

IF JESUS DESCENDED TO SHEOL, THEN OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS ALSO DESCENDED TO SHEOL

by
Mark A. Snoeberger¹

Introduction

As was the case in the previous article of this journal, the question addressed in this article is the destination of the souls of Old Testament saints at death: Did they go (1) to an undifferentiated “place of the dead” to which all human souls *descend*, (2) to a “compartment” of this common place (viz., *Upper Sheol*) that serves as an antechamber for heaven, or (3) to the very abode of God, a place to which all elect souls *ascend* at death in every age.² In this article I will be defending a variation of position (2), viz., that OT saints descended to a comfortable and restful, but less than wholly satisfying compartment of Sheol, from which our Lord Christ liberated them after his crucifixion (an event sometimes called the “harrowing of hell”).³

Since this question is one of Old Testament theology, one would expect that the preponderance of exegetical support for its answer would derive from the Old Testament. However, as my title suggests, I will be arguing that there are elements of NT exegesis and systematic theology that inform the answer as well. Specifically, if it can be argued successfully that Jesus descended into Sheol after his death in order to

¹Dr. Snoeberger is Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in Allen Park, MI. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2020 DBTS Summer Lecture Series, 11 August 2020.

²By using the terms “ascend and descend” or “up and down,” I do not mean to imply spatial direction. It is necessary that the souls of the dead go to some place, and one of the persistent suggestions for that place remains the center of the earth. Since souls are localized, but apparently take up very little space, they could be almost anywhere, including the earth’s core. While this is possible, I am unwilling to defend this hypothesis, and remain skeptical that the directional terms used in Scripture are adequate to demonstrate Sheol’s location (any more than are biblical references to the abode as a subterranean region at the bottom of the sea—2 Sam 22:5–6; Job 26:5; Ps 69:15; Jonah 2:2). Instead, the terms likely suggest that souls go “down” to Sheol in judgment, gloom, and/or uncertainty, or go “up” in triumph, joy, and hope. The salient question of this article is whether the OT righteous dead were obliged to “descend” in any of these senses to await a future ascent in triumph to the abode of God.

³The idea of “harrowing” reflects an old English term for a military sortie or raid, and was used as early as A.D. 1000 by Aelfric to reference Christ’s liberation of OT saints from their captivity to the great enemy, Death.

liberate the souls of OT saints held captive there, then it follows necessarily that they previously had gone to this place when they died.

A Very Brief Summary of the Old Testament Material

Although this presentation is primarily a NT study, it is helpful, I think, to swiftly survey the salient OT references to Sheol that speak to its residents, both actual and potential.⁴ With most Hebrew lexicographers, I understand that while the word שְׁאוֹל occasionally stands as a metaphor for death, its primary function is to connote a place of detention for the souls of the dead. Its location is inconsequential, but it is vital to recognize that it *is* a location (not merely a state of being), and its location is distinct from the *grave* (a place for the bodies of the dead).

The majority of OT references to שְׁאוֹל speak of this place in decidedly negative terms: a place of fiery wrath (Deut 32:22), decadence (Isa 14:11), restriction (2 Sam 22:6; Isa 38:18; Hab 2:5; Ps 18:5; 116:3; Job 7:9), hopelessness (Isa 38:18; Jonah 2:2; Pss. 6:5; Eccl 9:10), and sorrow (Ps 116:3) to which one *descends*, either locatively or, more likely, in misery/judgment (Gen 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; 1 Sam 2:6; 1 Kgs 2:6, 9; Isa 5:14; 14:11, 15; Isa 57:9; Ezek 31:15ff; 32:26ff; Amos 9:2; Job 7:9; 17:16; 21:13; Prov 1:12; 5:5).

The majority of OT references to שְׁאוֹל speak of this place as the residence of the *wicked* dead, where they await their final judgment and consignment to a place even more dreadful (Num 16:30, 33; 1 Kgs 2:6, 9; Isa 5:14; 14:9ff; Ezek 31:15ff; 32:26ff; Pss 6:5; 9:17; 31:17; 42:14; 49:14; 55:15; Job 24:19; Pss 9:17; 31:17; Prov 7:27; 9:18). The Hebrew Scriptures also speak, however, of detention in Sheol as the fate of *all* men (Ps 89:48; Eccl 9:10), and specifically, as the fate of the *righteous* dead. Indeed, the first four references to Sheol in the Torah indicate that one of the patriarchs, Jacob, expected to go there (Gen 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31). King Hezekiah, too, one of Israel's more godly kings, wept over the prediction of his untimely descent into Sheol (Isa 38:10, 18). Among the psalmists, Heman feared going to Sheol (Ps 88:3), and David (together with the Christ with whom he identifies) also expects, arguably, to be temporarily incarcerated there (Ps 16:10).⁵ It is true that this last verse and others (1 Sam 2:6; Hos 13:14;

⁴In this survey I follow the pattern of discussions found in Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (repr., Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1969), 36–47, and Rolland D. McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, vol. 3 (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 313–28.

⁵It is notable that the OT faithful seem uniformly to recoil from death and the afterlife, a sharp contrast from Paul's embrace of the prospect (e.g., Phil 1:23; 2 Cor 5:8). There are three possible explanations for this: (1) that OT saints were systematically denied assurance of their salvation (a dubious idea; note that one of the strongest OT statements of assurance [Job 19:25] comes from the mouth of an OT writer who is quite optimistic about Sheol [Job 14:13]), (2) that OT saints were uninformed, even mistaken about the afterlife (a troubling prospect for inerrancy, since they would

Job 17:13ff; 19:25; poss. Ps 49:15) assured OT saints that they will *eventually* escape Sheol, rise, and ascend;⁶ still, the language suggests that they were at least *temporarily* detained in Sheol. And while many Scripture writers view their tenure there with angst, Job suggests that, in contrast to his miserable life on earth, Sheol will be a place of relative solace (Job 14:13; cf. 1 Sam 28:15).

While more may be said of these texts, this short foray fits reasonably well with my thesis, stated above, that the OT righteous descended to a comfortable and restful, but ultimately unsatisfying compartment of Sheol, from which our Lord Christ liberated them in the wake of his crucifixion.

The Question of the Creeds

The “descent clause” does not appear in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, but does appear variously in versions of the Apostles’ Creed, a creed of earlier but also of evolving provenance. The Apostles’ Creed, likely first employed as an ancient baptismal formula, predates the standardizing impulse begun at Nicaea and was never formally adopted by any council. For this reason, its “original” form has been long debated.⁷ Notable for our study, we observe that the descent clause does not appear in some earlier versions to the creed, and does not appear with the selfsame wording in any of the three languages under consideration (Greek, Latin, and English); still, it represents generally the studied consensus of the majority church from the third through the seventh centuries. Note the following:⁸

have written their Scriptures from a standpoint, potentially, of error), or (3) that OT saints correctly anticipated a period of detention in Sheol before ascending to God. The last of these options seems the most likely.

