

WHAT WILL BE THE FATE OF THE SINNERS IN HELL?
THE CATEGORIES OF THE DAMNED
IN SOME MUSLIM POPULAR LITERATURE

Roberto Tottoli

Università di Napoli "L'Orientale"

1. Eschatology, the End of the World and the fate of man after death have always been central questions in almost every culture and religion. Islam is no exception to this, as is demonstrated in the Qur'ān, where the question of the final Hour, i.e. of the Day of Doom, constitutes the major topic of the early revelations. No other theme involved such profound speculation, prompting the circulation of numerous traditions on themes such as the nature of the destination of the man and his soul, the consistency of the rewards and punishments to be meted out, the reality of the contact with and vision of God, etc. In this regard, for earth-rooted men, it has always been a source of fascination to learn something concrete of their destiny, i.e. that rewards and punishments are real in accordance with their earthly meanings. But even this does not suffice. In every period and age people have felt the need to describe not only what will happen but also to identify to whom it will happen, thereby giving voice to an attitude that prompts the use of descriptions of heaven or hell for discussions on earth.

Because there are so many Muslim traditions on this topic, the scope of this treatment shall be limited to a restricted number of examples. We shall try to follow the path of traditions through works and ages, starting with the most recent, the literary elaboration of a presumed author of the late Medieval period, his description of the punishment of the damned, the relationship of his description with the numerous others included in the same body of literature and the sources on the topic in classical literature starting from the Qur'ān. In doing so, we not only aim to deal with the topic itself but will also attempt to discuss the question of the author in late medieval popular literature and, to a certain extent, to show how this literature is not a mere reworking of old themes, but a dynamic reshaping of the classical heritage including literary elaboration and original elements.

2. Manuscript no. 95 preserved in the Forschung- und Landesbibliothek of Gotha (Germany) is a miscellaneous collection of short stories, written in the 17th-18th centuries, consisting of 110 folios. This manuscript has no peculiar originality in itself, nor are the stories that it contains rare. It is simply a collection of stories, with no author indicated, put together somewhere in the Arab world. The calligraphy is a common *nashī* including ca. 21 lines in each page. The most notable feature of this manuscript is that the first story which it contains is one of the various anonymous

versions of the “story of Jesus and the skull” attested in numerous manuscripts. I dedicated to this story a study in which about thirty of these versions are analyzed¹. A long passage in this story describes the damned and their punishment and here we shall restrict our discussion to this part of the story, first of all in the version given by Ms Gotha 95 in relation to all the other versions of the story attested.

If we should characterize the manuscripts preserving the story of Jesus and the skull as a whole, we cannot but note that they are of differing quality. There are books or booklets or small folios written down to record one or more texts. The story is sometimes assembled in a longer miscellaneous collection of stories (see for ex. Gotha: Ms 2757 dated 1166; Mss 95, 1740, 2760; Rome, Bibl. Vat.: Mss 1191, 1362, Borg. 161; Paris, Bibl. Nat.: Ms 1363 dated 1204/1790; Ms 2738 dated 1176/1762-3), Mss 2761, 3652; 3655, 5616; Berlin, Staatsbibl.: Ms We. 1785 dated 1097/1686; Ms Spr. 2005 dated 1120/1708, Ms Pet. 110; Milan, Ambrosiana: Ms 614 dated 1074/1663; Ms 1161) or in single collections of quite a few folios (see for ex. proper Gotha 2737, cf. 2736). The date of writing is usually between 16th and 19th centuries. What is more relevant, as discussed in my article referred to above, is the feature of all these versions: they are all individual versions – i.e. each is different from the other with the exception of one case only – which share the structure of the story and the use of the same motifs and elements, but without textual relationship. Ms. Gotha 95 is the only exception in this situation: it is almost identical to Ms. Gotha 2737, that is the two manuscripts are clearly testimonies of the same text, while all the other manuscripts attesting the story are unique. So, our starting point is an anonymous “author” of a version of our story the only distinctive character of which is that we have two copies of that version instead of only one.

The core of the story of Jesus and the skull is that Jesus encountered a skull, brought it back to life and that it recounted to Jesus its life as a king and what happened after its death when it went to hell, including its description of hell. The skull, according to Ms Gotha no. 95, thus mentions the damned people, and tells how after being called back to life by Jesus it became a true believer:

“(f. 1b) In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, thus said Ka‘b al-Aḥbār: (...) (3b) (...) “The Ġahannam has seven layers, one upon the other and it is of a huge black, blended with the rage of the Omnipotent King. The name of the first layer is Ġahannam and it is for those who committed great sins of the community of Muhammad, God bless him and grant him salvation; the second layer is called Saqar and it is for the Jews; the third layer is named al-Ġaḥīm and it is for the Christians; the fourth layer is called (4a) Lazā and it is for Rāfiḏites, i.e. those who detest Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, may god be pleased with them; the

¹ For a comprehensive study of this story in Arabic literature and a study of all the manuscript versions (about 30), see Tottoli 2003.

