

for Him to be raised to that status by adoption.¹ "What but God", he inquired, "could have been born from God?"²

4. *The Descent to Hell*

None of the modifications of R we have so far considered can be reckoned as of decisive importance. There is one, however, which really adds something of substance to the second article of the creed, and which involves exegetical difficulties of no mean order—HE DESCENDED TO HELL (*descendit ad inferna*³). The first variant of R to exhibit it is the Aquileian creed commented upon by Rufinus: he remarked that the clause was not to be found in either the Roman creed or in Eastern formularies. It occurs in some Spanish creeds of the sixth century, and was a feature of the Gallican creeds of the seventh and eighth centuries, beginning with that of St Caesarius of Arles in the sixth. Rufinus himself had not much light to shed on its interpolation: he merely remarked that it seemed to have much the same implications as BURIED,⁴ while in a later chapter he connected it with 1 *Pet.* 3, 19 (how Christ "went and preached to the spirits in prison"), which he regarded as explaining "what Christ accomplished in the underworld"⁵ In view of his silence it is improbable that the clause was a recent addition to the Aquileian creed. In any case its first credal appearance was in the Fourth Formula of Sirmium, the Dated Creed of 359,⁶ which affirmed (with an allusion to *Job* 38, 17) that the Lord had "died, and descended to the underworld (*εἰς τὰ καρχθόνα κατελθόντα*), and regulated things there, Whom the gatekeepers of hell saw and shuddered". The Homoean synods which met about the same time, at Niké (359) and at Constantinople (360), published creeds armed with similar statements. Both these, of course, were modifications of the Fourth Formula of Sirmium, and it is interesting to recall that, according to the historian Socrates,⁷ its author had been Mark of Arethusa, a Syrian. There is a good deal of evidence pointing

¹ Cf. e.g. *Adv. haer. Felix* 37; 70 f. (P.L. 101, 102; 117 f.).

² *Adv. Felix* 4, 8 (P.L. 101, 102).

³ The form *inferos* is nowadays preferred as indicating that the place of the departed, not the damned, is meant: so the Roman Breviary.

⁴ *Comm. in symb. apost.* 16 (C.C.L. 20, 153). ⁵ *Op. cit.* 20 (C.C.L. 20, 161).

⁶ See above, p. 289 f. ⁷ *Hist. eccl.* 2, 30 (P.G. 67, 280).

to the probability that the Descent figured very early in Eastern creed material. The doxology of the Syrian *Didascalia*, for example, contained the sentence: "Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and departed into peace, in order to preach to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the saints concerning the ending of the world and the resurrection of the dead." This seems to echo credal language. Even more to the point is the fact that the creed of Aphraates, the Persian sage (fl. 340), so far as it can be pieced together from his *Homilies*, seems to have included an article WENT DOWN TO THE PLACE OF THE DEAD. A reference to the Descent occurs seven or eight times in the works of Aphraates, twice in the third-century *Acts of Thomas*, and a number of times in other sources for Syrian creeds.¹ Thus, although it never caught on in official Eastern creeds (St Cyril of Jerusalem, however, reckoned² it among the Church's *credenda*), it is very likely that the West admitted it to its formularies under Eastern influence.

The belief that Christ spent the interval between His expiry on the cross and His resurrection in the underworld was a commonplace of Christian teaching from the earliest times. Apart from the possibility of its having been in the minds of New Testament writers,³ the Descent was explicitly mentioned by St Ignatius,⁴ St Polycarp,⁵ St Irenaeus,⁶ Tertullian,⁷ and others. According to one strain of patristic exegesis,⁸ the Lord Himself had hinted at it in His prophecy (*Mt.* 12, 39 f.) that the Son of Man would spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (*ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ τῆς γῆς*). St Paul's remarks in *Rom.* 10, 7, as well as *Col.* 1, 18, were widely interpreted as involving a visit of Christ to the place of the departed. So, too, St Peter's speech in *Acts* 2, 27-31, transferring to Christ the words of *Ps.* 16, 8 ff. ("Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell" etc.), was taken as a clear pointer in the same direction, as were the famous texts 1 *Pet.* 3, 19 and 4, 6, suggesting that He

¹ On this see R. H. Connolly's important article in *Z.N.T.W.* vii, 1906, 213 ff.

² *Cat.* 4, 11 (P.G. 33, 469).

³ F. Loofs detected allusions in *Hebr.* 11, 39 f.; 12, 22 f.; 10, 20, as well as in *Mt.* 27, 51-53; see *H.E.R.E.* IV, 662.

⁴ *Magn.* 9 (Bihlmeyer, 91).

