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Jesus' Descent into Hell

Preston McDaniel Hill and Catherine Ella Laufer

The Apostles' Creed affirms that, between his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ *descendit ad inferna*, 'descended to the realm of the dead' or, more traditionally, 'descended into hell'. Christians across time and history have expressed particular interpretations of this clause in liturgy, iconography, and formal doctrinal statements.

The Creed was developed during the early patristic period. Exactly when and why the so-called 'descensus clause' became part of the Creed is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that, despite its ambiguous inclusion in the Creed, the belief in Christ's descent into hell is among the earliest and most widespread of Christian beliefs in the first few centuries after the death of Jesus. Nevertheless, the creedal clause became the focus of intense theological discussion at certain times, and was almost ignored at others. This entry examines the scriptural basis of the clause and its development as part of the Creed. It then summarizes various interpretations of the clause by looking at significant writers in those periods when it was the subject of debate.

Although it is likely the clause was formally inserted into the Creed as a counter to heterodox christological beliefs such as Apollinarianism, its contemporary significance lies in its affirmation of Christ's genuine death and therefore of his resurrection, as opposed to a revivification. If Christ descended to the state of death, and experienced the worst of human suffering – 'hell' – it would mean that believers are never alone in suffering and give them hope in the midst of whatever hell they may face.

Keywords: Christian theology, Hell, Jesus Christ, Sheol, Hades, Death, Resurrection, Sin, Judgment, Salvation, Icons, Imagination

Table of contents

1 Introduction

To be human, in ordinary experience, is to die. That Jesus Christ – God incarnate – died, that as a man Jesus joined humanity in whatever the experience of death might be, is central to Christian faith, as is the belief that he was raised from death by God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit (many traditions also emphasize the agency of the Son himself in this act). Christian confessions of faith, including the ancient creeds, all make mention of Christ's death and resurrection. The period between the two events is referred to only in some confessions, including the Apostles' Creed which states that Christ '*crucifixus, mortuus et sepultus, descendit ad inferna*': 'was crucified, died and was buried, he descended to the dead/hell'.

The Latin phrase *descendit ad inferna*, the descensus clause, formally expresses the Christian belief that, between his death and resurrection, Jesus descended to the dead/hell (both translations are used; see section 2.1). There is no universal consensus on specific or obvious biblical foundations for the doctrine, nor on specifically how the clause came to be included in the Creed or how it is to be interpreted. The doctrine has been the focus of scholarly debate at various times; at others, it has disappeared from theological discourse almost entirely. This entry covers the development of the clause insofar as is known and the various interpretations that have been suggested. It concludes with a discussion of the doctrine's implications.

2 Bases of the doctrine

2.1 Language for the afterlife

For ancient peoples with premodern cosmological perspectives, the netherworld lay beneath the surface of the earth. *Hades* (Greek), *inferna* (Latin), or *sheol* (Hebrew) held both good and evil persons, in the same shadowy state. During the first two centuries CE, most Greeks and Romans thought of Hades as being divided into different regions for the good and the wicked, although the term *hades*/*inferna* referred to both simultaneously (Bauckham 1998; Bremmer 2014).

First-century Jews, like many people groups during these periods, held a diversity of views on the afterlife. The growth in the intertestamental period of apocalyptic literature which spoke of the bodily resurrection of the righteous at the end of time gave rise to a variety of beliefs about the afterlife and resurrection. The Pharisees and many of the ordinary people believed in an afterlife with rewards and punishments and in eschatological resurrection. The Sadducees denied any concept of an afterlife. Other groups held to variations of these views (Grabbe 1996: 73–74, 78–84; Sanders 1992: 298–303). The term *Sheol* continued to refer to the entirety of the underworld, including righteous and wicked alike.

English usually renders both the New Testament *hades* and the Apostles' Creed *inferna* as 'hell'. One reason for this is that the root of the word 'hell' comes from the Old English *helian*, to cover over something that is 'lower' or 'beneath' (the meaning of *inferna*). Until the eighteenth century, to 'hele over' something meant to cover it, and a roof tiler was a 'helliar' (Thomas 1951: 66). Like *hades*, *inferna*, and *sheol*, 'hell' originally meant 'the lower place', the underworld that is 'covered over' by worlds above, with no specific implication of punishment. However, it is important to note that, by the close of the second century CE, the distinction between a netherworld after death to which righteous and wicked alike go (*Hades*, *inferna*, *Sheol*) and a future eschatological place of punishment reserved only for the wicked (*Gehenna*) was no longer as clear as it had been. Thus, by the time of the Apostle's Creed, at least some readers would not have just thought of Jesus as descending 'to the dead' but rather 'into hell', which includes the notion of a place of punishment after death (Bauckham 1998).

2.2 Possible biblical references

While many biblical passages could be explored to support different Christian doctrines, the specific passages included here have played an important role in the history of Christian understanding of what it might mean that Jesus descended into hell. A particular writer's interpretation of a given passage does not necessitate a specific interpretation or understanding of the descent. There is rich variety in exegesis to support the descensus doctrine.

2.2.1 1 Peter 3:18b–20

1 Peter 3:18b–20 is frequently cited as a biblical basis for the doctrine. The first person recorded as reading it in reference to Christ's activity in Hades was Clement of Alexandria, at the end of the second century. Since then it has been debated extensively. There are two main issues: what is the temporal context of 'made alive in the spirit' (v. 18), and who are 'the spirits in prison' (v. 19)? A further concern is the meaning of 1 Pet 4:6, and how it relates to the earlier passage.

Clement's interpretation was that, while Christ was in Hades, he preached to the dead of the first covenant who believed and were saved (*Stromata* VI.6). By contrast, Augustine understood the phrase 'made alive in the spirit' to refer to the pre-incarnate Spirit of Christ preaching through Noah prior to the flood (*Epistle 164: To Euodius*). Martin Luther understood the phrase to refer to Christ's resurrection (Pelikan 1957: 113–114). For those following either Augustine's or Luther's view, the passage is not obviously relevant to Christ's descent. It is only if 'made alive in the spirit' is interpreted as occurring during Christ's entombment that the identity of the 'spirits in prison' becomes pertinent. These spirits have been equated variously with the disobedient pre-flood humans (and, by some,

all the damned); the penitent pre-flood humans (and, by some, all penitent souls); or the sons of God who intermarried with human women in Gen 6:1–4.