name of the fifth is al-Hutama and it is for idolaters; the sixth layer is called as-Sa'ir and it is for jinn and demons; the seventh layer is called al-Hāwiya and it is for those who utter lies and for sinners. So said the skull and then Jesus, peace be upon him, wept and said: "Tell me of the people of Hell, of their conditions in Hell". The skull answered: "O Prophet of God! How many young people cried 'What a shame'! How many women cried and your people will see that! And I have seen, O prophet of God, people in Hell with the worst punishments. When I entered into it, my skin burned but I wore forty skins one upon the other and among them there were snakes and scorpions. After that, prophet of God, I was hungry, I was taken to the tree az-Zaqqūm and I ate from it, but the food became stuck in my throat. I became thirsty and I was brought a copper basin in which there was melted lead and when I drank of it, my bowels fell down, but then they returned to where they were. In Hell, O prophet of God, I saw plenty of people who had in their hands (4b) good food and bad food: they were eating the bad one and leaving the good one. I asked who they were and I was told: they are those who used to eat forbidden food instead of eating the permitted food. I saw, O prophet of God, in Hell a multitude of people wearing upon their heads enormous turbans and eating fire. I asked who they were, O prophet of God, and I was told: these are those who used to devour the property of orphans. O prophet of God, I saw in Hell people drinking pus. I asked who they were, O prophet of God, and I was told that they were the usurers. O prophet of God, I saw in Hell people hanging by their hands and the Zabāniyya beating them with fire cudgels. I asked who they were, O prophet of God, and I was told that they were the ones who used to refuse to pay the *zakāt*. O prophet of God, I saw in Hell people who were slaughtered upon the fire of Ġahannam and then returned to their initial state. I asked who they were, O prophet of God, and I was told that they were the ones who murdered others and that they were not permitted to kill and without right. O prophet of God, I saw in Hell a multitude of women hanging down by their breast while the Zabāniyya were beating them with fire whips. I asked who these women were, O prophet of God, and I was told that they were disloyal to their husbands. (5a) O prophet of God, I saw in Hell a multitude of women howling like dogs. I asked who they were, O prophet of God, and I was told: they are those who used to mourn the dead. Then I saw, O prophet of God, in Hell people crucified upon fire axes. I asked who they were, O prophet of God, and I was told: they are those who forgot their prayer"².

The description of the damned given here is, as in all the versions of the story of Jesus and the skull, divided into two distinct parts: the former dealing with the layers

² Ms Gotha 95 is reproduced and translated in Italian in the dissertation of Torta 1993-94, see in particular 44-57.

and broad categories of the damned according mainly to various religious faiths and the latter describing vividly the punishments assigned to specific categories of sinners. As regards the first part as described here and in relation to the other versions, it must be said that the broad categories of the various faiths cited are not original and are instead very common: Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians (*‘ubbād an-nār*) and idolaters (*‘ubbād al-aṣnām*). Each has a specific layer (whatever it is) in all the versions, and it is notable that all the sources state that the first layer is that of the community of Muḥammad³. A peculiar though once again not original detail is the mention of the Rāfidites, defined as those who offended Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. The reference is clearly to the Šī‘ites – reference which can also be found in other versions⁴ – and this clearly indicates the Sunnite affiliation of our author. One could at this point expect, as in other versions of the same story, to find mention of the name of ‘Uṭmān but the writer of this version refrained from making such reference to the controversial name of the third Caliph⁵.

Further, we note that the damned of the Muslim *umma* are sent to the first layer and that in the seventh layer there is another category of sinners who are surely from the Muslim *umma*, i.e. the *mukaddibūn* and the *muḡrimūn*. This brings into focus the question of the position of Muslim sinners and the debate about temporary punishment to which they will be subjected, but our author’s principal interest is not the theological issue, as in the other versions of the story which also indicate a layer for the generic sinners: *muḡrimūn*⁶, *mukaddibūn*⁷, rebels and sinners of the Muslim community⁸, *muḡrimūn* and *mukaddibūn*⁹. Some of the other versions, however, ex-

³ Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3652, 93a; Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek We. 1785, 50b; Ms Manchester, John Rylands Library nr. 648, 27a; Ms Strasbourg, Bibl. Nat. et Un. nr. 137, f. 132b; Ms Damascus, Mak. al-Asad nr. 12685, 47a; Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 2761, 74a; Ms Milan, Ambrosiana 1161, 106a; Ms Milan, Ambrosiana 614, 201a; *Munāḡāt* 65; Ms Gotha 2757, 106b; Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 48b; Ms Gotha 2736, 6a; Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 1363, 157b. Cf. Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3655, 114a.

⁴ As to their punishment see: “those who insult Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uṭmān, their tongues are cut with fire scissors: Ms Damascus, Mak. al-Asad nr. 12685, 47a; cf. also Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 49a; Ms Strasbourg, Bibl. Nat. et Un. nr. 137, f. 135b: without ‘Uṭmān like our author.

⁵ On the question see Zaman 1997:50: “Any criticism of Abū Bakr and ‘Umar was, for all *abl al-sunna*, tantamount to heresy”, and 51f about the position of ‘Uṭmān.

