

'He Descended into Hell': Creed, Article and Scripture Part I

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1. Introduction

The 'descent into hell' is an expression of Christian truth to which members of the Anglican Communion are immediately committed in three places: The Apostles' Creed, The Athanasian Creed and Article 3.¹ Despite this it is probably true that of all the credal statements (at least of those in The Apostles' Creed) it is the one which is the most poorly understood. One major aim of this article is to remedy this deficiency in a public forum, and to do so in a manner which self-consciously remains faithful to the classical Anglican emphasis on the essential interrelatedness of scripture, tradition and reason in all matters of theological endeavour. To adopt such an approach is to deny both that appeal to tradition alone can be determinative for doctrine (as in Roman Catholicism), or, that one must necessarily be able to point *directly* to passages of scripture to authenticate a theological position (as in the claims of various forms of modern Fundamentalism). Article 8 puts the matter at hand clearly. 'The Three Creeds, *Nicene Creed*, *Athanasius's Creed*, and that which is commonly called the *Apostles' Creed*, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture'. This Article does not claim that the form of a credal statement must be scriptural, but rather that because the content of the specifically named creeds are biblical they are to be accepted.² The authority of the creeds in matters of faith and conduct rests upon their background in the Bible, and never vice-versa.

Much of what has been said above may appear to be self-evident, but in the course of investigating what Evangelical Christians may reasonably take Christ's 'descent into hell' to mean, it will be found that the relationship between credal and scriptural interpretation is an extraordinarily complicated one. Because of the variety of prevalent interpretations I have thought it expedient to outline historical and dogmatic positions first, before examining the matter in relation to the teaching of the New Testament.

2. The 'Descent into Hell' in the Apostles' Creed against its Historical Background

(a) The meaning of 'hell'.

The English expression 'descended into hell' is a translation of the

Latin credal expression *descendit ad infera*.³ This in turn can be traced back to earlier creeds, in Greek, where the equivalent for *infera* is *hades*.⁴ The meaning of *hades* both in secular and biblical Greek is clear, it refers to the place of repose of departed spirits. Whilst in the Homeric period *hades* is very similar to *sheol* of the Old Testament,⁵ being a dull inactive place devoid of moral differentiation, in the intertestamental period important developments took place in both Hellenistic and Hebrew culture.⁶ In particular the apocalyptic writings are replete with references to *hades/sheol* as a place of genuine human activity and as an intermediate state wherein souls await the resurrection.⁷ The morally neutral condition so marked in the older conception is replaced by a division of the dead along lines of righteousness, the just enter into a place of blessing and the wicked into one of torment.⁸ These regions are thought of as spatial divisions or compartments of the one place.⁹ In some sources the region of the righteous is called 'paradise',¹⁰ whilst the wicked are said to be tortured in the 'accursed valley'. This presumably relates to the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, a smouldering rubbish heap and former site of idolatrous practices (2 Ki. 16:3; Jer. 7:31 etc.), in Hebrew this is *ge hinnom* and so, in Greek, *gehenna*. At times *gehenna* is identified with *hades* or a part of it.¹¹ As to location, *hades* is generally thought of as beneath the earth, the 'underworld',¹² though at times 'paradise' is situated in the third heaven.¹³

When we pass to the literature roughly contemporaneous with the New Testament the above lines of thought persist. Josephus reports that the Pharisees locate the souls of both the righteous and ungodly in *hades*,¹⁴ but he himself indicates that only the wicked pass into the underworld whilst the righteous go immediately to heaven.¹⁵ The latter opinion, though more heavily hellenized, is also that of Philo.¹⁶ Unfortunately the material available from Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls) does not permit definite conclusions about the community's belief in the fate of the deceased.¹⁷ The Rabbinical literature on the future life is of a varied nature, and the matter is confused by dating problems. It is clear however that the Rabbis held the same mix of ideas as that represented in the range of works mentioned above.¹⁸

As expected, the New Testament shows strong lines of continuity with the above ideas. Most commonly the realm of the dead is designated by *hades*. That *hades* serves only an interim purpose may be seen by the sharp distinction between it and *gehenna*. Only the latter may strictly be translated as 'hell',¹⁹ it alone is the place of the eternal fiery torment (Matt. 13:42, 59; Mark 9:43, 48) of the ensouled body (Matt. 10:28) of the wicked after the last judgment (Matt. 25:31-46). *Hades* receives souls at death (Luke 16:23) and delivers them up at the resurrection when it is replaced by *gehenna* (Rev. 20:13-14a).

As to the location of *hades* there is general agreement that it lies at the heart of the earth. In contrast to heaven as the highest height it signifies the deepest depth (Matt. 11:23; Luke 10:15); it is the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40) and one goes down into it (Matt. 11:23; Luke 10:15); it is called *phulake* (prison) as the underground keeping place of the ungodly (Rev. 20:2, 3, 7; cf. 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). The image 'gates of *hades*' (Matt. 16:18. Cf. 'keys of *hades*' (Rev. 1:18) is to be understood in terms of the ancient oriental and biblical cosmology according to which the underworld, located in the hollow earth, is enclosed by sacred cliffs.²⁰

The developments which took place in the intertestamental apocalyptic literature, whereby *hades* became internally divided into compartments, or the righteous dead were thought of as resident elsewhere, continues into the New Testament. In Luke 16:23, 26 all the dead are pictured as in the underworld, and Acts 2:27, 31, based on Psalm 16:8–11 (LXX), which understands *hades* in a classical Old Testament sense, treats *hades* as a place of assembly for all souls. Yet there are other passages in which only the souls of the ungodly are in the underworld (Rev. 20:13f.), whereas the righteous are in 'everlasting habitations' (Luke 16:9), in 'paradise' (Luke 23:43), 'with the Lord' (2 Cor. 5:8), united 'with Christ' (Phil. 1:23), in the 'heavenly Jerusalem' (Heb. 12:22), under the heavenly altar (Rev. 6:9), or before the throne of God (Rev. 7:9; 14:3).

At first glance it might seem that the entire range of literature in the period under review is ambiguous concerning whether *hades* is always underground with a compartment for the righteous. Closer examination reveals that this is not so, for all the relevant New Testament texts situated after Jesus' resurrection²¹ locate the righteous outside of *hades*.²² This observation will have important implications at a later stage of this article.

(b) 'The Descent into Hell' in the Patristic Writings

The belief that Jesus spent the interval between his death and resurrection in *hades* is a common feature of Christian teaching from the Apostolic Fathers onwards. This *hades* never means the place of the wicked but the dwelling of the righteous dead, although at times the region of the blessed is thought of as a spatial division of the netherworld.²³ It was common belief that the Old Testament saints were located at the time of the 'descent' in *hades*,²⁴ and it seems to have been almost universally accepted by orthodox Christians that Christ's descent in some way related to their redemption. At this point two broad streams of interpretation can be discerned.²⁵

First, there is an emphasis on Christ's preaching salvation to the Old Testament worthies. Justin Martyr and Irenaeus both cite an apocryphal Old Testament passage as proof of this doctrine. 'The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the

graves; and descended to preach to them his own salvation'.²⁶ Irenaeus quotes a 'certain presbyter' 'who had heard it from those who had seen the apostles that Christ 'descended . . . below the ground, preaching His advent there also and declaring remission of sins received by those who believe in Him, . . . who foretold His advent . . . just men and prophets and patriarchs.'²⁷ The problem with this view was that it seemed that there was little that a dominical visit could achieve, for it was usually combined with a belief that, with the exception of martyrs, neither the Old Testament believers nor Christians pass into the immediate presence of God until after the general resurrection.²⁸ All that Christ did for the Fathers was to give them a better experience of *hades*.²⁹

