

**A CONTRIBUTION TO THE
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE
MEDIEVAL VISIONS OF HEAVEN,
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE
MIDDLE-ENGLISH VERSIONS**

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A Contribution to the Comparative Study of the Medieval Visions of Heaven, with Special Reference to the Middle-English Versions by Ernest J. Becker

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ERNEST J. BECKER

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MEDIEVAL VISIONS OF HEAVEN,
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE
MIDDLE-ENGLISH VERSIONS**

**A Contribution to the Comparative
Study of the Medieval Visions of
Heaven and Hell, with Special
Reference to the Middle-
English Versions.**

A DISSERTATION

**PRESENTED TO THE BOARD OF UNIVERSITY STUDIES OF
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BY

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INTRODUCTION.

The present study represents the result of an attempt to compare more closely than has hitherto been done the English medieval Visions of Heaven and Hell. The original plan was to specialize on one particular work (the *Vision of St. Paul*), and using it as a point of departure, to bring the other similar works into organic connection with it and with one another. Almost inevitably, however, the field for investigation grew broader and broader as the work went on; new and important points of contact constantly presented themselves, and it very soon became evident that the study, in order to attain even a partial degree of completeness, could not be confined within the boundaries of England. In order to trace the incidents of the English visions back to their ultimate sources, it became imperative to consider carefully certain intermediate continental works in connection with them; and from these it was but a short step to the earlier and more primitive works which constitute the foundation of medieval vision-literature.

No systematic comparative study of the visions, with a view to tracing their oldest elements to their sources, has yet been attempted. Such an undertaking, necessitating as it would a careful analysis of the forms which the doctrine of an after-life assumed among the various peoples, and a painstaking collation of the many elements thus obtained, would severely tax the powers of any single investigator. As Schermann puts it: "Diese Nachforschungen dürfen sich nicht damit begnügen die

einschlägigen Produkte eines der grossen Sprachstämme, wie etwa des indogermanischen, in den Kreis der Untersuchung zu ziehen. Dies verbietet sich schon durch die Natur der in Betracht kommenden litterarischen Werke, dann aber vornehmlich auch durch die Erwägung, dass die Möglichkeit einer um jene Schranken unbekümmerten Entlehnung nirgend so nahe liegt, als da, wo es sich um elementare religiöse Begriffe und ihre Weiterbildung handelt."¹ It seems evident, therefore, that the only means by which a complete and satisfactory final result can possibly be obtained is through a large number of special studies tending to the same end. It is with this object in view that the present slight contribution, in specializing on the rise and development of the visions on English soil, is offered.

Aside from England, two stages in the general development of visions have been taken up in some detail in the following pages: Oriental influence, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Such a procedure hardly requires an apology. Many of the analogies between the visions and the oriental conceptions of the otherworld have been previously pointed out. But the data are widely scattered, and it seemed well to gather them, together with a few hitherto unnoticed points of similarity, into a connected account. Whereas the *Apocalypse of Peter*, being the earliest Christian vision—in our sense of the word—which we possess, seemed the best possible point from which to indicate the organic manner in which all the visions are connected.

The intermediate stages between these two cardinal points in vision-development are, 1. Classical antiquity; 2. The Old Testament; 3. Old Testament Apocrypha, especially the Book of Enoch; 4. The Canonical New Testament; 5. New Testament Apocrypha, especially the Gospel of Nicodemus. For the sake of completeness, these points will be briefly treated in the following pages.

Within Christian times, the works of the church fathers were of course chiefly instrumental in diffusing the visions. Homilies, commentaries, theological essays, and ecclesiastical histories were alive with accounts, in vision form, of the terrors of hell and of purgatory. These accounts were spread among the people by

¹ *Materialien zur Geschichte d. Indischen Visionslitteratur.* Leipzig, 1892, p. 3 f.

popular preachers and homilists, and in this way the visions no doubt became largely responsible for the epidemics of terror which pervaded the Middle Ages.

Thus we have the skeleton of vision-development established. Deriving the general form and many of the details from the East, the earliest Christian vision-writers grafted them upon such slight material as they found in the Old and New Testaments and their apocrypha, and attaching the names of Christian saints and martyrs to the results, launched them as inspired revelations. Barren in detail and crude in execution at first, they lived on in the minds of the people for several centuries without material alteration or embellishment. The church fathers made use of them to support their doctrines, and were chiefly instrumental in giving them the great vogue which they afterwards attained. Gregory the Great adduced them in support of his doctrine of purgatory, just as they are still adduced for the support of the same doctrine at the present day.¹ Through Gregory especially they passed into the work of local historians, such as Bede in England; and were taken up and diffused among the people by homilists, such as Aelfric. And all the while the clergy was becoming ever more and more powerful, and the people ever more and more panic-stricken at the thought of what even the least sinful of them would have to undergo before obtaining everlasting bliss. And the more panic-stricken the people became, the greater swelled the power of the clergy, till at last the terror of the one became a nervous disease afflicting nations at a time, and the power of the other greater than the world had ever known.

It was in such an unhealthy atmosphere that visions flourished in all their power. They are the outgrowth of a fundamentally morbid psychological condition. The clergy who wrote began to pour them out in countless numbers, and preachers thundered them down upon the heads of their terrified congregations with all the additional emphasis of voice and gesture; and, finally, even laymen took them up and put them into verse, adding new horrors from their own fertile imaginations, and producing such

¹ Cf. for example, F. X. Schouppe, *The Dogma of Purgatory, Illustrated from the Lives and Legends of the Saints.* London, 1893.