⁶ Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 2761, 74a; Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3652, 93a; Ms Princeton N.S. Mansell 2160, f. 74a; Ms Milan, Ambrosiana 614, 201a Ms Paris Bibl. Nat. 5616, 68a; Ms Bibl. Vaticano ar. 1362, 208b; cf. Ms Paris Bibl. Nat. 5616, 68a; Ms Princeton N.S. Mansell 2160, f. 74b.

⁷ Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3652, 93a; Ms Gotha 2760, 13b; Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3655, 114a.

⁸ Ms Bibl. Vaticano ar. 1362, 208b; Ms London, British Lib. 1254, 14b; Ms Princeton N.S. Mansell 2160, f. 74b; Ms Paris Bibl. Nat. 5616, 68a: those committing great sins (*kaḅā’ir*); Weil 1846:224.

plore in more detail the question of the sinners in relation to the layers and indicate more specific categories, though not mentioning the kind of punishment: hypocrites¹⁰, usurpers of orphans' money¹¹, those committing *zinā*¹², usurers¹³, those drinking and eating forbidden food¹⁴, misbelievers or idolaters¹⁵, Iblīs and his followers¹⁶, those slandering honest women¹⁷, those not believing in the Day of Doom¹⁸, the '*ulamā*' not applying the precepts of religious law¹⁹, women killing their children and betraying their husbands²⁰, women neglecting prayer²¹, worshippers of the sun²², tyrants and their helpers²³, those doubting the truth of the prophets²⁴,

⁹ Both the categories, such as in Ms Gotha 95: Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 48b; Ms Damascus, Mak. al-Asad nr. 12685, 47a. Cf. also Ms Strasbourg, Bibl. Nat. et Un. nr. 137, f. 133a: *mukaddibūn* and *mulhidūn*.

¹⁰ They are in the first layer: Ms Princeton N.S. Mansell 2160, f. 74a; Ms Paris Bibl. Nat. 5616, 68a; Ms Bibl. Vaticano ar. 1362, 208a-208b; Ms London, British Lib. 1254, 14b; Ms Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibl. nr. 234, 34a; Weil 1846:224.

¹¹ First layer: as-Saqṣīnī, *Zahra* Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Pet. II 556, 36; Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Sprenger 2005, 22a. Some sources refer to the first door and not to the first floor: Asín Palacios 1917:427; Vespertino Rodríguez 1983:346-7. Second layer: Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek We. 1785, 50b. Third layer: Ms Gotha 2757, 107a; Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3652, 93a; Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3655, 114a: third door. Fifth layer: Ms Bibl. Vaticana ar. 1191, 48b-49a; cf. Abū Nuʿaym, *Hilya* 11.

¹² Second layer: as-Saqṣīnī, *Zahra*, Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Pet. II 556, 36; Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Sprenger 2005:22a.

¹³ Second layer: Ms Gotha 2757, 107a; Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3652, 93a; Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3655, 114a; Fourth layer: as-Saqṣīnī, *Zahra* Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Pet. II 556, 36; cf. Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Sprenger 2005:22a.

¹⁴ Second layer: Asín Palacios 1917:427.

¹⁵ Third layer: Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek We. 1785, 50b; Ms London, British Lib. 1254, 14b.

¹⁶ Third layer: Ms Milan, Ambrosiana 614, 201a. Fourth layer: *Munāḡāt* 65.

¹⁷ Third layer: Asín Palacios 1917:427.

¹⁸ Fourth layer: Ms Bibl. Vaticano ar. 1362, 208b. Fifth layer: Ms Gotha 2736, 6a; *Munāḡāt* 65; cf. Ms Milan, Ambrosiana 614, 201a.

¹⁹ Fourth layer: Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3655, 114a; Ms Gotha 2757, 107. Sixth layer: Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Sprenger 2005:22a.

²⁰ Fourth layer: Ms Bibl. Vaticana ar. 1191, 48b.

²¹ Fourth layer: Asín Palacios 1917:427; cf. instead Ms Vaticana Borg. Ar. 161, 61a: they are men.

²² Fifth layer: Ms London, British Lib. 1254, 14b.

²³ Fifth layer: Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek We. 1785, 50b; Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 48b; Ms Gotha 2757, 107a: for the arrogant.

²⁴ Fifth layer: Weil 1846:224.

those forbidding *zakāt*²⁵, adulteresses or adulterers²⁶, apostates²⁷, Pharaohs²⁸, and a lot of recognisable groups²⁹.

If we were to judge the choices and peculiarities of our author at this point only some provisional hypotheses on his attitude towards all these categories and definitions are possible. It seems clear that our author includes broad categories about which there was no controversy, with a direct attack upon Šīʿites as the most specific peculiarity. We could define this as a more sober position when compared to some of the other versions, probably due to the desire and aim not to include vivid descriptions of sinners.

3. At this point we will deal with the passage relating to the damned and their punishments, that is the second part of the tradition describing the specific types of sinners. Our author mentions in general young and women, then more specifically 1) those eating forbidden food 2) usurpers of the rights of orphans 3) usurers 4) those not paying the *zakāt* 5) murderers 6) adulteresses 7) women mourning the dead 8) and those forgetting to pray, and refers to their punishment. This list delineates common categories of sinners such as murderers and adulteresses as well as more specifically Muslim categories such as those connected to ritual and religious duties (prayer, *zakāt*), major religious prohibitions (eaters of forbidden food, usurers) or categories already dealt with by the Qurʾān or *ḥadīths*, such as eaters of forbidden food, usurpers of the goods of orphans and women mourning the dead. Once again, to understand more about this version and its author, we have to examine a number of other versions.

