

**HE DESCENDED INTO HELL:
AN ENGLISH REFORMATION CONTROVERSY**

**A Thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

by

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February 2020

Abstract

Charles Frederick Camlin, *He Descended Into Hell: An English Reformation Controversy*, Doctor of Philosophy, Middlesex University/London School of Theology, 2020.

During the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, almost all of the reformers appealed in some way to the writings of the early fathers in their polemical debates against the Roman church. But the English church made the claim that their purpose was only to teach that which was taught by the fathers of the first five or six centuries. This thesis examines whether this was true concerning one of the most disputed doctrines of the English Reformation: Christ's descent into hell.

We first define what the early church taught regarding the descent. In spite of later claims that the fathers offered diverging views on this doctrine, we found a broad consensus with only minor variations (those of Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria). We then trace the doctrine from the patristic era to the eve of the reformation in England. The broad consensus of the fathers was propagated throughout this period in the various adaptations of the so-called *Gospel of Nicodemus*. There were a few dissenting voices during the medieval period: Abelard denied a local descent, suggesting that Christ's "power" descended; Nicholas of Cusa taught that Christ descended into hell to suffer; and Reginald Pecock questioned whether the doctrine was apostolic at all.

We then trace how the doctrine of Christ's descent was taught in the successive reigns of the Tudors. The official formularies of the English church largely maintained the mainstream patristic view during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI, but during the reign of Elizabeth I, pressures came from some of the continental reformers who had formulated new explanations for the creedal formulation. The central impetus behind this change was the assertion that Christ's deliverance of the Old Testament saints from Sheol was conceptually too close to the Roman doctrine of souls being delivered from purgatory. Some in England sought to align the official teachings with one of these other continental views, but the established church resisted this urge and continued to insist upon a local descent of Christ to hell. By the end of the Elizabethan era, the Church of England maintained a local descent of Christ into hell, but the central purpose was to defeat the devil, not to deliver the Old Testament saints. This put the Church of England out of step with most of their continental counterparts on this

doctrine; but it also meant that they had departed from an important aspect of the descent from the patristic era.

Acknowledgements

I am especially grateful for my dear wife, Brett, who has supported me throughout the writing of this thesis. I am also grateful for my children and grandchildren for their patience with me as I burned the candle at both ends to get this completed. I would also like to thank everyone on staff at Church of the Holy Communion and Cranmer Theological House where I serve. They have covered for me many times while I was away in England or writing at home. I am especially indebted to my bishop, The Most Rev. Ray R. Sutton, who encouraged me to pursue this research degree. I am also blessed to have a parish that was supportive of this endeavor and prayed for me often. A special note of thanks is due to John and Carol Mulvey for their support.

Professor Tony Lane has been such a wise and gentle supervisor. I have treasured his counsel and insight over the last several years. Richard Snoddy has also been quite helpful, especially with some of his early suggestions regarding the direction of my research and his keen comments on my final draft. Everyone at London School of Theology has also been quite helpful and kind, especially Sandra Khalil, who has answered many questions for me, and Keith Lang, who at one point, went above and beyond the call of duty by locating a sixteenth century record for me.

I am also grateful to my colleagues who have helped me in various ways: for The Rev. John Boonzaaijer, who helped me with some Dutch translations; for The Rev. Dr. Eric Parker, who shared his expertise in Latin; for the Rev. Dr. Joshua Harper who graciously helped me with one of my appendices, and for The Rev. Dr. Charles Erlandson and The Rev. Dr. Nevada DeLapp, who both read portions of my work and offered their insights and encouragement.

Most of all, I am grateful to God for the opportunity to research this topic which has piqued my interest for many years. I pray that my efforts will be useful to others who are interested in this topic as well.

Charles Camlin
Epiphanytide 2020
Dallas, Texas

Abbreviations

ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
ABD	Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary
BCP	The Book of Common Prayer
CWE	Collected Works of Erasmus
ESV	English Standard Version
GB	The Geneva Bible
HC	The Heidelberg Catechism
NKJV	New King James Version
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
OED	The Oxford English Dictionary
PG	Patrologia Graeca edited by J.-P. Migne
PL	Patrologia Latina edited by J.-P. Migne
WBP	The Whole Book of Psalms by Sternhold and Hopkins

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Introduction

In the sixteenth century, when the Church of England departed from the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome, it was frequently charged with theological novelty. The English reformers responded by appealing to the early church fathers as a means of arguing for their theological principles. Some of this was implicit, such as where they allude to certain fathers in the Articles of Religion, or when they quote the fathers copiously in the Books of Homilies. But the leaders of the church also made frequent explicit references to their reliance upon the fathers (especially regarding the interpretation of scripture, which was viewed as the ground of their faith). Two of the more famous examples of this were made by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and Bishop John Jewel.

Cranmer, at his degradation, said:

And touching my doctrine of the sacrament, and other my doctrine, of what kind soever it be, I protest that it was never my mind to write, speak, or understand any thing contrary to the most holy word of God, or else against the holy catholic church of Christ; but purely and simply to imitate and teach those things only, which I had learned of the sacred scripture, and of the holy catholic church of Christ from the beginning, and also according to the exposition of the most holy and learned fathers and martyrs of the church.¹

Even though Cranmer was primarily defending his view of the Eucharist, he says here that he sought to make all of his doctrine consistent with what was taught in scripture “according to the exposition of the most holy and learned fathers and martyrs of the church.”

The second example of this appeal to the fathers was made by Bishop John Jewel, especially known for the *Apology* which he wrote, at least in a semi-official capacity, for the Elizabethan church, to answer antagonistic claims made by Roman polemicists. He ends Part I of this *Apology* with these words:

In like manner, because these men take us to be mad and appeach us for heretics, as men which have nothing to do neither with Christ nor with the church of God; we have judged it should be to good purpose and not unprofitable if we do openly and frankly set forth our faith wherein we stand and show all that confidence which we have in Christ Jesus, to the intent all men may see what is our judgment of every part of Christian religion and may resolve with themselves whether the faith which they shall see confirmed by the words of Christ, by the writings of the apostles, by the testimonies of the catholic fathers, and by the example of many

¹ John Edmund Cox, ed., *The Works of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, Martyr, 1556*, vol. 2, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1846), 227.

ages, be but a certain rage of furious and mad men and a conspiracy of heretics.²

Quotations like these could be multiplied. In fact, we will see several others in later chapters.

Any study which deals with the reception of the church fathers during the reformation period is complicated by the fact that this topic is undergoing a thorough reevaluation in contemporary scholarship. Concerning the continental reformers' reception of the fathers, important work has recently been broached in a two-volume work edited by Irena Backus.³ For the same topic in its English context, Jean Louis Quantin's *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity* has offered fresh insights.⁴ Quantin's primary focus was on the appeal to antiquity in England during the seventeenth century. In preparation for discussing this topic in the seventeenth century, he does deal to some extent with the sixteenth century. But he notes, "It would require a whole book to examine all the disputes in Reformation England that discussed patristic texts." This thesis will seek to explore one of these: the dispute over Christ's descent into hell.

It should be readily admitted that all of the reformers in the sixteenth century were reading and employing the church fathers polemically in their disputes with Rome. England was certainly not exceptional in this regard. But there were discernable degrees of emphasis among the Protestant reformers regarding their reception of the fathers. Backus hints at this when she writes: "Whereas Luther tried to divide sharply the Fathers' authority from that of the Bible, Ulrich Zwingli and Martin Bucer adopted the 'implicit normativity' approach. They tended to interpret the Bible through institutional and individual writings of the early Church, which they interpreted in turn through the Bible."⁵ Elsewhere, she noted that Zwingli "had a much greater and a much more scholarly interest in the Fathers than Luther."⁶ She also writes, "Calvin's use of the

² John Jewel, *An Apology of the Church of England*, ed. John E. Booty (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2002), 21.

³ Irena Backus, *The Reception of the Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1997).

⁴ Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century*, First (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵ Irena Backus, "The Fathers and the Reformation," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics* (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 434.

⁶ Backus, *Reception*, 1.xix.

Fathers was primarily polemical: they were meant to support his own teaching against Lutheran and Roman Catholic opponents and were a mere accessory to the Bible.”⁷

The statements quoted above from Cranmer and Jewel demonstrate that the fathers were also being used polemically in Tudor England. Together, they asserted that the English church purposed to have its teachings in continuity with what had been taught in the earliest centuries of Christianity. This polemical tactic was intended to help them demonstrate that Rome had been guilty of altering or adding to the faith from the patristic era. It should be noted that when the fathers were appealed to in this sixteenth-century context, that they were not viewed as an equal authority with scripture. In this regard, the English reformers were “unmistakably Protestant.”⁸ Quantin says of Cranmer’s use of the fathers, “‘The consent of the most ancient doctors of the Church’ was not meant to establish doctrine but only to confirm the correct interpretation of scripture.”⁹ He suggests that Jewel’s use was essentially the same: “He always maintained that the prime authority belonged to Scripture alone. The Fathers were only an aid towards an understanding of it.”¹⁰ This truth appears to be embedded in the Articles of Religion, where it is asserted that “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation” and later, that “The three Creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius’ Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles’ Creed, ought thoroughly to be received (and believed) for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture.”¹¹

This thesis will seek to explore the extent to which the English reformers of the Tudor period followed through on their stated purpose to have their teachings consistent with the church fathers on the particular topic of Christ’s descent into hell. As the debate played out, it was not merely a Catholic vs. Protestant dispute, but also became a point of contention among Protestants. The debate was multi-faceted: participants argued about whether the doctrine was actually taught in the scriptures, and there were vehement disagreements over hermeneutics, translation, and philology.

⁷ Backus, *Reception*, 1.xx. See also Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

⁸ Quantin, *Church of England*, 26.

⁹ Quantin, *Church of England*, 26.

¹⁰ Quantin, *Church of England*, 32.

¹¹ Gerald Bray, ed., *Documents of the English Reformation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995), 287, 289. It should be noted that the words “and believed” were added to Article VIII in 1563. Quantin, *Church of England*, 44.

Only two authors have dealt with this English doctrinal dispute in a significant way.¹² First, the topic was broached in a lengthy journal article by Dewey Wallace in the late 1970s. Wallace noted that this was a “lesser but vigorous” controversy of the Reformation era and that “its story had not been told in detail nor has its significance received proper assessment.”¹³ He came to no less than nine conclusions from his survey. The five most important are as follows: 1) Since Protestant theology ruled out any notion of purgatory or limbo, this led many to move away from a literal view of Christ’s descent;¹⁴ 2) Calvin’s view of the descent, which oriented it to the cross, was appealing to the Puritan party because it “stressed divine grace, in this case through a maximalization of the humiliation and suffering of Christ.”;¹⁵ 3) the doctrine was employed by conformist theologians (anti-Puritans) near the end of Elizabeth I’s reign to separate themselves from the Puritans by appealing to a “patristically inspired spiritual ethos;”¹⁶ 4) these conformist theologians, not wanting to compromise their Protestant convictions, turned to the Lutheran theologians to support their more literal and triumphalist view of the descent;¹⁷ 5) Wallace suggests that these conformist theologians embraced this view as “an early, hesitant step in the path toward a distinctly Anglican theology different from the theology of Puritanism.”¹⁸

Wallace laid a considerable foundation with his work. My intention is to reassert Wallace’s position that this was a significant theological debate that is worthy of greater attention. I will do so by expanding upon what he wrote and supplementing further important details which he did not elaborate upon. For instance, he only mentions in passing the notes on the descent in the Geneva Bible, he provides very little analysis of the varying views of the continental reformers (he devotes one paragraph to explaining John Calvin’s view), and even though he concludes that the Protestant abandonment of purgatory was a factor in moving away from a literal descent, he does not really develop this argument. As we will see, this was a central factor in these debates and deserves greater attention. Furthermore, the limited scope of Wallace’s work did not allow him

¹² David Bagchi (discussed below) deals with the topic more broadly in “Christ’s Descent into Hell in Reformation Controversy,” *Studies in Church History* 45 (2009): 228–47.

¹³ Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., “Puritan and Anglican: The Interpretation of Christ’s Descent Into Hell in Elizabethan Theology,” *Archive for Reformation History* 69 (1978): 248.

¹⁴ Wallace, “Puritan and Anglican,” 284.

¹⁵ Wallace, “Puritan and Anglican,” 284.

¹⁶ Wallace, “Puritan and Anglican,” 285.

¹⁷ Wallace, “Puritan and Anglican,” 285.

¹⁸ Wallace, “Puritan and Anglican,” 286.

to show how the church fathers employed a significant number of biblical texts in the development of this doctrine. This thesis will seek to fill in these gaps and to give a more thorough answer as to why many during the Tudor period desired to reinterpret the doctrine or to abandon it altogether.

The second work which deals with the dispute over the descent on English soil is Quantin's *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity*. Quantin's overall project was to dismantle the Anglo-Catholic assertion that the Church of England was exceptional in its adoption of the teachings of the church fathers. He shows that such an assertion is "unhistorical."¹⁹ Even though the fathers were appealed to throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England, the reason for this appeal changed over time. In exploring his thesis, Quantin traces the appeal to the fathers in England through a variety of sixteenth and seventeenth century controversies, including the topic of Christ's descent into hell. He opens this particular section by saying: "To see divergences among English Protestants on the authority of the Fathers, one should look at less obvious and less well-known topics than episcopacy or ceremonial. The controversy about Christ's descent into Hell is potentially the most interesting, as both sides agreed that it concerned doctrine."²⁰

Quantin purposed to show how the fathers were employed by the various sides in the debate. For instance, in discussing the debate between Bishop Thomas Bilson and Henry Jacobs, he notes that Jacobs charged the fathers with misinterpreting the term Hades and with other mistakes in religion. This led Bilson to accuse Jacobs with rejecting the fathers.²¹ Quantin's encyclopedic inclusion of materials was immensely helpful, but the scope of his work was slightly different from my project. He admits in his introduction that he is writing from the perspective of a seventeenth century theologian, which leads him to focus primarily on the late Elizabethan period (1590s) through the seventeenth century. Furthermore, even though he quotes some catechetical works, he also admits to deriving most of his material from "higher culture," meaning, that he focused almost entirely on the scholarly writings of the period.²²

In the English-speaking world, there was a decline in interest in the doctrine of Christ's descent in the twentieth century. This was likely due to the philosophical

¹⁹ Quantin, *Church of England*, 16.

²⁰ Quantin, *Church of England*, 114.

²¹ Quantin, *Church of England*, 121-2.

²² Quantin, *Church of England*, 21.

changes which led to a denial of the three-tiered universe of the ancient world, but it may have also been impacted by the “wider hope” controversy in England in the late nineteenth century.²³ However, in the last twenty years, several works on Christ’s descent have appeared. These range from general surveys to narrower topical studies.

One of the recent general surveys was a work entitled *Hell’s Destruction* by Australian theologian, Catherine Ella Laufer.²⁴ In this work, Laufer provides something of a history of the interpretation of the descensus clause, focusing particularly on the various points where there was a reassessment and alteration of the doctrine (including a brief account of the controversy over the descent in Tudor England). In the end, she attempts to collate these inconsistent views. The first half of her work provides a nice introductory summary of the doctrine for anyone who is new to the subject. However, some will be reluctant to follow her in her broad application of the descent into a certain form of universalism (which is suggested in the book’s title).

Another recent survey is *Christ the Conqueror of Hell* by Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev.²⁵ In this work, Archbishop Hilarion explores the scriptural and patristic roots of the doctrine, and then delves into how the descent is set forth in the various liturgical texts of the Eastern Church. In his epilogue, he draws out the theological implications of the doctrine. Even though the author briefly explores the interpretation of the descent according to some Western theologians, his emphasis is on his own tradition. Like Laufer, he applies the doctrine in the direction of universal salvation. More recently, Matthew Emerson, an American Baptist theologian, has written a book which is intended to encourage evangelicals to embrace this ancient doctrine.²⁶

Of those works which are more narrowly focused, one of the most helpful, but lesser-known works, is *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England* by Karl Tamburr. This is a compilation of papers which the author gave at conferences which were turned into a book. He writes in the foreword that “the essays attempt to reflect the larger

²³ See especially Michael J. McClymond’s work, *The Devil’s Redemption: A New History of Christian Universalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 1.77-98.

²⁴ Catherine Ella Laufer, *Hell’s Destruction: An Exploration of Christ’s Descent to the Dead* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2013).

²⁵ Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood, N.Y: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009).

²⁶ Matthew Y. Emerson, *“He Descended to the Dead”: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

trends for this theme [the harrowing of hell] as it moves from the Anglo-Saxon era to the English Reformation.”²⁷ This work was especially useful in understanding the liturgical background in England, offered many insights into the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, and even touched briefly upon the subject of this thesis in the final chapter.

Another more recent work is entitled *The Apostles' Creed: 'He Descended Into Hell*.²⁸ This work explores the descensus clause from a variety of disciplines: Biblical Studies, History of the Liturgy, Jewish Studies, History of Theology, History of Spirituality, Practical Theology, Cultural Theology and Systematic Theology.²⁹ This multidisciplinary approach is intriguing, but there was very little in this volume that was not covered by the general surveys noted above and the subject of the Reformation debate was not explored. One other topical work on the descensus clause is *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ's Descent into the Underworld* by Justin Bass.³⁰ This work was quite helpful regarding the Biblical background of the doctrine. The author not only explores the text noted in the book's title, he also collates it with other Biblical texts and interacts with Greco-Roman and Second Temple Jewish literature.

One work which was rather insightful concerning the broader Reformation context of the debate over Christ's descent was David Bagchi's article, "Christ's Descent Into Hell in Reformation Controversy." His purpose in this article was to show how this doctrine was unusual or unique "in its ability to undermine and cut across confessional allegiances."³¹ He adds: "Although Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed all contributed to the debate, it was a topic on which party lines shifted."³² After showing the various ways in which the doctrine was employed, he concluded that the debate was a demonstration of an ongoing tension in the Christian tradition between two types of theology: affective (or mystical) and speculative (or dogmatic).³³ Drawing on Wallace's work, Bagchi suggests that this tension was visible in England with the Puritans

²⁷ Karl Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), ix.

²⁸ Marcel Sarot and Archibald van Wieringen, eds., *The Apostles' Creed: "He Descended Into Hell,"* vol. 24, *Studies in Theology and Religion* (Boston: Brill, 2018).

²⁹ Sarot and Wieringen, *The Apostles' Creed*, 7.

³⁰ Justin Bass, *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ's Descent into the Underworld* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2014).

³¹ Bagchi, "Christ's Descent", 229.

³² Bagchi, "Christ's Descent", 229.

³³ Bagchi, "Christ's Descent", 246.

embracing the affective aspect of the descent and the conformist theologians embracing the dogmatic aspect.³⁴

There are occasions within this thesis where older secondary works are referenced. These works include: *The Belief of the First Three Centuries Concerning Christ's Mission to the Underworld* by Frederic Huidekoper (1854), *The Intermediate State Between Death and Judgment* by H. M. Luckock (1892), Charles Biggs' commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude (1902), Edgar C. S. Gibson's works *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (1906) and *The Three Creeds* (1908), *The Glory After the Passion* by James Stone (1913) and *The Harrowing of Hell* by J. A. MacCulloch (1930). These texts are quoted when there is an insight which is not included in the more recent works or when the author states a truth in a particularly helpful way.

There are several other books which were useful for understanding background material and other topics related to Christ's descent. Philip S. Johnston's *Shades of Sheol* provided helpful insights into how the underworld was understood in the Old Testament period.³⁵ Richard Bauckham's work, *The Fate of the Dead*, gave important information on Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings related to the descent.³⁶ Chapter One of this work, "Descents to the Underworld", is an excellent introduction to the topic as it is found in Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman mythological literature, as well as the Biblical context. Jacques Le Goff's *The Birth of Purgatory* gives crucial insights into how that doctrine developed in the medieval period. As we will see, the development of the doctrine of purgatory had an enormous impact on the debates over the descent in the Reformation Era. For the English context of this doctrinal debate, Peter Marshall's work, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*, was rather helpful in giving the background for the debate over Christ's descent and helps us to understand why the topic was so consequential.

The debate over this doctrine in Reformation England has been largely ignored by recent histories of this period. Laufer writes: "That this doctrine was one of the issues of the Reformation, and in England at least a major issue, has escaped the notice

³⁴ Bagchi, "Christ's Descent", 247. Bagchi has also written notably on Luther's doctrine of Christ's descent (see discussion in Chapter 2 below).

³⁵ Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

³⁶ Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998).

of Reformation historians.”³⁷ This assessment is undoubtedly true of modern works. A. G. Dickens’ standard twentieth century work, *The English Reformation*, does not mention the dispute. The same can be said for more recent works, Eamon Duffy’s *Reformation Divided* and Diarmaid MacCulloch’s *The Reformation*. Peter Marshall briefly mentions the “Descensus Controversy” in his work, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*,³⁸ but does not engage in the topic in his more recent work on the English Reformation.³⁹ However, some earlier English historians made note of the controversy including John Strype in the eighteenth century⁴⁰ and Henry Soames in the nineteenth century.⁴¹ The journal articles by Wallace and Bagchi mentioned above are helpful in beginning to fill this gap.

Since the topic continues to be largely ignored by historians, this thesis will attempt to show the significance of the debate by broadening and expanding upon the work of Wallace and Quantin. I will do so by discussing more thoroughly the development of the doctrine of Christ’s descent in the patristic period; by extending the discussion over how the descent was understood during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI; and by examining a broader field of literature from the Tudor period, including liturgical, catechetical, and devotional material. This will take the debate beyond the scholarly circles into the lives of the laity.

More precisely, after delineating the teaching of the fathers in the first five centuries on the topic of Christ’s descent, I intend to examine this doctrine in the context of the Tudor Reformation in order to measure whether the English reformers lived up to their stated ideal of teaching only the doctrines which are found in scripture as they were understood by the early church fathers. To that end, the first chapter will be devoted to tracing the development of the doctrine of Christ’s descent in the first five centuries of church history. Here I will seek to show especially which biblical texts were deployed to explain the doctrine and why the fathers saw the descent as an important aspect of the Christian faith.

³⁷ Laufer, *Hell’s Destruction*, 74.

³⁸ Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 192.

³⁹ Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁴⁰ John Strype, *Annals of the Reformation and Establishment of Religion, and Other Various Occurrences in the Church of England, During Queen Elizabeth’s Happy Reign*. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1824), Vol. 1, Part 1, 518-19.

⁴¹ Henry Soames, *Elizabethan Religious History*. (London: John W. Parker, 1839), 476-78.

In the second chapter, we will briefly outline the exposition of this doctrine through the medieval period. Then we will discuss the understanding of the descent among the continental reformers, since there was a great deal of cross-pollination among Protestants during that era. Then we will move on to discuss how the doctrine was understood during the successive reigns of Henry VIII (1509-1547) and Edward VI (1547-1553). Special attention will be given to devotional, catechetical, and homiletical works, as well as to official and unofficial doctrinal statements during these periods. It should be noted that there has been very little research over the doctrine of the descent in England during these periods (both Wallace and Quantin move quickly through this material to focus primarily on the Elizabethan era).

In the third chapter, we will briefly explore how this doctrine was understood during the reign of Mary Tudor (1553-1558), before spending the bulk of the chapter tracing the points of controversy that arose during the lengthy reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603). In addition to considering these scholarly debates, we will also discuss the doctrine as it was found in homiletical and liturgical works, as well as in the new Bible translations that were being published at this time.⁴² We will see how the understanding of the descent became quite tricky for the established church, as they sought to follow the paradigm of appealing to the ancient fathers, while also trying to remain consistent with their protestant brethren on the continent (this was especially pertinent because Roman Catholic polemicists charged that the Protestants could not agree with one another). I will endeavor to show that while the English church largely followed the fathers on this doctrine, they did make adjustments due to the charge made by some within the realm that the doctrine was too closely aligned with the teaching of Rome. In quoting some of the older documents, I have occasionally updated the spelling of certain antiquated words (though I tried to keep this to a minimum). I have also purposely sought to steer clear of the anachronistic term “Anglican” and the pejorative term, “Puritan.”

⁴² Special attention will be given to the Geneva Bible, the Bishops’ Bible and the Rheims New Testament.

Chapter 1 – He Descended into Hell: The Patristic Background

Many authors from the time of the Reformation to the modern era have sought to dismiss the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell by arguing that it is based solely on pagan myths. We will encounter some from the Reformation period in ensuing chapters but one example from the modern era comes from Wilhelm Bousset (a leading figure in the history of religions school of New Testament scholarship). After recounting some of the patristic witnesses, he dismisses the doctrine out of hand when he writes: "It really can no longer be doubted that the popular conceptions of Christ's journey into hell and of his struggle with the demons of the underworld contain a myth which originally has nothing to do with the person of Jesus but only later has been adapted to him."⁴³ But as this chapter will demonstrate, the doctrine of Christ's descent was developed in the patristic era through an interaction with Scripture.⁴⁴ Demonstrating how the fathers came to embrace and articulate this doctrine will be an important step before we consider how the English reformers articulated it and this will help us measure how closely they aligned their teaching on the subject with them.

It is beyond the scope of this work to include every work from this era that touches on the descent. Rather, the purpose is to present a survey, in roughly chronological order, of how the early Christians understood this teaching. Some analysis will be offered as to what Biblical texts were being employed and how they were interpreted.⁴⁵ Most modern authors suggest that there are only a few potential passages regarding the descent and even these are debatable. But as we will see, the Patristic writers tended to see the doctrine reflected in many other passages of Scripture. In some ways, their exegesis and hermeneutical principles will seem foreign to us. Sebastian Brock, in a work on Jacob of Serugh, offers an admonition to modern readers which may also be applicable at the outset of this chapter:

Jacob's way of thinking is essentially symbolic, and like Ephrem's, it shuns the logic and precision of Greek thought; it can also be described as mythical—provided one uses this word without any pejorative overtones. Much of what he says about baptism will appear fanciful to the modern mind brought up on historical scholarship, and I should stress at the

⁴³ Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, Revised edition (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 66.

⁴⁴ This is not to say that there is not some cross-pollination with the various mythologies that the Hebrews and the early Christians encountered in their Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman contexts.

⁴⁵ For a full list of Biblical passages associated with the descent throughout Christian history, see Appendix I.

outset that it is essential to read Jacob on his own terms, and not approach him with our own Western presuppositions, if we are to appreciate his true originality and profundity. In other words, we must make an effort of the imagination in order to recapture this supra-historical way of thinking.⁴⁶

For the sake of brevity, certain writings have been selected from the second through the fifth centuries. There are three reasons for this: first, by the end of the fifth century, the doctrine had reached a rather full expression. There are some developments in the ensuing centuries, prior to the Reformation, but these will be explored at the beginning of the next chapter. Second, when we reach the period of the Reformation in England, the debates largely centered upon what had been taught in the first five centuries of the Common Era. Third, the passages considered in this chapter have been chosen for two reasons: first, the selection of the fathers is based upon those authors who were appealed to in the sixteenth century debates; second, many of the texts have been chosen in anticipation of the issues that will become most volatile in the debates over the descent during the Tudor era.

The Terminology Associated with the Doctrine

As we will see in the rest of this work, the terminology associated with this doctrine is significant. This is primarily due to variations in terminology in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Greek New Testament, and then in the subsequent translations of them into Latin and English. The primary term in the Hebrew Scriptures for the abode of the dead was *Sheol*. The general understanding was that when a person died, his body would be laid in the tomb (whether in the ground or in a cave), and the soul of the departed one went to *Sheol*.⁴⁷

The language concerning this abode of the dead typically points to a proximity below the earth which is envisioned in synonyms such as “underworld” or “netherworld” (Ps 86:13; Luke 10:15). “Sheol is typically depicted as a place to which one ‘goes down’ (Num 16:30; Job 7:9; Isa 57:9).”⁴⁸ In Deuteronomy 32:22 and Isaiah

⁴⁶ Sebastian Brock, “Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh,” *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 205, Symposium Syriacum (1976): 325–26.

⁴⁷ Modern scientific thought leads us to think in materialist terms, but the Bible also deals with the realm of the metaphysical. We think in terms of the grave; the Bible adds the dimension of Sheol, the realm where dead souls were gathered. cf. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 505.

⁴⁸ Theodore J. Lewis, “Dead, Abode of the,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 102.

7:11, Sheol is viewed as being in the depths of the earth, “the lowest place imaginable”⁴⁹ and in the first of these texts, is contrasted with the highest heavens. A related word is “pit” which also implies a location in the earth.⁵⁰ Darkness is often associated with Sheol (Job 17:13; Pss 88:13; 143:3). In several places, Sheol is described in prison-like fashion, as having gates and bars.⁵¹ In other places, Sheol is envisioned as an insatiable monster.⁵² Another synonymous term in the Hebrew Scriptures is *Abaddon* which is “a poetic synonym for the abode of the dead, meaning ‘Destruction,’ or ‘(the place of) destruction.’”⁵³ Depending on the context, “death” and “the dead” are occasionally used in reference to the realm of departed souls.⁵⁴

When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the word *Hades* was typically chosen to translate the word Sheol. The word had associations with Greek mythology and the wider culture.⁵⁵ In that context, Hades was the god of the underworld. “The netherworld was called the ‘house of Hades’ and eventually simply Hades.”⁵⁶ The Greek notion also included the idea of compartments: basically, a place of torment (Tartarus) and a place of happiness (Elysium). Along these lines, at least two texts from the Hebrew Scriptures imply something akin to compartments within Sheol (a concept which will become important in later discussions).⁵⁷ In the New Testament, one of Jesus’ stories, typically entitled “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” seems to offer a parallel notion.⁵⁸ This story looks at what happens to these two men in the afterlife: the

⁴⁹ Kilian McDonnell, *Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 157.

⁵⁰ Isa 38:18; Ezek 31:16; Ps 30:4.

⁵¹ Job 17:16; 38:17 LXX; Ps 107:18; Isa 38:10 LXX; Prov 7:27.

⁵² Num 16:30-32; Ps 69:15; Prov 1:12; Isa 5:14; Jonah 2.

⁵³ Herbert G. Grether, “Abaddon,” ABD, 1.6.

⁵⁴ Job 26:5-6; 28:2; 38:17; Pss 6:5; 9:13; 10:5; 22:15; 88:5, 10; etc.

⁵⁵ Even though there are some similarities between Greek, Hebrew and Christian references to descents, there are also some profound differences. For example, Georgia Frank writes: “Unlike Greek heroes or Jewish or apocalyptic travelers, Jesus undertook his journey after death and without a guide.” “Christ’s Descent to the Underworld,” in Ancient Ritual and Legend” in Robert J. Daly, ed., *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 214-15. For other contrasts, see Bass, *Battle For the Keys*, 64-5.

⁵⁶ Lewis, “Dead, Abode of the,” 104.

⁵⁷ Isa 26:19-20; Deut 32:22; Later Judaism was not monolithic in this view. For the alternative views, see Bauckham, *Fate of the Dead*.

⁵⁸ Luke 16:19-31, One author says of this story: “The most important Biblical texts that explicitly describe the fate of the dead, particularly the wicked dead, are in the Synoptic Gospels: Mk. 9.43-48, Mt. 25.31-46, and Lk. 16.19-31. Mark and Matthew both identify this place of punishment as Gehenna, but Luke employs the classical postmortem destination known throughout the Greek-speaking world – hades. And among these three texts, only Lk. 16.19-31 is intent on explicitly describing the abode of the dead; it is the only Biblical tour of hell.” Matthew Ryan Hauge, *The Biblical Tour of Hell* (Bloomsbury: T & T Clark, 2013), 1.

rich man “was in torments in Hades” and Lazarus “was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom.” Jesus goes on to say that there was “a great gulf fixed” between the two places.⁵⁹

There are other terms in the New Testament which have some relation with this concept. “The dead” and “death” are also occasionally used to refer to the realm of the dead, as in the Hebrew Scriptures.⁶⁰ Gehenna originally referred to a place outside of Jerusalem where child sacrifices had once been offered.⁶¹ These practices were observed during the monarchy, at least under the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh who themselves sacrificed their own children, causing them to “pass through the fire.”⁶² Apparently, it was later turned into a place where trash was burned.⁶³ Jesus would later speak of Gehenna as a place of judgment, “the fire that shall never be quenched.”⁶⁴ The words “Tartarus” and “Abyss” appear to be essentially synonymous terms, with the additional idea of being the holding place for rebellious angels.⁶⁵

Some terminological confusion may have crept into the Western church when the Scriptures were translated into Latin. The word *inferos* was used to translate the concept of “those below” (the dead); the word *inferna* was used in reference to the entire underworld (plural, suggesting “compartments”); and the word *infernus* was used regarding the place of torment for the wicked.⁶⁶ These terminological variations can be seen in the Western Creeds. Rufinus’ version of the descensus clause in the Apostles’ Creed was *descendit ad inferna*. Venantius Fortunatus, sixth-seventh century bishop of

⁵⁹ Lk 16:22-23, 26.

⁶⁰ Matt 28:7; Mark 12:25; Luke 16:30-1; John 2:22; Acts 2:24; 13:30, 34; Rom 4:24; 6:9; 14:9; 1 Cor 15:12, 55; Eph 1:20; 5:14; 1 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 2:8; Rev 1:18; 20:13-14; etc. Bass says of this: “So every time Christ is spoken of as being raised from the dead, the original readers would not have thought of him coming back from just the state of death, but that he came back from the realm of the dead, namely Hades.” Bass, *Battle For the Keys*, 42.

⁶¹ 2 Kgs 16:3; 21:6; 2 Chr 28:3; 33:6; Jer 7:31; 19:4-5; 32:35; Duane F. Watson, “Gehenna (Place),” ABD, 2.927.

⁶² 2 Kgs 16:3; 21:6; 2 Chr 28:3; 33:6.

⁶³ It eventually was envisioned as the place of torment and the later phrase “lake of fire” may be conceptually related to this.

⁶⁴ Mk 9:43.

⁶⁵ Luke 8:31; 2 Pet 2:4; The term “abyss” sometimes denotes “the depths of the sea.” In another context, the word appears to be used synonymously with Hades: “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).” (Rom 10:7 NKJV) One author writes concerning the word “abyss”: “In the Old Testament this stands for ‘the deep,’ the underlying waters by which the earth was covered at the first (Gen. i 2), but on which it afterwards rested (Ps. xxiv 2, cxxxvi 6), and from which its springs and rivers welled up (cp. Gen. vii 11). It is thus the ‘underworld,’ the region below land and sea alike, with which all waters, rivers or ocean, are in communication...It was to this ‘abyss’ that, according to St. Paul (Rom. x 7), Christ descended after His passion.” J. Armitage Robinson, *Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature*, Vol. 8, *The Odes of Solomon* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1912), 32.

⁶⁶ See Laufer, *Hell’s Destruction*, 3.

Poitiers, has *descendit ad infernum* in his version. The later form of the Roman Creed (typically called T) contained the clause *descendit ad inferos*. The last of these became the standard in the West because, as Kelly says, “inferos is nowadays preferred as indicating that the place of the departed, not the damned, is meant.”⁶⁷ The Athanasian Creed has two versions of the clause: *descendit ad inferna* and *descendit ad inferos*. The former was likely the original, but the latter became the standard.⁶⁸ Laufer says that in later ecclesiastical Latin, *infernus* became associated with “the place of the damned” while *inferos* has the more general meaning “the place of the dead.”⁶⁹ It would appear that *inferos* became the standard in the West to guard against the notion that Christ went to the place of torment.

This terminological confusion intensified when the Scriptures were translated into English. The word “Hell” (hel, helle) was derived from the old Teutonic “Halja,” which referred to the goddess of the infernal regions, literally “the coverer up or hider.”⁷⁰ Hell was the word frequently chosen in the earliest English versions to translate Sheol and Hades.⁷¹ The Oxford English Dictionary quotes Sir Thomas More from 1529 saying that the phrase *descendit ad inferna* means that Christ “descended down beneath into the low places,” “instead of which low places the english tongue hath ever used this word hel.”⁷² This would suggest that at the time, the word Hell would have been an apt substitute for Sheol/Hades.⁷³ But when Hell was also used to translate the word “Gehenna” (the place of fiery judgment), it conflated the realm of the dead in general with the specific compartment in the realm of the dead which was reserved for the wicked.⁷⁴ As we will see, this conflation of terms would have negative consequences regarding the doctrine of the descent in later controversies.

One other term should be noted as having some bearing on the topic of Christ’s descent: “paradise.” Luke records for us that one of the thieves that was crucified with

⁶⁷J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, Third (New York: Continuum, 2006), note 3, page 378.

⁶⁸Cf. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell*, 73.

⁶⁹Laufer, *Hell’s Destruction*, 30.

⁷⁰J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 117.

⁷¹This includes Wycliff in the 14th century as well as Tyndale (1525), Coverdale (1536), The Matthew Bible (1537), Taverner’s Bible (1539), The Great Bible (1540), The Bishops’ Bible (1568) and even the Authorized Version (1611). As we shall see in Chapter 3, The Geneva Bible departed from this tradition in certain places.

⁷²OED, 2.117.

⁷³See James S. Stone, *The Glory After the Passion: A Study of the Events in the Life of Our Lord from His Descent Into Hell to His Enthronement in Heaven*. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1913), 38-9.

⁷⁴In modern English, the word Hell is used almost exclusively for the place of torment.

Jesus requested that he would remember him when he came into his kingdom, to which Jesus responded: “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”⁷⁵ Charlesworth says that the word paradise is “A loanword from Old Persian (*pairi-daēza*), which means ‘enclosure,’ then ‘park’ or ‘garden.’”⁷⁶ The word was transliterated into Greek as *paradeisos* and was employed by the Septuagint translators in Genesis 2-3 for the Garden of Eden. It was also used more generally to speak of a forest (Neh 2:8), an orchard (Song 4:13), and gardens and parks (Eccl 2:5).⁷⁷ The word was later employed in an eschatological sense by Isaiah to speak of Jerusalem as paradise (51:3).⁷⁸ In the Second Temple period, paradise is envisioned as the dwelling place of the righteous in the afterlife. Depending on the literature, the situation of paradise was either in the underworld (1 Enoch 22; 4 Ezra 4:7-8; 7:37-38), on the earth (*Jubilees* 3:12; 4:26; 8:16, 19), or in heaven (1 Enoch 60:8; 65:2; 70:3; 89:52; *Ps. Sol.* 14:2-3; 2 Enoch 8-9).⁷⁹ The word is used three times in the New Testament: in the passage from Luke noted above, in 2 Corinthians 12:4, where it refers to the “third heaven,” and in Revelation 2:7, where it appears to be synonymous with the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:2). Since Luke records Jesus’ promise of paradise to the thief and later records Peter speaking of Jesus in Hades between his death and resurrection, this may suggest that he adopted the view that paradise was in the underworld.⁸⁰ Some of the fathers held this same view, but others thought that paradise was situated in heaven. Ambrose of Milan and Thomas Aquinas suggested that paradise is wherever Christ is.⁸¹ These variations regarding the situation of paradise will be seen in the following chapters. The rationale in providing this terminological information in this opening section is to bring awareness to these issues which will be explored further in the ensuing sections.

⁷⁵ Luk 23:42-3.

⁷⁶ James H. Charlesworth, “Paradise,” ABD, 5.154.

⁷⁷ Justin W. Bass, “Paradise,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁷⁸ cf. Ezek 47:1-12; Rev 22:1-2; Bass, “Paradise.”

⁷⁹ Bass, “Paradise.” It should be noted that Josephus appears to hold the view that paradise was in the underworld. William Whiston, trans., *The Works of Josephus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 477 (*Antiquities*, 18.14-15).

⁸⁰ Bass, “Paradise.”

⁸¹ For Ambrose, see Arthur A. Just, *Luke*, ACCS NT 3. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 366. For a discussion about Aquinas, see Laufer, *Hell’s Destruction*, 50.

Biblical Passages Associated with the Doctrine

It should be noted that there is not a straightforward recorded account of Christ's descent into Hell in the New Testament. Rather, what we have are some texts which appear to imply the event. The clearest of these texts is the Pentecost sermon of the Apostle Peter in Acts 2. Peter quotes a portion of Psalm 16, "For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption."⁸² The Apostle goes on to make the point that when David spoke these words, they were not in reference to himself. Instead, he was speaking prophetically of his descendant, the Messiah: "Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses."⁸³ Patristic commentators would pick up on the implied truth that if Christ's soul was not left in Hades, then it certainly must have descended there prior to his resurrection. It is noteworthy that this places the doctrine in the original kerygma of the church.

In light of Peter's Messianic interpretation of Psalm 16 in reference to the descent, a further reading of the Psalter reveals other similar statements. Two of the most notable are Psalms 30:3 and 86:13. The first of these texts reads, "O LORD, You brought my soul up from the grave [literally, Sheol]; You have kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit." Psalm 86:13 says, "For great is Your mercy toward me, And You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol." Following the Apostle's exegetical method, these texts would appear to correlate as statements of Christ, that his soul was brought up or delivered from Sheol, implying that he had been there. There are other similar passages in the Psalms which will be discussed in the course of the ensuing chapters.⁸⁴

⁸² Acts 2:27; Ps 16:10.

⁸³ Acts 2:30-32. It is significant that Paul also appealed to this same Psalm in one of his earliest sermons, Acts 13:32-39. He does not exactly state the fact of the descent in that passage but he implies it by contrasting David, who after serving God in his generation, "fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption;" on the other hand, "he whom God raised up (Jesus) saw no corruption." Though he does not repeat the fact, we would assume that Jesus also "was buried with his fathers" (implying not just the burial of his body but also the descent of his soul to be with the departed in Sheol).

⁸⁴ A full list may be found in Appendix I.

Another central biblical text associated with the descent is Ephesians 4:9. In the context of the passage, Paul is discussing the spiritual gifts which Christ bestowed upon the Church at his ascension. But the thought of Christ's ascension also brings to mind his descent: "(Now this, 'He ascended'—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)". Harris says that this text has been understood in three ways in the history of the church: as the descent of Christ to Hades following his death; as the descent of the Son of God in the Incarnation; and as the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As we will see, the church fathers tended toward the first option, reading this text as a clear allusion to Christ's descent into Hades (interpreting "the lower parts of the earth" as a reference to Sheol/Hades).⁸⁵

There are two passages in 1 Peter which have long been associated with the descent. The first is found in chapter three:

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has now gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him."⁸⁶

Even though this text is complicated by the inclusion of the reference to Noah and the ark, there would appear to be a clear pattern in the text, tracing chronologically the suffering and death of Christ, followed by his descent, resurrection and ascension. The key phrase in reference to the descent is where he writes, "being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison ...". Many patristic writers saw this not only as referring to the fact of Christ's descent but also its purpose, namely, to make proclamation to the spirits in prison (presumably, an allusion to Hades). As we will see, this interpretation was questioned by Augustine of Hippo, and his influence cast a long shadow in the Western tradition.

⁸⁵ See W. Hall Harris, *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4:7-11 and Traditional Hebrew Imagery* (Boston: Brill, 1996), 4–30. Two other Pauline texts explicitly refer to the descent: Rom 10:6-7; 14:9.

⁸⁶ 1 Pet 3:18-22, ESV.

The second passage in this epistle is found just a few verses later where the author says, “For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.” The phrase appears to be related to the text from the previous chapter, assuming that “the gospel was preached” is synonymous with the earlier “proclaimed” and “those who are dead” correlates with the “spirits in prison.” The exegetical difficulties of these texts will play into the later doctrinal disputes.

There is a story in the synoptic gospels which was commonly associated with the descent in the patristic era. It comes in the context of Jesus casting a demon out of a man which prompted the Pharisees to claim that he did so by the power of Beelzebub. Jesus responded by pointing out the absurdity of their assertion by saying, “If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How can his kingdom stand?”⁸⁷ Then Jesus explains what was really happening: “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house.”⁸⁸ Jesus likens his deliverance of the man from the demon to a stronger man entering into a strong man’s house to plunder his goods. In the patristic era, this miracle was viewed as a preview of what Jesus would do on a larger scale after his death, when he descended to Hades to release those who had been held captive after death.⁸⁹ In this extension, the strong man was Satan, his house was Hades, and the stronger man was Christ, who entered this house and released the captives (the righteous dead).

