
NIAMH BHALLA, *Experiencing the Last Judgement* (Studies in Byzantine Cultural History). Abingdon – New York: Routledge 2022. xv+381 pp., 53 colour figs. – ISBN 978-0-367-89850-2

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Visual representation of the Last Judgement, of the rewards and punishments that according to Christian teaching await humans after death, has been attracting increasing attention in the past three decades – and rightly so, as it offers incredibly rich and diverse material for scholarly study. NIAMH BHALLA's book is a useful addition to the subject's rapidly growing bibliography. She states from the beginning that the course is set for an 'alternative' reading of the Last Judgment (p. 1). Several monuments support this contention: a fourteenth-century fresco in the former *parekklesion* (side chapel) of the Chora Monastery in Constantinople (pp. 29ff.), a tenth-century fresco in Yılanlı Kilise, Cappadocia (pp. 80ff., 255ff.), a late eleventh-century mosaic in Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello (pp. 114ff.), a late eleventh-century hexptych icon from Mount Sinai (pp. 154ff.), a late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century wall painting at the Mavriotissa Monastery in Kastoria (pp. 204ff.), and an additional twelfth-century Sinai icon (pp. 286ff.). Seasoned Byzantinist need not be reminded of these well-known works' importance for the study of Byzantine visual culture; moreover, the author's selection has the advantage of covering the principal media of Byzantine pictorial art – frescoes / wall paintings, mosaics, and icons, – while plenty of comparative material is provided by manuscript illumination. For the general reader, however, a clarification as to *why* particular monuments were chosen for discussion would not have gone amiss.

The book is well-written, amply illustrated, and supplied with extensive primary and secondary bibliography. The idea that the Last Judgment 'encloses' the viewer (p. 37) is introduced at the beginning and persuasively explored on the example of the Chora *parekklesion*. BHALLA argues that presenting the Last Judgment 'in the round' precluded a linear sequence and underlined the composition's timelessness, connecting the Second Coming with eternity (p. 50). Hers is indeed an excellent approach and one that requires further research in relation to depictions of Saint Peter at different moments in the process of opening Paradise for the righteous: standing

before the sealed doors guarded by a cherub, about to unlock them (the moment actually depicted at the Chora), and having already done so. There can be little doubt that such iconographic variants point to nuanced timing within the Last Judgement sequence.

The example of Yılanlı Kilise allows BHALLA to explore the direct relation between an image and its audience with the inclusion of elements important within a given community – in this case the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, who were very popular in Cappadocia (pp. 90, 106). According to the author, ‘the decorative programme at Yılanlı presents recurring features that reveal preoccupation of the community with evil, death, judgement, intercession and protection’ (p. 107). I would agree with this assessment but also take it (much) further: such concerns are inherent in *all* representations of the Last Judgement.

The Last Judgement at Torcello gives the author an occasion to address issues around ‘Byzantine identity’ and the medium of mosaic as an identity marker – issues recently placed centre-stage in Byzantine scholarship by LIZ JAMES (whose work is listed in the bibliography). I fully agree with the view that one cannot use Torcello as a mirror reflecting Constantinople (p. 128), yet I am not sure if the nuanced difference between ‘reflection of Byzantine art’ and ‘conscious use in a different context’ (p. 129) changes the fact that, one way or another, at the time this work was produced and for the specific audience it served, a Byzantine association was considered vital. Such an association is revealed, for instance, by the importance which this mosaic puts on salvation rather than punishment, the former being mostly associated with Byzantine / Orthodox Christianity (p. 135). BHALLA herself concludes, and with good reason, that Torcello’s Last Judgement is truly associated with Byzantine prototypes (p. 153).

In her discussion of the wall painting at the Mavriotissa Monastery, BHALLA explores the contrast of the ‘ugliness of the damned [...] with the beauty of those in heaven’ (p. 218). For this purpose, she uses as an additional source the tenth-century *Life of Basil the Younger*. There is no doubt that the text-image parallels which the author identifies (p. 288) are important ones, but a note of caution is due nonetheless: ‘ugliness’ and ‘beauty’ (the latter always in the proverbial ‘eye of the beholder’) are subjective and ambiguous terms, so inevitably the question is raised as to how readers were supposed to comprehend them. This may sound like a trivial point, but actually it is not: BHALLA herself spends considerable time arguing that we as viewers should not make religious and ethnic assumptions for certain sinners

punished in hell on the basis of their clothing and headgear (pp. 144–147). As a whole, BHALLA's 'alternative' reading of the Last Judgement is explored via well-presented case studies, each allowing for specific issues to be addressed – time, space, memory, gender, the relation between theology, text, and image. The common question seems to be how specific images would have been considered within their specific time and by the specific audience(s) for which they were created. The author correctly points out (p. 235) that the punishments which sinners suffer in hell suggest that corporeal punishment was a spectacle in Byzantium. Adding to this very constructive argument discussions of MICHEL FOUCAULT and of post-structuralism (p. 208) seems to me redundant.

While the two-volume collective study of *Hell in the Byzantine World* (2020) is cited in the bibliography, there is not a single reference to its treatment of the Chora *parekklesion*, of Saint Stephen in Kastoria, of Yılanlı Kilise, of Torcello, and of Giotto's Arena Chapel. All these monuments are explored by BHALLA, and since her book is so well researched, I can only assume that *Hell in the Byzantine World* was published at a point when *Experiencing the Last Judgement* was already with the publisher and when there was no possibility to revise its text. One wonders how certain arguments could have evolved, had the rich Cretan material been considered. Thus, BHALLA engages with gendered experience via the Yılanlı depiction of female sinners (p. 259). Looking at this image in isolation and within its specific context, one may argue that 'sexuality influenced the placement of the female gender in the hierarchy of the image but did not determine the placement of the male' (p. 285). However, a consideration of the numerous Cretan representations of punishment would probably modify such a conclusion. On Venetian Crete, fornicators of both sexes are the sinners most frequently included among those chastised in hell, appearing in no less than fifty-five times. Often, male and female fornicators are shown naked and standing next to each other. Some scholars have described the prominent exposure of male genitalia at eye-level within an Orthodox church as wholly inappropriate for a sacred space. On another occasion, BHALLA mentions that 'the figures represented in hell did not refer to specific individuals' (p. 143) – yet it is Crete again that offers us the example of a livestock thief, Leontis, named (and shamed) among the sinners at the late fourteenth or early fifteenth-century Church of the Virgin in Sklavopoula.

In sum, BHALLA's monograph sheds some new light on the wider meaning and function of Byzantine representations of the Last Judgement, Second Coming, Paradise, and Hell. Her work shows that such imagery continues to hold promise for future research.

Keywords

eschatology; iconography