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The Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell from the Medieval Era through the Reign of Edward VI

While a great deal of ink has been spilled on the major controversies of the Reformation period, such as justification by faith alone and the debate over transubstantiation, very little by comparison has been written on the controversy regarding Christ's descent into hell.[1] This is remarkable considering the intensity and longevity of the debate over this matter. One scholar writes, 'the descent of Christ into hell was one of the most controverted of all the creedal articles in the Reformation era'.[2] What makes this debate even more intriguing is the fact that it is not simply a Protestant versus Catholic debate. Often, it was an intramural debate among Protestants.[3]

This chapter will trace how the doctrine became controversial in the early to middle part of the sixteenth century in England.[4] We shall begin with a short survey of the doctrine in the medieval

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1. Wallace, 'Puritan and Anglican', p. 248.
2. Bagchi, 'Christ's Descent', p. 228.
3. As we shall see in Chapter 3, this was a debate which Roman Catholics were happy to exploit and to use as a wedge to divide their theological opponents.
4. A similar debate was held in Germany. See David George Truemper, 'The Descensus Ad Inferos from Luther to the Formula of Concord'

period, especially touching on points of controversy during that era. Then we shall draw together the theological reflections on this doctrine among the continental reformers during the first half of the sixteenth century. In the second half of the chapter, we shall explore how this doctrine was understood in England during the Henrician and Edwardian periods. This will provide important background information for our discussion of the debate over Christ's descent in the Elizabethan era.

Late Patristic and Medieval Developments Regarding the Doctrine of the Descent

The *Gospel of Nicodemus* (*The Acts of Pilate*), an apocryphal work of the fourth to fifth centuries, can serve as a bridge between the patristic era and the medieval period. This is because it both summarises the general thrust of this doctrine from the Church Fathers, and it became one of the most popular and influential works in medieval England. H.C. Kim tells us that it was the most popular of the New Testament apocrypha 'and was widely held to be a sacred document, almost equal in authority to the canonical Gospels'.[5] The popularity of the work in England is evident not only because there were Middle English and Anglo-Saxon versions of the work, but also because it became the source and inspiration for so many dramas and mystery plays of this period.[6]

The recollection of Christ's descent in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* is given by two witnesses, Leucius and Karinus, who were purportedly the sons of Simeon (Luke chapter two). The work presents them as two of those raised with Christ at his resurrection (alluding to Matthew 27:51-53). Leucius and Karinus recalled that at the hour of midnight,

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(unpublished thesis, The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, 1974).

5. H.C. Kim, ed., *The Gospel of Nicodemus* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1973), p. 2.

6. Karl Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), p. 105. See also William Henry Hulme, ed., *The Middle-English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus*, Early English Text Society (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1907); and Zbigniew Izydorczyk, 'The Legend of the Harrowing of Hell in Middle English Literature' (PhD diss, University of Toronto, 1985).

a great light shone upon them in Hades: 'And immediately our father Abraham, along with the patriarchs and prophets, was filled with joy, and they said to one another: This shining comes from a great light.'[7] Isaiah was there to assure them that this was the fulfillment of his prophecy: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.'[8] Others from John the Baptist to Adam and his son, Seth, also bore witness that this was their long-awaited saviour.

While the righteous who had waited for this moment were rejoicing, we learn of a concurring heated discussion between Satan and Hades. Satan demonstrates that he has been deceived because he assumed that Jesus was a mere man (all of this is consistent with the 'divine deception' motif noted earlier). Hades is not convinced and reminds Satan of the recent loss of Lazarus (John chapter eleven) who was snatched 'forcibly from [his] entrails with only a word'.[9] Hades warns Satan that, if he brings Jesus there, 'none of the dead will be left for me'.[10] Immediately, a loud voice thundered: 'Lift up your gates, O rulers, and be lifted up, O everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in' (Psalm 24:7).[11] Satan and Hades sought to withstand Christ but were unable. At this point, the witnesses said that the forefathers all began to mock Hades, quoting various prophecies of its demise (Isaiah 25:8; 26:19; Hosea 13:14; Psalm 24:7-9). When the refrain to lift up the gates was repeated, Hades responded by asking, 'Who is this King of glory?' The angels responded with, 'The Lord strong and

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7. Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schnee-melcher, trans. R.McL. Wilson, 2 vols (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), Vol. 1, p. 471.

