who disbelieved" (34:33) and "they will be dragged ON THEIR FACES through the fire, and hear [god say], "Taste ye the touch of Hell!" (54:47-48). All this, of course, occurs while they are forced to "drink boiling water that will sever their intestines" (47:15).

Needless to say, DRAGGING people to hell is hardly a gesture of reluctantly letting them remain separated from you. But being DRAGGED is–indubitably–what happens to those condemned to perdition. {7}

And, don't forget: The wife of each man will be forced to carry the firewood to fuel the flames that will burn him…with a rope around her own neck (111:3-5). On top of all that, he will be forced to choke on food (73:13)…presumably in between the forced guzzling of scalding then freezing liquids. {5}

All this elaborate torture is deliberately conducted by the Abrahamic deity. CLEARLY, "Jahannam" does not simply mean "separation from the divine"; it explicitly constitutes a venue for inflicting maximal physical pain.Such lurid descriptions provide us with a comically overwrought picture–a picture of cartoonish morbidity. {12}It's enough to make even Edgar Allen Poe wince.

The Koran devotes such a substantial portion of its text to graphic descriptions of this penal colony, it is obviously trying to convey something by "Jahannam" that is vastly different from, say, Taoism's notion of straying from the Way (i.e. being out of sync with divinity") or "distance from god" (i.e. being disconnected from the divine; or some other spiritual isolation).Rather, PHYSICAL anguish is the theme; to be inflicted in the manner of a medieval torture chamber.Its primary feature: hellfire (variously dubbed "Nar", "Jaheem", "Ladthaa", "Sa'eer").

As we have seen, the Koran's protagonist is a king that is hell-bent on being incessantly glorified…and unquestioningly obeyed (with dire penalties in store for subversives). The key to salvation, then, is to stick to the so-called "straight path" designated by Koranic dictates.

And so it goes: The Koran's hell is a cosmic penal colony–overseen by "Shaytan" (Satan)–in Islamic theology: "Iblis", the disobedient angel, fallen from grace."Shaytan", it should be noted, cannot do anything without a go-ahead from the Abrahamic deity (58:10).

In 50:30, god even checks to see if the cosmic penal colony is full yet. (It's not? Well, then keep dragging them down!) 67:8-11 even tells us that the attendants have conversations with the inmates. {10}

Hell even as a WARDEN.He is referred to as "Maalik" (presumably, a variation on the Semitic tri-root, "M-L-K"), and oversees the punishment of the inmates.He reports to either "Iblis" (i.e. "Shaytan" himself) or to the Abrahamic deity (i.e. "Allah"), depending on one's theological interpretation of the (cosmic) delegation of powers.Evidently, even hell requires administration.(The notion of a magistrate in the underworld has a long history.In Sumerian theology, Eresh-kigal's attendant is "Namtar".In Egyptian theology, the warden is "Anubis".)

Note: The Old Semitic name for this warden was "Douma" (Aramaic), which was later rendered "Dumah" (Hebraic).In Judaic lore, the warden of hell is referred to as "Abaddon" (rendered "Apollyon" in Greek).

17:8 describes hell as a dungeon. (A dungeon for whom? For non-Muslims, of course.)In 8:50, we are notified that the damned are reprimanded by henchmen ("malaikah", a variant of the moniker used for the warden; alt. "zabaniyah")…who hit people in the face and on the back during their conveyance to Jahannam (per 47:27). Yes, that's right: In the event that you are condemned to hell, en route, you will be taunted, slapped, and spanked by a posse of angelic goons.That a bevy of angels is commissioned to mock the damned for being damned is rather callow.How many are charged with this task?Nineteen (as specified in 74:26-30).(Only NINETEEN?Each must have a tremendously heavy workload!)The Koran explains that these henchmen take their instructions from god (ref. 40:49, 66:6, and 74:31).

We read about the convicted being shackled and chained, then dragged into the hellfire. Then we read about how the henchmen tending to hell will yell at the inmates: "Taste the punishment of the burning!" (8:50 and 22:19-22) and "Taste the touch of hellfire!" (54:48).(Really?THAT'S what they'll say?)And when the inmates plead for reprieve, they will be told, "No!The hellfire will melt off your skin!" (70:15-16). {10}

This particular collection of passages can be described as either jaw-droppingly sadistic or laughably absurd. In either case, it is bizarrely sophomoric.And the cloying dialogue encountered in the Koran is something we might expect in an amateurish script for some tacky, made-for-TV movie.Many of us have witnessed this kind of bad writing when we watch shoddy sci-fi flicks or bad porn. In spite of their laughably poor quality, we often enjoy such low-caliber fare.Yet we are never inclined to actually take such juvenile spectacle seriously.Alas.

In assaying the litany of disturbingly lurid passages about hell in the Koran, it becomes plain to see that there is a method to the madness.Such verses are clearly designed to instill fear (nay, terror) in the obsequious (and credulous) reader.It soon becomes apparent that the Koran's protagonist has some inexplicable predilection to RETALIATE against a large portion of mankind–as if damnation was his mode of retribution for having been slighted by creatures that himself made.This is a strange relationship for the Creator of the Universe to have with primates who dwell on the third planet from Sol on the outer reaches of the Milky Way galaxy–a species HE brought into existence.Would a super-being really be non-plussed by the non-cooperation of his own creation?This self-inflicted vexation would seem to be a daffy game to play with himself.One wonders if he was listless…or just lonely.

So the story goes: Homo sapiens are rewarded and punished for being precisely the way god made them.The justification for this charade employs circular reasoning with a radius of zero.But no matter: We humans are suckers for lofty notions of a longed-for destiny.That our fate is written in the stars holds myopic appeal to those who don't want to bother with the burdens of autonomy.After all, going to the trouble of thinking for oneself requires cognitive exertion…which often seems more of a hassle than it's worth.Mental discipline is not fun.It's easier to simply follow orders (or, as the case may be, an instruction manual), and get a prize in the end.

Divine command theory is appealing because it's straight-forward.Yet, in the final analysis, piety is no proxy for probity.And morality in "dunya" does not require us to posit a "akhira".Good will needn't be a means to an end.Placating an overlord is not an admirable motive; it's just a RATIONAL motive for those who are convinced there is an overlord in need of placating.

