

Redemption By Jesus

And Our Reconciliation With God



An In-Depth Look At The Truths
Upon Which Our Eternity Depends

RODERICK A. GRACIANO

with PASTOR CARLOS SAMUEL MARTÍNEZ

2022

Unless our civilization is redeemed spiritually,
it cannot endure materially.

(Thomas) Woodrow Wilson

Appendix 2: Did Jesus Descend Into Hell?

The Origins Of The Tradition

Some versions of the Apostles Creed (respectively dated to AD 390, AD 650, and AD 750), say of Jesus that “He descended into hell,” (Lat: *descendit ad inferna*):

I believe in ... JESUS CHRIST [God’s] only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; **he descended into hell [or Hades]**; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven; and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. ...¹

Likewise, the later Athanasian Creed speaks of Jesus, “Who suffered for our salvation: descended into hell: rose again the third day from the dead.”² *Jesus descended into hell?* How should today’s student of redemption understand a statement so jarring to modern ears?

The earliest known mention of the idea of Christ’s descent into hell appears in the *Church History* of Eusebius, published c. AD 324. Around that same time, or possibly a hundred years later, the apocryphal *Gospel Of Nicodemus* appeared, which includes a detailed, legendary account of Christ’s descent to Hades. Some scholars believe that the legend of the descent in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* was “formed by the end of the second century,” but no known external evidence supports that chronology.³ Thus, as John Calvin wrote,

... it is apparent from the writings of the ancient Fathers, that the clause which now stands in the [Apostles’] Creed [regarding the descent] was not formerly so much used in the churches ... Whence we may conjecture that it was added some time after the days of the Apostles, but gradually came into use.⁴

¹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 2, emphasis added. Other Latin copies read *ad inferos*, “to the inhabitants of the spirit-world.”

² Ibid.

³ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Christian Literature Company, Vol. 8, p. 353.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion* 2.16.8, emphasis mine.

In other words, so far as patristic evidence shows, the pre-Hellenized (i.e., before AD 135), pre-Romanized (i.e., before AD 312) church had no doctrine to the effect that Christ descended into hell or hades. Calvin went on to contradict himself, *and the historical record*, saying that, “there is none of the Fathers who does not mention Christ’s descent into hell, though they have various modes of explaining it.”⁵ He then departed from any semblance of biblical constraint, and made the creedal clause regarding the descent inviolable by saying, “it is of little consequence by whom and at what time it was introduced.”⁶ Any church historian today, however, knows that tectonic shifts in worldview occurred within the Christian church after the Second Jewish-Roman war, and again during and following the reign of Emperor Constantine. Whether the clause regarding the descent was confessed before or after these cultural shifts bears directly upon its biblical credibility.

The Meaning Of The Tradition

Let us return to the testimony of Eusebius: in a legendary, and arguably anti-Semitic, account of the ministry of Thaddeus (one of the seventy disciples of Jesus), Eusebius has Thaddeus teaching that Jesus “was crucified, and descended into Hades, and burst the bars which from eternity had not been broken, and raised the dead; for he descended alone, but rose with many, and thus ascended to His father.”⁷ Much ambiguity adheres to this purported doctrine of Thaddeus. What precisely does the word *Hades* mean? What “bars” did Jesus burst? To what does the raising of the dead refer in this account? To give it the most biblical interpretation, we would have to paraphrase the teaching of Thaddeus in this manner:

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.13.19.

Jesus “was crucified, and [His body] descended into the grave, then He burst the bars [of death], and [in conjunction with His own resurrection] He raised the dead [whose tombs had been opened when He yielded up His spirit]; for [His body] descended alone [into the grave], but rose with many, and thus, [while resurrected saints walked the earth anew] Jesus ascended to His father.”

One wonders, however, if this was all that was intended by the teaching of Thaddeus, and all that was understood by the historian Eusebius.

The apocryphal *Gospel Of Nicodemus* is much less ambiguous on the matter of Christ’s descent into hades. This “gospel” includes a fabulous account, narrated by Symeon and his sons, Jewish men who were raised from the dead along with the others who emerged from their tombs after Christ’s resurrection (cf. Mat 27.52-53). According to these men:

1. They were “in Hades,⁸ with all who had fallen asleep since the beginning of the world,” including Adam, Abraham, all the patriarchs and all the prophets.
2. John the Baptist appeared to all these saints in the darkness of Hades, proclaimed Jesus to them as “the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world,” and then urged them all to repent for the sins they had committed in the world, since “now only is for you the time of repentance ... and this is impossible at any other time.”
3. Then followed a dispute between Satan (heir of darkness, son of destruction), and (all-devouring and insatiable) Hades. Hades says to Satan, “by the darkness in which we live, if thou bring [Jesus] here, not one of the dead will be left behind in it to me.” Hades also speaks to “his demons,” telling them, “Secure well and strongly the gates of brass and the bars of iron, and attend to my bolts, and stand in order, and see to everything; for if he come in here, woe will seize us.”