8. Isaiah 9:2.

9. Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, Vol. 1, p. 473. The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead would later be viewed as a type of the descent. See Mark C. Pilkinton, 'The Raising of Lazarus: A Prefiguring Agent to the Harrowing of Hell', *Medium Aevum* 44, no. 1/2 (1975), pp. 51-53.

10. Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, Vol. 1, p. 473.

11. Ibid. Most of the Church Fathers (including Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Ambrose and Augustine) see this reference from Psalm 24 as envisaging the ascension of Christ when he arrives at the gates of heaven. However, perhaps for the first time in this early period, this text is being used in reference to the descent, envisaging Christ arriving at the gates of Hades and asserting his lordship there.

mighty, the Lord mighty in battle', echoing Psalm 24. The witnesses said: 'And immediately at this answer the gates of brass were broken in pieces and the bars of iron were crushed and all the dead who were bound were loosed from their chains, and we with them' (alluding to Isaiah 45:2-3).[12]

The dialogue then turns back to Hades and Satan, with the former blaming the latter for their defeat. At this moment, the King of glory stretched out his hand to take hold of Adam and told the others, 'Come with me, all you who have suffered death through the tree which this man touched. For behold, I raise you all up again through the tree of the cross.'[13] The witnesses then said: 'Thus he went into paradise holding our forefather Adam by the hand, and he handed him over and all the righteous to Michael the archangel. And as they were entering the gate of paradise, two old men met them' (a reference to Enoch and Elijah). While they were speaking with their predecessors in paradise, another man came up carrying a cross, the thief whom Christ told, 'Today, you shall be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43).[14] The text ends with Leucius and Karinus confessing that they had been sent by Michael the archangel to deliver this message after they had been baptized in the Jordan river with the rest of the dead who had been raised.[15]

It is not hard to see how this vivid portrayal, which wove together so many strands from the canonical Scriptures, would become so popular. These scenes were portrayed continuously throughout the medieval period, making the Harrowing of Hell one of the most popular doctrines, especially among the laity.[16] In spite of its popularity (or, perhaps, because of its popularity), the *Gospel of Nicodemus* was largely abandoned in the sixteenth century by Protestants (because of the general trend away from apocryphal works) but also by Roman

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12. Ibid, p. 474.

13. Ibid., p. 475.

14. This text appears to equate paradise with heaven instead of in Hades and envisages Enoch, Elijah and the thief on the cross as early inhabitants of it.

15. Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, Vol. 1, p. 476.

16. Marx also notes that there are verbal parallels between the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and Sermon 160 of Pseudo-Augustine that was quite popular among scholars of this period. See C.W. Marx, *The Devil's Rights and the Redemption in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), p. 57.

Catholics, after it made the list of forbidden books at the Council of Trent.[17] Tillyard suggests that the motive of Roman Catholics here may have been that, if 'the apocryphal gospels [were] taken too seriously, [they] would provide Scripture-intoxicated Protestants with excellent targets of attack, and it might be politic for Catholics to shuffle those targets conveniently away'.[18]

Caesarius of Arles, whose sermons became quite popular in medieval England, explored this doctrine in some creative ways. In a sermon on Judges chapter fourteen (the story where Samson defeats the lion and later returns to fetch honey from its carcass), Caesarius rehearses earlier interpretations of this passage and then makes his own connection with the descent:

> This lion, that is, Christ from the tribe of Juda, victoriously descended into hell to snatch us from the mouth of the hostile lion. For this reason He hunts in order to protect, seizes in order to free, leads men captive in order to restore them when freed to their eternal country.[19]

In another sermon, Caesarius recalls Samson's trip to Delilah's house and the subsequent destruction of the Philistines' gates and he says:

> Hell and love for a woman Scripture joins together; the house of the harlot was an image of hell. … At this point we recognize the actions of our Redeemer. … The words: 'He arose and left at midnight' signify that He arose in secret. He had suffered openly, but His Resurrection was revealed only to His disciples and to certain other people. … Moreover, he removed the city gates, that is, He took away the gates of hell. … Furthermore, what did our Lord Jesus Christ do

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17. Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), p. 97.

