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Holy Saturday and the Harrowing of Hell



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Holy Saturday and the Harrowing of Hell

Whereas the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday are well understood by the faithful and were visible in this world, the mystery of Holy Saturday is obscure to the faithful today, and was itself invisible to our world when it occurred.

The Apostle's Creed mentions the mysteries of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. The events of Good Friday are indicated in the words: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." Easter Sunday is indicated in the words: "On the third day He rose again from dead."

The mystery of Holy Saturday is given in the brief words: "He descended into hell" or otherwise translated: "He descended to the dead." In Latin: *descendit ad inferna*. Literally translated, this means that "He descended to the regions of the underworld." The meaning is that He descended to the souls of the dead.

How should we understand the meaning of Christ's descent "into hell"? The Church has a rich tradition about Holy Saturday which we can approach from the perspective of Scripture and Tradition. The latter includes the testimony of the Creeds, the Fathers of the Church, the liturgy, Magisterial texts, authoritative catechisms, the writings of the great theologians, and a wealth of Christian art.

As we shall see, the mystery of Holy Saturday, traditionally referred to as the harrowing of hell, has a great relevance for the cosmic import of Christ's paschal mystery. Just as Christ died for all men, so His death impacted the destiny of every man in human history, including both Jews and righteous pagans.

Christ had evangelized the Jews through the prophets. The fullness of His Revelation, however, reached them only on Holy Saturday as He descended to the souls of the dead in the "bosom of Abraham" to show them His glory, which was the glory of the Cross by which mankind was redeemed.

It is a mystery therefore that is quite relevant to Hebrew Catholics, because it concerns Christ's communication of salvation to all the faithful Jews who died before His coming in the blessed hope of His salvation.

In John 8:56, Jesus said that "Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad." Abraham beheld Christ's day in faith and hope. On Holy Saturday, that faith and hope would have been transformed into a direct vision of His glory.

When Christ died on the cross, He truly died. This means that His human soul separated from His body. Was His

Body as it lay in the tomb still the Body of God? Yes, indeed. The humanity assumed by the Son of God in the Annunciation in the womb of the Blessed Virgin is forever His. The hypostatic union was not disrupted by death. This means that the Body in the tomb was that of God, and the separated soul was likewise joined to the divinity. What happened to the soul of Christ as the Body lay in the tomb?

The Tradition answers that He "descended to hell," or "descended to the dead" (*ad inferna*). What does this mean?

Here there are two related questions. First, what does it mean for a soul separated from a body to be said to be in a "place"? Secondly, what is the meaning of the word "hell" in this context?

With regard to the first question, separated souls are not localized by a body, and like the angels and God, they are said to be in the place in which they act or interact. On Holy Saturday, Christ's soul went to interact or communicate with the souls of those who died before Him. Thus Christ's soul is said to be in the same place with those souls with whom He interacted. This leads us to the second question regarding the meaning of the term hell.

Sheol

It is important to know that "hell" in Tradition, in the Old Testament, and in the language of the Magisterium of the Church, does not only refer to the state of eternal condemnation of the damned. It has a wider significance. In this it corresponds with the Greek term "Hades" ("infernus," "inferna," or "infera" in Latin) which was the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament equivalent: *sheol*. All the deceased in the Old Testament went into *sheol*, including the souls of the just.¹ The word hell or sheol, taken in this broad sense, signifies a punishment of the soul after death in which the soul does not yet see God, and thus is deprived of its supernatural final end. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* states: "The word 'hell' as used here therefore means those invisible dwelling-places in which the souls are detained that have not yet been admitted to the place of heavenly happiness. In this sense the word is frequently used in Scripture."² In fact, "sheol" is used some 65 times in the Old Testament in this sense.

Sheol in this broad sense implies a dual punishment that was the consequence of Original Sin: the separation of the soul from the body in death, and the lack of the vision of God. A third punishment that includes suffering in soul

1 See, for ex., Gen 37:35, in which Isaac says that his soul will go down into hell in sorrow, after learning of the supposed death of his son Joseph.

2 Part I, art. 5; *The Roman Catechism*, p. 65.

and sense, would only have been experienced by those who were damned to *Gehenna*, and those who needed purification in Purgatory.

Jesus speaks of two very different states in sheol in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Lk 16:23. After the rich man dies, he finds himself “in Hades, being in torment.” Lifting up his eyes, however, he “saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom.” Hades would have been the Greek translation of the Hebrew sheol, which thus included the *Gehenna* of torment in which the rich man suffered, and the bosom of Abraham in which Lazarus was consoled, a condition greatly envied by the rich man. Jesus stresses the great gap between the two states by having Abraham say: “A great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us” (Lk 16:26).

Even though the bosom of Abraham did not include torment or misery, it still involved the notion of punishment for original sin resulting in the lack of the vision of God, which means the lack of heaven (which essentially consists in seeing God). This punishment was binding on all men until our Redemption was wrought in Christ’s Passion, making satisfaction for all sin and opening the gates of heaven. This state of rest in “Abraham’s bosom” is also known as the “limbo of the just.” The word “limbo” signifies threshold or border, and indicates the threshold or border of hell just outside of heaven. The limbo of the just was not yet heaven, but it was the part of sheol (hell) closest to heaven.