Two other passages in Matthew’s gospel were also linked with the descent. In response to a request from the scribes and Pharisees for a sign, Jesus said that the only one they would be given would be the sign of Jonah. Then he explains, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”⁹⁰ The obvious connection here is with the resurrection of Christ on the third day. But the church fathers also saw in Jesus’ statement a reference to his sojourn into Hades during the “three days and three

⁸⁷ Matt 11:26.

⁸⁸ Matt 12:29; see also parallels in Mk 3:27; Lk 11:21-22.

⁸⁹ The language of Heb 2:14-15 appears to echo this notion.

⁹⁰ Matt 12:40.

nights in the heart of the earth.” This connection also brings the Book of Jonah into the discussion of Christ’s descent.⁹¹

The other passage linked with Christ’s descent from Matthew’s gospel comes in the record of Christ’s death: “Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.”⁹² In the context of the passage, the evangelist is recording some of the signs that accompanied Christ’s death: the earth quaked, the veil in the temple was torn, and the graves were opened. But he also adds the enigmatic concept that “many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” and came out of their tombs after the resurrection, appearing to many in the holy city. The church fathers were fond of connecting the dots here to say that this was evidence of Christ’s descent to Hades and his deliverance of the righteous from there at his resurrection.

One last text should be noted at this point which has a thematic connection with Christ’s descent. It comes in the opening chapter of the Book of Revelation, where John had a vision of the ascended Christ in glory and was told by him: “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.”⁹³ The final statement here about Christ possessing the keys of Hades and Death was viewed by the church fathers as another reference to Christ’s descent to Hades and his release of those who had been held captive.

It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive list of the biblical texts associated with Christ’s descent but is representative of those which are appealed to most often. In the course of the following chapters, other passages will be added. A fuller index of those texts which have a connection with the doctrine may be found in Appendix I.

⁹¹ Jonah 2:1-10.

⁹² Matt 27:51-3.

⁹³ Rev 1:17-18.

The Doctrine of the Descent in the Second Century

The first writings outside the New Testament where the descent of Christ into Hades is encountered are the letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch. In his Epistle to the Magnesians, while drawing a contrast between the doctrines of Christianity and Judaism, Ignatius makes the point that the prophets of the Old Testament were persecuted because they “lived in accordance with Christ Jesus.” Then he adds: “Because of this he [Christ] for whom they rightly waited raised them from the dead when he came.”⁹⁴ This last sentence is Ignatius’ interpretation of the enigmatic statement noted above from Matthew’s gospel, that “many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after [Christ’s] resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.”⁹⁵

In his epistle to the Trallians, Ignatius employs the same text and adds two others⁹⁶ when he writes:

He was crucified and died under Pontius Pilate. He really, and not merely in appearance, was crucified, and died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. By those in heaven I mean such as are possessed of incorporeal natures; by those on earth, the Jews and Romans, and such persons as were present at that time when the Lord was crucified; and by those under the earth, the multitude that arose along with the Lord. For says the Scripture, ‘Many bodies of the saints that slept arose,’ their graves being opened. He descended, indeed, into Hades alone, but He arose accompanied by a multitude; and rent asunder that means of separation which had existed from the beginning of the world, and cast down its partition-wall.⁹⁷

Ignatius’ immediate concern in this context is to argue for the reality of Christ’s humanity (probably against Docetists).⁹⁸ His crucifixion and death happened “not merely in appearance” but in the sight of beings in heaven, on earth and under the earth.⁹⁹ The third category of beings, “those under the earth,” were delivered from

⁹⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle to the Magnesians,” 9.2, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*. Edited and revised by Michael W. Holmes. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 155. The larger context of several of the patristic texts quoted in this chapter may be found in Appendix II.

⁹⁵ Matt 27:52-53.

⁹⁶ Phil 2:10-11; Eph 2:14.

⁹⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians,” 9, *ANF*, 1.70. (This passage is found in the longer version of the epistle but not the shorter version). [PG 5.789a-b]. The statement is included because it will be employed by subsequent authors.

⁹⁸ Docetism is described as “a tendency, rather than a formulated and unified doctrine, which considered the humanity and sufferings of the earthly Christ as apparent rather than real.”

F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 496.

⁹⁹ This is obviously an allusion to Phil 2:10.

Hades by Christ at his descent. The previous quotation offered an allusion to Matthew 27:52-3, but here, Ignatius quotes it explicitly. The phrase “He descended, indeed, into Hades alone, but He arose accompanied by a multitude ,” offers a concise explanation regarding the purpose of Christ’s descent and will be echoed by later authors. Ignatius’ assertion is that Christ’s resurrection resulted in the resurrection of others as well.¹⁰⁰ As in the previous text, his purpose is to demonstrate that the death and resurrection of Jesus had implications for those who died before him, a concept that will be developed by others. Ignatius also adds here another intriguing text, Ephesians 2:14, which in the context, refers to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church. Ignatius applies it further, seeing “those who were far off” as the saints who had been in Hades. Though it is far from clear, Ignatius’ reference to Christ removing the “means of separation” or “partition wall” appears to imply the breaking-down of a prison wall and the release of the multitude from Hades.¹⁰¹ This concept of Christ’s saving work on earth being extended to or duplicated in Hades is prevalent in the Patristic era.

A contemporary of Ignatius, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, touched on the descent where he wrote to the Philippians that he rejoiced in them, “because your firmly rooted faith, renowned from the earliest times, still perseveres and bears fruit to our Lord Jesus Christ, who endured for our sins, facing even death, ‘whom God raised up, having loosed the pangs of Hades.”¹⁰² The phrase, “having loosed the pangs of Hades,” is taken from the same context of Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 where the Apostle quotes Psalm 16: “For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.”¹⁰³ What is particularly notable is that Polycarp opts for a textual variant in his allusion to this text. Most of the ancient manuscripts read “having loosed the pangs of death (Θανάτου),” but some read “the pangs of Hades (ᾅδου).” Metzger suggests that the variant “appears to be an assimilation to the use of [Hades] in verses 27 and 31.”¹⁰⁴ The language of this assimilation also echoes two other statements in the Psalter which were also associated with the descent (Psalms 18:5 and 116:3) as well as 2 Samuel 22:6.

¹⁰⁰ For a modern discussion of this, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 632-6.

¹⁰¹ The meaning of “the middle wall of separation” in Eph 2:14 has been a source of much scholarly debate.

¹⁰² “The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians,” 1, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Holmes (1999), 207.

¹⁰³ Acts 2:27.

¹⁰⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second (New York: American Bible Society, 1994), 259.

The word “pangs” here could refer to “sorrows” or to “snares.”¹⁰⁵ It is not known whether Polycarp had the text with the variant or if he made the assimilation.

Regardless, it shows that he saw the passage as a reference to Christ’s descent, that he could not be held by Hades, implying, like Psalm 16, that he sojourned there.¹⁰⁶

In the Epistle of Barnabas, dated somewhere between AD 80-120, the author writes, “But let us inquire whether the Lord took care to foreshadow the water and the cross,” which he goes on to define as “that baptism that brings forgiveness of sins.”¹⁰⁷ The author’s methodology is to quote texts from the Old Testament that foreshadow the New Testament. Regarding the topic of “the water and the cross,” he quotes Isaiah 45:2-3: “I will go before you, and level mountains and shatter brass gates and break iron bars in pieces, and I will give you treasures that lie in darkness, hidden, unseen, in order that they may know that I am the Lord God.”¹⁰⁸ He appears to suggest that that the Lord God’s promise to go before his people and to crush the gates and to break in pieces the bolts of iron is fulfilled through Christ, presumably at his descent, when he opens the gates of Hades for his people. Ferguson also suggests a connection here with the baptism of Jesus and Christian baptism when he writes: “[I]f *Barnabas* 11.4 refers to Jesus’ *descensus ad inferos* when he broke the gates of the hadean world and received ‘hidden treasures,’ there may be an allusion to going under the water as a parallel in baptism.”¹⁰⁹ There are several biblical texts which suggest a connection between the descent and baptism. We have already noted above 1 Peter 3, which connects the topics explicitly. Other writers, as we shall see in the ensuing sections, will connect the descent with Israel’s exodus from Egyptian slavery and its baptismal overtones (especially Romans 6).¹¹⁰ The Epistle of Barnabas’ implied connection between baptism and the descent will become explicit with later writers.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ For further discussion, see Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 122.

¹⁰⁶ This text along with the same variant will appear later in this chapter with Augustine of Hippo.

¹⁰⁷ “The Epistle of Barnabas,” 11.1, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Holmes (1999), 303.

¹⁰⁸ “The Epistle of Barnabas,” 11.4, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Holmes (1999), 305.

¹⁰⁹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*, First (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 213.

¹¹⁰ The church fathers also saw Psalm 74:13 as an allusion to the descent and baptism: “You divided the sea by Your strength; You broke the heads of the sea serpents in the waters.” See Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 11. These themes are explored more fully by Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 76-9.

¹¹¹ There are some pseudepigraphal writings from this same period (though likely not available to the English reformers) which tie together similar themes. See especially *Odes of Solomon* 17, 31 and 42 (Texts 2-4, Appendix II); and *Epistle of the Apostles*, 27 (Text 5, Appendix II).

Another work from the second century which enjoyed some popularity is the *Shepherd of Hermas*.¹¹² The Ninth Parable is indirectly related to the descent:

‘Sir, explain something else to me,’ I said. ‘What else do you want to know?’ he said. ‘Why, sir,’ I said, ‘did the stones come up from the deep, and why were they put into the building, even though they had borne these spirits?’ (2) ‘It was necessary,’ he said, ‘for them to come up through the water in order to be made alive, for otherwise they could not enter the kingdom of God, unless they laid aside the deadness of their former life. (3) So even those who had fallen asleep received the seal of the Son of God and entered the kingdom of God. For before a man,’ he said, ‘bears the name of the Son of God, he is dead, but when he receives the seal, he lays aside his deadness and receives life. (4) The seal, therefore, is the water; so they go down into the water dead and they come up alive. Thus this seal was proclaimed to them as well, and they made us of it in order that they might enter the kingdom of God.’ (5) ‘Why sir,’ I said, ‘did the forty stones also come up with them from the deep, when they had already received the seal?’ ‘Because,’ he said, ‘when these apostles and teachers who preached the name of the Son of God fell asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, they preached also to those who had previously fallen asleep, and they themselves gave to them the seal of preaching. (6) Therefore they went down with them into the water, and came up again. But these went down alive and came up alive, whereas those who had previously fallen asleep went down dead and came up alive. (7) So they were made alive through them, and came to full knowledge of the name of the Son of God. This is why they also came up with them and were fitted together with them into the structure of the tower, and were joined together without being hewn, for they fell asleep in righteousness and in great purity, only they did not have this seal. You now have the explanation of these things as well.’ I do, sir,’ I said.¹¹³

The reference here is indirect as it envisions “the apostles and teachers” descending to those who had fallen asleep in order to give them “the seal of the preaching” (a reference to baptism).¹¹⁴ Having been baptized, they “came up alive” and were made like stones in the building.¹¹⁵ The text, for all its quiriness, still contains the idea that the saving work of Christ was applicable to those who had died before his ministry. And once again, we have the themes of a descent to Hades, preaching and baptism

¹¹² “The Shepherd is the divine teacher, who communicates to Hermas, either by precept or by allegory, the lessons which are to be disseminated for the instruction of the Church.” Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 291.

¹¹³ “The Shepherd of Hermas,” Parable 9.16, 1-7, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Holmes (1999), 498-9.

¹¹⁴ In the *Epistle of the Apostles*, 27, it is Christ who descends and baptizes (Text 5, Appendix II).

¹¹⁵ A probable allusion to 1 Pet 2:4-5.

mentioned in the same context. MacCulloch says of this unique descent of the apostles: “This, however, was only a development of the existing doctrine of the Descent.”¹¹⁶

Also in the second century, the philosopher turned Christian apologist Justin Martyr, taught on the descent in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (a Jew), where he appealed to a supposed quotation from Jeremiah: “The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the graves; and He descended to preach to them His own salvation.”¹¹⁷ Justin’s claim is that this text (typically called the “Jeremiah logion”) had been removed by the Jews because of its explicit reference to Christ.¹¹⁸ This logion would later be picked up and employed several times by Irenaeus, as we will see below. Luckock says of this logion, “even if it is lacking Divine authority, it is manifest that the citation of it is a distinct witness to the belief of the Fathers who referred to it, that the deliverance of His holy ones was the object of Christ’s descent into hell.”¹¹⁹

Whatever the origin, this logion is another early witness showing that the descent of Christ was for the purpose of rescuing Old Testament figures. The New Testament sets forth Christ as the “one mediator between God and man,”¹²⁰ implying that his mediating work must also extend backwards to encompass those who longed for his arrival. The logion also includes the idea that at his descent, Christ preached “His own salvation,” another potential allusion to the 1 Peter texts mentioned earlier. Dalton suggests “that there is a considerable similarity between [1 Pet] 4:6a and the Jeremiah-logion,” but then qualifies this by adding that it is possible that “this similarity is verbal and external only.”¹²¹ This qualification is really not warranted since there are enough

¹¹⁶ J. A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), 246.

¹¹⁷ Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew,” *ANF*, 1.234–235 [PG 6.645a]. See Text 5, Appendix II.

¹¹⁸ This seems implausible given the fact that there are other, equally explicit prophecies concerning Christ in Jeremiah which were not removed. Swete suggests that the quote may have been a “fragment of a primitive homily.” (p. 58). Wicks offers an alternative theory that “the origin of this text postulates Christian midrashic work by converted rabbis who became Christian catechists and who adapted a given text by additions or by paraphrasing to make explicit reference to Christ’s descent.” Jared Wicks, “Christ’s Saving Descent to the Dead: Early Witnesses from Ignatius of Antioch to Origen,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17, (2008): 285.

¹¹⁹ Herbert Mortimer Luckock, *The Intermediate State between Death and Judgment; Being a Sequel to “After Death,”* Fifth (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1892), 152–53.

¹²⁰ 1 Tim 2:5.

¹²¹ William J. Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3: 18-4:6* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), 43. MacCulloch sees another potential connection with a text in the Apocrypha: “In a Latin text of Ecclesiasticus (xxiv. 32) Wisdom says: ‘I will penetrate all the lower parts of the earth, and will visit all that sleep, and will enlighten all that hope in the Lord.’” *Harrowing of Hell*, 251. Charles Bigg also suggests that there is a connection here with the 1 Pet. 3-4 texts, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 10.

other writers during this period who connect the Petrine texts with the descent to suggest that the connection between these texts is real.

At the close of the second century, we find the most significant witness to the descent from this period: Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons. In his magnum opus, *Against Heresies*, he spends a great deal of time arguing contra Marcion and other Gnostics that the God of the Old Testament was the same God as the God of the New Testament. He writes:

It was for this reason, too, that the Lord descended into the regions beneath the earth, preaching His advent there also, and [declaring] the remission of sins received by those who believe in Him. Now all those believed in Him who had hope towards Him, that is, those who proclaimed His advent, and submitted to His dispensations, the righteous men, the prophets, and the patriarchs, to whom He remitted sins in the same way as He did to us ...¹²²

In this text we have the recurring theme that Christ descended into Hades, “preaching His advent there also.” More specifically, he proclaimed forgiveness to “the righteous men, the prophets, and the patriarchs.” Statements like this, that limit the scope of Christ’s saving work in Hades, will become important later since some will suggest that he proclaimed the gospel there and delivered all, both the righteous and unrighteous. Christ’s means of deliverance for these saints was “preaching his advent, and declaring the remission of sins ...” While this is not a direct quotation of the aforementioned Petrine texts, it certainly sounds reminiscent of them.

It is also worth noting that at the beginning of the chapter where this passage is found, Irenaeus says that he received these truths “from a certain presbyter, who had heard it from those who had seen the apostles, and from those who had been their disciples ...”¹²³ The identity of this presbyter is not known but it shows that Irenaeus considered his teaching on the descent to be apostolic.

In another passage in *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus finds himself arguing against the Gnostics once again.¹²⁴ They apparently denied any concept of the resurrection of the body, opting rather for the notion that the spirit of Christ ascended directly into heaven at death. Against this notion, Irenaeus asserts that while the body of Christ was laid in the tomb, his soul “dwelt in the place where the dead were,” meaning, Hades. In support

¹²² Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” *ANF*, 1.499. [PG 7.1058b].

¹²³ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” *ANF*, 1.498. [PG 7.1058a]. The reception of and passing on of apostolic tradition is an important theme throughout this work.

¹²⁴ Text 9, Appendix I.

of this teaching, he gives a series of proofs: the Jeremiah-logion that we encountered earlier in Justin,¹²⁵ Jesus' own prophecy about Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish being a sign of his own descent and resurrection (Matt 12:40), and then Ephesians 4:9, which says that before ascending, Christ first "descended into the lower parts of the earth." Then he quotes Psalm 86:13, with David speaking in the voice of Christ saying, "Thou hast delivered my soul from the nethermost hell," implying that he went to Hades at death.¹²⁶ The final text has Christ telling Mary after his resurrection not to touch him because he has not yet ascended to the Father, confirming for Irenaeus (against the Gnostics) that Jesus had not yet gone to heaven.¹²⁷

In the very next section, he draws an important conclusion by saying that Jesus "observed the law of the dead," inferring from the previously quoted texts that he underwent what happened to every man at death, his body was laid in the tomb and his soul descended to Hades.¹²⁸ In saying that Christ observed the law of the dead so that he might become "the first-begotten from the dead," he alludes to Colossians 1:18. The straightforward meaning of the text is that Christ was the first one resurrected from death and that others will be raised as well. But Irenaeus' use of that passage in this context implies that he also saw it as a reference to Christ being the first one raised from the realm of the dead (Hades) and that his resurrection resulted in others being raised as well (another possible allusion to Matt 27:52-3).

In *Against Heresies* (1.27.3), Irenaeus refutes Marcion, a radical teacher who had turned the testimony of the Old Testament upside down by asserting that Cain, the people of Sodom and the Egyptians were the heroes and that Abel, Enoch, Noah, and the patriarchs and prophets were the villains.¹²⁹ Marcion argued that Christ descended to deliver the former while leaving the latter in Hades. Even though the doctrine is contrarily employed, it is further evidence that the descent was a given, the debate was simply over who was delivered.

¹²⁵ This logion was a favorite of Irenaeus. MacCulloch writes: "In no less than five passages in his work on Heresies and once in his *Epideixis* [*On the Apostolic Preaching*], extant in an Armenian version, Irenaeus cites the Jeremiah apocryphon quoted by Justin, assigning it once to Jeremiah (iv. 22. 1), once to Isaiah (iii. 20. 4), and again to 'the prophet,' 'the others,' or without reference (iv. 33. 1), 12; v. 31. 1). In the *Epideixis* (c. 78) it is assigned to Jeremiah." *Harrowing of Hell*, 89.

¹²⁶ Echoing Ps 16.

¹²⁷ John 20:17.

¹²⁸ Text 10, Appendix II.

¹²⁹ Text 11, Appendix II.

One of the central themes in Irenaeus' writings also has implications for the doctrine of the descent. Frequently, he regards the ministry of Christ as a recapitulation of the first man, Adam. Simply stated, whereas the first Adam rebelled against God, bringing himself and his offspring to ruin, Jesus came as a Second Adam to redeem the First Adam and his fallen race. In order to accomplish this work, it was necessary for the Son of God to identify fully with Adam. In tracing this theme, Irenaeus draws primarily upon Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:45-49, connecting Adam and Christ. His argument is that God's saving work had to reach all the way back to the first man, because if he had been conquered by death, "God would [in that case] have been conquered ... and the wickedness of the serpent would have prevailed over the will of God."¹³⁰ Here we encounter for the first time the saving work of Jesus applied explicitly to Adam. In his disobedience, Adam was "conquered by the serpent," was corrupted, lost his life, and came under the power of death. But God was unwilling that he "should be utterly [and for ever] abandoned to death" so he sent the "second man" [Christ] to recapitulate the life of the first and thereby, to deliver him.

One aspect of this recapitulation was to overcome and defeat Satan, the serpent of old. To this point, Irenaeus employs Matthew 12:29 where he writes, "by means of the second man did He bind the strong man, and spoiled his goods, and abolished death, vivifying that man who had been in a state of death."¹³¹ He explains: "For at the first Adam became a vessel in his (Satan's) possession, whom he did also hold under his power, that is, by bringing sin on him iniquitously ..." Then he concludes: "wherefore he who had led man captive, was justly captured in his turn by God; but man, who had been led captive, was loosed from the bonds of condemnation."¹³² Jesus was the stronger man who had entered the strong man's house and was now plundering his goods: in this case, setting free the first man, whom Satan had held captive.

Thus, Christ's defeat of the devil during his earthly ministry was a foreshadowing of his vanquishing of him at the descent. In the same way that Jesus was releasing those who were demon possessed in his earthly ministry, so did he release those who were held under the devil's power in Hades. It is also noteworthy that he frames the discussion of the descent here as a rescue mission: "The Lord, coming to the lost sheep

¹³⁰ Text 12, Appendix II.

¹³¹ Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 1.455-6. [PG 7.960a-c].

¹³² Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 1.455-6. [PG 7.960a-c].

...” echoes the opening parable of Luke 15 as well as other texts in Scripture where Christ is viewed as the Good Shepherd.¹³³ As the Good Shepherd, he is willing to go to the extremity to save his lost sheep; in this case, the extremity of Hades, and reaching all the way back to the first man.¹³⁴

Irenaeus went on to show that Christ rescued not only Adam but his progeny as well. He does this by appealing to the Adam/Christ connection once again. He quotes the ancient prophecy from Genesis 3:15 about the Seed of the woman crushing the head of the serpent and asserts that the prophecy was fulfilled by Christ, pointing specifically to Galatians 4:4, “But when the fullness of time was come, God sent his Son, made of a woman.” In essence, Christ was the Second Adam coming forth from the new Eve to defeat the enemy of our first parents and by doing so, delivered them from bondage. This stretches the effects of Christ’s redemption all the way back to the fall.¹³⁵

Irenaeus also introduces us to another important theme related to the descent: the idea that the devil was undone by his own craftiness. In one of the texts quoted above, he writes: “wherefore he who had led man captive [the devil], was justly captured in his turn by God.”¹³⁶ This concept of the devil being “captured” hints at a theme which will be developed later regarding the “fish hook” of God, namely, the idea that Christ’s humanity was like bait covering the “hook” of his divinity. The devil was like a fish greedily swallowing the bait only to find out that there was a hook contained within the bait. Similarly, Irenaeus appeals to Matthew 12:29 again, asserting that not only did Christ release the devil’s prisoners from bondage, he also bound the devil with his own chains.¹³⁷ In other words, the chains that the devil used to entrap Adam were redeployed by Christ to entrap him. In both of these contexts, the devil is beaten at his own game. We appear to have here, in seed form at least, a theme which Archbishop Hilarion calls “divine deception.”¹³⁸ This theme (which has more than one variation) will be explored in greater detail by later writers, especially in the fourth century.¹³⁹

¹³³ Especially Ps 23 and John 10.

¹³⁴ See also *Against Heresies*, 3.23.7, *ANF*, 1.457 [PG 7.964b-c].

¹³⁵ Text 13, Appendix II.

¹³⁶ Irenaeus, “*Against Heresies*,” 1.455-6. [PG 7.960c].

¹³⁷ Text 14, Appendix II. It should be noted that in Matt 12:29, Christ is surprisingly likened to a thief, plundering the strong man’s goods. But in reality, this was more like recovery than theft since the devil had used deception to capture that which really belonged to God, namely, humanity.

¹³⁸ Hilarion, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 62.

¹³⁹ Most notably, Gregory of Nyssa.

The Doctrine of the Descent in the Third Century

The first author from the third century who broaches the subject of the descent is Tertullian.¹⁴⁰ Tertullian wrote at a time when Christians were under severe persecution in the Roman Empire, even to the point of martyrdom, which flavors what he writes. In the course of this discussion, he offers some interesting details concerning his understanding of Hades. Hades is not “a bare cavity ... but a vast deep space in the interior of the earth.” Christ (alluding to Matt 12:40) spent three days “in the secret inner recess which is hidden in the earth, and enclosed by the earth, and superimposed on the abysmal depths which lie still lower down.” Here we seem to have the concept of two compartments in Hades: there is the “secret inner recess” which is located above “the abysmal depths.” In saying these things, it is clear that he is drawing on Jesus’ story of The Rich Man and Lazarus from Luke 16 since he explicitly mentions “Abraham’s bosom.” So we must assume that he is working from that story which sees Hades as having two compartments: one of torment and one of refreshment. He makes this even more explicit later in this same work when he says that in Hades, “there are already experienced there punishments and consolations.”¹⁴¹

Tertullian goes on to argue that only martyrs are received directly into Paradise at death (here he appeals to Rev 6:9, which means that he is one who viewed paradise as synonymous with heaven).¹⁴² Everyone else, alluding to his now lost treatise *On Paradise*, “is detained in safe keeping in Hades until the day of the Lord.”¹⁴³ Some of this is likely driven by his antagonism towards Greek philosophy and a desire to distinguish Christian doctrine from it.¹⁴⁴ This certainly appears to be a minority position in the early church. It begs the question as to what benefit Christ’s descent brought to those in Hades. Along these lines, he says that Christ descended “into the lower parts of the earth, that He might there make the patriarchs and prophets partakers of Himself.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Text 15, Appendix II.

¹⁴¹ Tertullian, “A Treatise On the Soul,” 55, *ANF*, 3.234 [PL 2.795b].

¹⁴² See the terminological discussion above.

¹⁴³ Tertullian, “A Treatise On the Soul,” 55, *ANF*, 3.234 [PL 2.790b]. There is a section in his treatise *De Fuga* which seems to assert that after Christ descended to Hades, he opened heaven for his people (but admittedly, he could be thinking of this as referring to martyrs only before the Last Day). “All this took place that He might redeem us from our sins. The sun ceded to us the day of our redemption; hell re-transferred the right it had in us, and our covenant is in heaven; the everlasting gates were lifted up, that the King of Glory, the Lord of might, might enter in, after having redeemed man from earth, nay, from hell, that he might attain to heaven.” Tertullian, “De Fuga in Persecutione,” 9.12, *ANF*, 4.123 [PL 2.136b].

¹⁴⁴ Tertullian, “Apology,” 47, *ANF*, 3.51-2 [PL 1.515a-520b].

¹⁴⁵ Tertullian, “A Treatise On the Soul,” 55, *ANF*, 3.231 [PL 2.788a].

What does it mean that he made the patriarchs and prophets “partakers of himself?” Did this mean that he was now somehow with them in Hades? Or does it mean that he simply revealed to them his redeeming work and the promise of his return on the Last Day?¹⁴⁶ To be fair, it could be that Tertullian was guarding against any notion that salvation was fully achieved apart from the resurrection of the body. That is, by arguing that the vast majority of the souls of the righteous remained in the good part of Hades, it heightened the need for the Last Day and the bodily resurrection. But the notion that only those who suffered martyrdom were allowed to enter heaven is problematic. We may even have here, in seed form, one aspect of the later doctrine of purgatory since there are some who enter heaven (based on their merit, in this case, martyrdom), while others remain in Hades.¹⁴⁷

That being said, the majority position of the early writers appears to be that when Christ descended into Hades, he rescued the souls of those who were awaiting his arrival and ushered them into heaven. Subsequent to that, when Christians die, their souls join the saints in heaven, awaiting the resurrection of the body.¹⁴⁸ This was expressed in one of the earliest hymns in the church, the *Te Deum laudamus*, which says that after his death, Christ “opened the kingdom of heaven to *all believers*.” We will see in Chapter 3 how the minority view, expressed by Tertullian, was essentially adopted by some English theologians of the sixteenth century.

Hippolytus, bishop of Rome early in the third century, also teaches on the descent in several places. One of the more intriguing is in a work called *On Christ and Antichrist*, where Hippolytus introduces us to several other Biblical texts which he believed to be associated with the descent.¹⁴⁹ He quotes Daniel 7:14 and Matthew 28:18 to affirm Christ’s authority on earth and heaven. But in alluding to Philippians 2:9, Hippolytus extends the authority of Christ to under the earth as well (in Hades). He was “reckoned among the dead” (echoing Ps 88:4), preached the Gospel to the souls of the saints (echoing 1 Pet 3:19 and 4:6), and overcame death (likely alluding to 1 Cor 15:54-

¹⁴⁶ Gerald Bray translates the phrase in this way: “Christ descended into hell in order to acquaint the patriarchs and prophets with his redeeming mission.” *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*, ACCS NT 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 107.

¹⁴⁷ See the related discussion in Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 46-8.

¹⁴⁸ Bass, *Battle For the Keys*, 103.

¹⁴⁹ Text 16, Appendix II.

7). It is worth noting again that “the saints” are explicitly mentioned as receiving the benefits of Christ’s descent.

Later in this same work, Hippolytus offers a new passage on the descent which would continue to have influence with later writers.¹⁵⁰ The text he alludes to is Matthew 11 where John the Baptist was in prison, awaiting a certain death. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”¹⁵¹ Jesus tells the disciples to go and tell John what he was doing in his ministry (recounting a number of fulfilled Messianic prophecies from Isaiah).¹⁵² The idea suggested is that upon hearing this, John was then ready to depart this life so that he might convey these truths to those in Hades, preparing them for Christ’s eventual sojourn there. We saw earlier the idea that Jesus descended to Hades to continue what he did on earth. Here Hippolytus applies the same principle to John the Baptist. That is, Christ’s forerunner on earth became his forerunner in Hades. Even though Hippolytus is the first to make the connection between this passage and the descent,¹⁵³ he would not be the last.

In his commentary on Luke 23, Hippolytus envisions Christ descending victoriously to Hades, breaking its bars and gates.¹⁵⁴ This was due to the fact that he came as a man, but not a mere man. He writes, “For this reason the warders of Hades trembled when they saw Him; and the gates of brass and the bolts of iron were broken. For, lo, the Only-begotten entered, a soul among souls, God the Word with a (human) soul.”¹⁵⁵ Earlier, we saw how the descent was especially associated with Christ’s humanity, but Hippolytus now emphasizes his deity in this event as well. The notion that Christ’s divine nature descended in conjunction with his human soul in order to accomplish his victory would become even more prominent in the subsequent Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ Text 17, Appendix II.

¹⁵¹ Matt 11:3.

¹⁵² Isa 26:19; 29:18; 35:4-6; 61:1-2.

¹⁵³ Harris, 3. See also Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, *NPNF 2*, 7.22 [PG 33.469c]; John Chrysostom, “Homilies on the Gospel according to St. Matthew,” *NPNF 1*, 10.238–242 [PG 7.407-420].

¹⁵⁴ Text 18, Appendix II. He appeals to Pss 9:13; 107:18; Isa 38:10.

¹⁵⁵ Hippolytus of Rome, “Fragments from Commentaries on Various Books of Scripture,” *ANF*, 5.194.

¹⁵⁶ Hippolytus also included the descent in the *anaphora* of his liturgy: “Who when He was betrayed to voluntary suffering that He might abolish death and rend the bonds of the devil and tread down hell and enlighten the righteous and establish the limit and demonstrate the resurrection.” Gregory Dix and Henry Chadwick, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr*, Third (New York: Routledge, 1995), 8.

Later in the third century, Melito, bishop of Sardis, offers some intriguing references to the descent in his Paschal Homily. He imagines Christ explaining what he had accomplished in his descent after the resurrection and ascension.¹⁵⁷ In doing so, Melito echoes some texts from Isaiah (49:25; 50:8) and uses triumphant imagery for the descent. He personifies death and Hades and says that Christ was victorious over them, likely drawing upon Revelation 1:18, where Christ claims to have the keys to Death and Hades (by defeating Death he opens Hades).¹⁵⁸ He makes reference to the binding of the strong one which has already been encountered,¹⁵⁹ and then concludes by saying that Christ brought man “safely home to the heights of heaven” (contra Tertullian above).¹⁶⁰

Another implied connection with the descent has to do with the timing of this homily, likely at the Easter (Paschal) Vigil, a prime occasion for baptism in the ancient church.¹⁶¹ At several points, Melito draws connections between the salvation of Christians and of their fathers in the faith, the Jewish people.¹⁶² He writes:

For led as a lamb and slaughtered as a sheep, he [Christ] ransomed us from the ruin of the world as from the land of Egypt, and freed us from the slavery of the devil as from the hand of Pharaoh, and sealed our souls with his own spirit and the members of our bodies with his own blood. This is he who clothed Death with *a garment of shame* and bound the devil in anguish as Moses *bound Pharaoh*.¹⁶³

Early Christian writers saw connections between the exodus and Christian baptism, and these were elaborated at the Easter Vigil. Those who were baptized underwent their own exodus by sacramentally participating in Christ’s death, burial, descent, and resurrection.¹⁶⁴ The binding of the devil is another likely allusion to Matthew 12:29.

¹⁵⁷ Text 19, Appendix II.

¹⁵⁸ Bass writes: “Melito is the first to use the battle imagery for Christ’s descent that will become commonplace throughout the Fathers and the medieval period. It is difficult to find a better Scripture than Revelation 1:18 for the background to Melito’s belief that Christ conquered Death and Hades. Where else in the NT are Death and Hades personified and brought together in this way?” *Battle For the Keys*, 11.

¹⁵⁹ Matt 12:29.

¹⁶⁰ It would appear that when Melito says “man” here that he only envisions the righteous being delivered from Hades since he says of unfaithful Israel, “And you lie dead, while he rose from the dead, and is raised to the heights of heaven.” Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha: With the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 64-5.

¹⁶¹ Georgia Frank writes: “By the fifth century the story [of Christ’s descent] was woven into the celebration of Easter, as the long hours of the all-night vigils inspired meditations on hell. Lectionaries indicate that Christians in many parts of the empire would have listened to scriptural readings containing strong intimations of hell.” “Christ’s Descent to the Underworld,” 217.

¹⁶² A connection first noted by Paul in 1 Cor 10:1-13.

¹⁶³ Campbell Bonner, ed, *The Homily on the Passion by Melito Bishop of Sardis and Some Fragments of the Apocryphal Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940), 175-6.

¹⁶⁴ Text 20, Appendix II. cf. Rom 6:1-14.

There is an interesting passage concerning Christ's own Baptism which is found in another fragment from Melito: "If the sun, together with the stars and the moon, is bathed in the ocean, why should Christ not bathe in the Jordan, the King of the heavens and the ruler of creation, the sun of uprising who appeared to mortals in Hades and on earth alike, and who rose alone as a sun out of heaven?"¹⁶⁵ Ferguson says of this text: "The descensus theme of Christ's victory over the forces of evil obviously had cosmic consequences. These two motifs are brought together in the fragments of *On Baptism* ascribed to Melito of Sardis."¹⁶⁶ Here again is a theme which will be expanded upon by later writers.¹⁶⁷

In this same century we encounter Clement of Alexandria, an influential teacher at the famous catechetical school in that city. The most significant passage from Clement on the descent is found in his *Miscellanies*. As we will see, he is interested in seeing the work of Christ applied in a more expansive way, not just to "the saints" of the Old Testament, but also to "righteous pagans." He writes: "But as the proclamation [of the Gospel] has come now at the fit time, so also at the fit time were the Law and the Prophets given to the Barbarians, and Philosophy to the Greeks, to fit their ears for the Gospel."¹⁶⁸ Likely playing on Galatians 4:4, Clement sees the Law and the Prophets as well as Greek philosophy as preparatory for Christ's message.¹⁶⁹

Clement continues in this same chapter: "Wherefore the Lord preached the Gospel to those in Hades. Accordingly the Scripture says, 'Hades says to Destruction. We have not seen His form, but we have heard His voice.'"¹⁷⁰ Here he alludes to the texts from 1 Peter as well as a quote from Job 28:22. He argues that it is not Hades which actually speaks here but those who have been put there. Putting this together with the previous quote, the reference is to those who had not seen Christ's form but had heard his voice, presumably in either the Law and the Prophets or in the Greek philosophers. Clement goes on to specify that he wants to make sure that God is not charged with "injustice" for not making the gospel known to all.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, Behr, 75.

¹⁶⁶ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 122.

¹⁶⁷ Wicks also includes a couple of newly discovered fragments attributed to Melito which touch on the descent, *Christ's Saving Descent*, 292-3.

¹⁶⁸ Clement of Alexandria, "Miscellanies," 6.6, *ANF*, 2.490 [PG 9.265a].

¹⁶⁹ Wicks writes, "These are not salvific, but do dispose people to hear the gospel in faith." "Christ's Saving Descent," 302.

¹⁷⁰ Clement of Alexandria, "Miscellanies," 6.6, *ANF*, 2.490 [PG 9.268b].

¹⁷¹ Clement of Alexandria, "Miscellanies," 6.6, *ANF*, 2.490 [PG 9.273b].

Clement then offers what he believes to be scriptural support for this: “But how? Do not [the Scriptures] show that the Lord preached the Gospel to those that perished in the flood, or rather had been chained, and to those kept ‘in ward and guard’?”¹⁷² Up to this point, we have seen apparent allusions to 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6 but here we have these texts used explicitly in reference to the descent.¹⁷³ He asserts that Christ descended to Hades to “preach the Gospel,”¹⁷⁴ but in saying this, he wrestles with the idea of whether this preaching was for the Hebrews only or for all who were there. It should be noted that there is a certain tentativeness in Clement’s argument; but undoubtedly, he wants to see the scope of Christ’s saving work in a broader fashion. And he believes that the texts from 1 Peter support this. Some will see here the seeds of universalism, but this should be qualified somewhat because he at least requires that those who heard Christ in Hades had to embrace the gospel in faith. Some would also later charge that Clement’s teaching gives cover to those who believe in a “second chance” beyond this life for salvation. Later writers will wrestle with this concept. But from Clement’s perspective, it was not a “second chance” because those he has in mind had never heard the gospel in the first place. He says later in this same chapter: “If, then, He preached the Gospel to those in the flesh that they might not be condemned unjustly, how is it conceivable that He did not for the same cause preach the Gospel to those who had departed this life before His advent?”¹⁷⁵

MacCulloch comments on this text: “Clement thus argues that, as was insisted on by other writers, Gentiles were as acceptable to God as the Jews; but, as no other had yet done, he applies this argument to those Gentiles who had passed away before Christ’s coming.”¹⁷⁶ MacCulloch adds that this quote is: “the most beautiful and reasonable in all the many references to the descent in early Christian literature. For it is on reasonable grounds that he argues for the benefit of the Preaching in Hades to righteous Pagans.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² Clement of Alexandria, “Miscellanies,” 6.6, *ANF*, 2.490 [PG 9.268a].

¹⁷³ Huidekoper says of this text: “That Peter believed his Master to have been in the Underworld would seem an unavoidable inference from his argument in Acts. This being the case, it is not unnatural that the question should have arisen in his own mind, or been suggested by an inquirer, ‘What did the Master do there?’” Frederic Huidekoper, *The Belief of the First Three Centuries Concerning Christ’s Mission to the Underworld* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Co., 1854), 51.

¹⁷⁴ Text 21, Appendix II.

¹⁷⁵ Clement of Alexandria, “Miscellanies,” 6.6, *ANF*, 2.492 [PG 9.273c].

¹⁷⁶ MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 98.

¹⁷⁷ MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 101.

We come now to the final and most significant witness to the descent in the third century, Origen of Alexandria. As a careful, and sometimes, creative exegete, he finds the doctrine not only in the passages mentioned up to this point but in many more. In one of his homilies on Exodus, he explores the verse which says, “We will go a journey of three days in the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God.”¹⁷⁸ The mention of three days brings a number of other texts to mind for Origen. The first is Hosea 6:2: “God will revive us after two days, and on the third day we will arise and live in his sight.” After quoting this text he says: “The first day is the passion of the savior for us. The second is the day on which he descended into hell. The third day is the day of resurrection.”¹⁷⁹ He goes on to link this with baptism when he writes: “But if according to what we said above, the Apostle teaches us rightly that the mysteries of baptism are contained in these words [1 Cor. 10:12], it is necessary that ‘those who are baptized in Christ are baptized in his death and buried with him,’ also arise from the dead with him on the third day ...”¹⁸⁰ The second text quoted here is Romans 6 which echoes the themes from Exodus. In this passage, those who are baptized are released from slavery to sin in the same way that the exodus resulted in Israel’s deliverance from slavery to the Egyptians. These themes are lurking beneath the surface of these texts in Origen’s mind and others will draw them out.

There is a similar section in one of Origen’s homilies on Romans where he draws together several Biblical texts on the descent and offers his own illustrative parable.¹⁸¹ Some of these themes have been alluded to by previous authors but with Origen’s fertile mind and extensive knowledge of Scripture, we see him expanding the horizons concerning the descent. He employs the prophecy of Jesus concerning his death and burial in relation to the Jonah story (Matt 12:40), but he adds the concept of “divine deception” since Christ enters Hades incognito, “in the form of a slave.”¹⁸² He unfolds this further in his parable where a noble king (Christ), in order to deliver his subjects from an unjust tyrant (the devil), disguises himself as one of those under the tyrant for the express purpose of overthrowing him.¹⁸³ Presumably, under the disguise, he

¹⁷⁸ Exod 5:3.

¹⁷⁹ Ronald E. Heine, *Fathers of the Church Origen Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 278.

¹⁸⁰ Heine, *Origen Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, 278-9.

¹⁸¹ Text 22, Appendix II.

¹⁸² Phil 2:9.

¹⁸³ Matt 12:29 is employed once again in this context.

overtakes the tyrant unexpectedly and releases his subjects. He goes on to make this explicit by connecting the parable with Christ's descent and liberation of his people (a variation of the "divine deception" theme). It is a remarkable text which shows a great maturation of thought, building on those who explored the subject before him.

In a homily on Genesis 15:5, Origen comments on the phrase, "I will recall you from there in the end." He writes:

I think this means that at the end of the ages his only-begotten Son descended even into the nether regions, for the salvation of the world and recalled 'the first-formed man' from there. Understand that what he said to the thief, 'This day you shall be with me in paradise,' was not said to him alone but also to all the saints for whom he had descended into the nether regions. In this man more than in Jacob the words will be fulfilled, 'I will recall you from there in the end.'¹⁸⁴

Christ went to the "nether regions, for the salvation of the world" and this included the "first-formed man," meaning Adam. Origen then suggests that Christ's promise to the thief on the cross was not just for him but for all who were in Hades. This leads us to the question, Does this mean that the thief and those in Hades were translated to heaven that day? Probably not. More likely, he is envisioning "paradise" as equivalent with the aforementioned "Abraham's bosom" (the "good" compartment of Hades). This may suggest that when Christ arrived in Abraham's bosom that he transformed it into paradise.¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the comment in the text that Christ would "recall you from there in the end" suggests that they were taken elsewhere (presumably, to heaven in his resurrection/ascension). There are many other comments on the descent in Origen's writings. This sampling shows how the doctrine was being explored and applied in new ways.

¹⁸⁴ Just, *Luke*, ACCS NT 3, 366.

¹⁸⁵ Augustine, who will be discussed below, had a different take on Luke 23:43 when he wrote: "Recognize to whom you are commending yourself. You believe I am going to come, but even before I come, I am everywhere. That is why, although I am about to descend into hell, I have you with me in paradise today. You are with me and not entrusted to someone else. You see, my humility has come down to mortal human beings and to the dead, but my divinity has never departed from paradise." Just, *Luke*, ACCS NT 3, 366. For Augustine, "paradise" was another name for "heaven." Here and in other places, he is stressing the omnipresence of Christ's divine nature, asserting that he could be in "hell" and "paradise" (heaven) at the same time. In fact, he wrote a letter to Claudius Postumus Dardanus, a layman in Italy, which expanded upon this idea. See Saint Augustine, *Letters 156-210: Epistulae II* (New York: New City Press, 2004), 230-235.