⁸ The word *hades* is capitalized when referring to the mythological god, to a particular place, or to a power poetically personified.

4. The King of glory (Jesus Christ) “came in the form of a man, and all the dark places of Hades were lighted up.... the brazen gates were shattered, and the iron bars broken, and all the dead who had been bound came out of the prisons,” Symeon and his sons with them.
5. “Then the King of glory seized the ... Satan by the head, and delivered him to His angels, and said: With iron chains bind his hands and his feet, and his neck, and his mouth. Then He delivered him to Hades, and said: Take him, and keep him secure till my second appearing.”
6. Hades complains, “not one of the dead has been left in me,” and tells Satan, “thou hast been deprived of all who have died from eternity.”
7. Then “the Saviour blessed Adam with the sign of the cross on his forehead,” and “setting out to paradise, He ... delivered him, and all the just ... into the door of paradise,” where among others they meet the thief still carrying his cross.⁹
8. Symeon and his sons, however, are sent back to earth to testify to the resurrection of Jesus, and to be baptized in the Jordan river. After documenting their story “they immediately disappeared.”¹⁰

From this summary, we see that Hades is death personified. He imprisons the dead, and he is protective of his own power. We see also that the righteous dead are not yet saved while in Hades, but must wait for millennia in darkness (and implied solitude) for the preaching of the gospel by John the Baptist. John’s preaching provides their one and only opportunity for repentance, but indicates the

⁹ Let us note that in this earliest detailed account of Christ’s descent into hell, Hades and Paradise are diametrically distinguished from one another. No one today should think, like Matthew Y. Emerson, that the “hell” of the traditional descent doctrine refers to “the place of the righteous dead,” namely, “paradise or Abraham’s bosom” (see comments on Emerson’s position below).

¹⁰ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Christian Literature Company, Vol. 8,, pp. 435-438.

possibility of spiritual improvement *after death*.¹¹ Christ comes and completely empties Hades, an event that implies some kind of universalism.¹² Then, Satan is completely bound from the time of Christ's resurrection until the time of the Second Coming, an idea that conforms well with the most unrealistic of amillennial teaching. Is *this* the fuller doctrine we are to understand from the condensed, credal formulation, "He descended into Hell"?

From its meager patristic and apocryphal beginnings, the "descent into Hell" doctrine was inherited by Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Alyssa Lyra Pitstick summarizes the traditional Catholic doctrine with the following four points:

1. [On Saturday, while Christ's body was in the tomb,] "Christ descended in His soul united to His divine Person only to the limbo of the Fathers."
2. "His power and authority were made known throughout all of hell, taken generically."
3. "He thereby accomplished the two purposes of the Descent, which were 'to liberate the just' by conferring on them the glory of heaven and 'to proclaim His power.'"
4. "His descent was glorious, and Christ did not suffer the pain proper to any of the abodes of hell."¹³

We note that the traditional Catholic doctrine of the descent followed the *Gospel Of Nicodemus* in developing the idea of Limbo, the place in which the righteous dead were held captive until liberated by Christ (still dead Himself?) and taken to heaven.

¹¹ Contra the Nisibene Hymn 72.22, in which Satan says, "Sheol is hated because in her is no repentance: a pit that swallows and closes on all movements." NPNF 2.13.

¹² Please see a brief summary of the doctrine of universalism in ch. 6, "False Assurance."

¹³ *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell*, p. 342.