⁶A few texts seem to suggest that OT saints avoid Sheol altogether (Pss 30:3; 49:15 [?]; Prov 15:24; 23:14), though, following the dictates of the analogy of Scripture, these texts seem to be exceptional passages explained by the majority rather than the texts doing the explaining. Specifically, I suggest that these texts speak to either (1) to the saints’ *temporary* avoidance of Sheol (i.e., God kept certain OT saints alive for a time in answer to prayer) or (2) to their avoidance of *Lower* Sheol (a compartment implied, perhaps, in the Psalmist’s use of the phrase “lowest Sheol” in 86:13; cf. Deut 32:22; also the “depths” of Sheol in Prov 9:18 and the “recesses” of Sheol in Isa 14:15).

⁷For a comprehensive discussion of competing views and variants of the descent clause among the Church Fathers see J. A. MacCulloch’s classic work, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930). Major modern treatments of the topic include Justin W. Bass, *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ’s Descent into the Underworld* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014); Marcel Sarot and Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen, eds., *The Apostles Creed: “He Descended into Hell”* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); and Matthew Y. Emerson, *“He Descended to the Dead”: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

⁸The Latin and Greek texts reflect Schaff’s *Creeds of Christendom* (6th ed. in 3 vols. [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1931], 2:45), with alternative readings noted in the succeeding discussion (2:45–55). The English reflects the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Greek	Latin	English
κατελθόντα εἰς τὰ κατώτατα [alt. εἰς ᾗδου] ⁹	<i>descendit ad inferna</i> [alt. <i>ad inferos</i>] ¹⁰	He descended into hell [alt. <i>into the place of departed spirits</i>] ¹¹

The suggestion, made principally (but not only) by Philip Schaff, that the descent clause does not appear at all in the earliest forms of the Apostles' Creed and only in Rufinus (c. A.D. 390) prior to the seventh century, has rendered some evangelical scholars (notably Wayne Grudem) comfortable excising the clause.¹² The historical data that informs this decision may, however, be questioned.

Schaff argues that Rufinus made a redundant addition to clarify a *single event*, something like, "He was buried and so joined the dead [in the grave]," but that this innocuous redundancy developed into a rogue addition to the Kerygma with the passing of time. Specifically, the phrase came to be interpreted to mean that *two* things happened to Christ: [1] his body was physically buried, *and* [2] his soul descended to Hades to suffer—the latter which Grudem rightly fingers as non-orthodox.¹³ A closer look at the data, however suggests a situation somewhat different than this.¹⁴

⁹The comparative "lower parts of the earth" (κατώτερος) of Eph 4:9 is rendered superlative (κατώτατα—*lowest*) in the most common versions of the Creed, and reflected in others as *Hades*. The implication of the superlative is significant, because it suggests that the early Church would not have accepted Grudem's comparative understanding that Christ descended to the lower place, viz., the material realm; rather, he descended to the superlatively lowest parts *of* the earth, viz., the realm of the dead.

¹⁰The term *inferna*, which eventually became associated with the raging fires of hell, does not have this meaning intrinsically, but only by later association. It is properly rendered "to the lower [parts]," and is contrasted with the minority *inferos*, "the ones below," thus, "to the dead" or "among the inhabitants of the netherworld."

¹¹The *Book of Common Prayer* allows the presiding minister to choose either reading, the latter "which are considered as words of the same meaning in the Creed" (q.v. under "The Order for Daily Morning Prayer").

¹²Wayne Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991): 103–13; cf. idem, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988; idem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1994), 582–94; also R. E. Otto, "Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Doctrinal Conundrum," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 143–50; Michael Williams, "He Descended Into Hell? An Issue of Confessional Integrity," *Presbyterian* 25 (1999): 80–90.

¹³Note that Grudem's objection creates a frustratingly false dilemma for those who accept the Descent clause. He routinely assumes throughout his article that belief in Christ's *descent* to Sheol is necessarily connected to belief that Christ *suffered* in Sheol, then argues against the Descent into Sheol on the grounds that Christ cannot have suffered in Sheol. But as we shall see, these two beliefs have only recently been paired. Most who have accepted the Descent throughout history have argued that Christ descended for reasons other than for suffering.

¹⁴For a comprehensive answer to Schaff/Grudem, see esp. Jeffery L. Hamm,

First, we note that Rufinus's recension of the Creed (c. A.D. 390) was formally commissioned and widely accepted,¹⁵ and remains today the very earliest whole version known to us. Hamm explains that, prior to the Edicts of Milan (A.D. 313) and Thessalonica (A.D. 380), the Creed was rarely written, being maintained secretly and orally as a sort of "password" for distinguishing true believers from interlopers in the community of faith.¹⁶ As one might expect with an oral tradition, variations began to proliferate. Some of these variations included only the "he was buried" clause (as reflected in the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325); others only the "he descended" clause (as reflected in the Athanasian Creed of A.D. 431). Both *ideas*, however, were accepted overwhelmingly by the Ante-Nicene and Nicene majorities. Rufinus did not invent the descent into Hades; he merely codified it.¹⁷

We observe **second** that Rufinus's rendition, situated halfway between Nicaea and Ephesus, was penned at the height of the Apollinarian crisis. Among other peculiarities, Apollinarus (d. ca. A.D. 390) argued that Jesus had a human body but no human soul, and therefore could not have descended into Sheol. Since the Apollinarian heresy had been freshly condemned at the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381), it made good sense for Rufinus to clarify the orthodox position away from Apollinarianism—which he did by specifying both a material *and an immaterial* descent, reflecting the orthodox consensus.¹⁸ In short, the picture of Rufinus as a maverick theologian sneaking a new idea into the Creed is quite wrong. Belief in Christ's descent into Sheol was as ubiquitous in early ecumenical orthodoxy as was belief in Christ's burial.¹⁹

We note **third** that the diversity of destinations for Christ's descent

"*Descendit*: Delete or Declare? A Defense against the Neo-Deletionists," *Westminster Theological Journal* 78 (2016): 93–116.

¹⁵Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* 1 (ANF, 3:542).

¹⁶Hamm, "*Descendit*," 99; also Marcel Sarot and Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen, "Theology from the Abyss," in *The Apostles' Creed: "He Descended into Hell,"* ed. Marcel Sarot and Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 5.

¹⁷Hamm notes, for instance, that the descent of Christ's soul into Hades was maintained by Polycarp, Ignatius, Hermas, Justin, Melito of Sardis, Hippolytus, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen. After Nicaea, it is seen in both the Eastern and Western Churches, including substantial discussions in Athanasius, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, Eusebius, John Chrysostom, and Augustine ("*Descendit*," 100).

¹⁸Rufinus observes that part of the tension in the wording is that many in his day held to Christ's *incarnate* descent into Sheol. He clarifies that if this were the case (a position he apparently accepted as orthodox), Christ's descent must not be regarded as *merely* a material one: his soul descended too (*Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* 1 [ANF, 3:542]).