It is hardly surprising that another view of the 'descent' came to predominate; this dramatically pictured Christ as the liberator of the Old Testament saints from the powers of darkness. The *Odes of Solomon*³⁰ are explicit about this:

sheol saw me and was made miserable . . . and I made a congregation of living men among his dead men . . . and they cried, and said, Son of God have pity on us . . . and my name I sealed upon their heads: for they are free men and they are mine.³¹

Melito of Sardis's *Paschal Homily* 68; 102³² has traces of this idea where it speaks of the descent in terms of the defeat of evil. The fourth century *Gospel of Nicodemus* couples in dramatic fashion Christ's descent into *hades* and transportation of the Old Testament saints to heaven with the defeat and casting of Satan into the torture of *Tartarus*.³³ The creed of Sirmium A.D.359, puts the picture thus: '(Christ) was crucified and died and descended into hell, and regulated things there, whom the gatekeepers of hell saw and shuddered.'³⁴ Examples could be multiplied,³⁵ but it is hardly disputable that by the time of the entry of our clause into the Apostles' Creed the Western Church understood by the 'descent into hell' Christ's triumph over Satan and the power of death on behalf of lost mankind.³⁶

3. Confessional and Dogmatic Positions from the Middle Ages to the Present Day

(a) Roman Catholicism

The early mediaeval period in the Western Church effectively knew of only one way of interpreting Christ's 'descent into hell', i.e. in terms of a violent overthrowing of the devil. This is the motif of the so-called 'harrowing of hell'.³⁷ The 'descent' was viewed, not as an addendum to Christ's work of salvation, but as pivotal and instrumental, for it became allied with the ransom theory of the atonement whereby Christ through his vicarious death paid guilty

man's dues to Satan.³⁸ In *hades*, Jesus turned the tables as it were, overpowering Satan who had been deceived into thinking that Christ too had become one of his vanquished. With the subsequent predominance of Anselm's satisfaction theory of the atonement,³⁹ for which all of man's debt for sin is owed to *God*, it was inevitable that the doctrine of the 'descent' should take on a more moderate form.

This is immediately apparent when one considers the writing of Aquinas, the main lines of whose interpretation have become standard for Roman Catholicism.⁴⁰ St. Thomas teaches that it was fitting for Christ to descend to hell for three reasons: in his identification with man as a sinner; to liberate the prisoners in hell, for by his passion he had overcome the devil; to manifest his power in hell by visiting it and enlightening it.⁴¹ Aquinas is quite clear that the 'hell' of the credal statement is not that of the damned⁴² but rather the *limbus patrum* or resting place of the Old Testament saints. The purpose of this descent, which is understood in spiritual terms (by effect) and not locally (that is, spatially),⁴³ was to deliver the holy fathers from the penalty of original sin⁴⁴ and to lead them into the presence of God in heaven.⁴⁵ It is explicitly denied that Christ liberated any persons from the hell of damnation.⁴⁶

It is immediately apparent how the formal lines of the official theological position of the Church of Rome recapitulate the essential elements of the older patristic interpretation outlined above. When we come to examine the cogency of this understanding of the 'descent' the two shall therefore stand or fall together.

(b) Lutheranism

If, in Roman Catholicism, one may discern an element of Christ's humiliation for man in an overall context of triumph, Lutheranism has altogether denied that the 'descent' has any references to Christ's suffering.⁴⁷ As to the views of Luther himself these naturally underwent a shift during his lifetime.⁴⁸ At first he adhered to the Roman Catholic tradition described above, but once he had concluded that the faith of the 'fathers' was one with our own he had to abandon it. All believers, he came to hold, 'sleep' in the sure protection of God until the last day when they shall be awakened at the resurrection.⁴⁹ It is not surprising therefore to find Luther turning, at least in his popular discourses, to a modified version of the 'harrowing of hell': 'the Lord Christ—the entire person, God and man, with body and soul, undivided—had journeyed to Hell, and had in person demolished Hell and bound the Devil.' He elsewhere speaks more carefully: 'I shall be quite content if people do not vex themselves greatly with high and subtle thoughts as to how (the descent) was carried out; for it did not take place in the body at all, as He remained in the grave for three days . . . Please God, the banner, doors, gate, and chains (of Hell) were of wood, or of iron, or did not exist at all.'⁵⁰

Notwithstanding the highly metaphorical cast of Luther's language, confessional Lutheranism became committed to his position as summarized in the *Formula of Concord*:

For it ought to be enough for us to know that 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.⁵¹

Lutheran orthodoxy, following the lead of Melancthon,⁵² self-consciously developed a doctrine of 'the descent' in opposition to Calvinism (see below). Christ's descent was the first stage in the *status exaltationis*, his triumph; this event was usually placed in time between the return to life in the grave and the resurrection.⁵³ One important development that took place in this context was that, in going beyond the simple lines of the *Formula of Concord*, it became usual for dogmaticians to appeal to a particular exegesis of 1 Peter 3:19ff.⁵⁴

(c) Calvin and his successors

The view to be expounded here, that the clause in the Creed refers to Christ's experience on the cross, is most usually associated with the name of Calvin. It should be noted however that as early as the fourteenth century Durand of St. Pourcain interpreted *infera* in the Apostles' Creed as a punishment and not a place, it meant Christ's punishment for man's redemption. These views were essentially repeated in the next century by Pico della Mirandola and Nicholas of Cusa, but had no influence in the Roman Communion.⁵⁵ The Lutheran theologian Johann Agricola⁵⁶ expounded a view similar to that afterwards maintained by Calvin; and Zwingli at times identifies 'the descent' with Christ's inner experience of suffering punishment on the cross.⁵⁷

For Calvin however 'the descent' is a major plank in his soteriological platform: 'a matter of no small moment in bringing about redemption'.⁵⁸ He sweeps aside the possibility that 'the descent' clause in the Creed is there to reinforce the statement about Christ's death, for repetition is alien to the summary nature of a creed. References to the limbus are deemed 'childish' and 1 Peter 3:19 has to do with a revelation to the dead of the significance of Jesus' work, and so is not relevant.⁵⁹ Rather: 'the "descent into hell" is an expression of the spiritual torment that Christ underwent for us . . . By these words (Is. 53:5) he means that Christ was put in the place of evildoers as surety and pledge—submitting himself even as the accused—to bear and suffer all the punishments that they ought to have sustained . . . No wonder, then, if he is said to have descended into hell, for he suffered the death that God in his wrath had inflicted upon the wicked.'⁶⁰ Appeal is made in defence of the

doctrine to scripture.⁶¹ Acts 2:24f. speaks of Christ's release from the pangs of death, Hebrews 5:7f. tells us of his godly fear and Matt. 27:46 relates the effect on Christ (abandonment) of the bearing of the divine severity. Calvin's logic has pushed the notion of a substitutionary atonement to its upper limit.