Matthew Y. Emerson summarizes the Eastern Orthodox understanding of the descent as differing from the Catholic view only in that it teaches the release of *all* in Hades, not just the liberation of the Fathers in Limbo.¹⁴

The Interpretation Of The Tradition In The Reformation And In The Present

Jumping ahead to the Reformation era, we find a doctrine of the descent in Calvin's *Institutes* that is unencumbered by the fabulous elements of earlier expressions, but is nevertheless idiosyncratic. In Calvin's exposition of the descent into hell, he explained that while the world could see the external sufferings of Christ, the credal statement points to the invisible sufferings of Christ on the cross which went beyond corporeal suffering and death, namely, the "incomprehensible judgment which he endured before God," since, "it was necessary that he should feel the weight of divine vengeance."¹⁵ This judgment and vengeance involved the bearing of "the weight of the divine anger," such that, being "smitten and afflicted, he experienced all the signs of an angry and avenging God."¹⁶ Therefore, Calvin assured his readers, "There is nothing strange in its being said that he descended to hell, seeing he endured the death which is inflicted on the wicked by an angry God," which included, engaging, "as it were, at close quarters with the powers of hell and the horrors of eternal death."¹⁷ In other words, for Calvin, the credal statement of Christ's descent into hell essentially meant that Jesus not only died a corporeal death, but having taken the sin of humanity upon Himself, He suffered also the incomprehensible, hellish, wrath of God while on the cross. Calvin recognized that His explanation of the credal statement would imply an

¹⁴ "He Descended to the Dead": An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday, p. 98.

¹⁵ *Institutes* 2.16.10.

¹⁶ *Institutes* 2.16.11.

¹⁷ *Institutes* 2.16.10.

anachronism, in that he described the descent into hell as occurring while Christ was alive on the cross and culminating with His cry of abandonment, “My God, My God ...,” while in contrast the creed confesses the descent into hell *after* the pronouncement of Christ’s death. Calvin called this objection “frivolous and ridiculous,” explaining that the order of the points in the creed is not chronological but conceptual, with the invisible suffering described after the visible.¹⁸

In our own time, Evangelical Matthew Y. Emerson defends the doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell, and summarizes (what he calls) the “biblical doctrine” with these four points:

1. Jesus experienced human death as all humans do;
2. his body was buried;
3. his soul departed to the place of the dead;
4. by virtue of his divinity, he defeated death and the grave.¹⁹

With regard to this summary, we note,

- A. The first two points hardly form part of the doctrine of the descent since they are antecedently covered in the Apostles’ Creed: “Jesus Christ ... was crucified, dead, and buried”
- B. There is no mention of a *descent* or of *hell*. How can these four points represent the traditional doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell with no reference to a descent or to hell? Emerson gives a partial answer by explaining that what the traditional doctrine means by *hell* is *the place of the dead* (point 3), and in the case of Jesus, “the place of the righteous dead,” namely, “paradise or Abraham’s bosom.”²⁰ If this is the case, though, why teach that Jesus descended into *hell*, when the word *hell* in the NT (whether translated from the Greek *γέεννα* or from *ᾗδης*) universally refers to the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Emerson, pp. 23-24.

²⁰ Emerson, p. 24, note 8.

abode of the departed wicked, the fiery place of punishment (with the only exceptions being the more general use of ἄδης in the references to Psa 16.10 in Act 2.27,31)? Using the word *hell* to describe where the soul of Jesus went when His body died on the cross, only causes confusion. As John Lightfoot wrote, “it seemeth harsh, that Christ’s soul descended into hell, which, in our English language, speaketh most plainly and usually [of], ‘The place of the damned’; a place very improper to look for the soul of Christ in, when departed out of his body.”²¹ Furthermore, if the soul of Jesus went to be with the Father in Paradise when His body died, as Emerson affirms, and as Jesus anticipated (Luk 23.46) and as His words from the cross confirmed (Luk 23.43),²² then the soul of Jesus did not *descend* but *ascend*. Paradise is the garden in the heavenly Jerusalem (see the excursus on Paradise in ch. 4), and Paul spoke of it as located in what he called “the third heaven” (2Co 12.2-4). For the soul of Jesus to be caught up, like Paul, to the Paradise of God²³ in the third heaven, is hardly the image brought to our minds by the confession that “Jesus descended into hell”!

- C. The creedal statement of the descent does not specify whether it was the body or soul of Christ that descended, and as Emerson has documented, the various expressions of the doctrine in history have differed on this point.
- D. While all will agree that Jesus “defeated death and the grave,” this hardly occurred while His body was still in the tomb during a supposed sojourn of

²¹ John Lightfoot, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 3.