The Doctrine of the Descent in the Fourth Century

Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea, is an early witness to this doctrine at the beginning of the fourth century. He asserts that the “laws of love summoned [Christ] even as far as death, and the dead themselves, so that he might summon the souls of those who were long dead.”¹⁸⁶ One text explicitly employed here for the first time in our survey is Hebrews 2:14-15: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”¹⁸⁷ By employing this text, Eusebius intertwines three themes: the Incarnation, the defeat of the devil, and the deliverance of those who were under the power of death (meaning in this context, those in Hades). He also suggests that Christ demonstrated power in that he was not willing to wait on death but gave up his spirit willingly so that he might descend and defeat it.¹⁸⁸

In his most important work, *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius recounts a legend about Jesus sending one of his seventy disciples (Thaddeus) to Abgarus, prince of Edessa, to heal him. Thaddeus presents the gospel in a succinct manner, including a reference to Christ’s descent: “he humbled himself, and died and debased his divinity and 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.”¹⁸⁹ This proclamation sounds reminiscent of the kerygma of Acts 2 and also echoes Philippians 2 (as well as the texts alluding to the “bars” of Hades). The idea that Christ descended alone but rose with many echoes one of the earlier quotes from Ignatius and makes explicit once again that he descended to deliver those who died before his advent to take them with him to heaven at his ascension.

Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, found himself constantly embroiled in theological controversy, and his writings on the descent are typically found in these

¹⁸⁶ Text 23, Appendix II.

¹⁸⁷ Gustaf Aulen says of this text, “Similarly, the Epistle to the Hebrews, in a passage which is perhaps the more often quoted by the Fathers than any other New Testament text (2:14) ...” *Christus Victor*, (London: Macmillan Publishing, 1975), 74. This appears to be a bit of an overstatement. My research only turned up five direct quotes whereas passages such as Matt 12:40 and 27:52-3 are quoted much more frequently.

¹⁸⁸ There may also be an attempt to show that Christ was not fearful of death, a charge which the Arians would make later (assumedly, to argue his status as less than divine). Athanasius will deal with this explicitly below.

¹⁸⁹ Text 24, Appendix II.

contexts. In one instance, he responded to the Arian claim that Christ was less than divine because he was terrified of death by saying:

Whence neither can the Lord be forsaken by the Father, who is ever in the Father, both before He spoke, and when He uttered this cry.¹⁹⁰ Nor is it lawful to say that the Lord was in terror, at whom the keepers of hell's gates shuddered and set open hell, and the graves did gape, and many bodies of the saints arose and appeared to their own people.¹⁹¹

The quote regarding the keepers of hell's gates shuddering is taken from Job 38:17 and is one that Athanasius employed several times in reference to the descent.¹⁹² He also alludes to Matthew 27:52-3 concerning the saints rising from their graves at Christ's resurrection.¹⁹³ Athanasius' point against the Arians was that Christ was not in terror at the thought of death; rather, he became the cause of terror for those who were the gatekeepers of Hades at his descent.

In another argument against the Arians, Athanasius employs this doctrine to assert Christ's divinity by first arguing that no mere mortal has the power to lay down his life and take it up again (John 10:17-18).¹⁹⁴ He then quotes Psalm 16:10 which has Christ saying to the Father, "You will not leave my soul in Hades." Writing before the Apollinarian controversy, Athanasius does not directly assert that Christ descended in his human soul. For him, the emphasis was on the Logos departing from the body and descending to Hades.¹⁹⁵ It should be recalled that in this context, he was writing against the Arians who denied the deity of Christ, not his humanity. He appears to allude to the same concept in a passage from *On the Incarnation* where he asserts that "the Lord touched all parts of creation" in his descent.¹⁹⁶ Christ's redemptive work is set forth as a cosmic event (Athanasius specifically quotes Col 2:15 where Christ disarms the principalities and powers, triumphing on the cross). This passage sets forth the cosmic

¹⁹⁰ It should be noted that "this cry" is a reference to Ps 22:1 which Christ quoted from the cross. This text will be central to John Calvin's view of the descent, albeit with a vastly different meaning from what Athanasius taught here as we shall see later.

¹⁹¹ Athanasius, "Four Discourses against the Arians," *NPNF 2*, 4.424. [PG 26.444b-c]. See also Text 25, Appendix II.

¹⁹² He appeals to this same text earlier in this same work, 3.54 and again in his work called "Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia," 1.8, Athanasius, *NPNF*, 4.454 [PG 26.693a].

¹⁹³ The phrase "set open hell" may also be related to Rev 1:18 where Christ is holds the keys to Death and Hades.

¹⁹⁴ Joel C. Elowsky, *John 1-10*, ACCS NT 4a (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 352.

¹⁹⁵ Athanasius' understanding of the human soul in Jesus is a controverted topic in modern scholarship. For opposing views see Aloys Grillmeier, S.J. *Christ in the Christian Tradition, Volume 1: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*. Second (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1975), 315-17; and G. Christopher Stead, "The Scriptures and the Soul of Christ in Athanasius," *Vigiliae Christianae* 36 (1982): 233-250.

¹⁹⁶ Text 26, Appendix II.

scope of Christ's saving work (along with Eph 4:7-11, Phil 2:5-11 and Col 1:20). That is, his death, descent, resurrection, and ascension are of such significance that the effects are felt from the lowest depths (Hades) to the highest heaven.¹⁹⁷

The early fourth century is a good context to discuss the doctrine of Christ's descent and the early creeds. The doctrine was significant enough in the early church to make its way into the Apostles' Creed. This creed took on this name because of an early legend that said that the apostles, before they departed on their various missionary endeavors, came to a stated doctrinal agreement which they would all profess in their ministry. Some versions of this legend have each of the twelve apostles contributing one line to the creed. This legend may be found as early as Rufinus' fourth century commentary on the Creed.¹⁹⁸ Even though this explanation of the Creed's origin was widely accepted in the ancient church, few scholars today believe this to be the case.¹⁹⁹

The provenance of the Apostles' Creed is more complicated and has been widely researched and discussed in recent centuries. The more likely scenario of the Creed's origin is that it developed from the kerygma found in the Acts of the Apostles into the rule of faith (*regula fidei*), which is found in the Apostolic Fathers, into the third century baptismal creed of Rome (typically called R). From Rome it spread to the various churches around the ancient world.²⁰⁰ As the Creed spread, it was occasionally expanded to deal with doctrinal controversies. One of these expansions was the clause "he descended into hell." Rufinus tells us that this clause was in the creed of Aquileia but was not found in the Roman or Eastern creeds.²⁰¹ Kelly adds, "It occurs in some Spanish creeds of the sixth century, and was a feature of the Gallican creeds of the seventh and eighth centuries, beginning with that of St Caesarius of Arles in the

¹⁹⁷ See also "Ep. To Epictetus" 5-6 where Athanasius alludes to 1 Pet 3:19 in reference to the descent. *NPNF*, 4:572 [PG 26.1060a]. Also, "Festal Letter," 10.10, *NPNF*, 4:531 [PG 26.1402b-c].

¹⁹⁸ Rufinus of Aquileia, "A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed," *NPNF* 2, 3.553.

¹⁹⁹ Even in the sixteenth century, this was essentially acknowledged. Alexander Nowell's catechism, in response to the question as to why it is called the Apostles' Creed, includes the answer: "Because it was first received from the apostles' own mouth, or most faithfully gathered out of their writings ..." G. E. Corrie, ed., *A Catechism Written in Latin by Alexander Nowell, Dean of St. Paul's: Together with The Same Catechism Translated into English by Thomas Norton*, vol. 53, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1853), 142.

²⁰⁰ For a more extensive discussion of the Creed's origins, see Chapter 1 of Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries*, *Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia* 43 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2002) and Chapter 13 of Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*.

²⁰¹ However, he says that Christ's descent was implied in the phrase "he was buried" (see below). Rufinus of Aquileia, "A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed," 18, *NPNF* 2, 3.550.

sixth.”²⁰² By the eighth century, the descensus clause was a staple in the Apostles’ Creed. The other main Western creed, called “The Athanasian,” will be discussed below.

What is intriguing is the fact that even though the descent was pervasively taught in the fourth century, it was not inserted into the Creed of Nicaea in AD 325. The pertinent section of the Nicene Creed says of Christ, “Who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, becoming human. He suffered and the third day he rose, and ascended into the heavens.”²⁰³ However, after that council, as the battle raged between the Nicene and Arian parties, there were several gatherings of bishops which attempted to bring peace. In preparation for one of the synods at Sirmium in AD 359, a statement of faith was produced for discussion which is commonly called the “Dated Creed.” It inserted the following statement concerning Christ: “he was crucified and died and went down to the subterranean places and fulfilled his mission there, and the gate-keepers of Hell (Hades) shuddered when they saw him; and he rose from the dead on the third day ...”²⁰⁴

Similar statements are also found inserted into creedal formulations at Niké and Constantinople around the same time.²⁰⁵ Given the ensuing controversy involving Apollinarius after Nicaea,²⁰⁶ it is curious that a statement on the descent was not added to the Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381), especially since it would appear to have a clear application to that controversy (which denied that Jesus had a human soul).²⁰⁷ In fact, Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, wrote an anti-heretical work entitled *Panarion* in AD

²⁰² Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 378.

²⁰³ John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, Third Edition (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), 31.

²⁰⁴ R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 363. It is worth noting that one of Athanasius’ favorite passages on the descent (Job 38:17) is quoted in the Dated Creed. Since this creed was an attempt to include “moderate Arians,” the bishops who were loyal to the decisions of Nicaea may have been reluctant to acquiesce to any additions from it.

²⁰⁵ MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 67.

²⁰⁶ cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, First (Longmans Green and Co, 1950), 332-338.

²⁰⁷ Laufer sees it as applicable in this context. After quoting Gregory’s famous phrase concerning the humanity of Christ, “that which is not assumed is not healed,” she says: “My argument is that the descensus clause is essential to Christology, specifically to the doctrine of the incarnation.” *Hell’s Destruction*, 3. Some have suggested that the Descensus clause was inserted in the Creeds on account of the Apollinarian heresy [John Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1797), 1.358]; Luckock, *The Intermediate State*, 128. Kelly is not convinced. He follows Swete in arguing that it was likely employed against the earlier heresy of Docetism. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 382–83. Maybe it would be more comprehensive to say that the doctrine was first employed to combat Docetism and later, re-employed to combat the heresy of Apollinarianism, because of its implications regarding Christ’s full humanity.

377 where he made this connection.²⁰⁸ He applied the descent against Apollinarius when he wrote:

And I have a great deal to say < about this >. He rose from the dead, what is more, forced the gates of hades, took the captives, brought them upward; and after rising the third day in his holy flesh itself, and in his holy soul, mind and entire human nature, he became perfect man united with Godhead, for he had joined his manhood to his Godhead, and death 'hath no more dominion over him' ... He descended to hades in his Godhead with his soul, bravely and mightily freed the prisoners, truly ascended the third day, the divine Word with his holy soul, with the captives he had rescued; he was truly raised with body, soul and all his human nature.²⁰⁹

Despite the fact that the descent was widely held and would have been applicable against the Apollinarian heresy, it was not inserted into the Constantinopolitan Creed (commonly called The Nicene Creed today) which says, "He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures, and ascended to heaven ..." ²¹⁰ However, in that context, "was buried" likely implied the concept of the descent of the soul to Hades. In fact, MacCulloch points out that an anathema from this same council "condemned those who denied that the Logos in His 'reasonable soul' had descended to Hades."²¹¹ We will see later that Rufinus also argued that the phrase "he was buried" in the Apostles' Creed implied the descent of Christ's soul at death. There is some irony in the fact that the early Eastern creeds did not ultimately insert the clause, but as Kelly says, "it is very likely that the West admitted it to its formularies under Eastern influence."²¹²

In the fourth century, we encounter the works of Ephrem the Syrian. Buchan comments on the Syrian context when he writes:

In the ancient church, Christ's descent to the underworld was nowhere earlier, more elaborately, or more influentially expressed than in the geographical and cultural milieu of Syriac Christianity, and it was

²⁰⁸ Raven suggests that Epiphanius may have been the first bishop "to realise and repudiate the teaching of Apollinarius." Charles E. Raven, *Apollinarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 146. Epiphanius' work was similar to Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*.

²⁰⁹ Frank Williams, trans. *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III. De Fide*. Second (Boston: Brill, 2013), 606, 613.

²¹⁰ Leith, ed. *Creeds of the Churches*, 33.

²¹¹ MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 71.

²¹² Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 379.

nowhere within this milieu more frequently, effectively, and influentially implemented than in the writings of Saint Ephrem the Syrian.²¹³

In one of his homilies, Ephrem wrote:

Since death was unable to devour Him without a body, or Sheol to swallow Him without flesh, He came to a virgin to provide Himself with a means to Sheol ... And with a body from a virgin He entered Sheol, broke into its vaults, and carried off its treasures ... When death came confidently, as usual, to feed on mortal fruit, life, the killer of death, was lying in wait, so that when death swallowed (life) with no apprehension, it would vomit it out, and many others with it.²¹⁴

Here Ephrem envisions Sheol as a beast, swallowing Christ, and later being forced to vomit him out.²¹⁵ Whereas Athanasius emphasized the necessity of Christ's divinity at his descent, Ephrem emphasized the necessity of his humanity in accomplishing this vital mission of defeating Death and Sheol.²¹⁶

Ephrem was also one of the earliest hymn writers in the church and the descent was one of his favorite themes. Making the connection between Christ and Adam, he asserts that Christ "was embalmed for Adam's death, He rose up and raised Adam up in His glory."²¹⁷ In another hymn, Ephrem personifies Death and imagines it describing the torment that it experienced when Christ descended to Sheol:

While he was living he brought to life and restored three that were dead;
But now by his death at the gate of Sheol they have trampled on me,
The dead who have come to life,
Whom I was going to shut in.²¹⁸

Buchan comments on this text saying:

The 'three that were dead' whom Jesus restores to life—the son of the widow of Naim (Lk 7.11-17), the daughter of Jairus (Mt 9.18-26; Mk 5.21-43; Lk 8.50-56), and Lazarus (John 10.40-11.44)—were all seen by Ephrem as demonstrations of Christ's power over death ... precursors of the resuscitation of the saints at the crucifixion, harbingers of his own death and resurrection, and antecedent evidence of the resurrection of all the dead.²¹⁹

²¹³ Thomas Buchan, *Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam from Sheol* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2004), 22. What makes this even more intriguing is the fact that the Apostle Peter, who alludes to the descent in his sermon in Acts 2 and his first epistle, spent some time in Antioch of Syria (Acts 10-11). See also Texts 27 and 28 in Appendix II from Aphrahat, a near contemporary of Ephrem in Syria.

²¹⁴ Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 61.

²¹⁵ This is related conceptually to the "fish-hook" analogy discussed above.

²¹⁶ Text 29, Appendix II.

²¹⁷ Text 30, Appendix II.

²¹⁸ Text 31, Appendix II.

²¹⁹ Nisibene Hymns, 36.13, Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 142.

It is clear that Ephrem envisioned this doctrine as a crucial aspect of the saving work of Christ.

Cyril, the fourth century bishop of Jerusalem, touched upon this doctrine several times in his Catechetical Lectures. It is significant that this topic made it into the basic instructions for those who came to be baptized during his ministry.²²⁰ He links together Christ's humanity and deity in the descent. He was laid in the tomb as a man, but the rocks "were rent asunder by terror because of him" [alluding to Matt 27:51-3].²²¹ In this text, he also touches on several themes we have already seen but with some new twists. For instance, he seems to conflate the terror of the rocks with the terror of the gatekeepers in Hades at Christ's death. He also appears to anticipate some angst among his hearers about Christ descending to Hades when he says, "tell me, couldst thou wish the living only to enjoy His grace, and that, though, most of them are unholy," and then he goes on to list those in Hades who needed to hear from Christ: Adam, Isaiah, David, Samuel, all the prophets, and there is even an allusion to John the Baptist (implying Matt 11:3 which we saw earlier associated with the descent). The concern once again is that the saving work of Christ would reach into the past to encompass all their fathers in the faith. Note again that Cyril sees Christ's descent as intended to "redeem the righteous."

Cyril also offers a fascinating contrast between the ministries of Jonah and Christ, drawing on Matthew 12:40. Regarding the descent, Jonah was cast into the whale's belly while Christ went to where "the invisible whale of death is."²²² Here we have an allusion to death/Hades as a whale (envisioned earlier as a beast).²²³ Christ went down there willingly so that "death might cast up those whom he had devoured," (besides the obvious allusion to Jonah, Hos 13:14 is also quoted: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; and from the hand of death I will redeem them.").²²⁴ In another lecture

²²⁰ Notably, the descent clause is not found in the Creed of Jerusalem which he likely would have been using. Commenting on the later commentary from Rufinus on the Apostles' Creed, one author writes: "It is also remarkable to find that forty years earlier (c. 348) Cyril of Jerusalem in commenting on the Creed of his church (which did *not* contain the clause), introduces the doctrine of the descent under the head of the burial, and writes fully concerning it and its object, saying that 'He descended into the realms beneath the earth that He might thence ransom the righteous.'" Edgar C. S. Gibson, *The Three Creeds*, eds. W. C. E. Newbolt and Darwell Stone, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 71.

²²¹ Text 32, Appendix II.

²²² Text 33, Appendix II.

²²³ The allusion is not totally unfounded since the great fish and Sheol appear to be conflated in Jonah's prayer: "Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 'I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.'" (Jonah 2:1-2 ESV)

²²⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, "Catechetical Lectures," *NPNF 2*, 7.98-9. [PG 33.845c-848a].

given to the newly baptized (probably at the Easter Vigil), Cyril articulates what had just happened in their baptism.²²⁵ Drawing on several Biblical allusions, Cyril links their baptism with the death, burial, descent and resurrection of Christ, drawing primarily upon Romans 6:3-14, which we have already seen connected with the descent. Even though the descensus clause was not in the Jerusalem Creed, Cyril considered the doctrine significant enough to include in his lectures to the newly initiated.

Also during this century, the Cappadocian Fathers all commented on this doctrine. Gregory of Nazianzus, in one of his beloved paradoxical statements exploring the divinity and humanity of Christ, writes: “He dies but he brings life ... He goes down to hades, yet he leads souls up, [and] ascends to heaven ...”²²⁶ In another place, he writes:

Many indeed are the miracles of that time: God crucified; the sun darkened and again rekindled; for it was fitting that the creatures should suffer with their Creator; the veil rent; the Blood and Water shed from His Side; the one as from a man, the other as above man; the rocks rent for the Rock’s sake; the dead raised for a pledge of the final Resurrection of all men ...²²⁷

Note the reference again to Matthew 27:52-3, which he sees as a figure of the future general resurrection. Gregory also sees Christ’s baptism as signifying his cosmic saving work: “Jesus goeth up out of the water ... for with Himself He carries up the world ... and sees the heaven opened which Adam had shut against himself and all his posterity, as the gates of Paradise by the flaming sword.”²²⁸ Again, this statement is reminiscent of the line from the *Te Deum*, that Christ “opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.”

Gregory’s friend and fellow bishop, Basil of Caesarea also engages with this doctrine. In his homily on Psalm 49, Basil sees a connection with the descent in verse 14: “They are laid in hell like sheep: death shall feed upon them.” The “enemy” (presumably, Satan), cast mankind into “his own prison and has handed them over to death to feed.” Christ as the “true Shepherd” laid down his life for the sheep and then led these prisoners out of hell on the early morning of his resurrection.²²⁹ We saw

²²⁵ Text 34, Appendix II.

²²⁶ Text 35, Appendix II.

²²⁷ Gregory Nazianzen, “Select Orations,” 45.29, *NPNF 2*, 7.433.

²²⁸ Nazianzen, “Select Orations,” *NPNF 2*, 7.358. On this text, see Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 122.

²²⁹ Text 36, Appendix II.

earlier the theme of Christ as Shepherd associated with the descent (drawing on the parable in Luke 15); but here, Basil draws on John 10 with Christ as the Good Shepherd extending his pastoral ministry into Hades.²³⁰ In his work *On the Holy Spirit*, Basil also makes a connection between baptism and the death, burial, descent and resurrection of Christ.²³¹ Basil asks, “How then do we achieve the descent into hell? By imitating, through baptism, the burial of Christ. For the bodies of the baptized are, as it were, buried in the water.”²³²

The third Cappadocian, Basil’s brother, Gregory of Nyssa, offers us a development of the earlier notion of “divine deception.” After setting forth the descent of Christ straightforwardly, Gregory explains what happened during the three-day period. Christ, the Wisdom of God, made the “Mind” which dwells in the heart of the earth “utterly foolish.”²³³ The “Mind” is a reference to the devil, drawing on Isaiah 14. The devil saw Christ in the flesh and sought to devour him, not knowing that his flesh was “Godbearing.” An analogy is made with a fish devouring bait only to find out that it has swallowed a hook as well.²³⁴ The idea of the “fishhook” (which we also saw earlier) comes from Job 41:1 which says, “Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook or press down his tongue with a cord?” We may find this line of thinking odd, but Aulen notes, “This idea of the deception of the devil occurs frequently, both in the East and the West.”²³⁵

Other Biblical texts which may offer further support to the idea of “divine deception” include Psalm 18:26 where the Psalmist says to God, “With the pure You will show Yourself pure; And with the devious You will show Yourself shrewd.”²³⁶ Another text is 1 Corinthians 2:7-8: “But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” Origen saw this latter text as associated with the concept of “divine deception” and Gregory was

²³⁰ Hilarion makes a similar statement, *Christ the Conqueror*, 56. You would think that these themes would have been also explored in Psalm 23 which talks about the Lord as Shepherd, walking through the valley of the shadow of death, but I was unable to locate any who did.

²³¹ Text 37, Appendix II.

²³² Basil of Caesarea, “On the Holy Spirit,” *NPNF 2*, 8.21-22 [PG 32.129b].

²³³ Text 38, Appendix II.

²³⁴ See also his Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Discourse: A Handbook for Catechists*, trans. Ignatius Green (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2019), 115.

²³⁵ Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 53.

²³⁶ Compare this with what is said of the serpent when he is introduced in Gen 3:1.

certainly influenced by him.²³⁷ The notion that Christ outwitted the devil and defeated him through the cross and the descent is a significant theme among the early theologians.

In a sermon likely preached at the Easter vigil, Gregory says that at the resurrection, “the iron gates of death were crushed ... [and] the brazen bars of Hades were shattered” [Isa 45:2-3]²³⁸ He then alludes to Isaiah 9:14, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.” Matthew saw this text as relating to the light shining on the Gentiles with Christ preaching to them,²³⁹ but Gregory also sees the saving work of Christ being extended to those in Hades. That is, “those who sat in darkness” is also applied to those who were in Hades.

One final witness from this century should be noted: Ambrose, bishop of Milan and spiritual father to Augustine of Hippo. He affirms the descent by calling Christ the “Vanquisher of Death” and saying that in his resurrection, Christ “burst the bonds of hell and exalted the souls of the godly” (note the scope of his deliverance once again). He also argues that before Christ ascended into heaven that no one had gone there (appealing to John 3:13); this included Enoch and Elijah, who had both apparently escaped death. Ambrose concludes by appealing to Psalm 24 (a text which would later be popularly associated with the descent): “And therefore [the angels] descrying the approach of the Lord of all, first and only Vanquisher of Death, bade their princes that the gates should be lifted up, saying in adoration, ‘Lift up the gates, such as are princes amongst you, and be ye lifted Up, O everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in.’”²⁴⁰ Ambrose’s conclusion is that heaven was shut to humanity until the ascension of Christ. This topic will resurface in later debates.²⁴¹ One other work which belongs to this time period but has not been discussed is the so-called *Gospel of Nicodemus*. In light of its influence on the mystery plays of the Middle Ages, we will postpone discussion of it until the opening of Chapter 2.

²³⁷ Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 51.

²³⁸ Andreas Spira and Christoph Klock. *Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa: A Translation and Commentary*. (Cambridge, MA: Mercer Univ Press, 1981), 35.

²³⁹ Matt 4:16.

²⁴⁰ Ambrose, “Exposition of the Christian Faith,” *NPNF* 2, 10.263 [PL 16.644b].

²⁴¹ Text 40, Appendix II.

The Doctrine of the Descent in the Fifth Century

We begin this section with an author whose ministry bridged the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Rufinus of Aquileia. Rufinus is important because he offers us the earliest extant commentary on the Apostles' Creed. In his section on the death of Christ, he speaks of the cross as a "signal trophy" marking Christ's victory over the enemy. He then argues that this victory amounted to bringing "three kingdoms at once into subjection," drawing on Paul's statement, "that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth" [Phil 2:10].²⁴² The cross was the sign of this victory, with the top of the cross pointing to heaven, the arms of the cross reaching out to the earth; and with the portion of the cross buried in the earth, Christ "signified His bringing into subjection to Himself the kingdoms of the nether world." Rufinus also offers fresh insight regarding the notion of "divine deception."²⁴³ Echoing Gregory Nyssen, he says that as a fish seizes bait on a hook so the devil seized the body of Jesus in death, "not being aware of the hook of Divinity."²⁴⁴ Besides the reference to the hook in Isaiah 14 and Job 41, he also appeals to Ezekiel 29:4-5 and the LXX version of Psalm 74:14 to strengthen this argument.

Later, Rufinus explicitly discusses the article, "He descended into hell," which was in the Aquilean version of the Creed: "But it should be known that the clause, 'He descended into Hell,' is not added in the Creed of the Roman Church, neither is it in that of the Oriental Churches. It seems to be implied, however, when it is said that 'He was buried.'"²⁴⁵ Some would later take from this that Rufinus was equating "he descended into hell" with "he was buried" (most notably, Christopher Carlile and Heinrich Bullinger, who will be discussed in Chapter 3).²⁴⁶ But in light of the fact that he had just discussed the doctrine of the descent in the preceding section and then elaborated upon it after this (see below), this is erroneous. Rather, he is suggesting that the descent of Christ's soul into Hades at death is implied by the fact that the Creed says he was buried (meaning, what happens to every other human at death, when the soul departs to the

²⁴² Text 41, Appendix II.

²⁴³ Text 42, Appendix II.

²⁴⁴ Rufinus, "A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed," 18, *NPNF 2*, 3.550 [PL 21.355a-b].

²⁴⁵ Rufinus, "A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed," 18, *NPNF 2*, 3.550 [PL 21.355a-b].

²⁴⁶ William Whitaker makes the same point. *A Disputation on Holy Scripture Against the Papists* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000), 537.

realm of the dead, is what happened to Jesus).²⁴⁷ This notion is strengthened by the fact that Rufinus goes on to discuss the descent in greater detail, offering a series of proof texts which include several references to the Psalter, as well as a direct quotation of 1 Peter 3.²⁴⁸

In the ensuing section on the resurrection, Rufinus posits the purpose for Christ's descent, mostly employing common themes which have been explored earlier, while adding one new twist at the end.²⁴⁹ When he quotes the text from Matthew 27 about the saints being raised at Christ's resurrection, he takes the following statement that they "entered the holy city" to mean the heavenly Jerusalem (alluding to Gal 4:26). Given Rufinus' exposition of the descent in his commentary, it is disingenuous of later writers to suggest that he thought that "he descended into hell" was nothing more than a restatement of "he was buried."²⁵⁰ Rather, it is clear that he believed the descent of Christ's soul to Sheol was implied by the words "he was buried" (even when the descensus clause was absent in the Creed).

Also in the fifth century, we find the Biblical scholar Jerome offering some noteworthy insights. Commenting on Ephesians 4:9, he says that Christ "descended to the lower parts and ascended to heaven, so that he might bring fulfillment to those who were in those regions ..." ²⁵¹ This is another witness to the cosmic scope of Christ's work while playing on the text's discussion of Christ's work as a divine mystery.²⁵²

In his commentary on Daniel 3, where the three young Hebrew men were thrown into the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar because they refused to worship his statue, Jerome links the presence of the fourth man in the fire to the descent:

But as for its typical significance, this angel or son of God foreshadows our Lord Jesus Christ, who descended into the furnace of hell, in which the souls of both sinners and of the righteous were imprisoned, in order that He might without suffering any scorching by fire or injury to His person deliver those who were held imprisoned by chains of death.²⁵³

This text suggests that Christ descended "into the furnace of hell" [meaning, the place of torment], but Jerome is also careful to note that this was "without suffering any

²⁴⁷ As discussed above, this means that at death, the soul departed to Hades while the body was laid in the tomb.

²⁴⁸ Text 43, Appendix II.

²⁴⁹ Rufinus, "A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed," 18, *NPNF 2*, 3.554.

²⁵⁰ In the sixteenth century, Erasmus, Heinrich Bullinger, and William Perkins would do this.

²⁵¹ Text 45, Appendix II.

²⁵² cf. Eph 1:9; 3:3-4, 9.

²⁵³ Gleason Archer, Jr., *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 44.

scorching fire ...”²⁵⁴ This is due to the fact that in the story from Daniel, neither the three men nor the one “like the Son of God” suffered from the flames. Given the fact that in the story, the fire did not touch the men who were thrown into it, even if Jerome envisioned Christ going to this furnace, it is clear that he did not believe that he suffered there.

Jerome also offers an intriguing insight on the location of Christ’s crucifixion, which provides another link with the redemption of Adam and an allusion to his rescue from Hades (employing Eph 5:14):

Tradition has it that in this city, in fact, on this very spot, Adam lived and died. The place where our Lord was crucified is called Calvary, because the skull of the first man was buried there. So it came to pass that the second Adam, that is, the blood of Christ, as it dropped from the cross, washed away the sins of the buried one who was first formed, the first Adam, and thus the words of the apostle were fulfilled: ‘Awake, you who sleep, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.’²⁵⁵

Here Jerome is likely drawing on legends from Jerusalem (where he spent time), but the text shows again how the fathers were interested in seeing the saving work of Christ extended to Adam.

One of the most important commentators of this period, especially on Paul’s epistles, was Ambrosiaster.²⁵⁶ In his commentary on Ephesians 4:9, he alludes to the 1 Peter texts saying that Christ “descended to the heart of the world, so that he might preach to the dead, that all who desired him might be set free.”²⁵⁷ In his comments on the next verse he says that Christ descended to earth in the incarnation and then, after dying, descended to hell before rising and ascending to heaven. What is noteworthy

²⁵⁴ The notion that Christ descended to suffer does not occur until the time of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464). This issue has become a significant contemporary debate in the Roman Catholic Church because of the teaching of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, ed. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990). See the critique by Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007) and *Christ’s Descent into Hell: John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger, and Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2016). Wicks also writes, “Regarding the debate over Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology of redemption, these early testimonies give strong support to his critics. They offer no indication at all of the descent being Christ’s extreme experience of Godforsakenness in the netherworld.” “Christ’s Saving Descent,” 308.

²⁵⁵ Joel C. Elowsky, *John 11–21*, ACCS NT 4b (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 309–310. For further quotations from Jerome on the descent, see William Carrington Finch, “The Descent Into Hades: An Exegetical, Historical, and Theological Study” (Doctoral Dissertation, Madison, NJ, Drew University, 1940), 177–78.

²⁵⁶ This name was apparently crafted by the Benedictine editors of these works in the seventeenth century because earlier tradition had attributed the works to Ambrose. Gerald L. Bray, *Commentaries on Galatians-Philemon: Ambrosiaster*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), xv.

²⁵⁷ Text 46, Appendix II.

here is that he is another witness to the idea that no one had ascended into heaven prior to the ministry of Christ (using John 3:13 as a proof text).²⁵⁸

Ambrosiaster also connects another passage which we have not encountered yet with this doctrine, Romans 14:9. Christ “allowed himself to be killed by his enemies, so that by going down to hell he could condemn sin, because he was killed as an innocent man, and liberate those whom the devil held there.” By virtue of showing salvation to the living and delivering the dead from hell, “he is Lord of both the living and the dead.”²⁵⁹ This idea is conceptually related to Revelation 1:18, where Jesus is envisioned holding the keys to Death and Hades.

John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople (AD 398-404), refers to this doctrine numerous times in his homilies including the one on Hebrews 10:19-23. Christ offered “a new and living way” to heaven as opposed to the prior “way of death” which led to Hades. Chrysostom adds that Christ opened the gates of heaven, something which had not even been done for Abraham, implying that no one had entered heaven before Christ. Here again, these comments anticipate the sixteenth century debates.²⁶⁰

Chrysostom offers another reference to the descent in his second homily on Matthew’s gospel. With great rhetorical flair, Chrysostom introduces his sermon series on this gospel as a glorious battle in which he plans to show the cross as a “trophy” of victory as well as the spoils won by Christ, “the booty of our king.” On the cross, “death is set forth crucified ... and sin is hanged up.” This was made possible when “God from Heaven, arising ‘out of the royal thrones, leaped down’ unto the earth, and even unto hell itself, and stood in the battle array ...”²⁶¹ The descent is described as the tyrant being bound and his dens being broken up and laid open (obviously alluding to Matt 12:29). Here we see how this doctrine was employed homiletically for hope and comfort.

Augustine of Hippo will serve as our final witness from this period. Because of his status in the West he will be quite significant in our later discussions. Daniel D. Williams, echoing a famous statement of Alfred North Whitehead about Plato and Western philosophy, suggested that all of Western theology after Augustine has been a

²⁵⁸ Text 47, Appendix II.

²⁵⁹ Text 48, Appendix II.

²⁶⁰ Text 49, Appendix II.

²⁶¹ Text 50, Appendix II.

series of footnotes to him.²⁶² Augustine argued strenuously for the descent. In one quip, which would be employed by numerous subsequent authors, he wrote: “Who, therefore, except an infidel, will deny that Christ was in hell?”²⁶³ But he admits to being perplexed over some of the details. Connell says, “It is not an exaggeration to say that the descent into hell stirred up significant puzzlement for the prolific bishop of Hippo in ancient North Africa.”²⁶⁴ The puzzlement, as we shall see, is not over whether Christ went to Hades; it is over what he did there.²⁶⁵

In one sermon, Augustine develops the “divine deception” theme in a related but slightly different manner from the Eastern authors we have encountered:

The devil was defeated by his own victorious achievement. The devil, you see, hugged himself for joy, when by leading the first man astray he cast him down into death. He killed the first man [Adam] by leading him astray; by killing the last man [Christ], he lost the first from his snare ... The devil was exultant when Christ died, and by that very death of Christ was the devil conquered; it’s as though he took the bait in a mousetrap. He was delighted at the death, as being the commander of death; what he delighted in, that’s where the trap was set for him. The mousetrap for the devil was the cross of the Lord; the bait he would be caught by, the death of the Lord.²⁶⁶

Note the interesting connection between the ensnaring of Adam and the releasing work of Christ. The descent is not explicitly noted but is implied in the idea of Adam being released “from his snare,” and in the phrase, “the bait which caught him was the *death of the Lord*,” implying that the devil was undone by Christ’s divinity. The mousetrap has replaced the fishhook in this analogy.

Augustine’s most extensive work on the subject is in a letter responding to Evodius, a fellow bishop, who posed a question about the interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22. In the opening response, Augustine acknowledges that this text “is wont to perplex me most seriously.” He even says, “I therefore refer this question back to yourself, that

²⁶² Roy W. Battenhouse, ed., *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 4.

²⁶³ Augustine of Hippo, “Letters of St. Augustin,” *NPNF 1*, 1.516.

²⁶⁴ Martin F. Connell, “Descensus Christi Ad Inferos: Christ’s Descent to the Dead,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 270.

²⁶⁵ His perplexity on the subject likely influenced the amount of his teaching on the subject which, compared to other vital doctrines, is rather scarce considering his voluminous output. This is evident in his catechetical training where the descent is not included in his teaching on the Creed and does not appear to have been broached at all in that context. For example, the subject is not referenced in Harmless’ excellent work on the subject: William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995).

²⁶⁶ Augustine, Sermon, 263 in *Sermons III/7 (230-272B) on the Liturgical Seasons* trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1993), 219-20.

if either you yourself be able, or can find any other person who is able to do so, you may remove and terminate my perplexities on the subject.” Then he adds, “In the meantime, I will communicate to you the things in the passage which occasion difficulty to me, that, keeping in view these remarks on the words of the apostle, you may either exercise your own thoughts on them, or consult any one whom you find competent to pronounce an opinion.”²⁶⁷ We should note that Augustine is tentative in his interpretation. Later writers would employ his interpretation without acknowledging this tentativeness.

Augustine acknowledges his belief in Christ’s descent when he writes: “It is established beyond question that the Lord, after He had been put to death in the flesh, ‘descended into hell ...’²⁶⁸ He appeals to the prophecy of Psalm 16:10 which was quoted in Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2). The real conundrum for Augustine is the interpretation of 1 Peter which says that the Lord made proclamation to “the spirits in prison” (3:19) and then preached “to the dead” (4:6). In his letter to Augustine, Evodius had claimed that some were teaching that Christ descended to Hades to preach and thereby, to empty it (meaning, all in Hades embraced his preaching and were delivered by Christ to heaven).²⁶⁹ Augustine offers an alternative view of the text, giving a spiritual interpretation. He believes that when the text talks about Jesus going to make proclamation to ‘the spirits in prison’ or preaching to ‘the dead,’ that these are references to those who were alive but imprisoned by sin or spiritually dead (not in Hades). Furthermore, since the text references “the days of Noah,” Augustine asserts that the preaching noted took place through Noah, who spoke to his generation by the Spirit of Christ who was in him.²⁷⁰ In the final analysis, Augustine denied that the Petrine texts made reference to the descent at all.

Roman Catholics and Protestants would wrestle with Augustine’s interpretation of 1 Peter in the sixteenth century. The Rheims New Testament references Augustine’s interpretation but then quotes other fathers who argued that 1 Peter 3 was about the descent.²⁷¹ William Fulke (protestant) appealed to Augustine as he argued against

²⁶⁷ Augustine of Hippo, “Letters of St. Augustin,” 164.1, *NPNF 1*, 1.515.

²⁶⁸ Text 52, Appendix II.

²⁶⁹ Augustine considered those who held this position to be misguided and devoted two chapters (18 and 24) of Book 21 in *The City of God* to refuting their views. See R. Bauckham, “Augustine, the ‘Compassionate’ Christians, and the Apocalypse of Peter” in *The Fate of the Dead*, 149-159.

²⁷⁰ “Letters of St. Augustin,” *NPNF 1*, 1.517-20.

²⁷¹ *The New Testament of Jesus Christ, Translated Faithfully into English, out of the Authentical Latin, According to the Best Corrected Copies of the Same.* (Rhemes: Iohn Fogny, 1582), 661.

Gregory Martin (Roman Catholic).²⁷² Bishop Thomas Bilson originally agreed with Augustine's interpretation but was later convinced by Richard Parkes to the contrary.²⁷³ Heinrich Bullinger, who would argue against a local descent of Christ to Hades, appealed to Augustine in his dismissal of this text as a reference to the descent.²⁷⁴ More will be said on this in the context of the Tudor period in Chapter 3.

In his work, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine also acknowledged some confusion over the terminology associated with Hades, saying that he had searched the canonical Scriptures looking for where the netherworld was spoken of in a good sense. Finding none, he concludes that the bosom of Abraham must not be in the netherworld.²⁷⁵ Plumptre, in tracing the development of this doctrine, sees Augustine's writing on this subject to be "the first serious break in the continuity of testimony."²⁷⁶ While this is true regarding his interpretation of the 1 Peter texts, there are other places in his writings where Augustine sounds very much like our earlier authors.²⁷⁷ When we get to the Reformation period, we will see how Augustine's quote, "Who, therefore, except an infidel, will deny that Christ was in hell?," was employed against those who denied a local descent; while his denial that the Petrine texts were about Christ's post-death descent were used by others to dismiss these passages. We can say at the very least that Augustine, in his own perplexity, muddied the waters concerning this doctrine in the West.²⁷⁸

It was also during the fifth century that the so-called Athanasian Creed was penned.²⁷⁹ The authorship of this statement of faith has been explored in great detail by many: some proposing Ambrose, Hilary of Arles, Honoratus, or Caesarius of Arles, the earliest commentator on it.²⁸⁰ Even though the work is named in Athanasius' honor, its

²⁷² William Fulke, *Confutation of the Rhemish Testament* (New York: Leavitt, Lord and Co., 1834), 365.

²⁷³ Quantin, *Church of England*, 123-4.

²⁷⁴ Thomas Harding, ed., *The Decades of Henry Bullinger, The First and Second Decades* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1849), 138.

²⁷⁵ Text 54, Appendix II.

²⁷⁶ E. H. Plumptre, *The Spirits in Prison and Other Studies on the Life after Death* (New York: T. Whittaker, 1894), 90.

²⁷⁷ Texts 55-57, Appendix I.

²⁷⁸ Not all Western authors were as conflicted on this doctrine as Augustine. Gregory the Great, for instance, developed many of the themes which we have seen in the Eastern writers (see Hilarion, *Christ the Conqueror*, 93-7.).

²⁷⁹ Kelly, in his work, writes: "According to the well-known epigram, the only two assured facts about the Athanasian Creed are that it is neither a creed nor by Athanasius." J. N. D. Kelly, *The Athanasian Creed*, First (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964), 1.

²⁸⁰ Kelly, *Athanasian Creed*, 5-13.

teachings are most closely aligned with those of Augustine of Hippo.²⁸¹ The creed says that Christ “suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again from the dead.”²⁸² The placement of the statement is immediately after the section on Christ’s death, as in the Apostles’ Creed. Whereas the Nicene/Constantinopolitan creeds make note of the burial but not the descent, the Athanasian notes the descent but not the burial. This may offer further proof that the descent was implied in the burial and vice versa. The Athanasian does not offer any purpose for Christ’s descent; it simply states it as a matter of fact. There is some irony here since the contents of the Creed are closely aligned with Augustine, who affirmed Christ’s descent but did not offer much of a rationale for it, while Athanasius, for whom it is named, had a clearer sense of its purpose, as we saw earlier.

Summary

The purpose of this opening chapter has been to survey the development of the doctrine of the descent in the first five centuries of the church. Many authors and texts have not been included because of the limited scope of this work.²⁸³ However, the texts that have been quoted will give us some boundaries as we move forward to that period where this doctrine was fiercely debated. Our knowledge of this development and the texts surrounding it will help us to better understand the Tudor debates. This is a step which was beyond the scope of Wallace’s and Quantin’s works.

Some modern scholars, particularly those who appeal narrowly to the historical-grammatical method of interpretation, would question the use of certain biblical texts used in this development, but these early authors were operating with a different hermeneutic. N. T. Wright, in his monumental work on the resurrection, quotes Paul’s statement that, “The Messiah was raised on the third day according to the scriptures,”²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Text 51, Appendix II.

²⁸² A. E. Burn, *The Athanasian Creed*, (London: Rivingtons, 1918), 6.

²⁸³ The doctrine is pervasive in the early church. Hilarion writes, “Every major writer from the ‘Golden Age of Eastern Christian literature’ touches, in one way or another, on the theme of Christ’s descent into Hades.” *Christ the Conqueror*, 52. The same could be said for Western authors though admittedly, with less clarity and boldness than their Eastern counterparts. However, creativity on this doctrine is not entirely lacking (see for instance Caesarius of Arles’ sermons on Samson in *Sermons, Volume 2 (81–186)*, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 187–201). Huidekoper has a similar quote on the pervasiveness of this doctrine in the early centuries: “In the second and third centuries, every branch and division of Christians, so far as their records enable us to judge, believed that Christ preached to the departed; and this belief dates back to our earliest reliable sources of information in the former of these two centuries.” *The Belief of the First Three Centuries*, 52-3.