In obeying a master, we are given specious reasons to do "good" when there are universal moral principles available to us.Resorting to supplication enables us to abide hubris with the pretense of humility; obeisance with the pretense of valiance.Servility is thereby misconstrued as integrity.

Getting into heaven (and avoiding hell) is ultimately about asking: “What’s in it for ME?”By adopting this modus operandi, self-interest can masquerade as service.And–depending on the sacred doctrine being honored–turpitude can operate under the auspices of rectitude.We can be craven while fashioning ourselves as courageous.

The prospect of gaining admission to a celestial luxury resort (vs. being condemned to a preternatural dungeon) can be riveting.This false choice reminds us that every human can’t help but operate within some sort of incentive structure.

Therefore, the power to tweak the incentive structure within which people operate translates to a profound ability to control people.Such machinations are largely a matter of manipulating the interests / perceptions of one’s audience. Persuade enough people that there is a glorious master to obey, throw in some eye-catching carrots and sticks, and PRESTO: One has a totalitarian regime in the making.

When it comes to our proclivity to invent fantastical after-death destinations, our imaginations often run amok. For it is a way for us to make sense of THIS world–a consolation for the injustices with which we often contend. The notion that everyone will get what’s coming to them, that there will be a “settling of accounts”, is tremendously gratifying. The problem is we often get carried away with these flights of fancy. (Ernst Becker addressed our penchant for immortality in his classic, “The Denial Of Death”.) For every case, though, we find that it takes a great deal of mental discipline to disabuse ourselves of the captivating illusions on which we’ve come to depend.

In the end, we might ask: What would a sophisticated conception of hell actually look like?Sartre had it backwards.Hell is NO other people.It is isolation, not camaraderie, that makes life hellish.Indeed, the worst possible condition for any human-being is complete disconnection from fellow human-beings.

Meanwhile, “heaven” is not a place; it’s something one has with another person.It is something that one has in THIS–the only–life.That requires not faith in a deity, but faith in humanity.

One might even say that heaven is the epitome of human connection.No golden bracelets required.



FOOTNOTES & APPENDICES:

{1“Shamayim” was based on the Assyrian term for sky (“samu”) plus the Old Semitic term for “waters” (“mayim”): hence “waters of the sky”.(Similarly, the Hebrew term for sun, “shemesh”, derives from “samu” and the Assyrian term for fire, “ish”: hence “fire of the sky”.)Meanwhile, the etymology of the Anglo-Saxon term “heaven” has its origins in lexemes for “sky”: Celtic (hevin), Norse (himinn / hifinn), and Germanic (himil / heban).This is roughly the equivalent of “An” in Sumerian; “Tian” in Classical Chinese; or “Gok” in Old Turkic.}

{2For the descriptions of “Jannah” in the Koran, see 2:25, 3:136, 4:57, 9:72, 13:23-24, 15:45-47, 18:31, 22:23, 25:10, 29:58, 35:33, 36:55-58, 37:41-49, 38:50-52, 39:20, 43:71-73, 44:51-55, 47:15, 52:17-24, 55:45-77, 56:11-38, 69:21-24, 76:5/12-21, 77:41-44, 78:31-34, 83:22-28/34-35, and 88:10-16.The picture that is painted is a strikingly tawdry one–far more bawdry than bucolic. What with the bevy of voluptuous vixens, the venue is more of a bordello than a seraglio.}

{3The notion of SEVEN heavens–and even seven Earths–goes back thousands of years.Sumerian inscriptions dating back to the late second millennium B.C. read: “An imin bi; Ki imin bi” [the heavens are seven, the earths are seven].“An” is Earth; “Ki” is the heavens, “bi” is seven.The Vedic version of Seven Heavens was: Deva-loka, Yama-loka, Svarga-loka, Brahma-loka, Vaikunth[a]-loka, Shiva-loka, and Para-loka

(not to be confused with the seven levels of the world: Bhu-loka, Bhuvar-loka, Indra-loka, Mahar-loka, Jana-loka, Tapar-loka, and Satya-loka).The Islamic claim that heaven has seven levels (ref. 71:15 in the Koran) derives from Judaic cosmology: Vilon (alt. “arafel”), Raki’a, Shehaqim, Zebul, Ma’on, Machon, and Araboth (in which can be found god’s throne).This view was explicated in medieval Judaica like the Merkabah and Heic[h]alot; and was also referenced in the third Book of Enoch.Even Dante adapted the leitmotif in his “Paradiso”. One might wonder: Why the elaborate design of heaven? God only knows. Either way, it serves as an after-death destination for the chosen: resembling a celestial luxury resort–replete with concubines and sumptuous buffet.}

{4A coterie of nubile virgins with large, beautiful eyes and bodacious bosoms? Gosh-golly.Apparently, god is a fan of anime. Shall we suppose that the “houri” have pig-tails, pleated mini-skirts, and thigh-highs too?(God willing!)It was no feat of genius to peddle enticing blandishments before an audience of hungry, horny Bedouin men.The gimmick was merely a matter of engineering incentives.Once a man is promised blow-jobs on-demand…for all eternity (but ONLY IF he follows certain instructions), he will be less inclined to consider alternative options.Throw in a sumptuous, all-you-can-eat buffet in shaded pavilions…every day, in perpetuity… and one will be sure to command a medieval desert-dweller’s attention.}

{5In Islamic cosmogony, one of the rivers in heaven even has a name: “al-Kawthar” (108:1).Meanwhile, “Salsabil” came to be the name for its main river.Due to the presence of the “Lote Tree”, abundance is guaranteed.The endless supply of fruit will ensure there will be no hunger.Meanwhile, 37:62-68, 44:43-46, and 56:52 tell us that there is also a special tree IN HELL (the “Tree of Zaqqum”), from which the inmates will be forced to eat putrid fruit.(Yikes!)The idea of being forced to eat poisonous produce in hell came from the Zoroastrian hell.}