Most scholars who read the 1 Peter passage as referring to supernatural beings read it in the context of intertestamental literature. In particular, 1 Enoch, in which 'heaven' is not a single place but a series of 'heavens' including paradise, the place of torment of the wicked, and the prison of fallen angels. In this context, 1 Pet 3:18b–20 refers to the resurrected Christ ascending through the heavenly realms and proclaiming his triumph to the angels imprisoned in a lower heaven (Dalton 1989: 226–241). Under this view, 1 Pet 4:6 refers to normal preaching of the gospel to those who subsequently have died.

2.2.2 Ephesians 4:9

Christ's descent to 'the lower parts of the earth' was equated with the descent into Hades by Tertullian, Irenaeus, Chrysostom, and others of the patristic period. However, the context of a descent from heaven could ostensibly refer just as easily to the incarnation. This was the view of Theodore of Mopsuestia and is a common current interpretation (Harris 1996: 1–30).

A recent alternative interpretation is that these verses are speaking of the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. This view is grounded in the verse's quotation from Psalm 68, one of the readings for the Jewish feast of Shavuot (Pentecost) which is associated with the gift of Torah. In quoting Psalm 68:18, the author of Ephesians may well be drawing a parallel between Moses' ascent and subsequent descent of Mount Sinai with the gift of Torah and Christ's ascent into and subsequent descent from heaven with gifts for the church (Harris 1996).

2.2.3 Acts 2:24–27

In Acts 2:24–27, Peter asserts that Christ's soul had been in Sheol and that God had raised him up. Issues such as where and what exactly Sheol was, why Christ went there and what – if anything – he did there are not addressed by Peter. This passage is the clearest scriptural basis for the credal clause.

2.2.4 Matthew 12:40

In Matt 12:40, Jesus states that the only sign which will be given his hearers is the sign of Jonah. In first-century Jewish thought, the phrase 'heart of the earth' was a synonym for Sheol. The term 'abyss' was understood to mean either the sea (and thus the place of Jonah's three-day sojourn) or Sheol. Moreover, Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish describes his experience as one of going to Sheol (Jonah 2:2). Thus, this verse provides another scriptural basis for the credal clause, again without further explanation.

2.2.5 Romans 10:6–7

Paul's mention in Rom 10:6–7 of descent into the abyss (or Hades) to bring Christ up from the dead is polemic, part of his larger argument for justification, rather than an obvious doctrinal statement in its own right. Nonetheless, Paul's phraseology is seen by some as evidence of belief in Christ's descent into Hades (e.g. Dunn 1989: 184–187).

2.3 Post-biblical texts

There are too many apocryphal texts discussing Christ's descent into hell to recount here (for a definitive treatment, see MacCulloch 1930). However, two apocryphal texts from the patristic period (second to fourth century) describe Christ's activity during his descent and are useful for this entry: *The Questions of Bartholomew* and the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (Elliott 1993: 169–204, 655–668). The first tells how Bartholomew, watching the crucifixion, saw Jesus vanish from the cross. Meeting Jesus after the resurrection, Bartholomew asks him where he went. Jesus answers: 'I went down into Hades that I might bring up Adam and all those who were with him […] and came again to the cross' (*Questions of Bartholomew* 9, 20; Elliott 1993: 656, 657). Thus, according to this document, the descent occurred while Jesus was on the cross, not after his death.

Another apocryphal document purporting to be the work of Bartholomew also discusses the descent. A Coptic text from the fifth to sixth century, *The Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ by Bartholomew the Apostle* (Elliott 1993: 669–672) recounts how Death approached Jesus in the tomb. Jesus laughed at Death, 'wrought havoc in Hell, breaking the doors, binding the demons Beliar and Melkir and delivered Adam and the holy souls' (Elliott 1993: 669). According to this document, there were only three souls left in Hades after the resurrection: Herod, Cain, and Judas (Elliott 1993: 669).

The *Gospel of Nicodemus* is in two parts: *Acta Pilati* and *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* (Elliott 1993: 169–204). The latter dates from the second or third century and gives a dramatic account of the event, which lies behind patristic allusions to Christ in Hades (Elliott 1993: 185–204). It claims to be the eyewitness account of two brothers who had been raised from the dead as a result of Christ's resurrection. They describe John the Baptist entering Hades and telling its inhabitants of the baptism of Jesus who sent John to them. A voice like thunder quotes Ps 24:7–8: 'Lift up your gates, O rulers, and be lifted up, O everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in'. Hades responds, '[w]ho is this King of Glory?' and the angels answer, '[t]he Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle'. Jesus enters, deprives Satan of his powers, and leads Adam and the other Old Testament saints into Paradise where they are given into the keeping of the Archangel Michael and meet Enoch, Elijah, and the penitent thief. Finally, Michael appoints the two brothers to be raised and to preach the gospel (*Gospel of Nicodemus* 18.2, 21–22, 24.1, 25.1; Elliott 1993: 186–189).

These apocryphal texts exemplify the interpretation of the descent known as the ‘harrowing of hell’, from the Middle English *harrow*, to lay waste. According to this interpretation, as Christ rose from Hades and ascended to heaven he carried with him the saints of the first covenant whom he freed from Hades. This view was common amongst the fathers and is expressed in the iconography and liturgy of the Eastern Church (it was also present in Western churches prior to the Reformation). Thus the icon of the resurrection shows Christ taking Adam and Eve by the hand as he rises, with various figures from the Hebrew scriptures in the background following him.

3 The credal clause

3.1 Development of the Apostles’ Creed

The precise origins of the Creed are unclear. It developed over time with variations in different regions. One such variation is the descensus clause, possibly inserted to refute the Apollinarian heresy (Kelly 1972). To proclaim that Christ descended to the place of the dead after his death may imply the presence of a human soul capable of such descent, and thus assert the humanity of Christ’s soul, contrary to Apollinarius’ view that Christ’s body was enlivened by the divine Logos, not a human soul.