The New Testament, with the exception of this parable of Lazarus, therefore no longer speaks of all men going down to hell/hades/sheol, as did the Old Testament, but only of the reprobate.

Two other distinct states in sheol should also be noted: purgatory and the limbo of the children dying with original sin, but without personal sin. The doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell concerns exclusively the bosom of Abraham, the *sheol* in which were the souls of the just who died before Good Friday.³

Catechism of the Catholic Church

What did Christ’s soul do in sheol? Did He undergo the culmination of His sufferings, as Calvin and von Balthasar suggest, or did He gather the first fruits of His triumph, as is the common view in the history of the Church? If we ask whether the descent of Christ into hell belongs more to the abasement of Christ or if it is the beginning of the glorification of Christ, we would have to say the latter.

³ Ibid.: “Lastly, the third kind of place is that into which the souls of the just who died before Christ were received. Here they enjoyed a peaceful rest without experiencing any sort of pain and supported by the blessed hope of the redemption. Christ the Lord descended into this ‘hell’ to liberate these souls, who, in the bosom of Abraham, were waiting for their Savior.”

Christ goes to the souls of the just as the Victor over death, the despoiler of the devil. Just before His death, He said: “All has been consummated,” indicating that the work of Redemption was finished.

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* sums up the mystery thus:

With his soul united to his divine Person Jesus went down to the just in hell who were awaiting their Redeemer so they could enter at last into the vision of God. When he had conquered by his death both death and the devil ‘who has the power of death’ (Hb 2:14), he freed the just who looked forward to the Redeemer and opened for them the gates of heaven. (no. 125)

Christ did not go to hell to suffer the pains of hell in our place for the space of time in which His body lay in the tomb. He went rather to empty the part of hell containing the souls of those who died in grace: the just who died with contrition and charity before Christ’s Atonement. He went to finish His messianic mission of bringing the Gospel to all men. At that moment He brought it to all those who were awaiting a Savior in the realm of the dead. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nos. 634-635) says this beautifully:

This is the last phase of Jesus’ messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ’s redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption. Christ went down into the depths of death so that “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (Jn 5:25). Jesus, “the Author of life,” by dying destroyed “him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and [delivered] all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (Hb 2:14-15). Henceforth the risen Christ holds “the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev 1:18), so that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil 2:10).

Scripture on the Descent into Hell

The four Gospels do not directly recount Christ’s descent to the dead. The reason for this would seem to be simply because the Gospels are the eyewitness accounts of Christ’s deeds and words. Christ’s descent on Holy Saturday and the harrowing of hell, unlike the Passion and Resurrection, was a mystery hidden from all eyewitnesses on earth! Thus it has no proper place in the Gospel accounts.

Nevertheless, Jesus alluded to His descent to the dead in three texts. In Mt 12:40, He speaks of His death using the figure of Jonah: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” The text seems to refer principally to his burial, but also secondarily to His soul which went to Sheol, a deeper and more mysterious “heart of the earth.”

Christ also alluded to His future descent in the parable of the binding of the strong man. In Mt 12:29, Christ said: “Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.” This verse was applied to the harrowing of hell already in the second century in a homily by Melito of Sardis (died c. 190) who has Jesus say: “I am the one who trampled hell, bound the strong one, and snatched away people and took them up to heaven on high.”⁴ Christ bound the strong man in dying on the Cross. Now came His time to plunder his house. Hence the “harrowing of hell.”

A third text which perhaps also refers to this mystery is Jn 5:25: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”

In Acts 2:24, St. Peter cites Ps 16 as a prophecy of Christ’s Resurrection. Although principally about the Resurrection, it also touches on Christ’s descent when the Psalm states: “For You will not abandon my soul in Sheol.”

1 Peter 3:18-4:6

Christ’s descent into hell is alluded to most explicitly in a controverted and very difficult text from the First Letter of Peter 3:18-22:

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, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

This passage puts together four key elements in the paschal mystery: Christ’s death, His descent, the sacrament of Baptism whose power comes from the Resurrection, and His Ascension.⁵

After being “being put to death in the flesh,” Christ was “made alive in the spirit.” This does not yet seem to refer to His bodily Resurrection, but to the His soul which separated from His body during the time between His death and Resurrection. What did His glorious soul do? Christ’s life-giving soul went to preach to the “spirits in

prison, who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah.”

“Spirits in prison” seems to refer to the souls of those detained in sheol, which was regarded as a kind of prison, keeping the righteous in the bondage of not being able to see God. Verse 20, however, specifies that Christ preached also to certain souls who at one time were without faith—when Noah was building the ark. However, the text specifies that these “formerly” or “at first” did not obey, thus implying that they did afterwards come to believe. Presumably this coming to faith and repentance would have occurred when they experienced the actual event of the Flood foretold by Noah. Although all of mankind, with the exception of Noah and his household would have perished physically in the Flood, it is reasonable to think that many would have died with repentance and contrition. Natural disasters, especially if prophesied, have a way of bringing men to seek forgiveness.