So, if we come to the treatment of the categories and punishment of the damned in all the other versions it is notable that some of the categories employed in our version are among the most common. These are the adulterers and adulteresses³⁰,

²⁵ Fifth layer: Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Sprenger 2005:22a.

²⁶ Fifth layer, adulteresses: Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Sprenger 2005, 22a. Sixth layer, adulterers: Abū Nuʿaym, *Hilya* 12.

²⁷ Sixth layer: Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 2761, 74a.

²⁸ Sixth layer: *Munāḡāt* 65.

²⁹ Sixth layer: Ms Bibl. Vaticana ar. 1191, 49a.

³⁰ Ms Gotha 2757, 106b; Ms Gotha 95, 4b. Cf. Ms Damascus, Mak. al-Asad nr. 12685, 47a: hanging by their nails; cf. also Ms Strasbourg, Bibl. Nat. et Un. nr. 137, f. 135b; Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 49a; cf. Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3655, 113a; Ms Milan, Ambrosiana 1161, 105b; *Munāḡāt* 66; Ms Gotha 2760, 14a-14b; Ms Manchester, John Rylands Library nr. 648, 27b. Other versions also mention those thinking of forbidden acts or those committing *zināʾ*, see Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek We. 1785, 50b.

those eating forbidden food³¹, usurers³², and the murderers³³. The usurpers of the rights of orphans is another very common category but it needs to be underlined here that, along with their punishment and the description of their sin, our version contains a further qualification: those wearing big turbans. Who are these men bearing big turbans? In some of the other sources, where the same reference is made, it is more explicitly stated: they are the powerful judges³⁴. No less relevant are the categories quoted only by our author and not by the numerous other authors: those not paying the *zakāt*, those forgetting to pray, and those mourning the dead. This point is not only significant but even astonishing if we consider the importance of these points in the Muslim faith, especially with regard to the first two: no other version of the story of Jesus and the skull identifies these categories of sinners.

The next step is to list the categories found in the other sources and not considered by our author. They include the following: suicides³⁵, slanderers³⁶, people who mistreat their parents³⁷, and the wetnurses, described as women hanging down by their nipples³⁸. A further peculiar category occasionally mentioned is that implicating a sort of critical social position: in Hell there are people bearing fire stones around their necks: these are those who used to exploit people in this world³⁹, who used to be bullies and unjust in this world⁴⁰, or who accumulated gold

³¹ Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 48b; *Munāğāt* 66; cf. Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3655, 113a; Ms Strasbourg, Bibl. Nat. et Un. nr. 137, f. 134b; Ms Manchester, John Rylands Library nr. 648, 27b.

³² Ms Paris Bibl. Nat. 5616, 68b; Ms Gotha 2760, 14a; Ms Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibl. nr. 234, 34a; Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek We. 1785, 50b; Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 49a.

³³ Ms Paris Bibl. Nat. 5616, 68b; Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 49a; Ms Gotha 95, 4b; Ms Milan, Ambrosiana 1161, 105b: their heads were cut off and then reattached only to be removed again; Ms Manchester, John Rylands Library nr. 648, 27b.

³⁴ See in particular Ms Strasbourg, Bibl. Nat. et Un. nr. 137, f. 135b: they are the judges (*qudat*); cf. the more generic Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 48b-49a; Ms Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibl. nr. 234, 34a; Ms Milan, Ambrosiana 1161, 105b-106a; *Munāğāt* 66; Ms Gotha 2760, 14a-14b; another punishment is quoted in Ms Leiden or. 14027, f. 131a.

³⁵ Ms Gotha 2760, 14a.

³⁶ Ms Strasbourg, Bibl. Nat. et Un. nr. 137, f. 135a. For other punishments and categories of damned see Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 49a; Ms Damascus, Mak. al-Asad nr. 12685, 47a; Ms Leiden or. 14027, f. 131a: people hung by their tongues.

³⁷ Ms Damascus, Mak. al-Asad nr. 12685, 47a.

³⁸ Ms Damascus, Mak. al-Asad nr. 12685, 47a. Regarding Muslim conceptions and controversies on this point see Giladi 1999, in particular 13-40.

³⁹ Ms Leiden or. 14027, f. 131a; Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek We. 1785, 50b; Ms Gotha 2757, 106b; Ms Paris, Bibl. Nat. 3655, 113a.