²² As R. C. Sproul noted in *What We Believe*, p. 130, “The punctuation of [Luke 23.43] can be changed so it reads, ‘I tell you the truth today, you will be with me in paradise.’ Th[is] latter rendition is less likely on grammatical grounds, though not impossible.” The natural way to understand Christ’s emphasis on “today,” though, is in contrast to the plea of the crucified thief, “**when** you come into your kingdom.” Rather than having to wait somehow until the *parousia*, the thief would, immediately upon his own death and that of Jesus, be with the Lord in the garden.

²³ Cf. Rev 2.7.

His soul in Hell. While we can grant that Christ's expiating death provided the basis for His defeat of death and the grave, only His resurrection accomplished the defeat proper. Furthermore the creedal statement says nothing about the defeat of "death and the grave" occurring by virtue of Christ's divinity, though His divinity was certainly a necessary component of His expiating and propitiating work on the cross that led to that victory. Thus, it appears that Emerson is one more in a long line of theologians who have simply interpreted the creedal statement, *descendit ad inferna*, in whatever way it seemed right to them. We trust he has not succumbed to the problem, described by Oswald Chambers, of those who advocate for a creed:

When we become advocates of a creed, something dies; we do not believe God, we only believe our belief about Him.²⁴

Evaluating The Essence Of The Creedal Statement

The problem with many creeds, or at least with portions of them, is their inherent ambiguity. This problem occurs with overly brief, unelaborated propositions. Thus, all that we can say with certainty, as to what is taught by the creedal statement, *descendit ad inferna*, is that:

1. Christ descended.
2. The destination of His descent was hell (or Hades)

The creeds say nothing about how, in what form, or for what purpose He descended. They say nothing about *when* He descended but only imply that it occurred sometime between His burial and resurrection. The creeds say nothing about what occurred when He arrived in hell or while He sojourned there, and they say nothing about what occurred when He emerged from hell.

²⁴ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*.

Therefore, our task, which is to examine the biblical basis for the tradition of the descent into hell, is very simple. We need only verify whether Scripture anywhere teaches that Christ:

- A. Descended
- B. ... into hell or hades.

First, then, did Christ ever, in any sense, descend? If we include the pre-incarnation Christophanies, then, He descended many times from the heavenly realm to the visible earthly realm (Gen 11.5; Ex 3.8; 19.18,20; 34.5; Num 11.17,25; 12.5; 1Ki 2.8; Neh 9.13; Isa 64.3). In Pro 30.4, the oracle Agur asked, “Who has ascended into heaven and descended?”²⁵ Jesus would later answer Agur, saying, “No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.”²⁶ Of course, none of these passages relate to the death of Christ, and none of them speak of hell or Hades; they speak only of God, or the Son of God, descending from heaven to the earthly realm. We have in these passages, then, references to Christ descending, but not into hell or Hades.

Like Agur and Jesus, Paul juxtaposed the ideas of ascent and descent, and in doing so, seems to bring us closer to the issue at hand:

But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: “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).” But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart”—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching ...²⁷

The passage which Paul paraphrased for this segment of a complex argument, Deuteronomy 30.12-14, makes no reference to Christ; Paul inserted the parenthetical thoughts about bringing Christ up and bringing Christ down. By these paraphrases and insertions, Paul argued that the gospel and the life that it

²⁵ NAU.

²⁶ Joh 3.13.

²⁷ Rom 10.5-8.

promises is accessible, unlike the righteousness that is sought by the keeping of the law. He affirmed that the righteousness of faith is accessible because the Messiah has already come down from heaven, and He has already risen from the dead and ascended to heaven. We do not have to keep the law perfectly to be saved, nor do we have to reproduce the incarnation and the ascension. By virtue of God's gracious and redemptive works of power in Christ, righteousness and salvation are available to us by faith (Rom 10.9-11). The point, though, for our present concern is that the descent of Christ in view in Romans 10.7 is a poetic reference to the state of death, i.e., the state of being "among the dead ones." Thus, we have another passage that speaks of Christ descending, but not into hell or hades, since the Greek phrase ἐκ νεκρῶν is too general to point in any definite way to a particular *place*.

Paul juxtaposed the ideas of ascent and descent again in Ephesians 4.8-10:

Therefore it says,

"When He ascended on high,
He led captive a host of captives,
And He gave gifts to men."

(Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)²⁸

Once again the apostle paraphrased an Old Testament passage, and added his parenthetical comments. The passage, Psalm 68.18,²⁹ was a battle psalm about God's victorious deliverance of His people. In it, David rejoiced at how God had taken "captivity captive," i.e., "taken many captives" (v. 18).³⁰ Neither Psalm 68 nor Ephesians 4 says anything about anyone descending into hell or hades. The Psalm is about God delivering His people from earthly enemies, and the relevant

²⁸ NASB 95.