⁵ *Ad Philipp.* 1 (Bihlmeyer, 114).

⁶ *Adv. haer.* 4, 27, 2; 5, 31, 1; 5, 33, 1 (P.G. 7, 1058; 1208; 1212).

⁷ *De anima* 55 (C.C.L. 2, 862 f.).

⁸ E.g. St Cyprian, *Testim.* 2, 25 (Hartel, 92).

had preached to "the spirits in prison". (After St Augustine, it should be remarked, the prevailing Western fashion was to explain 1 *Pet.* 3, 19 as testifying to a mission of Christ's to the contemporaries of Noah long prior to His incarnation.) In its original significance the doctrine had nothing to do with pagan mythology, though numerous superficially apt parallels can be adduced. It was no more than the natural corollary of Judaeo-Christian ideas about the condition of the soul after death. To say that Jesus Christ had died, or that He had been buried, was equivalent to saying that He had passed to Sheol. The unquestioned premiss, for example, of the lengthy passage in Tertullian's *De anima* 50 ff. is that all souls descend to Hades immediately after death, and that

Christ our God, Who because He was man died according to the Scriptures, and was buried according to the same Scriptures, satisfied this law also by undergoing the form of human death in the underworld, and did not ascend aloft to heaven, until He had gone down to the regions beneath the earth.¹

In view of the early popularity of the Descent in Syriac-speaking regions, it is worth noticing that, as R. H. Connolly has pointed out,² the Syriac translation for "from the dead (*ἐκ νεκρῶν*)", so frequent in the New Testament of the risen Lord, was ambiguous: it could mean either "from the dead", or "from the place, or house, of the dead". In harmony with this the Peshitta version of *Rom.* 10, 6 f. introduced an explicit mention of Sheol.

A full study³ of the meaning of the conception in the eyes of the early Church would divert us into irrelevant, if attractive, by-paths. Two broad, often intermingling streams of interpretation can be distinguished. According to one, Christ was active during the mysterious three days preaching salvation, or else administering baptism, to the righteous of the old Covenant, according to the other He performed a triumphant act of liberation on their behalf. The former found representatives in

¹ *De anima* 55 (C.C.L. 2, 862 f.).

² Cf. *Z.N.T.W.* vii, 1906, 213 f.

³ Cf. A. Grillmeier's two detailed articles in *Z. für Kath. Th.* 71, 1949.

the author of the *Gospel of Peter*,¹ St Justin,² St Irenaeus,³ and Origen.⁴ St Hippolytus added the pleasing detail that John the Baptist acted as the Lord's precursor in the underworld as on earth,⁵ while Hermas suggested that the Apostles and teachers who had passed away carried on His ministry below and baptized their converts.⁶ The main difficulties facing this line of thought were that the Old Testament saints scarcely needed illumination, since they had foreseen Christ's coming, and that it seemed inappropriate that the unconverted should receive a second opportunity for repentance in the other world. Hence the alternative view, which placed the accent on the deliverance of the saints and the defeat of Satan, gained ground and established itself in the West, where indeed the doctrine that Christ had liberated any others than those holy persons, primarily Jews, who had either foreseen His coming or kept His precepts by anticipation, was afterwards branded as heretical.⁷ What is important for us to observe, however, is that by the time the Descent became an accepted article in the creed, a rather different complex of ideas was being associated with it according to which Christ's activity consisted in completely subjugating hell and the ruler of the underworld. Clear traces of this occur as early as the Paschal Homily (68; 102) of Melito of Sardis and Hippolytus's anaphora. We can see it taking shape in the thought of Rufinus, who argued that Christ consented to die in order that He might spoil death, and expiated on His victorious combat in the underworld with the Devil.⁸ For him, it would appear, the underworld meant hell, and the Descent was coming to be viewed as the occasion of the redemption, not just of the patriarchs of old, but of mankind in general. The older tradition that it was simply the natural corollary of the Lord's death,⁹ or that its object was the release of the Old Testament saints, still persisted.¹⁰ But for an

¹ Vv. 41 f. ² *Dial.* 72 (E.J.G., 182).

³ *Adv. haer.* 3, 20, 4; 4, 22, 1 (P.G. 7, 945; 1046 f.); *Epist.* 78 (P. Or. 12, 717); etc.

⁴ *Con. Cels.* 2, 43 (Koetschau I, 166).

⁵ *De Christo et anti-Christo* 45 (G.C.S. 1, 2, 29).

⁶ *Sim.* 9, 16, 6 f., 5-7 (G.C.S. 48, 90).