Why does 1 Pt 3:20 single out the formerly disbelieving souls who died in the Flood as the recipients of Christ’s preaching on Holy Saturday? One reason for this is that in this way a connection is made with Baptism, for the Flood was a type or figure of that sacrament. As humanity was purged by the water of the Flood, so sin is purged in every soul by the water of Baptism. Christ’s preaching to the dead in Sheol was a kind of Baptism for these souls, even though they died in a state of grace, in that His communication opened up the gates of Heaven for them and joined them definitively to the Church triumphant, which is an effect of the grace of Baptism. Although they had to die physically and suffer the penalty of original sin and their personal sins, they were freed from the “second death,” which is eternal separation from God. We can infer that this only applied to those who died with proper repentance, and not to the impenitent, who would have gone to Gehenna to remain without end.

Another possible reason why 1 Pt 3:19 singles out the people who lived at the time of the Flood is to address a stumbling block to a right understanding of God’s mercy. For it could seem that the Flood story paints a picture of God’s severity in contrast with the mercy of God shown in the New Testament. How could God have simply condemned all of mankind at that time with the exception of eight people? The answer of 1 Pt 3:19 is that although all of humanity passed away in the Flood, not all of humanity was condemned eternally to hell. A chance was given to all of them to repent, for God gives sufficient grace to all men to be saved, and it would seem that many, in fact, were saved, despite a prior resistance to God’s grace.

The text goes on to exhort Christians to live in the spirit and not according to human passions like the Gentiles, for Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. St. Peter then states: “For this is why the gospel was preached even

⁴ Melito of Sardis, *On the Pasch* 102, in the Liturgy of Hours, Office of Readings for Holy Saturday.

⁵ For commentaries on this text, see Urbanus Holzmeister, *Commentarius in Epistulas SS. Petri et Iudae Apostolorum*, part 1 (Paris: Lethielleux, 1937); and William Joseph Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965). I am following the interpretation of Holzmeister, who follows Cajetan and St. Robert Bellarmine.

to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God” (4:6). Once again, it seems that this text alludes to those who died at the time of the Flood. Although they suffered punishment in the flesh by drowning, they were given the opportunity of salvation.

Does this mean that Christ gave those who died impenitent a second chance after death? No. That would be contrary to the dogma of faith that our eternal destiny is sealed by the state of our soul in which we die. However, God always gives sufficient aids of actual grace to all men to repent. Only those who repented before death could benefit from Christ’s descent into hell.

Christ’s descent into hell, therefore, is of great relevance to a right understanding of God’s universal salvific will and His superabundant mercy. This mercy was shown in Christ’s descent both with regard to ancient Israel and also to mankind outside the sphere of Israel, as in the case of those who died in the Flood.

Ephesians 4

Another difficult text that seems to refer to the mystery of Christ’s descent to the dead is Eph 4:8-10, in which St. Paul comments on an enigmatic verse from Ps 68:18: “Thou didst ascend the high mount, leading captives in thy train, and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious.” St. Paul interprets the reference to ascending the high mount as Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension, which, he says, was preceded by a descent into the “lower parts of the earth”:

Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (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 descent to the “lower parts of the earth” is thus followed by a glorious Ascent in which Christ led a “host of captives.” The “giving of gifts to men” concerns the subsequent mystery of the sending of the Spirit on Pentecost. St. Paul thus connects five distinct aspects of the one Paschal mystery: death, descent to the underworld and the liberation of captives, Resurrection, Ascension, and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Who are comprised in this “host of captives” who are brought up to heaven by Christ? The Catholic tradition understands them to be the just of the Old Covenant and of the entire history of mankind, who were in Sheol awaiting their Redeemer. St. Thomas Aquinas commented on this verse as follows:

Ascending, I say, not alone, but “he has taken captivity captive,” that is, those whom the devil had held captive. The human race was captive and the saints who died with charity and who merited glory were held in captivity to the devil as captives in Limbo. . . . Christ liberated this captivity and took

them with him into heaven.⁶

Philippians 2:10; Revelation 1:18

The mystery of Christ’s descent is touched on also in the hymn in Phil 2:9–11: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and *under the earth*, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”⁷

The reference to souls “under the earth” bowing to the name of Jesus seems to make reference to the mystery of Holy Saturday in which all those who died in friendship with God before Good Friday were liberated and shown the glory of the Word made flesh, Savior of mankind through His Passion and Cross.

The full glorification of Christ thus would have reference only to the just in the underworld. The damned would also have experienced something of His glory, a revelation that would add to their confusion.

Another text alluding to the harrowing of hell is Rev 1:18: “I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” Christ, in His death, unlocked Hades, releasing those who died in a state of grace from the privation of the vision of God. The “keys of Hades” will become a frequent theme in the artistic and poetic depictions of the harrowing of hell.