{6Such gloating is nothing new.Some Christians insist that the screams of the damned can be heard from purgatory–and that observing their anguish from Paradise will be one of the most gratifying perks of the heavenly life-after-death: “akhira”.Shall we suppose that schadenfreude is an integral part of heavenly bliss? Alas, gloating is a common theme in eschatology that fixates on the exalted status of “the chosen” vis a vis everyone else.}

{7See 14:49-50, 34:33, 40:70-72, 44:47-50, 69:30-32, 73:12-13, 76:4, and 96:13-16.There is no remorse.In fact, the Koran's protagonist seems to derive a perverse satisfaction from the fact that billions of humans will be dragged, kicking and screaming, into hellfire to burn for all eternity…for failing to toe the line.}

{8Shall fornication to one's heart's content be our highest aspiration?According to the authors of the Koran: YES.(Bear in mind: The Koran is addressed exclusively to men.)The telos of life is not love or probity or wisdom; it's getting pussy.As for myself, I have no desire to fuck an angel.So far as love-making goes, I prefer fellow homo sapiens, thank you very much (with all the idiosyncrasies, wonder, and quirks germane thereto).Cumming is tons of fun; but emotional bonding is also key.Without a shared humanity, it would be a rather empty experience.Moreover, it would seem that orgasms would lose their punch if they were achieved on-demand every day, day in and day out, for trillions of years…with angelic concubines that offered limited human connection.}

{9And he will actively FORCE them there–as is made clear in passages like 31:24, 52:13, and 72:17.In a side note: It might also be surmised that, in "prepping" hell, god was required to provide an atmosphere with just the right amount of oxygen, somehow sustained indefinitely…considering the perpetually burning people would need to be BREATHING so as to remain conscious; and the fact that fire also uses up oxygen.A perpetual infusion of oxygen, presumably without vegetation present, entails some kind of magical ventilation system.}

{10See 2:61, 2:90, 4:102, 4:151, 6:66, 6:124, 22:57, 31:6, 33:57, 34:5, 34:14, 37:18, 37:98, 39:26, 40:49, 41:16-17, 45:9, 46:20, 58:5, 58:16, 58:20, 88:2, and 89:16.Needless to say, the material found in the Koran would make for a VERY bad movie. Even "Iblis" says some strange things.(Note 14:22. Really? THAT'S what Satan said? Verbatim? In Arabic?) 37:24-32 even goes so far as to give us a future dialogue with the damned (putting words into their mouths during an alleged interrogation after they've been condemned) in which god TAUNTS those who are consigned to perdition.One can't help but wonder, though: In what language do these attendants speak?Not in Arabic; as the vast majority of inmates wouldn't be able to understand these sophomoric taunts (unless, that is, one of the perks of damnation is that–magically–one is suddenly made fluent in Arabic).So these attendants have to be omni-lingual.They must communicate with each inmate in his native tongue.How does one say "hellfire" in Inuit?}

{11The Nordic version of hell was a dark realm of ice.The ancient Norse did posit a realm of fire (“Muspell-heim[r]”), associated with destruction.“Muspell-heim[r]” (the realm of fire) was not for the damned, though; it served as home of the nefarious jötunn, “Surtr”.Meanwhile, “Nifl-heim[r]” was a neutral realm of the dead. Also note: In ancient Norse cosmology, Myrk[r]-heim[r] (alt. “Nidavellir”) was seen as the house (realm) of darkness, to which the dishonorable were consigned (ref. the “Voluspa”).Darkness is scary, as it represents unknown dangers, coldness, ignorance, and even shame; so it is the natural condition to associate with bad things.}

{12Especially sadistic are verses like 4:55-56, 10:4, 13:5, 14:16-17, 14:49-50, 18:29, 22:19-22, 23:104, 25:11-14, 34:33, 36:63-65, 37:63-68, 38:55-58, 40:71-72, 44:43-48, 47:15, 54:47-48, 56:41-44, 56:51-56, 56:93-94, 73:12-13, 74:27-30, 76:4, 78:24-26, 88:2-7, and 101:9. Each of these is a graphic description of the horrific repercussions (i.e. endless torture) in store for those who fail to curry favor with the cosmic overlord–a pathologically vindictive super-being with the temperament of a petulant child.}

{13The gold medal for the most ridiculous–and deranged–hell probably goes to the Siamese version of “Naraka”, dubbed “Maha-norok”.In this version of perdition, a giant, fiery phallus impales those deemed guilty of sexual transgressions.And unfaithful wives have giant swords shoved into their vaginas for all eternity.The other Narakas are just as macabre.}

{14At no point in the entire book is the term “empathy” used.This is rather perplexing, as empathy is the ultimate basis for both morality and human bonding.}

{15See 2:58, 4:154, 7:40/161, 13:23, 15:14/44, 16:29, 23:77, 39:71-73, 40:76, 54:11, and 78:19.}

{16Passages like 41:31, 42:22, 43:72-73, and 44:51-57 reiterate that in heaven each one of us can have “all that we desire”. Satiating primal cravings as the sine qua non of human existence?Is that what the ultimate state of being is really all about?}

{17See 2:29, 17:44, 23:17, 23:86, 65:12, 67:3, 71:15, and 78:12. For other versions of seven heavens, see footnote 3 above.}

{18See 9:72, 13:23, 16:31, 18:31, 19:61, 20:76, 35:33, 38:50, 40:8, and 61:12.}

{19The guards of the gates are called “Zabaniyah”.One wonders whether these are more like Praetorian Guards, Grenadier Guards, or the Swiss Guards.See 41:12, 72:8, and 96:17-18 for heaven’s gates; 15:43-44, 39:70-72, 40:49, 66:6, and 74:31 for hell’s gates.The name for the gates of “Sheol” in Judaic lore were “Sha’are-i Mavet[h]”, meaning gates of death.}

{20On this point, see especially 4:57, 37:48-49, 44:51-54, 52:20, 55:54-56, 55:70-76, 56:22-24, 56:35-38, and 78:33.}

{21See 5:65, 9:21, 10:9, 22:56, 31:8, 37:43, 52:17, 56:12, 56:89, 68:34, 70:35/38, 74:40.}

{22See 27:67, 36:78-79, 54:7, 75:3-4, and 79:10-11.}

{23See 56:8/27/38/90-91, 69:19, 74:39-40, and 90:18.}

{24Tellingly, the people on the respective rosters are referred to as the “winners” (e.g. 28:67) and the “losers” (e.g. 23:34 and 39:15).This is a taxonomy that reveals much about the authors’ mindset.Meanwhile, the people THEMSELVES are also given their own personal verdict.The saved receive it in their right hands (84:7-9) while the damned receive it behind their backs (84:10-12).}

{25In Asgard, there are two great structures. “Valhalla” is reserved for the bravest warriors; while “Gim-lé” / “Gim-li” is where the worthy will go after the apocalypse (“Ragnarök”).In some versions, there are three levels of heaven: Asgard, Andlang[r], and Vidblainn.}

APPENDIX 1:

Notions of pre-destination go back to the earliest civilizations.