¹⁹MacCulluch argues that "from at least the second century there was no more well-known and popular belief" than "the Descent into Hades, the overcoming of Death and Hades, the Preaching to the Dead, and the Release of Souls, and its popularity steadily increased" (*Harrowing of Hell*, 45).

suggested in the creedal variations should not be an impediment to acceptance of the clause. It is here argued that all six of the terms used in the table above (Hades, *ad inferna*, *ad inferos*, τὰ κατώτατα, hell, and the place of departed spirits) may all be seen as synonymous. It is true that debate over Christ's *purpose* in going to this place is debated: Some, like von Balthasar and Moltmann, suggest that Christ went to Sheol to suffer there with the damned;²⁰ others, like Calvin, suggest that Christ went through the essence of hell on the cross;²¹ most in the early church opined that Christ condemned those in Lower Sheol from a distance, crying out to them across the "great chasm" from the comforts of Upper Sheol (cf. Luke 16:20ff), which he subsequently emptied. This question will long be debated. But there was no debate in the early Church as to where Christ went: he went to Sheol, that is, to ᾗδης, τὰ κατώτατα, *ad inferna*, *ad inferos*, to hell, the place of departed spirits.

The Salient New Testament Texts

Of course, the creeds are valuable to us only so far as they accurately summarize the biblical tradition. It is theoretically possible that the *descensus ad inferna* is orthodox in a creedal sense, but unbiblical—unlikely I would venture, but possible. True orthodoxy makes its appeal *ad fontes* (i.e., to the "fountain" of Scripture upon which the creeds rest) for legitimacy. Grudem's burden is primarily to discredit the traditional proof texts for the descent *for the purpose of punishment* (which I am emphatically not defending). He addresses five key texts, but chiefly 1 Peter 3:18ff, which he regards (erroneously, I think), as the *crux interpretum* for the doctrine. We will look at this text, but we begin with the observation that the Church saw a great many NT "proof" texts for the doctrine under consideration. We will look at the NT witness to the descent in three clusters: (1) texts that suggest Christ had the same experience of death and afterlife had by all men (Matt 12:40; Acts

²⁰The idea of Christ suffering in hell after his death is an idea largely unknown before the twentieth century, when von Balthasar connected the *inferna* with *Limbus Patrum*, the Roman Catholic prison for those in need of "purging" but not hopelessly damned. By undergoing further purging in this place, Christ achieved comprehensive solidarity with mankind and offered a message of hope even to those already suffering in Sheol, rendering it possible for them to follow him out of that place. Not surprisingly, a universal impulse has been on the rise in modern Romanism. Jürgen Moltmann argues similarly from a broadly Protestant tradition.

²¹Calvin's concern was the vicarious penal nature of Christ's sacrifice. He recognized that when Christ uttered the word τετέλεσται, "It is finished," his vicarious suffering ended. However, Calvin also believed that Christ must have suffered the whole experience of hell on behalf of his elect in order for atonement to be complete. Calvin thus theorized, based loosely on the Creed, that Christ must have "descended into hell" to suffer its torments, not *after* he died, but *in his dying* (see his *Institutes* 2.16.8–10). This understanding of the Creed is dubious, and one looks in vain for it in the early Church, though it has enjoyed some popularity due to Calvin's stature.

2:27; and Luke 23:43 with 16:18ff); (2) texts that speak to descent of Christ to Lower Sheol to affirm his receipt and use of the keys to condemn its inhabitants (Rom 10:6–7; 1 Pet 3:18–22 [?]); and (3) texts that speak to Christ liberating Upper Sheol and “opening Paradise” (1 Pet 4:6 [?]; Eph 4:8–10 cf. Matt 27:52; Rev 1:18 with Matt 16:18–19).

Texts That Predict Christ’s Ordinary Death and Descent

That Christ died an ordinary death is a fact necessarily accepted by all orthodox believers. His material and immaterial were disjoined, his body was entombed, and his soul went elsewhere. Since Christ was an ordinary human, we should not imagine that his soul became omnipresent when he died (this would be a direct violation of Chalcedon); rather, his human soul remained localized and went wherever righteous souls went in that day. If we can establish where Christ’s soul went upon death, then we should be able to establish where the souls of the OT righteous went upon death as well.

Luke 23:43, 46

Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.²²

Many suggest that Christ’s statement to his Father, “Into your hands I commit my Spirit” (v. 46) proves that he ascended to his Father in heaven. This conclusion is furthered by his promise to the believing thief that the two of them would be *together* in *Paradise* on *that day* (v. 43). All three italicized elements are crucial. They indicate that Jesus on the very day of his death went to the same place as the thief—a place called Paradise. It is not possible that Christ ascended to heaven while the thief descended to Sheol/Hades; nor, oppositely, that the thief ascended to heaven while Christ descended to Sheol/Hades. And since the location *Paradise* is used in the NT on only two other occasions, the first referencing a place to which Paul was “caught up” (2 Cor 12:4) and the second wherein is the tree of life enjoyed by “overcomers” (Rev 2:7), it is reasonable to suggest that both Christ and the thief, and consequently all the OT righteous dead, ascended to the abode of God immediately upon their respective deaths.

Intertextual/theological arguments alone are not enough to set aside this conclusion, but they do lead me to examine it with a critical eye. And I believe that there are good reasons to doubt this conclusion:

First, Christ’s commendation of his spirit into the Father’s hands is not a statement of his soul’s destination. The phrase “into your hands” is a metaphor, not a location. Christ is entrusting his spirit to the

²²Unless otherwise indicated, I will be using the NIV, 1984 ed.

sovereign control of God (cf. Ps 31:15; also Gen 16:6; Josh 9:25; 1 Sam 24:20; Ezra 10:4; Jer 21:4; Dan 2:38; John 3:35). The destination of Christ's spirit is not in view.

Second, while Paul refers to the abode of God as παράδεισος (2 Cor 12:4), John's usage in Revelation 2:7 is not so clear. If the location of the tree of life is our clue to locating Paradise, then it might be the restored Garden of Eden (the majority of the 32 uses of παράδεισος in the LXX are to Eden) or the New Earth (Rev 22:2). Paradise *is* a location (not just an experience), but it does not seem to be a fixed location. This leaves two major options: (1) that Paradise is *wherever God chooses to manifest himself most visibly* or more generically, (2) that Paradise is simply *the place of righteous souls at rest*, wherever that may be within the peculiar government of God then in effect. The latter view may be accused of receiving too many cuts from Ockham's razor, but it is one with which all can agree. The preceding leads me to three observations:

- The fact that Paradise is demonstrably in three separate locations in Scripture (first the Garden of Eden, later Heaven, and finally the New Earth) renders plausible the idea that it may also have enjoyed yet another location, viz., Upper Sheol/Hades, then migrated to heaven with the "harrowing of hell." Of course, there is no specific biblical statement equating Paradise with Upper Sheol/Hades, but plausibility is established. If this is the case, then Jesus went with the thief "that very day" to the relative Paradise of Upper Sheol.
- The Paradise-as-Sheol theory better explains Luke's earlier story of the rich man and Lazarus (6:19–31) than does the Paradise-as-Heaven theory. In this story, the departed spirits of both an unrighteous and a righteous man are observed in proximate location, but with a great gulf fixed between them. The unrighteous man is described as "in torment" and "agony" in Hades, while the righteous man is described as being "comforted" in Abraham's Bosom. If this story accurately reflects the normal state of affairs for the OT dead, then there can be no question that OT saints went to this shared space.