⁴⁰ Ms Milan, Ambrosiana 1161, 105b.

and silver without using them *fi sabīl Allāh*⁴¹. If we compare these categories to those mentioned by our author it can be noted that these are rather more “specific” groupings of sins and sinners. The mention of the wetnurses touches upon a controversial point. Less controversial is the case of suicides, while those slandering people and mistreating their parents fall into the broad category of generic ethic prescriptions. The allusion to tyrants or rulers in general is far more significant here. It harks back to the environment in which these versions, which include this category, originated and it is a critical statement or attack upon a specific group of people. The difference with our author is clear. The problem once again is the definition of the damned in connection with identifiable groups of living people. Apart from the mention of usurper judges – that it is a regular feature in this type of literature as we shall see below – it is difficult to account for the reason that no other category seems to emerge as a direct reference to a “real” category of people or to a controversial category of sinners in our version. It should not be forgotten that our author is not alone in this regard: not all of the sources share this feature, and we must not forget that we lack information regarding the place and time, as well as the identity of our author and that all of these considerations suggest a need for caution on our part: the mention of formal and generic categories such as those forgetting prayer and *zakāt* could be far more specific than we suppose and could be allusions to a peculiar local situation of laxity in the fulfilment of these two of the *arkān*, or may well be related to a peculiar group of people who were guilty in this regard.

4. It is time now to take a step back, to the presumed additional sources of our author. Up to this point our author’s version has been considered in connection to all the other versions of the story of Jesus and the skull. It is of no less importance to examine the body of Muslim literature in its entirety, since we can presume that Muslim literature on eschatological themes must have constituted a source of reference. In this regard, the undisputable starting point is the Qur’ān itself in which Hell – referred to with many names – is mentioned almost in every *sūra* as being the frightening destiny awaiting those who do not believe the message of Muhammad. In particular, there are passages of great interest to this study in which vivid descriptions of the damned and their punishment are given.

The Qur’ān states, for example, that Hell has seven doors (Q 15:44), has angels as guardians (nineteen of them, *aṣḥāb an-nār*, Q 74:30-31; cf. also 76:6, *ḥazāna*, Q 39:71; 40:49; 67:8), whose presumed leader is called *Mālik* (Q 43:77). More details are given as we come to the punishments awaiting the damned in Hell: they will be

⁴¹ Ms Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Pet. I 110, 49a. Cf. Ms Gotha 2760, 14b: they had a different punishment.

“watered at a boiling fountain, no food for them but cactus (*dari*, Q 88:5-6), “tasting therein neither coolness nor any drink save boiling water and pus⁴² (*gassāq*)” (Q 78:24-25), “the Fire smiting their faces the while they glower there” (Q 23:104), and “for them garments of fire will be cut, and there shall be poured over their heads boiling water whereby whatsoever is in their bellies and their skins shall be melted; for them await hooked iron rods” (Q 22:19-21), to the point that “as their skins are wholly burned, We shall give them in exchange other skins” (Q 4:56). In fact God has prepared “for the unbelievers chains, fetters (*aglāl*), and a Blaze” (Q 76:4; cf. also 40:71-72; 73:11-13), “a chain of seventy cubits’ length (...) neither any food saving foul pus, that none excepting sinners eat” (Q 69:32-37), and they will be “mid burning winds and boiling waters and the shadow of smoking blaze neither cool, neither goodly” (Q 56: 42-44); “seized by their forelocks and their feet” (Q 55:41), “dragged on their faces into the Fire” (Q 54:48, cf. 25:34), and “their faces are turned about” (Q 33:66), “coupled in fetters, of pitch their shirts, their faces enveloped by the Fire” (Q 14:49-50). When describing the prodigious tree *Zaqqūm* from which the damned will eat, it is also added that it “is the food of the guilty, like molten copper (*muhl*), bubbling in the belly as boiling water bubbles” (Q 44:43-46), “a tree that comes forth in the root of Hell; its spathes are as the heads of Satans, and they will eat of it” (Q 37:64-66), and “you (i.e. the damned) shall fill therewith your bellies and drink on top of that boiling water (*al-ḥamīm*) lapping it down like thirsty camels” (Q 56:52-55).

In these passages the Qur’ān does not list categories of sinners along with their punishments, but speaks of generic enemies of God (*a’dā’ Allāh*, Q 41:28) disbelievers (*kāfirūn*, Q 76:4; cf. 22:19; 33:64; 35:36; 39:71; 41:28; 67:6), those who utter lies (*mukaddibīn*, Q 73:11), those who do not believe in the Hereafter (Q 27:4), sinners (*muḡrimūn*, Q 14:49; 55:41, 43), idolaters (*muṣṣrikūn*, Q 48:6), the insolent (*tāḡīn*, Q 38:55), and hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*, Q 48:6) – hypocrites which, another verse states, “will be in then lowest reach (*dark*) of the Fire” (Q 4:145). However, more specific statements can be found elsewhere in the holy text, as in the case of the one who “never believed in God the Almighty, and he never urged the feeding of the needy” (Q 69:33-34), or of “those who think evil thoughts of God” (Q 48:6), and when it is said that “surely those who cast it upon women in wedlock that are heedless (*al-muḥṣanāt al-ḡāfilāt*) but believing shall be accursed in the present world and the world to come; and there awaits them a mighty chastisement” (Q 24:23). But the most interesting passage in this regard is that in which the Qur’ān states that “those who devour the property of orphans (*al-yatāmā*) unjustly, devour Fire in their bellies, and

⁴² Boiling water (*ḥamīm*) is a frequent reference: see Q 56:93, 55:44, 47:15: “boiling water that tears their bowels asunder”; 44:45-46: “then pour over his head the chastisement of boiling water”; 38:57-58: “boiling water and pus, and other torments of the like kind coupled together”; 37:67: “brew of boiling water”; cf. also Q 14:16: “oozing pus (*ma’ sadīd*)”.

shall assuredly roast in a Blaze" (Q 4:10)⁴³. From the evidence discussed above it can be concluded that the Qur'an mentions a range of punishments, mostly repeating the same motifs in various passages, and in only a few cases going beyond a generic definition of the sinners destined to hell. There is certainly no indication of specific categories and corresponding punishments as those included in our story.