The first appearance of the descensus clause in a creed is in the Fourth Formula of Sirmium, 359 CE (Badcock 1938: 105). It also appeared at roughly the same time in the formulae of Nike in Thrace and Constantinople (Badcock 1938: 105). All three creeds are in Greek. The clause next appears in Latin in the baptismal creed of Aquileia, cited by Rufinus around 404 CE (Badcock 1938: 105). The Creed of Jerome, a contemporary of Rufinus, also contains the clause, as does the Creed of Venantius Fortunatus in the late sixth century (Badcock 1938: 99–100).

By the mid-seventh century the phrase had travelled south to Rome, where it appears in a later form of the Roman Creed, known as T, as *descendit ad inferos*. By the end of the seventh century, references to the descent occurred in a number of credal documents throughout western Christendom: the *Quicumque vult* or Athanasian Creed (circa 480), the Bobio Missal (Irish, 630–640), the Bangor Antiphonary (Irish, 680–691), and the Gallican Missal (around 700; Badcock 1938: 145–146, 156). With its appearance in Ireland, the movement of the descensus clause in the church from east to west was complete.

Though the Latin constructions vary, they all translate to ‘he descended into hell’: *descendit ad inferna, descendit ad inferos, descendit ad infernum* and *ab inferis resurrectionis* occur in different documents (Badcock 1938: 156). The two root words in these expressions, *infernus* and *inferos*, are synonyms for the underworld, the place beneath the surface of the earth, the realm of the dead. *Descendit ad inferna* became the standard form.

3.2 Patristic commentary

The doctrine of Christ's descent was part of Christian thought long before it was included in credal formularies. Many of the Fathers refer to the descent, some briefly, others at length (Wicks 2008: 281–309). All take it as a given doctrine, part of Christ's salvific act.

For the most part, the church fathers understood the descent as the harrowing of hell. Exactly how this worked and by whom the idea was first propounded is not known. Mentions of it predate the apocryphal documents described above. As early as the end of the first century, Ignatius of Antioch writes of the prophets awaiting Christ and being raised by him (*Epistle to the Magnesians*, 9). While Ignatius refers only to the righteous of the first covenant (mainly Jews, but presumably including some non-Jews such as Job), later church fathers address the issue of righteous non-Jews beyond the confines of the first covenant. At the same time, the fathers begin to speak of Christ preaching in Hades. For example, Irenaeus (late second century) states that Christ came for all those who, in their own time, feared and loved God, dealt justly with others, and looked forward to Christ's coming (*Against Heresies*, IV.22.2). Christ descended beneath the earth to preach to all righteous souls, both Jews and Gentiles (*Against Heresies*, IV.27.2).

The Fathers make extensive reference to the Hebrew scriptures – especially the Psalms, Hosea (especially Hos 13:14), and Jonah – in their discussions of the descent. The Psalms in particular are seen as foretelling Christ's sojourn in Hades and his activity there. Thus Rufinus states that Christ's descent into Hades was prophesied in the Psalms, citing 15:10; 21:16; 29:4, 10; 68:3 (1955: section 28). In commenting on the descent, Rufinus uses the analogy of a king entering a dungeon and releasing the prisoners (1955: section 17). In his resurrection, Christ brought with him 'spoils from hell […] those whom death held prisoners' (Rufinus 1955: section 29), though Rufinus does not clearly specify who these were beyond calling them 'friends of the king'. For Rufinus (and for the majority of the Fathers), Christ's descent is not merely an aspect of his humiliation or suffering. It is rather an affirmation of his triumphant solidarity and presence with humanity in death (present as the king is present in the dungeon, not as a prisoner), and thus is a preliminary to his resurrection and glorification. The descent is a consequence of the atonement that Christ has already accomplished; as a result, the prisoners can be 'discharged from punishment' (Rufinus 1955: section 17).

Cyril of Jerusalem includes the descent in a list of doctrines to be explained to those preparing for baptism. He discusses the descent in several of his *Catechetical Lectures*, delivered in 347–348. In the fourth lecture he states that Christ 'went down into the regions beneath the earth, that thence also He might redeem the righteous' (*Catechetical Lectures* IV.11; Cyril of Jerusalem 1980: 22). Cyril states that those living during and after the Lord's

lifetime ‘enjoy His grace’, therefore it is reasonable that the righteous who lived before Christ should be delivered from death (*Catechetical Lectures* IV.11).

In Lecture 14, Cyril draws a parallel between Jonah’s sojourn in the sea monster and that of Christ in hell, an understanding that was common amongst the fathers and some later writers. Cyril points out that it would be physically impossible for Jonah to survive in the conditions of a fish’s stomach but that the ‘power of God descended with Jonas’ and preserved him (*Catechetical Lectures* XIV.18). If God could exercise his power to give life to his mortal servant, goes the argument, surely he could do the same for himself. Cyril concludes that, as Jonah was preserved in the fish, so also Christ was raised from hell, ascending ‘with a great company; for […] many bodies of the saints which slept arose through him’ (*Catechetical Lectures* XIV.18; cf. Matt 27:52–53).

Augustine of Hippo discusses the descent in a letter he wrote to Euodius, bishop of Uzalis in Africa, who had enquired about the spirits in prison referred to in 1 Pet 3:19. Augustine’s reply (*Epistle 164*; see 1887b) indicates that he does not relate the 1 Peter passage to the descent, but he does affirm the harrowing of hell, citing Ps 16:10 as well as Acts 2:24 and 2:27 in support of it. Augustine argues that, while Christ rescued some from hell, this does not imply that he rescued all those imprisoned there. It is worth noting that Augustine does not mention the descent in his works on the creed (*Of Faith and the Creed*, 1887c; *A Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed*, 1887a), as it appears that the creed Augustine used did not include the descensus clause.

While the great majority of the fathers accept the doctrine of the descent, at the end of the fourth century Philastrius (or Filaster), bishop of Brescia in northern Italy, included belief in the descent in a catalogue of heresies (Connell 2001: 265–266). By contrast, the bishop of Aquileia – Philastrius’ contemporary Chromatius – emphasized ‘the universality of salvation brought about by the descent’ while preaching at the Easter vigil (Connell 2001: 267–268). Although Brescia and Aquileia are in the same region, the episcopal disagreement may have geographical origins: Philastrius was a western Christian from Italy and Chromatius came from the east – as did the descensus clause in Aquileia’s creed. Some of these differences in understanding Christ’s experience or activity during his death, and their results, remain to the present day. The Eastern Church continues to affirm Christ’s descent to (and harrowing of) Hades in its liturgy, theology, and iconography, even though these are not mentioned explicitly in eastern credal formularies. Western traditions are more diverse, with some containing a degree of hesitancy at expressing the idea of Christ descending into hell.