²⁸⁴ 1 Cor 15:4.

and then notes how that concept is not easily found in the Hebrew scriptures (to which Paul was referring) at first glance. But then he asserts that later Jewish and Christian exegetes “became skilled at discovering covert allusions which earlier readers had not seen ...”²⁸⁵ This same principle is applicable to the doctrine of the descent. And the church fathers drew upon both the Old and New Testaments to propound this doctrine.

There is broad agreement among the early fathers that the soul of Christ (with his divinity) descended into hell at death; the divergences among them concerns what he did there.²⁸⁶ Several themes regarding this doctrine have appeared repeatedly:

1. The patristic authors saw the descent as part of the earliest kerygma of the church, especially because of its placement in Peter’s Pentecost sermon.²⁸⁷
2. The primary purpose for the descent in the patristic era was to extend Christ’s saving work to the Old Testament saints.²⁸⁸ This is true even for Tertullian, though he did not believe that Christ transferred their souls from Hades to heaven as the majority of the fathers did.
3. The descent was envisioned as a continuation of Christ’s earthly ministry. Whatever he did on earth, he continued to do in Hades.²⁸⁹ Clement of Alexandria sought to broaden this aspect of Christ’s saving work by suggesting that the statements in 1 Peter 3 and 4 point to some sort of post-mortem salvation for some in Hades who embraced Christ’s preaching at the descent. Evodius said in his letter to Augustine that some were teaching that Christ emptied hell at his descent, which was surely one of the reasons that Augustine was unsettled about those texts.²⁹⁰
4. Christ’s descent is viewed as a victory in which he is triumphant over death, Hades and the devil. The defeat of the devil is almost always by outwitting him, as we saw with the theme of “divine deception.”

²⁸⁵ Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 85.

²⁸⁶ The list of authors who referred to the descent is a virtual “Who’s Who” list of the earliest Christian writers.

²⁸⁷ Acts 2:22-36; cf. also Paul’s sermon in Acts 13:16-41 where he quotes the same text from Psalm 16 that Peter did. If this doctrine was a part of the Church’s earliest kerygma, then it can be argued that it deserves a place in the creedal formulations of the Church.

²⁸⁸ If Christ is the “one mediator between God and man,” then his redemptive work must have application to those who lived prior to his advent. The more controversial topic related to this is the extent of this application whether it be to “righteous pagans” or to all who were in Hades.

²⁸⁹ The cosmic implications of his work are asserted by appealing to texts such as Phil 2:9, Eph 4:9 and Col 1:18.

²⁹⁰ “Letters of St. Augustin,” *NPNF 1*, 1.516.

5. The descent became significant in the Christological debates as it was employed in a variety of contexts to assert either (or both) Christ's humanity (when he died, his soul departed his body and went to the abode of the dead as all other men), and his deity (when he went to Hades he was not like all other men because death had no dominion over him).
6. A notable connection was also frequently made between Christ's death, descent and resurrection and Christian baptism.²⁹¹

Having set the background from the patristic era, we will now discuss some of the medieval developments before delving into the debates of the Reformation period in England.

²⁹¹ Especially drawing upon Rom 6 and 1 Pet 3:19-4:6. Wand goes so far as to say of the latter passage, "Its creedal character is shown by the emphasis upon Christ's death, descent into Hell, resurrection, and the relation of all this to Baptism." J. W. C. Wand, *The General Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, First (London: Methuen & Co, 1934), 100.

Chapter 2 – The Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell from the Medieval Era through the Reign of Edward VI

While a great deal of ink has been spilled on the major controversies of the Reformation period such as justification by faith alone and the debate over transubstantiation, very little by comparison has been written on the controversy regarding Christ’s descent into hell.²⁹² This is remarkable in light of the intensity and longevity of the debate over this matter. One scholar writes, “the descent of Christ into hell was one of the most controverted of all the creedal articles in the Reformation era.”²⁹³ What makes this debate even more intriguing is the fact that it is not simply a Protestant versus Catholic debate. More often than not, it was an intramural debate among Protestants.²⁹⁴ We will see that the roots of the Elizabethan debate are found in the earlier Tudor period.

The purpose of the present chapter is to trace how the doctrine became controversial in the early to middle part of the sixteenth century in England.²⁹⁵ We will begin with a short survey of the doctrine through the medieval period, especially touching on points of controversy during that time. Then we will draw together the theological reflections on this doctrine among the continental reformers during the first half of the sixteenth century. Then, in the second half of the chapter, we will trace the use of this doctrine in England through the Henrician and Edwardian periods. Wallace’s discussion of these periods was rather limited. He only wrote one paragraph on the Henrician period and less than three pages on the Edwardian. Quantin did not explore the Henrician (since it was beyond the scope of his work) and offered only a short section on the Edwardian period, choosing to focus mainly on the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. This chapter is intended to add important background information for our discussion of the debate over Christ’s descent in the Elizabethan era.

Late Patristic and Medieval Developments Regarding the Doctrine of the Descent

The *Gospel of Nicodemus* (*The Acts of Pilate*), an apocryphal work from around the fourth to fifth centuries, can serve as a bridge between the patristic era and the

²⁹² Wallace, “Puritan and Anglican,” 248.

²⁹³ Bagchi, “Christ’s Descent,” 228.

²⁹⁴ As we will see in Chapter 3, this was a debate which Roman Catholics were happy to exploit and to use as a wedge to divide their theological opponents.

²⁹⁵ A similar debate was held in Germany. See David George Truemper, “The Descensus Ad Inferos from Luther to the Formula of Concord” (Unpublished Thesis, Chicago, The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1974).

medieval period. This is because not only does it summarize the general thrust of this doctrine from the church fathers, it also became one of the most popular and influential works in medieval England. H. C. Kim tells us that it was the most popular of the New Testament apocrypha “and was widely held to be a sacred document, almost equal in authority to the canonical Gospels.”²⁹⁶ The popularity of the work in England is evident not only because there were Middle English and Anglo-Saxon versions of the work, but also because it became the source and inspiration for so many dramas and mystery plays of this period.²⁹⁷

The recollection of Christ’s descent in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* is given by two witnesses, Leucius and Karinus, who were purportedly the sons of Simeon (Luke 2). The work presents them as two of those raised with Christ at his resurrection (alluding to Matt 27:51-3). Leucius and Karinus recalled that at the hour of midnight, a great light shone upon them in Hades: “And immediately our father Abraham, along with the patriarchs and prophets, was filled with joy, and they said to one another: This shining comes from a great light.”²⁹⁸ Isaiah was there to assure them that this was the fulfillment of his prophecy: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.”²⁹⁹ Others from John the Baptist to Adam and his son, Seth, also bore witness that this was their long-awaited Savior.

While the righteous who had waited for this moment were rejoicing, we learn of a concurring heated discussion between Satan and Hades. Satan demonstrates that he has been deceived because he assumes that Jesus, even though he calls himself the Son of God, is a mere man (all of this is consistent with the “divine deception” motif noted in ch. 1). Hades is not convinced and reminds Satan of the recent loss of Lazarus (John 11) who was snatched “forcibly from [his] entrails with only a word.”³⁰⁰ Hades warns Satan

²⁹⁶ H. C. Kim, ed., *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1973), 2.

²⁹⁷ Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England*, 105. See also *The Middle-English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus* by William Henry Hulme and “The Legend of the Harrowing of Hell in Middle English Literature” (University of Toronto, 1985) by Zbigniew Izydorzyc. One cannot but wonder if the prominence of Joseph of Arimathea in this work might also have fueled its popularity in England, given the various legends associated with him in the British Isles.

²⁹⁸ Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, 1.471.

²⁹⁹ Isa 9:2.

³⁰⁰ Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, 1.473. The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead would later be viewed as a type of the descent. See Mark C. Pilkinton, “The Raising of Lazarus: A Prefiguring Agent to the Harrowing of Hell,” *Medium Aevum*, Vol. 44, No. 1/2 (1975), 51-53.

that if he brings Jesus there, “none of the dead will be left for me.”³⁰¹ While they were speaking, a loud voice thundered: “Lift up your gates, O rulers, and be lifted up, O everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in” (Ps 24:7).³⁰² Satan and Hades sought to withstand Christ but were unable to. At this point, the witnesses said that the forefathers all began to mock Hades, quoting various prophecies of its demise (Isa 25:8; 26:19; Hos 13:14; Ps 24:8). When the refrain to lift up the gates was repeated, Hades responded by asking, “Who is this King of glory?” The angels responded with, “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle,” echoing Psalm 24. The witnesses said: “And immediately at this answer the gates of brass were broken in pieces and the bars of iron were crushed and all the dead who were bound were loosed from their chains, and we with them” [alluding to Isa 45:2-3].³⁰³

The dialogue then turns back to Hades and Satan, with the former blaming the latter for their defeat. At this moment, the King of glory stretched out his hand to take hold of Adam and told the others, “Come with me, all you who have suffered death through the tree which this man touched. For behold, I raise you all up again through the tree of the cross.”³⁰⁴ The witnesses go on to say: “Thus he went into paradise holding our forefather Adam by the hand, and he handed him over and all the righteous to Michael the archangel. And as they were entering the gate of paradise, two old men met them” (a reference to Enoch and Elijah). While they were speaking with their predecessors in paradise, another man came up carrying a cross, the thief whom Christ told, “Today, you shall be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).³⁰⁵ The text ends with Leucius and Karinus confessing that they had been sent by Michael the archangel to deliver this message after they had been baptized in the Jordan River with the rest of the dead who had been raised.³⁰⁶

It is not hard to see how this vivid portrayal, which wove together so many strands from the canonical Scriptures, would become so popular. These scenes would

³⁰¹ Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, 1.473.

³⁰² Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, 1.473. Most of the church fathers (including Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Ambrose and Augustine), see this reference from Psalm 24 as envisioning the Ascension of Christ when he arrives at the gates of heaven. But perhaps for the first time in this early period, this text is being used in reference to the descent, envisioning Christ arriving at the gates of Hades and asserting His Lordship there.

³⁰³ Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, 1.474.

³⁰⁴ Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, 1.475.

³⁰⁵ This text appears to equate paradise with heaven instead of in Hades and envisions Enoch, Elijah and the thief on the cross as early inhabitants of it.

³⁰⁶ Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, 1.476.

be portrayed continuously throughout the medieval period, making the Harrowing of Hell one of the most popular doctrines, especially among the laity.³⁰⁷ In spite of its popularity (or perhaps, because of its popularity), *the Gospel of Nicodemus* was largely abandoned in the sixteenth century by Protestants (because of the general trend away from apocryphal works); but also by Roman Catholics, as it made the list of forbidden books at the Council of Trent.³⁰⁸ Tillyard suggest that the motive of Roman Catholics here may have been that if “the apocryphal gospels [were] taken too seriously, [they] would provide Scripture-intoxicated Protestants with excellent targets of attack, and it might be politic for Catholics to shuffle those targets conveniently away.”³⁰⁹

Caesarius of Arles also had some influence on this doctrine through his sermons which became quite popular in medieval England. He creatively employed some other biblical texts in promulgating this doctrine. In a sermon on Judges 14 (the story where Samson defeats the lion and later returns to fetch honey from its carcass), Caesarius rehearses earlier interpretations of this passage and then makes his own connection with the descent: “This lion, that is, Christ from the tribe of Juda, victoriously descended into hell to snatch us from the mouth of the hostile lion. For this reason He hunts in order to protect, seizes in order to free, leads men captive in order to restore them when freed to their eternal country.”³¹⁰ In another sermon, Caesarius recalls Samson’s trip to Delilah’s house and the subsequent destruction of the Philistines’ gates where he says:

Hell and love for a woman Scripture joins together; the house of the harlot was an image of hell ... At this point we recognize the actions of our Redeemer ... The words: ‘He arose and left at midnight’ signify that He arose in secret. He had suffered openly, but His Resurrection was revealed only to His disciples and to certain other people ... Moreover, he removed the city gates, that is, He took away the gates of hell ... Furthermore, what did our Lord Jesus Christ do after He had taken away the gates of death? He went up to the top of a mountain. Truly, we know that He both arose and ascended into heaven.³¹¹

³⁰⁷ Marx also notes that there are verbal parallels between the Gospel of Nicodemus and Sermon 160 of pseudo-Augustine that was quite popular among scholars of this period. See C. W. Marx, *The Devil’s Rights and the Redemption in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 57.

³⁰⁸ Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 97.

³⁰⁹ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Some Mythical Elements in English Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 29. See also Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, 175-8.

³¹⁰ Caesarius, *Sermons, Volume 2*, 191.

³¹¹ Caesarius, *Sermons, Volume 2*, 187-88. The Venerable Bede would follow Caesarius’ last line in this quote, seeing a close relationship between the descent and ascension of Christ. See his *In ascensione domini*, quoted in Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, 44-5.

Aelfric of Eynsham, another author of popular homilies in medieval England, echoed Caesarius' imagery in an Easter Day sermon.³¹² The lasting influence of these connections on the Western church can be seen where Philip Melanchthon would write in the sixteenth century, "The power of death, the power of sin, the very gates of hell have been broken by our Samson" [meaning, Christ].³¹³

Gregory the Great picked up on this same imagery in one of his homilies,³¹⁴ and taught on the descent in many other places, including his popular work on Job. Commenting on Job 14:13, where Job said, "O that thou wouldst defend me in hell!" Gregory wrote:

That before the coming of the Mediator between God and man, every person, though he might have been of a pure and approved life, descended to the prisons of hell, there can be no doubt; in that man, who fell by his own act, was unable by his own act to return to the rest of Paradise, except that He should come, Who by the mystery of His Incarnation should open the way into that same Paradise ... Nor yet do we maintain that the souls of the righteous did so go down into hell, that they were imprisoned in places of punishment; but it is to be believed that there are higher regions in hell, and that there are lower regions apart, so that both the righteous might be at rest in the upper regions, and the unrighteous be tormented in the lower ones. Hence the Psalmist, by reason of the grace of God preventing him, says, *Thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell*. Ps. 86:13. Thus blessed Job before the coming of the Mediator, knowing of his going down into hell, implores the protecting hand of his Maker there, in order that he might be a stranger to the places of punishment; where, while he is brought to enjoy rest, he might be kept hidden from punishment.³¹⁵

Here we see Gregory repeating the ideas from the earlier period about no one entering heaven prior to the coming of Christ. But we also begin to see an emphasis on the regions (note the plural) above and below in hell, showing an expansion upon the earlier idea of two regions, an upper and lower in Hades.³¹⁶

Another series of biblical texts which became popular in medieval England were those where David rescues a sheep from the jaws of a lion, defeats Goliath, and is

³¹² Benjamin Thorpe, *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, vol. 1 (London: Richard and John E. Taylor, 1844), 228–29. For a full discussion of this imagery, see Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, 22–4.

³¹³ Charles Leander Hill, trans., *The Loci Communes of Philip Melanchthon, With a Critical Introduction by the Translator* (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1944), 221.

³¹⁴ Dom David Hurst, *Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 162–63. Gregory was likely held in high esteem in England since he commissioned Augustine and other monks on a mission there in AD 596. See Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986), 66–7.

³¹⁵ Saint Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, vol. 2 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1845), 53–54.

³¹⁶ See the discussion on purgatory later in this section.

portrayed as a victorious warrior king. These connections proved effective in the missionary expansion of the church in England during this period. Tamburr suggests that “the tribes were converted to Christianity, and the new religion’s portrayal of Christ as a conquering king would have struck a sympathetic chord because it was so congenial to the Anglo-Saxons’ own warrior ethic.”³¹⁷ These connections would also correlate well with the “King of glory” imagery from Psalm 24 in the Gospel of Nicodemus discussed earlier.³¹⁸

One of the complicating factors of this period is the development of the doctrine of purgatory. Early authors speculated on the concept of purgation: basically, the idea that if a person died with unsatisfied sins, he would need to have those sins purged before entering heaven. Origen, Augustine and Gregory the Great offered such speculations, drawing upon just a few biblical and apocryphal texts (2 Macc 12:39-45, Matt 12:32, Luke 12:59, and 1 Cor 3:13-15). Jacques Le Goff, in his work *The Birth of Purgatory*, argues that the concept of a *place* where this purgation would take place (purgatory) was not developed until the twelfth century (1170 to be precise).³¹⁹ Later scholars have modified this conclusion, arguing that the concept of purgatory is already present in the writings of the Venerable Bede (c. 673-735).³²⁰ The ongoing speculation over these matters became more complex as time went on to the point where there were no longer two destinies for human beings following this life but five. Marshall sums up, and hints at the significance of this for our topic, when he writes:

The medieval Church had come to recognize five distinct places or states which defined the location and condition of the dead: in addition to heaven and hell, there was purgatory for the souls of the moderately sinful, a limbo for unbaptized infants, and a second limbo for the righteous patriarchs and prophets who had died, of necessity non-Christians, before the incarnation of Jesus. This latter place was usually thought to be empty, since Christ had liberated its inhabitants in a kind of daring commando raid performed between his death and resurrection—the so-called harrowing of hell.³²¹

³¹⁷ Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, 32-4.

³¹⁸ See also the Easter Day homily in R. Morris, ed., *The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century. From the Marquis of Lothian's Unique MS. A. D. 971* (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1880), 82-96.

³¹⁹ Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 135.

³²⁰ Isabel Moreira, *Heaven's Purge: Purgatory in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: The University Press, 2010), 11-14.

³²¹ Peter Marshall, “The Reformation of Hell? Protestant and Catholic Infernalisms in England, c. 1560-1640,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61 (2010), 280.

We will see in the debates of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries how these complexities would have an effect on the understanding of the descent.

In light of their influence in the universities, we will touch briefly upon three scholastic theologians. First, Peter Lombard, whose *Sentences* became the preeminent theological textbook of the medieval period, addressed the descent in his exploration of the question, “Why God man and dead?,” writing: “And so he [Christ] was made a mortal man, in order to vanquish the devil by dying” (arguing primarily from Heb 2:9-11).³²² In addressing the question, “Whether in death Christ was a man anywhere, and whether he is a man wherever he is?,” Lombard concludes: “From all this, it is plainly shown that Christ was united to the flesh lying in the tomb, as he was to the soul in hell.”³²³ We see a common thread in these quotes, an interest in the unity of Christ’s two natures even beyond death. The divine nature of Christ was with both his body in the tomb and his human soul in hell.³²⁴

Second, Peter Abelard and his theological adversary, Bernard of Clairvaux, had a significant rift over several important doctrines including the descent. The intensity of the debate can be seen as Bernard envisions the skilled Abelard as Goliath and himself as David, saying, “when all have fled before him, he calls me out, the least of all, to single combat.”³²⁵ Bernard said of Abelard’s teachings, “When he speaks of the Trinity, he savours Arius; when of grace, he savours of Pelagius; when of the person of Christ, he savours of Nestorius.”³²⁶ Pitstick quotes the official statement on this matter from the Council of Sens (1141), where Abelard was condemned, and offers a brief comment: “[Abelard taught] ‘that the soul of Christ per se did not descend to those who are below [*ad inferos*], but only by means of power,’ i.e., that Christ had an effect on the dead without joining them in his soul.”³²⁷ The gist of this is that Abelard denied a local descent of Christ, only his “power” descended. Bernard was so dismayed at these

³²² Guilio Silano, *Peter Lombard, The Sentences, Book 3: On the Incarnation of the Word*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), 80.

³²³ Silano, *Peter Lombard*, 94–95.

³²⁴ Aquinas makes the same point in his Exposition of the Apostles’ Creed in *The Catholic Tradition: The Church, Volume 1* (Wilmington, NC: A Consortium Book, 1979), 213.

³²⁵ Bruno Scott James, trans., *The Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1998), 318 [Letter 191].

³²⁶ Letter 240, To Guy of Castello; James, *The Letters of St Bernard*, 321.

³²⁷ Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 20.

perceived errors that he wrote more than a dozen letters in which he sought to undermine Abelard's influence prior to the council.³²⁸

The third scholastic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, offers the most significant discussion of this doctrine during the medieval period in his *Summa Theologica*.³²⁹ His most intriguing contribution occurs in his question over whether Christ went down into the hell of the lost. Aquinas answers that a thing may be said to be in a place in two ways:

First of all, through its effect, and in this way Christ descended into each of the hells, but in a different manner. For going down into the hell of the lost He wrought this effect, that by descending thither He put them to shame for their unbelief and wickedness: but to them that were detained in Purgatory He gave hope of attaining to glory: while upon the holy Fathers detained in hell solely on account of original sin, He shed the light of glory everlasting.³³⁰

He goes on to say that a thing may also be said to be in a place through its essence. This distinction is used to argue for Christ's saving presence with the "holy Fathers," whom he delivered from hell.³³¹ What we gather is that Aquinas was saying that Christ descended in *effect* to the damned, to confirm their condemnation, while he descended in *essence* to deliver the righteous. Otherwise, Aquinas largely repeats the themes from the patristic era.³³² We can already see in these medieval writings how the changing geography of the underworld complicated the understanding of Christ's descent.

In England, there are three sources which may help us understand how the laity understood the descent during this period. First, we have the work entitled *The Lay Folks' Catechism* from the fourteenth century. The work contains an expanded paraphrase of the Apostles' Creed which says in the pertinent section: "and so he was done on the cross and after dead and buried; afterwards, his soul went to hell and took

³²⁸ Letters 236-249 in James, *The Letters of St Bernard*, 314-329. For further insights into this whole affair, see Ralph V. Turner, "Descendit Ad Inferos: Medieval Views on Christ's Descent into Hell and the Salvation of the Ancient Just," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 173-94. Abelard also compiled some of the conflicting ideas from the patristic authors in his work *Sic et Non*. See *Yes and No, the Complete English Translation of Peter Abelard's Sic et Non* (Charlotte, VT: Medieval MS, 2008), 188-89; 202-212. Regarding Abelard, see also Constant J. Mews, *Abelard and His Legacy* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2001).

³²⁹ Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans., *Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), 4.2296-2302, [Part 3, Question 52, in Eight Articles.

³³⁰ *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 3 Q. 52 Art. 2.

³³¹ *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 3 Q. 52 Art. 2.

³³² In his exposition of the descent clause in the Apostles' Creed, he appeals to Ps 88:4-5; Ecclus 24:45; Jn 12:31; Col 2:15; Matt 12:29; Phil 2:10; Zech 9:11; Hos 13:14; Wis 10:13-14; Isa 38:10. *The Catholic Tradition*, 213-16. See also Izydorczyk, "The Legend of the Harrowing of Hell in Middle English Literature," 41-2.

out the souls that he ordained to save before this world was made.”³³³ A bit later, in “The Points of Belief,” it says, “Yet while his body lay in the grave, the soul with the Godhead went unto hell, and harrowed it, and took out those that were his, Adam and Eve and the other former fathers.”³³⁴

Second, there is the Sarum Missal, which contained the influential liturgical forms of Salisbury as far back as the eleventh century. It is well-attested that this work was one of the major influences on The Book of Common Prayer. It is a veritable treasure-trove of material on this doctrine from which the following examples are drawn. It should be noted that since the work was in Latin, its impact on the laity would have surely varied, based upon their knowledge of that language. The Good Friday liturgy contained the following from a hymn:

Therefore the side of the crucified Lord being pierced by the lance of the soldier, there came forth blood and water for our redemption and salvation. O admirable price! by the weighing of which the captivity of the world is ransomed, the infernal gates of hell are burst, and the door of the kingdom is opened unto us.³³⁵

On Holy Saturday, the deacon was to sing the *Exultet* which said, “This is the night in which Christ burst the bonds of death, and ascended conquering from the grave.”³³⁶ The sequence hymn for Easter Monday contains a number of types from the Old Testament associated with the descent, including this line:

So vanquishing Death’s penalties
Jesus comes back again.
Free from the serpent’s deadly power
He pharaoh’s serpents doth devour
Like Moses’ rod of yore;
To those by fiery serpents’ bite
Wounded, the brazen serpent’s sight
Doth life and health restore.
Piercing his jaw with iron hook,
Christ the great dragon captive took ...³³⁷

The theme continues on Easter Tuesday in this hymn:

Pour forth, chaste band, your holy canticles,
With deep-toned organ peal accompanied;

³³³ Thomas Frederick Simmons and Henry Edward Nolloth, eds., *The Lay Folks’ Catechism* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1901), 17. I have slightly updated some of the language of older works throughout this chapter.

³³⁴ Simmons and Nolloth, *The Lay Folks’ Catechism*, 28.

³³⁵ *The Sarum Missal in English* (London: The Church Press Company, 1868), 155.

³³⁶ *Sarum Missal*, 161.

³³⁷ *Sarum Missal*, 177-79.

Unto the King Who burst the gates of hell,
Our God, repeat your joyful melodies.
When death He had o'ercome, He rose again,
Bearing perpetual joy to all the world.³³⁸

The following Saturday recalls the theme from Holy Saturday:

Upon the week's first dawning grey
The Son of God that blessed day
Our hope and glory rose;
The king of evil and his crew
Vanquish'd, hell's portals open threw,
And triumph'd o'er His foes.
He by His Resurrection blest,
Throughout the world with joy confest,
Doth consolation shed.³³⁹

Third, the descent into hell was also incorporated dramatically into the worship services of Holy Week during this period. The fifteenth century English mystic, Margery Kempe, recounts how the priest would take his staff of the cross and strike the outside of the church door, symbolizing Christ's opening of the gates of hell at his descent.³⁴⁰ These dramatic liturgical acts are consistent with the themes from the Gospel of Nicodemus which were popularly reenacted in the mystery plays during this period.³⁴¹ Taken together, this catechism and these liturgical practices help us to envision how the laity might have understood the descent during this period in England.

There are two other important developments from the end of the medieval period that are worth noting. Both of them involve theologians reflecting on this doctrine in the mid-fifteenth century. Nicholas of Cusa, a German cardinal, took a new path concerning this doctrine. Commenting on Peter's quotation of Psalm 16 in his Pentecost sermon, Cusanus writes: "And the Prophet [writes]: 'He did not leave my soul in Hell.' Therefore, if you rightly consider [the matter], Christ's suffering, than which there cannot be a greater [suffering], was as [the suffering] of the damned who cannot

³³⁸ *Sarum Missal*, 180.

³³⁹ *Sarum Missal*, 187.

³⁴⁰ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 167. See also Chapter 1 of Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*; Karl Young, "The Harrowing of Hell in Liturgical Drama," *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters*. 16 (1909).

³⁴¹ The popularity of the doctrine is also evident in the various artistic representations throughout England from this period. See especially Finch, "The Descent Into Hades." For a further exploration on the hymnody associated with the descent, see "The Descent Theme in Medieval Latin Hymns," Ruth Ellis Messenger (*Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 67, 1936), 126-147. The descent was also popularized through literature including *The Divine Comedy* of Dante and *The Golden Legend*.

be more greatly damned—i.e., was [suffering] all the way to punishment in Hell.”³⁴² Cusanus envisioned Christ descending into hell to suffer with the damned, a novel interpretation. This assertion was repeated later by Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, the French humanist, in his *Quincuplex Psalterium*. Commenting on Psalm 30, Lefèvre followed Cusanus’ line of interpretation. After receiving some criticism concerning this view, he slightly modified his comments in the reprint of this same work.³⁴³ As we will see, some Protestants would later adopt Cusanus’ view.

The second development in the fifteenth century took place on English soil, involving a learned Welshman, Reginald Pecock (c. 1395-c. 1460), who became bishop of St Asaph and then Chichester.³⁴⁴ When he began to preach some rather unpopular ideas, his opponents began to comb through his writings and sermons, looking for a way to condemn him. Capes writes, “He was a voluminous writer, hasty and self-confident, fond of irony and paradox, and it was easy to find ambiguous phrases whose natural meaning sounded like heresy to those who wished to find it.”³⁴⁵ He apparently implied that the Church could err and raised questions about certain doctrines, including the descent of Christ into hell.

Pecock was brought to trial and the Archbishop of Canterbury said in his opening address:

Dear Brother (*Condilecte Frater*), since all heretics are blinded by the light of their own understandings, and will not own the perverse obstinacy of their own conclusions, we shall not dispute with you in many words (for we see that you abound more in talk than in reasoning) but briefly show you that you have presumed to contravene the sayings of the more authentic doctors. For as regards the descent of Christ into hell, the Tarentine doctor in an enquiry of his into the three creeds says that it was left out of the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, because no heresy had arisen against it, nor was any great question made about it.³⁴⁶

³⁴² Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Last Sermons (1457-1463)*, 2011, 204. Bagchi notes that Cusanus’ interpretation created such a stir that he was obliged to preach another sermon on the topic not long after this, in which he “expressed more conventional views on the subject.” David V. N. Bagchi, “Luther versus Luther? The Problem of Christ’s Descent into Hell in the Long Sixteenth Century,” *Perichoresis* 6 (2008): 180.

³⁴³ For a thorough discussion, see Gergely M. Juhász, *Translating Resurrection: The Debate between William Tyndale and George Joye in Its Historical and Theological Context* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 154–59.

³⁴⁴ For a succinct account of Pecock, see W. W. Capes, *A History of the English Church in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, vol. 3, *A History of the English Church* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1909), 202–10.

³⁴⁵ Capes, *A History of the English Church*, 208–09.

³⁴⁶ V. H. H. Green, *Bishop Reginald Pecock: A Study in Ecclesiastical History and Thought*, Second (Cambridge: The University Press, 1945), 54. Izydorczyk, “The Legend of the Harrowing of Hell” (p. 14), says that the “Tarentine doctor” mentioned here is a reference to Pierre de Tarentaise who later became

This address shows that Pecock's denial of the descent was at the forefront of his trial. The snippets of arguments alluded to here are difficult to decipher. But we do know from his writings that Pecock had raised questions about the inclusion of the phrase "he descended into hell" in the Apostles' Creed on these grounds: first, the descent is not clearly taught in Scripture; second, the so-called Apostles' Creed was not really apostolic; third, the article was not in the earliest forms of the Creed since St. Augustine did not include this phrase in his exposition of it. Pecock said these things in response to Duns Scotus, who apparently thought that the doctrine was absent from Scripture and could only be held on the grounds of it being in the Creed (tradition).³⁴⁷ Izydorczyk appropriately writes, "It may be noticed that although Pecock's opinion about the non-apostolic origin of the Creed has since been proven correct, his notion that the creeds of the late fourth and early fifth centuries entirely lacked the 'descensus' article was incorrect."³⁴⁸ In the end, Pecock was forced to recant and lost his see, becoming the first bishop of the English Church to be formally convicted of heresy.³⁴⁹

The Doctrine of the Descent in the Thought of Erasmus and the Continental Reformers

There was a deep affinity in England for the "Prince of the Humanists," Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. And the feeling was mutual, especially since Erasmus credited John Colet, Dean of St. Paul's and a humanist himself, with awaking in him a deep desire to study the Scriptures.³⁵⁰ Erasmus, in turn, went on to exert a significant influence on the English Reformation, especially during the reign of Henry VIII. G. W. Bernard and other modern scholars argue that Henry himself was an Erasmian.³⁵¹

Pope Innocent V. The assertion that the descent was absent from the Athanasian Creed is an obvious error.

³⁴⁷ Reginald Pecock, *Book of Faith: A Fifteenth Century Theological Tractate, Ed. from the MS. in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge*, ed. J. L. Morison (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1909), 303-5. See also Zbigniew Izydorczyk, "The Legend of the Harrowing of Hell," 16.

³⁴⁸ Pecock, *Book of Faith*, 16-17.

³⁴⁹ Charles W. Brockwell, Jr., "The Historical Career of Bishop Reginald Pecock, D.D.: The Poore Scoleris Myrrour or A Case Study in Famous Obscurity," *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981): 177.

³⁵⁰ Colet's own Catechism contained the Apostles' Creed without an exposition. See J. H. Lupton, *A Life of John Colet, D.D., Dean of St. Paul and Founder of St. Paul's School* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1909), 286.

³⁵¹ G. W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 236-243. Basil Hall, in "Cranmer's Relations with Erasmianism and Lutheranism," says that Cranmer possessed a large number of Erasmus's writings but was quite guarded in his references to both Catholic reformers and Protestants during Henry's reign which makes it difficult to justify an assertion that he was a disciple of Erasmus. Paul Ayris and Selwyn David, eds., *Thomas*

In his earliest works, Erasmus held a view of the descent that was consistent with the mainstream of patristic authors. In his *Inquisitio de Fide* (1524), while including a short note on the fact that the clause “he descended into hell” was not in early versions of the Creed, he saw Psalm 16:10 and even 1 Peter 3 as likely references to the descent. There he adds, “But though I believe [Christ] descended into hell, yet I believe he did not suffer anything there. For he descended not to be tormented there, but that he might destroy for us the kingdom of Satan.”³⁵² Erasmus’ Paraphrases of the NT, which were highly influential in England, also contain traditional references to the descent.³⁵³ His paraphrase of Acts 2 (1524) says: “For although the soul of Jesus descended to the dead, it was not held there, but instead it freed the souls that were held.”³⁵⁴ In his paraphrase of 1 Pet 3:18-22, he followed many patristic authors in seeing this as Christ’s proclamation to the dead following his death.³⁵⁵ And in his Exposition of Psalm 85 (86) in 1528, he offers a traditional view of the descent, with Christ’s soul victoriously descending to hell to deliver the Old Testament saints, employing numerous biblical texts which we have already encountered (1 Pet 3:19; Matt 12:29, 40; Isa 9:2; Jon 2:10; Luke 16:19-26; Eph 4:8-9).³⁵⁶

But later in life, Erasmus became timid on this doctrine. This is evident in his exposition of the Apostles’ Creed written in 1533, just a few years before his death, and appropriately, for our purposes, dedicated to an Englishman: Thomas Boleyn, Earl of Wiltshire, and the father of Anne Boleyn. When the descensus clause is mentioned, Erasmus says rather sparingly that this is what the soul of Christ did at the time that his dead body rested in the sepulcher.³⁵⁷ He notes that this article was not in the earliest

Cranmer: Churchman and Scholar (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1993), 6-38. See also J. J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 398.

³⁵² Craig R. Thompson, ed., *Inquisitio De Fide: A Colloquy by Desiderius Erasmus Rotterodamus 1524*, Second (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1975), 65.

³⁵³ The Paraphrase of the Gospels were actually enjoined to be placed in every English parish during Edward’s reign (1547), and the entire NT was commended by Bishop Ridley to his clergy in 1550. W. H. Frere and W. P. M. Kennedy, eds., *Visitation Articles and Injunctions, 1536-1557*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans Green & Company, 1910), 117-18; 235.

³⁵⁴ Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrase on the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Robert D. Sider, trans. John J. Bateman, vol. 50, CWE (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 21.

³⁵⁵ See Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrases on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, the Epistles of Peter and Jude, the Epistle of James, the Epistles of John, and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Robert D. Sider, trans. John J. Bateman, vol. 44, CWE (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 98.

³⁵⁶ Dominic Baker-Smith, ed., *Expositions of the Psalms*, vol. 64, CWE (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 82-86.

³⁵⁷ Desiderius Erasmus, *A Playne and Godly Expositio[n] or Declaratio[n] of the Co[m]mune Crede*. (London: Robert Redman for William Marshall, 1534), 17.

forms of the Creed. Erasmus cites Cyprian, saying that he showed that the clause was not present in the Roman or Eastern versions.³⁵⁸ This misattribution will be picked up by many others after this, but the actual statement comes from Rufinus' exposition of the Creed (see chapter 1).³⁵⁹ Erasmus also notes that Augustine, in his work on the Creed, did not expound the descensus clause and speculates that it is likely that he agreed with Cyprian [really Rufinus] that it was not in the earliest Creed.³⁶⁰ He went on to speculate that Thomas Aquinas may have added the clause.³⁶¹

Later, he alludes to Rufinus' work once again [continuing to ascribe it to Cyprian], saying that he suggested that the descent was synonymous with Christ being buried, alluding to Christ's own words about being buried in the heart of the earth (Matt 12:40).³⁶² He questions some of the biblical passages that had been used in the past to proclaim this doctrine, saying that they are dark with the mist of allegory and receive diverse and manifold interpretations.³⁶³ The student who is being instructed eventually asks if we are now at liberty to believe or not believe this article. The response is that it is sufficient to profess that Christ died and descended into hell as the Scriptures and the Church say. He goes on to allude to peripheral teachings which are not central to the faith including the idea that Christ delivered the souls that were in Hades at his death and then returns to the straightforward phrases from the Creed (leaving out the descensus clause, implying perhaps by this time, that he thought "he was buried" encompassed the meaning).

What are we to make of Erasmus' last exposition of the Creed? At the very least, we can see in Erasmus a great timidity regarding this doctrine. He is hesitant to argue for removing the article altogether because of the tradition; but it is clear that he later questioned some of the ideas associated with it. Some of his arguments about the fact that this clause was a late addition (and even his erroneous attribution of Rufinus' work to Cyprian) will be picked up by later authors. Finch sums up quite well that Erasmus,

³⁵⁸ Erasmus, *A Playne and Godly Expositon*, 23.

³⁵⁹ See especially footnote 57 on p. 438 of *Colloquies, Volume 1 CWE* which says: "Erasmus means the exposition by Rufinus ... Erasmus' edition of Cyprian (Basel 1520) includes this text, but it is placed there under works falsely ascribed to Cyprian, and Erasmus says the style shows that it is not the work of Cyprian. Yet even in *Explanatio symboli* he names Cyprian instead of Rufinus as the author." See also pp. 128-29 of *Controversies, Volume 12* of the same series.

³⁶⁰ Erasmus, *A Playne and Godly Expositon*, 26.

³⁶¹ Erasmus, *A Playne and Godly Expositon*, 79-80.

³⁶² Erasmus, *A Playne and Godly Expositon*, 81.

³⁶³ Erasmus, *A Playne and Godly Expositon*, 81.

“with his characteristic tendency to reform from within, conserving the values of old and adding the contributions of the new, without disrupting the system itself, [shifted] the emphasis of this doctrine ... from the excessively materialistic, traditional concept to a more spiritual, and therein less exaggerated, interpretation ...”³⁶⁴

We will now look at some of the views of the continental reformers of the early sixteenth century. This is a necessary step because there was, understandably, quite a bit of cross-pollination going on among Protestants during this period. We begin with Martin Luther who mentioned the descent many times. His views on the subject would become quite controversial among his followers after his death, who questioned whether the descent was more closely associated with Christ’s passion or his resurrection. Later Lutherans would argue for one or the other, finding in him support for both views. Luther did not seem to be fazed by the conundrum. Bagchi writes that Luther “held simultaneously two interpretations that would in time be deemed contradictory and mutually exclusive.”³⁶⁵

Regarding the connection between the descent and Christ’s passion, Luther comments on Christ’s quotation of Psalm 22:1 from the cross (My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?) and concludes that he was experiencing the pains of hell: “To have the same consciousness as the damned—that is death, that is the descent into Hell.”³⁶⁶ This sounds very much like the view that John Calvin would propose later. Luther strikes a similar chord in his lectures on Genesis where he writes:

Thus Christ our Lord and liberator was in the very hell for us all. For he truly sensed death and hell in his body. What he did or felt after his exit from the body, we do not know. But in this life and in his body he truly tasted hell.³⁶⁷

But Luther also aligned the descent closely with Christ’s victorious resurrection in other places. In his Small Catechism (1529), he says, “I believe that Jesus Christ ... delivered me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil [presumably, at his descent] ...”³⁶⁸ This becomes clearer in his Large Catechism (1530) where he writes, “[Christ] snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free,

³⁶⁴ Finch, “Descent into Hades,” 261.

³⁶⁵ Bagchi, “Luther vs. Luther?,” 177.

³⁶⁶ Quoted in Bagchi, “Luther versus Luther?,” 191.

³⁶⁷ Quoted in Truemper, “The Descensus Ad Inferos,” 116.

³⁶⁸ Theodore G. Tappert, trans., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 345.

and restored us to the Father's favor and grace."³⁶⁹ The "jaws of hell" reference is drawing on the popular vision of Sheol as the great fish of Jonah or as an insatiable beast.

In an interesting move, Luther's view of the descent was ensconced in The Formula of Concord through the insertion of what is commonly called "The Torgau Sermon."³⁷⁰ In his typical pastoral manner, Luther said:

For before he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven—while he was still in the grave—he descended into hell so that he might redeem us who lay imprisoned there, just as he came into death and was laid in the grave that he might bring us out of it. I do not want to preach this article with sublime or precise language, describing exactly how it happened or what it means to descend into hell. Instead, I want to stick to the simple meaning of the words as they must be presented to children and simple people.³⁷¹

Luther asserted that this "simple meaning of the words" was available for children and simple people in the hymns and various images in the churches. In a move which might surprise later Protestants, Luther essentially says, you will be saved by gazing upon those pictures, in the same way that the Israelites were saved in the wilderness by looking upon the brazen serpent.³⁷² He also argues that things such as Christ breaking the gates of hell should not be taken in an overly literal manner.³⁷³ Then he adds:

Therefore, I believe also in this case that Christ personally destroyed hell and bound the devil whether banners, portals, doors, and chains were made of wood and iron or did not exist at all. It doesn't depend on whether I hang on to what is depicted with the image but rather that I believe these things of Christ. Believing in him is the chief thing. It is useful and gives the power that we have from this: that neither hell nor the devil can take us and all others who believe on him captive nor can they do us harm.³⁷⁴

One other aspect of Luther's descensus theology is where he asserted that Christ descended body and soul into hell: "Therefore I am not supposed to divide up his person but instead simply to believe and to say that this very Christ, God and human

³⁶⁹ Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, 414.

³⁷⁰ Robert Kolb and James Arne Nestingen, *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 245-255. For an analysis of the background and contents of this see Truemper, "The Descensus Ad Inferos," 95-104.

³⁷¹ Kolb and Nestingen, *Sources and Contexts*, 246.

³⁷² Bagchi, "Luther versus Luther?," 191.

³⁷³ Kolb and Nestingen, *Sources and Contexts*, 247.

³⁷⁴ Kolb and Nestingen, *Sources and Contexts*, 249.

creature in one person, descended to hell.”³⁷⁵ This doctrine of ubiquity was most prominent in the debates over the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper.³⁷⁶ Later Lutheran theologians explained that Christ’s body and soul appearance in hell occurred on the third day, when His soul was reunited with his body, right before he emerged from the tomb.³⁷⁷

Philip Melanchthon, Luther’s close associate, has already been quoted in brief at the beginning of this chapter, where he spoke of Christ as “our Samson.” Truemper says that Melanchthon’s “descensus theology stands in marked contrast to that of Luther,” meaning that he did not associate the descent with the cross as Luther had.³⁷⁸ He asserts that Melanchthon, along with the earlier tradition, associated the descent entirely with Christ’s victory and not his passion. One example is taken from Melanchthon’s commentary on John’s Gospel (1536) where he alludes to several biblical texts (1 Pet 3; Ps 16; Hos 13) and concludes:

I have no doubt that Christ showed himself to the devils as the Risen One, and that he struck them with terror when they saw that they could not carry out such ferocity as they wished, for he demonstrated his power. This, I believe, happened gloriously, indeed so gloriously that the devils trembled and fled.³⁷⁹

Melanchthon also speculated that 1 Peter 3 might suggest that Christ preached to some of the “noblest Gentiles” in Hades (as Clement of Alexandria had).³⁸⁰ Truemper rightly asserts, “If part of the task of reformation theologians was to engage in re-interpreting the prevailing descensus theology of the Middle Ages in terms of the new understanding of the Gospel, then it can be said of Melanchthon that he made the least possible changes in that medieval view.”³⁸¹

Andreas Osiander, another German reformer, said in a sermon in 1551: “The Lord Christ was crucified for us, and died a shameful death for us, and went to hell because we deserved it, and suffered for our sake.”³⁸² Whereas Luther had hinted at

³⁷⁵ Kolb and Nestingen, *Sources and Contexts*, 248.