We now move to Muslim literature as a whole. As regards our subject and the contents of our story the entire body of religious literature potentially offers useful data⁴⁴. In fact, if works such as the Qur'anic commentaries, *ḥadīṭ* collections and specific works on the subject are of primary interest, the role of eschatological beliefs and even the relevance of the question of the categories of sinners suggest that we could expect to find material of relevance in almost all religious literature. In fact, apart from the Qur'an, the most significant description of the damned and their punishments is to be found in one of the most authoritative early works, the *Sīra* of Ibn Hišām. In the chapter dealing with Muḥammad's night journey and ascent to heaven, a report included under the authority of Abū Sa'īd al-Ḥudrī, states that the Prophet recounted, when he was in the lowest heaven:

"Then I saw men with lips like camels; in their hands were pieces of fire like stones which they used to thrust into their mouths and they would come out of their posteriors. I was told that these were those who sinfully devoured the wealth of orphans. Then I saw men resembling the family of Pharaoh, with such bellies as I have never seen; there were passing over them as it were camels maddened by thirst when they were cast into hell, treading them down, they being unable to move out of the way. These were usurers. Then I saw men with good fat meat before them side by side with lean stinking meat, they were eating of the latter and leaving the former. These are those who forsake the women which God has permitted and go after those he has forbidden. Then I saw women hanging by their breast. These were those who had fathered bastards on their husbands"⁴⁵.

With this passage we are on the same ground as the description of our author. The first category – i.e., those devouring orphans' wealth – is inspired by the Qur'an. The other three categories – usurers, male adulterers and female adulteresses who gave birth to bastards – are not Qur'anic and neither are the punishments.

A number of other particulars can be traced to *ḥadīṭ* works. The only report similar to the tradition quoted in the *Sīra* is this: the Prophet states that during his ascent to heaven he saw people with wide bellies from which snakes could be seen

⁴³ On orphans see also Q 17:34.

⁴⁴ Various reports on this subject are discussed by Asín Palacios 1919:8-30, 46-52, 357-368.

⁴⁵ Ibn Hišām, *Sīra* 405-406; the translation here is from Guillaume 1955:185-186; cf. also at-Tabarī, *Tafsīr* XV, 7, 13.

coming out: these were the usurers⁴⁶. Some other statements are quoted in connection with some recurring formulas. For instance in al-Buḥārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* there are reports which contain references to discussions by the Prophet mentioning the ones who will suffer less severe punishments in Hell (*inna abwan abl an-nār 'idāban*): the man who will have live coals placed in the hollows of his feet which will drive him mad⁴⁷. The other major collections contain similar references. Muslim, for instance, adds a pair of *ḥadīṭs* in which the Prophet states that the least onerous punishment would consist of a man under whose sandals were placed two burning embers⁴⁸. Other traditions introduce statements from the opposite point of view: who will be subjected to the most exacting punishment (*ašaddu n-nās 'idāban*) in hell. According to a widespread report these will be those making images (*al-musawwirūn*)⁴⁹, while there are a great number of other differing versions to be found amongst the various sources⁵⁰. Another particular that emerges in later reports is in the case of the *munāfiqūn* who will be confined in iron boxes⁵¹. Mention of punishment in Hell is used in another *ḥadīṭ* in which it is said that women who display golden necklaces and earrings will wear similar jewellery, but made of fire, on the day of Resurrection⁵².

We also expect to find useful statements regarding generic punishments in Hell in the numerous *ḥadīṭs* listing sins, such as drinking from vessels of gold and silver, those who vilify the prophets, companions and Muslims⁵³, the tyrannical *imāms* or

⁴⁶ See Ibn Abī Ṣayba, *Musannaḥ* VII, 335 no. 36574; Ibn Māḡa, *Sunan* II, 763 no. 2273; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* III, 269-70 no. 8648, 289 no. 8765.

⁴⁷ al-Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* VII, 258 no. 6561; cf. also no. 6562; the text says, instead of becoming insane, that the live coal will make his brain boil; see also Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* I, 196 no. 213.

⁴⁸ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* I, 195-6 no. 211-12 see also Ibn Abī 'Āsim, *Zuhd* 399, and above all Ibn as-Sarī, *Zuhd*, who includes a chapter with the sentence as its title. For an abundance of other references, see the occurrences of the sentence *abwan abl an-nār 'idāban* in *al-Maktaba al-alfiyya*.

⁴⁹ al-Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* no. 5606, cf. 5610. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* III, 1670 no. 2109 (three versions) and cf. also the similar ones *ibid.* III, 1667-68.