Whilst those Reformed theologians who later followed Calvin in this interpretation of the Creed extended its meaning to the agonies of Gethsemane,⁶² it was universally proclaimed by them (in opposition to Lutheranism) that 'the descent' was the final stage of the *status humiliationis*.⁶³ The most important formularies to adopt this position are the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (qu.49–50) and the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Question 44 of the latter, in asking 'Why is it added: "He descended into hades"?' answers: 'That in my greatest temptations I may be assured that Christ, my Lord, by his inexpressible anguish, pains, and terrors which he suffered in his soul on the cross and before, has redeemed me from the anguish and torment of hell'.⁶⁴ This interpretation of the Creed has remained a living force down to our own time, even for theologians outside the Reformed camp;⁶⁵ Karl Barth has been its most influential modern representative.⁶⁶

(d) Other Reformed Positions

Other Reformed theologians were not persuaded by Calvin's interpretation of the Creed. They returned to an uncommon patristic view that the 'descent' clause was intended simply as a gloss on 'crucified, dead and buried': the human nature of Christ truly died and underwent the full experience of death.⁶⁷ The clause, it was argued, had originally been inserted to underline the reality of Christ's death.⁶⁸ This would seem to be the standard position of Zwingli, Leo Jud⁶⁹ and also of Bucer.⁷⁰

Anglican Article 3 contains the bald statement: 'As Christ died for us, and was buried, so also it is to be believed, that he went down into hell.' This Article, of 1563, is considerably shorter than that of 1553, deleting the explicit interpretatory words: 'The body of Christ lay in the grave until His resurrection: but His spirit, which He gave up, was with the spirits which were detained in prison, or in hell, and preached unto them, as the place of St. Peter testifieth.' The omission of these words was due to a considerable controversy, which raged in England well into the seventeenth century, between the Puritans, who tended to favour Calvin's view, and conformist Anglican theologians who looked either to the early Fathers or Lutheran interpretations.⁷¹ As it stands the Article is open to a number of views. This is significant, for had the original Article been allowed to stand any interpretation of it would have had to conform to a form of exegesis of 1 Peter 3:18ff which was compatible with a descent of Christ into hades.⁷² In other words the meaning of the credal clause would be

closed to further developments in exegesis so that it could not be truly 'proved' by Holy Scripture. That is, the Creed, via Article 3, would control its scriptural 'foundation', and not vice-versa.

That 'descended into hell' has essentially the same meaning as 'dead and buried' has been a popular view amongst many outstanding Anglican theologians. In the seventeenth century it was embraced by the renowned English scholars John Lightfoot and John Pearson, and is favoured in the important commentaries on the *Thirty-Nine Articles* by E.H. Browne,⁷³ W.H. Griffith Thomas,⁷⁴ E.C.S. Gibson,⁷⁵ and E.J. Bicknell.⁷⁶ Others to approve of it include E.A. Litton,⁷⁷ G.F. Maclear⁷⁸ and T.C. Hammond.⁷⁹ A common feature of these expositions is an emphasis not only on Jesus' death as real, but as real in solidarity with our death, that he took it upon himself to experience all that we could ever experience, and this for us. This being so, Christ having gone ahead as it were, there no longer remains any region of terror for those who believe in his work.⁸⁰ *Prima facie* this position has an important combination of features lacking in the other interpretations, that of both antiquity and simplicity.

(e) The 'Descent' as a Work of Universal Redemption

This undoubtedly is the most common contemporary interpretation of the credal clause amongst practising theologians.⁸¹ It expands, perhaps to its logical conclusion, an ancient opinion that through his 'descent' Jesus not only brought liberty to the Old Testament worthies but also to notable men of classical culture.⁸² Not infrequently this view is combined with some of the other interpretations of the descent, particularly (c) and (d).⁸³ Since in every case it seems to stand, at least symbolically, upon a particular exposition of 1 Peter 3:18ff., I shall leave an examination of this position until the next section of this paper.⁸⁴

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NOTES

- 1 The expression does not appear as such in the Bible. Cf. the comments of L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974 p.341).
- 2 Cf. the priority given to Holy Scripture in Article 6.
- 3 The phrase *descendit ad infernos* is nowadays preferred to indicate the place of the departed, not the departed. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, 1972, 3rd edition, p.378).
- 4 The first creed to give official recognition to the 'descent' is the so called 'dated' or semi-Arian creed of Sirmium A.D.359. The clause is unknown in the *Old Roman Symbol*, the progenitor of the present Apostles' Creed (see Kelly, *Early Creeds*, ch.3 and 4). The first reference in a Latin creed is to that in use at the church in Aquileia (A.D.390) mentioned by Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* (tr. J.N.D. Kelly, London: Longmans Green, 1950, ch.16).

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- 5 See O. Kaiser and R. Lohse, *Death and Life* (tr. J.E. Steeley, Nashville: Abingdon, 1981, p.43); A.Seth Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of Immortality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922, p.19).
- 6 On the former see W. Fairweather, *The Background of the Epistles* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1935, pp.201–207); Pringle-Pattison, *op. cit.*, pp.23–37.
- 7 1 Enoch 9:10; 22:7; 2 Esdras 7:80ff.; Similitudes of Enoch 61:12; Testament of Asher 6:5–6 etc.
- 8 2 Enoch 40:12; 49:2; 58:4–6; 2 Baruch 21:23, 23:4; 30:2 etc.
- 9 1 Enoch 22:2–13; 2 Esdras 4:41.
- 10 1 Enoch 60:8; Apocalypse of Moses 37:5.
- 11 1 Enoch 51:1; 54:1; Psalms of Solomon 14:6; 15:11; 16:2; 2 Enoch 10:1ff.
- 12 1 Enoch 22; 2 Esdras 4:41; 2 Baruch 21:23; 23:4; 30:2 etc.
- 13 Apocalypse of Moses 37:5; Wisdom of Solomon 2:1; 17:14. This means of course that 'paradise' has become separated off from the older conception of *hades*.
- 14 *Antiquities* 18:14; *Jewish War* 2:163.
- 15 *Jewish War* 3:375.
- 16 *On the Migration of Abraham* 84; *On the Contemplative Life* 1:151.
- 17 See: G. Vermes, 'Dead Sea Scrolls', in *Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, supp.vol. 1976, p.18).
- 18 See C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (Meridian n.d. *passim*); C.V. Filcher, *The Hereafter in Jewish and Christian Thought* (London: S.P.C.K., 1940, pp.84–87).
- 19 It is unfortunate that the Apostles' Creed, Article 3 and the Authorised Version create an unnecessary source of confusion by using 'hell' for *hades*.
- 20 See J. Jeremias, *hades*, in *T.D.N.T.* (1, p.148).
- 21 That is, not those written in the post-resurrection period, for this is the whole New Testament, but those who describe conditions for the righteous dead after the resurrection of Jesus.
- 22 I have discussed these matters in full in my unpublished M.A. thesis *The Intermediate State* (Deakin University, 1984), and with special reference to 2 Cor.5:1–10 in 'Immediate or Intermediate? The State of the Believer Upon Death' (*Churchman*, vol.101 no. 4, 1987).
- 23 Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4:34.
- 24 It was usual to infer this from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16) which places the latter, after death, in 'Abraham's bosom' a region physically separated but in some way adjacent to the *hades* of suffering. See, e.g. Origen, *Commentary on the Psalms* 9:18; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4:34; Chrysostom, *Homilies on Dives and Lazarus*; Augustine, *Exposition of Genesis*, 12:33–34.
- 25 This is picked up by F. Loofs, 'Descent to Hades', in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, J. Hastings (ed.), vol.4, 1911, pp.659–661); and Kelly, *Early Creeds*, pp.381–382.
- 26 Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 72; Irenaeus, *Against all Heresies* 3:22; 4:36. See, E.C.S. Gibson, *The Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England* (London: Methuen, 1902, 3rd edition, p.175).
- 27 Irenaeus, *Against all Heresies*, 4:42. Cf. *Gospel of Peter*, vv.41f; Origen, *Against Celsus*, 2:43.
- 28 Irenaeus, *Against all Heresies*, 5:31, 1f., Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 43; *On the Soul*, 55.
- 29 It is worth noting that this would seem to approximate the position of the Orthodox Church on the subject. See: Loofs, *Descent*, p.654; P. Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom 2: Greek and Latin Creeds* (N.Y.: Harper, 1919, pp.477–478).
- 30 The date is disputed for this collection, but perhaps c.100 A.D. See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, F.L. Cross (ed.), 1974, 2nd edition, p.1288); J.W. Charlesworth, 'Odes of Solomon', in *Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, Abingdon, supp. vol. 1976, pp.637–638).