4 The medieval period

4.1 Theological writings

A variety of interpretations of the descent into hell appeared during the medieval period (Hill Forthcominga). Medieval theologians often viewed the descent as the harrowing of hell. In some sense, this was a logical necessity: no one could enter heaven before Christ's salvific death; the patriarchs and prophets looked forward to Christ's atonement and were righteous; they therefore had to await Christ's death somewhere; Christ therefore had to rescue them from where they waited. That Christ rescued some from Hades – that he 'harrowed hell' – was thus a given. The question was who, precisely, was included in the harrowing: was it only the righteous of the first covenant? What of virtuous pagans who had no opportunity to hear of Christ? Another issue related to the hypostatic union: was it only Christ's human soul which descended, or did his divine nature also descend? The hypostatic union implies that the two cannot be separated, yet how can the divine nature enter hell? Many of the greatest minds of medieval Christendom addressed these questions: Gregory the Great, John Scotus Erigena, Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, Hugh of St Victor, John Duns Scotus, and, particularly, Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* [*ST*] 1965: 153–179).

However, there are notable exceptions to this exclusive focus on the harrowing of hell. For example, some mystical and syncretistic theologians (e.g. Nicholas of Cusa, Pico Mirandolla, and eventually Faber Stapulensis) speculated that Christ suffered the second death of the soul in his descent into hell, a view which was tempered, refined, and popularized in the Reformation through the writings of Luther, Erasmus, and Calvin (Hill 2022). The logic of this idea is that Christ's vicarious substitution included the descent into hell. Just as Christ suffered the death of the body as the wages of sin, so too Christ suffered the punishment due to the soul. Christ is a complete substitute, taking both bodily and spiritual death in his own crucifixion and descent into hell (Howsare 2017).

This view is consistently expressed by Aquinas. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas lays out two reasons why it was fitting for Christ to descent into hell (expanded to four reasons in his *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*): (1) to bear the fullness of humanity's penalty for sin, which meant dying a bodily death to save humanity from bodily death as well as descending into hell to save humanity from hell; and (2) to overthrow the devil and deliver hell's captives. It is worth noting that Aquinas here expresses both a descent-as-humiliation and descent-as-triumph view. Overall, Aquinas' discussion emphasizes the centrality of Christ's passion: Christ won his victory in his death; his descent and activity in hell are the result of that victory (*ST* 3a52.6; 1965: 173).

While the first reason relates to the penal substitution theme for the descent into hell, the second relates to the triumphant and harrowing of hell theme for the descent. Regarding the harrowing of hell, Aquinas clarifies how the descent relates to the hypostatic union and two natures of Christ. As regards the hypostatic union, Aquinas states that Christ's soul and body, although separated in death, were not separated from his divinity as Son of

God. The ‘whole Christ’ was present in hell, meaning not just the human soul of Christ but the human soul united to the divine Person, the second member of the Trinity (*ST* 3a52.3; 1965: 163).

Aquinas then lists the possible subjects of the harrowing: the patriarchs, unbaptized infants who died in original sin, souls in purgatory, and/or the damned (*ST* 3a.52). The damned were ‘put down and confounded’, but ‘consolation and deliverance’ were brought to the righteous ‘who were joined to Christ’s passion in faith vivified by love, which takes away sin’ (*ST* 3a52.6; 1965: 173).

The issue regarding unbaptized infants was the reality of original sin and its direct consequence for the unbaptized – exclusion from the presence of God. For Aquinas there were only two means of deliverance from this: faith in Christ’s passion (as shown by the patriarchs) and baptism. Unbaptized infants had missed out on the latter and did not yet have reason for the former; therefore they remained in hell (*ST* 3a52.7; 1965: 175–177). Similarly, the descent does not effect an emptying of purgatory. Only those souls whose purgation time was at an end would have been released. ‘Christ’s passion did not have a greater efficacy then than it has now’ (*ST* 3a52.8; 1965: 179).

4.2 The descent in art

The harrowing of hell was a favourite subject of all forms of medieval art: visual, musical, literary, and dramatic. It was a theme of Easter hymns and devotional works. It is described in Dante’s imaginative poem *The Divine Comedy*, in which Christ’s death results not only in the descent and harrowing but also in an earthquake in hell, presumably part of the same quake mentioned in Matt 27:51 (Dante Alighieri 1980: 36–45).

The visual representations of the harrowing are illustrations of hell’s conquest, symbolized primarily by its broken gates. Christ stands as victor and behind or beside him are the faithful whom he is leading out of their imprisonment. In some versions, the gates are fallen in the shape of a cross; in others, Christ holds his cross as a victory banner. Such depictions can be found in medieval sculpture and stained glass as well as painting. Albrecht Dürer made two series of woodcuts of scenes from Christ’s Passion, both of which include depictions of Christ harrowing hell. These portray Christ inside the gates of hell, holding the banner of the resurrection in one hand and reaching down to pull John the Baptist from the pit with the other. Behind Christ stand Adam and Eve, already released.

The scene is still familiar in the icon ‘ὁ ἀνάστασις’ (*anastasis*), ‘The Resurrection’. The title of this icon indicates an important aspect of the theology behind it: the harrowing of hell is part of the narrative arc of Christ’s glorification out of humiliation, not his humiliation alone.

The harrowing of hell was also depicted in the mystery plays which were a feature of medieval European life. The plays were in the vernacular, performed annually either during

Whitsuntide or on Corpus Christi. They were seen by the whole populace, many of whom acted in them. Attending the plays was seen as a religious activity akin to going to Mass (Laufer 2013: 61–62).

Each town or region had its own cycle of plays. While there were variations on which 'events' were included, all cycles incorporated Christ's death and resurrection. Between these two plays was a third, the harrowing of hell. The drama was based on the *Gospel of Nicodemus* with Christ entering hell, conquering Satan, and releasing the saints (e.g. Stevens 1987).

5 The Reformation

The Reformation was a time of profound upheaval and rapid change in European economics, religious life, and society. During this time, several early modern thinkers and leaders advocated for distinct interpretations of the descent into hell that represent the acceleration in varieties of religious identity and theology. The writings of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and debates in England are representative of the development of the topic in this period.