Christ’s Descent, Witnessed in the Liturgy

The liturgy of Holy Saturday offers many references to Christ’s descent to the dead. In the ordinary form of the current Latin rite, the Office of Readings in the Divine Office for Holy Saturday (also included in the CCC 635) is an extremely rich early Patristic depiction of this mystery:

Today a great silence reigns on earth, a great silence and a great stillness. A great silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. . . . He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow Adam in his bonds and Eve, captive with him—He who is both their God and the son of Eve.

The Lord goes in to them holding his victorious weapon, his cross. When Adam, the first created man, sees him, he strikes his breast in terror and calls out to all: “My Lord be with you all.” And Christ in reply says to Adam: “And with your spirit.” And grasping his hand he raises him up, saying: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light. I am your God, who for your sake have become your son, who for you and your descendants now speak and command with authority those in prison: Come forth,

⁶ St. Thomas’ commentary on Eph 4:9, lectio3.

⁷ Two other Pauline texts that imply the descent are Rom 10:7 and Col 2:15.

and those in darkness: Have light, and those who sleep: Rise.

“I command you: Awake, sleeper, I have not made you to be held a prisoner in the underworld. Arise from the dead; I am the life of the dead. Arise, O man, work of my hands, arise, you who were fashioned in my image. Rise, let us go hence.... For you, I your God became your son; for you, I the Master took on your form; that of slave; for you, I who am above the heavens came on earth and under the earth; for you, man, I became as a man without help, free among the dead; for you, who left a garden, I was handed over to Jews from a garden and crucified in a garden.

“Look at the spittle on my face, which I received because of you, in order to restore you to that first divine inbreathing at creation. See the blows on my cheeks, which I accepted in order to refashion your distorted form to my own image. See the scourging of my back, which I accepted in order to disperse the load of your sins which was laid upon your back. See my hands nailed to the tree for a good purpose, for you, who stretched out your hand to the tree for an evil one.

“I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side, for you, who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side healed the pain of your side; my sleep will release you from your sleep in Hades; my sword has checked the sword which was turned against you. But arise, let us go hence. The enemy brought you out of the land of paradise; I will reinstate you, no longer in paradise, but on the throne of heaven. I denied you the tree of life, which was a figure, but now I myself am united to you, I who am life.”

St. Hippolytus

In the ancient Eucharistic prayer conserved in the *Apostolic Tradition*, ascribed to St. Hippolytus, and dating probably to the early third century, there is a mention of the descent just before the words of Consecration:

Who, . . . that He might *destroy death and break the bonds of the devil, and tread down hell and illuminate the righteous*, and fix a limit and manifest the resurrection, taking bread and giving thanks to you, he said: “Take, eat, this is my body that will be broken for you.”⁸

The Anaphora (a part of the Byzantine liturgy that corresponds to the Canon of the Mass in the Roman rite) in the Divine Liturgy (Mass) of St. Basil the Great also includes a similar mention of Christ’s descent: “Descending through the Cross into hell that he might fill all things with himself, he loosed the pangs of death.”⁹

Fathers and Doctors on Christ’s Descent into Hell

St. Ignatius Martyr briefly mentions the mystery of Christ’s descent in his Letter to the Magnesians 9.2. He is speaking of Jews who have come to faith in Christ:

8 Paul F. Bradshaw et al., *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Hermeneia Series (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 38-40. Quoted in Jared Wicks, p. 300.

9 *The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great* (London, 2001), pp. 46-48, quoted in Alfeyev, p. 218.

If, then, those who had lived in antiquated practices came to newness of hope, no longer keeping the Sabbath but living in accordance with the Lord’s day, on which our life also arose through him and his death. . . . How can we possibly live without him, whom even the prophets, who were his disciples in the Spirit, were expecting as their teacher? Because of this he for whom they rightly waited raised them from the dead when he came.¹⁰

The prophets who were awaiting him for many centuries in Sheol were the first fruits of the victory of His Passion. He also mentions the descent in the Letter to the Trallians 9: “Who really was crucified and died while those in heaven and on earth and *under the earth* looked on.”

Jewish Christian Patristic Texts

The descent into hell was a theme of special importance to the early Jewish Christians. One reason for this is because it provides a beautiful bridge between Israel and the Church.¹¹ This theme of theology of early Jewish Christianity can be seen in a variety of writings from the first centuries.

The great historian of the Church, Eusebius, presents a curious document alluding to the preaching of Thaddeus in the court of King Agbar in Edessa,¹² which Eusebius dates shortly after the Ascension of Christ. Thaddeus, whom Eusebius identifies as one of the seventy disciples sent out by Christ, gives a summary of Christ’s salvific work, in which the descent to hell/hades is given a prominent place:

I will preach to them . . . how He was crucified and *descended into Hades, and rent asunder the partition which had never been rent since time began*, and raised the dead; how He descended alone, but ascended with a great multitude to His Father.¹³

In this very early Syriac text from Edessa, Christ is said to have destroyed the barrier which prevented the righteous dead from seeing the face of God. The first fruit of Christ’s victory, therefore, was the destruction of this veil, which kept mankind from the vision of God. It was symbolized by the veil in the Temple of Solomon which was before the Holy of Holies, and which could only be penetrated by the High Priest once a year on the feast of Yom Kippur. The Gospels tell us that the veil in the Temple was mysteriously rent in the very moment of Christ’s death, the same moment that He descended to the dead. The physical rending of the Temple veil thus marked the simultaneous rending of a far more important veil that kept those in the underworld from seeing the face of God.