The earliest Canaanites worshipped the goddess of fate, “Ashima”–who was herself based on the Assyrian concept of fate, “shimti”.(Ashima’s Nabatean counterpart was “Manat”, a goddess that would appear in Arabian theology.)Certain Hindu sects posited “kismet”, most notably, the practitioners of “Ajivika” (which started in the 5th century B.C.)There was also the notion of “niyati-vada”. In Persia, there emerged sects that posited fatalism–as with “Zurvanism”, a divergent sect of Zoroastrianism. So the ideation was nothing new when it cropped up in Abrahamic cosmogony.

(Meanwhile: The ancient Anglo-Saxons and Celts posited “wyrd”. And the ancient Turks adopted the Vedic notion of “kismet”–though with a more romantic connotation.)

The hardening of someone’s heart (to ensure they perpetrate evil) was lifted from the Torah.Exodus is suffused with this peculiar trope (4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:1/20/27, and 11:10).Why did the godhead do this?So that he would then have an excuse to punish the perpetrator (4:21-23).Indeed, throughout the Hebrew Bible, the Abrahamic deity was known to deliberately lead people astray–as with Second Kings 19:7 and Second Chronicles 18:20-22.

Thus one’s fate is “sealed” from the day of one’s birth.A way out of this predicament is the Judaic approach: Revising one’s fate on a yearly basis.Such annual updates allow for the possibility that one can have a say in one’s own destiny (by deliberately altering one’s behavior).As the story goes, once per year (Yom Teruah; a.k.a. “Rosh Hashanah”), the Abrahamic deity inscribes each person’s fate in a celestial register (the Book of Life); but only for the ensuing year.He then waits ten days–during which people are enjoined to engage in repentance (“viddui”).Consequently, wrongs can be ameliorated via contrition.Then, on the day of atonement (Yom Kippur), the Abrahamic deity “seals” the verdict for the coming year (which might be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on how one fared in the register).One’s fate is thereby set in stone…but only for the next year. So one’s fate is time-bound and provisional.

The notion of “fate until the next year” is a rather peculiar one, as fate is not supposed to have a statute of limitations; nor is it supposed to come in yearly installments. One might think of this as temporary eternality–an oxymoron that offers solace.Of course, destiny isn’t supposed to be iterative.

But no matter.At least this (extremely accommodating) arrangement gives one the chance to alter one’s destiny…which effectively means that there REALLY IS NO destiny.The problem, of course, is that if one can–at any point in one’s life–erase one’s sins by repentance (a tenet known as “antinomianism”), even the most iniquitous are let off the hook. Ergo salvation via Faith, not works. Such a theme (“sola fide”) is prevalent in Nicene Christianity (though eventually jettisoned by Calvinists and Jansenists).

When, in his letter to the Romans, Saul of Tarsus averred that salvation depends not on human will or effort, but rather on god (9:18), what was he getting at, exactly?He reiterated the point in his letter to the Ephesians (2:8-9).Yet he contradicted himself on the matter of “sola fide” in his letter to the Galatians (5:6) as well as his first letter to the Corinthians (13:2); so the matter seems to have been a point of confusion.Note that in his letter, James makes the claim that salvation is through DEEDS (2:17-34).Of course, benevolent ACTS are rather intractable insofar as one’s heart has been “hardened” by forces beyond one’s control.So we come back to god’s dictation of any given person’s moral intuitions.

In the end, one’s fate is sealed by what is in one’s heart…a state that is, as it turns out, determined by GOD rather than by personal initiative.Passages in the Koran about god hardening the hearts of certain people are likely derived from the same trope as did Saul’s assertion that god “has mercy on whomever he chooses, and hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.” {A}In the next verse, the rhetorical question is posed: Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, “Why have you made me like this?” ?This passage is suffused with intimations of pre-emptive divine ordinance. {B}

In the Koran, Biblical stories are retroactively modified to (retroactively) reflect pre-destination.For example, instead of Lot’s wife turning around OF HER OWN VOLITION to see the destruction of Sodom (and being turned to salt for her impudence), the Koran tells us that god INTENDED for her to look back (11:81).

The Koran propounds pre-destination (“Qad[a]r”).Thirty passages tell us that there are certain people god does not want to guide / help: 3:86, 4:118-119/143, 5:67, 6:25/122-123, 9:37/80/109, 13:27/33, 14:4, 15:12, 16:107, 17:46, 18:57, 23:44, 27:4, 32:13, 36:7-10, 37:22-23, 38:82-83, 39:23, 40:33, 42:46, 45:23, 46:10, 61:7, 68:44, and 91:7-10. Who might they be? Well, those who are pre-ordained to be non-Muslims… and are consequently destined for hellfire.In other words: Everyone who will end up in Jahannam has been pre-selected for damnation.

It gets worse.In twenty other passages, we are notified that non-believers are doomed to be non-believers from the beginning, regardless of what one might tell them…even as others are “chosen” for Faith: 2:6, 3:74, 6:39/125, 7:37/155, 11:33-34, 16:9/36-37, 24:46, 28:56, 30:56, 37:40/55-57/74/98/128, 48:11/15, and 68:50.In other words: The game is rigged from the get-go.(And for any to whom god does not give light, there is no light–as 24:40 states.)