Of course, the condition in the last sentence is precisely the point under consideration. Some dismiss the story as parable, and thus as contrary to fact and of no value for establishing theology.²³ To this two replies may be made: (1) the identification of this story

²³By denying the rich man's request to allow Lazarus to return, Richard Bauckham affirms, "the story in effect deprives itself of any claim to offer an apocalyptic glimpse of the secrets of the world beyond the grave. It cannot claim eyewitness authority to a literal description of the fate of the dead. It has only the status of parable" ("The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels," in *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* [Leiden: Brill, 1998], 117).

as parable is rendered suspect by features atypical of biblical parables, chiefly its setting in the afterlife and the use of a proper name (*Lazarus*) rather than a generic designation common in parables (e.g., “a certain beggar”). But, conceding for a moment that this is a parable, (2) it is observable that all Christ’s parables are historically *plausible* even if they are not historically *true*.²⁴ In employing parables, Jesus may have told stories that were fictional, but never stories that were totally fantastical.²⁵ This means that even if the story of the rich man and Lazarus *is* a parable, it reflects plausibly the state of affairs in the afterlife.

Third, Christ tells his disciples, after the Resurrection, that he had not yet ascended to the Father (John 20:17), suggesting that he had gone elsewhere after his crucifixion, likely to Sheol/Hades. This has been countered by the possibility that Christ was referring only to his bodily ascension, which had not yet occurred. Still, his words leave the former possibility squarely on the table.

Fourth, the term “today” (σήμερον) may not reference a specific day, but may rather be part of an oath formula, paired with ἰμὴν σοι λέγω (“truly I say to you”) to suggest a sort of theological certainty tied to Christ’s assured victory. If this is the case in Luke 23, then the emphasis is that they would *most assuredly* be in Paradise together, without explicit reference to time.²⁶ If this is Christ’s intent, then he says nothing at all here about the specific destination of the OT righteous dead.

I conclude that the Lukan corpus is favorable to the idea that, rather than ascending to heaven, Jesus descended, together with the OT

²⁴For example, there may not have been a good Samaritan who helped an injured man alongside the road after a priest and a Levite ignored him, but the story is plausible: it reflects the kind of events that happened routinely in that culture, whether or not they occurred precisely as Christ told them. This is true of all Christ’s parables.

²⁵Those who reject inerrancy will often suggest here that Jesus accommodated local Jewish beliefs about the afterlife, which are many and diverse, but which nearly always entail a common, multi-compartmental place of the dead, often in the earth but possibly instead in one of the “heavens,” where the dead awaited in detention their final judgment and/or reward (for a helpful summary of intertestamental and other early Jewish beliefs about hell, see Richard Bauckham, “Early Jewish Visions of Hell,” in *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* [Leiden: Brill, 1998], 49–96). The diversity of these Jewish views means that Christ could not possibly have endorsed every detail of every Jewish model of the Netherworld; still, it is here argued that, if inerrancy be assumed, Christ’s specific acceptance of any details of these accounts affirms their incidental factuality.

²⁶As Sabourin notes, “Luke’s ‘today,’ belongs...more to theology than to chronology” (cited in Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman, 2003], 593). For a likely parallel see Genesis 2:17, where God informs Adam that he will surely die “on the very day” he eats the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. While many suggest, since Adam did not drop dead when he ate the fruit, that God intended *spiritual* death or perhaps the mere onset of physical mortality, others suggest that God was making an emphatic threat: “If you eat, you most certainly will die” (so the NET [esp. n. 53], NIV2011, NLT, etc.).

righteous dead, to a “compartment” of Hades—a place of rest for righteous souls also denominated *Paradise*.

Matthew 12:40

As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

In Matthew 12:40, Jesus answers the request of the Scribes and Pharisees for a “sign” of his Messianic identity, not with the positive miracles that he had heretofore been performing, but with a darker sign portending judgment. As Jonah had been in the belly of the whale for three days and then emerged miraculously to condemn Nineveh, so also Christ would be in the “heart of the earth” for three days before emerging miraculously to condemn his interlocutors.

Note that in the OT analogy, Jonah descends into the belly of the whale, which he calls *Sheol* (2:2 [MT 2:3]), the “heart of the sea” (2:3 [MT 2:4]), the “pit” (2:6 [MT 2:7]), and the barred “land beneath” (2:7 [Heb. 2:8]), wherefrom his *soul* cries out for deliverance (2:5, 7 [MT 2:6, 8]). It is, of course, possible that his analogy is not to be pressed to the level of detail that these words suggest, but the parallels seem much too detailed to be coincidental. It is not that Christ’s soulless body descended into the earth, but that he descended both body and soul, to a nether place in which not merely his body, but also his conscious *soul* anticipated vindication.

This suggests that the descent of both the bodies and souls of the OT righteous is normative.

Acts 2:26b–28

My heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to [εἰς] the grave [ᾠδην], nor will you let your Holy One see decay.

You have made known to me the paths of life [ὁδοὺς ζωῆς]; you will fill me with joy in your presence.

We come now to one of the more critical passages, and one to which both sides of the debate routinely appeal. My gracious interlocutor has already detailed the OT source for Peter’s citation (Ps 16:8–11) in the preceding article of this journal;²⁷ we now add NT scrutiny.

Similar questions exist in both Greek and Hebrew, chief among them whether the referent speaks to the abandonment of *entering into Sheol*, or to the abandonment of *remaining in Sheol*. As in the Hebrew, the ranges of meaning both of abandonment (ἐγκαταλείπω) and the

²⁷Kyle C. Dunham, “Ransomed from the Hand of Sheol: The Heavenly Destiny of Old Testament Saints in the Afterlife,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 26 (2021): 3–33.

preposition εἰς are such that both meanings are possible. Context must be consulted. As in the original psalm, appeal is made to a contrasting “way of life” that culminates in God’s presence, but this to me is not determinative. All agree that the referent, being among the righteous dead, will eventually live forever *coram deo*—Sheol is not the *final* destination for the faithful “way of life.” But the question at hand in this article is whether Sheol may stand as a *temporary* destination for the OT faithful. To suggest this does not, I think, destroy the “two ways of life” motif.