5.1 Martin Luther

In Eastertide of 1533, Luther preached at Torgau on Christ's descent and its portrayal in hymns, paintings, and plays (Luther 1976). According to the 'Torgau sermon', the artistic images of the descent help the Christian understand the Creed's article which teaches that even hell and the devil cannot harm those who have faith in Christ.

Luther reads the *descensus* clause as part of the next statement: 'Descended into hell, on the third day arose from the dead'. Traditionally, according to this sermon, Luther understands the descent not as an aspect of Christ's humiliation but his triumph. This is best expressed in the arts: painting, drama, hymnology. Most of the sermon is, in effect, a theological reflection upon such depictions of the descent, especially in the visual arts:

> […] it has been the custom to represent in fresco-painting how Christ went down, clad in a priestly robe and with a banner in His hand – how He reaches hell and with His banner beats and drives out the devil, takes hell by storm and delivers His followers. […] through Christ, hell has been torn to pieces and the devil's kingdom and power utterly destroyed […] although hell itself remains hell and holds captive the unbelieving. (Luther 1976: 45–47)

Luther describes the theological debates about the descent as 'far-fetched and useless' (1976: 46). He treats the descent as a mystery, best expressed in picturesque

ways. When Christ ‘comes down with His banner’, devils flee ‘and all hell with its fire becomes extinguished’ (1976: 47).

Luther’s understanding as expressed in the Torgau sermon became part of the confessional base of Lutheranism in the Formula of Concord (completed in 1577, first published 1580):

> […] let us follow the godly teaching of Dr. Luther, who, in his discourse held at Torgau in the year 1533, unfolded this article […] Christ descended into hell, that he destroyed hell for all believers, and that we through him have been snatched from the power of death and Satan, from eternal damnation, and even from the jaws of hell. (Schaff 1878: 160)

Since then, Luther’s sermon in Torgau has been the criterion of orthodox Lutheran interpretation of the descensus clause. On this basis, English-speaking Lutherans in the twentieth century refused to accept the new translation of the descensus clause – ‘He descended to the dead’ – causing some consternation in ecumenical discussions.

However, despite the influence of the Torgau sermon on contemporary Lutheran orthodoxy, Luther’s original views of the descent into hell emphasized Christ’s humiliation and suffering more than his triumph and victory (Bagchi 2008). Luther discusses Christ’s distress in the garden of Gethsemane and his cry of dereliction from the cross as central expressions for what it means that Christ ‘descended into hell’. It is less common for scholars to discuss this aspect of Luther, an aspect which merits better understanding and further research (Hill Forthcominga).

5.2 John Calvin

Calvin locates his descensus interpretation within his theology of the atonement. The descent is an essential part of Christ’s atonement, in that Christ suffered not only bodily death in his crucifixion but also endured the death of the soul in his descent into hell, in order to redeem humanity from both physical and spiritual death (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.xvi.8; 1949: 441–442).

For Calvin, viewing hell as a place beneath the earth where souls of the dead are imprisoned is ‘childish’, ‘a fable’ (*Institutes*, II.xvi.9; 1949: 442). While Calvin rejects the extravagant details of the ‘fable’ of Christ as harrower of hell, he does interpret the descent in relation to Christ’s preaching to the spirits in his earliest edition of the Institutes (Hill Forthcominga). Nevertheless, the focus of his interpretation is on Christ’s passion and death. Calvin understands the descent as Christ experiencing ‘in his soul the tortures of condemned and ruined man’ (*Institutes*, II.xvi.10; 1949: 443). Hell, understood by Calvin as a condition of inner torment, is part of the condition of sinners. As Christ bore the full

experience of humanity's fallen condition to redeem humanity, he must have experienced hell in this psychological sense (*Institutes*, II.xvi.10). Christ's physical death was obvious but this aspect of his suffering was not. It needed to be included in the Creed so that the faithful could know that Christ suffered the full punishment for sin, including the torments of hell (*Institutes*, II.xvi.11). According to Calvin, Christ experienced this descent into hell most pointedly in the garden of Gethsemane, in the cry of dereliction, and he even insinuates that Christ continued his saving activity on Holy Saturday (*Institutes*, II.xvi.11; Hill Forthcominga).

5.3 Debates in England

The influence of both Calvin and Luther was felt in England (Wallace 1978). Thus, English reformation debates were three-sided arguments among Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics. One focal point was the interpretation of the descensus clause. The changing views of the Church of England can be traced through developments of Article III of the Articles of Religion, 'Of the going down of Christ into Hell'. The Articles were drafted by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VII and Edward VI, and signed by the six royal chaplains in 1552. At that time, Article III read:

> As Christ died and was buried for us, so also it is to be believed, that he went down into hell. For the body lay in the sepulchre until the resurrection, but his Ghost departing from him was with the Ghosts that were in prison, or in hell, and did preach to the same, as the place of St. Peter doth testify. But Christ the Lord by his descent liberated none from their prisons and torments. (Cloquet 1885: 39)

Several changes were made to the Articles before publication in 1543, including the deletion of the final sentence of Article III.

During the reign of Catholic Queen Mary, the Articles were ignored. Under Elizabeth I, they went through a major revision, including the removal of all but the first sentence of Article III which has remained unchanged to the present day.

The reduction of the Article's wording to the bare minimum – avowing only that Christ descended to hell, without any interpretation – was the result of disputes about the descent between Catholics, reformers, and Puritans during Elizabeth's reign (MacBride 1853: 129–130). Stating only the fact of the descent allowed each group to interpret it as they wished.

However, there were also some in England who denied the descent entirely. The first to do so was Reginald Pecock, Bishop of Chichester in the fifteenth century. Pecock's view was that, as the descensus clause has no explicit basis in scripture and is not

present in the earliest forms of the Creed, it must be an addition of the later church. His discussions of the clauses of the Creed omit the descensus clause. Based on his denial of the clause, Pecock was tried and condemned as a heretic. He recanted and, instead of being executed, his works were burnt and he was kept under arrest in a monastery until his death (Green 1945).