³⁷⁶ See David R. Law, “Descent into Hell, Ascension, and Luther’s Doctrine of Ubiquitarianism,” *Theology* 107 (2004): 250–56. Bagchi suggests that Luther’s insertion of this notion in the “Torgau Sermon” was in response to the Schwenckfelders, who denied the real presence in the Eucharist. “Luther vs. Luther?,” 195–6.

³⁷⁷ Gaylin Schmeling, “The Descent Into Hell,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 25 (September 1985): 24.

³⁷⁸ Truemper, “The Descensus Ad Inferos,” 202–3.

³⁷⁹ Quoted in Truemper, “The Descensus Ad Inferos,” 205–6.

³⁸⁰ See Truemper, “The Descensus Ad Inferos,” 204–6.

³⁸¹ Truemper, “The Descensus Ad Inferos,” 202.

³⁸² Quoted in Truemper, “The Descensus Ad Inferos,” 195.

Christ's suffering on the cross as a sort of "descent into hell" prior to his actual victorious descent, Osiander places the descent after Christ's death, in a manner consistent with Nicholas of Cusa. Osiander suggests that Christ suffered in hell on behalf of Christians.

Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer, said in his *Fidei Expositio* (1531):

If he had not 'died and been buried,' who would believe that he was a real man? Therefore the apostolic Fathers added in the creed, '*descendit ad inferos*,' i.e., he descended to those below, using the expression as a circumlocution to signify real death. For to be reckoned with those below is to have gone from the land of the living, and shows that the efficacy of his redemption extended even to those below. And this St. Peter hints at when he says [I Pet. 3:19f.] that the gospel was preached also to them that are dead, that is, to those below who following the example of Noah from the foundation of the world, believed the warnings of God, when the wicked were scornful.³⁸³

In the same work, in the section on Purgatory, Zwingli writes, "[S]ince Christ did not experience the torments of the regions below, as St. Peter teaches, Acts 2:27, but having gone through death ascended to heaven, we also, when freed from the bonds of the body, shall go thither without delay, hindrance, or new torment, if only we have sincere faith ..." ³⁸⁴ Contrary to Luther and Calvin, Zwingli ends up with a view more in line with the descensus theology of the patristic and medieval periods, like Melanchthon.³⁸⁵

Heinrich Bullinger, the successor to Zwingli in Zurich, did not visit England, but had significant influence there because of his hospitality towards the Marian exiles and through his letters. His *Decades* became a theology textbook in the universities during Elizabeth's reign.³⁸⁶ In a sermon on the Creed he writes: "The fifth part of this fourth article ["he descended into hell"] some do put severally by itself, for the fifth article of our faith. I for my part do see no cause why it should be plucked from that that goeth

³⁸³ James T. Dennison, Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 184.

³⁸⁴ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1.185.

³⁸⁵ For an explanation of Zwingli's letter to Berchtold Haller in 1526 which also touches on this doctrine, see Juhász, *Translating Resurrection*, 199-203.

³⁸⁶ Powel Mills Dawley, *John Whitgift and the Reformation* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955), 200-202. On the *Decades* in England, see also George M. Ella, "Henry Bullinger's Influence on the Church of England," *Churchman* 128 (2014): 142-44.

before; nor why it should make by itself a peculiar article of our faith.”³⁸⁷ This is a signal that he is less than enthused with the doctrine. He continues:

Touching this there are sundry opinions among the expositors of the holy scriptures. Augustine, in his book *De Fide et Symbolo*, doth neither place these words in the rule of belief, nor yet expound them. Cyprian saith thus: It is to be known verily, that in the creed of the Latin church this is not added, ‘He descended into hell;’ nor yet is this clause received in the churches of the east: but yet the sense of that clause seemeth to be all one with that, where it is said, ‘He was buried.’³⁸⁸

In this, Bullinger appears to downplay the descensus clause. Like Calvin, he says that “there are sundry opinions” regarding the descent. He says that Augustine did not address it in his sermon on the Creed (echoing Pecock); and quoting Rufinus (misattributing the quotations to Cyprian), he says that the clause was not in the Latin Creed nor was it received in the churches of the east. He concludes: “So then Cyprian’s [Rufinus’] opinion seemeth to be, that to descend into hell is nothing else but to be laid in the grave, according to that saying of Jacob: ‘Ye will bring my grey hairs with sorrow to hell, or the grave.’”³⁸⁹ This is quite misleading. Rufinus had said that the clause, “he descended into hell,” “seems to be implied ... when it is said that ‘he was buried.’”³⁹⁰ Furthermore, Rufinus did not quote the text from Genesis 42:38 that Bullinger did. And as we saw in the preceding chapter, Rufinus clearly taught Christ’s descent into hell, which Bullinger fails to note. Regardless, he ends up denying the descent as burial view because it would make no sense to add a second phrase in the Creed which does not clarify the first.³⁹¹

He goes on to offer his own view, though not as clearly as we might like. He makes reference to Augustine’s view that Christ went into hell, but that he felt no torment. But then he says: “We shall more agreeably to the truth seem to understand this article, if we shall think that the virtue [power] of Christ [at] his death did flow even to them that were dead, and profited them too: that is to say, that all the patriarchs and holy men, that died before the coming of Christ, were for the death of Christ preserved

³⁸⁷ Harding, *The Decades*, 1.137. Henrycho Bullinger, *Sermonum Decades Quinque, De Potissimis Christianae Religionis Capitibus, In Tres Tomos Digestae* (Tigvri: Froshoverus, 1567), fol. 23b.

³⁸⁸ Harding, *The Decades*, 1.137. *Sermonum Decades*, fol. 23b.

³⁸⁹ Harding, *The Decades*, 1.137. *Sermonum Decades*, fol. 23b.

³⁹⁰ Rufinus, “A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed,” 18, *NPNF 2*, 3.550.

³⁹¹ Harding, *The Decades*, 1.137. *Sermonum Decades*, fol. 23b. cf. Calvin below.

from death everlasting ...”³⁹² At the same time, he quotes 1 Peter 3:19, “that the Lord went in the Spirit, and preached unto the spirits that were in prison,” and concludes: “For verily they by the death of Christ were made to know the sentence of condemnation justly pronounced against them, because, when they lived, they believed not with Noe and them that were with him in the Saviour that was to come.” Bullinger’s language here sounds close to what Abelard had said, essentially denying a local descent of Christ’s soul, and opting instead for his power “descending.” However, Bullinger has a different view of the geography of the afterlife. It is noteworthy that he chooses to speak of Christ’s power “flowing” to the righteous dead. Bullinger chooses the word *dimanasse* [flow] here rather than the word *descendit* [went down]. His reason for choosing this word becomes evident as he offers the following statement about the geography of the afterlife:

Or else otherwise, by the lower parts, or by hell, we understand not the place of punishment appointed for the wicked, but the faithful that are departed, even as also by the higher parts we understand them that yet are remaining alive. Wherefore the soul of Christ descended into hell, that is to say, it was carried into Abraham’s bosom, wherein all the faithful already departed were gathered together. Therefore, when he said to the thief that was crucified with him, “This day shalt thou be with me in paradise,” he promised him the fellowship of life and of the blessed souls. Touching Abraham’s bosom, our Lord spake at large in the sixteenth chapter of the gospel after St Luke. For whereas the Lord is said to have descended, that cometh to pass by the manner of speaking: for otherwise it is evident by Luke, that Abraham’s bosom is a place severed a great way from hell, and placed up aloft. But to inquire or reason over curiously of these things is rather the point of a curious fool than of a godly-minded man.³⁹³

For Bullinger, when he says that “the soul of Christ descended into hell,” he means that his soul “was carried into Abraham’s bosom, wherein all the faithful already departed were gathered together.” He is deriving this from the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16. He suggests that “Abraham’s bosom is a place severed a great way from hell, and placed up aloft,” appearing to equate it with heaven. But before making this explicit, he quickly concludes his discussion of the descent, suggesting that reasoning “over curiously of these things” would be to follow the “curious fool” rather

³⁹² Harding, *The Decades*, 1.138. In the original, Bullinger says that “virtutem mortis Christi dimanasse etiam ad defunctos ...” *Sermonum Decades*, fol. 23b.

³⁹³ Harding, *The Decades*, 1.138-9. *Sermonum Decades*, fol. 23b.

than “the godly-minded.”³⁹⁴ What makes this even more confusing is where he expounds the article of the resurrection in the next sermon, saying: “hell [was] broken up for the faithful by the death of Christ,” and “the devil [was] vanquished, and hell destroyed.”³⁹⁵

Deciphering Bullinger’s view is rather difficult. He seems to suggest that the power of Christ’s death descended to hell to confirm the just condemnation of the wicked, but his power also “flowed” to the dead, to “profit” the Old Testament righteous (whom he perceives to have already been in heaven). Conceptually, his view appears to be similar to that of Abelard, in denying a local descent of Christ’s soul and opting rather for a “descent” of Christ’s power. But while Abelard and the earlier tradition held the view that the Old Testament righteous were in the “good part” of Sheol below, Bullinger viewed them as already in heaven. So, for Bullinger, there is something like a “double-descent” of Christ’s power: it descended below to confirm the condemnation of the wicked; and it “flowed” above to “profit” the righteous dead.

Leo Jud, the associate of both Zwingli and Bullinger in Switzerland, published large and shorter catechisms in 1534. Question 127 of the shorter deals with the descent:

T. Why did Christ descend into hell?

C. That is a sign that he truly died. Also, the fruit, power and energy of his suffering do not come only to those who were still alive on the earth but also to those who died since the times of Adam and Noah, for the death of Christ is a redemption for all those who from the beginning of the world have waited for his salvation and have rested in the bosom of Abraham (I Pet. 4.6; 3.19f; Acts 2.27; Psa. 16.10).³⁹⁶

Some have asserted that Jud equated the descent with Christ’s burial.³⁹⁷ But in this particular work, he appears to suggest that Christ’s saving power was effective for those still alive as well as those who had previously died. In other words, he avoids a spatial descent of Christ’s soul and believes that it was his power that descended, which is what Abelard had taught. Unlike Bullinger, Jud says nothing about Christ’s descent confirming the state of the wicked, he only suggests that Christ’s power went to the righteous in Abraham’s bosom (though he is vague about where that was). It should be

³⁹⁴ Harding, *The Decades*, 1.139. *Sermonum Decades*, fol. 24a. On this topic, see also 2.288-9 and 3.386-7.

³⁹⁵ Harding, *The Decades*, 1.140. *Sermonum Decades*, fol. 24a.

³⁹⁶ David T. Priestly, trans., “Leo Jud: The Shorter Catechism,” *Zwingliana* 44 (2017), 236.

³⁹⁷ Loofs, Friedrich, “Descent to Hades (Christ’s),” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1910), 657. Wallace quotes Loofs, “Puritan and Anglican,” 253.

noted that he abstains from using the word “descend” in his answer, avoiding any spatial reference.

The last of the continental reformers to be discussed in this section is John Calvin, the French reformer in Geneva. In his exposition of the Apostles’ Creed in his 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin says of the descent: “That he descended to hell means that he had been afflicted by God, and felt the dread and severity of divine judgment [Ps. 21:9], in order to intercede with God’s wrath and make satisfaction to his justice in our name [Is. 53:4, 11], thus paying our debts and lifting our penalties, not for his own iniquity (which never existed) but for ours.”³⁹⁸ After assuring his readers that God was not angry with his Son, he makes note of Christ’s cry of dereliction from the cross (Ps 22:1), connecting it with Christ’s descent into hell as Luther did before him. Then he says more explicitly:

It is obviously said that ‘he descended into hell,’ but did not enter a certain place (for which the term ‘limbo’ was invented), where the fathers who had lived under the Old Testament were as it were imprisoned, there awaiting their release from bondage and captivity, and forcibly broke through the gates of that place, to set them free from it. For this story, although it is repeated by great authors, and even today is earnestly defended as true by many persons, still is nothing but a story.³⁹⁹

He goes on to offer an intriguing interpretation of 1 Peter 3 saying, “By this Peter only meant that the power of redemption imparted through Christ was shown forth and plainly manifested to the spirits of those who had died before that time.” The believers who had awaited their salvation “at that time plainly and face to face perceived his visitation.” The reprobate, who comprehended too late that Christ was their sole salvation, “more plainly recognized that no hope remained in them.”⁴⁰⁰ Calvin goes on to clarify that the godly were not bound up with the ungodly in prison but were “gazing on Christ at a distance, obscurely and enshrouded in clouds—not yet shown forth.” The reference in Peter’s text to “a prison” is in fact a figure of speech which speaks of their “anxious waiting.” However, “they were in Abraham’s bosom [Luke 16:22-23; Rev 6:9-11], as they now also are, that is, in repose and quiet, which is for them the beginning of

³⁹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 55. Petrus Barth, ed. *Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta: Volume 1, Scripta Calvini ab anno 1533 usque ad annum 1541 continens*, 82-3.

³⁹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes, 1536 Edition*, 55.

⁴⁰⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes, 1536 Edition*, 55.

blessedness ... awaiting the day of blessed resurrection.”⁴⁰¹ Hence, he places “Abraham’s bosom” in heaven, rather than in Sheol.

More succinctly, he writes in his Catechism of 1537:

Concerning the expression that [Christ] descended into hell, it means that he was afflicted by God and that he has felt and endured the horrible rigor of his judgment in order to shield us from his wrath and to satisfy his justice for us. Thus he has suffered and borne the penalties due to our iniquity and not to him who was without sin and without stain.⁴⁰²

Here he equates Christ’s descent with his atoning work on the cross, “to shield us from [God’s] wrath and to satisfy his justice for us.”

His most extensive exposition is found in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*. After noting that the clause was not in the early versions of the Creed, he asserts that it became customary in the churches over time. But it is almost as if he is guarding against those who want to remove the clause when he writes: “This much is certain: that it reflected the common belief of all the godly; for there is no one of the fathers who does not mention in his writings Christ’s descent into hell, though their interpretations vary.”⁴⁰³ Once again, he connects the descent with Christ’s suffering on the cross and even says that a mere bodily death would have been ineffectual. Rather, “he must also grapple hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death.”⁴⁰⁴ He answers the chronological problem of the descensus clause being inserted after “he was buried” in the Creed by saying, “the Creed sets forth what Christ suffered in the sight of men, and then appositely speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he underwent in the sight of God ...” Those who raise such objections (as the chronological problem) “are making a very trifling and ridiculous objection.”⁴⁰⁵

At the risk of being trifling and ridiculous, even though this is a clever solution to the problem of the chronology in the Creed, it remains a problem. It is hard to imagine that equating Christ’s death on the cross with his descent into hell was what the compilers and editors of the Creed had in mind. As we saw earlier, Luther made a similar connection, but he held that view together with Christ’s descent into Hades following his death. But here Calvin has chosen to depart even from that interpretation.

⁴⁰¹ John Calvin, *Institutes, 1536 Edition*, 56.

⁴⁰² Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1.374.

⁴⁰³ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 2.16.8.

⁴⁰⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.10.

⁴⁰⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.10.

Any sense of a local descent has been abandoned. What we end up with is a “psychological” version of the descent which Christ manages while on the cross. Mary Rakow says approvingly, “Calvin demythologized an ancient and troublesome doctrine by freeing it of its awkward geographical apparatus and its unbelievable symbolic imagery.”⁴⁰⁶ While modern authors may embrace Calvin’s view, it is safe to say that in the sixteenth century, it was clear that he had departed from a whole stream of thought on this matter and had developed a novel view of the descent which is tied exclusively to the cross. Furthermore, (even though Calvin did not go here), it would seem that a denial of the spatial *descent* of Christ would inevitably lead to a denial of his spatial *ascent* as well. Calvin’s view had minimal impact in England during the Edwardian era (no impact on the official formularies), but it would gain steam during the Elizabethan period.

This brief survey should adequately serve to prepare us for the succeeding sections, but it should also be noted that the doctrine was facing further reinterpretations by some of the more radical reformers who are typically labelled “Anabaptists.” Friedman asserts that it was within the “Radical Reformation ranks that the *descensus* finally came into its own as an important concept within itself and as a central idea in several religious systems where it took its place along side other dramatic, if bizarre, notions.”⁴⁰⁷ He summarizes these views into three types. First, Caspar Schwenckfeld argued that Christ’s descent was a sole act of his divinity. Friedman says that this was “the most moderate and least radical position” [among the Anabaptists]⁴⁰⁸ Schwenckfeld wrote: “[Christ] descended into the prison [of hell] and preached through the Spirit, proclaiming to them the salvation and the gospel of grace for which they had been expectedly waiting.”⁴⁰⁹ He took all of the souls out of this prison and led them to his heavenly kingdom, leaving the outer court of hell empty. For Schwenckfeld, it was necessary that this was accomplished solely by Christ’s divinity

⁴⁰⁶ Mary Rakow, “Christ’s Descent into Hell: Calvin’s Interpretation,” *Religion in Life* 43 (1974): 225.

⁴⁰⁷ Jerome Friedman, “Christ’ Descent into Hell and Redemption Through Evil. A Radical Reformation Perspective,” *Archive for Reformation History* 76 (1985): 219. Friedman argues earlier in the article that the *descensus* did not play a fundamental role in Patristic thought (p. 218)—a notion which would be contrary to what we have already unfolded in chapter 1.

⁴⁰⁸ Friedman, “Christ’ Descent into Hell,” 220.

⁴⁰⁹ Friedman, “Christ’ Descent into Hell,” 220.

because, “Only a totally celestial being could leave the grave and enter hell and return unscathed.”⁴¹⁰

The second view took the opposite end of the spectrum in interpreting Christ’s descent. The Hutterite Anabaptists John Schlaffer and John Spittelmaier argued that Christ descended in his humanity so that he could experience the depths of human experience. Drawing on Jesus quoting Psalm 22 from the cross, Schlaffer said that “all who would be blessed in Christ must go into this deep.”⁴¹¹ Friedman says that in contrast to Luther’s subjective description of the reality of each person’s experience, Schlaffer was presenting an objective reality which everyone must endure. In light of his fully human descent, it was necessary for his Father to rescue him from hell and he will do the same for those who descend with Christ into this hell.⁴¹² Friedman suggests that the Hutterites viewed the suffering that they endured at the hands of Roman Catholics and other Protestants alike as their own descent into hell.⁴¹³

Michael Servetus, the famed radical who was ultimately executed in Geneva during Calvin’s days (1553), offered a third and even more radical version of Christ’s descent. He denied the uniqueness of Christ’s descent by saying that it “was one more chapter in the eternal historical conflict between God and Satan.”⁴¹⁴ His views became even more bizarre because they were bound up in a future conflict between God and Satan which supposedly would culminate in 1585, with Christians emulating Christ’s battle with Satan in their own lives.⁴¹⁵

George Hunston Williams, in his magisterial work on the radical reformation, posits a fourth stream of thought on the descent among the Anabaptists when he writes: “Common to all the radical reformers was a great interest in safeguarding the literal sense of Christ’s descent into Hades to redeem the worthies of the Old Covenant and by implication, in some instances at least, the good pagans.”⁴¹⁶ The offering of salvation to righteous pagans (such as Plato, Aristotle and others) was a theme which we saw among some of the Eastern Fathers in chapter 1, as well as Melanchthon and Zwingli in

⁴¹⁰ Friedman, “Christ’ Descent into Hell,” 220.

⁴¹¹ Friedman, “Christ’ Descent into Hell,” 221.

⁴¹² Friedman, “Christ’ Descent into Hell,” 221-22.

⁴¹³ Friedman, “Christ’ Descent into Hell,” 229.

⁴¹⁴ Friedman, “Christ’ Descent into Hell,” 223.

⁴¹⁵ Friedman, “Christ’ Descent into Hell,” 228-9.

⁴¹⁶ George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, Third (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1992), 1271. For a list of other Anabaptist writings on the descensus, see Constance I. Smith, “Descendit Ad Inferos--Again,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28 (1967), 87–88.

this chapter. It seems possible that the Anabaptists' emphasis of this doctrine may have served to make some of the mainstream reformers cautious about it or more inclined to reject certain aspects of it.

The Doctrine of the Descent in England During the Reign of Henry VIII

Having explored this important background information, we will now begin our discussion of how the doctrine of Christ's descent was taught in the successive reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. As noted in the introduction, a thorough exploration of this topic has not been broached. In our journey to sixteenth century England, we might expect to arrive and step into a debate between the Church and John Wycliffe's followers, the Lollards, over this doctrine since they challenged other doctrines such as transubstantiation, clerical celibacy and pilgrimages. But Christ's descent was not one of the issues on their radar for reform. Rather, if you look at *Piers Plowman* or *The Praier and Complaynte of the Ploweman Vnto Christe*, you find a version of the descent rather consistent with what had gone before.⁴¹⁷ In fact, Tamburr argues that the version of the descent contained in *Piers Ploughman* "owes much of its structure and details to the *Gospel of Nicodemus* ..." ⁴¹⁸

There was a related debate in the early part of the sixteenth century, but it was over a different post-death issue, the soul sleep controversy.⁴¹⁹ In England, this was largely played out between William Tyndale and his former assistant, George Joye.⁴²⁰ But the issue was also broached in the doctrinal debates between Tyndale and Sir Thomas More. Tyndale seems to have been most interested in making sure that the bodily resurrection on the Last Day was not an afterthought.⁴²¹ Though somewhat tentative in his assertions, he saw a close relationship between the body and soul that was maintained even after death. For him, the soul descended into the grave with the body, awaiting the last trumpet. In light of this, there are scant and vague references to

⁴¹⁷ *The Vision and Creed of Piers Ploughman* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1887). The second work was written during Lollard times but appeared in print in 1531. Douglas H. Parker, ed., *The Praier and Complaynte of the Ploweman Vnto Christe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 3. For the descent, see p. 116.

⁴¹⁸ Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell*, 141.

⁴¹⁹ Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall, eds., *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 116-17.

⁴²⁰ See the aforementioned work by Juhász, *Translating Resurrection*. On this topic, see also Norman T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

⁴²¹ Henry Walter, ed., *The Works of William Tyndale* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2010), 2.63, 180-81.

the descent of Christ in his writings. After all, it would be superfluous to argue that Christ moved sleeping souls from one place to another. We might also suspect that Tyndale's view of soul-sleep until the resurrection would be embraced by others as an effective argument against two other doctrines which Protestants abhorred: purgatory and prayer to the saints.⁴²² However, the issue of soul sleep was out of the mainstream in England, and it was condemned by one of the Forty-Two Articles of Religion that were issued by Cranmer and his associates during Edward's reign (1553).⁴²³

The Apostles' Creed has had a special prominence in the English church. Swete writes: "No Christian document outside the limits of the Canon appeals to the loyalty of religious Englishmen so forcibly as the Apostles' Creed."⁴²⁴ This was surely a factor in the debate over the descent clause which we will see in this chapter and the next. This is also why the thought of rescinding the clause altogether, which we will see proposed by a few, was a radical idea. The Latin variations noted in the Introduction likely had some effect on the way that the clause was translated in the various documents. The Creed was rehearsed or paraphrased in the following ways in the Tudor period. In some documents, we have "he went down to hell" (Marshall's Primer, Taverner's and Ponet's catechisms). This is also how it is expressed in the Articles of Religion (in Latin, *ad Inferos descendisse*). There are also occasional instances of "he descended down to hell" (Roye's catechism) and at least one instance of "he descended among the dead" (Henry Jacobs). (The variation of this, "he descended to the dead," has become popular in modern versions of the Creed.) But the most pervasive version in the Tudor period is the one found in the catechism appointed for confirmation in the Book of Common Prayer: "he descended into hell."⁴²⁵ This would have been the version recited in the daily worship of the churches at Morning and Evening Prayer. There are also some paraphrases of the Creed during this period, most notably, the *Bishops' Book* and the *Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter*. The version in the *Bishops' Book* says: "he descended

⁴²² cf. Juhász, *Translating Resurrection*, 173-79.

⁴²³ Bray, *Documents of the English Reformation*, 309-10. It should also be noted that John Calvin's first theological work, *Psychopannychia*, was a devastating critique of soul-sleep. The descent does not have a prominent role in that work, being mentioned only once. John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters, Volume 3* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 480-1.

⁴²⁴ Swete, *Apostles' Creed*, 9.

⁴²⁵ Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59, 152.

immediately in his soul down into hell.”⁴²⁶ The Sternhold-Hopkins said: “His spirit did after this descend, into the lower partes.”⁴²⁷ We will discuss the various versions and the issues surrounding them more thoroughly below.

We will examine the Henrician and Edwardian periods following this pattern: looking at how the descent was set forth in devotional and catechetical works, then in official doctrinal statements, and finally, by noting the controversies over the doctrine during these reigns.

Devotional and Catechetical Works in Henry VIII's Reign

Compared to what we have seen in the continental context, the debates over the descent during Henry's reign were rather tame. Earlier, we looked at some of the catechetical and liturgical material from late medieval England to ascertain what the laity were being taught about the descent. It might be helpful to do the same here by looking at early primers and catechisms of this period. Primers were small, hand-held prayer books which typically contained both devotional and catechetical material for the educated layperson. And they were exceedingly popular. Butterworth notes that from 1525-1560, there were more than 180 editions: some in Latin, some in Latin and English, and some in English alone.⁴²⁸ Some of the early primers, particularly George Joye's (1530),⁴²⁹ managed to include some biblical material in English, such as certain Psalms and the passion narratives. Spinks writes, “It was precisely this liturgical genre that became something of a Trojan horse for the spread of the Reformation ideals and theology in England.”⁴³⁰ Their popularity waned in England with the issuance of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) in 1549 but had a brief resurgence during Queen Mary's reign when traditional devotional practices were being encouraged.⁴³¹

In 1534 and 1535, two official primers were issued in English by William Marshall (notably, right around the time of the Act of Supremacy). The 1535 edition,

⁴²⁶ Charles Lloyd, ed., *Formularies of Faith Put Forth by Authority During the Reign of Henry VIII*. (Oxford: The University Press, 1856), 233.

⁴²⁷ Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins, *The Whole Booke of Psalmes Collected into Englysh Metre by T. Starnhold, I. Hopkins, & Others*. (London: John Day, 1565), 381.

⁴²⁸ Charles C. Butterworth, *The English Primers (1529-1545): Their Publication and Connection with the English Bible and the Reformation in England* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 1.

⁴²⁹ The only reference to the descent in Joye's primer is where the Apostles' Creed is included in the form of a dialogue. Butterworth, *The English Primers*, 32.

⁴³⁰ Natalie Mears and Alec Ryrie, eds., *Worship and the Parish Church in Early Modern Britain* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2013), 75.

⁴³¹ Butterworth, *The English Primers*, 2.

called “The Goodly Primer,” included the following teaching on the descent of Christ in an exposition of the Creed:

I believe that he went down to hell to subdue and make captive (to me and all that believe) the Devil with all his impery, subtlety, and malice, to deliver me from hell, whereunto I was condemned in my first father Adam, taking away all power thereof, that it might not hurt me, but should rather be a profitable occasion to me, to laud and praise God for my delivery.⁴³²

Here we see a rather pastoral application of Christ’s descent since he went there to “deliver *me* from hell” (as well as “all that believe”). In a later section entitled “A Fruitful Remembrance of Christ’s Passion,” the reader is encouraged to recall these events: “Therefore on this manner shalt thou unlade thy mind, and cast thy sins on Christ.”⁴³³ After acknowledging the burden of sin on the conscience, the following statement (which includes the descent) is intended to comfort:

For the conscience cannot be quiet, when he feeleth his sin, but esteemeth it greater than that we of our own power should be able to quench it, as without doubt it is. Notwithstanding, if he saw that Christ, which is both God and man, had taken them upon him, and had vanquished them by his death, yea, and rising again had triumphed upon death, hell, and the Devil, then should he soon perceive how weak the sting and power of sin is.⁴³⁴

This is another instance of the descent being applied pastorally to the individual Christian, asserting that it gives him power over sin.

Later in Marshall’s Primer, there is a catechetical section entitled “The Dialogue Between the Father and the Son” where the following response is given in explaining the significance of Christ’s descent: “I believe that Christ was conceived, born, and suffered for my sins, and that he went down to hell for my sake, to deliver me thence, and all them that truly believe, and that he rose to make me righteous.”⁴³⁵

Unsurprisingly, this echoes the earlier exposition of the Creed. Even later in this Primer, there is a section entitled “The Psalms of Christ’s Passion” which includes Psalm 24 (discussed earlier on account of its use in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*).⁴³⁶ There is no reason for including this among the Psalms of the Passion unless it is believed to be describing the descent, where Christ enters Hades as the King of glory following his

⁴³² Edward Burton, ed., *Three Primers Put Forth in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Oxford: The University Press, 1834), 41–42.

⁴³³ Burton, *Three Primers*, 206.

⁴³⁴ Burton, *Three Primers*, 206–07.

⁴³⁵ Burton, *Three Primers*, 217–18.

⁴³⁶ Burton, *Three Primers*, 291–92.

death. Psalm 30, which was also associated with the descent, is also included in this section.⁴³⁷ Immediately following these Passion Psalms, the prayer of Jonah from the belly of the fish is quoted. We have already seen the association between Jonah and the descent in light of Christ's comments in Matthew 12:39-40. The prayer ends with, "For the Lord commanded the fish, and anon he cast out Jonas upon the dry land," appropriately signifying the resurrection of Christ after his descent.⁴³⁸

In 1539, another primer known as "Hilsey's Primer," was issued at the command of Thomas Cromwell.⁴³⁹ The work opens with the Athanasian Creed which contains the article "he descended into hell."⁴⁴⁰ Only the opening line of the Apostles' Creed is given, assuming the reader has memorized this basic formula with its descensus clause. A version of the hours of prayer, popularized especially by Benedictine monasticism, follows after this. At Prime, there is a memory of Christ's passion which includes this prayer: "thou, Lord, by these most holy pains which we thy unworthy servants do render, and by thy holy passion deliver us from the pains of hell, and vouchsafe to bring us, wretched sinners, whither as though broughtest the penitent thief crucified with thee ..." ⁴⁴¹ It would appear that in this work there is a narrowing emphasis to the cross of Christ. There are several petitions for Christ to deliver into paradise those who are praying, but no further explicit references to the descent are made.

In 1545, a third primer was set forth "By the King's Majesty, and His Clergy, to be taught, learned, and read: and none other to be used throughout all his dominions" (commonly known as *The King's Primer*).⁴⁴² Based on this title, it is assumed that this primer was to supersede the preceding ones. It is noteworthy that there is only a single reference to the descent of Christ in this work, in the recitation of the Apostles' Creed. There does not even follow any sort of exposition of its meaning. It is remarkable that the theme of the descent, which is so prominent in Marshall's Primer, is greatly diminished in Hilsey's, and is almost absent from *The King's Primer*.

⁴³⁷ Particularly, v. 3 which says, "O LORD, you brought up my soul up from Sheol; you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit." (ESV) This is the psalm where Lefèvre made the comments in concert with Cusanus concerning the descent that got him into hot water. See especially Juhász, *Translating Resurrection*, 152-164.

⁴³⁸ Burton, *Three Primers*, 300.

⁴³⁹ Burton, *Three Primers*, liv.

⁴⁴⁰ Burton, *Three Primers*, 325-27.

⁴⁴¹ Burton, *Three Primers*, 346.

⁴⁴² Burton, *Three Primers*, 437.

We have already seen that some primers, such as Marshall's, included catechetical material, but there were many other works printed in England that were devoted exclusively to catechesis. Green has masterfully surveyed an enormous number of these catechisms, which is no small feat given the fact that his catalog of those issued from c. 1530 through 1740 extends into the hundreds.⁴⁴³ Most of these were written in the Elizabethan period and beyond, but there were some during the Henrician and Edwardian periods. The first catechism in English was William Roye's "A Breve Dialoge Bitwene a Christen Father and His Stobborne Sonne" (1527). This was a translation of the Latin work produced in Strasbourg earlier the same year by Wolfgang Capito.⁴⁴⁴ Even though it contains some more radical ideas (including a version of soul sleep), it is fairly traditional in its brief statement on the descent: "He descended down to hell (as clearly appeareth by the scripture) that all his thereby should be delivered both from death and hell."⁴⁴⁵

Philippa Tudor notes that "between 1536 and 1553 an attempt was made to intensify and extend basic religious education amongst the English laity."⁴⁴⁶ Richard Taverner, who managed to survive the reigns of Henry, Edward, Mary, and part of Elizabeth's, issued a catechism in 1539 which included this cryptic note on the descent:

And where we say he went down to hell, it is meant he was extremely handled of God, and that he felt the sharpness of God's judgment in that he did put himself between us and God's wrath, and on our behalf satisfied the rigor and sharp judgment of God, so did he pay and suffer the due pains not for his own iniquity, for he had none in him, but for our wickedness.⁴⁴⁷

This sounds very much like Calvin in relating the descent to Christ's death on the cross. In fact, Green tells us that Taverner's Catechism "was an adaptation of Calvin's first attempt at a catechism in 1537."⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴³ Ian Green, *The Christian's ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England c. 1530-1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁴⁴⁴ Anthea Hume, "William Roye's 'Breve Dialoge' (1527): An English Version of a Strassburg Catechism," *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967): 307-8. This work originally had limited exposure since one of Wolsey's agents purchased most of the copies. However, it was reissued in 1550. Philippa Tudor, "Religious Instruction for Children and Adolescents in the Early English Reformation," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35 (1984): 407.

⁴⁴⁵ William Roy, *A Breve Dialoge Bitwene a Christen Father and His Stobborne Sonne: The First Protestant Catechism Published in English*, ed. Douglas H. Parker and Bruce Krajewski (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 120.

⁴⁴⁶ Tudor, "Religious Instruction," 411.

⁴⁴⁷ Richard Taverner, *A Catechisme or Institution of the Christen Religion. Newly Set Forthe by Richard Tauerner* (London: R. Bankes, 1539), 41-42.

⁴⁴⁸ Green, *The Christian's ABC*, 59.

Taverner, whom Duffy calls “one of Cromwell’s evangelical clients,” was also commissioned in 1540 to edit a series of postils or homilies on the Epistles and Gospels for each Sunday.⁴⁴⁹ In the homily for Easter Day (based on Rom 4:25), Taverner gives a more traditional view of the descent. Speaking of Christ’s resurrection as a victory over the devil, death, and hell, he alludes to texts where this was prefigured such as: when Samson slew the lion and drew honey from its carcass, when David rescued the lamb from the lion’s mouth and slew Goliath, and when Jonah was delivered from the belly of the whale.⁴⁵⁰ We have seen how all of these texts had been used as types of the descent and resurrection by earlier writers. But then he gets even more explicit: “Thus hath his resurrection wrought for us life and righteousness. He passed through death and hell to put us in good hope, that by his strength we shall do the same.”⁴⁵¹ And then a bit further: “Thus good Christian people, for as much as ye have heard these so great and excellent benefits of Christ’s mighty and glorious resurrection how that he ransomed sin, overcame the devil, death, and hell, and hath victoriously obtained the better hand of them all, to make us free and safe from them ...”⁴⁵² It is possible that Taverner’s inconsistency on the descent between these two works is due to the fact that his catechism was an adaptation of Calvin’s catechism. Or it may be that like Luther, he envisioned Christ suffering the pains of hell on the cross, but then descending to hell in victory prior to the resurrection.

Official Doctrinal Statements in Henry VIII’s Reign

We move now from the devotional and catechetical material during Henry’s reign to the official doctrinal statements that were issued. The Ten Articles, issued by parliament in 1536, were intended by King Henry and his clergy to “avoid contentious opinions.”⁴⁵³ The First Article commends “the whole body and canon of the Bible, and also ... the three Creeds or symbols ...”⁴⁵⁴ The Article appears to equate both the Bible and the

⁴⁴⁹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 425.

⁴⁵⁰ Edward Cardwell, ed., *Postils on the Epistles and Gospels Compiled and Published by Richard Taverner in the Year 1540* (Oxford: The University Press, 1841), 192.

⁴⁵¹ Cardwell, *Postils*, 193.

⁴⁵² Cardwell, *Postils*, 194.

⁴⁵³ Charles Hardwick, *A History of the Articles of Religion* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1881), 237.

⁴⁵⁴ Hardwick, *A History of the Articles*, 241.

Creeds with “the infallible words of God.” The interpretation of the same must be consistent with “the holy approved doctors of the Church.”⁴⁵⁵

This line of interpretation was further clarified in *The Institution of a Christian Man* (commonly called “The Bishops’ Book”), which was issued the following year. Duffy notes that this book was “designed to be an authoritative explanation and expansion of the teaching of the Ten Articles for use in preaching and catechizing.”⁴⁵⁶ MacCulloch writes: “The text of the Bishops’ Book was indeed designed (albeit with little oratorical skill) to be read as sermons.” Then he notes: “It represents an important stage in the development of a new idea: the issuing of a collection of official sermons or homilies to guide the beliefs of the nation.”⁴⁵⁷

The Bishops’ Book contains the most extensive exposition of the descent in England during this period. Rupp suggests that the section on the descent may have been aimed at recent controversy on the matter since “Bale and others had recently attacked the doctrine on theological and critical grounds.”⁴⁵⁸ The opening section is worthy of a lengthy quote:

I believe assuredly in my heart, and with my mouth I do profess, that this our Saviour Jesu Christ, after he was thus dead upon the cross, he descended immediately in his soul down into hell, leaving his most blessed body here in earth, and that at his coming thither, by the incomparable might and force of his Godhead, he entered into hell. And like as that mighty man, of whom St. Luke speaketh, which entering into the house of another strong man, first overcame him, and bound him hand and foot, and afterward spoiling him of all his armour and strength, wherein he trusted, took also away from him all the goods and substance he had; and like as strong Samson slew the mighty lion, and took out of his mouth the sweet honey: even so our Saviour Jesu Christ, at his said entry into hell, first he conquered and oppressed both the devil and hell, and also death itself, whereunto all mankind was condemned, and so bound them fast, that is to say, restrained the power and tyranny which they had before, and exercised over all mankind, that they never had sith that time, nor never shall have any power finally to hurt or annoy any of them that do faithfully believe in Jesu Christ; and afterward he spoiled hell, and delivered and brought with him from thence all the souls of those righteous and good men, which from the fall of Adam died in the favour of

⁴⁵⁵ Hardwick, *A History of the Articles*, 241. This is another instance of the English church claiming to align their doctrine with the fathers.

⁴⁵⁶ Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 400.

⁴⁵⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 206. cf. Felicity Heal, *Reformation in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 292.

⁴⁵⁸ E. G. Rupp, *Studies in the Making of the English Protestant Tradition (Mainly in the Reign of Henry VIII)* (Cambridge: University Press, 1949), 140. This passing reference unfortunately does not include a footnote. I have pieced together the controversy to the best of my ability below.

God, and in the faith and belief of this our Saviour Jesu Christ, which was then to come.⁴⁵⁹

This explanation of the descent is entirely consistent with what we saw from the patristic era, employing many of the same biblical passages. With a pastoral intent similar to that of Marshall's Primer above, it makes the point that Christ's victory over the devil and hell was not just applicable to those who awaited his arrival in Hades but also for those hearing or reading this text. This power is even extended to believers that they might have power over sin and the devil in this life:

And I believe assuredly, that by this descending of Christ into hell, and this his resurrection again from death to life, Christ hath merited and deserved for me and all true and faithful Christian men, not only that our souls shall never come into hell, but also that we shall here in this life be perfectly justified in the sight and acceptation of God, and shall have such grace, might, and power given unto us by him, that we shall be made able thereby to subdue, to mortify, and to extinguish our old Adam, and all our carnal and fleshly concupiscences, in such sort, that sin shall never afterward reign in our mortal bodies, but that we shall be wholly delivered from the kingdom of sin, and from spiritual death, and shall be resuscitated and regenerated into the new life of the Spirit and grace.⁴⁶⁰

Of all of the resources from this period, this exposition offers the fullest and clearest account of the descent of Christ. Not only does it explain what happened, it also explains the significance of the doctrine for each Christian.

The Thirteen Articles of 1538 were negotiated between English and German representatives but were never adopted as an official formulary. The sole reference here is where it says, "he descended into hell," quoting the Apostles' Creed.⁴⁶¹ The controversial Six Articles (1539) were limited in scope and did not mention the descent. The final official formulary to be considered in this section was issued in 1543 as "The Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for Any Christian Man" (commonly known as "The King's Book"). This work came about after Henry, who styled himself as something of a new King David,⁴⁶² issued a number of corrections to the Bishops' Book. Even though Henry had much to say on other Articles, his corrections on the descent were limited to just a few inconsequential sentences.⁴⁶³ But when he issued the King's Book, he made

⁴⁵⁹ Lloyd, *Formularies of Faith*, 40–41.

⁴⁶⁰ Lloyd, *Formularies of Faith*, 42–3.

⁴⁶¹ Bray, *Documents of the English Reformation*, 186.

⁴⁶² John N. King, "Henry VIII as David," in *Rethinking the Henrician Era: Essays on Early Tudor Texts and Contexts*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 78–92.

⁴⁶³ Cox, *The Works of Thomas Cranmer*, 2.89–90.

significant changes. First, instead of having a separate article on the descent, he divided his comments on this doctrine between his sections on the death and resurrection of Christ. Second, his comments on the descent amount to approximately one-third of those in the Bishops' Book (See Appendix III where the two are set side-by-side for comparison). Third, much of the pastoral material from the Bishops' Book disappears. MacCulloch says of the King's Book as a whole, "In almost every respect it was more doctrinally conservative than the Bishops' Book, the exception being its highly dismissive treatment of purgatory."⁴⁶⁴ This is not the case regarding the section on the descent as the Bishops' Book was the more conservative of the two.

Controversy Over the Descent in Henry VIII's Reign

At this point we can circle back and try to reconstruct the issue that Rupp raised concerning John Bale's denial of the doctrine of the descent. A very short transcript is given of the matter in the State Papers of 1536.⁴⁶⁵ The section is entitled: "The answer of John Bale, priest, unto certain articles unjustly gathered upon his preachings." Bale's first response was that he, "Never denied that 'descendit ad inferna' was an article of the Creed, but said that it was St. Cyprian's opinion it had not been so long in the common creed as other articles." Here we see him repeating what Erasmus had said earlier (including his erroneous attribution of this quotation to Cyprian rather than Rufinus). Secondly, he "Told them not to believe it 'as they see it set forth in painted cloths or in glass windows, or like as myself had before time set it forth in the country there in a certain play.' They must not suppose that Christ fought violently with the devils for the souls of the faithful." Here he gave his audience the exact opposite instructions that Luther had given to his in his Torgau Sermon. Bale, in essence says, ignore those paintings and glass windows! He also refers to one of the plays that he had written earlier in his life which had, embarrassingly to him, contained a reference to the descent.

Thirdly, regarding the descent, Bale reportedly claimed to have merely repeated Erasmus' speculation "'that the said article' was added by Thomas of Aquinas." And in

⁴⁶⁴ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 309.

⁴⁶⁵ "John Bale.' Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII. Ed. J. Gairdner. Vol. 11: 1536. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 19 Nov 1536. 446. State Papers Online. Web. 11 Aug. 2018," accessed August 11, 2018, <http://go.galegroup.com/mss/i.do?&id=GALE%7CMC4301901125&v=2.1&u=pro&it=r&p=SPOL&sw=w&viewtype=Calendar>.

an effort to discredit Aquinas, Bale is reported to have “[r]emarked on his [Aquinas’] errors concerning the primacy of the bishop of Rome, and that he was not the more a saint because the bishop of Rome had canonised him for money.” There is one last response which Bale had reportedly made regarding the descent: [he] “Said that no man ought to believe anything as infallible or grounded truth, but what is plainly expressed in Scripture, and no truths ought to be preached but what are in Scripture.” This sounds essentially like a challenge to those who were critical of him to prove that the doctrine is found in Scripture, sailing awfully close to the position which cost Bishop Pecock dearly in the previous century.

