

He Descended into Hell: The Patristic Background

Many modern scholars have sought to dismiss the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell by arguing that it is reliant upon pagan myths. One example is Wilhelm Bousset (a leading figure in the history of religions school of New Testament scholarship). After recounting some of the patristic witnesses, he dismisses the doctrine out of hand when he writes: 'It really can no longer be doubted that the popular conceptions of Christ's journey into hell and of his struggle with the demons of the underworld contain a myth which originally has nothing to do with the person of Jesus but only later has been adapted to him.'¹ However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the doctrine of Christ's descent was developed in the patristic era through an interaction with Scripture, not pagan myths.² Demonstrating how the Fathers came to articulate this doctrine will be an important step before we consider what the English reformers said on the subject and this will help us measure how closely their teachings aligned.

1. Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, rev. edn (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), p. 66.

2. This is not to say that there is not some cross-pollination with the various mythologies that the Hebrews and the early Christians encountered in their Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman contexts.

It is beyond the scope of this book to include every work from this era that touches on the descent. Rather, the purpose is to present a survey, in roughly chronological order, of how the early Christians understood this teaching. Some analysis will be offered as to what biblical texts were being employed and how they were interpreted. Most modern authors suggest that there are only a few potential passages regarding the descent and even these are debatable. Nonetheless, as we shall see, the patristic writers tended to see the doctrine reflected in many other passages of Scripture. In some ways, their exegesis and hermeneutical principles may seem foreign to us. However, Sebastian Brock, in a work on Jacob of Serugh, offers an admonition to modern readers which should be applicable at the outset of this chapter:

Jacob's way of thinking is essentially symbolic, and like Ephrem's, it shuns the logic and precision of Greek thought; it can also be described as mythical – provided one uses this word without any pejorative overtones. Much of what he says about baptism will appear fanciful to the modern mind brought up on historical scholarship, and I should stress at the outset that it is essential to read Jacob on his own terms, and not approach him with our own Western presuppositions, if we are to appreciate his true originality and profundity. In other words, we must make an effort of the imagination in order to recapture this supra-historical way of thinking.³

For the sake of brevity, certain writings have been selected from the second through to the fifth centuries. There are three reasons for this: first, by the end of the fifth century, the doctrine had reached a rather full expression. There are some developments in the ensuing centuries, prior to the Reformation, but these will be explored at the beginning of the next chapter. Second, when we reach the period of the Reformation in England, the debates largely centred upon what had been taught in the first five centuries AD. Third, the passages

3. Sebastian Brock, 'Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh', *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205, Symposium Syriacum (1976), pp. 325-26.

considered in this chapter have been chosen for two reasons: first, the selection of the Fathers is based upon those authors who were appealed to in the sixteenth-century debates; second, these texts have been chosen in anticipation of the issues that will become most volatile in the debates over the descent during the Tudor era.

The Terminology Associated with the Doctrine

As we shall see in the rest of this work, the terminology associated with this doctrine is significant. This is primarily because of variations in terminology in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Greek New Testament and then in the subsequent translations of them into Latin and English. The primary term in the Hebrew Scriptures for the abode of the dead was *Sheol*. The general understanding was that, when a person died, his body would be laid in a tomb (whether in the ground or in a cave) and the soul of the departed went to Sheol.⁴

The language concerning this abode of the dead typically points to a proximity below the earth which is envisaged in synonyms such as ‘underworld’ or ‘netherworld’ (Psalm 86:13; Luke 10:15): ‘Sheol is typically depicted as a place to which one “goes down” (Num 16:30; Job 7:9; Isa 57:9).⁵ In Deuteronomy 32:22 and Isaiah 7:11, Sheol is viewed as being in the depths of the earth, ‘the lowest place imaginable’,⁶ and in the first of these texts is contrasted with the highest heavens. A related word is ‘pit’, which also implies a location in the earth.⁷ Darkness is often associated with Sheol (Job 17:13; Psalms 88:12, 143:3). In several places, Sheol is described in prison-like fashion, as having gates and

4. Modern scientific thought leads us to think in materialist terms, but the Bible also deals with the realm of the metaphysical. We think in terms of the grave. The Bible adds the dimension of Sheol, the realm where dead souls were gathered; cf. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 505.

5. Theodore J. Lewis, ‘Dead, Abode of the’, in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (ABD), 6 vols (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Vol. 2, p. 102.