- 31 *Odes of Solomon*, 42:15ff; cf. 17:9; 311:1.
 32 c.180 A.D.
 33 See Loofs, *Descent*, p.660 for details.
 34 See Kelly, *Early Creeds*, p.289 for original text and translation.
 35 E.g. Rufinus, *Commentary*, 14f; Augustine, *On Heresy*, 79; *Letters* 164; Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon* 119; Gregory the Great, *Sermons on the Gospel* 22; *Letters*, 15.
 36 See W.R. Alger, *A Critical History of the Doctrine of the Future Life* (N.Y.: Greenwood, 1968, vol.2, p.400).
 37 See M.M. Gatch, 'The Harrowing of Hell', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36, suppl. 1981, pp.75–88.
 38 See J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: a History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol.3, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp.133–136).
 39 St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* in *Anselm of Canterbury* (tr. and ed. J. Hopkins and H. Richardson; Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1976, vol.3, pp.39–138).
 40 See A.C. Custance, *Journey Out of Time* (Brockville: Doorway, 1981, pp.263–269). R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christ the Savior* (tr. B. Rose, St. Louis: Herder, 1952, pp.658–662). Loofs, *Descent*, pp.654–656. R.T.A. Murphy, *Summa Theologiae*. Appendix 5: 'The Descent into Hell' (London: Eyre and Spottiswode, 1965, pp.208–215).
 41 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3a. 52, 1. (henceforth *S.Th.*).
 42 Aquinas, *S.Th.* 3a, 52, 3.
 43 'Christ's soul did not go down into hell in the way a body would, but by the sort of angelic movement which was discussed in the *Prima Pars*.' *S.Th.* 3a, 52, 1.
 44 Aquinas *S.Th.* 3a, 49, 5; 52, 5. The penalty in mind here is an exclusion from the divine glory which could not be remedied until Christ's passion.
 45 Aquinas *S.Th.* 3a, 52, 5.
 46 Aquinas *S.Th.* 3a, 52, 6.
 47 For example: 'The Scriptures teach that Christ, having been "made alive" in his grave, descended into hell, not to suffer, but to "proclaim his victory over his captives."' *Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis; Concordia, 1943, no. 150) The reference to scripture here is to 1 Peter 3:19ff., a matter to be dealt with below.
 48 See Loofs, *Descent*, pp.656–657 for details.
 49 See P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (tr. R.C. Schultz, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966, pp.410–417) for a detailed discussion.
 50 See Loofs, *Descent*, p.657 for both quotations.
 51 *Formula of Concord*, Art. 9. cited in P. Schaff (ed.) *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3. *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (New York: Harper, 1919, p.160).
 52 See D.D. Wallace, 'Puritan and Anglican: The Interpretation of Christ's Descent Into Hell in Elizabethan Theology', *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte*, 69, 1978, p.253.
 53 See: W. Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man* (tr. L.L. Wilckens and D.A. Priebe, London: S.C.M. 1968 p.278).
 54 See Loofs, *Descent*, p.657.
 55 For full details see Wallace, *Puritan and Anglican*, p.251.
 56 See Loofs, *Descent*, p.658.
 57 See *Zwingli and Bullinger* (tr. and ed. G.W. Bromiley, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953, p.252).
 58 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16, 8. (tr. F.L. Battles, London: S.C.M., vol.1, 1960.)
 59 Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 16, 9.
 60 Calvin, *Institutes* 2. 16, 10.
 61 Calvin, *Institutes* 1. 16, 11.
 62 For example, Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p.342.
 63 See, for example, *Westminster Larger Catechism* qu. 46, 49, 50; G.C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (tr. C. Lambregtse, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, p.179).

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- 64 Cited in Schaff, *Evangelical Creeds*, p.321.
- 65 It is interesting to note the favourable reception it receives from both Helmut Thielicke, *I Believe* (tr. J.W. Doberstein and H.G. Anderson, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968, pp.130–131) and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed* (tr. M. Kohl, London: S.C.M., 1972, p.91), *Jesus: God and Man*, pp.269–270.
- 66 K. Barth, *Credo* (tr. J.S. McNab, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935, pp.89–94).
- 67 So, Rufinus, *Commentary*, 16.
- 68 See Kelly, *Early Creeds*, pp.379, 380, 383 for evidence that this is what it would have meant for the Syriac speakers amongst whom it was perhaps first to receive confessional status.
- 69 See Loofs, *Descent*, p.657.
- 70 See G. Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962, pp.270, 841).
- 71 For full details see Wallace, *Puritan and Anglican*, pp.255ff.
- 72 Cf. W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Principles of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979, p.67).
- 73 E.H. Browne, *An Exposition of the Thirty Nine Articles* (London: John W. Parker, 1860, 5th edition, p.94).
- 74 Griffith-Thomas, *Principles*, p.69. Cf. his *The Catholic Faith* (London: Longmans Green, 1943, p.43).
- 75 E.C.S. Gibson, *The Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England* (London: Methuen, 1902, 3rd edition, pp.169–170).
- 76 E.J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty Nine Articles* (London: Longmans Green, 1939, pp.122–123).
- 77 E.A. Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology* (London: James Clarke, 1960, p.193).
- 78 G.F. Maclear, *An Introduction to the Creeds* (London: Macmillan, 1904, pp.142–143).
- 79 T.C. Hammond, *In Understanding be Men* (London: I.V.P., 1968, 6th edition, p.107).
- 80 Cf. the treatment by W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1889, vol.2, pp.602ff.). Also worth consulting as a Roman Catholic expression very much along these lines is R. Lachenschmid, 'Descent of Christ into Hell', in *Sacramentum Mundi* (London: Burns and Oates, K. Rahner (ed.), 1968, vol.3, pp.9–10).
- 81 See the comments by A.T. Hanson, 'The Descent into Hell', in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: S.C.M., A. Richardson and J. Macquarrie (edd.), 1983, pp.153–154).
- 82 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 6:6; Gregory of Nazianzen, *Orations* 45:23; Cyril of Alexandria, *Paschal Homily* 7, (Cyril is in fact of the opinion that only Satan was left in hell); Augustine, *Letters*, 164.
- 83 So, Bicknell, *Articles*, pp.123–125; M. Downey, 'Worship Between the Holocausts', *Theology Today*, 43, 1986, pp.75–87; Pannenberg, *Creed* pp.92–95; Thielicke, *I Believe*, pp.130ff.
- 84 See: Loofs, *Descent*, p.658 for the origins of this view in modern theology.

