I. Christ's Descent to Hades (Early Church)

As well as retaining the fundamental notion that Jesus Christ's soul had to descend to Hades in order for him to fully share the human lot in death (*Sib. Or.* 8:312; Iren. *Haer.* 5.31.2; Tert. *De anim. 55.2*), Christians from a very early date saw in the descent to Hades an event of soteriological significance for the righteous dead of the period before Christ, whose souls were in Hades. This significance was expressed in three main motifs: (1) that while in Hades Christ preached to the dead, announcing and conferring on them the benefits of the salvation he had achieved; (2) that he brought the righteous out of Hades and led them into paradise or heaven; (3) that he defeated the powers of death or Hades which keep the dead captive in the underworld. The second of these motifs is usually combined with the first or the third, as its consequence. Only rarely (*Odes Sol.* 42:11–14) are the first and third combined.

The idea of Christ's preaching to the dead is found from the ⚑ beginning of the 2d century onward (*Gos. Pet.* 41–42; *Ign. Magn.* 9.2; *Odes Sol.* 42:14; *Ep. Apost.* 27; *Sib. Or.* 1:377–78; 8:310–11; the elder quoted in Iren. *Haer.* 4.27.1–2; Hipp. *Antichr.* 26, 45; *fr. Cant.* 1). An apocryphal fragment attributed to Jeremiah was current (quoted in somewhat varying forms in Just. *Dial.* 72.4; Iren. *Haer.* 3.20.4; 4.22.1; 4.33.1; 4.33.12; 5.31.1; *Dem.* 78; and see Geschwind 1911: 199–227; Bieder 1949: 135–41): it is possible that one form of this (Iren. *Haer.* 4.33.1; 4.33.12; 5.31.1) was a Jewish text prophesying the resurrection of the righteous at the last day, whereas the version which mentions the preaching to the dead (Just. *Dial.*

72.4; Iren. *Haer.* 3.20.4; 4.22.1; *Dem.* 78) is a Christian adaptation of the text referring it to Christ's descent to Hades. The recipients of Christ's preaching in these early references are the righteous people of the OT period who hoped for Christ (*Ign. Magn.* 9.2). When he proclaimed to them the good news of the salvation he had won, they believed in him and received forgiveness of sins through his death (Iren. *Haer.* 4.27.1–2). The idea met the problem of the fate of the righteous who died before Christ, and most probably arose in a Jewish Christian context where this would be a natural concern. According to the *Ep. Apos.* 26, Christ not only preached to but baptized the righteous dead (cf. also *Gos. Nicod.* 19)—a natural corollary of the idea that he brought Christian salvation to them. The idea of the baptizing of the dead is also found in Hermas *Sim.* 9.16.2–7, where it is not Christ but the apostles and teachers of the first Christian generation who preached Christ and administered baptism to the dead. This unique notion is otherwise found only in Clement of Alexandria, who quotes it from Hermas (*Str.* 2.43.5; 6.45.4).

The scope of the preaching was extended beyond the OT saints by Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who were also the first to refer to 1 Pet 3:19 in connection with the descent to Hades (see Dalton 1965: 16–20). Clement included righteous pagans alongside the OT saints (*Str.* 6.6.37–53), while Origen thought also of the conversion of sinners in Hades (*Princ. 2.5*), as 1 Pet 3:19 must imply, if taken seriously as a reference to the descent. Some other Greek Fathers followed Origen (Dalton 1965: 18–19), but the prevalent view in

David Noel Freedman et al., eds., *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

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the Latin church continued to limit the soteriological benefit of the descent to those who were already believers before Christ.