18. E.M.W. Tillyard, *Some Mythical Elements in English Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 29. See also Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, pp. 175-78.

19. Saint Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons: Volume 2 (81-186)*, trans. Sister Mary Magdeleine Mueller OSF, Fathers of the Church series 47 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), p. 191.

after He had taken away the gates of death? He went up to the top of a mountain. Truly, we know that He both arose and ascended into heaven.[20]

Aelfric of Eynsham, another author of popular homilies in medieval England, echoed Caesarius' imagery in an Easter Day sermon.[21] The lasting influence of these connections on the Western Church can be seen in, for example, Philip Melanchthon, who would write in the sixteenth century, 'The power of death, the power of sin, the very gates of hell have been broken by our Samson' (meaning, Christ).[22]

Gregory the Great picked up on this same imagery in one of his homilies[23] and, in many other places, taught on the descent, including in his popular work on Job. Commenting on Job 14:13, where Job said, 'O that thou wouldest defend me in hell!', Gregory wrote:

> That before the coming of the Mediator between God and man, every person, though he might have been of a pure and approved life, descended to the prisons of hell, there can be no doubt; in that man, who fell by his own act, was unable by his own act to return to the rest of Paradise, except that He should come, Who by the mystery of His Incarnation should open the way into that same Paradise. … Nor yet do we maintain that the souls of the righteous did so go down into hell, that they were imprisoned in places of punishment; but it is to be believed that there are higher regions in hell, and that there are lower regions apart, so that both the righteous

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20. Caesarius, *Sermons*, pp. 187-88.

21. Benjamin Thorpe, *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: The First Part Containing the Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Aelfric* (London: Richard & John E. Taylor, 1844), Vol. 1, pp. 228–29. For a full discussion of this imagery, see Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, pp. 22-24.

22. Philip Melanchthon, *The Loci Communes of Philip Melanchthon*, ed. and trans. Charles Leander Hill (Boston, MA: Meador Pub. Co., 1944), p. 221.

23. Dom David Hurst, *Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies*, Cistercian Studies Series 123 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), pp. 162-63.

might be at rest in the upper regions, and the unrighteous be tormented in the lower ones.[24]

Here we see Gregory repeating the ideas from the earlier period about no one entering heaven prior to the coming of Christ. However, we also begin to see an emphasis on the regions (note the plural) above and below in hell, showing an expansion upon the earlier idea of two regions, an upper and lower in Hades.[25]

Another series of biblical texts which became popular in medieval England were those where David rescues a sheep from the jaws of a lion, defeats Goliath and is portrayed as a victorious warrior king. These connections proved effective in the missionary expansion of the Church in England during this period. Tamburr suggests that 'the tribes were converted to Christianity, and the new religion's portrayal of Christ as a conquering king would have struck a sympathetic chord because it was so congenial to the Anglo-Saxons' own warrior ethic'.[26] These connections would also correlate well with the 'King of glory' imagery from Psalm 24 in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* discussed earlier.[27]

One of the complicating factors of this period is the development of the doctrine of purgatory. Early authors speculated on the concept of purgation: basically, the idea that, if a person died with unsatisfied sins, he would need to have those sins purged before entering heaven. Origen, Augustine and Gregory the Great offered such speculations, drawing upon just a few biblical and apocryphal texts (2 Maccabees 12:39-45; Matthew 12:32; Luke 12:59; and 1 Corinthians 3:13-15). Jacques Le Goff, in his work *The Birth of Purgatory*, argues that the concept of a *place* where this purgation would take place (purgatory) was not developed until the twelfth century (1170 to be precise).[28] Later scholars have modified this conclusion, arguing that the concept of purgatory is already present in the writings of the Venerable Bede

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24. Saint Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, 3 vols (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1845), Vol. 2, pp. 53-54.
25. See the discussion on purgatory later in this section.
26. Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, pp. 32-34.
27. See also the Easter Day homily in R. Morris, ed., *The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century* (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1880), pp. 82-96.
28. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, p. 135.