'He Descended Into Hell': Creed, Article And Scripture Part II

JOHN YATES

1. The 'Descent Into Hell' according to the New Testament

In Part I I have briefly outlined the major representative positions taken up historically in the interpretation of the credal clause, 'he descended into hell'. Self-consciously I have avoided any critical analysis of these positions along theological lines, under the conviction that the best way of weighing up what the Creed can be taken to mean is to consider those various passages of Scripture to which appeal is usually made by theologians. I shall now endeavour to examine the major texts in order to see which, if any, of the theological views can be 'proved' by Holy Scripture.

a. Matthew 12.40

The first such text contains Jesus' words in Matthew 12.¹ 'For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so, will the Son of man be those days in the heart of the earth (*en tē kardiā tēs gēs*).² Some have claimed that the expression 'heart of the earth' means simply the grave.² This however is to overlook the natural association that Jesus' hearers (and Matthew's readers) would make between the centre of the earth and *hades* as the realm of the dead.³ Even more compelling is the parallel between the experience of Jonah and what is being described. The term *kardia* occurs in the Septuagint of Jonah 2.4 (English 2.3) where the reference is to *hades*, and in Jonah 2.7 (English 2.6) Jonah's descent to *hades* is described as *katabēn eis gēn*. It seems safe to conclude that the word *hades* is replaced by a designation of its location, 'the heart of the earth', language adapted to express formally the parallel to 'the belly of the whale'.⁴ Matthew 12.40 therefore clearly expresses a doctrine of Christ's descent after death into the place of the dead; however, it tells us no more than this and as such is of no help in filling out the Creed beyond the plain meaning of its words.

b. Matthew 27.52–53

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, and the earth shook, and the rocks were split, the tombs also

were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

This is an incident which is unique to Matthew, and it does not fit easily with the accepted position of the rest of the New Testament that all except Christ are waiting for the general resurrection (e.g. 1 Thess.4.13ff.). The point of the story is unquestionably to relate the eschatological significance of the death of Jesus: by his death the end of the ages has been ushered in.⁵ It is not uncommon for commentators to assume that the idea of the 'descent' underlies this passage.⁶ Caution however must be exercised in this matter, for whilst latter sources, such as the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, certainly use and develop this text Matthew himself speaks with brevity and sobriety. He does not describe a 'descent' at all. At the most one may conclude that the passage is complementary with certain interpretations of the descent formulated in dogmatic theology. In particular it is difficult to decide the precise sequence of events located in the passage.

The part of the text which reads 'and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city' is ambiguous, it could mean that the saints came out of their tombs after Jesus' resurrection or that they went into the holy city after his resurrection. If 'after his resurrection' (*meta tēn egersin autou*) is coupled with what precedes it the doctrine of Christ as the 'first born' and 'first fruits' from the dead, prominent in the New Testament (1 Cor.15.20; Col.1.18; Rev.1.5) is certainly preserved. On this account many see the expression as a deliberate Matthean addition to an earlier tradition.⁷ Robert Gundry however has argued that in all the temporal uses of *meta* ('with') elsewhere in the first gospel this preposition and its accusative object precede the verb qualified.⁸ He concludes that Matthew's meaning is not that the saints came out of their tombs after the resurrection but that they entered Jerusalem after Christ's resurrection. This leaves the question of the timing of the saints' resurrection open—did it occur before or after Jesus' resurrection?⁹ He is of the opinion, again against the background of the 'first born' doctrine that: 'the saints stayed in their tombs for several days even though their bodies had been raised to life.'¹⁰ For this view he cites no biblical or extra biblical parallels. It would seem to me that this opinion is contradicted by the very meaning of 'resurrection', both as Matthew and the rest of the Bible understand it. In 27.52 Matthew describes the resurrection of the saints in language reminiscent of the Old Testament 'and many of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised' recalls Dan.12.2: 'and many of those who sleep in the dust shall awake.' Matthew's 'and the tombs (*mnēmeia*) were opened' echoes Ezek.37.12 LXX 'I will open your tombs (*mnēmata*), and

will bring you up out of your tombs. . . ' It seems indubitable that these texts, together with the whole range of New Testament material,¹¹ describe resurrection as an immediate and public event. To be raised from the dead is simply to 'stand up' with a body, transformed and active in the world. It would seem natural therefore to suppose that this is Matthew's meaning in our text, he considers that the saints were raised immediately before their entry into Jerusalem and so *after* the resurrection of Jesus. If therefore Matt.27.52-53 is used in support of any 'descent' doctrine, and this in itself is an inference, it would seem best to place the 'descent' by which Jesus raised the saints after his own resurrection. One however feels very reticent about going behind the passage even to this limited degree.

c. Luke 23.43

Although this text is sometimes omitted in discussions of the 'descent into hell' it is perhaps the clearest of all New Testament passages concerning the experience of Jesus between his death and resurrection. In the context of the crucifixion Jesus says to the penitent thief on the adjacent cross: 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.'¹² I have already touched upon the concept of 'paradise' in Section 2 of Part I when dealing with the intertestamental literature. As the thief has just confessed Jesus as the Messiah (v.42), the dominical utterance would intimate to him immediate participation (after death) *with Jesus*, in the blessed abode of the righteous.¹³ Nothing here is said about the location or 'eschatological geography' of 'paradise' so prominent in apocalyptic literature, but the thrust of the passage is all the more clear because of this.¹⁴

d. Acts 2.27

'For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy Holy One see corruption.'

Here Peter is represented as quoting from Psalm 16.10 (in his sermon on the day of Pentecost) with reference to the experience of Jesus between his death and resurrection. *Prima facie*, the natural way of understanding this verse is that while Christ's soul, in company with all other men's, went down to *hades* God did not leave him there but raised him from the dead. If such an exegesis be accepted we have a clear reference to 'the descent into hell'.¹⁵

This interpretation has been resisted on a number of grounds. Calvin took the verse to teach, not that Christ's soul was in *hades*, but that his life was consigned to the grave.¹⁶ Such a position has about it an air of special pleading, and need not detain us here for a more plausible view takes into account details of Lukan theology. First, in Acts 2.24 Luke has described Jesus' resurrection in terms of being loosed from 'the pangs of death'. This expression is from the LXX

of Pss. 18.4; 116.3 where it is parallel to 'pangs of *hades*' and 'dangers of *hades*', and from 2 Sam. 22.6, where it is the LXX translation of 'cords of *sheol*'. If Luke was making a point about Jesus' descent into *hades* it is hardly likely that he would have chosen the neutral expression.¹⁷ Furthermore, Luke begins his quotation of Ps. 16 at verse eight 'I saw the Lord always before me. . . .' (Acts 2.25). He can hardly mean by this that God was with Jesus in an undifferentiated underworld. Finally, since Acts 2.27a reads 'thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades (*eis haidou*)' it is quite appropriate to see Luke as holding that the Psalm as applied to Jesus means that God did not allow him to enter into (*eis*) *hades* at all.¹⁸ Much is to be said for Haenchen's remark that all of the above leads to the conclusion that Acts 2.24–27 pictures Jesus as in 'paradise'.¹⁹

e. Romans 10.6–7

But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart 'Who will ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

Here Paul adopts Deut. 30.12–4 (LXX) to describe certain characteristics of the righteousness by faith which comes through Christ. The key word here is 'abyss', which Paul has used to replace 'sea' in Deut. 30.13 so as to make more explicit a reference to Christ. In the LXX *abyssos* usually translates the Hebrew word *tehom*, 'depth of water', but in Ps. 71.20 it is used of the depths of the earth as the realm of the dead.²⁰ It is clearly in this sense that Paul uses it here.²¹ Yet how much can we safely deduce from this reference to the sojourn of Christ in 'the abyss'? In his article on *abyssos* in *Kittel* Jeremias is unable to produce a parallel to Paul's use of this term for the realm of the dead outside of a passage in the Babylonian Talmud.²² This means that apart from Psalm 71 itself we have no context in which to situate the word's connotation.²³ As the psalm in its Old Testament setting bears the usual meaning for *hades/sheol*²⁴ we cannot take Paul to mean anything more than Christ died and went to the place of the dead before his resurrection. To extract anything more than this from the passage is to go beyond its intention to proclaim Christ's accomplished work for the sake of salvation.²⁵

f. Ephesians 4.9

(In saying, 'He ascended' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.).