10 Magnesians 9, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 155.

11 See Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. John A. Baker (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964), 233-48.

12 Edessa is the city where the holy Shroud was believed to been kept until the city was captured by the Moslems.

13 Eusebius, *History of the Church* 13.21, p. 69.

A document of the mid-second century, called the “Letter of the Apostles,” speaks of the descent and connects Christ’s harrowing of hell with Baptism. Indeed, Christ’s descent to the dead communicated to their souls the merit He won on Calvary when He expired. The full effects of Baptism were thus applied to the souls of all the faithful departed, both Jew and pagan:

On that account I have descended and have spoken with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, to your fathers the prophets, and have brought to them news that they may come from the rest which is below into heaven, and have given them the right hand of the baptism of life and forgiveness and pardon for all wickedness, as I have done unto you and to them that believe in me.¹⁴

Odes of Solomon

Another interesting early second-century Jewish-Christian work that highlights the descent into hell, is *Odes of Solomon*, which comes from a Jewish-Christian context. Ode 42 speaks of Christ shattering Sheol with very striking images:

Sheol saw me and was shattered
and Death ejected me and many with me.
I have been vinegar and bitterness to it
and I went down with it as far as its depth.
Then the feet and the head it released
because it was not able to endure my face.
And I made a congregation of living among his dead.
And I spoke with them by living lips
in order that my word may not fail.
And those who had died ran toward me
and they cried out and said,
“Son of God, have pity on us.
And deal with us according to your kindness
and bring us out from the chains of darkness.
And open for us the door
by which we may go forth to you.
. . . And I placed my name upon their head
because they are free and they are mine. Hallelujah.¹⁵

Another interesting treatment of Christ’s descent occurs in the apocryphal “Acts of Thomas” dating from the third century, in which we find the following hymn:

Our Lord, companion of his servants . . .
You have shown the glory of your Godhead,
In your longsuffering towards our manhood,
When you hurled the evil one from his power,
And called with your voice to the dead and
they became alive . . .
And you descended into Sheol and
went to its uttermost end;
And opened its gates and brought out its prisoners,
And trod for them the path [leading] above by the

14 “Epistula Apostolorum,” Quoted in Jared Wicks, “Christ’s Saving Descent to the Dead: Early Witnesses from Ignatius of Antioch to Origen,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17, n. 3, p. 285, and in Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:152.

15 Cited in Jared Wicks, p. 290. See Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:166-67.

nature of your Godhead.¹⁶

The Greek version of this work gives the following prayer:

Jesus Christ . . . , the ambassador that wast sent from the height and camest down even unto hell, who didst open the doors and bring up thence them that for many ages were shut up in the treasury of darkness.¹⁷

Countless icons of Christ’s descent illustrate this conception.

Melito of Sardis

As mentioned above, in a homily by Melito of Sardis (died c. 190), he has Jesus say: “I am the one who trampled hell, bound the strong one, and snatched away people and took them up to heaven on high.”¹⁸ Melito is alluding to Mt 12:29, in which Christ said: “Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.”

Another text of Melito of Sardis puts together Christ’s preaching on earth, his preaching in Hades, and His glorious Resurrection: “King of heavens and creation’s Captain, sun of uprising who *appeared both to the dead in Hades* and to mortals in the world, he also alone arose a Sun out of heaven.”¹⁹

Another recently discovered fragment is still clearer:

When the savior shut his eyes upon the cross
light shone in hell;
because the Lord descended to destroy hell
not in body but in soul;
because the Lord descended and ravished all hell with
his soul, but with his body the earth.²⁰

St. Justin

St. Justin, writing in the mid-second century, mentions the harrowing of hell in his *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho* 72. He and St. Irenaeus cite an early Christian text, which Justin thought was part of the prophecies of Jeremiah, but which is apocryphal: “The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the graves; and He descended to preach to them His own salvation.”²¹ Although this text is not part of Old Testament Scripture, it predates Justin, and shows the faith of the primitive Church.

16 See A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 70, quoted in Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, p. 38.

17 Quoted in Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, p. 38.

18 Melito of Sardis, *On the Pasch* 102, in the Liturgy of Hours, Office of Readings for Holy Saturday.

19 Fragment 8b, 4 (lines 40-44), ed. and trans. Stuart George Hall, *On Pascha and Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 73. Quoted by Jared Wicks, “Christ’s Saving Descent to the Dead,” 292.