6. Kilian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 157.

7. Isaiah 38:18; Ezekiel 31:16; Psalm 30:4.

bars.⁸ In other places, Sheol is envisaged as an insatiable monster.⁹ Another synonymous term in the Hebrew Scriptures is *Abaddon* which is ‘a poetic synonym for the abode of the dead, meaning “Destruction,” or “(the place of) destruction”’.¹⁰ Depending on the context, ‘death’ and ‘the dead’ are also occasionally used in reference to the realm of departed souls.¹¹

When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the word *Hades* was typically chosen to translate the word Sheol. Hades had associations with Greek mythology and the wider culture.¹² In that context, Hades was the god of the underworld: ‘The netherworld was called the “house of Hades” and eventually simply Hades.’¹³ The Greek notion also included the idea of compartments: basically, a place of torment (Tartarus) and a place of happiness (Elysium). Along these lines, at least two texts from the Hebrew Scriptures imply something akin to compartments within Sheol (a concept which will become important in later discussions).¹⁴ In the New Testament, one of Jesus’ stories, typically entitled ‘The Rich Man and Lazarus’, seems to offer a parallel notion.¹⁵ This story looks at what happens to these two men

8. Job 17:16; 38:17 LXX; Psalm 107:18; Isaiah 38:10 LXX; Proverbs 7:27.

9. Numbers 16:30-32; Psalm 69:15; Proverbs 1:12; Isaiah 5:14; Jonah chapter two.

10. Herbert G. Grether, ‘Abaddon’, ABD, Vol. 1, p. 6.

11. Job 26:5-6; 28:2; 38:17; Psalms 6:5; 9:13; 10:5; 22:15; 88:5, 10; etc.

12. Even though there are some similarities between Greek, Hebrew and Christian references to descents, there are also some profound differences. For example, Georgia Frank writes: ‘Unlike Greek heroes or Jewish or apocalyptic travelers, Jesus undertook his journey after death and without a guide.’ See Georgia Frank, ‘Christ’s Descent to the Underworld in Ancient Ritual and Legend,’ in Robert J. Daly, ed., *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), pp. 214-15. For other contrasts, see Justin Bass, *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ’s Descent into the Underworld* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), pp. 64-65.

13. Lewis, ‘Dead, Abode of the’, ABD, Vol. 2, p. 104.

14. Isaiah 26:19-20; Deuteronomy 32:22. Later Judaism was not monolithic in this view. For the alternative views, see Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998).

15. Luke 16:19-31. One author says of this story: ‘The most important Biblical texts that explicitly describe the fate of the dead, particularly

in the afterlife: the rich man ‘was in torments in Hades’ and Lazarus ‘was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom’. Jesus goes on to say that there was ‘a great gulf fixed’ between the two places.¹⁶

There are other terms in the New Testament which are related. ‘The dead’ and ‘death’ are also occasionally used to refer to the realm of the dead, as in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁷ Gehenna originally referred to a place outside Jerusalem where child sacrifices had once been offered.¹⁸ These practices were observed during the monarchy, at least under the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, who themselves sacrificed their own children, causing them to ‘pass through the fire’.¹⁹ Apparently, it was later turned into a place where refuse was burned.²⁰ Jesus would later speak of Gehenna as a place of judgement, ‘the fire that shall never be quenched’.²¹ The words ‘Tartarus’ and ‘Abyss’ appear to be essentially synonymous terms, with the additional idea of being the holding place for rebellious angels.²²

the wicked dead, are in the Synoptic Gospels: Mk. 9.43-48, Mt. 25.31-46, and Lk. 16.19-31. Mark and Matthew both identify this place of punishment as Gehenna, but Luke employs the classical postmortem destination known throughout the Greek-speaking world – hades. And among these three texts, only Lk. 16.19-31 is intent on explicitly describing the abode of the dead; it is the only Biblical tour of hell.’ Matthew Ryan Hauge, *The Biblical Tour of Hell* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2013), p. 1.

16. Luke 16:22-23, 26.

17. Matthew 28:7; Mark 12:25; Luke 16:30-31; John 2:22; Acts 2:24; 13:30, 34; Romans 4:24; 6:9; 14:9; 1 Corinthians 15:12, 55; Ephesians 1:20; 5:14; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Timothy 2:8; Revelation 1:18; 20:13-14; etc. Bass says of this: ‘So every time Christ is spoken of as being raised from the dead, the original readers would not have thought of him coming back from just the state of death, but that he came back from the realm of the dead, namely Hades.’ Bass, *Battle for the Keys*, 42.