(*c.* 673-735).[29] The ongoing speculation over these matters became more complex as time went on to the point where there were no longer two destinies for human beings following this life but five. Marshall sums up, and hints at the significance of this for our topic, when he writes:

> The medieval Church had come to recognize five distinct places or states which defined the location and condition of the dead: in addition to heaven and hell, there was purgatory for the souls of the moderately sinful, a limbo for unbaptized infants, and a second limbo for the righteous patriarchs and prophets who had died, of necessity non-Christians, before the incarnation of Jesus. This latter place was usually thought to be empty, since Christ had liberated its inhabitants in a kind of daring commando raid performed between his death and resurrection – the so-called harrowing of hell.[30]

We shall see in the debates of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries how these complexities would influence the understanding of the descent.

Considering their influence in the universities, we shall touch briefly upon three scholastic theologians. First, Peter Lombard, whose *Sentences* became the pre-eminent theological textbook of the medieval period, addressed the descent in his exploration of the question, 'Why God man and dead?', writing: 'And so he [Christ] was made a mortal man, in order to vanquish the devil by dying' (arguing primarily from Hebrews 2:9-11).[31] In addressing the question, 'Whether in death Christ was a man anywhere, and whether he is a man wherever he is?', Lombard concludes: 'From all this, it is plainly shown that Christ was united to the flesh lying in the tomb, as he was

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29. Isabel Moreira, *Heaven's Purge: Purgatory in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 11-14.
30. Peter Marshall, 'The Reformation of Hell? Protestant and Catholic Infernalisms in England, *c.* 1560-1640', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61, no. 2 (2010), p. 280.
31. Peter Lombard, *The Sentences: Book 3: On the Incarnation of the Word*, trans. Giulio Silano, MST 45 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), p. 80.

to the soul in hell.'[32] We see a common thread in these quotes, an interest in the unity of Christ's two natures even beyond death. The divine nature of Christ was with both his body in the tomb and his human soul in hell.[33]

Second, Peter Abelard and his theological adversary, Bernard of Clairvaux, had a significant rift over several important doctrines including the descent. Pitstick quotes the official statement on this matter from the Council of Sens (1141), at which Abelard was condemned, and offers a brief comment: '[Abelard taught] "that the soul of Christ per se did not descend to those who are below [*ad inferos*], but only by means of power", i.e., that Christ had an effect on the dead without joining them in his soul.'[34] The gist of this is that Abelard denied a local descent of Christ, only his 'power' descended. Bernard was so dismayed at these perceived errors that, prior to the council, he wrote more than a dozen letters in which he sought to undermine Abelard's influence.[35]

The third scholastic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, offers the most significant discussion of this doctrine during the medieval period in his *Summa Theologica*.[36] His most intriguing contribution occurs in his question over whether Christ went down into the hell of the lost. Aquinas answers that a thing may be said to be in a place in two ways:

> First of all, through its effect, and in this way Christ descended into each of the hells, but in a different manner.

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32. Ibid., pp. 94-95.

33. Aquinas makes the same point in his *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*, in *The Catholic Tradition: The Church, Volume 1*, ed. Charles J. Dollen, James K. McGowan and James J. McGivern (Wilmington, NC: McGrath Pub. Co., 1979), p. 213.

39. Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, p. 20.

40. Letters 236-49 in Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Bruno Scott James (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1998), pp. 314-29. For further insights into this whole affair, see Ralph V. Turner, 'Descendit ad Inferos: Medieval Views on Christ's Descent into Hell and the Salvation of the Ancient Just', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 2 (1966), pp. 173-94.

41. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), Pt 3, Q. 52, Vol. 4, pp. 2296-302.