The commentary provided in Peter’s sermon is informative. Most significantly, he surprises us with the revelation that David was not speaking strictly about himself when he wrote Psalm 16, but was anticipating a descendant who would sit on his throne, viz., Jesus Christ. This is rendered obvious, Peter suggests, by the fact that David’s body was still resting in a nearby tomb (in a presumably decadent state), and had not ascended to heaven at death (vv. 29–31). The implications of this revelation are significant. Note the following:

- If Peter is saying that David’s words were strictly prophetic, referring *only* to the Christ, then the value of this passage for establishing details about the OT afterlife is muted.²⁸ It is likely, however, that David was tying his own destiny with that of the Messianic King such that the assurances of Psalm 16 are true for David in a generic sense: *David* will not be abandoned to Sheol because *Christ* will not be abandoned to Sheol. This solution preserves an originalist hermeneutic and salvages the value of both texts for explaining the “normal” state of the afterlife for OT saints.²⁹
- That Peter apparently sees David’s statement (at least so far as it concerns himself) as contrary to fact in Peter’s day suggests that David had in fact been consigned to Sheol and had not yet been rescued. This observation suggests that David’s expectation was not that he would avoid Sheol entirely, but that he would not perpetually *remain* there. That is to say, Peter’s clarification of Psalm 16 suggests that David’s intent in saying that his soul would not be abandoned to (εἰς/?) Sheol should be understood as an affirmation that he would not stay there *permanently*.
- That David had not yet been delivered in Peter’s day strikes an apparent blow to the idea that Sheol was emptied at Christ’s

²⁸We might be left quibbling over whether David’s royal descendent (Jesus) was abandoned “in” or “to” Sheol, but *David* (and with him the rest of the OT righteous dead) would not be in view.

²⁹Much more may be said hermeneutically about this text, and I recognize I am departing from the typological norm that dominates the evangelical scene, but I have neither the time nor the space to develop the topic further.

Resurrection. However, David's reference to the deliverance of his "body" and "tongue" from "decay" suggests that he anticipated a holistic deliverance that would be incomplete until his resurrection at the end of the age. Jesus had been delivered body and soul, giving hope to David for a similar deliverance. Peter observes that David's body had yet to be restored; whether David's "heart" (i.e., his immaterial) had been delivered from Sheol in Peter's day, however, is not specified.

In any case, the conclusion from the NT commentary on this difficult text tilts us in favor of seeing David, like Christ, as redeemed *from out of Sheol*, not from going there in the first place.

*Texts that Describe Christ's Descent to Lower Sheol
to Condemn Its Inhabitants*

We turn now to a series of texts that speak to Christ's descent to Lower Sheol (a.k.a., the *abyss*) in partial completion of his whole Messianic mission assigned for his first advent.

Romans 10:6–8

But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming.

Paul's reference to Christ's descent in Romans 10 is both incomplete and indirect. No mention is made of Christ's purpose in Sheol, and the context of the passage is a curious one for so glancing a mention of this controversial event. Still, the text cannot be ignored.

The context of Romans 10 is Paul's contrast between acquiring righteousness by law with acquiring righteousness by faith. His point is that acquiring a righteous standing by legal obedience is as difficult as ascending to heaven to summons Christ or descending to the ἄβυσσος to retrieve Christ from among the dead ones (ἐκ νεκρῶν). Righteousness is instead supplied immediately by God, is near at hand, and is easily secured by faith.

The contrast of the impossibly elusive with the near at hand is not a new one, being drawn from Deuteronomy 30:11–14. There, the object near at hand is the "word" (הַדְּבָרִי) or "command" (מִצְוָה) of God. This confuses, perhaps, because Paul's point in Romans 10 is that righteousness by obeying commands is impossible. Still, the point is made—once God circumcises the hearts of his people, what previously had been hopelessly elusive becomes proximate and delightful.

The Apostle's subtle changes to the Deuteronomy text, however, inform. The elusive "word" that in Deuteronomy 30 is actuated by regeneration is replaced in Romans 10 by "Christ," union with whom

makes the obedience of faith possible. And like the regenerate embrace of God's Word, Christ's descent from heaven for incarnation and his ascent/resurrection out of Sheol for our own newness of life are divine accomplishments.³⁰

It is with his reference to the resurrection, however, that Paul makes a second and more significant change: replacing the Deuteronomist's *across the sea* (לְעֵבֶר הַיָּם [LXX πέραν τῆς θαλάσσης]) with *in the abyss* (εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον). On one level the change is not particularly remarkable: both phrases speak to impossible distances and other-earthly mystery, particularly in the LXX, where the term ἄβυσσος very often translates דְּהֵימָה, "the deep"—a metaphorical place of mystery and despair, not infrequently associated with death (Ps 70:20 [Eng. 71:20]; cf. Ezek 31:15, where it parallels לִיָּצֵן).³¹ Still, Paul's decision to depart from the LXX translation θάλασσα and supply the word ἄβυσσος is telling. The term ἄβυσσος appears in the NT on only eight other occasions, each with reference to a place of detention for evil spirits (Luke 8:31; Rev 9:1–2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3; cf. also the use of Τάρταρος in 2 Pet 2:4 and 1 Enoch 20:2). This observation renders unlikely the possibility that Paul was intending merely "the grave" or even "death," because angels neither die nor have graves. Rather, it must be a real place of detention for spirit beings (note the plural νεκρῶν). Paul's unforced shift of metaphorical θάλασσα to more precisely locative ἄβυσσος is confusing if, in fact, Christ never went there.³²

I conclude that Romans 10 definitely affirms Christ's descent to Sheol, though not, at this point, his interaction with OT *saints* in Upper Sheol (which, lest we forget it, is the focus of this article). Still, it offers us an important piece of the puzzle that we are constructing.

³⁰As Emerson notes, the suggestion sometimes made in discussions of Eph 4, that Christ's descent was merely to earth (and not to the sub-earthly realm), does not work in Rom 10. Here in Romans the earth is the reference point for both clauses: Christ descends from heaven to earth at his incarnation, and ascends from the Abyss to the earth at his resurrection (*"He Descended to the Dead,"* 48).

³¹See, e.g., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "ἄβυσσος," by J. Jeremias, 1.9ff.

³²Doug Moo acknowledges this tension and notes that "Käsemann and many other commentators" infer Paul's assumption of prevailing Jewish traditions about Sheol/Hades, a conclusion that I share. Moo suggests, however, that "this may read too much into the appearance of the word 'abyss' in the quotation, since that word was, to some degree, forced upon Paul by the OT tradition he was using" (*The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018], 674, n. 477). As I have suggested, however, Paul's word change was *unforced* and, by all appearances, quite deliberate. Paul does more than passively assume prevailing Jewish ideas about Sheol/Hades for sake of argument; he goes out of his way to actively affirm them.

1 Peter 3:18–20 (with 4:6 [?])

Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.