20 New fragment II, 12 (lines 107-19), in Hall, 90. Quoted in Jared Wicks, p. 292.

21 St. Irenaeus cites text this in *Against Heresies* 3.20 (attributing it to Isaiah) and 4.22 (attributing it to Jeremiah).

St. Irenaeus

St. Irenaeus refers to the harrowing of hell in various texts of his great work, *Against Heresies*, emphasizing the universality of Christ's redemption:

“He also descended into the lower parts of the earth” [Eph 4:9], to behold with his eyes the state of those who were resting from their labors, in reference to whom he did also declare to the disciples, “Many prophets and righteous ones have desired to see and hear what you see and hear” [Mt 13:17].

For it was not merely for those who believed on Him in the time of Tiberius Caesar that Christ came, nor did the Father exercise His providence for the men only who are now alive, but for all men altogether, who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation have both feared and loved God, and practiced justice and piety towards their neighbors, and have earnestly desired to see Christ, and to hear His voice.²²

With regard to kings David and Solomon, he wrote:

It was for this reason, too, that the Lord descended into the regions beneath the earth, preaching His advent there also, and the remission of sins received by those who believe in Him. Now all those believed in Him who had hope towards Him, that is, those who proclaimed His advent, and submitted to His dispensations, the righteous men, the prophets, and the patriarchs, to whom he remitted sins in the same way as He did to us.²³

Clement of Alexandria

In the beginning of the third century, Clement of Alexandria speaks of Christ preaching to the dead (referring to 1 Pt 3:19):

Do not [the Scriptures] show that the Lord preached the Gospel to those that perished in the flood.... If then, the Lord descended to Hades for no other end but to preach the Gospel, as he did descend, it was either to preach the Gospel to all or to the Hebrews only. If, accordingly, to all, then all who believe shall be saved, although they may be of the Gentiles, on making their profession there.²⁴

Clement thus anticipates the later theological doctrine of the possibility of salvation for those who languished in invincible ignorance, through the power of repentance through the aid of the invisible grace of God.²⁵

22 *Against Heresies* 4.22.1-2, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:494.

23 *Ibid.*, 4.27.2, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:499.

24 *Stromateis* 6.6; *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 2:490. Quoted in Alveyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, p. 47.

25 See Vatican II, *Lumen gentium* 16: “Those also can attain to salvation who *through no fault of their own* do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and *moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience*. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.”

Tertullian

Tertullian has a beautiful text on the descent into hell, drawing on Eph 4:9:

Nor did he ascend into the heights of heaven before descending into the lower parts of the earth, that he might make the patriarchs and prophets partakers of himself.²⁶

Origen

The greatest exegete of the third century was Origen, who gives abundant witness to Christ's descent to hell. Like Melito of Sardis, he connects Christ's descent to Mt 12:29 and the binding of the devil:

Through that death he destroyed him who was holding the power of death, i.e., the devil (Heb 2: 14-15), so that he could liberate those who were being held fast by death. For when Christ had bound the strong man (Mt 12:29) and triumphed over him by means of his cross (Col 2:15), he even advanced into his house, the house of death in the underworld, and from there he plundered his possessions, that is, he led away the souls which the devil was keeping.²⁷

In his commentary on Romans 5:14, according to which “Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam,” Origen shows that death exercised dominion even over the righteous Patriarchs and Jews until Christ descended to hell to liberate them:

But it was on this account that Christ descended into the underworld, not only because he would not be held by death (Acts 2:24), but also in order that he might release those who were held there, as was said, not so much through the crime of transgression as much as by the condition of dying. . . . In this as well the prophet's sayings were fulfilled, in which he said of Christ, “In ascending on high he led captivity captive” (Ps 68:18; Eph 4:8).²⁸

Another interesting text is Origen's commentary on 1 Sam 28:8–19, concerning the strange text in which King Saul has the sorceress of Endor call forth the spirit of Samuel to prophesy. To the objection that the righteous Samuel could not have been in Sheol, Origen responds by mentioning Christ's descent to Sheol:

Was Christ in hell or was he not? Is not the word of the Psalms true that the apostles in their Acts interpreted about the Savior's descent to hell? It is written that Ps 15 refers to him in the verse, “You will not abandon my soul to Hades

26 *De anima* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1947), 73, quoted in Jared Wicks, p. 298. Tertullian, however, made a grave error with regard, holding that only the martyrs would see God before the general Resurrection. Despite this rigorist error, it is interesting that he still held the common view of the harrowing of hell, although adapting it to his particular point of view.

27 Origen, *Commentary on Romans* V, 10, 11–12, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, *Fathers of the Church* 103 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 373, quoted by Jared Wicks, p. 305.