As we analyze the teaching of the descent during Henry VIII’s reign, we might note that even though the doctrine continued to be asserted, its significance would appear to be in decline. This is evident in the catechetical material in the primers from the period. The descent was quite prominent in Marshall’s Primer, but by the time *The King’s Primer* was issued, the descent was only included in the recitation of the Apostles’ Creed without any exposition. The same pattern can be seen in the transition from *The Bishops’ Book* to *The King’s Book*. Based on Henry’s revision of *The Bishops’ Book*, we might suspect that he had a hand in this. The best guess for why he would want to minimize the teaching on Christ’s descent is because he may have perceived that it was too closely related to the “popish purgatory” which he was trying to purge from his realm. If true, this would also have fit well with his program of dismantling the monasteries where the pope’s pardons were purchased and dispensed.⁴⁶⁶ Some tension between the new teachings on the descent and the traditional view is also evident in the works of Taverner, who echoes Calvin in his catechism while setting forth the traditional teaching in his homilies. Bale’s questioning of the descensus clause shows that skepticism over the doctrine was on the rise.

⁴⁶⁶ For a discussion on Henry VIII and his program against the popish purgatory, see Bernard, *The King’s Reformation*, 285-8.

The Doctrine of the Descent in England During the Reign of Edward VI

Catechetical Works in Edward VI's Reign

We begin the final section of this chapter by attempting to follow a pattern similar to the preceding section through the reign of Edward VI: catechetical material, homiletical and liturgical works, official formularies, and controversy. We begin with the official Catechism of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer issued near the beginning of Edward's reign in 1548. A brief background to this work is necessary. MacCulloch says that Andreas Osiander (whose niece Cranmer would marry), was preparing a catechism in 1532 for the city of Nuremberg which would become the basis of the catechism published under Cranmer's patronage in 1548.⁴⁶⁷ He adds that the publication of this catechism was "only semi-official" and would later prove to be embarrassing for Cranmer when he would have to answer charges of being inconsistent in his eucharistic doctrine.⁴⁶⁸ Cranmer's 1548 Catechism included some additions and significant modifications of Osiander's work. Some of these changes were derived from another project by Osiander, a work for children based on Luther's *Small Catechism* of 1529. The Wittenberg reformer, Justus Jonas (Jodocus Koch) translated that work into Latin in 1539. Cranmer used Jonas' version as the basis for his English version. MacCulloch concludes, "[T]he book which Cranmer adapted was the one purely Lutheran devotional work to take official place in the English Reformation."⁴⁶⁹

Cranmer's Catechism has the following statements on Christ's descent: "And as man he suffered death for us, and descended into hell. But as naturally God he loosed the bands and pains of hell, he destroyed the kingdom of death, he rose from death to life, and so paid ransom for our sins, and took away the guiltiness of the same."⁴⁷⁰ A bit later in the same sermon regarding our redemption, Cranmer adds: "And when our Savior Jesus Christ had thus satisfied for our sin, and so overcame death and hell, then like a valiant conqueror he ascended into heaven ..."⁴⁷¹ One more line is worth noting: "And although we be never so much afraid of the sorrows and pains of hell, yet they

⁴⁶⁷ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 71.

⁴⁶⁸ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 386-87.

⁴⁶⁹ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 387.

⁴⁷⁰ Edward Burton, ed., *A Short Instruction into Christian Religion, Being A Catechism set forth by Archbishop Cranmer*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1829), 114. The language from this work has been slightly updated.

⁴⁷¹ Cranmer, *A Short Instruction*, 116.

shall not be able to hold us, because to them that be his servants, he hath broken hell, and set open the gates thereof.”⁴⁷² The language here is quite traditional and, once again, pastoral in intent.

The 1549 Book of Common Prayer contained a catechism as a part of the Confirmation service. The candidate rehearses the Apostles’ Creed (which includes “he descended into hell”), and is then asked, “What dooest thou chiefly learn in these articles of thy believe?” The simple answer regarding the work of Christ is: “[I learne to beleue] in God the sonne who hath redeemed me and all mankinde.”⁴⁷³ The second Prayer Book, issued in 1552, repeats the same.⁴⁷⁴ Further discussion on the descent in these Prayer Books may be found below.

A second stand-alone Catechism that came out during this period was the work of John Ponet, one of Cranmer’s chaplains and later, Bishop of Winchester. The work was issued in 1553 along with the Forty-Two Articles of Religion. The section on the descent was brief but was consistent with Article III which will be discussed later. After rehearsing the Apostles’ Creed (which says “He went down to hell” rather than “he descended into hell”), the “Scholar” goes on to explain the significance:

Then he truly died: and was truly buried: that by his most sweet sacrifice, he might pacify his Father’s wrath against mankind: and subdue him by his death, who had authority of death, which was the devil: forasmuch not only the living, but also the dead, where they in hell, or elsewhere, they all felt the power and force of his death: to whom living in prison (as Peter sayeth) Christ preached, though dead in body, yet alive in Spirit.⁴⁷⁵

The most significant aspect of this is that the 1 Peter 3 text is quoted in reference to the descent (see further below).

The ensuing section on the resurrection also contains allusions to Christ’s descent:

For to die is common to all men: but to loose the bonds of death, and by his own power to rise again, that properly belongeth to Jesus Christ the only begotten Son of God, the only author of life. Moreover it was necessary, that he should rise again with glory, that the sayings of David and other prophets of God might be fulfilled, which told before: that neither his body should see corruption: nor his soul be left in hell.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷² Cranmer, *A Short Instruction*, 116.

⁴⁷³ *The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1949), 248.

⁴⁷⁴ *The First and Second Prayer Books*, 405.

⁴⁷⁵ John Ponet, *A Short Catechisme, or Playne Instruction, Conteynyng the Su[m]me of Christian Learning*, (London: Iohn Day, 1553), xx-xxii. Language slightly updated in this work.

⁴⁷⁶ Ponet, *A Short Catechisme*, xxiii-xxiv.

Reference here is made to “David and other prophets of God,” specifically to Psalm 16 (quoted in Acts 2), that Christ’s soul would not be left in hell.

A third major catechism from the Edwardian period came from the pen of Thomas Becon, another of Cranmer’s chaplains. Written in dialogue fashion between father and son, it has a more extensive section on the descent than Ponet’s, including four questions. The first question is, “How provest thou that Christ went down to hell?”⁴⁷⁷ Like Ponet, Becon appeals to Psalm 16/Acts 2 as well as 1 Peter 3. The second question is, “What profit have we by Christ’s descension and going down unto hell?”⁴⁷⁸ The answer echoes the patristic writings: “By this means are we well assured, that Christ hath overcome the devil, broken the serpent’s head, destroyed the gates of hell, vanquished the infernal army, and utterly delivered us from everlasting damnation ...”⁴⁷⁹ Hosea 13:14 and 1 Corinthians 15:55 (“O Death, I will be thy death,” etc.) are quoted for support.

The third question is: “Suffered Christ pains also in hell?”⁴⁸⁰ Becon’s answer is conflicted. First it says, “Nothing less,” but in the very next sentence: “For whatsoever pains were to be suffered for our sins and wickednesses, *he suffered them all in his blessed body on the altar of the cross.*” The last sentence reads: “He went not down unto hell as a guilty person to suffer, but as a valiant prince to conquer, and as most puissant and glorious king to triumph over his enemies, and to make us also lords and conquerors of Satan and of all his infernal army.”⁴⁸¹ The thrust of the answer is that Christ did not suffer *in hell*, making the first statement misleading. The answer suggests a view similar to that of Luther (and Taverner), that Christ suffered the pains of hell on the cross but then descended victoriously into hell after death. It also alludes to an ongoing effect of Christ’s descent for the Christian, though in a much shorter manner than the Bishops’ Book. Unlike the first two responses, no biblical text is cited.

The fourth question leads into the discussion of the resurrection. In the responses of this section, Becon alludes to a string of texts employed with reference to the descent/resurrection by patristic authors: Hosea 6, Matthew 12 (alluding to Jonah), Psalm 3, as well as Acts 2 and 13. The response to the last question in the section on the

⁴⁷⁷ Thomas Becon, *The Catechism of Thomas Becon: With Other Pieces Written by Him in the Reign of King Edward the Sixth*, ed. John Ayre, vol. 13, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1844), 33.

⁴⁷⁸ *The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, 33.

⁴⁷⁹ *The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, 33.

⁴⁸⁰ *The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, 33.

⁴⁸¹ *The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, 33. Emphasis mine.

resurrection alludes to Philippians 2:9-11, another text related by some to the descent: “and truly risen from death, by this means shewing himself to be an Almighty God, and Lord over sin, devil, death, and hell, he by the power of his Godhead, leaving this world, ascended into heaven visibly and corporally ...”⁴⁸²

Homiletical and Liturgical Works in Edward VI's Reign

Leaving the catechetical sources of this period, we turn now to the homiletical and liturgical writings. The official Book of Homilies was issued by Cranmer in 1547. MacCulloch notes that Taverner’s works likely provided inspiration for Cranmer in gathering his collects for the 1549 Prayer Book, so we might also surmise that his earlier postils provided some inspiration for the homilies.⁴⁸³ The Homilies served a dual purpose: they were intended to supply unskilled priests with sermons and were also intended to propagate and consolidate official reformed doctrine. The First Book of Homilies (so-called to distinguish it from the Second Book issued in Elizabeth’s reign) does not contain any explicit reference to the descent, but it does contain some related material.⁴⁸⁴ Homily II, “A Sermon of the Misery of All Mankind, and of His Condemnation to Death Everlasting, by His Own Sin” (which was written by Archdeacon John Harpsfield), includes this statement: “Now, how these exceeding great mercies of God, set abroad in Christ Jesus for us, be obtained, and how we be delivered from the captivity of sin, death, and hell, it shall more at large, with God’s help, be declared in the next sermon.”⁴⁸⁵ Harpsfield seems to imply here that he either thought he would be writing the following sermon on salvation or at the very least, that Christ’s victory over death and hell would be broached more broadly there. The ensuing homily was written by Cranmer (Of the Salvation of Mankind) but it does not explicitly mention the descent. The closest it comes is where he writes, “whereas we were condemned to hell and death everlasting, [God] hath given his own natural Son ... to suffer most shameful and painful death for our offences, to the intent to justify us and to restore us to life everlasting ...”⁴⁸⁶ Interestingly enough, Harpsfield would eventually have the opportunity to write a

⁴⁸² *The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, 35.

⁴⁸³ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 336.

⁴⁸⁴ Wallace notes the absence of references to the descent but does not draw out the related material. “Puritan and Anglican,” 257.

⁴⁸⁵ Gerald Bray, ed., *The Book of Homilies: A Critical Edition* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015), 20.

⁴⁸⁶ Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 30.

homily on salvation in Bishop Bonner's *Homilies* issued during Mary's reign but alas, he failed to broach the subject there.⁴⁸⁷

Homily IX, "An Exhortation against the Fear of Death," is an exposition of Christ's story about the Rich Man and Lazarus from Luke 16 (a passage of much debate later regarding the descent).⁴⁸⁸ The homily does not explicitly mention the descent but touches on related themes: "And we ought to believe that death, being slain by Christ, cannot keep any man that steadfastly trusteth in Christ under his perpetual tyranny and subjection, but that he shall rise from death again unto glory at the last day ... like as Christ our Head did rise again ... the third day."⁴⁸⁹ It goes on to say that the Christian's death, "delivering us from our bodies, doth send us straight home into our own country [heaven], and maketh us to dwell presently with God for ever in perpetual rest and quietness."⁴⁹⁰ The fathers under the old Law went to the refreshment of Abraham's bosom before "our Saviour Christ's ascension into heaven."⁴⁹¹ The homily implies that the state of the departed now is far better:

Now then, if this were the state of the holy fathers and righteous men before the coming of our Saviour, and before he was glorified, how much more then ought we all to have steadfast faith and a firm hope of this blessed state and condition after our death; seeing that our Saviour now hath performed the whole work of our redemption, and is gloriously ascended into heaven, to prepare our dwelling places with him ...⁴⁹²

When the Old Testament saints departed this life, they went to Abraham's bosom (a place of refreshment); but now, when Christians depart from this life, they go to be with Christ in heaven (which is better). This implies a distinction between Abraham's bosom and heaven. We will see how some later writers will conflate the two. There is also implied here a change of location for the righteous departed subsequent to the ascension of Christ: "And we see by holy Scripture, and other ancient histories of Martyrs, that the holy, faithful, and righteous, ever since Christ's ascension in their death did not doubt but that they went to Christ in spirit ..."⁴⁹³ The key words here are "ever since Christ's ascension," implying that Christ opened heaven to all believers, both

⁴⁸⁷ "The Homily of the Redemption of Man," in Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 136-40.

⁴⁸⁸ The author of this Homily is unknown. Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 10.

⁴⁸⁹ Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 76.

⁴⁹⁰ Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 78.

⁴⁹¹ Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 81.

⁴⁹² Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 81-2.

⁴⁹³ Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 82.

those of the Old and New Covenants. We will see a shift in this notion in Elizabeth's reign.

For liturgical references to the descent, we turn to the Book of Common Prayer which was issued in two editions during Edward's reign (1549 and 1552). The average layperson would have heard about Christ's descent in almost every encounter with the Prayer Book. At every baptism, they would have heard the priest ask the godparents, "Doest thou beleue in Jesus Christ hys onely begotten sonne our lorde ... that he went downe into hel ...?"⁴⁹⁴ (The same would be confessed at every Confirmation service as the confirmands recited the Catechism). At every service of Matins or Evensong that they attended, they would have confessed that "he descended into hell," using either the Apostles' or Athanasian Creeds. On their sick beds, the minister would recite the Apostles' Creed and they would be expected to assent.⁴⁹⁵

The theme became even more prominent in the appointed services around Easter. If they attended the Easter Even service, they would have recited Psalm 88, which we saw associated with the descent earlier. The psalmist, or according to the patristic authors, Christ himself says, "For my soule is full of trouble: and my lyfe draweth nye unto hell," but then he adds that he is "free among the deade."⁴⁹⁶ Then immediately after the conclusion of this Psalm, the worshiper would have heard in the Epistle Lesson the words of 1 Peter 3.⁴⁹⁷ It should be noted here that this was a change from The Sarum Missal which preceded it, for the Epistle Lesson for Easter Eve there was Colossians 3:1-4 (this text was moved to Easter Day in the BCP).⁴⁹⁸ By using the text from 1 Peter 3 in reference to the descent, there would now be consistency between the Prayer Book, the Forty-Two Articles (see below) and its accompanying Catechism by Ponet.

Carrying the theme of the descent into the day of the resurrection, the BCP appointed Exodus 12, Romans 6, and Psalm 16 (all associated with the descent) at the Eucharist.⁴⁹⁹ For those who came back for Evensong that same day, they would have

⁴⁹⁴ *The First and Second Prayer Books*, 244.

⁴⁹⁵ *The First and Second Prayer Books*, 262.

⁴⁹⁶ *The First and Second Prayer Books*, 108.

⁴⁹⁷ *The First and Second Prayer Books*, 108-09.

⁴⁹⁸ *Sarum Missal*, 172.

⁴⁹⁹ The 1552 follows the first version in keeping most of the same lessons with the exception of Ps 16. Another interesting note is that Zech 9, associated with the descent by the patristic writers, is appointed for Morning Prayer on Easter Even. *The First and Second Prayer Books*, 331.

heard the entirety of Acts 2 which included Peter's reference to the descent from Psalm 16. In light of the official teaching of the reformed church, we must assume that these texts were chosen with the purpose of teaching the church's official doctrine on the descent and resurrection. We can also gather from the catechetical, homiletical and liturgical resources surveyed here that the descent of Christ would have been quite familiar to the laity in Edward's reign.

Official Doctrinal Statements in Edward VI's Reign

We now move on to consider the official formularies issued during Edward's reign. Since we have already surveyed the Book of Homilies, the official Catechisms and the BCP, this leaves us with the Forty-Two Articles of Religion and the *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum*. It is worth noting that Article III of the Augsburg Confession only included the phrase, "Moreover, the same Christ also descended into hell ...,"⁵⁰⁰ while the English church saw fit to dedicate an entire article to the doctrine. Article III from the Forty-Two Articles (1553) reads:

As Christ died, and was buried for us: so also it is to be believed, that he went down in to hell. For the body lay in the sepulcher, until the resurrection: but His Ghost departing from him, was with the Ghosts that were in prison, or in hell, and did preach to the same, as the place of S. Peter doth testify.⁵⁰¹

This version was actually a slight recension of Article III in the Forty-Five Articles signed by six royal chaplains in 1552. The one change from that version was the elimination of a single phrase at the end: "*At suo ad inferos descensu nullos a carceribus aut tormentis liberavit Christus Dominus*" ("But Christ the Lord freed no one from prison or torment by his descent into Hell.")⁵⁰² At first glance, this seems rather odd given the fact that it follows after the 1 Peter 3 text which talks about Christ preaching to the spirits in prison. But it was likely inserted to guard against what was perceived as a heresy in the West, the idea that Christ would deliver any of the wicked from hell (those in "prison or torment"—the righteous were perceived as being in Abraham's bosom). This may have been proposed to deal with Augustine's concerns

⁵⁰⁰ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 38.

⁵⁰¹ Hardwick, *A History of the Articles*, 292. Language slightly updated.

⁵⁰² Edgar C. S. Gibson, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, Fifth (London: Methuen & Co, 1906), 159. See also Hardwick's *History of the Articles*, 278-79.

over employing the Petrine text in association with the descent because of the perception that some might think that Christ emptied hell. Regardless, the line was excluded from the 1553 Article. As we will see, this same Article would undergo a more extensive recension during Elizabeth's reign. However, at this point, the Article set forth both the fact of Christ's descent and its purpose, which was supplied by the Petrine text.⁵⁰³

As far back as 1532, King Henry had selected a committee of thirty-two scholars to revise the canon law of England. After a twenty-year delay, the *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum* appeared in 1552. It was intended to stand alongside the Forty-Two Articles of Religion and the second Prayer Book of Edward VI to define the canon law of the Church of England.⁵⁰⁴ There is nothing controversial here since it merely says in Chapter 3 that, "Christ, true God and true man ... truly suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried, descended into hell and rose on the third day ..." ⁵⁰⁵ In Chapter 5, it commends the Three Symbols: the Apostolic, the Nicene, and the Athanasian "as a compendium of our faith which can easily be proved by the most firm testimony of the divine and canonical scriptures."⁵⁰⁶ These statements were consistent with the other official formularies.

There is a work of Archbishop Cranmer, which even though it is not one of the formularies, probably fits best in this discussion. It comes in his highly publicized disputations over the Lord's Supper with Stephen Gardiner, by this time, the late Bishop of Winchester, and Richard Smyth (Smith), the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford.⁵⁰⁷ The dispute over the Eucharist at the time of the Reformation had all the Protestants in opposition to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, but it was also a source of division among Protestants since they could not come to full agreement with one another. The controversy centered on two major questions: 1) "the connection of the

⁵⁰³ Quantin suggests that Cranmer's use of 1 Peter 3 here was likely influenced by Peter Martyr. *Church of England*, 118.

⁵⁰⁴ James C. Spalding, *The Reformation of the Ecclesiastical Laws of England, 1552* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., 1992), 1.

⁵⁰⁵ Spalding, *The Reformation of the Ecclesiastical Laws*, 60.

⁵⁰⁶ Spalding, *The Reformation of the Ecclesiastical Laws*, 60.

⁵⁰⁷ John King notes that the same Richard Smyth was required by the privy council to recant some of his published views while a professor at Oxford. In what was likely a feigned recantation, he repudiated all "unwritten verities" and sarcastically included the baptism of children, the Trinity, and the Harrowing of Hell. See John N. King, "Paul's Cross and the Implementation of Protestant Reforms Under Edward VI" (especially pp. 143-146) in *Paul's Cross and the Culture of Persuasion in England, 1520-1640*, P. G. Stanwood and W. J. Torrance Kirby, editors.

Eucharist to the sacrifice of Christ;” and 2) “the presence of Christ in the meal.”⁵⁰⁸ The two texts below from Cranmer are related to the second of these questions.

Cranmer’s Eucharistic theology has been the source of much scholarly debate.⁵⁰⁹ The disagreements are typically over the question of how many transitions Cranmer went through in his thinking on the subject and over which other reformer that he was aligning his view with. However, Basil Hall makes the point that Cranmer “always related ideas he selectively adopted to the standard of Bible, Fathers and right reason.”⁵¹⁰ Ashley Null essentially agrees with this assessment.⁵¹¹

In Book II of the disputation with Gardiner, they are debating whether the doctrine of transubstantiation is found in the teaching of the fathers. In the pertinent section, the dispute is over whether Augustine taught transubstantiation. Gardiner asserts that Augustine affirms the doctrine where he says “it is bread before the consecration, and after, the flesh of Christ.”⁵¹² Cranmer responds by saying that within that same work, Augustine acknowledges that this was figurative language: “St. Augustine declareth at length in what manner of speech that is to be understand [sic]; that is to say figuratively, in which speech the thing signifieth and the thing that is signified, have both one name, as St. Cyprian manifestly teacheth.”⁵¹³ A few pages later, Cranmer expands upon this when he writes: “the Fathers neither said nor believed as you here report, but they taught that both the sacrament and the thing thereby represented (which is Christ’s body) remain in their proper substance and nature, the sign being here, and the thing being signified in heaven ...”⁵¹⁴ Then Cranmer employs the doctrine of Christ’s descent to confirm this truth:

But it is not required that the thing signified should be really and corporally present in the sign and figure, as the soul is in the body,

⁵⁰⁸ Michael Allen, “Sacraments in the Reformed and Anglican Reformation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 291.

⁵⁰⁹ Three of the most significant works from the last century were: C. W. Dugmore, *The Mass and the English Reformers* (New York, Macmillan, 1958); Peter N. Brooks, *Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of the Eucharist*, Second Edition (London, Macmillan, 1992); and Basil Hall, “Cranmer, the Eucharist and the Foreign Divines in the Reign of Edward VI” in *Thomas Cranmer: Churchman and Scholar* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1993). More recently, Ashley Null has entered the discussion in two works: “Thomas Cranmer” in *Christian Theologies of the Sacraments: A Comparative Introduction*, and “Thomas Cranmer’s Reputation Reconsidered” in *Reformation Reputations* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

⁵¹⁰ Hall, “Cranmer, the Eucharist and the Foreign Divines, 221.

⁵¹¹ Null, “Thomas Cranmer,” *Christian Theologies of the Sacraments*, 212–13. See also Null’s “Thomas Cranmer’s Reputation Reconsidered” in *Reformation Reputations: The Power of the Individual in English Reformation History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 189–221.

⁵¹² Henry Jenkyns, *The Remains of Thomas Cranmer, D. D.* (Oxford: The University Press, 1833), 3.426.

⁵¹³ Jenkyns, *The Remains of Cranmer*, 3.431.

⁵¹⁴ Jenkyns, *The Remains of Cranmer*, 3.439.

because there is no such union of person; nor it is not required in the soul and body that they should be ever together; for Christ's body and soul remained both, without either corruption or transubstantiation, when the soul was gone down into hell, and the body rested in the sepulchre. And yet was he then a perfect man, although his soul was not then really present with the body. And it is not so great a marvel that his body should be in heaven, and the sacrament of it here, as it is that his body should be here, and his soul in hell.⁵¹⁵

Later, he employs the same analogy again:

For Christ was perfect God and perfect man, when his soul went down to hell and his body lay in the grave, (because the body and soul were both still united unto his Divinity;) and yet it was not required, that his soul should be present with the body in the sepulchre: no more is it now required, that his body should be really present in the sacrament; but as the soul was then in hell, so is his body now in heaven. And as it is not required, that wheresoever Christ's Divinity is, there should be really and corporally his manhood; so it is not required, that where the bread and wine be, there should be corporally his flesh and blood.⁵¹⁶

Cranmer is making a parallel argument here. In the descent, Christ's body was in the tomb while his soul was in hell. By virtue of his resurrection and ascension, Christ's body is now in heaven and the sacrament of it is here. Or, as Cranmer says in the passages quoted above, the fathers teach that "the sign being here, the thing signified being in heaven ..." ⁵¹⁷ In his conclusion, Cranmer speaks of participating in the Eucharist as "spiritual eating" and explains "... as outwardly and corporally we eat the very bread and drink the wine, and call them the body and blood of Christ, so inwardly and spiritually we eat and drink the very body and blood of Christ. And yet carnally and corporally he is in heaven, and shall be until the last judgment, when he shall come to judge both the quick and the dead." ⁵¹⁸ For our purposes, this parallel argument provides further affirmation that Cranmer himself held the patristic view of the descent. To the best of my knowledge, Cranmer's employment of Christ's descent in discussing the Eucharist is unique. ⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁵ Jenkyns, *The Remains of Cranmer*, 3.439.

⁵¹⁶ Jenkyns, *The Remains of Cranmer*, 3.522.

⁵¹⁷ Jenkyns, *The Remains of Cranmer*, 3.439.

⁵¹⁸ Jenkyns, *The Remains of Cranmer*, 3.520-1.

⁵¹⁹ Peter Martyr Vermigli makes several inferences that are conceptually related in his *Dialogue on the Two Natures in Christ*, trans. John Patrick Donnelly (Moscow, ID: The Davenant Press, 2018), 148-64.

Foreign Influences and Controversies During Edward VI's Reign

At this point, some reference should be made to the foreign influences on Cranmer and the English church. We have already mentioned some of the continental reformers, but there were three others who need to be discussed because they actually moved to England to participate in the reformation there: Peter Martyr Vermigli, Martin Bucer and John à Lasco. Smyth says of Peter Martyr, an Italian reformer who was invited to England by Cranmer, that of all the foreigners, he probably had the most influence on Cranmer.⁵²⁰ Collinson asserts that his influence extended into Elizabeth's reign: "But if we were to identify one author and one book which represented the centre of theological gravity of the Elizabethan Church it would not be Calvin's *Institutes* but the *Common Places* of Peter Martyr ..." ⁵²¹ Martyr's teaching on the descent in his exposition of the Apostles' Creed is worth quoting at length because of its phraseology:

When the soul [of Christ] had departed from the body it did not stay idle but descended into the lower regions. This means nothing else than that it experienced the same condition as other souls separated from their bodies—association with the saints, or with the company of the condemned. Both of these groups were confronted with the presence of Christ's soul. The believing, who (as Christ said in Luke's Gospel, when speaking of the miserable rich man and blessed Lazarus) were in a quiet place appropriately called Abraham's bosom, shared the same faith as that holy Patriarch, awaiting salvation through Christ, so that the age is named for Abraham. These spirits were the first to receive the greatest consolation; they thanked the divine goodness, which through this mediator had liberated them and performed all that had been promised them in times past. The spirits condemned to eternal perdition also encountered the soul of Christ, because as Peter wrote, 'He preached to them.' We may interpret this to mean that he rebuked them for the obstinacy and incredulity they had shown to the words and divine promptings addressed to them by God while they lived on earth. Perhaps even then he addressed words of salvation to them. Because they rejected the message while on earth, they condemned themselves to the full, and justified the judgment of divine wisdom, since they could no longer plead ignorance.⁵²²

What we see from Martyr is completely consistent with the official formularies. In addition to that, we see a more extensive explanation of both the descent and its

⁵²⁰ C. H. Smyth, *Cranmer and The Reformation Under Edward VI* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1970), 117.

⁵²¹ Patrick Collinson, "England and International Calvinism 1558-1640," in *International Calvinism 1541-1715* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 214.

⁵²² Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Early Writings: Creed, Scripture, Church*, ed. John Patrick Donnelly, S.J. (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies, 1994), 43-44.

purpose. Like many in the West (and echoing the rescinded phrase from Article III above), he guards against any notion that Christ delivered the wicked at the descent.

In his sermon, “On the Death of Christ,” from Philippians 2:5-11, Martyr writes: “He emptied himself in regard to both natures because he hid the divine and submitted the human. Still he did not empty the divinity without in some way exercising it ... the earth quaked; rocks were sundered apart; the veil was torn; the tombs were opened; hell gave up its dead ...”⁵²³ Regarding the Lordship of Christ mentioned in this same text he says: “Were not many of the dead raised in the name of Christ by the apostles and other saints, and did not hell obey the name of the Lord?”⁵²⁴ Here he is alluding to the Matthew 27:52-3 text about the saints who left the graves at Christ’s resurrection.⁵²⁵ What we see with Martyr is a view of the descent which is consistent both with the patristic authors and the official Edwardian formularies. Especially notable is his use of the 1 Peter text with regard to the descent (consistent with the BCP and Articles discussed above).

Martin Bucer, the reformer of Strasbourg, was also invited to England by Cranmer and was appointed Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge.⁵²⁶ In the 1530 Tetrapolitan Confession, Bucer sounds as if he is a proponent of the traditional view of the descent when he writes: “Nor do they vary in these particulars in any respect from what the Church, taught out of the Holy Gospels, believes concerning our Saviour Jesus Christ ... [that], having died on the cross and been buried, he descended to hell, and was recalled the third day from the dead into immortal life.”⁵²⁷ But in his work, “A Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine,” he skips over the descent altogether when recalling Christ’s redeeming work: “He died for our sins, and rose again for our justification. He was exalted to the Father’s right hand as Prince and Saviour, to give to all God’s elect repentance and forgiveness of sins ...”⁵²⁸ Also, in his argument for Psalm 16 (translated into English by George Joye), Bucer writes: “For thou wilt not leave me in my grave: nor

⁵²³ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Life, Letters, and Sermons*, trans. John Patrick Donnelly, S.J. (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies, 1999), 237.

⁵²⁴ Vermigli, *Life, Letters, and Sermons*, 249.

⁵²⁵ He touches on the same subject in the Oration on Christ’s Resurrection. Vermigli, *Life, Letters, and Sermons*, 225.

⁵²⁶ For a summary of Bucer’s work in England, see “Martin Bucer in England” by Basil Hall, pp. 144-160 in *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community*, D. F. Wright, editor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

⁵²⁷ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1.142.

⁵²⁸ D. F. Wright, *Common Places of Martin Bucer* (Appleford, England: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972), 78.

suffer thy dear beloved holy one to be corrupted.”⁵²⁹ Likewise, in Psalm 30, he writes, “Lord thou hast called me again from my grave ...”⁵³⁰ In both places, he uses “grave” to translate “Sheol.” The standard way of reading the Psalms at the time was to interpret the words of David as prophecies of Christ (likely following the manner that Peter interpreted Psalm 16 in Acts 2:25-31).⁵³¹ In some ways, Bucer was modifying this, but he would have been well-aware of this interpretive tradition.⁵³² So when he substitutes “grave” for “Sheol,”⁵³³ he demonstrates that he has adopted the view that Christ’s descent was nothing more than his burial.⁵³⁴ We saw in chapter 1 how a narrow reading of Rufinus might lead one to think that he was a proponent of this view, but that is misguided since he went on to clearly teach Christ’s descent to Hades.

Plumptre offers the following critique of the descent as burial view (as well as Calvin’s view): “We may be quite sure that no Jew or Greek in the apostolic age would ever have thought that the words ‘He descended into Hades’ meant only that the body of Christ had been laid in the grave, or that His soul had suffered with an exceeding sorrow in Gethsemane on the cross.”⁵³⁵ Bass adds: “To equate the *Descensus* with Christ’s burial was nothing more than a pre-Bultmannian attempt to demythologize the NT text because Bucer and those who followed him could no longer accept an underworld beneath the earth.”⁵³⁶ Lest these modern critiques of this view sound harsh, Calvin was not much softer in his critique of the descent as burial view (though for different reasons):

“How careless it would have been, when something not at all difficult in itself has been stated with clear and easy words, to indicate it again in words that obscure rather than clarify it! Whenever two expressions for the same thing are used in the same context, the latter ought to be an

⁵²⁹ George Joye, *Dauids Psalter, Diligently and Faithfully Tra[n]slated by George Ioye, with Breif Arguments before Eury Psalme, Declaring the Effecte Therof*, (Antwerp: Maryne Emperowr, 1534), fol. 18a-b. Here Bucer uses the Latin word “sepulchrum” in place of the Vulgate’s “inferno.” Aretius Felinus, *S. Psalmorum Libri Quinque Ad Ebrai Cam Veritatem Versi Et Familiari Ex Planatione Elucidati* (Andlanus, 1529), 89–94.

⁵³⁰ George Joye, *Dauids Psalter*, fol. 40a. In the Latin text, Bucer substitutes *inferis* (below) for the Vulgate’s *inferno* (hell). *S. Psalmorum Libri*, 155.

⁵³¹ On this topic, see Herman J. Selderhuis, *Psalms 1-72, Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), xlvi–lii.

⁵³² R. Gerald Hobbs, “How Firm a Foundation: Martin Bucer’s Historical Exegesis of the Psalms,” *Church History* 53 (1984): 477–91.

⁵³³ Bucer uses the Latin word “sepulchrum” in place of the Vulgate’s “inferno.” *S. Psalmorum Libri*, 89–94.

⁵³⁴ cf. Smith, “Descendit Ad Inferos--Again,” 87. Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor, would also propound this view later.

⁵³⁵ Plumptre, *The Spirits in Prison*, 102.

⁵³⁶ Bass, *The Battle for the Keys*, 18.

explanation of the former. But what sort of explanation will it be if one says that ‘Christ was buried’ means that ‘he descended into hell?’”

He adds that it is unlikely that “a useless repetition” would have crept into this summary of our faith which is stated in the “fewest possible words.”⁵³⁷

John à Lasco (Jan Laski), the Polish reformer, was also brought to England by Cranmer and was made superintendent of the Stranger’s Church in London. In 1551, he published a confession which was the basis for admission to that church.⁵³⁸ The Form of Public Prayers included in this work contains the Apostles’ Creed with the descensus clause.⁵³⁹ He had also written a catechism for the Emden churches in 1546 which he brought with him to England.⁵⁴⁰ This lengthy work contains an exposition of the Creed where it asks: “What more did the Son of God, Jesus Christ, do on our behalf?” The answer given says, “I believe and confess that Jesus Christ ... was seized, suffered, and was condemned to the fork of the tree, and thus, met a shameful death and was buried according to the story of the Gospels.”⁵⁴¹ The next question deals with why this happened. The response includes this line: “Therefore, he stood as the image of the true mediator, wholly in the place of the sinner, confronting the wrath of God: he satisfied the justice of God and thus, freed us from sin, death, hell, and the Devil.”⁵⁴² We should note here that there is no reference to an actual descent of Christ subsequent to his death. Rather, the focus appears to be on the cross, along the lines of what Calvin had taught.

During this same period, controversy arose in the Stranger’s Church over this doctrine. Marten Micronius wrote in a letter to Bullinger in 1550: “The churches of Bremen and the rest are strengthening themselves; but are far more injured by their private disagreements in matters of religion ... They are disputing about the descent of Christ into hell ...”⁵⁴³ This is most likely a reference to the incident involving Walter Deloenus, one of the other ministers in the church who lectured on the Old Testament, where he argued that the article of the descent should be removed from the

⁵³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.8.

⁵³⁸ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1.552.

⁵³⁹ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1.581.

⁵⁴⁰ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1.584.

⁵⁴¹ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1.619-20.

⁵⁴² Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 1.620.

⁵⁴³ Hastings Robinson, trans., *Original Letters Relative to the English Reformation, Written During the Reigns of King Henry VIII, King Edward VI, and Queen Mary: Chiefly from the Archives of Zurich*, vol. 2, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1847), 560–61.

Confession.⁵⁴⁴ We would surmise that à Lasco perceived that if the established church got wind of the fact that the Stranger's Church was denying an article of the Apostles' Creed that their charter in England would be endangered. This is evidenced by the fact that he revised his catechism by adding seven questions on the descent.⁵⁴⁵

Since à Lasco maintains the clause, he has to explain it. The first question asks, "What should men understand by the word Hell, to which Christ descended?" The answer is, "Certainly not as the bailey [gatehouse] of Hell, from which to rescue the ancient holy fathers—for they had always been in joy ..." ⁵⁴⁶ The next two questions deal with the meaning of "Hell" in the Scriptures. The word means "the place of the damned" (to which Christ did not descend); but it also refers to "a grave, and thus of the condition of dead people. Additionally, for the supreme dread and terror of souls. In these two ways is the article of the descent of Christ rightly understood." ⁵⁴⁷ In the following questions, he elaborates on these "two ways." "Regarding the first, that he thus verily died and was buried—that his soul until the time of his resurrection was separated from his body, not with anyone on earth—but where the separated souls of the faithful are, namely, in Paradise." Regarding the second, he says: "That Christ in his soul tasted every deepest pain and terror of God's wrath and of our damnation, in all his life: but particularly on the wood of the cross because he there had taken upon himself the punishment for the sins of the world." ⁵⁴⁸ So for à Lasco, the descent of Christ means that he truly died and was buried; and his soul was separated from his body, going to the place where the separated souls of the faithful were (Paradise). But he also asserts that Christ's soul tasted the pain and terror of God's wrath, especially on the cross. The latter is akin to Calvin, and to some extent, Luther; but the "truly died and buried" aspect of this does not appear to be a descent at all. Rather, he talks about Christ going to the "ancient holy fathers" who were "in joy" (Paradise) and does not use the word

⁵⁴⁴ Andrew Pettegree, *Foreign Protestant Communities in Sixteenth-Century London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 64. A footnote in the McNeill/Battles version of Calvin's *Institutes* (1.513) quotes Lasco's letter to Bullinger where he tells him that Deloenus proposed removing the article altogether, saying that it was "a plant that the Lord had not planted" (alluding to Matt 15:13). When rebuked he apparently recanted.

⁵⁴⁵ These are translated into English in Appendix IV. Pettegree, *Foreign Protestant Communities*, 64.

⁵⁴⁶ Question 1, Appendix IV.

⁵⁴⁷ Questions 2-3, Appendix IV.

⁵⁴⁸ Questions 4 and 6, Appendix IV.

“descended” in the explanation, opting for “separated” instead.⁵⁴⁹ It would appear that Paradise was synonymous with heaven for à Lasco.

So in essence, à Lasco has adopted Calvin’s view that the “descent” took place on the cross. At this point, he would have been in the minority in England in adopting this view, but it would gain more adherents in the following years. The foreign scholars which Cranmer brought into England held varying views on the doctrine of the descent: with Vermigli holding to the traditional view, while Bucer associated it with Christ’s burial, and à Lasco associated it with Christ’s passion. The thought of excising the descensus clause (as Deloenus had proposed) was rejected. The latter two reformers opted to reinterpret the clause instead.

As we conclude this chapter, we would note that there were others besides Bucer and à Lasco who were proffering different views on the descent during Edward VI’s reign. In a 1549 Lenten sermon delivered to the royal court before King Edward, Bishop Hugh Latimer hints that there was a rise in skepticism concerning the descent.⁵⁵⁰

Preaching on the passion, he says:

His soul descended to hell for a time.” Here is much ado! These new upstarting spirits say, ‘Christ never descended into hell, neither body nor soul.’ In scorn they will ask, ‘Was he there? What did he there?’ What if we cannot tell what he did there? The creed goeth no further, but saith, he descended thither ... These arrogant spirits, spirits of vain-glory, because they know not by any express scripture the order of his doings in hell, they will not believe that ever he descended into hell.⁵⁵¹

He goes on to acknowledge that this doctrine does not have as much biblical support as some other doctrines, but it has enough. “[I]t hath two or three texts; and if it had but one, one text of scripture is of as good and lawful authority as a thousand, and of as certain truth.”⁵⁵² He is hesitant in his assertions saying that he will not arrogantly determine and define the doctrine. But then he says: “There be some great clerks that take my part, and I perceive not what evil can come of it, in saying, that our Saviour Christ did not only in soul descend into hell, but that also he suffered in hell such pains as the damned spirits did suffer there.”⁵⁵³ Here Latimer has adopted the view propounded earlier by Nicholas of Cusa, Lefèvre, and Osiander. He continues:

⁵⁴⁹ Questions 1 and 4, Appendix IV.

⁵⁵⁰ George Elwes Corwie, ed., *Sermons by Hugh Latimer*, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1844), 216–38.

⁵⁵¹ Corwie, *Sermons by Latimer*, 233.

⁵⁵² Corwie, *Sermons by Latimer*, 233-34.

⁵⁵³ Corwie, *Sermons by Latimer*, 234.

I see no inconvenience to say, that Christ suffered in soul in hell. I singularly commend the exceeding great charity of Christ, that for our sakes he would suffer in hell in his soul. It sets out the unspeakable hatred that God hath to sin ... If this that I have spoken of Christ's suffering in the garden, and in hell, derogate any thing from Christ's death and passion, away with it; believe me not in this. If it do not, it commends and sets forth very well unto us the perfection of the satisfaction that Christ made for us, and the work of redemption, not only before witness in this world, but in hell, in that ugly [loathsome] place; where whether he suffered or wrestled with the spirits, or comforted Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, I will not desire to know.⁵⁵⁴

Surprisingly, there does not appear to be any backlash following this sermon, maybe because he asserted it in such couched terms. He said that if the audience did not see his view as consistent with the work of Christ, they should dismiss it. This probably disarmed any who would have been offended with his view. It does not appear that Latimer, in spite of his reputation as a fine preacher, convinced many to follow him in this matter. Wallace wryly remarks, "This interpretation of Latimer was allowed to pass into oblivion by his English theological posterity, whatever their views on the descent into hell!"⁵⁵⁵

Controversy was stirred-up in 1549 when a man named Putto had been put to silence "for his lewde preaching." He was referred to Archbishop Cranmer and the Bishop of Ely for examination.⁵⁵⁶ In the next year, we are told that one Thomas Putton (likely the same man), was apparently forced to pay a fine to the King to escape further punishment. The condition was that he must exercise good behavior and not preach any more until he be thereunto lawfully called and authorized.⁵⁵⁷ Wriothesley connects this when he records that "one Puttoe, a tanner in Colchester in Essex, bare a faggott at Poules Crosse, which was an Anabaptist and was abiured the xxxth daie of Aprill at Poules, before my Lorde of canterburie; his opinion was, he denied that Christ descended not into hell, which damnable opinion he now lamentith."⁵⁵⁸ The double negative is in the original. We assume this means that he denied the descent. Apparently, he had trouble with authority because about three weeks later, he found

⁵⁵⁴ Corwie, *Sermons by Latimer*, 235-36.

⁵⁵⁵ Wallace, "Puritan and Anglican," 259.

⁵⁵⁶ Acts of the Privy Council, Volume 3, 1550-1552, 20. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/acts-privy-council/vol3/pp1-25>

⁵⁵⁷ Acts of the Privy Council, Volume 3, 1550-1552, 413. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/acts-privy-council/vol3/pp401-425>

⁵⁵⁸ Charles Wriothesley, *A Chronicle of England During the Reigns of the Tudors, From A.D. 1485 To 1559*, ed. William Douglas Hamilton (Westminster: J. B. Nichols and Sons, 1877), 2.12-13.

himself at Paul's Cross doing penance again, this time for standing with his cap on his head for the whole sermon. He found himself again before Cranmer and was enjoined to stand "with a faggott on his sholdre bare-headed, which he did."⁵⁵⁹ Oxley mentions that Putto got in trouble during Mary's reign (1556) for indulging in illegal preaching once again.⁵⁶⁰

In *A Brief and Clear Confession of the Christian Faith*, which was published in 1550, Bishop John Hooper adopted a view consistent with Calvin's: "I believe also that while he was upon the cross, dying and giving up his spirit unto God his father, he descended into hell; that is to say, he did verily taste and feel the great distress and heaviness of death, and likewise the pains and torments of hell ..." ⁵⁶¹ He supports this notion by appealing to Psalm 22, as Calvin had. He goes on to say that he knows the article has not always been in the Creed and that others have interpreted it differently. He, like Latimer, was likely spared from trouble by the fact that he goes on to say, "This is simply my understanding of Christ his descending into hell." And regarding the use of 1 Peter 3 in reference to this doctrine (as the official formularies did), he says: "I confess the matter is yet covered and hid from me. The Lord vouchsafe to open the gate unto us, and to give us an entrance into such mysteries."⁵⁶²

In 1552, a debate on this matter broke out that makes these earlier controversies pale in comparison. The reason for this was that it took place at Cambridge, where men were in training for public ministry. Christopher Carlile, a graduating student, apparently followed in Pecock's (and Deloenus') footsteps in proposing that the descensus clause be stricken altogether. Like Bucer, he proposed that "hell" in the Creed meant "grave." He was answered at commencement that year by Sir John Cheke, who was later convinced by Carlile's arguments and joined him in rejecting the descent.⁵⁶³ All of this will be explored in Chapter 3, since Carlile went on to write extensively on the subject during Elizabeth's reign. These controversies that began during the reign of Edward VI demonstrate that some significant disagreements over the doctrine of the descent were in formation.