Often considered the *crux interpretum* for the *descensus ad inferna* (though, as we shall suggest, inadvisably so), Peter's remarks in 1 Peter 3 are variously understood. As Grudem notes, there are three matters of debate: (1) the identity of those addressed, (2) the content of the preaching, and (3) the timing of the preaching.³³

That the recipients are described as "spirits" (πνεύμασιν) suggests that they are *angelic* beings (the overwhelmingly majority use of the plural of πνεῦμα, excepted only in Heb 12:23), the leading candidates being the wicked "sons of God" who precipitated the Flood by their sin in Genesis 6:1–4.³⁴ Following the sequence of our passage, this occurred when Christ himself "went" personally to their place to announce (ἐκήρυξεν, v. 19) their doom. This understanding is plausible, and I might accept it...if I could accept that the "sons of God" in Genesis 6 were angels, which I cannot (Matt 22:20; Luke 20:35; in principle Heb 2:16).³⁵

This leads to a second position, that the "spirits" are the souls of the OT wicked dead who were visited by Christ in Sheol between his death and resurrection and offered a gracious "second chance" for redemption.³⁶ I give no credence to this view because of its summary rejection of the system of theology commended by the whole Scriptures (Heb 9:27 etc.).

³³Grudem, *1 Peter*, 157–58, 203.

³⁴Edward G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle to Peter* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 197–203; 314–62; W. J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965); J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, Thornapple Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 151–58; R. T. France, "Exegesis in Practice: Two Samples," in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 264–81; Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 138–41; Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1996), 239–62; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 184–90; Scot McKnight, *1 Peter*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 215–17.

³⁵I might be persuaded that these "spirits" are angels who are incarcerated for reasons other than the sin of cohabitation in Genesis 6, but then the connection with Noah is severed, creating contextual tension.

³⁶Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner's, 1909), 162–63; C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM, 1960); idem, "The Interpretation of I Peter iii.19 and iv.6," *Expository Times* 69 (1957–58): 369–72.

This leads to a third position, championed by John Calvin, that the “spirits” in view are the souls of “formerly disobedient” men who had ridiculed Noah but who converted and became “godly spirits” at the eleventh hour, even as the deluge consumed them. By identifying the “spirits” of 3:18–20 with the “dead” of 4:6, Calvin argued that though these were not saved “in the flesh” with Noah (they died in the Flood), they nonetheless became true recipients of the saving grace of God. As such they rejoiced when Christ came to preach *good news* in 4:6, where Peter uses the more evangelistic verb for preaching, εὐαγγελίζω, to qualify the more generic verb κηρύσσω used in 3:19.³⁷ Calvin did not, however, believe that these “spirits” were imprisoned in the φυλακή of Upper Sheol; rather, they were held captive by the metaphorical chains of the law of sin and death, the onus of which was not removed until Christ fulfilled the Law by his sinless life and penal death.³⁸ As such, Christ did not need to go anywhere, per se, to do this preaching; rather, the announcement was made after the Resurrection and “in the spirit,” that is, apart from any “notion of what may be called a real presence.”³⁹ While inventive, this position fails from a thousand cuts, including (1) the rare use of πνεύμασιν to reference human spirits, (2) the tortured understanding of the disobedient spirits, (3) the debatable equation of the “spirits” of 3:19 and the “dead” of 4:6; (4) overly spiritualized senses of imprisonment and preaching, and (5) the failure of Christ to “go” anywhere to preach, as is implied by the use of πορεύομαι in 3:19.⁴⁰

More ancient is the position, championed by Augustine and more recently by Wayne Grudem, that the “disobedient spirits” are Noah’s wicked adversaries, imprisoned in sin, to whom Christ preached *through Noah*, a type of Christ.⁴¹ This position rejects all notion of a descent, consenting only to Noah’s *historical* preaching to then-living humans who have *since* become disembodied spirits. This position suffers from many of the same tensions as the previous, including (1) the rare use of πνεύμασιν for human spirits and (2) the failure of Christ to “go” anywhere to preach; also (3) the total absence of any markers that suggest Peter was shifting from his own perspective of these “spirits” as disembodied to their historically embodied state, and most importantly, (4) the employment of a troublingly non-literal hermeneutical

³⁷ *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 98.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97, 99. Calvin here explicitly rejects Augustine’s idea that Christ preached “spiritually” through Noah.

⁴⁰ See Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 186.

⁴¹ Augustine, *Ep.* 164; Grudem, *1 Peter*, 203–39; also John Feinberg, “1 Peter 3:18–20, Ancient Mythology, and the Intermediate State,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 303–36.

approach. In J. Ramsey Michaels's words, this view "must be judged a failure."⁴²

This leads finally to the historically majority position within Church History, viz., that Christ descended to Sheol/Hades and triumphed finally over the damned in residence there (chiefly disembodied *human* spirits, but not necessarily limited thereto), confirming their doom.⁴³ This position is not without its tensions, including (1) the rare use of πνεύμασιν for human spirits, (2) an ordering of events that apparently places the descent *after* the Resurrection, and (3) the arbitrary singling out of Noah's generation.⁴⁴

The decision is extraordinarily difficult; none of the five options is without significant tension. The first position has, I think, the *fewest* tensions, and if the Sons-of-God-as-Angels elephant in the room could be tamed, would be compelling. I find the second and fourth positions wholly unacceptable, respectively, on theological and hermeneutical grounds. The remaining views see Christ "preaching" to the regenerate dead but not in Sheol (Calvin)⁴⁵ and, oppositely, Christ preaching in Sheol but not to the regenerate dead (the majority position of the Early Church). The disparity of views and complete lack of consensus on any of them leads me to conclude, if I may close somewhat unsatisfactorily, that we should probably remove this text from its supposed pedestal as the *crux interpretum* for the descent, as it fails to land a solid blow for or against it.⁴⁶ In any case it does not speak credibly to the question of whether the OT righteous dead were there.

Texts that Describe Christ's Liberation of Upper Sheol and the Unlocking of Paradise

We come now to our most crucial set of texts, namely, those that ostensibly see Christ descending to Sheol to deliver the OT righteous dead and bring them to God.

⁴²*1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 210.

⁴³This is the position of many Church Fathers (among others, Ignatius, *Magn.* 9:2; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.20.4; 4:22.1; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.6; Athanasius, *Ep. Epict.* 109.5; Justin, *Dial.* 72.4); also R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1945), 160–69; MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 50–66; Emerson, "He Descended to the Dead," 59–64; Bass, *Battle for the Keys*, 84–96.

⁴⁴For contemporary answers to these tensions, see Emerson, "He Descended to the Dead," 59–64; Bass, *Battle for the Keys*, 84–96.

⁴⁵Calvin's view could be easily modified, however, to accommodate this.

⁴⁶Both Emerson and Bass argue convincingly that we should cease viewing this text as the *crux interpretum* for the descent. As both point out, there is a long history in the church of luminaries (most visibly Augustine but by no means limited to him) who believed firmly in Christ's descent into a partitioned place of the dead, but who found in 1 Peter 3 no compelling proof for the doctrine. I am of a mind with them.