18. 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31; 19:4-5; 32:35. Duane F. Watson, ‘Gehenna (Place)’, *ABD*, Vol. 2, p. 927.

19. 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6.

20. It eventually was envisaged as the place of torment and the later phrase ‘lake of fire’ may conceptually be related to this.

21. Mark 9:43.

22. Luke 8:31; 2 Peter 2:4. The term ‘abyss’ sometimes denotes ‘the depths of the sea’. In another context, the word appears to be used synonymously with Hades: ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ

Some terminological confusion may have crept into the Western Church when the Scriptures were translated into Latin. The word *inferos* was used to translate the concept of ‘those below’ (the dead); the word *inferna* was used in reference to the entire underworld (plural, suggesting ‘compartments’); and the word *infernus* was used regarding the place of torment for the wicked.²³ These terminological variations can be seen in the Western Creeds. Rufinus’ version of the descensus clause in the Apostles’ Creed was *descendit ad inferna*. Venantius Fortunatus, sixth- to seventh-century bishop of Poitiers, has *descendit ad infernum* in his version. The later form of the Roman Creed (typically called ‘T’) contained the clause *descendit ad inferos*. The last of these became the standard in the West because, as Kelly says, ‘inferos is nowadays preferred as indicating that the place of the departed, not the damned, is meant’.²⁴ The Athanasian Creed has two versions of the clause: *descendit ad inferna* and *descendit ad inferos*. The former was likely the original, but the latter became the standard.²⁵ Laufer says that in later ecclesiastical Latin *infernus* became associated with ‘the place of the damned’, while *inferos* has the more general meaning ‘the place of the dead’.²⁶ It would appear that *inferos* became the standard in the West to guard against the notion that Christ went to the place of torment.

up from the dead) (Romans 10:7 NKJV). One author writes concerning the word ‘abyss’: ‘In the Old Testament this stands for “the deep”, the underlying waters by which the earth was covered at the first (Gen. i 2), but on which it afterwards rested (Ps. xxiv 2, cxxxvi 6), and from which its springs and rivers welled up (cp. Gen. vii 11). It is thus the “underworld”, the region below land and sea alike, with which all waters, rivers or ocean, are in communication. ... It was to this “abyss” that, according to St. Paul (Rom. x 7), Christ descended after His passion.’ J. Armitage Robinson, *Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature: Vol. 8, The Odes of Solomon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), p. 32.

23. See Catherine Ella Laufer, *Hell’s Destruction: An Exploration of Christ’s Descent to the Dead* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Co., 2013), p. 3.
24. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edn (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 378, n. 3.
25. J.A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1930), p. 73.
26. Laufer, *Hell’s Destruction*, p. 30.

This terminological confusion intensified when the Scriptures were translated into English. The word ‘Hell’ (*hel, helle*) was derived from the old Teutonic *Halja*, which referred to the goddess of the infernal regions, literally ‘the coverer up or hider’.²⁷ Hell was the word frequently chosen in the earliest English translations for Sheol and Hades.²⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes Sir Thomas More from 1529 saying that the phrase *descendit ad inferna* means that Christ ‘descended down beneath into the low places’, ‘instead of which low places the english tongue hath ever used this word hel’.²⁹ This would suggest that, at the time, the word ‘Hell’ would have been an apt substitute for Sheol/Hades.³⁰ However, when Hell was also used to translate the word ‘Gehenna’ (the place of fiery judgement), it conflated the realm of the dead in general with the compartment in which the wicked were tormented.³¹ As we shall see, this conflation of terms would have negative consequences regarding the doctrine in later controversies.

One other term should be noted as having some bearing on the topic of Christ’s descent: ‘paradise’. Luke tells us that one of the thieves that was crucified with Jesus requested that he would remember him when he came into his kingdom, to which Jesus responded: ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’³² Charlesworth says that the word ‘paradise’ is: ‘A loanword from Old Persian (*pairi-daēza*), which means “enclosure,” then “park” or “garden”.’³³ The word was transliterated into Greek as *paradeisos* and

27. J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, eds, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), 2nd edn, 20 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), Vol. 2, p. 117.