28 *Commentary on Romans*, V, 1, 36, in Scheck, 324–25; quoted by Jared Wicks, p. 304.

or let your holy one experience corruption” (Ps 15:10). So Jesus Christ was in hell and do you fear to say that he went to prophesy there and to go to the other souls to whom he descended?²⁹

St. Ephraem

St. Ephraem, a great fourth-century Father who wrote in Syriac (an Aramaic dialect), repeats the theme of the descent in various hymns. He writes: “Blessed is He Who has quickened the dead of Sheol by His Cross!”³⁰ Or again: “To Thee be glory, Watcher, that didst come down after them that slept: and utter the voice from the Tree, and waken them!”³¹ Or again: “To Thee be glory who didst descend and plunge after Adam: and draw him out from the depths of Sheol, and bring him into Eden!”³²

St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas Aquinas gives a very good summary of the Patristic tradition regarding Christ’s descent. In his *Catechesis on the Apostle’s Creed*, he gives three purposes for which Christ descended to the dead. First of all, he states that Christ went there in solidarity with all those who had preceded Him, paying this penalty of Adam. Christ assumed this human reality in order to redeem it.

Secondly, He went there on a mission of charity, for the souls of the just are His intimate friends. He went there to be with those whom He loved. St. Thomas says: “For He had His friends not only in the world but also in hell, since one is Christ’s friend by having charity and in hell there were many who had died in charity and faith in Christ to come, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and other righteous and perfect men. And since Christ had visited His friends in the world and had succored them by His death, He wished to visit his friends who were in hell and succor them by coming to them.”³³

Thirdly, He went to hell (Abraham’s bosom) to completely overcome the devil, whose kingdom He overthrew on the Cross. St. Thomas says: “For this reason He descended into hell, deprived the Devil of his own, bound him, and carried off his spoils.”³⁴

This despoiling of the devil consisted in the deliverance of the just who were awaiting Him. Christ did not despoil the devil of all that were his, but only those who did not

29 Origen, *Homilies on Samuel*, 5.6; trans. Jared Wicks, p. 306. See also *Against Celsus* 2.43: “When he became a soul [at the moment of death], without the covering of the body, he dwelt among those souls which were without bodily covering, converting such of them to himself as were willing, or those whom he saw, for reasons known to him alone, to be better adapted to such a course” (quoted in Alveyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 49).

30 Hymn 38, quoted in Pitstick, p. 81.

31 Hymn 66, quoted in Pitstick, p. 81.

32 Hymn 65, quoted in Pitstick, p. 81.

33 *The Aquinas Catechism*, p. 48.

34 *The Aquinas Catechism*, pp. 48-49

die in mortal sin but in the grace and friendship of God. St. Thomas writes: “For just as Christ wished to suffer death that He might deliver the living from death, so did He wish to descend into hell in order to deliver those that were there. . . . For although Christ destroyed death altogether, he did not altogether destroy hell, but took a piece out of it, as it were, in that He did not deliver all who were there, but only those who were free from mortal sin as well as Original Sin.”³⁵

The Interpretation of Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16

Calvin reinterpreted the traditional theme of Christ’s descent into hell. He recognized that “there is no one of the fathers who does not mention in his writings Christ’s descent into hell,”³⁶ but he dismissed the traditional interpretation as childish fable, rejecting the idea that the dead before Christ’s Passion were in a kind of “Limbo” in which they were separated from the vision of God, from which condition they were freed by the visit of Christ’s soul on Holy Saturday. Instead, he gave the article a completely different interpretation, seeing the descent into hell as a reference to the spiritual torment that Christ suffered in His Passion and Crucifixion, as evidenced by the words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

While it is true that Christ suffered inconceivable spiritual agony in His Passion, caused by His sorrow over the sins of the entire human race, this suffering occurred before Christ’s death, and the descent into hell occurred afterwards. Thus the two mysteries—Christ’s interior abandonment in Gethsemane and Calvary, and the descent into hell—are very distinct in nature, as well as in time. Death put an end to the spiritual suffering of Christ, as is manifested by Christ’s final words on the Cross: “It is consummated.” The work of redemption was complete with the moment of Christ’s death. The victory had to be communicated, however, to the souls that were awaiting redemption. This communication of the first fruits of victory was the content of the traditional understanding of Christ’s descent.

Why did Calvin radically reinterpret this article of faith? Probably for two reasons. On the one hand, his opposition to Purgatory made him inclined to do away with any abode of the souls of the faithful departed distinct from heaven. Thus he denied that the souls in the bosom of Abraham had to wait for Christ’s death in order to see God. Secondly, he sought to emphasize, excessively, the idea of penal substitution, by which Christ literally took the place of the sinners He came to redeem. Thus He would have to suffer hell, to release us from hell. The suffering of hell is pictured as Christ experiencing “all the signs of a wrathful

35 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

36 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. 2, ch. 16, 8, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:513.

and avenging God,” and knowing “that he stood accursed before God’s judgment seat for our sake.”³⁷ Christ thus would have suffered the unspeakable spiritual torment of a terrorized conscience before the Just Judge.

In effect, by seeing the descent as simply indicating Christ’s spiritual suffering, Calvin emptied the descent of its proper theological content, and substituted a new content which belonged to another mystery (Gethsemane).

Other Protestants reduced the mystery even more radically, holding it to be simply Christ’s descent into the sepulcher (Theodore Beza).