A century after Pecock, Christopher Carlile, a clergyman of the Church of England, also maintained that Christ did not descend into hell. Carlile argued that, if Christ descended, it must have been in body, in soul, or in Godhead. His body was in the grave, his soul in paradise, and his Godhead was omnipresent, as much in the interval between his death and resurrection as at other times. As no part of Christ could descend to hell, he did not do so. Moreover, if Christ descended into hell, he must have delivered the faithful, the unfaithful, both, or neither. The faithful were in heaven, a view Carlile maintained in contradiction to theologians from the Fathers to his own time, who had assumed that heaven was closed even to the patriarchs until Christ's resurrection. Christ could not have delivered the unfaithful as there is no redemption in hell. As Christ delivered none from hell, his descent was in vain, an impossibility for any act of Christ. Therefore, the descent did not occur (Carlile 1582).

6 The twentieth century

Between the Reformation and the twentieth century, discussion of the descent was limited to occasional publications on the Apostles' Creed. Those which included commentary on the descensus clause reiterated earlier interpretations. In the twentieth century the descent was again a topic of theological discourse, now with a distinctly trinitarian emphasis.

6.1 Karl Barth

As a Swiss reformed theologian, Karl Barth follows Calvin in his discussion of the descent. This is explicit in the title of his commentary on the Creed, 'according to Calvin's catechism' (Barth 1958). Barth sees the descent as 'the inward explanation' of the previous credal clauses which describe what happened 'outwardly' in Christ's death and burial (1958: 81). According to Calvin's catechism, the cry of dereliction shows Christ in agony but he 'did not cease to hope in the Father' (1958: 80). However, Barth argues that Christ did experience total despair:

> The descent into hell deals with Jesus Christ cast into despair, into distress of conscience, into that feeling that God is against him. […] Christ's] soul goes to hell, that is, into remoteness from God […] In our place the Christ suffered that situation which ought to

> have been ours. Our lives too know despair. But it is not, it is no longer, that total despair suffered by Jesus Christ alone. (Barth 1958: 81)

Barth examines the descent in more detail in the *Church Dogmatics* (*CD*), where he argues that Jesus endured the second death, eternal corruption, hell:

> […] the death to which we all move implies the threat of eternal corruption. [… Jesus] suffered *eternal* corruption. This is what distinguishes His death from all others. […] the last 'loud cry' with which Jesus died […] points beyond the comfortless but tolerable situation of the righteous man of the Old Testament […] the realm of the dead […] becomes 'hell'. Here the alienation from God becomes an annihilatingly painful existence in opposition to Him. Here being in death becomes punishment, torment, outer darkness, the worm, the flame – all eternal as God Himself […]. (*CD* III.2; Barth 1960: 602–603)

Thus Barth essentially repeats Calvin: Jesus' descent is into hell, occurs on the cross, and is integral to his substitutionary atonement. Because he suffered hell, believers are no longer under threat of eternal punishment (*CD* IV.1; 1956: 253–254).

6.2 Hans Urs von Balthasar

For Hans Urs von Balthasar, Christ's descent to the dead (Holy Saturday in Balthasar's preferred terminology) is integral to Christology. As God incarnate, Jesus is God in solidarity with sinful humanity in every aspect of human experience, including the experience of death. Without the descent, understood as solidarity with the dead, Christ's redemption of sinners would be incomplete. This is not due to a lack in the suffering of the cross but rather to Christ taking upon himself all the penalties of sin in both body and soul (Balthasar 1990: 161). The physical penalty of sin is physical death; the soul's penalty is exclusion from the eternal presence of God (1990: 164).

Holy Saturday is the culmination of the Son's sense of being abandoned by the Father. Balthasar equates this experience with what he calls the *visio mortis* (vision of death), the ultimate punishment of sin:

> Christ's suffering […] was like that of the damned […] his suffering went to the length of infernal punishment […]. (Balthasar 1990: 170)

Although Jesus is solitary amongst the dead, Holy Saturday is a trinitarian event. Just as the Father sent the Son into the world to save it instead of judging it, so the Father also

sends the Son into the place of the dead. Because the Son has endured the *visio mortis*, the Spirit is sent so that redeemed humanity may enjoy the beatific vision (1990: 175).

The liberation of the captive dead (the harrowing of hell) is not an activity of Christ on Holy Saturday, since he is totally passive during that time. Rather, it is an outcome of his resurrection, as per the traditional icon entitled ‘The Resurrection’ (1990: 180).

Further consequences follow from Christ’s presence in Hades and his resurrection from it, including the very existence of hell. Balthasar is clear that, on Holy Saturday, Christ is in the Sheol of the Old Testament in which there is no distinction between good and evil, no state of torment or bliss, only solitary existence separated from God. Jesus’ solidarity is with the unredeemed dead for, up to this point, there had been neither redemption nor damnation, as it was impossible to make a definitive decision for or against Christ before his coming. Hell, the state of those who decide against Christ, is a function of the Christ event (1990: 161, 164, 171–172). It is important to note that, despite his ambitious developments of Catholic tradition regarding the descent, Balthasar’s theology of Holy Saturday has received stringent critiques that demonstrate the provocative quality of his interpretation (Pitstick 2007).

6.3 Jürgen Moltmann

Although Jürgen Moltmann does not discuss the descent as such in *The Crucified God* (1974), it is implicit in his discussion of the cry of dereliction. His understanding is essentially that of Calvin: the descent into hell is a way of describing Christ’s suffering on the cross as enunciated in the cry of dereliction. For Moltmann, this suffering is trinitarian. The Son suffers forsakenness in his dying, the Father suffers the surrendering of the Son and grief at the Son’s death, and the Spirit proceeds from this event of boundless love (1974: 244, 246).

For Moltmann, the experience of God-forsakenness, of being ‘abandoned and delivered up to death as one rejected’ by the God one simultaneously knows as gracious and loving ‘is the torment of hell’ (1974: 148). This is not only a post-death experience: certain experiences in life are hellish. According to Moltmann, the cry of dereliction shows that Christ himself suffered hell in this life as other humans do. Because Christ endured this hell alone, believers are no longer alone when in the midst of hellish suffering, for Christ is with them. ‘Christ experiences death and hell in solitude. His followers experience it in his company. That is no substitution, but a liberation […] from impossible burdens and from solitude’ (1974: 263).