The key expression here is 'lower parts of the earth' (*katōtera merē*

tēs gēs). This could mean either, 'the lower parts, that is, the earth', or 'the lower parts of the earth' i.e. the underworld.²⁶ Arguments for the second alternative include:²⁷

- (i) The language of Ephesians has parallels with Pss.63.9; 139.5 *katōtata tēs gēs*, where *sheol* is meant.
- (ii) If 'the earth' were meant *merē* would lack any force.
- (iii) It is simpler, for a genitive with *merē* most naturally denotes the whole to which the parts belong, especially if this whole has not yet been named.
- (iv) The obvious antithesis to an ascent to heaven is a descent to the underworld.
- (v) Only if Christ has been operative in his mission to the furthest reaches of the cosmos, represented by the heavens and the underworld, could he in fact 'fill all things' as Paul maintains.

Strong arguments however can be brought from the other side and have been usefully summarized by Markus Barth.²⁸

- (i) The LXX passages adduced to parallel Eph.4.9 are not exact, they speak of the 'deepest *places*' and not the 'deepest *parts*' of the earth.
- (ii) A descent to *hades* would be a second step following a descent to earth from heaven. A two stage descent would hardly correspond to the single ascent into heaven mentioned in Ephesians 4.8, 10.
- (iii) Parallels in the New Testament such as John 3.13 'No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man', discourage the thought of *hades*.

This matter is not easy to decide, but the grammatical considerations adduced for the first alternative are perhaps decisive.²⁹ Additionally, point (ii) immediately above would seem to be nugatory if the centre of the scene in Eph.4.9 is the earth itself, this would give a quite natural temporal sequence of the ascension following a descent to *hades*. This also eliminates the argument from John 3.13 where the point of reference is clearly heaven.

Accepting that Eph.4.9 refers to a descent to *hades* does not however entail seeing here a reference to the 'harrowing of hell'. According to Eph.2.2 and 6.12 the evil spirit and his hosts are located in the heavenly places, not under the earth. In Eph.1.19–21; 4.8 the defeat of the powers is explicitly linked to Christ's exaltation, not to his descent. Finally, a reference to a conquest of the realm of the dead would not seem to fit the context of Eph.4.9.³⁰ We seem to be left again with the rather mundane conclusion that whilst the New Testament makes reference to a descent of Christ into *hades* virtually no details are given.

g. 1 Peter 3.18–20; 4.6

Without a doubt 1 Peter has been considered by modern theology to be the *locus classicus* for the 'descent into hell'.³¹ For purposes of

convenience I shall treat the exegesis of 1 Pet.4.6 first.

'For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God.'

The immediate context of this saying must be judged to be absolutely determinative for its meaning. Throughout the epistle Peter is seeking to encourage his fellow believers in the face of hostile persecution. He picks this matter up in some detail in 4.1ff. by describing the abuse and misunderstanding to which his readers are subject. Any interpretation of 4.6 must come to terms with this.

One popular line of interpreting the text seems to overlook this completely. It takes 'the dead' of v.6 to mean all who have died without the opportunity to hear the preaching of the Gospel. Christ preached to them at the time of his 'descent' in order that they, like the living, might believe.³² It is not explained however just how this teaching is meant to be meaningful to Peter's readers, for whom it would have to be a piece of esoteric dogma. Additionally this view is inevitably connected with (a particular interpretation of) 3.18ff., though neither by grammar nor in Peter's train of thought does there seem to be any linkage.

The other position understands 'the dead' to be Christians who have died since the apostolic preaching began, for whilst there is nothing in the context to suggest Christ was the preacher the verb *euangelizomai* often has Christ as its object in the New Testament.³³ The judgment 'in the flesh' is death itself, a common way of stating the fact of mortality in the Bible.³⁴ To 'live in the spirit like God' means that these believers, though they have died like all men, and outwardly seem not to have benefitted from their sober way of life, shall, unlike their pagan calumniators, enjoy a blissful state of imperishable existence. It is this view which makes excellent sense in context, and so removes 1 Pet.4.6 from any consideration of Christ's 'descent into hell'.³⁵

1 Peter 3.18ff. is more significant, and reads:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah . . . who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

In interpreting this passage the main points to be considered are: 1. 'made alive in the spirit'. This is the R.S.V. text, but should it be printed 'Spirit'? The alternatives are between understanding a Petrine reference to Christ's immortal soul (or divine nature) or to his resurrection. There is general agreement amongst modern

commentators that the anthropological antithesis of 'flesh' and 'spirit' in v.18 is not to be interpreted, *contra* older writers, in terms of Platonic dualism,³⁶ but in terms of the whole man viewed from different standpoints. 'Flesh' refers to Christ's earthly existence and 'spirit' to his heavenly life. Since 'made alive' (*zōopoiein*) normally refers to the resurrection in the New Testament,³⁷ we may safely conclude that 'in the spirit' is a dative of reference. Christ having died in the earthly sphere has been resurrected in the sphere of the Spirit of God.³⁸

2. 'in which'. The critical question is whether this is to be treated as a phrase continuing on from 'in the spirit', that is the subsequent action described of Christ took place in his resurrected body,³⁹ or whether it is a vague resumptive phrase which could refer back to v.18 generally.⁴⁰ Although there are some weighty grammatical considerations favouring the second possibility patristic commentators unhesitatingly adopted the first sense, and this provides a natural temporal sequence for the passage as a whole. As such it is to be preferred.

3. 'he went'. Given the argument above, the timing of this journey of Christ to 'the spirits' can only have one reference: it must refer to the ascension. This is confirmed by what is said in verse 22 'who has gone into heaven . . .', which picks up the preceding texts without a break, as a reference to the suggested alternative, an interim descent, would not.⁴¹

4. 'the spirits in prison'. What is the identity of these beings? A popular opinion is that the spirits referred to here are sinful human beings, of whom the antediluvians are representative.⁴² This judgment however faces insuperable obstacles:⁴³

(i) it imposes a strict form of anthropological dualism upon the writer of 1 Peter alien to the ethos of both this epistle and the New Testament as a whole.

(ii) there appears to be only one clear New Testament use of 'spirit' used absolutely to stand for the dead, Heb.12.23, and there the context acts as a qualifier so that there can be no doubt that human beings are meant.

On the other hand there are many places both in the intertestamental literature⁴⁴ and in the New Testament⁴⁵ where *pneuma* is used absolutely to designate supra-human beings (angels). Peter would seem to be referring to those evil angels who transgressed in the days before the flood (Gen.6.1ff.) and who, both in Jewish and Christian tradition, were thought to be imprisoned for their misdeeds.⁴⁶

5. 'in prison'. Where is this located? Although it is common for this prison to be thought of as in the underworld⁴⁷ the context here (see

the arguments above) would suggest a prison *above* the earth.⁴⁸

In conclusion it would seem that there are no grounds for regarding 1 Peter 3.18ff. as teaching a doctrine of the descent of Christ with universalistic implications. On the other hand it would seem to be at one with other New Testament passages that associate Christ's triumph over the forces of evil with his ascension.⁴⁹ Having completed our biblical review it is now possible to proceed to evaluate the various dogmatic positions on the 'descent into hell'.