⁵⁵⁹ Wriothesley, *A Chronicle of England*, 2.13.

⁵⁶⁰ James Edwin Oxley, *The Reformation in Essex to the Death of Mary* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), 225.

⁵⁶¹ Charles Nevinson, ed., *The Later Writings of Bishop Hooper*, vol. 46, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1852), 30.

⁵⁶² Nevinson, *The Later Writings of Bishop Hooper*, 30.

⁵⁶³ Quantin, *Church of England*, 116.

Summary

We have seen in this chapter that the patristic view of the descent was widely held and even popularized in medieval England, primarily due to the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and its influence on mystery plays and popular literature. However, towards the end of that period, we do begin to see some new interpretations offered by Abelard and Nicholas of Cusa, as well as an outright denial of the doctrine by Bishop Pecock. As we enter the sixteenth century, we also see how the influential Erasmus held varying positions between his earlier and later writings. This allowed for others after him, who lacked his conservatism, to cherry-pick his critiques and to employ them in undermining the traditional view.

Luther, while expanding the vision of the descent to encompass the cross, still maintained the local descent of Christ (even though he uniquely includes the body of Christ in the descent). Among the continental reformers, Zwingli and Melancthon held close to the traditional interpretation. Bullinger and Jud adopted views related to Abelard's. Osiander adopted Cusanus' view and Calvin forged his own path in reorienting the descent entirely to Christ's suffering on the cross. The Anabaptists offered their own diverging paths, largely reflecting their unwitting reappraisal of the Christological heresies of the earlier centuries.

As we reached England under the reign of Henry VIII, we saw a traditional interpretation of the descent with a remarkable pastoral emphasis (especially in *The Bishops' Book*). But it appears that toward the end of this period, the doctrine was already losing some of its popularity, even though it was maintained in the official formularies. Greater emphasis was being placed on the cross of Christ in the later primers. Tyndale proposed a form of soul-sleep, which made the descent superfluous. Further confusion may have arisen through the arrival of the writings of the continental reformers and their varying views on the descent.

In the Edwardian period, there is a great deal of continuity regarding the descent in the official formularies. There was a consistent line of interpretation (especially involving 1 Peter 3) in the Forty-Two Articles of Religion, the BCP, and the official catechisms. However, with at least two of the foreign theologians imported by Cranmer (Bucer and à Lasco), contrary interpretations were soon being proposed on English soil. Even bishops in the established church (Latimer and Hooper) were offering diverging views, albeit somewhat tentatively. The Carlile affair at Cambridge is a foreboding of

things to come. The final snapshot of Edward VI's reign seems to present the official church as trying to hold the line on the traditional view of the doctrine while these pockets of dissent signal that there is trouble on the horizon. By extending the discussion of this doctrine back into the Henrician and Edwardian reigns, we will have a more expansive context for the ensuing Elizabethan debates.

Chapter 3 – The Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell in Elizabethan England

In the preceding chapter, we saw that the official formularies of the English Church maintained a traditional view of the doctrine of Christ’s descent. There is a clear and consistent line of interpretation which runs through the Forty-two Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), and Ponet’s Catechism (the official catechism of the church beyond the short version within the BCP). The official teaching on this matter is that after his death on the cross, Christ descended into hell, where he made proclamation of his victory to those therein (alluding to 1 Pet 3), and then arose from death and hell as a valiant conqueror over the devil. One important aspect of this doctrine from the patristic era that is not explicitly stated is the deliverance of the Old Testament saints. However, it would appear that even though this concept is not explicitly stated, it continued to be held because: 1) the Petrine text which was used for biblical support had long been held to refer to Christ’s proclamation of victory to those in Sheol who had longed for his appearing; 2) reference is made to Christ’s breaking and opening of the gates of hell; 3) there are several references to Christ loosening “the bonds of death.” The failure to explicitly state this long-held purpose of Christ’s descent will become significant in the ensuing debates.

In spite of the unity of the official formularies, we also saw in the last chapter that there were pockets of dissent regarding this doctrine. The initial rumblings came from foreign sources, especially the writings of Calvin and Bullinger, which began to be popularized in Edwardian England. Both men, without denying the doctrine, reinterpreted it. Calvin reoriented Christ’s descent into hell to the cross, tying it to Christ’s cry of dereliction (Ps 22:1). Bullinger, though far from clear, seems to suggest that the power of Christ descended to hell after death, but his soul went to Abraham’s bosom which he equates with heaven. In addition to these sources, we saw where the foreign influences which were brought to England by Cranmer also brought with them their own ideas on this matter. Bucer equated Christ’s descent with his burial while à Lasco essentially followed Calvin’s line of thinking. Near the end of Edward’s reign, there were some who wanted to carry this even a step further, calling for the elimination of the article from the Apostles’ Creed altogether. This included Walter Deloenus, one of the teachers at the Strangers’ churches in London. But he was not alone. We even saw where the controversy reached Cambridge University when

Christopher Carlile publicly called for eliminating the descensus clause in a sermon he preached there in 1552.

The present chapter will trace these themes through the reign of Queen Elizabeth. It was during this period that these initial rumblings would grow into a full-blown debate that would involve two archbishops of Canterbury and ultimately reach the queen herself. The two main published works on this subject which were mentioned in the introduction, Dewey Wallace's article and Jean-Louis Quantin's chapter in *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity*, emphasized the scholarly debates of the Elizabethan period. The extensive background provided in the preceding chapters will allow me to broaden this discussion and to offer additional analysis as to why this doctrine became a conundrum for English Protestants.

I will begin with a short section on the doctrine during the reign of Queen Mary. The remainder of the chapter will be given to tracing how the doctrine of Christ's descent became a significant point of controversy during Elizabeth's reign. First, we will see how the doctrine was largely settled at the beginning of her reign by examining the official and semi-official documents: The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, John Jewel's Apology, the Elizabethan Book of Homilies, Alexander Nowell's Catechism, and the Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter. Then we will consider some of the continental reformation works that impacted England during this period: namely, Bullinger's *Decades*, Calvin's *Institutes*, and the Geneva Bible. Following this, we will delve into a largely unexplored aspect of this debate: the effects of sixteenth-century Bible translation on the topic. Then finally, we will survey and dissect some of the manifestations of the debate over this doctrine as it played out in the course of the latter half of the sixteenth century into the beginning of the seventeenth century.

As we will see, this debate took place among *three* opposing parties: Roman Catholic polemicists, the conformists within the Church of England (meaning, those who were largely satisfied with the established doctrinal formularies), and non-conformists (those who had a desire to see the English Church further reformed by removing what they perceived as papist notions). Wallace chose to categorize this as an "Anglican vs. Puritan" debate.⁵⁶⁴ While there is certainly an element of truth to this, I have sought to use slightly different labels because the term "Anglican" is anachronistic and the term

⁵⁶⁴ "Puritan and Anglican," 248.

Puritan has been frequently overused and can have negative connotations. Instead, I have chosen to frame the debate in terms of the established church (the conformists) and the non-conformists. Regarding the latter, it should be recalled that for the better part of Elizabeth's reign, even those we are terming "non-conformists," remained within the established church. It wasn't until the time of the Marprelate Tracts that we begin to see the controversial idea of separatism being considered. It is highly likely that Christ's descent was one of the sticking points between these competing groups which ultimately led to separation.

The Doctrine of the Descent During the Reign of Mary Tudor

When Queen Mary came to the throne her desire was to return the church in England to the fold of the Roman church. This program included bringing the established doctrine back into conformity with Rome. But Cardinal Reginald Pole had his own plan in this regard. Peter Marshall summarizes this plan when he writes:

Catholics, bruised and battered by the iconoclastic assaults of the Edwardian years, recovered their voice. The universities were thoroughly 're-Catholicized'. Reginald Pole, Cranmer's replacement at Canterbury, assisted by a revitalized and pastorally minded bench of bishops, oversaw a comprehensive programme of planned reforms. Some of these—insistence on episcopal residence, plans for diocesan seminaries and a vernacular catechism—anticipated key reforms of the Council of Trent. The Marian Church was not the ghost of the medieval past, but a vision of the Counter-Reformation future.⁵⁶⁵

One part of this program included Bishop Edmund Bonner's significant reworking of *The King's Book* (which, as we saw in chapter 2, was Henry's revision of *The Bishops' Book*). Of course, Bonner did not simply adopt Henry's work; rather, he revised and expanded it.⁵⁶⁶ In his exposition of the Apostles' Creed, he broaches the subject of the descent by noting some controversy over the matter and then writing:

And therefore let us with the Scripture and the catholic church firmly and steadfastly believe that our Savior Christ, after that he was crucified, and dead upon the cross, did descend in soul knit with the deity into hell (his body remaining and lying in the grave), and did loose the pains and sorrow thereof, in which it was not possible that he should be holden ne

⁵⁶⁵ Anthony Milton, ed., *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume I: Reformation and Identity, c.1520-1662* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 46–47.

⁵⁶⁶ The work was published in 1555 and entitled: *A Profitable and Necessary Doctrine, with Certain Homilies Adjoined Thereunto, Set Forth by the Reverend Father in God, Edmund Bishop of London*. It is reprinted as Bishop Bonner's Book in pp. 238-478 of Gerald Bray, ed., *The Institution of a Christian Man* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 2019).

yet to see corruption at all, and he did also conquer and oppress both the devil and hell, and also death itself, whereunto all mankind was condemned by the fall of our forefather Adam into sin.⁵⁶⁷

He then adds that proof of this doctrine is taken from Zechariah 9, Hosea 13, Luke 1, Matthew 12, Acts 2, Ephesians 4, “and in divers other places of Scripture.”⁵⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that the 1 Peter 3 text does not make his list of biblical proofs.⁵⁶⁹ It could be that Bonner followed Augustine in not seeing that text as a reference to the descent, but it is also possible that since that text had been used by the reformed English church that he abandoned it.⁵⁷⁰ Like the formularies under Edward’s reign, he does not explicitly mention the deliverance of the Old Testament saints at the descent, but the texts he alludes to imply it (Zech 9, Hos 13, Luke 1, Eph 4). Bonner’s work serves to represent how the doctrine was viewed in the English church under Mary.

Regarding the Protestants who remained in England under Mary, little is known of what they taught. But we do know some of what happened with the exiles who departed from England. In Frankfurt, there was a significant dispute among the English exiles.⁵⁷¹ In brief, there was a group under the leadership of John Knox, who wanted to align the worship of the exiles in Frankfurt more closely with that of Geneva. However, there was a rival group led by Bishop Richard Cox that desired to maintain the worship of the Book of Common Prayer which they had brought with them from their homeland. In the end, the Coxian group gained the upper hand and many from the Knoxian group moved to Geneva where they could worship in a manner that they perceived was more biblical. The descensus controversy is not explicitly mentioned in the records of this debate, but if the divide extended to include the catechisms, the topic would have been significant since Calvin’s interpretation was at odds with that of the official catechisms, the BCP and the Articles of Religion.

⁵⁶⁷ Bray, *Institution of a Christian Man*, 258–59.

⁵⁶⁸ Bray, *Institution of a Christian Man*, 259. In the footnote, Bray adds the verse numbers that he thinks Bonner is alluding to. On the Zechariah quote, he puts 9:9 but the more likely reference is 9:11 which reads: “As for you also, Because of the blood of your covenant, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.” (NKJV)

⁵⁶⁹ His appeal to the *Benedictus* (Lk 1:68-79) is also intriguing. He is likely alluding to the phrase, “To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death ...” which echoes Isaiah 9:1-2, a text employed in the patristic era (Chapter 1).

⁵⁷⁰ Later on, Cardinal Bellarmine would not feel these restraints as he argued contra Augustine that 1 Peter 3 and 4 were about the descent. Robert Cardinal Bellarmine, *Controversies of the Christian Faith*, trans. Kenneth Baker, S.J. (Saddle River, NJ: Keep the Faith, 2016), 553–57.

⁵⁷¹ William Whittingham, *A Brief Discourse of the Troubles Begun at Frankfort, in the Year 1554, about the Book of Common Prayer and Ceremonies* (London: Gilbert & Rivington Printers, 1846). See also Frederick J. Smithen, *Continental Protestantism and the English Reformation* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1927).

In Geneva, the Knoxian group produced their own confession in 1556 which did, in fact, adopt Calvin's view of the descent. In Article II, tracing the words of the Apostles' Creed, the following is found in reference to "dead, and buried:" "And forasmuch as He, being only God, could not feel death, neither being only man, could overcome death, He joined both together, and suffered His humanity to be punished with most cruel death (Acts 2:24; I Pet 2:24; Isa 53:4, 5, 7, 10), feeling in Himself the ..."⁵⁷² The sentence breaks off and then moves to the next topic: "He descended into hell" where it continues, "feeling in Himself the anger and severe judgment of God, even as if He had been in the extreme torments of hell, and therefore, cried with a loud voice, 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' (Ps 22:1; Matt 27:46)." So Calvin's catechism was translated into English and adopted by the Knoxians.⁵⁷³

When these exiles returned at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, they brought these texts back to England with them. This certainly had an impact on the ensuing debates. But it was another work that they brought back with them that would prove to be even more influential: The Geneva Bible. We will return to this topic later, in the section on the controversies over the descent in Elizabeth's reign.

The Doctrine of the Descent During the Reign of Elizabeth I

The Doctrine of the Descent in the Articles of Religion

When Elizabeth took the throne, the 1552 BCP was slightly revised and adopted in 1559. This essentially placed the English church, doctrinally speaking, back where it had been at the end of Edward's reign. It served as an interim until the bishops could meet in convocation. When that finally took place in 1562/1563, we find that the doctrine of the descent was front and center among the topics that were broached by the bishops. Bishop William Alley of Exeter presented a paper at Convocation where he pled for unity and clarification of the church's teaching on this matter. The pertinent section reads:

First, For matter of scripture, namely, for this place which is written in the epistle of St Peter, that *Christ in spirit went down to hell, and preached to the souls that were in prison*. There have been in my diocese great invectives between the preachers, one against the other, and also

⁵⁷² Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2.97.

⁵⁷³ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2.96.

partakers with them; some holding, that the going down of Christ his soul to hell was nothing else but the virtue and strength of Christ his death, to be made manifest and known to them that were dead before. Others say, that *descendit ad inferna*, is nothing else but that Christ did sustain upon the cross the infernal pains of hell, when he called, *Pater, quare me dereliquisti?* i.e. *Father, why hast thou forsaken me?* Finally, others preach, that this article is not contained in other symbols, neither in the symbol of Cyprian, or rather Rufine. And all these sayings they ground upon Erasmus and the Germans, and especially upon the authority of Mr. Calvin and Mr. Bullinger. The contrary side bring for them the universal consent, and all the fathers of both churches, both of the Greeks and the Latins: for of the Latin fathers, they bring in St. Austin, St. Ambrose, St. Jerom, Gregory the Great, Cassiodore, Sedulius, Virgilius, Primasius, Leo, and others, as it may appear in the places by them alleged. Of the Greek fathers, they allege Chrysostom, Eusebius, Emissenus, Damascen, Basil the Great, Gregory Nyssen, Epiphanius, Athanasius, with others: which all, both Latins and Grecians, do plainly affirm, *quod anima Christi fuit vere per se in inferno*, i.e. that the soul of Christ was truly of itself in hell; which they all with one universal consent have assertively written from time to time, by the space of 1100 years, not one of them varying from another.

Thus, my right honourable good lords, your wisdoms may perceive, what tragedies and dissensions may arise for consenting to or dissenting from this article: wherefore your grave, wise and godly learning might do well and charitably, to set some certainty concerning this doctrine; and chiefly because all dissensions, contentions, and strifes may be removed from the godly affected preachers.⁵⁷⁴

Here Bishop Alley presents some of the diverging views on the descent within his diocese. The first view that he presents is that which was associated first with Abelard, and as we saw in the last chapter, loosely held by Bullinger: that Christ did not descend locally to hell, but the power of Christ's death was made manifest to those who had died. Secondly, there were those who had adopted the view of Calvin, associating the descent with Christ's cry of dereliction from the cross. Thirdly, there were some who were arguing that the article was not in the earliest form of the Creed, quoting Rufinus (correcting the misattribution to Cyprian). He adds that this view gained support from Erasmus, "the Germans," and the authority of Calvin and Bullinger. His presentation of this seems to imply that those who said that the article was not in the earliest creeds wanted to do away with it altogether. As we have seen, there were some who were taking this stand. However, Erasmus, Calvin and Bullinger did not argue for removing the article.

⁵⁷⁴ Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, Vol. 1, Part 1, 519.

Bishop Alley's own view is not hard to decipher. At the beginning, he speaks of the topic in terms of 1 Peter 3, which is not surprising since that was the main biblical text which had been used in the Edwardian formularies to affirm this doctrine. He is dismayed because he believes that each of these other views is contrary to that of the church fathers, listing some from both east and west, "who do plainly affirm ... that the soul of Christ was truly of itself in hell; which they all with one universal consent have assertively written from time to time, by the space of 1100 years, not one of them varying from another."⁵⁷⁵

By the end of the 1563 Convocation, the bishops had revised the Third Article, but probably not in the way that Bishop Alley had envisioned. The Article now read: "As Christ died for us, and was buried; so also is it to be believed, that he went down into Hell."⁵⁷⁶ What had been rescinded from the Edwardian Article was the biblical rationale asserted by paraphrasing 1 Peter 3. Why the bishops chose to remove this is unclear. The most plausible idea is that Augustine's hesitancy regarding the relation of that passage to the descent was recalled (his statements were well known and were quoted often in the later debates). Quantin offers an alternative suggestion, "It may be that the suppression of the reference to Peter was partly a tribute to the authority of Augustine, but the main reason must have been to avoid contradicting the continental divines."⁵⁷⁷ Whatever the motivation for removing that text, it is mysterious that another biblical text was not added in its place, especially a text like Psalm 16/Acts 2: "thou wilt not abandon my soul to hell", which even Augustine saw as referring to the descent. What does remain in the Article, however, is an unambiguous assertion that the descent occurred subsequent to Christ's death (contra Calvin), and that his descent into Hell is distinct from his burial (contra Bucer). Ironically, the 1 Peter 3 passage that was removed from the Article continued to be appointed for the Epistle Lesson in the BCP for Easter Even, the common liturgical moment for reflection on Christ's descent.

A commentary on the Articles was written later in Elizabeth's reign by Thomas Rogers, an Oxford graduate who early in his career, was friendly towards non-conformists, but later became chaplain to Richard Bancroft, who was virulently opposed

⁵⁷⁵ His view is set forth more extensively in his work *Poore Man's Librarie*. (London: Iohn Day, 1565), Vol. 2, fol. 70b-77a.

⁵⁷⁶ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2.754.

⁵⁷⁷ Quantin, *Church of England*, 120.

to them.⁵⁷⁸ In the introduction to his work, Rogers shows that he is sensitive to the charges from Roman Catholic polemicists that the Protestants were all at odds with each other:

Besides, forsomuch as the Papists do not only think, but also give-out, that we are at fierce contention among ourselves, let them advisedly consider, either how all the Protestant Churches in Europe do subscribe unto our Articles, or we unto their confessions, and then tell what our dissension is. It may be they will say, all reformed Churches subscribe not to every of our Articles. But many do, and none deny, I say not any of our Articles, but not any one Thesis, or proposition of any Article common to all Christians.⁵⁷⁹

Collating the protestant confessions was one of Rogers' guiding principles, as we will see, and influenced what he wrote about the theology of the English church. There are places where he adjusts the theology of the Articles to sound more like the continental confessions, and the Third Article is a prime example.

Concerning Article III, Rogers says that it is taught in the Apostles' and Athanasian Creeds as well as the Confessions of Helvetica, Basel, Augsburg, and Sueuia.⁵⁸⁰ He explains that the word Hell does not refer to the place of everlasting torments, where Dives was, and is, and where all the reprobate shall be [Luke 16:23; Matt 25:41]: "In which place Christ, as man, was not, forasmuch as: His body was in the grave (Matt 12:40; 16:4; Luke 11:29); His soul was: commended into the hands of the Father (Ps 31:5; Lk 23:46) and in Paradise (Luke 23:43).⁵⁸¹ Then Rogers adds, "The terrors, and torments of the body, and soul, which Christ suffered, as appeareth" (he then lists a number of biblical texts: Isa 53:6, 10; Ps 116:3; Matt 26:38; 27:46; Luke 22:42). In light of this statement and these texts, we would surmise that Rogers is essentially agreeing with Calvin: that the descent took place upon the cross before Christ's death. He does, however, avoid the language of "hellish torments."

Rogers concludes by saying:

And so we are against them: 1) which say that Christ descended not into Hell at all; 2) which think that Christ descended into the place of torments, where in soul he endured for a time the pains which the damned spirits do there sustain; 3) which hold that Christ went down into

⁵⁷⁸ Patrick Collinson, *Richard Bancroft and Elizabethan Anti-Puritanism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵⁷⁹ Thomas Rogers, *The English Creede Consenting Vvith the True Auncient Catholique, and Apostolique Church* (London: Iohn VVindet for Andrew Maunsel, 1585), The Preface.

⁵⁸⁰ Rogers, *The English Creede*, sig. B.1.b. "Sueuia" refers to the Tetrapolitan or Swabian Confession of 1530.

⁵⁸¹ Rogers, *The English Creede*, sig. B.1.b.

Lake Limbo, to fetch from thence, as Canisius: to loose from thence, as Vaux saith, the souls of our forefathers, which afore his death were shut up in the prison of Hell.⁵⁸²

The first view was that of Carlile and Deloenuus. The second view was that of Nicholas of Cusa, which had been loosely held by Hugh Latimer (as we saw in the preceding chapter). This was surely a minority opinion among Protestants and denied by Roman Catholics of that period. In the third view, Rogers is arguing against Roman Catholic polemicists, but this is an early instance of how English Protestants of all stripes were moving away from any notion of Christ rescuing the Old Testament saints. It also shows that by this time, this view was perceived as that which was held by the Roman church.

However, by the time Rogers reissued this work in 1607, he had changed his view. He gives the proposition: "Christ went down to hell;" then he gives the proof from God's word saying, "Sundry be the texts of scripture for Christ his descension into hell," then he quotes the following texts (Ps 16:9-10; Acts 2:26-7; Pss 30:2-3; 86:12, 23; Eph 4:9-10; 1 Cor 15:55).⁵⁸³ It should be noted that this is an entirely different set of texts from his first version. These were all popularly used in the patristic era for the descent (there is a notable absence of 1 Peter 3 which is not surprising since it was frequently disputed and had been removed from the earlier version of Article III).

In his section on the correlation of the Article with the other protestant confessions (noted in the margin), he writes:

"Also that Christ went down into hell all sound Christians, both in former days, and now living, do acknowledge; howbeit in the interpretation of the article there is not that consent as were to be wished: some holding that Christ descended into hell:" 1) As God only, and not man; as they do which say how Christ descended powerfully and effectually, but not personally into hell; and that the Deity exhibited itself, as it were present in the infernal parts, to the terror of the devil and other damned spirits; 2) As man; and that, as some think, in body only, as when death as it were prevailed over him lying in the grave: as others deem, in soul only, when he went unto the place of the reprobate, to the increasing of their torments. 3) As God and man in one person; as they do, which affirm that Christ in body and soul went, some think, as it were into hell, when upon the cross and elsewhere he suffered the terrors and torments prophesied of (Isa 53:6, 10; Ps 116:3) and mentioned (Matt 26:38; 27:46; Lk 22:42); and some say even into hell (the very place destined for the reprobate), which he entered into the very moment of his resurrection, at which time

⁵⁸² Rogers, *The English Creede*, sig. B.1.b.

⁵⁸³ Thomas Rogers, *The Catholic Doctrine of The Church of England, An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles*, ed. J. J. S. Perowne, vol. 45, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1854), 59–60.

he shewed and declared himself a most glorious conqueror both of death and hell, the most powerful enemies."⁵⁸⁴

Here we see that Rogers has shifted his argument. Instead of saying that all Protestants agreed on this topic, he acknowledges a range of beliefs. Once again, it should be noted that the deliverance of the Old Testament saints is not included in this list of beliefs held by Protestants (more below). We have encountered most of these views with the exception of Christ lying in the grave under the power of death. As we will see later, this view was held by Zacharius Ursinus and William Perkins.

Rogers then lists the "errors and adversaries unto this truth." He introduces this section by saying: "But till we know the native and undoubted sense of this article, and mystery of religion, persist we adversaries unto them which say ..." [Then he lists five perceived errors, including examples of those who held them]: 1) Denial of the descent altogether (he mentions Carlile in particular); 2) That Christ descended to be tormented (alluding to "Bannister's error," whose identity is uncertain, but this was the view of Cusanus); 3) That Christ suffered the torments of hell upon the cross (Paget's Catechism is noted in the margin, also Ferus, Hume's Rejoinder, The Household Catechism, and Gifford's Catechism); 4) That Christ personally in soul went down into Lake Limbo, to fetch from thence, as Canisius, to loose from thence, as Vaux saith, the souls of our forefathers, which afore his death (as the papists dream) were shut up in the close prison of hell; 5) That Christ by his descension hath quite turned hell into Paradise, as Coesterus the Jesuit's error.⁵⁸⁵

The first, second and fourth critiques are consistent with his earlier work. The fifth critique is a new one aimed at another Roman polemicist. But the most interesting is the third one which disavows Calvin's view. J. J. S. Perowne, the editor of this work in the version printed by the Parker Society, notes that the chief difference between this version and the earlier *English Creede* is the explication of the Third Article.⁵⁸⁶ Perowne talks about the "great revolution" concerning this doctrine (which had taken place in the interim, which we will discuss below), and then concludes: "Hence we find that in this edition he speaks far less confidently than before, and whilst mentioning different views that had been entertained of the doctrine, does not strongly advocate any."⁵⁸⁷ Rather,

⁵⁸⁴ Rogers, *The Catholic Doctrine*, 60-1.

⁵⁸⁵ Rogers, *The Catholic Doctrine*, 61-2.

⁵⁸⁶ Rogers, *The Catholic Doctrine*, xii.

⁵⁸⁷ Rogers, *The Catholic Doctrine*, xiii.

this is a complete reversal of the position of his first work, where, however loosely stated, he appeared to hold to Calvin's view.

The Doctrine of the Descent in Other Official and Semi-Official Documents of the Church of England

In 1562, Bishop John Jewel issued a work titled *An Apology of the Church of England*. This work was primarily aimed at offering the rationale for why the church in England had departed from the jurisdiction of Rome. Haugaard describes Jewel's methodology when he writes: "Although continental reformers also claimed to have returned to patristic standards, Jewel made the congruity of the English with the ancient churches a central argument in his *Apology*. Jewel consistently insisted that the only final source of doctrine lay in the Bible, but he looked first to the fathers for help in its interpretation."⁵⁸⁸ Only a passing reference is made to the descent in this work, probably because the teaching of the Church of England did not greatly differ from Rome on this doctrine. Jewel essentially repeats what the Apostles' Creed said: "We believe that for our sake he died, and was buried, descended into hell, the third day by the power of his Godhead returned to life and rose again ..."⁵⁸⁹ Given his approach of appealing to the church fathers and his commitment to the official doctrine of the English church, it is hard to imagine that Jewel did not hold to a traditional view of the descent. Furthermore, it should be remembered that Jewel participated in the Convocation of 1562/3 that approved Article III of the Thirty-Nine Articles and he was a part of the committee during the same that reviewed Alexander Nowell's Catechism,⁵⁹⁰ which offered a rather traditional view of Christ's descent (see below).

Early in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, a second Book of Homilies was issued (1563/4). In the Homily for Good Friday, there is a brief statement which will have some bearing on later discussions. The homily, in meditating upon the fact that God sent his son, says:

O Lord, what had Adam or any other man deserved at God's hands that he should give us his own Son? We were all miserable persons, sinful persons, damnable persons, justly driven out of paradise, justly excluded

⁵⁸⁸ William P. Haugaard, *Elizabeth and the English Reformation: The Struggle for a Stable Settlement of Religion* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1968), 246.

⁵⁸⁹ John Ayre, ed., *The Works of John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury*, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1848), 59.

⁵⁹⁰ Angela May Ranson, "'Because Thy God Loves England': Bishop John Jewel and the Catholicity of the Church of England, 1535-1599" (unpublished Thesis, York: University of York, 2013), 183.

from heaven, justly condemned to hell fire; and yet (see a wonderful token of God's love) he gave us his only begotten Son ...⁵⁹¹

The phrase that stands out for our purposes is where it says that we were all "justly excluded from heaven" before Christ's ministry. This is noteworthy because some later writers will claim that even before the redeeming work of Christ, the just were received into heaven. This statement would seem to stand against that notion.

The Homily *On the Resurrection* has several points of contact with our discussion:

His death took away sin, and malediction, his death was the ransom of them both, his death destroyed death and overcame 'the devil, which had the power of death' [Heb 2:14] in his subjection; his death destroyed hell with all the damnation thereof. Thus is death swallowed up by Christ's victory; thus is hell spoiled for ever. [1 Cor 15:54, 57]⁵⁹²

Here are some of the texts used in the patristic era being employed in this homily with reference to Christ's victory over death, hell and the devil. This passage also alludes to the descent:

This mighty conquest of his resurrection was not only signified afore by divers figures of the Old Testament, as by Samson when he slew the lion, out of whose mouth came out sweetness and honey [Jud 14:5-8]; and as David bare his figure when he delivered the lamb out of the lion's mouth, and when he overcame and slew the great giant Goliath [1 Sam 17:34-35, 49-50]; and as when Jonah was swallowed up of the whale's mouth, and cast up again on land to live [Jon 1:17, 2:10]; but was also most clearly prophesied by the Prophets of the Old Testament, and in the New also confirmed by the Apostles. 'He hath spoiled,' saith St. Paul, 'rule and power' and all the dominion of our spiritual enemies; 'he hath made a shew of them openly, and hath triumphed over them in his own person.' [Col 2:15]⁵⁹³

Here again, all these texts were employed by the fathers in their discussion of the descent.

This becomes even more explicit later:

Thus hath his resurrection wrought for us life and righteousness. He passed through death and hell, to the intent to put us in good hope that by his strength we shall do the same. He paid the ransom of sin that it should not be laid to our charge. He destroyed the devil and all his tyranny, and openly triumphed over him, and took away from him all his captives, and hath raised and set them with himself amongst the heavenly citizens above [Eph 2:6]. He died to destroy the rule of the devil in us; and he

⁵⁹¹ Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 413.

⁵⁹² Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 419.

⁵⁹³ Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 419-20.

arose again to send down his Holy Spirit to rule in our hearts, to endow us with perfect righteousness.⁵⁹⁴

The most striking phrases here are where it says that Christ “passed through death and hell” and triumphed over the devil by [taking] “away from him all his captives, and hath raised and set them with himself amongst the heavenly citizens above.” This is an obvious allusion to Matthew 12:29 (Christ’s story about the stronger man entering the strong man’s house), and is nothing less than the patristic concept that Christ, subsequent to death, descended into the realm of the dead, bound the devil, and raised up with him all who had longed for his appearing. It is clear that the Second Book of Homilies presents a view of the descent that is consistent with mainstream view from the patristic era.

There were three catechisms during the Elizabethan period which were at least semi-official in character.⁵⁹⁵ Two of these, the Prayer Book Catechism and Ponet’s Catechism were discussed in chapter 2. The third is the work of Alexander Nowell, the Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London (1561-1602), which was published in 1570.⁵⁹⁶ Haugaard argued that Nowell, “with the more vigorous affirmations of double predestination ... produced all the distinctive elements and emphases of the theology of John Calvin.”⁵⁹⁷ But as we will see, Nowell’s view of the descent was not entirely consistent with Calvin’s view.⁵⁹⁸

In his discussion of the death of Christ on the cross, Nowell seems to echo Calvin’s view when he writes:

That Christ suffered not only a common death in the sight of men, but also was touched with the horror of eternal death: he fought and wrestled as it were hand to hand, with the whole army of hell: before the judgment-seat of God he put himself under the heavy judgment and grievous severity of God’s punishment: he was driven into most hard distress: he for us suffered and went through horrible fears, and most bitter griefs of mind, to satisfy God’s judgment in all things, and to appease his wrath.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁴ Bray, *The Book of Homilies*, 420.

⁵⁹⁵ John E. Booty, ed., *The Godly Kingdom of Tudor England: Great Books of the English Reformation* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Company, Inc., 1981), 241.

⁵⁹⁶ It would appear that the BCP catechism was intended for the home and church memorization; Ponet’s Catechism was for use in schools; and Nowell’s Catechism was more for the preparation of pastors (like Luther’s Larger Catechism). See Booty, *The Godly Kingdom*, 241-2.

⁵⁹⁷ William P. Haugaard, “John Calvin and the Catechism of Alexander Nowell,” *Archive for Reformation History* 61 (1970): 65.

⁵⁹⁸ Wallace marks this in a footnote in his article as well. Wallace, “Puritan and Anglican,” 159.

⁵⁹⁹ G. E. Corrie, ed., *A Catechism Written in Latin by Alexander Nowell, Dean of St. Paul’s*, vol. 53, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1853), 159.

His statement about Christ “wrestling as it were hand to hand” is almost certainly borrowed from Calvin who said, “For this reason, he must grapple hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death.”⁶⁰⁰ He also quotes Psalm 22:1, Calvin’s main text for his psychological view of the descent.

Then he comes to the question, “What meaneth that which followeth, of his descending into hell?” The Scholar answers:

That as Christ in his body descended into the bowels of the earth, so, in his soul severed from the body, he descended into hell: and that therewith also the virtue and efficacy of his death, so pierced through to the dead, and to very hell itself, that both the souls of the unbelieving felt their most painful and just damnation for infidelity, and Satan himself, the prince of hell, felt that all the power of his tyranny and darkness was weakened, vanquished, and fallen to ruin. On the other side, the dead, which, while they lived, believed in Christ, understood that the work of their redemption was now finished, and understood and perceived the effect and strength thereof with most sweet and assured comfort.⁶⁰¹

Contrary to Calvin, Nowell asserts a local descent of Christ: “his soul severed from his body [at death], he descended into hell ...” He talks about how the virtue [power] and efficacy of Christ’s death also “pierced through to the dead, and to very hell itself.” He goes on to explain that the unbelieving felt the justice of their damnation for unbelief and that the devil felt his power and tyranny to be vanquished. Note that he speaks of this as “very hell itself.” This is significant because he goes on to say, “On the other side,” and then makes note of those who had believed prior to the coming of Christ and how they now understood from his arrival that their redemption was now finished. The terminology implies that Nowell believed there were two compartments within the underworld: “very hell itself” (where the devil and unbelieving were), and “the other side,” where the believing ones awaited their Redeemer. This would be completely consistent with the earlier patristic consensus as well as the formularies produced under Henry VIII and Edward VI. The one exception is that the deliverance of the Old Testament saints from Sheol to heaven is not explicitly set forth. Consistent with the revised version of Article III, no reference is made to 1 Peter 3 either.

In the ensuing section on the resurrection, there are some other interesting allusions to the descent. In response to the question, “Was it not enough that by his

⁶⁰⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.10.

⁶⁰¹ Corrie, *Nowell's Catechism*, 160–61.

death we obtain deliverance from sin, and pardon?” Nowell includes the following in his answer:

To die, certainly, is common to all; and though some for a time have avoided death intended against them, yet to loose or break the bonds of death once suffered, and by his own power to rise alive again, that is the proper doing of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Author of life, by which he hath showed himself the conqueror of sin and death, yea, and of the devil himself.⁶⁰²

When the question is posed, “For what other cause rose he again?” the answer is—so that the prophecies of David and the other holy prophets might be fulfilled—and the marginal note references Psalm 16:10, Matthew 12:40, and Acts 2:26, 31, which are the prophecies of David and Jesus as well as Peter’s quotation of Psalm 16 in his Pentecost sermon (all texts associated with the descent).⁶⁰³ This important catechism, which enjoyed a semi-official status in the English church, offered a traditional view of the descent that was consistent both with the patristic consensus and the formularies from the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI.

Of course, these official/semi-official catechisms were not the only ones circulating in England during this period. Hundreds were written during this period,⁶⁰⁴ and some of these proffered different views of the descent from the catechisms we have just rehearsed. John Calvin’s psychological view of Christ’s descent, the idea that he suffered hellish torments on the cross, was the most popular alternative view. This came through in Calvin’s own catechism, which had been translated into English and was often bound with the Genevan Bible.⁶⁰⁵ Other catechisms from this period which taught Calvin’s view include the immensely popular works by Edward Dering, George Gifford, Richard Greenham, and Robert Openshaw (whose work is sometimes attributed to Eusebius Paget). The widespread popularity of these works among the laity suggests that Calvin’s view would have been widely known.

⁶⁰² Corrie, *Nowell's Catechism*, 161.

⁶⁰³ Corrie, *Nowell's Catechism*, 161.

⁶⁰⁴ See Green, *The Christian's ABC*.

⁶⁰⁵ Gerald T. Sheppard, ed., *The Geneva Bible (The Annotated New Testament, 1602 Edition)*, vol. 1, Pilgrim Classic Commentaries (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 15.

The Doctrine of the Descent in the Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter

One other resource should be discussed in this section because it also had a semi-official status and also has some bearing upon our topic.⁶⁰⁶ *The Whole Book of Psalms* [*WBP*] was a metrical version of the Psalter which was composed by Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins and others [sometimes referred to as the Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter]. Beth Quitslund writes:

By the middle of Elizabeth's reign it was used by virtually every English Protestant in public worship, and by many in household devotions. Although ubiquitous, the *WBP* was never specifically mandated for use by any national authority, which meant that it depended largely on custom for its continuance.⁶⁰⁷

She later adds: "In fact, some Elizabethan and early Stuart bishops did try to enforce the use of the singing psalms in their Visitation Articles, despite the lack of higher-level injunction."⁶⁰⁸

The *WBP* was immensely popular and many surviving copies were bound with the Book of Common Prayer, the Geneva Bible, and later, with the King James Version of the Bible (1611). The related psalms will be discussed later, but at this point, we should note that a metrical paraphrase of the Apostles' Creed was included in this work. The pertinent section read:

And so he dyed in the fleshe,
But quickned in the sprite:
His body then was buried,
As is our vse and ryte.
His sprit did after this descend,
Into the lower partes:
To them that long in darknes were,
The true lyght of theyr hartes.⁶⁰⁹

The first two lines of the text are an obvious paraphrase of 1 Peter 3, and the idea of Christ descending "into the lower parts" is a likely allusion to Ephesians 4:9. The reference to "them that long in darkness were," echoes Isaiah 9:1-2 and perhaps, the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:79). The idea of bringing a shining light to those that sat in darkness is consistent with what we saw in Nowell's Catechism above. It points implicitly to a

⁶⁰⁶ This topic is not addressed at large by either Wallace or Quantin. Wallace alludes to it without naming it. "Puritan and Anglican," 265.

⁶⁰⁷ Beth Quitslund, "The Psalm Book," in *The Elizabethan Top Ten: Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2013), 203.

⁶⁰⁸ Quitslund, "The Psalm Book," 206.

⁶⁰⁹ Sternhold-Hopkins, *The Whole Booke of Psalmes*, 381.

blessing being brought to those in Sheol who longed for the Messiah's appearance. As we will see below, this metrical version of the Creed and many passages from the Psalter were at odds with the translation and notes of the Geneva Bible.⁶¹⁰ The fact that they were bound together so often is an indicator of just how popular the Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter was in England during that period.

The Doctrine of the Descent in Continental Reformation Influences on England

In spite of the fairly consistent view of the descent of Christ into hell which we have seen in the official formularies and other semi-official publications of the church of England, there were divergent views on the matter in Elizabeth's reign. We should note at the outset that these diverging views were, in some sense, the fault of the church's hierarchy. That is, during the reign of Elizabeth, there were three major works from the continental reformation which were employed by the established church, each of which offered a view of the descent which was contrary to that of the official formularies: Bullinger's *Decades*, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and The Heidelberg Catechism.

Regarding the *Decades* of Henry Bullinger, we saw in the previous chapter how he was less than enthused with the doctrine but refused to deny it. He reinterpreted it to mean that the power of Christ's death descended to the hell of the damned, to confirm their just condemnation, while the soul of Christ went to paradise/Abraham's bosom, which he seems to have equated with heaven. The traditional, local descent of Christ's soul to deliver the Old Testament saints was set aside by him.

Regarding the *Institutes* of John Calvin, we saw in chapter 2 how Calvin denied that Christ made any spatial descent and also denied that Christ went to the underworld. Rather, he argued that the descent of Christ into hell took place in the midst of his suffering, most significantly when he cried out from the cross the opening words of Psalm 22: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" This view had minimal effect on England during Edward's reign, but in the early years of Elizabeth's reign, became much more popular. This shift is noted by Milton:

But as Elizabeth's reign continued, this influence [of Bullinger] paled before the extraordinary popularity of the works of John Calvin. This

⁶¹⁰ Quitslund writes, "Indeed, it is well-nigh impossible to find a Geneva Bible printed in England without the metrical psalter." Beth Quitslund, *The Reformation in Rhyme: Sternhold, Hopkins and the English Metrical Psalter, 1547-1603* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2008), 249.

influence is not merely evidence that English religion was not hermetically sealed from the continent: in fact, Genevan theological works were actually vastly *more* popular in England than in other Protestant countries, with ninety editions of Calvin's works and fifty-six of those of his successor Beza published in England by 1600.⁶¹¹

We have already mentioned how the English exiles during Mary's reign adopted Calvin's Catechism, formulated a confession of faith that was consistent with that of Geneva, and brought these documents and practices back to England with them. We will see in later controversies how often this view will appear.

But Calvin's view was also propagated through The Heidelberg Catechism (HC).⁶¹² Milton explains how this work was received in England:

But Geneva and Zurich were not the only courses of foreign Reformed influence: the Rhineland Palatinate and its Heidelberg Catechism can lay claim to an equally substantial impact upon English Protestantism. Oxford's Catechetical Statute of 1579 prescribed the Heidelberg Catechism (along with several others) as a set work to be used by all juniors in the university and those without degrees.⁶¹³

Question 44 of the HC asks the question: "Why is it added: 'He descended into hell'?" The answer given is: "That in my greatest temptations I may be assured that Christ my Lord, by His inexpressible anguish, pains, and terrors, which He suffered in His soul on the cross and before, has redeemed me from the anguish and torment of hell."⁶¹⁴ Obviously, this answer is linked with the view espoused by Calvin. In fact, Bierma sees a connection between the HC and the Geneva Catechism, setting them side-by-side to prove the point.⁶¹⁵

In his exposition of the HC, Zacharias Ursinus, one of its authors, elaborates upon the thinking of Question 44. Since the topics here will be picked up by later authors, some discussion is worthwhile. First, he says that the word "hell" is used in three senses in Scripture: 1) it refers to the grave (Gen 42:38; Ps 16:10); 2) it refers to the

⁶¹¹ Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought 1600-1640* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 335.