⁷ Cf. St Augustine, *De haer.* 79; St Gregory, *Ep.* 15 (P.L. 42, 45; 77, 869 f.).

⁸ *Comm. in symb. apost.* 14 f. (G.C.L. 20, 151 f.).

⁹ The fact that it was so understood probably explains why it was so often passed over in silence in creed-expositions.

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., St Faustus of Riez, *Hom.* I (Caspari, *Quellen* II, 190).

illustration of the ideas which captured the popular imagination we need only refer to St Caesarius of Arles, who declared,¹ "Because this Lion, that is, Christ, of the tribe of Judah, descended victoriously to hell, snatching us from the mouth of the hostile lion. Thus He hunts us to save us, He captures us to release us, He leads us captive to restore us liberated to our native land." It was probably St Caesarius who in another sermon² remarked: "He descended to hell in order to rescue us from the jaws of the cruel dragon." So an African preacher could declaim: "He, so merciful and blessed, mercifully visited the region of our misery, so as to escort us to the region of His blessedness."³

A pertinent question, though it is not easy to work out a satisfactory answer to it, concerns the motives at work in the insertion of the Descent into the creed. A theory which enjoyed considerable influence in the past was that it had an anti-Apollinarian bias.⁴ It is true that developments in Christology were reflected in the changing interpretations put upon the doctrine.⁵ Thus in the earlier period Christ's death and Descent were understood in terms of the separation of His human soul from His body (so, e.g., Tertullian and Origen). Among the exponents of the Word-flesh Christology it was naturally the Logos alone, disjoined from the Lord's body, Who was conceived of as descending to the underworld (so Arius, St Athanasius, Eusebius of Caesarea, etc.). In the struggle against Apollinarianism, however, the older tradition that it was in His human soul that Christ descended reasserted itself. Yet it would be hazardous to infer that anti-Apollinarian motives prompted the insertion of the Descent into the creed. As we have seen, it was established in Syrian creed-material long before Apollinarius began to teach. Even more flimsy is the suggestion, which has sometimes been put forward, that the intention behind the clause was to bolster up the doctrine of Purgatory. If it is legitimate to seek polemical motives at all for its interpolation,

¹ *Serm.* 119 (C.C.L. 103, 498).

² Pseudo-Aug., *Serm.* 44, 6 (P.L. 39, 1834).

³ Pseudo-Fulgentius: cf. *R. Bin.* xxxv, 1923, 238.

⁴ Cf., e.g., Peter, Lord King, *The History of the Apostles' Creed*, 5th ed., London, 1737, 169 ff.

⁵ See A. Grillmeier, *arts. cit.*: also *Lex. f. Theol. u. Kirche* 5, 452-4.

the only heresy which can conceivably be envisaged is Docetism.¹ It is just possible that the details of the Lord's experiences were elaborated so as to underline the reality of His death. In the passage of Tertullian already cited,² for example, we can overhear a note of insistence that Christ's descent to the underworld proved His participation in the fulness of human experience. An objection to this is that, although the doctrine was frequently mentioned, it is hardly ever possible to read an anti-Docetic intention into the references to it. This is not to imply that the clause entered the creed fortuitously and was devoid of dogmatic significance. If it secured admittance first in a Syrian-speaking locality, it was no doubt regarded initially as no more than a more colourful equivalent of DEAD AND BURIED. But when it travelled Westwards, it may have been welcomed for several distinct reasons. The imagination of Christians delighted to dwell on the Saviour's experiences in the underworld, as we can see from the numerous and often fantastic attempts to portray them in art. The clause, moreover, provided the creed with something which had hitherto been lacking and of which the need may have been keenly, if inarticulately, felt, a mention of the act of redemption wrought by Christ. It is significant that, as has already been hinted, about the time when the Descent was beginning to appear in creeds, the ancient notion of Christ's mission to the patriarchs was fading more and more into the background, and the doctrine was coming to be interpreted as symbolizing His triumph over Satan and death, and, consequently, the salvation of mankind as a whole.

5. *The Third Article Reinterpreted and Revised*

By the time the Apostles' Creed assumed its final shape, the third article had come to be understood in the light of the Church's developed doctrine of the Trinity. Thus the interpretation read into THE HOLY SPIRIT represented the words as affirming belief in the third Person of the Godhead, coeternal, coequal and consubstantial with the Father and the Son. As Rufinus put it succinctly: "Thus with the mention of the Holy

¹ So H. B. Swete, *The Apostles' Creed*, Cambridge, 1894, 61; Kattenbusch II, 901.

² *De anima* 55 (C.C.L. 2, 862 f.).