1 Peter 4:6 (ESV)

This is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

We have noted above that John Calvin equated “the dead” in 1 Peter 4:6 with the “spirits” of 3:19, and concluded that Christ’s [singular] message was one of *good news* (εὐαγγελίζω), and thus that the referents in both texts must be the OT righteous dead.⁴⁷ We suggested there that the equation of these two groups cannot be successfully made, the earlier group being characterized as “disobedient” and the latter group as “alive in the spirit.”

Schreiner represents the modern evangelical majority in suggesting that Peter has moved on from his topic in 1 Peter 3 to a new one, viz., assuring his readers that their faithful friends who had heard and believed the Gospel but *subsequently* died had not died without hope—physical death had not annulled the Gospel.⁴⁸ This preaching was not done *by Jesus* or *in Sheol* (indeed, there is no trace of these two factors in Peter’s words in our text), but by human evangelists in the recent past. It should be observed that this understanding requires the addition of a temporal referent (i.e., the Gospel was preached to those who are *now* dead), but is a very plausible explanation. Indeed, many modern English translations have added the temporal particle despite its absence in the original.⁴⁹

Among those who reject the temporal amendment and see this preaching as directed literally to “the dead,” most argue for a “second chance”: Christ preached to unbelievers in Sheol and gave them one last chance to repent.⁵⁰ Others, however, argue for an announcement of good news to the OT righteous dead, those who had died “not having received the promise” (Heb 11:39). These would have been delighted to see Christ enter the halls of Upper Sheol, not with the message of doom reserved for those in Lower Sheol (3:18–20), but with a message of hope and release from the more comfortable climes of Upper Sheol.⁵¹ The proximity of 4:6 with 3:18–20 render this explanation a viable possibility; however, this text alone offers data too scant to demonstrate the harrowing of hell. More definitive proof is needed.

⁴⁷*Catholic Epistles*, 98.

⁴⁸Schreiner, *1 Peter*, 208–10; and nearly all modern evangelical commenters.

⁴⁹So the NIV, HCSB, NET, NLT.

⁵⁰E.g., Bigg, *Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, 170–71; Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, 110.

⁵¹So Hoyt, *End Times*, 45; McCune, *Systematic Theology*, 3:323–24.

Ephesians 4:7–10 (HCSB) cf. Matthew 27:52–53?

Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah's gift. For it says: "When He ascended on high, He took prisoners into captivity; He gave gifts to people. But what does "He ascended" mean except that He descended to the lower parts of the earth [κατέβη εἰς τὰ κατώτερα (μέρη) τῆς γῆς]? The One who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.

We come now to the NT text that I consider the most critical to our study, as it purportedly suggests a descent for Christ not merely to a Sheol/Hades occupied by evil spirits, but also one occupied, if temporarily, by the souls of the OT righteous dead, whom he liberated from that place and brought to a better place in the presence of God.

There are four basic options for understanding the descent of Christ in these verses. The contemporary majority understanding, following Calvin's lead but especially in the last century, is that Jesus descended via incarnation to the lower parts, *namely*, the earth.⁵² A more recent subset of this view that sees the "lower parts" as the earth proper understands the descent to be the bestowal of spiritual gifts at Pentecost.⁵³ A few have seen the descent simply as Christ's burial.⁵⁴ The historical consensus from the early church through the whole Medieval period, however (a position now in some disfavor), is that Christ descended to the lower parts *of* the earth (i.e., to the place of the dead in Sheol/Hades).⁵⁵

⁵²So the NIV (1984 & 2011), ESV, NLT, NET; John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Edinburgh: Olver & Boyd, 1965), 176; modern commentators Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 432–34; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 343–45; Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 533–36; Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 294–97; also Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 99–100; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 707.

⁵³So Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1990), 242–48; following G. B. Caird, "The Descent of the Spirit in Ephesians 4:7–11," *Studia Evangelica* 2 (1964), 535–45; and esp. W. Hall Harris III's monograph, *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4:7–11 and Traditional Hebrew Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

⁵⁴Timothy G. Gombis, "Cosmic Lordship and Divine Gift-Giving: Psalm 68 in Ephesians 4:8," *Novum Testamentum* 47 (2005): 376.

⁵⁵So Ignatius, *Magn.* 9:3; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.22.1; Tertullian, *De Anima* 55.2; Ambrosiaster, *Eph.* 4; Jerome, *Eph.* 4.2; Thodoret, *Eph.* 4; Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Matthew L. Lamb (Albany, NY: Magi, 1966), 159–61. Translations favorable to this view include the KJV, NKJV, NASB, HCSB. Modern supporters of this view include TDNT, s.v. "κατώτερος," by Friedrich Büchsel, 3:641–42; Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's*

The decision is not an easy one, and Wallace, especially, makes a linguistic case that τῆς γῆς may as well be a genitive of apposition as the more common partitive genitive. He concludes, however, that “grammar certainly will not solve this problem.”⁵⁶ The decision falls, thus, to context and theology. And it is here, it seems to me, that Arnold wins the day, suggesting that had Paul wanted to reference Christ’s incarnation, he did not need to add the confusing word κατώτερα: it would have been much simpler to have just said that “Christ descended to the earth” (cf. κατέβη εἰς τὴν γῆν, in Rev 13:13). But more than simplicity is at stake here. In view of an Ephesian audience infatuated with the spirit world and susceptible to intermixing Greek categories with Christian ones, Paul would have been exceptionally cautious with his words, avoiding those that might confuse, and using words that expressly address the Ephesian context.⁵⁷ As such, it is much more likely that Paul was consciously affirming Christ’s triumph in the realm of spirits, the underworld, and the afterlife, distinctly Ephesian concerns.

Arnold also makes the case that while the comparative “lower parts of the earth” (τὰ κατώτερα τῆς γῆς) is unique in the biblical record, the superlative “lowest parts of the earth” (τὰ κατώτατα τῆς γῆς) has precedent in the LXX of Psalm 62:10 [Eng. 63:9], where it points clearly to the consignment of David’s earthly enemies to death and further punishment in the afterlife.⁵⁸ It also parallels the similar phrase in LXX Isaiah 14:15, where the king of Babylon’s consignment to Sheol/Hades is described as “being brought down to the foundations of the earth” (καταβήσῃ...εἰς τὰ θεμέλια τῆς γῆς), a construction similar to Ephesians 4:9.⁵⁹

That Christ’s purpose in descending to τὰ κατώτερα τῆς γῆς was to liberate the OT righteous dead is not conceded by all who see our passage as a reference to Christ’s descent to Hades. Arnold suggests that a more likely understanding is that Christ descended to Hades to announce his triumph over “the spiritual forces of evil in the [nether] realms,” to turn Paul’s phrase in Ephesians 6:12. If this is the case, he

Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Ephesians (New York: United Bible Societies, 1982), 99–100; Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 252–54; also MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 45–46, 243–44, 253; Emerson, “*He Descended to the Dead*,” 39–47, and esp. William Bales, “The Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72 (2010): 84–100, a distillation of his larger work, “The Meaning and Function of Ephesians 4:9–10 in Both Its Immediate and More General Context,” Ph.D. dissertation (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 2002).