Thus god pre-selects whom he will guide–as a dozen passages inform us–4:49, 6:144, 10:11/25/99-100, 14:21, 16:93, 17:13, 18:17, 35:8, 74:31, and 81:28-29. Such people are even given immunity from going astray–as specified in 39:37.15:39-42 and 34:21 even indicate that Muslims are immune to Satan's diabolical machinations…and so are protected from being misled. Thus FIFTEEN MORE passages tell us that the game is rigged.

In 35:32, the Koran's protagonist declares that–historically speaking–he caused ONLY CERTAIN PEOPLE to inherit the scriptures.(Also ref. 42:14.)This was an odd game to play…for THOUSANDS OF YEARS.Alas.The Koran's protagonist openly describes himself as a deceiver.To what end?It seems he revels in his power to AFFLICT.(6:17 even dubs him THE AFFLICTER.)

And as for the mis-guided?God has deliberately mis-guided them!2:26, 4:88, 6:137, 7:100-101/178, 11:33-34, 14:27, 17:97, 30:29, 35:8, 40:74, and 47:1 tell us that god intentionally misleads (i.e. sends astray); and thus dooms to perdition. Who does he send astray?Non-Muslims, of course.Why are they non-Muslims?Because he sent them astray.What shall happen to them as a result?They shall be punished.Hence the devious protagonist of the Koran does not guide non-Muslims. But wait.Aren't they non-Muslims BECAUSE they're not guided?

This is a catch-22.In effect, Hell is a gigantic torture chamber (equipped with shackles, chains, poisonous fruit, and lots of boiling water) to which all non-Muslims are sentenced FOR BEING non-Muslims. After they've arrived in hell, they will be INTERROGATED…just to ensure they understand WHY they are there. (21:39-40 notifies us that they will NOT understand why they are there. So much for a convict having his indictment explained to him.)

Tellingly, the damned are referred to as "the rejected" (by god) in 17:18 and the "abandoned" (by god) in 17:39. This is in stark contradistinction to Christian theology, in which god is said to never reject / abandon or "give up on" his children; he is always ready to forgive.Such forbearance in inimical in the Koran.

Still don't believe the Koran's protagonist is vindictive? In 6:137, he proudly announces that he deliberately made the slaughter of children "pleasing" to certain groups of people. Why? In order to make a point. 6:140 even makes clear that it's not killing children per se that's bad; it's doing so foolishly and without knowledge of the Final Revelation that's the problem.

This begs the question: Insofar as they are wrong-doers, is it not BECAUSE they are not guided? We are thus faced a conundrum. Wouldn't a beneficent deity want to (try to) HELP such (misguided) people, GUIDING them so that they might become better? Nope. He only guides those who have been pre-selected to be Muslims (27:81, 49:7, and 49:17). What a swell guy.

{AHarden our hearts, you say?This is certainly different from the deity found in the Judaic "Nevi'im" [scripture of the Later Prophets]–that is: a deity that seeks to uplift us, and help those who are errant.In the Book of Ezekiel, it is stated: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a real heart" (36:26).Behold a godhead that seeks to guide.This is a super-being that stands is stark contrast to the Koran's ornery protagonist: proudly known as the deceiver.}

{BIt is not for nothing that Calvinists–who believe in predestination–routinely cite this passage as justification for the supposition that god has divvied mankind up AB OVO.Of course, such thinking is concerning for several reasons.Most disturbingly, it rebukes supplicants for engaging in inquiry.Saul of Tarsus asks: "Would the pottery ask the potter why it was made in the way it was?" …as if this half-baked analogy made the point less objectionable.Thus humanity is abjured to act with no more agency than would a piece of clay.}

APPENDIX 2: The Logistics Of Paradise

Consider the decree: "You are encouraged to do in the most perfect place imaginable (in an after-death life) some things that you are prohibited from doing (during your life) on Earth."How does this make sense?The only explanation could lie in a theology based on deferred gratification.

A thorough discussion of the (highly problematic) logistics of the (cartoonish) Koranic heaven would take volumes.The enjoyment of slaking hunger or quenching thirst or satisfying libidinal impulses or finding reprieve from a sweltering sun under pavilions or resting one's legs by sitting on thrones…such things make NO SENSE in a place that such discomforts would never afflict its blessed denizens.Ergo the grapes and the wine / milk and the houri and the shaded grottos and comfy couches are provided in order to alleviate non-existent physical impositions (i.e. the yearning to remedy recurrent bouts of neural, carnal, muscular, and gastric privation).

Generally speaking: Any gratification derived from satiation can only be secured by ending some sort of antecedent deficiency.It is for this reason that an un-ending orgasm is tantamount to no orgasm at all.Thus Paradise as described in the Koran would involve no gratification whatsoever.Perpetually euphoria, it turns out, is the epitome of mundanity.

Suffice to say, after thinking it through for a minute, even a child can recognize that (Koranic) heaven would be the most boring place imaginable.In effect, it would be a kind of hell.No aspiration, no anticipation; just the same thing…forever.Intolerable listlessness would surely set in after a few weeks.After a few centuries, everyone would surely be insane.But, hey, at least one would get to see grandma again. (FOREVER.)

In Jannah, there is nothing to look forward to; nothing to shoot for; nothing to accomplish.Harps or no harps, the “afterlife” would be an utterly pointless existence.This is especially the case for women, as the litany of inducements is designed explicitly for men.What, pray tell, do WOMEN get (for slaking their libidinal impulses) in heaven?An entourage of hot studs?Endless cunnilingus?Hardly.The Koran is silent on the matter.For it’s all about enticing the target audience: males who are presumably straight.(The large breasts are not there for extra lactation capacity.)

But isn’t much of the sublimity of love-making the intimate human bond (i.e. love) anyway?Evidently not.Indeed, the coitus in Jannah is all about the fucking; there is nothing about love stipulated.(Large breasts?Indubitably.Forging a deep connection? Not so much.)This appeals to most mens’ deep-seated desire to be a virile stallion with a coterie of beautiful muses at his beacon call.In Jannah, EVERY man gets to be Lothario.

Simply reading the relevant passages in the Koran makes it quite plain that the authors–in their glaring lack of sophistication–were simply appealing to men’s basest impulses when offering their descriptions of Paradise.