The Interpretation of von Balthasar

Recently, this mystery has been given a new interpretation by Hans Urs von Balthasar.³⁸ His interpretation seems to be based on that of Calvin, in that he interprets the descent into hell as Christ’s soul experiencing the spiritual pains of hell. It differs from Calvin, however, in that von Balthasar does not view this suffering as occurring prior to Christ’s death. On the contrary, he sees it as a maximum spiritual suffering that occurred in the time of Christ’s death (when His soul was separated from His body that lay in the tomb on Holy Saturday).

Von Balthasar’s interpretation is in many ways the exact opposite of the Patristic tradition! The Fathers saw Christ’s descent to sheol as a supreme kind of spiritual activity and communication. Christ’s soul communicated salvific knowledge and glory to all the souls who were awaiting Him in Abraham’s bosom. Thus Christ was in interaction with a tremendous portion of mankind, exercising an evangelizing activity on a universal scale.³⁹

Von Balthasar, on the contrary, sees Christ’s descent as the experiencing of the total passivity of death and separation from God and from other souls. For von Balthasar, Holy Saturday marks the culmination of Christ’s kenosis (abasement) and suffering, whereas for the Tradition, it marked the glorious beginning and first fruits of His victory over death and over the consequences of sin, although as yet unseen by us on earth.

Von Balthasar starts from the premise that sheol is an undifferentiated place of passivity, gloom, and separation from God and men. However, this premise is false, and contradicted by Christ’s parable about Lazarus and the rich man, in which the bosom of Abraham was a place of communion and consolation very different from the picture painted by von Balthasar. Christ went to the bosom of Abraham to give those souls perfect consolation with His own presence, unlocking for them the beatific vision.

37 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. 2, ch. 16, 11-12 (1:517, 519).

38 *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), ch. 4, pp. 148-88.

39 See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* 634.

Von Balthasar’s interpretation has recently been challenged by Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, who has charged it with deviating significantly from the Catholic Tradition.⁴⁰ Some of you may have seen reference to this in the magazine *First Things*, which featured a debate between Pitstick and Fr. Edward Oakes, S.J., on this subject. Let me state that it seems that von Balthasar’s interpretation leans excessively toward that of Calvin on this point, and deviates from the Catholic tradition, so beautifully manifested in the liturgy of Holy Saturday in the office of Readings, the Catechism of the Council of Trent, the writings of the Fathers, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The Eastern Orthodox Tradition

In the Orthodox tradition, the mystery of Christ’s descent into hell is much more vigorous than in the West. It seems to me that we have much to learn from our Eastern brethren in this matter. For the Orthodox tradition, Christ entered hell as a Conqueror, bringing His victory to bear on all of human history before Him. The subject is intimately tied together with the Resurrection, and is represented together with it.

There is a recent book regarding the orthodox perspective on Christ’s descent by Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev, in which it can be seen that the Western and Eastern views are intimately linked, and both were born from the early Jewish-Christian theology of the first and second centuries. However, both the Eastern and the Western Catholic views diverge greatly from the reinterpretation of Calvin and von Balthasar.

Archbishop Alfeyev writes:

Christ descended into hell not as the devil’s victim but as Conqueror. He descended in order to “bind up the powerful” and to “plunder his vessels. According to patristic teaching, the devil did not recognize in Christ the incarnate God. He took him for an ordinary man and, rising to the “bait” of the flesh, swallowed the “hook” of the Deity. However, the presence of Christ in hell became the poison that began to gradually ruin hell from within.⁴¹

In summary, the primitive Christian tradition with regard to the harrowing of hell has great relevance to contemporary man. First of all, the harrowing of hell is crucial for understanding the universal and cosmic significance of the Paschal Mystery. We believe that the events of Good Friday to Easter Sunday stand at the center of all human history. Christ’s descent on Holy Saturday, although invisible to observers on earth, was of inconceivable significance for countless souls.

40 *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007).

41 Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 211.

On Holy Saturday Christ came into His rest and brought all mankind that had died repentant into the final rest of heaven. Holy Saturday thus brought the reality of final rest, which the Jewish Sabbath had prefigured for so many centuries. The Jewish Sabbath was but a figure of the awesome but hidden reality of Holy Saturday: the rest of God made man from all the labors of the body, and the bringing of faithful Israel into His heavenly rest.

Secondly, it is a mystery important for contemporary mankind, which on account of increasing globalism, is more concerned with the question of the salvation of mankind before Christ and outside the sphere of Christian revelation. It is not believable that God would have left *all* mankind outside of Israel and the Church to languish forever in hell, without giving them some means of salvation. The Patristic tradition of the harrowing of hell is of great relevance to this theme, and perfectly accords with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the possibility of salvation for those in invincible ignorance.

Thirdly, the harrowing of hell is important from the Hebrew Catholic perspective, and from the point of view of Jewish-Christian relations, because it shows Christ's salvation extended to all the faithful of ancient Israel. Ancient Israel was brought into the Church triumphant through the descent of Jesus on Holy Saturday.