2. The Dogmatic meaning of the 'Descent into Hell'.

Various of the dogmatic positions outlined in Section 2 above must be immediately rejected as non-viable interpretations of the Creed since they find no support in Holy Scripture. In particular not one of the passages examined in any way suggests that the work of Christ for the salvation of mankind received a personal application by him to all the dead immediately subsequent to either his death or resurrection. 'He descended into hell' cannot therefore be taken to imply an offer of universal salvation. Likewise, the 'harrowing of hell' motif found in both patristic and Lutheran sources is out of place as an interpretation of the credal clause. Whilst the insight that Christ triumphed over the powers in a dramatic fashion is scriptural, the relevant New Testament passages never associate this with the period between his death and resurrection. It is the risen and ascended Lord who is the victor.⁵⁰ Since the 'descent into hell' in the Creed is placed before its statement concerning his resurrection the Creed itself cannot be referring to Jesus' defeat of the powers, however important this truth might be.

The Calvinist interpretation stands in a rather different position to the views rejected above, for whilst much can be said for its interpretation of the significance and manner of the death of Christ as alienation from the Father,⁵¹ it simply does not fit in with the way in which 'the descent' is spoken of in either Scripture or the Creed. None of the 'descent' passages I have examined openly link this event with Christ's experience on the cross. At least one passage however, Matthew 12.40, would seem to be incompatible with such an interpretation—Jesus clearly speaks of an extended *sojourn in hades* as occurring *after* his death. If the compilers of the Creed had meant to describe Jesus' abandonment by the Father to the pains of the eternal hell it is certain that *infernus* and not *hades* would have been used.⁵² Finally, the order of the Creed is against Calvin, for the clause is placed between Christ's death and resurrection.

This leaves us with only two possible viable positions, the oldest view of Christ's descent, that it was for the liberation of 'the fathers', and that Reformed opinion which understood the Creed to be emphasizing the reality of Christ's death. The latter is certainly complementary with the very restrained manner in which certain

New Testament passages, especially Matthew 12.40, Romans 10.6–7, and Eph.4.9, speak of 'the descent'. I have argued above that these tell us little more than that Jesus was truly dead. Yet against their background these texts should be taken as saying a little more, for in the ancient world to be dead meant to be in the place of the dead, unlike for us, the two were conceptually indivisible. This Reformed interpretation also fails to explain why the clause should have been added to the Creed at the relatively late date that it was. If it is simply a gloss on 'dead and buried' it 'makes a useless repetition in figurative language'.⁵³ By the time of the Apostles' Creed a polemic against Docetism, a theoretically possible reason for the clause's addition according to this view, would lack all historical relevance.⁵⁴ One must conclude that 'he descended into hell' has a more positive meaning than this interpretation allows.

Thus, by a process of selection, we would seem to be left with the original patristic understanding of the 'descent to hell' viz. that Christ visited the underworld in order to effect full salvation for the Old Testament worthies. An immediate advantage of this interpretation is that it has strong historical associations with the Creed and that it fits in harmoniously with the credal ordering of Christ's work. Is it however true to scripture? The answer would appear to be 'yes' but with qualifications.

In the light of the clearest accounts of what happened to Jesus immediately after his death, i.e. Luke 23.43; Acts 2.24ff., according to the New Testament he was in that part of *hades* known as 'paradise'. That is, he went to that blessed abode which at that time contained (only) the Old Testament righteous. It is at this point however that we must depart from the later patristic and Roman Catholic exegesis, for the Bible nowhere suggests that the ancient worthies were in any state that could be described as bondage, either to external evil or to the effects of original sin.⁵⁵ What would seem to be completely in accord with the teaching of the New Testament⁵⁶ is that the spiritual fulfilment which the saints received was nothing other than Christ's personal presence amongst them. That is, they received illumination and blessing by encountering the Lord fresh from his atoning victory, the same Lord whom they had longed by faith to know during their time on earth.⁵⁷ I contend that only this interpretation can claim to be faithful both to scripture and to the Creed itself.⁵⁸

3. Conclusion

It has been the express intention of this article to arrive at a meaning for the credal clause 'He Descended into Hell' which is consistent with a fair exegesis of the Creed itself and may find support in Holy Scripture. This would seem to be a minimum requirement of Anglican orthodoxy. Such a task has not been easy, for not only has

the language of the Creed presented a need for preliminary clarification but the credal clause itself has been subject to widely differing interpretations. Not a single one of these views has been deemed wholly satisfactory. That view of 'the descent' favoured by liberal theologians, that Christ gave an opportunity for salvation to the ignorant, must be seen as being controlled by motives alien both to the Creed itself and to the New Testament. On the other hand the majority patristic, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran interpretations have uncritically assimilated too many elements from Christian tradition, here theological heritage has influenced the interpretation of Scripture. The various Reformed positions, whilst expressing a truth *per se*, have not been faithful to the meaning of the Creed. I suspect that they represent an overreaction to that dependence on tradition which I have just criticized. It has been the genius of Anglicanism to seek to use intelligently the insights of tradition in the light of the final authority of scripture. The interpretation for which I have settled can claim to be true to this methodology, it has sifted tradition by scripture. If found acceptable it may enable a greater number of Anglicans to confess meaningfully what hitherto has perhaps been the darkest clause of the Apostles' Creed, 'He descended into Hell'.

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NOTES

- 1 All quotations are from the R.S.V. unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 So, W.C. Allen, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1912, p.139); F.V. Filson, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Black, 1960, p.152); E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (tr. D.E. Green, London: S.P.C.K., 1976, p.293).
- 3 See the discussion in Part I, note, 1 and in particular Ecclesiasticus 51.5.
- 4 See the arguments in R.H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, p.244); A.H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1952, p.182); J.M. Robinson, 'Descent into Hades' in *Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville; Abingdon, 1962, vol.1, pp.826-827); and especially J. Woodhouse, 'Jesus and Jonah', *Reformed Theological Review*, 43, 1984, pp.33-49.
- 5 See G. Bornkamm, *seio kil*, in *T.D.N.T.*, (7, p.200.)
- 6 E.g. Bornkamm, *seio*, p.200; Loofs, *Descent*, p.662; McNeile, *Matthew*, p.424.
- 7 So, Allen, *St. Matthew*, p.296; Filson, *Matthew*, p.297; Schweizer *Good News*, p.516.
- 8 He lists Matt.1.12; 17.1; 24.29; 25.19; 26.2, 32, 73; 27.62, 63. Gundry, *Matthew*, p.576.
- 9 Gundry, *Matthew*, p.576.
- 10 Gundry, *Matthew*, p.576.
- 11 E.g. John 5.28-29; 1 Cor.15.51-52; 1 Thess.5.16.
- 12 The Greek does permit as translation 'Truly, I say to you today, you will be with