²⁹ Psa 68.19 in HB, Psa 67.19 in LXX.

³⁰ The text makes use of the seemingly redundant, Hebraic cognate accusative. Louw-Nida comment: "In Eph 4:8 αἰχμαλωσία 'captivity' ... is added redundantly to αἰχμαλωτεύω due to Semitic usage. The combination of words simply means 'to take many captives.'"

part of Ephesians 4 is about the glorious benefits that accrue to the church, thanks to Christ's victorious ascension after His humble descent to "the lower parts of the earth."³¹ David used this same phrase in Psalm 139.15,³²

My bones were not hidden from you,
which you made in secret,
[nor] my actual being ... **in the lowest parts of the earth.**

David uses this phrase in one other place, Psalm 63.9:

... they sought my soul in vain.
They will enter into the lowest parts of the earth.³³

In Psalm 139, David spoke of his as yet unborn substance being formed by God; in Psalm 63 he used the same phrase to speak of his enemies being killed. Therefore, in Ephesians 4.9, it is just as likely that Paul referred to Christ's incarnation as that he referred to His death. If Paul had Christ's death in view, however, he referred to Christ's death only, without any implication of visiting hell or of accomplishing something there.

Regarding captives, either the statement "He led captive a host of captives" is a general metaphor for triumphant conquest, in which case a specific identity for the captives is not in view, or it is a literal statement, in which case the "captives" have been taken prisoner by Christ, not liberated by Him.³⁴ Therefore, in Ephesians 4.8-10 we find again a reference to a descent by Christ, but not into hell, and we see further that this passage gives no support to the idea of liberating anyone held captive by death or Hades.

The only other passage that speaks explicitly of a descent by Christ is the one that speaks of His descent from heaven *in the future*, at His second coming,

³¹ Eph 4.9.

³² Psa 138.15 in the LXX. Emphasis mine.

³³ Psa 63.10 in HB, 62.10 in LXX.

³⁴ Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, in *Ephesians and Colossians*, p. 114, explained how "captives" must be the result of "taking captive."

when the dead in Christ will rise to meet Him along with the living saints who will be transformed (1Th 4.16-17). Obviously, this passage has no relevance to the credal statement about Christ, *in the past*, having descended into hell.

If no biblical passage speaks of Christ *descending* into hell or hades, does some passage, nevertheless, speak of Christ having been in hell or Hades? No, not explicitly. However, in Acts 2.27 Peter quoted Psalm 16.10 (Psa 15.10 in the LXX), applying it to Christ as the only One able to say,

You will not abandon my soul to Hades,
Nor allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.

Peter followed up with the declaration that this Psalm “spoke of the resurrection of Christ,” because He “was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay.” Peter’s citation and explanation implies that Christ did spend a brief time in Hades. It only *implies* the idea, however, because to not abandon someone at a specific location does not require that the someone in view spend any time at all in that location. I can truly say that I never abandoned any of my children at an orphanage, but as far as I can recollect none of my children have ever been in an orphanage. Nevertheless, let us assume for the moment that the *implicit* idea is correct, and that Christ (in body and/or soul) did spend a brief time in Hades, though He was not abandoned there.

Working from this assumption, we must then discern the meaning of *Hades* in this context.³⁵ We find that in the source passage, Psalm 16.10/15.10, the LXX uses *Hades* to translate the Hebrew *Sheol*. Defined by its usage, the word *Sheol* generally signifies death or the grave, often poetically personified. Though it is constantly related to downward motion and depth, it is difficult to equate the *Sheol*

³⁵ We note that while many of our Bible versions capitalize *Hades* in Act 2.27, thereby interpreting it as the name of a particular place, neither our Grk nor Heb mss used capitalization and so bequeathed us some ambiguity in interpreting references to *sheol* and *hades*. Thus, in Act 2.27, the KJV 1900 uses the uncapitalized *hell* and the NIV the uncapitalized *grave*.

of the Hebrew Bible with an “abode of the dead,” or an “underworld” in which the dead have a conscious existence (cf. Psa 6.5). Also, though the wicked certainly go there, it is difficult to equate Sheol with the place of eternal torment. Perhaps the first hint we get of *Sheol* signifying a place of torment is when its Greek equivalent, *hades*, appears in the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luk 16.19-31). In this story, the rich man finds himself in Hades, “being in torment” (Luk 16.23). Then, the Revelation (1.18; 6.8; 20.13-14) speaks of death and Hades as distinct entities, perhaps implying that Hades, *as it is to be understood in the Revelation*, is a subset of death, or a distinct location within the abode of the dead.