⁵⁶Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 99–100.

⁵⁷Arnold, *Ephesians*, 253–54.

⁵⁸Ibid., 253; Bales, “Descent of Christ,” 92.

⁵⁹Bales, “Descent of Christ,” 94.

was confirming the fate of the wicked detainees already in Hades, thus offering a parallel to 1 Peter 3.⁶⁰ This understanding, however, fails to explain, in verse 8, how (1) Christ “captured captives” (ἡχμαλώτευσεν αἰχμαλωσίαν) at this time (it follows that the unrighteous dead had been “captured” in Sheol long ago), or (2) how the triumph can be attached not only to Christ’s resurrection, but also to his *Ascension* (ἀναβὰς εἰς ὕψος).

These two facts led many in the early church to suggest that Christ at this time “harrowed hell,” that is, he took possession, from out of the hopeful clutches of the Evil One, a throng of OT saints then detained in Hades, then caused them to ascend with him to heaven forty days later. This could explain Matthew’s curious account that, at Christ’s death, “the tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people” (Matt 27:52–53). There are other possible explanations for this curiosity: it could, for instance, be emblematic of the eschatological implications of Christ’s death and resurrection for the righteous dead in ages past.⁶¹ But it seems at least as plausible that Matthew is selectively illustrating the contemporary transfer of the righteous dead from their detention in Sheol to the splendors of heaven.⁶² The scant details give little room, however, for certainty.

If this understanding of Ephesians 4:7–10 holds, then the case is made that OT saints descended at death to Upper Sheol/Hades, then were liberated from that place when Christ reorganized Hades and brought the OT righteous dead to be with God in heaven. It is conceded, however, that this understanding is not the majority one, so the strength of my conclusion must be appropriately tempered.

Revelation 1:18, with Matthew 16:18–19

I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

A more subtle argument in this debate has recently been resurrected in the afore-mentioned 2014 volume by Justin W. Bass, *The Battle*

⁶⁰Arnold, *Ephesians*, 254; also Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 344.

⁶¹So D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., vol. 9, ed. Tremper Longman, III, and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 650–51; J. W. Wenham, “When Were the Saints Raised?” *Journal of Theological Studies* 32 (1981): 150–52.

⁶²So Hoyt, *End Times*, 46; McCune, *Systematic Theology*, 3:324.

for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ's Descent into the Underworld.⁶³ In it the author argues that Christ's acquisition of the "keys" of death and Hades necessarily implies his descent and conquest of that place, citing scores of commentators from Cyprian to Beale.

Those who connect this verse with the release of the OT dead are fewer in number than those who see in it Christ's descent.⁶⁴ But there is good contextual reason to do so. Nearly all commentators see the "keys" of death and Hades as metaphorical of the authority given to Christ on account of his redemptive work: they are not literal keys. Still, John's use of the term "key" carries specificity of function that cannot be dismissed. The "key of death," by common consensus, represents Christ's authority to annul death and restore life to those held captive in its power. The parallel "key of Hades," it seems, then, must have a similar meaning, namely, Christ's authority to open the gates of Hades to release those held captive in its confines. The keys do not seem to connote primarily the power to *incarcerate*—this has already occurred⁶⁵—but the power to *release* (cf. Rev 9:1ff). As such, unless there are persons really incarcerated in Hades and in need of release the "key" motif loses its force.

This authority over Hades also seems to include the indemnification of the whole corpus of righteous dead from the present era (i.e., the Church), seen in Christ's promise to Peter in Matthew 16:18: "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." This may, of course, be a simple assurance that the church will persevere despite Satan's efforts,⁶⁶ but if so, the metaphor seems quite wrong—why would a struggling church fear the closing gates of Hades if no saint has ever entered this place? But if it *had been* the universal experience of the righteous dead, up until this point, to enter into Hades, then this statement is earth-shattering. A new day is coming, Christ seems to say, in which the netherworld will be fundamentally

⁶³Esp. pp. 97–114.

⁶⁴Among the few Bass cites are Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1329), *Apocalypse Commentary*, trans. P. D. W., Krey (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 40; R. H. Charles (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920], 1:32); Hoyt, *End Times*, 46; Richard Bauckham, ("Descents to the Underworld," in *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* [Leiden: Brill, 1998], 39). J. Jeremias (*TDNT*, s.v. "κλείς," 3:746); see also Oecumenius, *Tractate on the Apocalypse 1.20 in Revelation*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 17. Others, such as MacCulloch (*Harrowing of Hell*, 49) and J. A. Seiss (*The Apocalypse* [repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976], 48) see Christ receiving power to liberate the faithful from this place, but see no "reorganization" of Sheol/Hades at the Resurrection of Christ. For these, the faithful dead remain there until a general Resurrection.

⁶⁵But see rev 20:1ff; also Hoyt, *End Times*, 46.

⁶⁶So Leon Morris: "Jesus is saying that the gates of Hades are not strong enough to prevail against his church; that the church will never die" (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 425).

altered, with believers not *descending*, but *ascending* immediately to be with God. This idea is reinforced in verse 19, where Christ grants to the Apostle Peter (and later the organized church—18:18) the “keys” to another destination, viz., the “Kingdom of Heaven.” This phrase is a complex motif, to be sure, but one that seems to include in its scope right of access by church saints to the delights of God’s presence “in heaven,” where the coming Kingdom is being staged. The reference to the new set of keys in this context is almost certainly not a coincidence—they contrast with the keys given to Christ in Revelation 1:18.

I conclude that Revelation 1:18, with Matthew 16:18, suggests not only (1) Christ’s descent, but also (2) his use of the keys of Hades to release of the OT righteous dead detained there, and (3) his fundamental reorganization of Hades to thereafter exclude believers from that place.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to demonstrate that OT saints descended to a comfortable and restful, but ultimately unsatisfying compartment of Sheol, from which our Lord Christ liberated them in the wake of his crucifixion. I realize that this is a minority position in modern theology; most have rejected the idea either as too fantastical, too Greek, or too discontinuous with the experience of the NT dead. Other, less bizarre explanations of the OT texts seem better suited to the modern man. And I will concede that the work of Dr. Dunham, whose article precedes mine in this journal, rests more easily on my mind than do the dark and Medieval images that dance about in my mind as I wrote this essay. Still, I have yet to be dissuaded from my understanding that Sheol/Hades was fundamentally reorganized by Christ when he descended there, rendering death something more to be anticipated than feared for the pensive Christian.

Ours has been a topic that does not seem to have great theological import (though it surely did for the OT righteous as they anticipated and experienced death); still, we must not fail to see in this study the grandness of our Lord Christ’s systematic conquest of heaven, earth, and the things under the earth in anticipation of his glorious kingdom. If we have succeeded in doing this only, our exploration of these dusty corners of our Bibles has not been in vain.