It was widely believed that Christ brought the OT saints out of Hades and led them up to paradise or heaven, though this was denied by Tertullian in the interests of his view that before the last judgment only the Christian martyrs go to heaven, while the rest of the righteous dead remain in Abraham's bosom in Hades (*De anim.* 58). The primitive view was that the dead left Hades along with Christ at his resurrection (*Odes Sol.* 42:11) and ascended to heaven with him in his ascension (*Ascen. Is.* 9:17; *Apoc. Pet.* 17; Origen *Comm. in Rom.* 5:10). As it was sometimes put, he descended alone but ascended with a great multitude (*Acts of Thaddeus, apud* Eus. *Hist. Eccl.* 1.13.20; Melito New fr. 2.17; Armenian *Acts of Callistratus* 9). There is also good evidence that originally the thought was of an actual resurrection of the dead: language normally reserved for bodily resurrection is used (*Ign. Magn.* 9.2; Melito *Peri Pascha* 101; New fr. 2.12, 15; Origen *Comm. in Rom.* 5:10; cf. also the Jeremiah apocryphon mentioned above), and Matthew 27:52 was sometimes connected with this resurrection of the saints (Iren. fr. 26; cf. MacCulloch 1930: 289–91). Since Christ's death and resurrection were the eschatological saving event, entailing the resurrection of all who believe in him, the Jewish hope of the resurrection of the righteous was thought to be fulfilled when Christ brought them out of Hades. After all, to be brought out of Hades was to be raised from the dead, as it was for Christ himself.

Using the picture of Hades as a stronghold in which the dead are held captive by the angelic rulers of the dead, Christ's descent could be interpreted as a conquest of Hades. Often this was portrayed in images derived from OT prophetic texts. Thus the gatekeepers of Hades trembled when they saw Christ approach (Job 38:17 LXX; cf. Hipp. *Pasch.;* Ath. *Ar.* 3.29; Cyr. H. *Catech.* 4.11; Creed of Sirmium, *apud* Ath. *Synops.* 1.9; cf. MacCulloch 1930: 217–18). He broke open the gates of bronze and the iron bolts (Ps 107:16; Isa 45:2; cf. *Odes Sol.* 17:9–11; *Teach. Silv.* 110:19–24; Tert. *De Res. Carn.* 44; Eus. *d.e.* 8.1; *Ques. Barth.* 1:20; *Gos. Nicod.* 21:3), and released the captives from their chains and led them out of their prison (Ps 68:18; 107:14; Isa 49:9; 61:1; for releasing captives, cf. *Odes Sol.* 17:12; 22:4; Melito fr. 13; New fr. 2.12; *Acts Thom.* 10; *Gos. Nicod.* 21:3; for Ps 68:18, see *T. Dan* 5:10–11). Psalm 24:7–10 was often understood as a dialogue between Christ's angelic forces and the powers of death at the gates of Hades (*Gos. Nicod.* 21), as was Jesus' parable about binding the strong man and plundering his goods (Mark 3:27; cf. Melito *Peri Pascha* 103; fr. 13; Origen *Comm. in Rom.* 5.10; for plundering Hades, cf. *Ascen. Is.* 9:16; *T. Levi* 4:1; Cyr. *Hom. Pasch.* 6, 7; for binding Hades, cf. *Gos. Nicod.* 22:2; *Quest. Barth.* 3:20). Some texts explicitly state that Christ conquered or destroyed death or Hades (Melito *Peri Pascha* 102; New fr. 2.12; 3.5) and trampled death or Hades underfoot (Melito *Peri Pascha* 102; fr. 13; *Testament of Our Lord* 1.23; cf. MacCulloch 1930: 230–32).

There are traces of the view that as one of the dead, Christ was initially bound in Hades and had to break free before also freeing others (*Odes Sol.* 17:10; *Teach. Silv.* 110:14–16; Iren.