⁵⁰ See all the occurrences of the expression *ašaddu n-nās 'idāban* (259) in *al-Maktaba al-alfiyya*. Cf. Also the occurrences (more than a hundred) in Šī'ite literature, in *Noor* 2. Frequent quotations of *ḥadīṭs* of this kind in *tafsīr* can be found in for ex. al-Qurtubī, comm. to Q 2:44, at-Tabarī to 3:22 etc. Another quite common expression in all of the literature is that defining some sin or condemnable position saying that the one who maintains this will have his seat in Hell (*maq'aduhu min an-nār*).

⁵¹ as-Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 367 from Ibn Kaṭīr, *Nihāya*.

⁵² an-Nasā'ī, *Sunan* V, 434 no. 9439; cf. similar statements, prompting the use of silver instead of gold also for women, see Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan* IV, 90-91 nos. 4236, 4238.

⁵³ See for ex. as-Suyūṭī, *al-Budūr* 362, from the *Hilya* of Abū Nu'aym.

evil people who commit acts against men on earth⁵⁴, suicides, those giving false testimony, liars, those who claim objects that do not belong to them, those who lie about the Prophet⁵⁵, etc. We shall stop here, since to reproduce all of the statements found in *ḥadīṭ* literature would require an extended discussion and this is not necessary. It is clear that this literature undoubtedly mentions something related to the damned and their punishments with a precise intent: the reports on the lighter punishment serve the aim of demonstrating how cruel they are and they do not serve an eschatological purpose. The lesson is thus moral beyond the description itself and for this reason the only significant *ḥadīṭ*, as far as we have seen, seems that connected to usurers, which is quite similar to the report in the *Sīra*, where a category of sinners and a specific punishment are joined together.

5. It is also necessary to examine the eschatological *ḥadīṭ*-oriented literature where we usually find the reports belonging to the major *ḥadīṭ* collections as well as a range of other material. The most famous work on eschatology is the *Tadkīra* of al-Qurtubī (d. 1272), which resembles an encyclopaedia of traditions dealing with the range of eschatological themes. While he does mention sinners and the punishments they suffered, this only occurs in a chapter in which two traditions are dedicated to the categories of the most severely punished sinners and their punishments. In the first report there are three categories: great sinners who carry boxes of fire, usurpers of the rights of people whose bellies are ruptured and trail on the ground, their intestines on fire and people wearing amulets whose fate was to run without stopping. In the second report the punishments and categories are the same though there are four of them⁵⁶. A further chapter is dedicated to a common theme which is also attested in the sayings of Muḥammad: a definite category of the damned is made up of those who do not practice what they preach or those forbidding evil and prescribing good but not acting according to this precept. Their punishment is described as follows: their lips are severed with scissors of fire⁵⁷. Apart from this, many other reports describe degrees of punishment, listed for example by the names of the seven doors of hell, or the chains and fire of Hell with an abundance of particulars, but nothing else is included which is similar to or recalls the damned of the story of Jesus and the skull.

⁵⁴ as-Suyūṭī, *al-Budūr* 362, from the *Hilya* of Abū Nuʿaym.

⁵⁵ as-Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 363-364. Cf. also the *ḥadīṭ*s describing teeth and other particulars upon the *kāfir* in Hell, as-Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 340-342.

⁵⁶ al-Qurtubī, *Tadkīra* 466-467.

⁵⁷ al-Qurtubī, *Tadkīra* 483: this occurs in two versions traced back to Abū Nuʿaym and Ibn al-Mubārak, and the Prophet witnessed this during his ascension to heaven.

If we take the position of our author, it can be stated that he was not interested in the kind of material collected by such an *'ālim* as al-Qurtubī who proceeds by quoting what he can from Qur'ānic verses and the sayings of the Prophet. It was of no interest to him, it did not accord with the literary tone of the story nor, in all probability, did it appeal to his audience. This is made clear in a quite interesting statement of the same al-Qurtubī. Referring to the layers of Hell, the list of their names is given adding that the names and the categories of damned people (belonging to other religions) who are destined to inhabit these layers are usually mentioned in the books of *Zuhd*, but that these particulars do not appear in sound traditions (al-Qurtubī, *Tadkira* 444-445). We can thus safely suggest that our author could not find what he sought in the books of the learned authors such as al-Qurtubī because that was precisely what these authors did not intend to include in their works. Taking into account the extent to which Muslim literature originated against a polemical background it can be further suggested that books like this were written to counter the diffusion and spread of eschatological traditions such as those included in the story of Jesus and the skull. But our author and the authors of the numerous versions of the story of Jesus and the skull simply did not care about the religious purposes of these learned men.