Nevertheless, with regard to Peter’s declaration about Christ in Acts 2.27, and his application of Psalm 16.10, we cannot confidently interpret the word *Sheol* or *Hades* as signifying anything more than simply *death*, a conclusion strengthened by the Hebrew parallelism that associates Sheol/Hades with the decay of the body. So, the only passage which associates Christ with Hades, and which does so only implicitly, apparently refers only to Christ’s death without signifying any journey to the abode of the wicked dead, i.e., to hell. We must conclude, therefore, that there is no biblical basis at all for a doctrine of Christ descending into hell.

The Appeal To 1 Peter 3.19

Proponents of the tradition of the descent will object: “But the Bible says that Christ preached to the spirits in prison, 1Peter 3.19!” Indeed, 1Peter 3.18-20 says,

Christ also died for sins once for all, ... having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation [ἐκήρυσεν] to the spirits now³⁶ in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah ...

³⁶ The adverb *now* inserted by the NASB 95 is implied in the Greek text by the phrase, *the ones in prison*, being fronted syntactically before the noun *spirits*.

This statement of Peter’s intrigues us, certainly, but if it were not for centuries of various apocryphal doctrines about Christ descending into hell, we would never interpret this passage as supporting such an idea. These verses say nothing about descending, and they say nothing about hell or Hades. Sadly, Peter’s statement that Christ “went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,” like the credal statement, “He descended into hell,” contains enough ambiguity — due to a lack of further scriptural explanation — as to admit of several different interpretations.

Mark Dubis, in his *Handbook On The Greek Text of 1 Peter*, helpfully summarizes “the three major” interpretations of 1 Peter 3.19 with regard to the identification the “spirits” and the “timing and purpose of the proclamation to them”:

(1) The spirits are souls of human beings who died during the days of Noah to whom Christ made proclamation during the period between his death and resurrection in the realm of the dead, either (a) to convert them, (b) to announce good news to those who had been converted before their death, or (c) to condemn them; (2) The spirits are sinful human beings from the days of Noah to whom, when they were alive, the pre-incarnate Christ made proclamation through the person of Noah; or (3) The spirits are demonic spirits³⁷ to whom Christ proclaimed his victory either (a) between his death and resurrection, or (b) during his ascension to heaven. **Option (3b), argued persuasively by Dalton (1989), has approached the status of a near consensus among recent commentators ...**³⁸

³⁷ In 1Pe 3.19, Peter’s use of the plural word *spirits*, as opposed to *souls* or *men*, compels us to interpret him as referring to *non-human spirits*. In the NT, unless context tells us otherwise, the plural *spirits* does not refer to human spirits. The contextually apparent exceptions occur in 1Co 14.32, Heb 12.9, and Rev 22.6, and perhaps in the general phrase “Father of spirits” which may include human spirits among other kinds of spirits, as in Heb 12.9 (cf. in the OT, “God of the spirits of all flesh, Num 16.22; 27.16). Scholars have made a probable connection between the imprisoned spirits in Peter’s reference and the imprisoned spirits preached to by Enoch in the pseudepigraphal 1 Enoch (14.5 and 18.14).

³⁸ Mark Dubis, p. 120, emphasis added. Dubis derives his summary from the major investigation of the matter made by William Joseph Dalton in *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18–4:6*, 1989, pp. 25-66.

The “near consensus” that Christ made the proclamation in view *at the time of His ascension* — as opposed to between the time of His death and resurrection — underscores the fact that 1 Peter 3.19 says nothing explicitly about a descent while Jesus’ body was dying or dead. A descent may be inferred from an assumption about the location of the prison in which the spirits are held, but this inference also requires assumptions about exactly which spirits are in view and when they were imprisoned, since Peter only tells us of *some group* of spirits that are in prison *now*. Along with what we don’t know, though, let us note what we do know, namely that the spirits to whom Christ made proclamation are *now in prison*, and therefore cannot be the spirits of persons, righteous or unrighteous, liberated from hell/Hades around the time of Christ’s death.