For a Muslim to reject that (sophomoric) vision of the hereafter is IPSO FACTO to reject the portrayal of Jannah in the Koran.While the exact number of “houris” is not specified in Islam’s holy book (72 is from the Hadith), had they simply read the book, they would not be bewildered by how Salafis come to believe what they believe.

Amongst Islamic apologists, the disconnect between something iniquitous, X (say, slavery or theocracy or corporeal punishment for imaginary crimes) and the contents of the Koran (which clearly endorses X) is astounding.Hence the ubiquity of PIA unabashedly indicting X as reprehensible in one breath, then blithely apologizing for the magnificence of Islam's holy book in the very next breath.

In any case, enduring a "life" (if we could even call it that) of chronic bliss would be quite difficult–even with comfy couches and pavilions and plenty of wine with a bevy of hot chicks–knowing that billions of misguided humans were incurring unimaginable pain–RELENTLESSLY.No decent person derives gratification from such extreme retribution; no matter how "bad" the condemned may have (allegedly) been during life.Abiding the existence of hell whilst IN HEAVEN would be unconscionable for anybody with a conscience (assuming one's conscience remained fully intact when transported to the blissful hereafter).

Regarding the present discussion, the question might be posed: If sex is permitted during life (as it obviously is, per the Koran's discussion of the topic), then why in heaven's name WOULDN'T it be permitted in an after-death life ("akhira"), which–after all–is located in a Garden of Pleasure?Apparently, our craving for scrumptious fruit remains active.So why not our libidos too?

The problem about the "no commissioning of sin" comment in 52:23 is that it is makes no sense when pertaining to a place in which moral responsibility no longer attains.(Are we still obligated to CONTINUE TO follow orders in Paradise?Is there still a pressing need to routinely worship god and to constantly sing his praises?Is "iman" necessary?Does the Sunnah still apply?)Is there sharia in heaven?Does the Sunnah still attain?How?Why?It would seem not, since we've already arrived at the destination of the PATH we're supposed to follow.(We've reached the oasis; path no longer required.)

If we grant that there are no more moral responsibilities in Jannah, then another problem arises.We humans are–by our very nature–moral agents.Therefore, to deprive us of moral culpability is to deprive us of (part of) our humanity.(Much of what it means to be fully human is to devote ourselves to trying to do something GOOD, however that may be defined.)Consequently, we are forced to be less-than-human during our exalted existence in "akhira" (the hereafter).When no more self-discipline is warranted, then no act can be moral.

But, then again, OF COURSE there can be no sinful behavior in heaven.It's a perfect place; it is the epitome of purity; and–after all–we're so close to god.The venue may feature unbridled gluttony; but it is IMMACULATE gluttony.So the proper interpretation of 52:23 is quite simply: There is no sin in heaven.Lots of fucking; but no sin.

APPENDIX 3: The Limits of Metaphor

Upon reading the Koran for the first time, most people (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) are taken aback by how puerile its depictions are of the best and worst possible outcomes for sentient beings.Many Islamic apologists protest that "this is not REALLY how most Muslims think of heaven and hell." For them, heaven is being (eternally) in communion with the divine (i.e. God) …while hell is being (eternally) disconnected from the divine (i.e. God). The only response to this is: "Splendid. So you are completely disregarding what is actually written in the Koran."

"No," they typically retort, "We're just not taking it so literally."

But this is an unacceptable plea. For it rests on the highly dubious assumption that the authors of the Koran intended for all that graphic description to be taken metaphorically. Consequently, the question arises: Did the authors REALLY devote so much ink to such detailed descriptions of both heaven and hell merely for didactic reasons? Is this REALLY meant to be taken as an elaborate metaphor? At the risk of countenancing a cosmic scheme that is utterly insane, Islamic apologists are forced to answer: "Well, uh, yes" …and then hope nobody takes the time to read what the Koran actually says.

Thus: All the "forced to swallow boiling water" stuff was just to make a point…but they didn't REALLY mean it. And the declaration that god casts terror into the hearts of non-Muslims (59:2) REALLY means that god wants to welcome everyone into his arms (and is presumably only saddened by those who have not yet come to see the light).It's all FIGURATIVE, you see.

So is the Koranic hell just a metaphor? That is to ask: Should the graphic descriptions be read allegorically? This seems unlikely, given the lack of didactic value to the lurid details provided.

Is hellfire literal?Surah 111 of the Koran tells us that the derided Abu Lahab will "soon" be burning in the blazes of "Jahannam"; and that his wife will accompany him.How so?She will be following him into hell carrying the requisite firewood…with

a rope [“masad”] tied around her neck.(So no need to carry your own sticks; your wife–in tow–will do it for you.)Such a petty slight is rather peculiar for a book that is supposed to be eternal.

Here, the use of “soon” could mean one of two things.Either Abu Lahab was about to die soon (and immediately go to hell) or Judgement Day was immanent (at which point he would promptly be sent to hell…along with all the other damned from history).In either case, we are expected to believe that this personal vendetta had existed since the creation of the universe; and this gripe had been inscribed on celestial tablets since the beginning of time.

Think about it: As the galaxies formed across the lightyears, the cosmic impresario decided to inscribe a celestial table (the most important text ever composed) in which he felt the need to broach the topic of a insolent Bedouin from the 7th century A.D.In other words: God was thinking about Abu Lahab BILLIONS of years ago…as well has his wife with a rope around her neck.

Thus everyone on the planet needed to know about this for all eternity.

Needless to say, if the graphic descriptions of hell were intended as metaphor, the authors of the Koran would not have found the need to specify the precise length of the chains used to fetter the damned. (!)

In fashioning a decent metaphor, SALIENT features are articulated in order to convey key points. After all, the logic of symbolism is quite different from that of literal description. The former depends on analogical thinking; the later does not. Gratuitous details can only serve to compromise the integrity of a metaphor (even if an elaborate allegory).(This is as opposed to the other vehicle for symbolism, myth–in which painting a detailed picture abets the narrative.Unlike narratives, metaphors aren’t supposed to be a FULLY IMMERSIVE experience.With regard to the portrayal of hell, the authors of the Koran are plainly going for full immersion.)