The other works on eschatological themes do not alter this picture. In *ad-Durra al-fāhira* attributed to al-Ġazālī we find little on the topic⁵⁸, al-Bayhaqī, in his *al-Ba't wa-n-nuṣūr*, reviews Qur'ānic verses and *hadīths* on the major questions such as the temperature of Hell or what the damned eat⁵⁹. Nothing relevant to our story is to be found. The same attitude is clear in a later work of the same kind, the *Budūr as-sāfira fī umūr al-āhira*, by as-Suyūtī. For example, when dealing with the seven doors of Hell he does not mention the categories of damned destined to inhabit them⁶⁰, and whereas some other passages mention a few particulars of interest in connection with the long chapters dealing with punishments of disbelievers and sinners (such as in al-Qurtubī's work)⁶¹, he does not mention the kind of tradition which is encompassed in the story of Jesus and the skull.

The same happens if we examine excerpts from popular literature, loosely defined as literature deemed more popular than *hadīth* collections. The major example of this

⁵⁸ al-Ġazālī, *Durra*; on the same arguments, see al-Ġazālī, *Ihyā'* IV, 486-488, 514-519.

⁵⁹ al-Bayhaqī, *Ba't* 278-330, and in part. 268 on the seven names of the doors of Hell, and 269-312, for other particulars about Hell: the heat, the keepers, the snakes, etc.

⁶⁰ as-Suyūtī, *Budūr* 310-312: it is only said that the first one is for the sinners of Muslim community.

⁶¹ as-Suyūtī, *Budūr* 354-: those prescribing right and forbidding evil but acting differently; those whose knowledge was not useful to themselves; women wearing golden necklaces and earrings; those having two tongues will have two tongues of fire in hell; those who drink in vessels of gold and silver; suicides; wine drinkers.

genre is the Medieval *Liber Scalae Machometi*, where, in accordance with what is stated in the first biography of the Prophet, the ascent to heaven of Muhammad is described and Hell and its doors are mentioned, along with names and even categories of damned people. According to the Italian translation of the text to which I had access, the many pages listing the structure of Hell regularly mention punishments while repeating the prodigious action of snakes and scorpions against generic groups of sinners, without providing a description of the type translated at the beginning of this article⁶².

6. We have now assembled all of the relevant elements in order to consider the report translated at the beginning and to draw some conclusions about our author. The structure and elements of our story are perfectly Muslim and consonant in general with what is stated in all traditions, but if we take a closer look at the contents in relation to a specific point like the categories of the damned, we notice that the eschatological elements included in the versions of the story of Jesus and the skull do not correspond with those mentioned in classical Muslim literature on the topic. Some references or implicit hints from the Qur'ān and traditions are no doubt included – such as in the case of the usurpers of the orphans' money – but these constitute an “obligatory” category included along with the new elements. The point of these figures is both theological and stylistic: to deal with what, from a doctrinal point of view, cannot be avoided, and to include elements to make the story recognizable to the audience. In the treatment of the description of the damned, therefore, the numerous versions of the story of Jesus and the skull constitute a *corpus* or a body of literature which is, as a whole, not based upon reports taken from traditional *hadīth*-oriented literature.

One of the most interesting peculiarities of this body of literature is undoubtedly the prominence given to the fate of (Muslim) sinners as compared to that of believers of other faiths. The most vivid descriptions are displayed in connection with the various sins committed by the Muslim damned, thus indicating that the main concern of this literature is not that of inter-religious rivalries, but the Muslim community itself. In these cases, as a rule, sins and punishments are evoked to prompt people to avoid acting in certain ways and the more frequent mention of a particular sin tends to indicate that it was a point at issue at the time that the version was composed and circulated. But the range of sinners and punishments was not endless: within a body of religious literature the originality of the various versions is restricted to a limited number of particulars, following the dynamics of oral/written variations on a fixed theme whose diffusion and importance are testified by the numerous versions in evidence. As regards our subject, references to the seven layers, a number of broad

⁶² *Scala* 87-96 and above all 108-111, on the doors of Hell.

categories of unbelievers such as those belonging to other religions are obligatory points touched on by all the versions. Among the categories of sinners, the choices were larger and so we find various differing versions portraying categories and punishments in various ways. Here every author displays his authorial licence, preferences, interests and aims, that is, given all the limits, his originality.

We are now ready to consider our author. Firstly, it must be remembered that his elaboration was the only one copied into another version, thus attesting that somewhere at a particular time it was considered useful by at least one copyist. That is to say, our author had a certain, though limited, success. He showed no particular interest in including descriptions of specific sinners in the layers of Hell, in this way simply reflecting a clear Sunnite and anti-Šī'ite tendency, while in the description of punishments in relation to the various categories of the damned he displays a quite widespread critical assessment against the judges, the usurpers of orphans' rights, while not highlighting any other specific concern. The indication of those forgetting prayer and *zakāt*, not attested in any other version, is probably a generic critical statement against the laxity of people in these precepts and does not indicate a specific category. No social polemics against rulers are expressed, and no other peculiar categories – such as in those other versions which are more explicit in this regard – are enunciated. Our author probably aimed to produce a “sober”, non-polemical version in contrast to the other versions in circulation, avoiding as far as possible making polemical points in relation to the categories of the damned. However, while producing his work, he remained completely within this body of literature and did not introduce other traditions, for instance from *hadīth* literature. This is a significant point as it clearly indicates that this late popular literature constitutes a genre which shares something with “high” literature and yet is completely autonomous and in a certain way antagonistic towards it.

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