So, while some interpretations of 1 Peter 3.19, regarding the identity of the spirits and why Christ made proclamation to them, support the descent-into-hell doctrine, several other interpretations negate the descent-into-hell idea. The latter interpretations demonstrate that 1 Peter 3.19 cannot, in any compelling way, support the descent tradition.

The Appeal To Matthew 12.40

When the scribes and Pharisees requested a sign from Jesus, the Lord replied,

... just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.³⁹

From this cryptic prediction of *the brief duration of His death*, Emerson builds a theory from “intertextual connections” with the book of Jonah, to the effect that Jesus descended “to the depths of the pit, Hades, Sheol, the abyss.”⁴⁰ Emerson argues this idea extensively and concludes that, “Jesus, the true and better Jonah, will spend three days and nights in the place of the dead, his body in the grave, his

³⁹ NASB 95.

⁴⁰ Emerson, pp. 37-38.

soul in the righteous compartment of Hades.”⁴¹ This conclusion hardly deserves comment. All agree that Jesus’ body was in the grave, and there is no doubt that Jesus’ soul went to “the place of the [righteous] dead.” However, Emerson confuses “the pit, Hades, Sheol, and the abyss,” with Paradise to which Jesus’ soul *ascended*. To defend the tradition of a descent into hell/Hades from the parallel with Jonah involves too many inferences to merit consideration. A more reasonable understanding of Jesus’ “sign of Jonah” accepts the parallel to a “buried” and miraculously raised-in-three-days prophet as parallel enough.

The Appeal To Revelation 1.18

Emerson also attempts to support the tradition of Christ’s descent into hell with Revelation 1.18, in which verse Jesus says that He is “the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.” However, like the preceding prooftexts, this passage says nothing about a descent, and nothing about Christ spending even a moment in Hades *or hell*. The figurative declaration of having the keys simply connotes having authority over the place or institution to which the keys pertain. Contextually, Christ affirms His authority over death and Hades by virtue of His death and resurrection, without any reference to a descent occurring during His death or between His death and resurrection.

The Sabbath Rest Obscured By The Tradition

The more legendary interpretations of Christ’s supposed descent into hell imply that His death was not the end of the sacrificial phase of His redemptive work. In spite of the affirmation in John 19.28, that on the cross “all things had already been accomplished,” the traditions about His descent imply that He had more work yet

⁴¹ Emerson, p. 39.

to do. They leaves us confused, therefore, about what Jesus meant when He declared on the cross, “It is finished!”⁴²

To put it another way, the traditions about Christ’s descent into hell obscure the more biblical idea of Christ’s Sabbath rest in the tomb. Many commentators, at least since the time of Augustine, have seen the resting of Christ’s body in the tomb on Saturday as indicative of the completion of His “creative” work of redemption. As Augustine expressed it in more than one of his books,

And when all His works were completed, on the sixth day of the week, He bowed His head and gave up the ghost, and on the Sabbath-day He rested in the tomb from all His works.⁴³

In the 9th century, Rabanus Maurus, Archbishop of Mayence, made the parallel between Christ’s Sabbath rest and the first Sabbath after creation more explicit, writing,

Because on the sixth day man was made, and on the seventh God rested; therefore on the sixth day Jesus died for man, and rested the Sabbath day in the tomb.⁴⁴

Current author, Warren A. Gage writes of it in more detail:

In Genesis God completed all His work of creation on the sixth day, pronouncing it finished (Gen 2:1). But in John’s Gospel Jesus finished all the world’s redemption on the sixth day; then He cried out from the cross, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). And just as God rested on the first sabbath of creation (Gen 2:2), so Jesus remained at rest in the tomb on the sabbath day (John 19:31; 20:1).⁴⁵

⁴² Joh 19.30, Grk, Τετέλεσται, **it has been completed!** Christ’s resurrection subsequently verified the success of His redemptive work, and His having received “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Mat 28.18), including the authority (the keys) over death and Hades (Rev 1.18), but the work itself was finished on the cross.

⁴³ *Tractates On John* 17.15.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Matthew*.

⁴⁵ *Theological Poetics*, pp. 32-33. We also note a remarkable symmetry between the first Adam and the last Adam in that the first was taken from the earth on the 6th day and placed in a garden (Gen 1.26-31; 2.7-8); the last was placed in a garden and returned to the earth on the 6th day (Mat 12.40; cf. Joh 12.24), having at last expiated the fateful sin of the garden.