Haer. 5.21.3), but generally the picture of Christ entering Hades by storming its fortifications seems to have prevailed. In the fullest and most dramatic portrayal of the scene, in the *Gos. Nicod.*, he is accompanied by an army of angels (21:3). It is important to notice that in the early period the defeated powers are the angelic rulers of the world of the dead (cf. *Ascen. Is.* 9:16; *Acts Thom.* 10; 143; 156), often Death or Hades personified (*Odes Sol.* 42:11), but not Satan and the forces of evil. In Jewish and early Christian thought Satan was not located in the underworld, but in the lower heavens. (A very exceptional case in which Beliar is the power which Christ defeats is *T. Dan* 5:10–11.) However, the more Hades was thought of as an enemy whom Christ defeated, the more natural it would be to see him as an ally of Satan (cf. Origen *Comm. in Rom.* 5.10), as he is in the *Gos. Nicod.* and Ephraim Syrus (MacCulloch 1930: 111–13). In these and some other of the later Fathers, the result of the descent is that Satan is chained in the abyss (MacCulloch 1930: 232–33), and thus the descent becomes a mythical portrayal of Christ's triumph over all evil.

The influence of pagan myths of descent to the underworld on Christian ideas of Christ's descent to Hades was probably minimal. The parallels with Orpheus and Heracles were noticed and exploited in minor ways by some later writers, but there is no indication that they account for the origin of any of the Christian ideas. It is the theme of the conflict with and defeat of the powers of the underworld which has most often been claimed to have a broad mythological background in the religious cultures of the ancient world (see especially Kroll 1932), but it is extremely difficult to identify a suitable myth which was available in the environment of early Christianity. Of the myths surveyed in the earlier sections of this chapter, it is only in the Ugaritic account of Baal's victory over Mot (section C.) that the motif of a god who descends to the world of the dead and defeats the powers of death occurs. This parallel is far too chronologically remote to count as an influence on early Christianity. In fact, the idea of Christ's defeat of the powers of Hades is sufficiently explained from the Jewish apocalyptic expectation that at the last day God would "reprove the angel of death" (*2 Bar.* 21:23), command Sheol to release the souls of the dead (*2 Bar.* 42:8), abolish death (*L.A.B.* 3:10), close the mouth of Sheol (*L.A.B.* 3:10), and seal it up (*2 Bar.* 21:23; cf. *Teach. Silv.* 103:6–7). In the expectation of resurrection there was a sense of death and its realm as a power which had to be broken by God (cf. also Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 15:44–45; Rev 20:14; *4 Ezra* 8:53). These ideas were transferred to the context of Christ's descent to Hades because of the early Christian belief that Christ's death and resurrection were the eschatological triumph of God over death. The details, as we have seen, derived from that process of christological exegesis of the OT which supplied so much of the phraseology and imagery of early Christian belief.

The idea of Christ's descent to Hades was powerful and important for early Christians not just because it met the problem of the salvation of the righteous of the OT (and only occasionally because it opened salvation to good pagans of the past), but also

because it represented that definitive defeat of death from which Christian believers benefit. If it tended to take precedence over the resurrection of Jesus in this respect (so that Bieder 1949: 202–3, ascribes it to a flagging of faith in Christ's victory in death and resurrection), this was because it showed Christ delivering others from death. His rescue of the OT saints and taking them to heaven was the sign of what he would also do for Christian believers (*Ep. Apost.* 27–28), who experienced salvation as release from the chains of Hades (*Odes Sol.* 17:4). If the suggestion (too strongly asserted by Daniélou 1964: 244–48; Ménard 1972: 303–4) that in the *Odes of Solomon* baptismal immersion is conceived as a descent into Hades and an experience of Christ's deliverance of the dead from Hades, then perhaps at this point Christianity came closest to the significance of the Greek descents to Hades in the mysteries (see section F. above).

However, a final point at which the Christian tradition of the descent took up Jewish motifs is in the prominence which the raising of Adam from Hades to paradise gains in *Gos. Nicod.* 19, 24–25 (cf. also MacCulloch 1930: 337–39). Even Adam's baptism (19; cf. 24:2) has a precedent (*Ap. Mos.* 37:3) in the Jewish tradition of Adam's translation to paradise. The release of Adam from Hades gave a universal significance to the myth of the descent. In this form especially, the "harrowing of hell" became for medieval Christians a powerful dramatization of the *Christus victor* theme in soteriology