Meanwhile, why all the superficial details about heaven? If this was a metaphor, then why the need to describe all the amenities (essentially, just elaborate creature comforts), right down to the color and specific material of the garments and anatomical features of the angelic concubines? To wit: What is the POINT of this metaphor?

Let’s perform a brief thought experiment. If the book’s (comically obsessive) detailed depiction of hell were truly intended as mere metaphor, then the authors could have conceivably said to themselves something like the following:

“Hmm. Maybe **shackles and chains** were not the best image for conveying what we’re trying to ‘get at’ here. Perhaps we could have gone with ‘yokes’ instead…or with ‘dungeon’ or some kind of stiflingly hot immurement (or even a horribly COLD one). In order to make our point, we could have used, say, impalement via large spikes instead of scalding by boiling water. For that would be terrifying as well, would it not?After all, what we’re attempting to do is convey a general idea of grave consequences should someone reject our deity.Torture chambers can take many forms.”

Alas, this is clearly not how the Koran was authored. It is very particular about the details of both hell AND heaven; far more than it would need to be if it were merely being metaphorical. From the graphic depictions provided, it is quite obvious that the lurid descriptions of hell are NOT meant merely as a didactic tool.The same goes for the puerile depiction of the afterlife paradise.The cosmic seraglio portrayed in the relevant passages is clearly NOT intended as a mere symbol of some exalted spiritual state.Communion with the divine does not require shaded pavilions and wide-eyed, large-breasted concubines.

To make the present point, a juxtaposition is in order.Here is what a (well-crafted) metaphor involving CHAINS looks like:

“The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition that needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe, the halo of which is religion. Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain; not so that man will wear the chain without any fantasy or consolation, but so that he will shake off the chain and cull the living flower.”

Incidentally, directly preceding this metaphor (involving an embryo, a vale, a halo, and flowers…as well as chains) is another metaphor (involving sigh, heart, spirit, and opium): “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opiate of the masses.”

THAT is what metaphor looks like. (We can thank Karl Marx for this illustration.) The discerning reader can surely tell the difference between the above (eloquent) prose…and the (crude) prose found in the Koran about shackles and chains and fire and boiling water. Note that Marx did not have to specify the precise length of the chain in order to make his metaphor work. Why not? Because it was a METAPHOR.

The Hadith don't help the matter, as we encounter further elaborations on the already absurd Koranic depictions of "Jahannam".According to some of the material, the gates of hell are guarded by an angel named "Maalik" (initially mentioned in 43:74-77), captain of the guard.(In case you're wondering, the guards are a cadre of 19 angels called "azabaaniyah".)As it turns out, "Maalik" is just an updated version of "Moloch", an ancient Phoenician / Canaanite god that was adopted by early Hebrews in composing the books of Moses (i.e. in its allusions to hell).

When considering the overwrought Koranic portrayals, we should bear in mind that a comical degree of specificity was nothing new–whether describing the precise length of the chains in Jahannam or the style of upholstery on the couches in Jannah (silk, brocade, etc.)

In the Book of Revelation, note the oddly-specific descriptions of heaven: "The foundations of the wall of the city [recall heaven has WALLS] were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst.The twelve gates [recall, heaven as GATES] were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass" (21:19-21).Splendid!

In the Islamic description of heaven, we also encounter a preoccupation with gems–as with rivers flowing in valleys of pearls and rubies.

More sophisticated conceptions of the hereafter are, of course, easy to formulate.The two possible "destinations" aren't really PLACES, they are STATES OF BEING.Heaven is simply a matter of closeness to (being connected with) the divine; hell is simply a matter of being separated from (being disconnected from) the divine.This makes sense; but this is CLEARLY NOT what the relevant Islamic scripture says.In the Koran, hell is not merely being separated from god (to god's great

disappointment). Verses like 25:11 and 25:37 explain that god actually PREPARED hell for the condemned. There is no reluctance involved in damnation for the Koranic version of YHWH. He actively sends people to hell without remorse.

The Koran reminds us over and over and over again: This is not simply a matter of "being disconnected from the divine"; it is about PUNISHMENT. So the question naturally arises: Is this all supposed to be METAPHORICAL? The bizarre fixation on forcing people to drink scalding water (mentioned ad nauseam throughout the Koran) is a bizarre way to teach (what is purported to be) a noble lesson.

Felicitously, not EVERYONE in Dar al-Islam takes Koranic depictions literally.According to the Ahmadiyya sect, much of the imagery presented regarding heaven and hell is metaphorical, a claim that can only be taken seriously by those who have not actually read the Koran.So, the argument goes, the condemned will not LITERALLY be forced to eat poisonous fruit (44:43-46 and 88:6-7), drink boiling water (18:29, 22:19-22, 37:62-68, 38:57, 44:43-48, 47:15, 56:51-56, 88:5, etc.), and eat pus from their wounds (69:36-37).Their skin won't LITERALLY be melted off over and over again (4:56).The wives won't LITERALLY be carrying firewood.

But if all THAT is a metaphor (an instance of "majaz"), then how do we know where the metaphor ends?Perhaps the ENTIRE BOOK is just a metaphor.The boundary conditions for what is to be taken metaphorically inevitably become arbitrary.

APPENDIX 4: A Sadistic Deity?

Upon reading the slew of Koranic passages describing the torture occurring in hell, one can't help but wonder: Would a divine being–allegedly bursting with boundless love–really devote so much of his magnum opus to such hateful exposition? Can such sadism be squared with claims by the Koran's protagonist that he is infinitely "rahim"?

A theology that involves a celestial concentration camp seems not to be a theology born of an even marginally merciful impresario…let alone a MOST merciful one.It might be noted that "X is merciful except to those who have displeased him" means "X is NOT MERCIFUL". For mercy ["rahim"] means nothing if not extended to those whom one is otherwise inclined to condemn."Merciful only to those I favor" means "NOT merciful".Analogously, being "just to some but not to others" is the definition of "unjust".(The definition of "injustice" is SELECTIVE justice."Fair only to some" is just another way of saying "unfair".)