Even proponents of a descent of Christ into hell recognize the Sabbath significance of Christ's burial. Emerson, whose interpretation of the descent we have been tracing, wrote,

Another eschatological implication of Christ's burial is that it is, in some ways, his Sabbath rest. ... because Jesus is crucified on the sixth day and in the tomb on the seventh, the burial does have sabbatarian [sic] symbolism. Jesus finishes his work of salvation on the cross on the sixth day, rests on the seventh, and then on the eighth day rises again, inaugurating the new creation. The Sabbath for which the people of God hope (Heb 4:1–11) — the eschatological rest promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — is inaugurated in Christ's burial. Jesus' Passion inaugurates the last days in many ways, but the eschatological Sabbath rest is inaugurated specifically in Christ's burial and descent.⁴⁶

Sadly, Emerson goes too far by the final words of the above paragraph: *and descent*. Emerson, like other proponents of a descent into hell want to have it both ways: they want to affirm Christ's rest on the Sabbath and at the same time to affirm His working on the Sabbath. Thus, M. J. Edwards writes, "The flesh rests in the tomb while the soul performs its task among the dead."⁴⁷ Such affirmations only bring more confusion. If the soul of Jesus is performing tasks among the dead, what then were the "all things" that had been accomplished and finished on the cross? If the body of Jesus was resting in the tomb and the soul of Jesus was working in hell, then what part of Jesus' being was resting in Paradise with the thief from the cross? I can imagine responses to these questions, but I can't think of any that don't violate Ockham's razor. In the face of this problem, we must ask, why should we go to such trouble to defend an extra-biblical and profoundly vague credal phrase, *descendit ad inferna*?

It seems best that we drop the unwarranted idea of a descent into hell and instead affirm the appropriateness of Christ's Sabbath rest following the completion of His sacrifice, a sacrifice that was in a real sense creative. Just as

⁴⁶ Emerson, pp. 206-207.

⁴⁷ *We Believe in the Crucified and Risen Lord*, p. 143, note 25.

Alfred Edersheim affirmed the first Passover night as “the night of Israel’s birth as a nation: of their **creation** and adoption as the people of God,”⁴⁸ we can affirm the death of Christ, our Passover Lamb, as the *sine qua non* in the creation of the church (considering the church in both its past and future, as well as its corporate and individual, aspects; 2Co 5.17; Eph 2.10,14-16; 4.24; ⁴⁹ cf. Isa 43.7; Gal 6.15).⁵⁰

Conclusion Regarding The Tradition Of The Descent

Whatever the affirmation, *descendit ad inferna*, meant to those who first framed the Apostles’ Creed, it is now so diversely understood (I have found *eight distinct interpretations*) as to be practically meaningless for today’s Christian. What’s worse is that the differing traditions of Christ’s descent into hell have no biblical basis, and violate the principle of Ockham’s Razor in that they add a completely unnecessary element to the gospel. As a result, they inject much confusion into the biblical teaching about Christ’s redemptive suffering and obscure the significance of His Sabbath rest in the tomb and in Paradise upon the completion of His sacrificial work. With regard to the redemptive and liberating suffering of Jesus, let our creed be that provided by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.3-5:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

⁴⁸ *Bible History*, Vol. 2, p. 81, emphasis added. Edersheim cites Psalm 43 which connects the creation of Jacob-Israel with the exodus from Egypt.

⁴⁹ Note the cognates *κτίσις*, *creation*, and *κτίση*, *create* in these texts.

⁵⁰ By saying that the expiating sacrifice of Christ was necessary for the creation of the church, we do not imply that the church had no existence before Christ’s crucifixion. Instead, we affirm only that the church in earlier ages could not have existed apart from the divine certainty that the redemptive work of Christ would be accomplished “at the consummation of the age” (Heb 9.26). See Act 20.28; there is no “church of God,” without the sacrificial blood of the cross (cf. Heb 9.22).

In this gospel, which cites the bases for all aspects of our redemption, there is no “descent into hell” before Christ’s death, nor between Christ’s death and resurrection. Nothing more is needed for our redemption than the facts of Christ’s death for our sins, the verification of his death by proper burial, and His resurrection on the third day as corroborated by many witnesses. I must agree with Wayne Grudem,⁵¹ and his fellow disparaged “neo-deletionists,”⁵² that if the Apostles Creed (or later Athanasian Creed) is used in today’s church, the clause about the descent should be removed.

⁵¹ “He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles’ Creed.” *JETS* 34.1 (1991): 103–13.

⁵² Emerson, p. 11.