In his later work *The Coming of God* (1996), Moltmann grounds an explicit universalism in the doctrine of Christ’s descent. The primary argument against universalism is the existence of biblical texts which describe a double outcome of the last judgment; that is,

some will be damned and some saved. Moltmann does not deny the reality of damnation or hell but he places them on the cross of Christ. Judgment occurs at the cross where Christ suffers one outcome – damnation and hell – and in so doing ensures that humanity will experience the other – salvation and the eternal presence of God (1996: 251). As Christ has been raised from hell, therefore 'hell and death have been gathered up and ended in God' (1996: 252).

For both Balthasar and Moltmann, the descent is a trinitarian event. The major point of difference is their understanding of the relationship between Christ's descent 'to hell' and hell itself. For Balthasar, Christ in death descends 'to the dead'; hell exists as a consequence of this descent. Later, however, in Balthasar's mature theology, he asserts that this descent entailed Christ's experience of alienation from the Father, essentially repeating the mystical ideas from Nicholas of Cusa that were later tempered during the teaching of the Reformers. For Moltmann, Christ descends 'to hell' on the cross; hell ceases to exist as a result. These positions represent the two poles of late twentieth-century discussion about hell and judgment: either the work of Christ destroyed hell so that it no longer exists except as 'hell on earth', or else hell, understood as separation from God, is self-chosen.

7 The dying thief

One major issue with the doctrine of the descent is that it appears to contradict the words of Jesus to the dying thief: 'Today I say to you, you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43). At the point of death, it is unclear how Jesus can simultaneously descend to Hades and accompany the thief in paradise.

The Greek text of Luke has no punctuation. Therefore, 'today' could qualify either 'will be' or 'say'. If 'say', then the sentence can be translated: 'Today I say to you, you will be with me in paradise'. This translation removes the problem: the thief is promised paradise but without any time frame attached to the promise. However, the majority of scholars read 'today' as relating to 'will be': 'I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise', hence the problem.

The first person to note the contradiction between the promise and the credal clause was Origen. He offers two possible solutions. His first suggestion is that Jesus may have taken the thief to paradise before descending to Hades (Tollinton 1929: 221). The problem (not noted by Origen) is that Jesus died before the thief. Origen's alternative solution involves reinterpreting 'today'. He points out that, in Scripture, 'today' often means the present age. Jesus' promise then means that, 'in this present age, before the world to come, [Jesus] would cause [the thief] to be with Him in the Kingdom of God' (Tollinton 1929: 221–222).

Hilary of Poitiers argued that the Son remained in heaven even during his incarnation, and similarly during the descent (*On the Trinity* X.34). This resolves the apparent contradiction between the promise to the dying thief and the doctrine of the descent based on the incarnation itself. Since the Son became 'truly human', he was able to descend into hell in virtue of his human nature while also remaining omnipresent during his incarnation in virtue of his divine nature.

Thomas Aquinas offers another solution. 'Paradise' is not a physical location; rather, it refers to the spiritual state of enjoying the divine presence. The thief went to Hades where Christ was and so was in the divine presence. Thus, for him, Hades was paradise because Christ was present there (ST 3a52.4; 1965: 163).

Contemporary scholars who address the issue generally take one of three positions. A minority translate Jesus' promise as: 'Today I say to you'. Some follow Aquinas: the thief was with Christ in Hades which he perceived as 'paradise' because he was in the presence of Christ. Alternatively, Christ and the thief were in the section of Hades reserved for the just, that is, paradise, or what is also called the 'limbo of the Fathers' and is a natural paradise where saints wait for Christ to lead them into the supernatural paradise of heaven. Others read Jesus' promise in the context of the thief's request to be included in the kingdom of God. If this is understood as the eschatological kingdom, then 'today' in Jesus' promise can be understood as referring to eschatological time, to eternity (Laufer 2013: 195). This is a form of Origen's understanding of 'today'.

8 The place of the descent in Christology

Scholars have held six distinct understandings of the descensus clause:

(1) The clause should not be in the Creed because the doctrine it espouses is false. The small minority holding this view translate the clause as 'he descended into hell', with hell understood as the state of punishment of the wicked. They dispute the interpretation that Christ suffered the torments of the damned.
(2) The minimalist position: Christ died a fully human death, in soul as well as body.
(3) Christ went to paradise, the abode in Hades of just souls.
(4) Christ experienced the torments of the damned, either on the cross or in the place/state of damned souls.
(5) The clause relates to the proclamation of Christ's triumph in the realm of the dead.
(6) The clause refers to the 'harrowing of hell', Christ's release of certain souls from a place/state of detention and his carrying them with him to heaven in triumph over the devil, death, and hell.

These views are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, Balthasar (1990) creatively combines interpretations 2, 4, 5, and 6. Jesus was in solidarity with all humanity

in death as in life, dying a truly human death. In Sheol, he suffered the full penalty of human sin, exclusion from God's presence and the *visio mortis*. His presence in Sheol is itself a proclamation of the gospel to all imprisoned there. As a result, when Christ is raised by the Father, the dead are liberated (Balthasar 1990).

However, the significance of the descensus clause for Christology goes beyond its various interpretations. Its exclusion from Christian belief would potentially result either in an incomplete incarnation or in revivification instead of resurrection.

If there is no affirmation that Jesus descended to the dead but only that his body was entombed, then it is quite consistent to hold to the Apollinarian view that Christ's person comprised a divine intellect 'within' a human body. Bodily death would free the divine intellect to return to its origin. Only a human intellect can descend to the state of death when the body dies. To affirm that Christ descends into hell is thus to affirm that Christ possesses a human intellect capable of such descent. The descensus clause thus affirms the hypostatic union and the fully human incarnation of the Son.

Moreover, without the affirmation of the descent, Jesus need not truly die on the cross. The entombed body could be in a coma; then, the resurrection becomes resuscitation. The descensus clause affirms that the death of Jesus was a fully human death; consequently, the resurrection was not just a restoration of life but a transformation into a new form of being human, as Paul discusses in 1 Cor 15:42–57.