28. This includes Wycliff in the fourteenth century as well as Tyndale (1525), Coverdale (1536), the Matthew Bible (1537), Taverner’s Bible (1539), the Great Bible (1540), the Bishops’ Bible (1568) and even the Authorized Version (1611). As we shall see in Chapter 3, the Geneva Bible departed from this tradition in certain places.

29. OED, Vol. 2, p. 117.

30. See James S. Stone, *The Glory After the Passion: A Study of the Events in the Life of Our Lord from His Descent into Hell to His Enthronement in Heaven* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1913), pp. 38-39.

31. In modern English, the word ‘Hell’ is used almost exclusively for the place of torment.

32. Luke 23:42-43.

33. James H. Charlesworth, ‘Paradise’, ABD, Vol. 5, p. 154.

was employed by the Septuagint translators in Genesis chapters two to three for the Garden of Eden. It was also used more generally to speak of a forest (Nehemiah 2:8), an orchard (Song of Solomon 4:13), and gardens and parks (Ecclesiastes 2:5).³⁴ The word was later employed in an eschatological sense by Isaiah to speak of Jerusalem as paradise (51:3).³⁵ In the Second Temple period, paradise is envisaged as the dwelling place of the righteous in the afterlife. Depending on the literature, the situation of paradise was either in the underworld (1 Enoch 22; 4 Ezra 4:7-8; 7:37-38), on the earth (*Jubilees* 3:12; 4:26; 8:16, 19) or in heaven (1 Enoch 60:8; 65:2; 70:3; 89:52; *Psalms of Solomon* 14:2-3; 2 Enoch 8-9).³⁶ The word is used three times in the New Testament: in the passage from Luke noted above; in 2 Corinthians 12:4, where it refers to the 'third heaven'; and in Revelation 2:7, where it appears to be synonymous with the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2). Since Luke records Jesus' promise of paradise to the thief and later records Peter speaking of Jesus in Hades between his death and resurrection, this may suggest that he adopted the view that paradise was situated in the underworld.³⁷ Some of the Fathers held this same view but others thought that paradise was situated in heaven. Ambrose of Milan and Thomas Aquinas suggested that paradise is wherever Christ is.³⁸ These variations will also be seen in the following chapters. The rationale in providing this terminological information in this opening section is to bring awareness to these issues which will be explored further in the ensuing sections.

34. Justin Bass, 'Paradise', in *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry *et al.* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

35. Cf. Ezekiel 47:1-12; Revelation 22:1-2; Bass, 'Paradise'.

36. Bass, 'Paradise'. It should be noted that Josephus appears to hold the view that paradise was in the underworld; see *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.14-15, in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), p. 477.

37. Bass, 'Paradise'.

38. For Ambrose, see Arthur A. Just, *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (ACCS), NT 3 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), p. 366. For a discussion about Aquinas, see Laufer, *Hell's Destruction*, p. 50.

Biblical Passages Associated with the Doctrine

It should be noted that there is not a straightforward recorded account of Christ's descent into Hell in the New Testament. Rather, what we have are some texts which appear to imply the event. The clearest of these texts is the Apostle Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts chapter two. Peter quotes a portion of Psalm sixteen, 'For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.'³⁹ The Apostle goes on to make the point that, when David spoke these words, they were not in reference to himself. Instead, he was speaking prophetically of his descendant, the Messiah:

Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.⁴⁰

Patristic commentators would pick up on the implied truth that, if Christ's soul was not left in Hades, then it certainly must have descended there prior to his resurrection. It is noteworthy that this places the doctrine in the original kerygma of the Church.

Considering Peter's messianic interpretation of Psalm sixteen in reference to the descent, a further reading of the Psalter reveals other similar statements. Two of the most notable are Psalms 30:3 and 86:13. Psalm 30:3 reads, 'O LORD, You brought my soul up from the grave [literally, Sheol]; You have kept me alive, that I should not go down

39. Acts 2:27; Psalm 16:10.

40. Acts 2:30-32. It is significant that Paul also appealed to this same psalm in one of his earliest sermons, Acts 13:32-39. He does not exactly state the fact of the descent in that passage, but he implies it by contrasting David, who after serving God in his generation, 'fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption'; on the other hand, 'he whom God raised up [Jesus] saw no corruption'. Though he does not repeat the fact, we should assume that Jesus also 'was buried with his fathers' (implying not just the burial of his body but also the descent of his soul to be with the departed in Sheol).