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- me in paradise.' This rendering however makes the presence of 'today' superfluous, and removes from the statement the solace it offers to the dying thief. See A.A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978, p.103); J. Jeremias, *paradeisos*, in *T.D.N.T.* (5, p.770); A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1922, 5th edition, p.535.)
- 13 Cf. I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, p.873).
 - 14 W. Beveridge, *A Discourse upon the Thirty-Nine Articles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 1857, p.132) makes an attempt to escape the above interpretation by saying 'what our Saviour meant when he promised the thief he should be that day with him in paradise; certainly he did not promise him he would be with his soul, or with his body, but with his Deity.' This exegesis is so tortured as not to need a reply.
 - 15 So, Beveridge, *Discourse*, pp.125–126; Browne, *Exposition*, pp.88–89; Gibson, *Articles*, pp.167–168; W. Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Oliphants, 1973, p.77); E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of Saint Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1952, pp.319–320.)
 - 16 J. Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles* 1–13 (tr. J.W. Fraser and W.J.G. McDonald, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965, p.71); cf. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p.342; Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p.623.
 - 17 Robinson, *Descent*, p.826.
 - 18 At least not into the *hades/sheol* of Psalm 16, a place, in accord with the classical Old Testament view, devoid of God's activity and without regard to earthly righteousness.
 - 19 E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (tr. R.Mcl. Wilson, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971, p.181.)
 - 20 For details see, C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1979, vol.2, p.522–525), W. Sanday and A.C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1911, 5th edition, p.288).
 - 21 *Abyssos* is commonly used as a description of the underground keeping place of runaway spirits both in the apocalyptic literature (Jubilees 5.6ff; 1 Enoch 10.4ff.; 11ff.; 18.11ff.) and in the New Testament (Luke 8.31; Rev.9.1, 2, 11; 11.7; 17.8; 20.1,3).
 - 22 J. Jeremias, *abyssos*, in *T.D.N.T.* vol.1, pp.9–10. He cites Giffin Baruch 84a.
 - 23 *Contra* Ernst Käsemann, *Romans* (tr. G.W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, pp.289–290). I believe the Talmudic evidence to be too far removed in time from *Romans* to indicate a common Jewish-Christian midrash behind Paul's statements.
 - 24 See Part I Section 2.
 - 25 Cf. Selwyn, *1 Peter*, p.320: Paul's language is 'indefinite and untechnical'.
 - 26 The former is an example of the use of a genitive of apposition, the latter a partitive genitive. See F. Büchsel, *Katōteros*, in *T.D.N.T.*, (3, p.641.)
 - 27 See Beveridge, *Discourse*, p.123; Büchsel, *katōteros*, p.641; Selwyn, *1 Peter*, p.321; B.F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d. p.61.)
 - 28 M. Barth, *Ephesians 4–6* (New York: Doubleday, 1974, pp.433–434.) Cf. J. Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (rev. tr. L. Rawlinson and S.M. Houghton, London: Banner of Truth, 1973, pp.350–351); C.L. Mitton, *Ephesians* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951, p.205); E.K. Simpson, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, pp.91–92) J.R.W. Stott, *God's New Society* (Downer's Grove, I.V.P., 1979, pp.158–159.)
 - 29 See R.W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (tr. and rev. of F.W. Blass and A. Debrunner 9th–10th German edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, 167).
 - 30 See Barth, *Ephesians*, pp.433–434; Büchsel, *katōteros*, pp.641–642; Mitton, *Ephesians*, p.205.
 - 31 Though there seems to be no use of this passage to support any interpretation of

- the descent before Clement of Alexandria c.190 A.D. See Selwyn, *1 Peter*, p.340.
- 32 See, e.g. E. Best, *1 Peter* (London: Oliphants, 1971, pp.155–158); Bicknell, *Articles*, p.124; C. Bigg, *The Epistle of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1902, pp.170–172); Litton, *Dogmatic Theology*, pp.193–195.
- 33 Acts 5.42; 8.35; 11.20; 17.18; Gal.1.16.
- 34 Romans 5.12; 6.23; cf. Gen.2.17; 3.19; Wisdom 2.14.
- 35 For representatives of this view see A.T. Hanson, 'Salvation Proclaimed 1. 1 Peter 3.18–22', *Expository Times*, 93, 1982, pp.102–103; J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, (London: Black, 1969, pp.172–175); Loofs, *Descent*, p.659; Selwyn, *1 Peter*, pp.337–339.
- 36 See W.D. Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man* (London: Macmillan, 1956, pp.128 ff.; 154ff.); and the articles by E. Schweizer and others, *sax*, in *T.D.N.T.* (7, pp.98ff.); E. Schweizer, *pneuma*, in *T.D.N.T.* (6, pp.332ff.).
- 37 John 5.21; 6.63; Romans 4.17; 8.11.
- 38 See Best, *1 Peter*, p.139; Hanson, 'Salvation', p.100; Kelly, *Peter and Jude*, pp.150–151. Cf. the important parallel 'the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.' 1 Cor.15.45.
- 39 Hanson, 'Salvation', p.101; Kelly, *Peter and Jude*, p.152.
- 40 So that the action in verse 19 cannot be pinned down to any particular part of Christ's work. So Best, *1 Peter*, p.140; Schweizer, *pneuma*, p.447; Selwyn, *1 Peter*, p.197.
- 41 Kelly, *1 Peter*, pp.155–156. Thus the sequence in vv. 18ff. is 'put to death' (crucifixion), 'made alive' (resurrection), 'preached to the spirits' (ascension journey), 'is at the right hand of God' (Ascension journey completed).
- 42 So Bicknell, *Articles*, pp.123ff.; Bigg, *St. Peter and St. Jude*, pp.162–163; Hanson, 'Salvation', p.102; Litton, *Dogmatic Theology*, pp.194–195; Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, pp.272–273; A. Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London: S.C.M., 1958, pp.210–211); Schweizer, *pneuma*, pp.447–448.
- 41 See Best, *1 Peter*, p.142; Selwyn, *1 Peter*, pp.198–199.
- 42 E.g. Tobit 6.6; 2 Macc.3.24; Jubilees 15.31; 1 Enoch 60.11ff.; Testament of Dan 1.7; 5.5; 1Q S 3.17ff.; 1Q M 12.8ff.; 13.10.
- 45 Luke 10.20; Heb.1.14; Rev.1.4; 3.1.
- 46 1 Enoch 10; 18.13–15; 21; 67.4; Jubilees 10; 2 Peter 2; Jude 6–7.
- 47 1 Enoch 10; 21.1–7; Jubilees 5.6; 2 Peter 2.4, 9; Rev.18.2; 20.7.
- 48 Cf. Odes of Solomon 22.1ff.; Testament of Levi 3.1ff.; 2 Enoch 7.1–5; 18.3–6.
- 49 Cf. Eph.4.8; 1Tim.3.16 (see the commentary by M. Dibelius and H. Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (tr. P. Buttolph and A. Yarbro, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972, pp.61–62.))
- 50 The exception to this, Col.2.15, places the triumph at the cross.
- 51 See, e.g. P. Green, *Studies in the Cross* (London: Wells, Gardner, Darton, 1914, pp.79–104).
- 52 Cf. Griffith Thomas, *Principles of Theology*, p.68 'but when the word "hell" is properly interpreted of "Hades" and not of "Gehenna", this view, though prompted by a true desire to express completely our Lord's redemptive work, is at once and necessarily set aside.'
- 53 Schaff, *Greek and Latin Creeds*, p.46.
- 54 Cf. Kelly, *Early Creeds*, p.379.
- 55 Cf. the references to the conditions of 'paradise' in Section 2 (a) of Part I of this article. For all intents and purposes, *contra* the oldest patristic view, 'paradise' is heaven.
- 56 Cf. 'you will be *with me* in paradise' (Luke 23.43); 'we would rather be away from the body and at home *with the Lord*' (2 Cor.5.8); 'to depart and be *with Christ* . . . is far better' (Phil.1.23).
- 57 Cf. this as a recurring theme in Heb.11.
- 58 It is appreciated that this theory presupposes a disembodied spirit

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can meaningfully communicate with other such spirits. Epistemological and anthropological questions relevant to this claim I have discussed at length in my *Intermediate State* and in 'Disembodied Existence in an Objective World', *Religious Studies* (forthcoming).