The attitude and deeds of the Koran's protagonist do not accord with his professed nature ("most merciful").Bear in mind who the damned are, in large part.They are well-meaning people who, as it were, failed to toe the line.Does this default warrant incurring unmitigated agony without end?Such a penalty seems to be–to put it mildly–rather excessive.Once we take into account this deity's peculiar preoccupation with trivialities (eating ham, insufficient praise), we find that the punishment is not proportional to the (alleged) transgression.It would be safe to assume that such petty concerns would be "beneath" a super-being.Would he be so inordinately rash when such trifling demands were not met by otherwise good people?Only if he was EAGER to punish.

Burning people who have gone astray is not the way that a compassionate ruler would handle things. Moreover, wouldn't a cosmic "father" not rest until ALL his "children" were "saved"? It is odd that an omni-benevolent super-being would be fine with the majority of mankind–creatures that HE created–being damned. Would this not reflect some sort of failure on his part?

Make no mistake: The protagonist of the Koran REVELS in the idea that hell is being filled up. The deity portrayed in Islam's holy book seems to crave retribution. Such vengefulness is not exactly the hallmark of an even mildly beneficent being. In fact, the pathological vindictiveness so flagrantly exhibited by the Koran's protagonist constitutes the opposite of an entity that is "the most merciful". Compassion is anathema to the deity we encounter in every Surah.("Mercy", in this scheme, is defined rather queerly as the withholding of wrath; thereby vitiating the concept beyond recognition.)Couple this with the GLOATING he exhibits as the prospect of condemning BILLIONS to hellfire, and we find that no only is this deity not "MOST merciful", he is not even REMOTELY merciful.

Creating an intelligent species only to consign most of them to eternal doom: this seems not to be the ideal scenario. In fact, it couldn't be anything other than the master plan of a pernicious super-being.For what sort of entity would create a race of sentient life-forms only to derive some perverse gratification from punishing the portion of them that failed to live up to his expectations?What sort of entity revels in the suffering of other entities?What sort of entity is inclined to GLOAT when he subjects parts of his own creation to agony simply because he was not given sufficient tribute?

It is safe to assert that positing a deity hell-bent on retribution is a rather harebrained idea. Such a pathologically vindictive entity is certainly nothing close to beneficent. Would an omni-benevolent entity be inclined to carry out heinous acts of violence on members of his own creation simply because they displeased him?

Suffice to say, the celebration of suffering does not jive with a deity that is characterized by boundless mercy. It is vulgar to pass such brazen sadism off as a corollary of boundless compassion. Progressive Muslims need to come to terms with the fact that IF they are worshipping a beneficent deity, then it does not even remotely resemble the deity that is depicted in their holy book.

PostScript:

It is rather uncanny.After posting this essay (at the end of February 2020), the very next week, renown Biblical scholar, Bart D. Ehrman published a book on “Heaven and Hell” (billed as “a history of the afterlife”).

This was not exactly serendipitous; as I may have been better off having read that particular book prior to composing my own commentary.After all, nobody is more knowledgeable than Ehrman when it comes to early Christianity and the development of its first texts.Understandably, he focused almost entirely on the three major Abrahamic traditions–as they lay within the ambit of his expertise.

In my piece, I stepped back to survey eschatology / teleology on a global scale–that is: from the widest possible perspective.Thus I treated heaven and hell as mythemes.I found that, while these two afterlife destinations are universal (in their most generalized form), the manner in which they are portrayed is invariably a product of circumstance.In other words: How they are depicted is largely determined by the immediate physical environment (esp. climate) and a panoply of local concerns.Hence, in any given dogmatic system, the features of heaven and hell say more about the theologians than about the imagined hereafter.

Whether Scandinavian or African or Meso-American or European or Asian or Polynesian, heaven / hell is a reflection of the full compliment of hopes and fears of a people.Such aspirations and apprehensions are projected through a lens of myriad prejudices and superstitions (which happen to be salient at that time and place).This is a reminder that one cannot conduct a study of religion without delving into world history, anthropology, sociology, and evolutionary psychology.

While I touched upon the fact that this carrot-and-stick regimen constitutes a very effective incentive structure (for believers), I did not explore the repercussions of living a life that is primarily concerned with getting into heaven and avoiding hell–specifically as it relates to how well one follows orders.

In Christian and Islamic theology in particular, this inquiry is especially salient–as the process is largely a matter of placating a cosmic figure that resembles a petulant child–a fussy adolescent more than a sagacious master.Given this set-up, life is (almost entirely) about pandering to a petty, narcissistic, vindictive deity…who will punish you if you fail to appease him; and shower you with spoils if you show adequate fealty.This is, to put it mildly, a queer cosmogony.In considering it, certain questions arise: When it comes to day-to-day life, what does seeking such an enticing cosmic carrot entail?And what does averting such a terrifying cosmic stick entail?

More specific queries are worth posing: In the grand scheme of things, does participating in this charade somehow make one a better person?(Does it engender virtue?Does it facilitate arete?)Does it tend to make one's life any better?(Does it foster eudaimonia?Does it alleviate suffering while enhancing joy?)Does it in any way make the world a better place?(Is it conducive to the commonweal?Does it help facilitate justice?)In virtually every conceivable case, the answer to all these questions is: NO.Quite the contrary: Scrambling to gain admission into an after-death paradise (while gloating over the fact that those who aren't toeing the line shall be consigned to eternal hellfire) leads to grave dysfunction in almost every way imaginable.After all, piety is not probity.

A life of groveling before a temperamental overlord is not exactly a recipe for existential bliss.Moreover, this fevered scramble does not contribute to our understanding of the universe, nor to our ability to effect civil society. Yet there it is: cropping up over and over and over, in virtually every corner of the world.

This is a reminder that certain motifs resonate with all humans due to our shared nature (as homo sapiens).I will explore the variegated incidence of mythemes in a forthcoming piece. Suffice to say here: Mankind's timeless treatment of heaven and hell is an reminder that we are all dealing with the same basic psychical mechanisms; which is simply to say: Beliefs in heaven and hell are an illustration of an eminently human nature–replete with a set of innate proclivities that transcend culture.