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The Toll-Houses Myth in Religion, Folklore, Literature and Arts

The Bible is remarkably reticent about the post mortem fate of people who are not saints or great sinners. The need to fill in the gap in the West created the idea of purgatory and in the East it gave birth to the notion of toll-houses or stations of the souls after death. They reflect the various capital sins and feature angels and demons who quarrel about the deeds or misdeeds of the person committed on earth. One's eternal destiny is determined by weighing them on scales. In this paper I trace the origin of the toll-houses myth from the Egyptian Book of the dead and Gnosticism via Origen, the early church fathers to Asia Minor Paulicianism. The main means by which the myth entered Eastern Orthodox mentality is the life of doubtful St. Basil the New and the visions of his disciple Theodora. The tolls' reflection in folk legends, modern fiction, arts (the Balkans and Russia) is discussed on the basis of many examples. They can be interpreted as a dualist rite of passage aimed at negotiating the problems of theodicy and the anguish of death.