9 The Eastern Orthodox understanding of the descent

While western Christendom has debated the meaning of Christ's descent, the Orthodox Church has upheld the harrowing of hell. In the Eastern Church, uniquely, liturgical texts have become an expression of doctrine. The descent holds a significant place in Orthodox liturgy, especially the liturgies of Easter where the harrowing of hell is integral to the celebration of Christ's resurrection:

> Christ's victory over hell, the deliverance of Adam and of the righteous men of the Old Testament is the main theme of the Divine Service of Great Saturday; it runs through all the Easter service and is inseparable from the glorification of Christ's Resurrection in the flesh. (Ouspensy and Lossky 1989, cited in Laufer 2013: 88)

Since Christ's descent, Hades or hell has become 'a place of divine presence' (Alfeyev 2009: 211). Through the harrowing of hell, 'Christ granted to *all* the possibility of salvation and opened for all the doors to paradise' (Alfeyev 2009: 208, original emphasis). This includes not only those who died before Christ, but all humanity. While Christ's descent

and subsequent ascent opened heaven to all, there are different opinions amongst Orthodox theologians as to whether all will ultimately choose to respond.

10 Implications of the doctrine of the descent

10.1 Universalist implications

Ever since Origen in the third century, universalism has been a minor motif in Christian theology. Origen does not use the descent to defend his views; however, later writers appeal to both Origen and the doctrine of the descent to support universal salvation. There are two aspects to the argument. The first relates to the harrowing of hell. If Christ released souls from Hades, then the ultimate release of all souls is at least a possibility. This is essentially the position of the Orthodox Church. In the west, some who hold this view relate it to Origen's concept of *apokatastasis panton*, universal restoration, the belief (based on 1 Cor 15: 24–28) that every human being will ultimately share in the eternal presence of God (*De Principiis*, I.6.1).

Universalism is an attempt to address the issue of the fate of those who have never heard of Christ or whose knowledge of him is inadequate for them to commit themselves to him. While the harrowing of hell traditionally refers only to the righteous of the first covenant, it leaves open the possibility of the release of others, not only those who lived before Christ but also those who have lived since (e.g. Sarot 2018: 199–206).

The second universalist interpretation of the descent is a recent development, based on the understanding that, if Christ is present among the dead/in hell, then that state is no longer 'hell' (understood as separation from the presence of God) because God the Son is there. Christ's descent then becomes the destruction of the state of hell. Emil Brünner, an early proponent of a form of this view, maintained that, because Christ suffered the pains of hell, believers do not need to: 'Jesus Christ has gone into hell in order to get us out of there' (1961: 83). Moreover, when we feel ourselves to be forsaken by God, or in hell, then Christ is with us and 'because he is with us, there is therefore indeed no hell' (1961: 82).

More recently, Jürgen Moltmann has expressed a similar understanding. As outlined above, Moltmann argues that Christ suffered damnation and hell on the cross and as a result all humanity will ultimately enjoy God's eternal presence (1996: 251–252). Moltmann grounds his position in the doctrine of the descent and relates it to the *apokatastasis*:

> […] in his suffering and dying Christ suffered the true and total hell of God-forsakenness for the reconciliation of the world, and experienced for us the true and total damnation of sin. […] it is Christ's descent into hell that is the ground for the confidence that […] everything will be […] gathered into the eternal kingdom of God. (Moltmann 1996: 251)

As a result of this understanding of the descent, hell ceases to be hell. If Christ has experienced hell, then hell is no longer God-forsaken for God the Son is there; if Christ has descended into hell, then he is present in every human experience of hell, hence hell is no longer a solitary experience; and if Christ has been raised from hell, then 'hell and death have been gathered up and ended in God' (Moltmann 1996: 252). Consequently, since Christ's resurrection, 'there is no longer any such thing as "being damned for all eternity"' (Moltmann 1996: 254).

Some theologians do not go as far as an all-inclusive universalism but instead hope that all will ultimately be saved. This position is based on acknowledging two series of scriptural texts, one speaking of eternal punishment and the other of the salvation of all. Given the first group of texts, it is argued that one cannot deny the possibility of eternal separation from God. However, given the second set of passages, hope in universal salvation is legitimate. This position was taken by a number of nineteenth-century scholars, including Frederic W. Farrar who coined the term 'eternal hope' in his treatise with that title (Farrar 1878).

This is the position held by Balthasar, spelt out in detail in his 1988 essays *Dare We Hope 'That All Men Be Saved'?* and *A Short Discourse on Hell*. Given that there are two series of texts, and that neither invalidates the other, Balthasar thinks we must both acknowledge the possibility of hell and hope that all will be saved (Balthasar 1988: 163, 186–187).

10.2 Pastoral implications

A universalist interpretation of the doctrine of the descent can, in and of itself, provide some pastoral comfort. If all will, ultimately, rest in God's presence as a result of Christ's descent, then we do not need to fear for either our own eternal destiny or that of those we love (the issue of accountability for evil is another matter, related to universalism *per se* rather than specifically to the descent). However, since patristic times, the doctrine has been used to offer comfort quite aside from any universalist implications.

The incarnation asserts that God is 'Immanuel', literally, 'God with us'. The descent asserts that this 'being with' extends to all aspects of human existence, including the absolute depths of suffering – physical, mental, and spiritual. Whatever 'hell' may mean in this life or the afterlife, Christ has descended into it and infused it with his presence. Therefore, we are never alone, for Christ is with us.

The descent has also been seen as a comforting doctrine for those facing death and for those who mourn. In the fourth century, Ambrose referred to the descent in a sermon at his brother's funeral. He spoke of comfort in the knowledge that Jesus shared our experience of death, adding that his resurrection from Hades and rescue of others from there gives us hope (*On the Death of Satyrus* II.102–103). Similarly, Luther, in a letter to a friend who

fears death, suggests he ‘gaze at […] Christ, who descended into hell’ (1969: 105). Luther thought that the knowledge that in Christ’s descent ‘your hell is defeated’ would assure his friend of his salvation (1969: 107). Karl Rahner takes this a step further, arguing that, since Christ ‘has shared our fate and redeemed us […] whatever disasters may befall, at the bottom of them all is to be found eternal life’ (1971: 149–150).

The doctrine of the descent does not only speak to individual suffering but also to situations where evil triumphs and God seems to have abandoned humanity. This may have special application to pastoral theology and trauma theology when these disciplines examine the implications of divine solidarity for experiences of utter human darkness (Hill Forthcomingb). There, paradoxically, God is present in God-forsakenness. It is from those depths that God brings forth resurrection.

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