⁶¹² Wallace only mentions the Heidelberg Catechism in passing, noting that it was translated into English during the Elizabethan era and that it offered "the Genevan interpretation of the descent." "Puritan and Anglican," 261. This section will attempt to show the influence that it had in England and will explore its teaching through Zacharias Ursinus' commentary on it.

⁶¹³ Milton, *Catholic and Reformed*, 335. The "several others" here included Calvin and Bullinger's catechisms. G. W. Child, *Church and State Under the Tudors* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1890), 289.

⁶¹⁴ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2.779.

⁶¹⁵ Lyle D. Bierma, *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism: A Reformation Synthesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 59.

place of the damned (Luke 16:23); 3) it signifies the most extreme distress and anguish (Ps 116:3; 1 Sam 2:6). He concludes, "In this article the term hell is to be understood according to the third signification."⁶¹⁶ His choice of the third use of "hell" is non-spatial and is consistent with Calvin's view of the descent as Christ's suffering on the cross. In weighing the first possibility, it is worth noting that he correlates the word "Sheol" from Psalm 16:10 with "the grave," a view espoused earlier by Bucer and later by Theodore Beza, as we shall see. However, he clarifies that the word in this particular instance could not mean "grave" because the Creed had already said that Christ "was buried" and this would be redundant.⁶¹⁷

He then offers his critique of the second possibility:

Again, when it is said that Christ descended into hell, it cannot mean the place of the damned, which is the second signification of the term as above considered; as is proven from this division: The Divinity did not descend, because this is and was everywhere: neither did his body, because it rested in the grave three days, according to the type of Jonah; nor did it rise from any other place than the grave.⁶¹⁸

So Christ's divine nature did not descend and his body did not either. Then he broaches the possibility of his soul descending: "Neither did the soul of Christ descend" because 1) the Scriptures in no place affirm this; 2) then he quotes two sayings which Christ uttered from the cross which he perceives to contradict this (Luke 23:46, 43), and concludes, "The soul of Christ, after his death, was, therefore, in the hands of his Father in Paradise, and not in hell;"⁶¹⁹ 3) "If Christ descended into hell, (as to his soul) he descended either that he might there suffer something, or that he might deliver the fathers from that place, as the Papists affirm" [note that he links the deliverance of the fathers with the Papists].⁶²⁰ He rejects both of these notions. He did not descend to suffer because he said from the cross, "It is finished." Neither did he descend to liberate the fathers because he did this by his suffering on earth, he accomplished the same by the power and efficacy of his Godhead from the beginning of the world, and not by any local descent. Furthermore, he adds, the fathers were not in hell to be delivered. "The souls of the just are in the hands of God, neither do they suffer any pain." He then

⁶¹⁶ G. W. Williard, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1852), 228.

⁶¹⁷ Williard, *Commentary of Ursinus*, 228-9.

⁶¹⁸ Williard, *Commentary of Ursinus*, 229.

⁶¹⁹ Williard, *Commentary of Ursinus*, 229.

⁶²⁰ Williard, *Commentary of Ursinus*, 229.

alludes to the story of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16), and seems to indicate that Abraham's bosom was heaven, not the Limbus Patrum.⁶²¹

He then acknowledges that there is another view: there are some that think the soul of Christ descended to display His victory and to strike terror into the devils. But the Scriptures in no place affirm this. He swiftly clears away the passages which had been associated with this view: he takes an Augustinian view of 1 Peter 3, that it is about the spirit of Christ preaching through Noah while preparing the ark, then he curtly dismisses 1 Peter 4:6, and explains away Ephesians 4:9 by saying that this reference to Christ's descent was a figure for the depths of his humiliation on earth. In the end, he acknowledges that there is not anything inherently wrong with the view that Christ descended to display his victory and to strike fear in the devils and says that many fathers held to it.⁶²² It will become evident in the ensuing debates how the arguments against the traditional view of the descent in Ursinus' commentary on the HC will be echoed by other authors. His use of the words of Christ from the cross to argue that Christ's soul went to heaven immediately at death shows that new arguments were being formulated from the Scriptures to refute a local descent. The view that Christ descended to deliver the Old Testament saints is now clearly viewed as what "the Papists affirm."

At this point, we may wonder as to why this long-held view was being abandoned by so many. It is most likely because the transfer of souls from the good side of Sheol to heaven was beginning to be viewed as conceptually related to the transfer of souls from purgatory. Because of this perceived connection, many Protestants went to great lengths to explain it away. We have already seen how the official formularies simply avoided the topic. In the ensuing controversies, we will see how many other Protestants will follow Ursinus in framing the idea of the deliverance of the Old Testament saints from Sheol as the view of their Roman Catholic opponents.

The Doctrine of the Descent in Sixteenth Century Bible Translations

There was another way in which the official view of Christ's descent, as it was found in the official formularies of the English church, was being undermined: through Bible translation and accompanying notes. The translation of the Bible into the vernacular

⁶²¹ Williard, *Commentary of Ursinus*, 229.

⁶²² Williard, *Commentary of Ursinus*, 230.

was a touchy subject in England. In the fourteenth century, John Wycliffe defied the authorities and translated the Bible from Latin into English. In the sixteenth century, William Tyndale sought to follow the pattern of Martin Luther in providing a fresh translation from the originals, using the prescribed methods set forth by Erasmus in 1516. At every step of the way, the hierarchy of the Roman church sought to stop Tyndale and ultimately, he lost his life for the cause. In spite of this history, Thomas Cromwell and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer were able to convince Henry VIII to allow an official translation of the Bible (The Great Bible) in 1540 and each parish was even required to obtain it. There were other translations around, such as The Coverdale Bible (1535—essentially, the completion of Tyndale’s work), The Matthew Bible (1537), and Taverner’s Bible (1539).⁶²³

It was into this context that the returning exiles brought The Geneva Bible, published in 1560.⁶²⁴ This Bible was immensely popular in England. Some of the features which added to its popularity included the Roman type font rather than the Gothic type, the numbering of verses and the separation of paragraphs, a more portable size, and the addition of annotations and other study helps for the reader.⁶²⁵ The translation relied heavily upon the textual work of Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor in Geneva, whose own view of the descent flavored some of the translation choices that he made. It was essentially what we could call today a “study Bible.” The problem was that it contained some controversial translations and some of the notes were antagonistic to the official formularies. This apparently was not viewed as a problem early on since Elizabeth had granted permission to John Bodley to print the Geneva Bible in 1560 and Archbishop Parker requested an extension of his printing rights in 1565. In this request, he hints at the fact that another translation was in the works but reasons, “yet shall it nothing hinder but rather do much good to have diversity of translations and readings.”⁶²⁶ This statement reflects the humanist tendencies of Parker, but it was a miscalculation. Just three years later, he included this note to the translators of The

⁶²³ For the complete background, see David Norton, “English Bibles from c. 1520 to c. 1750,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: From 1450-1750*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 305–44.

⁶²⁴ The topic of the Geneva Bible and the descent was unexplored by Wallace or Quantin. Wallace only mentions it in one sentence, noting that the notes affirm Calvin’s view. “Puritan and Anglican,” 261.

⁶²⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, “The Geneva Bible of 1560,” *Theology Today* 17 (1960): 342–43.

⁶²⁶ Alfred W. Pollard, ed., *Records of the English Bible: The Documents Relating to the Translation and Publication of the Bible in English, 1525-1611* (London: Henry Frowde; Oxford University Press, 1911), 286. I am indebted to Berry’s Introduction to The Geneva Bible of 1560 (p. 13) for this insight.

Bishops' Bible: "Item to make no bitter notes upon any text, or yet to set down any determination in places of controversy," surely alluding to the Geneva Bible.⁶²⁷

The Bishops' Bible was published in 1568. It is clear that it was intended to be a rival version to the Geneva Bible since it tried to coopt some of its popular features, but it proved to be ineffective in overtaking the Geneva version in popularity.⁶²⁸ We will first look at how the view of the descent played out in these translations and then we will examine the controversial notes on the topic from the Geneva Bible.

In examining the topic of translation, three texts related to the descent will be explored: Psalm 16:10, Acts 2:27 (which is a quotation of Ps 16), and Psalm 86:13 (an important text associated with the descent in the patristic era). Psalm 16:10(11) from the Coverdale translation reads: "For why? thou shalt not leaue my soule in hell, nether shalt thou suffre thy saynte to se corrupcion."⁶²⁹ It should be noted that Coverdale translates the word "Sheol" with the word "hell," as Wycliffe had done almost two centuries before him. It should also be noted that Coverdale's translation of the Psalter was adopted as the version in the Book of Common Prayer, where in England and in many other provinces of the Anglican Communion it remains today. This translation would have been completely consistent with the official formularies. When Psalm 16 was quoted by Peter in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, Coverdale employed the same translation there ("hell" for "Hades"). The Matthew Bible, Taverner's Bible, and the Great Bible all followed this same translation in both contexts. The later Bishops' Bible (as well as the King James Version of 1611) would concur.

Psalm 86:13 (85:13) is translated in Coverdale, "For great is thy mercy toward me, thou hast delivered my soul from the nethermost hell."⁶³⁰ The Hebrew adjective translated here as "nethermost" (lowest) is noteworthy. This suggests that there is more than one "part" of hell (as we saw in the earlier eras). But it also raises the question about Christ going to the "lowest part," which earlier authors had associated with the place of torment. There is no hint that Christ suffered there; perhaps it is being suggested that Christ made proclamation there, confirming the state of the wicked (as some earlier authors suggested above). Once again, The Matthew Bible, Taverner's, and the Great Bible follow this same translation. The Bishops' version added a modifier:

⁶²⁷ Pollard, *Records of the English Bible*, 297.

⁶²⁸ Smithen, *Continental Protestantism*, 56.

⁶²⁹ *Coverdale Bible* (publisher not listed, 1535), sig. Cc ii.a.

⁶³⁰ *Coverdale Bible* (publisher not listed, 1535), sig. Ee.ii.b.

“thou hast delivered my soule from the lowest [part of] hell.”⁶³¹ Here again, the translation of this Psalm which makes reference to the descent is consistent with the official formularies.

But the Geneva Bible departs from each of these translations because of a different view of the descent shared by the translators and editors. Psalm 16:10 is translated: “For thou wilt not leave my soule in the grave: nether wilt thou suffer thine holie one to se corruption.”⁶³² Unsurprisingly, the same essential translation is carried over into Peter’s sermon in Acts 2:27. The controversial take here is the fact that “Sheol” in Psalm 16:10 and “Hades” in Acts 2:27 have now been rendered “grave.” The marginal note on this verse passes over the topic of the descent altogether. Regardless, the choice of the word “grave” here can be for no other reason than to deny Christ’s local descent. This translation was surely influenced by Beza.⁶³³ Even though Beza does not seem to deny Calvin’s view of the descent, he favors the view that Christ’s burial was his descent. This seems to correspond to what he wrote in his catechism:

[H]e was nailed on the cross for to fasten thereon our sins, he died and sustained the curse and malediction which was due to us for to appease the wrath of god forever by his only oblations made, he was buried to approve & verify his death and to vanquish death even to the house thereof, that is to say, even to the grave where he felt no corruption, for to declare that even in dying he had overcome & vanquished death.⁶³⁴

So Beza’s view that Christ’s descent was his burial comes through in the translation of Psalm 16:10 and Acts 2:27 in the GB.

The same view carries through to the GB’s translation of the other text we are examining, Psalm 86:13: “For great is thy mercy toward me, and thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest grave.”⁶³⁵ Inquiring minds may wonder what the “lowest grave” might be, especially since Christ, the ultimate referent of the Psalm, was likely buried in an above ground tomb. The marginal note is also an attempted sleight of hand: “That is,

⁶³¹ *The Holie Bible. Conteynyng the Olde Testament and the Newe.* (London: R. Iugge, 1568), sig. D.iii.b.

⁶³² *The Geneva Bible, A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), fol. 237.b.

⁶³³ Backus writes, “so far as the marginal notes in the English Bible are concerned, the influence of Beza was more significant than it might first appear.” Irena Dorota Backus, *The Reformed Roots of the English New Testament: The Influence of Theodore Beza on the English New Testament*, vol. 28, The Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series (Pittsburgh, PA: The Pickwick Press, 1980), 13–14. See also Richard A. Muller’s brief discussion on this topic in *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 2.435–6.

⁶³⁴ Theodore Beza, *A Briefe and Pithtie Summe of the Christian Faith Made in Forme of a Confession.*, trans. Robert Fills, (London: Robert Serll, 1565), fol. 11.b. Language has been slightly updated.

⁶³⁵ *The Geneva Bible (1560)*, fol. 253.b.

from most great danger of death: out of the which none, but only the mighty hand of God, could deliver him.”⁶³⁶ The note seems to imply that descending to the “lowest grave” is metaphorical for the “great danger of death.”

The creative translation of the words Sheol/Hades with “grave,” inspired by Beza, is highly questionable. The only other sixteenth-century English version that appears to follow this (and only at Psalm 16:10), is *The Whole Book of Psalms* (Sternhold-Hopkins).⁶³⁷ This is ironic given the fact that the previously discussed paraphrase of the Apostles’ Creed followed the traditional view of the descent. (It should be noted that the Sternhold-Hopkins inconsistently translates Psalm 86:13 as “lower hel.”)⁶³⁸ This translation of Psalm 16 was apparently maintained in Sternhold-Hopkins throughout the seventeenth century; but by 1762, the word “grave” had been changed to “hell” to correspond to the Coverdale Psalter and the official formularies.⁶³⁹ These irregular translations would be exploited by Roman Catholic polemicists, as the following discussion will demonstrate.

The denial of a spatial descent of Christ into hell also extended into the marginal notes of the Geneva Bible. This move sparked something like a sixteenth century “study Bible debate,” played out in the notes of the GB, the Rheims NT, and to a lesser extent, the Bishops’ Bible. Here we see that this was a three-way debate between the non-conformists, the Roman Catholic polemicists, and the conformists of the English church. Notes from the GB have been noted in the passages above. But there are others which are linked to our topic. The note at Psalm 22:1 references Christ being in “extreme torment,” an apparent allusion to Calvin.⁶⁴⁰ This is echoed in the note from the 1599 GB at Matthew 27:45-6 (where Christ quotes this psalm from the cross): “Heaven it selfe is darkened for very horroure, and Iesus crieth out from the depth of hell, and in the meane while he is mocked.”⁶⁴¹ This is clearly in line with Calvin’s interpretation.

The note at Ephesians 4:9 of the Geneva Bible is quite interesting:

⁶³⁶ *The Geneva Bible (1560)*, fol. 253.b.

⁶³⁷ Sternhold and Hopkins, *The Whole Booke of Psalmes*, 34.

⁶³⁸ Psalm 16 was penned by Sternhold while Psalm 86 was the work of Hopkins. See Appendix C of Quitslund, *The Reformation in Rhyme*.

⁶³⁹ *The Whole Book of Psalms, Collected into English Metre*, by Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins, and Others. (Birmingham: John Baskerville, 1762), sig. B.iv.b.

⁶⁴⁰ *The Geneva Bible (1560)*, fol. 239.a.

⁶⁴¹ *The Bible, that is, The Holy Scriptures contained in the Olde and Newe Testament*. London: Christopher Barker, 1599., fol. NT 15a. The 1560 edition merely references Ps 22:1 in the margin at Matt 27, fol. NT 16.b.

The Messiah came down from heaven into the earth, to triumph over Satan, death and sin, and led them as prisoners and slaves, who before were conquerors, and kept all in subjection: which victory he got and also gave it as a most precious gift to his Church.⁶⁴²

There are two veiled denials of the descent here. First, the note says that Christ came down from heaven “into the earth,” rather than “into the lowest parts of the earth.” This signals that the editors are taking the “descent” here as a reference to Christ’s incarnation. Secondly, the note suggests that when Christ led captivity captive, that the captives were Satan, death and sin (not the fathers who had been held in Sheol). It is worth noting that in the 1599 edition of the Geneva Bible, the note was shortened to read: “A multitude of captiues ... Downe to the earth, which is the lowest part of the world,” abandoning the note about Satan, death and sin being Christ’s captives.⁶⁴³ And the note about the descent being a reference to the incarnation is supplemented by saying that the earth “is the lowest part of the world” (in other words, there is no underworld). This begs the question as to where hell might be situated.

In the note at 1 Peter 3:18, the Geneva Bible says:

Christ being from the beginning head and governor of his Church, came in the days of Noah, not in body, which then he had not, but in Spirit, and preached by the mouth of Noah for the space of 120 years to the disobedient, who would not repent, and therefore are now in prison reserved to the last judgment.⁶⁴⁴

Here the editors are repeating Augustine’s interpretation, that this passage is about the spirit of Christ preaching through Noah. The 1599 version adds a note at verse 22: “By the vertue of which Spirit, that is to say of the diuinity: therefore this word, Spirit, cannot in this place be taken for the soule, unless we say, that Christ was raised up againe, and quickened by the vertue of his soul.”⁶⁴⁵ Here the “spirit” is said to be Christ’s divine nature because it could not be a reference to his human soul.

The note at 1 Peter 4:6 in the Geneva Bible reads:

Although the wicked think this Gospel new, & vex you that embrace it: yet, hath it been preached to them of time past, which now are dead, to the intent [that] they might have been condemned, or dead to sin in the faith, and also might have lived to God in the spirit, which two are the effect of the Gospel.⁶⁴⁶

⁶⁴² *The Geneva Bible (1560)*, fol. NT 90.b.

⁶⁴³ *The Geneva Bible of 1599*, fol. NT 86a.

⁶⁴⁴ *The Geneva Bible (1560)*, fol. NT 109.b.

⁶⁴⁵ *The Geneva Bible of 1599*, fol. NT 105b.

⁶⁴⁶ *The Geneva Bible (1560)*, fol. NT 110.a.

The exact audience is not specified but the note appears to suggest that the gospel had been preached even before the incarnation of Christ. There is no notion that this text might be connected to the similar reference in the previous chapter, which some had seen as referring to Christ preaching to the dead at the descent.

The last passage worth noting is Revelation 1:17b-18 which reads, “Fear not: I am the first and the last, And I am alive, but I was dead: & beholde, I am aliue forevermore, Amen: & I have the keys of hel and death.” The marginal note says that the reference to Christ having the keys to hell and death means that he “has power over them.”⁶⁴⁷ Perhaps this raised some questions in certain minds about how Christ might have obtained the keys to hell if he never went there. Furthermore, the idea that there were “keys” to hell might have reinforced the supposed mythical element that there were bars and gates to be opened. Thus, in the 1599 edition, this marginal note was removed.⁶⁴⁸

As we have seen in this survey, the Geneva Bible denied any concept of Christ descending into hell (beyond the cross). What was implicit in the translation of the texts noted became explicit in the marginal notes on the pertinent texts. It is no wonder that the authorities of the English church became increasingly troubled at these and other matters within the Geneva Bible. They hoped that the Bishops’ Bible would overtake the Geneva Bible in popularity and that this would take care of the problem, but the Bishops’ version was no match for the Genevan. As noted earlier, the more troubling aspect of this was that the Roman Catholic polemicists would exploit this, especially in the Rheims NT which we will see below.

The Bishops’ Bible offered some study helps like those in the Geneva Bible, but in contrast, the marginal notes were scarce and brief. Psalm 16:10, as we saw above, was translated “thou wilt not leave my soul in hell,” and the marginal note at “hell” reads rather unhelpfully: “In the state that souls be after this life.”⁶⁴⁹ We already noted above how Psalm 86:13 says “thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest [part of] hell.” No further note is given, but the translators’ understanding of the verse makes it clear that this is a local reference to the lowest part of Sheol. In Matthew 27:46, where Christ quotes Psalm 22:1 from the cross, the marginal note reads: “To make full satisfaction for

⁶⁴⁷ *The Geneva Bible (1560)*, fol. NT 115.a.

⁶⁴⁸ *The Geneva Bible of 1599*, fol. NT 111b.

⁶⁴⁹ *The Holie Bible. Conteynyng the Olde Testament and the Newe.* (London: R. Iugge, 1568), sig. A.iv.b.

us, Christ suffereth and overcometh, not only the torments of the body, but also the most horrible torments of the minde.”⁶⁵⁰ This sounds reminiscent of Calvin’s view. Unfortunately, there are no notes at most of the pertinent texts which we explored above in the Geneva Bible (Acts 2:27; Eph 4:9; 1 Pet 3; Rev 1:18). However, there is a note at 1 Peter 4:6, and it happens to be the very same note which we quoted above from the 1599 GB.⁶⁵¹ It would appear that the Genevan editors coopted this note from the Bishops’ Bible: for what purpose, other than perhaps taking away one of the references to the descent by using their own note, is anybody’s guess. It is not hard to see why the Bishops’ Bible would have a hard time overtaking the Geneva Bible if for no other reason than the brief and limited number of notes.

The Controversies Over the Descent During Elizabeth I’s Reign

Having looked at the official formularies and Bible translations, we now move to a discussion of the controversies on this topic during the Elizabethan period, which were many.⁶⁵² Some of the treatises in these controversies extend to hundreds of pages and there is quite a bit of overlap in the arguments. Trying to cover each of them would be laborious. I have sought to bring out unique themes in certain ones while also making note of how some authors are borrowing from others. In this regard, the authors who deny the traditional view of Christ’s descent to Sheol fall into one of three camps: 1) those who deny the descent altogether, equating it with the burial of Christ (following Bucer, Beza); 2) those who equate the descent of Christ with his suffering on the cross (following Calvin); 3) those who say that Christ’s power descended to the dead (first proposed by Abelard, later by Bullinger). There are slight variations on these views which will be pointed out along the way.

Christopher Carlile vs. Richard Smith

It has already been noted that at the end of Edward’s reign, Christopher Carlile started a controversy at Cambridge when he argued for removing the descensus clause at his

⁶⁵⁰ *The Bishops’ Bible, 1568*, sig. E.iv.a.

⁶⁵¹ *The Bishops’ Bible, 1568*, sig. S.i.b.

⁶⁵² A partial but helpful list may be found in Peter Milward, *Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan Age: A Survey of Printed Sources* (London: The Scholar Press, 1978), 163–68.

commencement sermon.⁶⁵³ At the time, he was answered by Sir John Cheke.⁶⁵⁴ But the debate would spill over into Elizabeth's reign because Carlile published a treatise, which was in part a response to a work by the Roman Catholic controversialist, Richard Smith (Smyth). Carlile took portions of Smith's work and created a fictitious debate between the two of them.⁶⁵⁵ Smith had lumped Carlile and Calvin together (as suggested in the lengthy title of the work).⁶⁵⁶ Why Carlile was linked with Calvin is uncertain since he did not share Calvin's view of the descent. We would assume that Smith perceived that both men were essentially denying the doctrine: Carlile outright and Calvin through reinterpretation.

Carlile's train of thought is on display in the opening salvo to the reader:

WHAT Hell is: when it began: where it is: and whether Christ descended, or ascended thither: and what he should do there: are questions no less doubtful than necessary: doubtful, for that the Doctors are variable: necessary to be known, for avoiding of fables, and pernicious heresies.⁶⁵⁷

This opening sets forth one of his guiding principles: to pit the Scriptures against the "Doctors," who he said had disagreed with one another. He goes a step further when describing the beginning of the dispute from 1552 where Dr. Perne, then vice chancellor, told him: "All the Scriptures, all the Doctors, and general Councils are contrary to your assertion." To which Carlile responded: "Not so ... for the Scriptures are all with me ... as for your Doctors and Councils, when you allege them, they shall be answered."⁶⁵⁸

Carlile was asked how he would answer Psalm 16:10, "Thou shalt not leave my soul in hell?" He responded by saying that it was not so in the Hebrew, which said "Thou wilt not forsake or leave my body in the grave."⁶⁵⁹ We have already seen how the Geneva Bible translated Sheol with the word "grave," but here we have Carlile translating the Hebrew *nepshesh*, typically translated as "soul," with the word "body."

⁶⁵³ Wallace briefly touched on this debate in one paragraph of his article ("Puritan and Anglican," 266-7.), Quantin only alludes to it in a footnote. *Church of England*, 118.

⁶⁵⁴ John Strype, *The Life of the Learned Sir John Cheke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1821), 89-90. It should be noted that Strype seems to be somewhat confused about the debate itself since he says that Carlile "maintained the tenet of Christ's local descent to hell."

⁶⁵⁵ Russ Leo, "Medievalism without Nostalgia: Guyon's Swoon and the English Reformation Descensus Ad Inferos," *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual* 29 (2014): 117.

⁶⁵⁶ Christopher Carlile, *A Discourse, Concerning Two Diuine Positions* (London: Roger Ward, 1582).

⁶⁵⁷ Carlile, *A Discourse*, sig. xiv.a.

⁶⁵⁸ Carlile, *A Discourse*, sig. A.iv.a.

⁶⁵⁹ Carlile, *A Discourse*, sig. A.iv.a.

Later in his work, he goes so far as to say that Sheol always means grave and that *nepshesh* means body and not soul.⁶⁶⁰

Recalling that this particular debate is against a Roman Catholic, Smith brings up the topic of purgatory in the course of discussion and Carlile's responses indicate that he links the idea of Christ's descent with the concept of purgatory. This may be one factor as to why he argues so vehemently against it. He is unwilling to grant any thought of a "third place," beside heaven and hell.

There is an interesting exchange between Smith and Carlile concerning the rescue of Adam. Smith said: "You reason much of the Grave and place where Adam was buried. I do not reason of the Bodie, but of the soul of Adam, which I am sure descended into Hell, and lay there almost four thousand years, till Christe fetched him out." Carlile responds, "He was not in Hell, and therefore Christ could not fetch him out." Smith, "Where was he then?" Carlile, "In heaven." Smith, "How prove you that?" Carlile then gives a lengthy reply which begins with this:

He ascendeth immediately into heaven that asketh pardon, that [c]raveth mercy with a steadfast faith: but this did *Adam: ergo Adam* ascended into heaven immediately after his death: for the death of the faithful is the high way to felicity, and faith is the salvation of our souls *1. Pet. 1. 9*. The assumption is proved by *Josephus*, who saith, that *Adam* confessed his fault, and craved pardon for his offence. Moreover *Adam* did not only confess his fault, but also repented and believed in the seed promised. And as he and *Caua* [Eve] were the first that offended, so were they the first that received grace and ascended into heaven, except *Abell* and *Enoch*.⁶⁶¹

There are several interesting topics here. At the heart of Carlile's conclusions lies the fact that he does not believe that Christ went to hell because there was no one there for him to deliver. He makes an assumption, based on the work of Josephus, the Jewish writer of the first century, that since Adam asked for pardon and craved mercy, God surely received him into heaven.⁶⁶² He goes on to say that "he and *Caua* [Eve] were the first that offended, so were they first that received grace and ascended into heaven," except for Abel and Enoch, the first martyred and the second who escaped death. Carlile is making an inference from Josephus, who does not suggest that Adam and Eve were

⁶⁶⁰ Carlile, *A Discourse*, fol. 31.a.

⁶⁶¹ Carlile, *A Discourse*, fol. 8.a-b.

⁶⁶² At fol. 17.b-18.a, he argues that Abraham's bosom is heaven.

received into heaven.⁶⁶³ It is somewhat ironic that Carlile rejects Christian tradition all the while embracing the Jewish tradition that came through Josephus.

Carlile continues to belittle the traditional view of the descent by employing the most nonsensical imagery that he can muster. He questions some of the language used regarding the descent: such as, how could Christ's soul preach without a mouth? And, how could he break the bars/gates without a body? He then exploits disagreements about these truths from other writers: including Cardinal Cajetan and even some Lutherans (Aepinus, Lossius, and Wellerus).⁶⁶⁴

Later, in a discussion of various texts, the subject of Ephesians 4 arises. Carlile takes "the lowest parts of the earth" to simply mean the earth. Smith responds by questioning Carlile's cosmological geography: "Did not he descend into the lowest parts of the earth? What other thing can you call the lowest parts of the earth than hell?"⁶⁶⁵

Carlile responds:

I will not dispute with you where hell is at this time, neither whether it be in the earth or not ... Notwithstanding Paul's meaning is that Christ, who ascended, is even he that descended here into the earth. And although that his manhood came not from Heaven, yet his Godhead did, and entered into the Virgin Mary and took flesh upon him, so that here he calleth the Virgin's womb the lowest parts of the earth. So doth *David* call his mother's womb wherein he was fashioned and enclosed as in a place under the earth.⁶⁶⁶

Like Ursinus and the editors of the Geneva Bible, Carlile takes Ephesians 4:9 as a reference to the incarnation (that Christ descended to the earth). But he goes even one step further. Appealing to Psalm 139:13-15, he argues that Ephesians 4:9 is ultimately about the divine nature of the Son entering into the womb of the Virgin Mary (which he interprets as "the lowest parts of the earth"), where he was fashioned as a man. That is, he links Ephesians 4 absolutely to the incarnation and even has a proof-text (Ps 139) for support.

Later, Smith says, "I have alleged those places of Scripture that seem to prove Christ his going to Hell, whereby the Fathers were persuaded, and shall that not persuade you that persuaded them?"⁶⁶⁷ To which Carlile responds that the fathers are

⁶⁶³ Whiston, *Works of Josephus*, 29-30.

⁶⁶⁴ Carlile, *A Discourse*, fol. 32.a.

⁶⁶⁵ Carlile, *A Discourse*, fol. 59.b-60.a.

⁶⁶⁶ Carlile, *A Discourse*, fol. 60.a.

⁶⁶⁷ Carlile, *A Discourse*, fol. 76.a.

of differing opinions and therefore, the Scripture ought to be the “only way and guide.”⁶⁶⁸ At this, Smith then asks him if it is not enough that it is in the Creed? Carlile denies that it is part of the Creed. He asks, “If it be in our Creed then I pray you, who did put it in? when, and where was it thrust in?”⁶⁶⁹ He continues:

If when the Apostles lived, where make they mention of it? *Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Peter*, diligently set out the healthful article of Christ’s Death, whereby we are saved, of his resurrection for our justification, and of his ascension for our glorification, and assured expectation of all Heavenly Felicity. Of this Fable they make no mention, it is excluded as, impertinent, omitted as not expedient, neglected as an inconvenience, and condemned as an absurdity.⁶⁷⁰

Furthermore, Carlile argues that the descent is absent from a number of versions of the Creed and discourses on it. His list of these discourses is quite extensive—sixty-six in all; but many of these are highly debatable.⁶⁷¹ He is emphasizing the fact that some of the early catechetical discourses (such as Augustine’s) passed over the descensus clause while ignoring that these teachers affirmed the descent in their other writings. Of course, all of this fits into his argument that the descensus clause does not belong in the Creed because, according to him, it is not found in Scripture either. It is worth noting that this debate was between Carlile and Richard Smith, a man who ultimately sided with Rome. In the end, Carlile comes down as one who wants to eliminate the article from the Creed altogether. He is an example of one who sees the descent as nothing more than Christ’s burial (following Bucer).

Remarkably, Carlile eventually persuaded Sir John Cheke, his original antagonist at Cambridge, to follow him. Near the opening of his book, Carlile triumphantly includes, like a trophy, the testimony of Cheke as to his reversal:

What time commencement holden amongst the learned men
In Cambridge, wherto great resort was from far and near was then:
In the year of Christ a thousand full five hundreth fifty twain,
I brought forth scriptures, quoted texts, and sentences did strain
This man’s opinion to confute with all my whole intent,
In open audience being then the only Respondent.
But fainting in my proofs at length and wresting texts amiss,
I straightways yielded unto Truth, of Time who daughter is.
For weighing all his words of weight which did his cause pursue,
I Sir John Cheke do here avouch his judgement to be true:

⁶⁶⁸ Carlile, *A Discourse*, fol. 76.b.

⁶⁶⁹ Carlile, *A Discourse*, fol. 76.b–77.a.

⁶⁷⁰ Carlile, *A Discourse*, fol. 77.a.

⁶⁷¹ Carlile, *A Discourse*, fol. 82.b–86.a.

And firmly with him do confess, and do believe it well,
That Christ in body nor in soul descended into hell.⁶⁷²

William Hughes vs. John Whitgift

There was another controversy which arose in 1567 on the topic, again at Cambridge.⁶⁷³ William Hughes, who received a B.D. from Christ's College and had been named Lady Margaret's Preacher, caused a commotion in a sermon he preached at Leicester. Without knowing the exact contents, the best we can piece together is that he was of a non-conformist persuasion and offered a "novel exposition" of the descent.⁶⁷⁴ A complaint was lodged with the University. The event was of such significance that it involved John Whitgift (at the time, Lady Margaret Professor and future Archbishop of Canterbury), Sir William Cecil (who at the time was Chancellor of the University), and Archbishop Parker. Whitgift and Dr. Stokes (Vice Chancellor), were sent to examine Hughes. The outcome of this is unknown. Cecil then wrote to Parker for his advice in handling the matter. Strype says that he could not find the actual advice, and neither could I.⁶⁷⁵

However, Cecil later writes back to Parker thanking him for his advice.⁶⁷⁶ We would assume that Parker advised Cecil to stifle any debate on the topic since Cecil issued an order for the University which read:

[T]hat no manner of Person there, should in any Sermon, open Disputation, or Reading, move any Question or Doubt upon the Article *De Descensu Christi ad Inferos*. It was the Wisdom of the famous Synod at London, 1562, to set down this article barely, without the Explication that went with it in the Articles, as it stood under King *Edward* the VIth, 1552; on purpose to avoid, as it seems, all Cavilling and Disputation, and to allow a Liberty of Mens Judgments and Understandings in such disputable points, wherein the Essence of Faith was not concerned.⁶⁷⁷

Since this censure was worked out in consultation with Archbishop Parker, we would assume that it was consistent with what he advised. Whatever Hughes had

⁶⁷² Carlile, *A Discourse*, sig. A.vi.b-A.vii.a. Strype fails to mention this reversal in his work on Cheke, which is not surprising since he seems to have confused the debate from the outset (see footnote on p. 131).

⁶⁷³ This controversy was not addressed by Wallace or Quantin.

⁶⁷⁴ T. Evan Jacob, *The Life and Times of Bishop Morgan, The Translator of the Bible into Welsh* (London: Rushwin Brothers, 1890), 89.

⁶⁷⁵ John Strype, *The Life and Acts of Matthew Parker, The First Archbishop of Canterbury, in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth.*, vol. 1 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1821), 513.

⁶⁷⁶ John Bruce and Thomas Thomason Perowne, eds., *Correspondence of Matthew Parker, D.D. Archbishop of Canterbury*, vol. 49, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1853), 305.

⁶⁷⁷ John Strype, *The Life and Acts of John Whitgift, D.D., the Third and Last Lord Archbishop of Canterbury in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1822), 1.12.

preached, it must have been at odds with what is written in Article III of the Articles produced by the Convocation of 1562/3. This order, since it involved Archbishop Parker, may also help us to understand why the 1 Peter 3 text had been rescinded from Article III at that Convocation four years earlier: to quiet the controversy and to allow a certain liberty of judgment and understanding on the descent (within the parameters of the Article).

*William Fulke vs. Gregory Martin*⁶⁷⁸

The following year (1568), William Fulke preached on the topic of the descent at his B. D. sermon at Paul's Cross.⁶⁷⁹ This was an extremely bold move given the fact of the controversy with Hughes the previous year and the subsequent censure on the topic from Cecil. Bauckham says of Fulke, "He too took the radical line, defending Calvin's interpretation of the article in the Creed and attacking the traditional interpretation given in the English metrical version of the Creed."⁶⁸⁰ The metrical version of the Creed mentioned here is the one found in the Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter discussed above. Beyond this sermon, Fulke's primary writing on the topic came in a controversy over Bible translation with Gregory Martin, a Roman Catholic. Martin was involved in the translation of the Rheims New Testament (this was the third component of the "study Bible debate" discussed earlier, which involved the Geneva Bible and the Bishops' Bible). In publishing the Rheims NT, Bauckham says that Martin "simultaneously denounced in detail all previous English versions as heretical mistranslations."⁶⁸¹ This is borne out by the marginal notes of that version.

Martin's point of attack on the topic of the descent was the Geneva Bible's translation of Acts 2:27 (inspired by Beza) which read: "But thou wilt not leave my soule in grave ..." Gregory accuses the "Bezites" of saying that "white shall be black, and chalk shall be cheese."⁶⁸² Fulke responds by saying, "we think it indeed a resolute conclusion, that the Scripture in this place, speaketh not of Christ's being in hell, which we

⁶⁷⁸ This debate is only briefly touched upon in Wallace's work (1 paragraph) and is passed over by Quantin. "Puritan and Anglican," 268.

⁶⁷⁹ Richard John Bauckham, "The Career and Theology of Dr William Fulke (1537-1589)" (Cambridge, n.d.), 85.

⁶⁸⁰ Bauckham, "The Career and Theology of Fulke," 85.

⁶⁸¹ Bauckham, "The Career and Theology of Fulke," 446.

⁶⁸² William Fulke, *A Defence of the Sincere and True Translations of the Holy Scriptures into the English Tongue, Against the Cavils of Gregory Martin*, ed. Charles Henry Hartshorne, The Parker Society (Cambridge: The University Press, 1843), 282.

acknowledge in the article of our Creed, but of his burial and resurrection.”⁶⁸³ Martin charges them with a false translation and marvels that they do so in contrast with the Creed, especially that which is sung in meter (another reference to the Sternhold-Hopkins Creed).⁶⁸⁴ Fulke responded that in their translation, they did not intend to deny the article in the Creed, “but because this place might seem unto the ignorant to confirm the error of Christ’s descending into *limbus patrum*, as it doth not, if it be rightly understood ...”⁶⁸⁵ It is remarkable that Fulke would concede that the translators intentionally translated the text this way, to guard against any notion of the *limbus patrum*, and we would also assume, purgatory.

The same topic regarding the translation of the word Sheol/Hades came up in another context. Martin says:

If to this purpose he [Beza] avouch that, *sheol*, signifieth nothing else in Hebrew but a grave, whereas all Hebricians know that it is the most proper and usual word in the Scripture for hell, as the other word *keber*, is for a grave: who would think he would so endanger his estimation in the Hebrew tongue, but that an heretical purpose against Christ’s descending into hell, blinded him?⁶⁸⁶

Here again is the charge of mistranslation for the purpose of denying the descent. Fulke responds by saying that “all learned Hebricians [Hebraists] know that *sheol* is more proper for the grave,” and after discussing some other Hebrew words, says that Gregory shows himself “to be too young an Hebrician, to carp at Beza’s estimation in the knowledge of the tongue.”⁶⁸⁷ Few (if any) Hebraists today would side with Fulke in this.⁶⁸⁸ Martin is most certainly right that Beza and Fulke had been blinded by their own prejudices to translate Sheol/Hades as grave in Acts 2:27.

Once again, Fulke shows that they were guarding against any notion of the *limbus patrum* and purgatory when he says in the same context:

Concerning the questions of *limbus*, purgatory, and the descending of Christ into hell, they are nothing like: for the last is an article of our faith, which we do constantly believe in the true understanding thereof; but the

⁶⁸³ Fulke, *A Defence*, 282.

⁶⁸⁴ Fulke, *A Defence*, 283.

⁶⁸⁵ Fulke, *A Defence*, 284.

⁶⁸⁶ Fulke, *A Defence*, 128.

⁶⁸⁷ Fulke, *A Defence*, 128.

⁶⁸⁸ Most modern Hebrew lexicons do not even list “grave” as a translating gloss for Sheol. See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 2:1368-70; David J. A. Clines, ed. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993-2011), 8:206-7; Francis Brown, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996 reprint), 982-3.

other are fables and inventions of men, which have no ground, in the scripture, but only a vain surmise, builded upon a wrong interpretation of the words of the scripture, as in the peculiar places shall be plainly declared.⁶⁸⁹

Fulke also, like Carlile, argues that Abraham's bosom is in heaven:

As for Abraham's bosom, we account it no place of descent, or going down, but of ascending, even the same that our Savior Christ upon the cross, called Paradise, Luk. 23. saying to the penitent thief, this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise, which of Saint Paul is called the third heaven, 2. Cor. 12.⁶⁹⁰

Martin responds by saying:

[T]hat in the old Testament, because there was yet no ascending into heaven, *the way of the holies* (as the Apostle in his epistle to the Hebrews speaketh) *being not yet made open*, because our savior Christ was to dedicate and begin the entrance in his own person, and by his passion to open heaven ..."⁶⁹¹

Here Martin challenges the notion that the Old Testament saints were already in heaven before Christ's ascension by appealing to Hebrews 9. The fathers also appealed in this regard to the words of Jesus: "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven."⁶⁹²

What is clear from this debate is that Fulke, Beza, and the translators of the Geneva Bible had opened themselves up to this stinging criticism from Gregory and the Roman Catholic polemicists: that they had engaged in mistranslating the scriptures in an effort to veil their audience from the idea that Christ descended to Sheol/Hades.⁶⁹³ Of course, as we have seen, they did so out of concern that their readers would be led to believe in Limbo or purgatory. It is worth noting that the other protestant translations from the same period did not feel the need to follow suit. However, Roman Catholic polemicists would accuse all Protestants of engaging in similar tactics.

The notes in the Rheims NT are also worth some examination. At Acts 2:27, the marginal note reads: "Who but an infidel (saith S. Augustine) will deny Christ to have descended to Hell? *Ep. 99.*"⁶⁹⁴ This was a well-placed dart aimed at the heart of those

⁶⁸⁹ Fulke, *A Defence*, 129.

⁶⁹⁰ Fulke, *A Defence*, 285.

⁶⁹¹ Fulke, *A Defence*, 287–88.

⁶⁹² John 3:13 (NKJV); cf. John 20:17.

⁶⁹³ For the broad claims, see especially p. viii of the Preface to *The New Testament of Jesus Christ, Translated Faithfully into English, out of the Authentical Latin, According to the Best Corrected Copies of the Same*. (Rhemes: John Fogny, 1582).

⁶⁹⁴ *Rheims NT*, 294.

who denied a local descent: especially since it came from Augustine, whom the Protestants relied so heavily upon. The only other note here is the brief statement: “As his soul suffered no pains in Hell, so neither did his body take any corruption in the grave.”⁶⁹⁵ We might suspect that further notation was avoided in order to highlight the statement by Augustine.

However, in the annotations at the end of the chapter, a fuller critique is offered. Commenting on the same text it says:

Where all the Faithful, according to the Creed, ever have believed, that Christ—according to his soul, went down to Hell, to deliver the Patriarchs and all just men there holden in bondage till his death, and the Apostle here citing the Prophet’s words, most evidently expresseth the same, distinguishing his soul in Hell, from his body in the grave.⁶⁹⁶

Then comes the critique:

Yet the Calvinists to defend against God’s express words, the blasphemy of their Master, that Christ suffered the pains of Hell, and that no where but upon the Cross, and that otherwise he descended not into Hell, most falsely and flatly here corrupt the text, by turning and wresting both the Hebrew and Greek words from their most proper and usual significations of, *Soul*, and *Hell*, into *body*, and *grave*: saying for, *my soul in Hell*, thus, *my body, life, person, yea* (as Beza in his New testament an. 1556) *my carcass* in the *grave*, and this later they corrupt almost through out the Bible for that purpose.⁶⁹⁷

Further notes against Beza are added including the fact that he later recanted his use of “carcass” in the text and changed it to “soul,” but they quote him in saying that he retained and kept the same sense still.⁶⁹⁸ They also note that he kept the word “grave” for Sheol/Hades for the purpose of denying the *Limbus Patrum*, Purgatory, and Christ’s descending into Hell. Then they add Beza’s own words where he called these foul errors and marveled “that most of the ancient fathers were in that error: namely of Christ’s descending into Hell, and delivering the old fathers.”⁶⁹⁹ Here we see again that Beza’s translations, and arguments as to why he chose those words, exposed the Protestants to such critiques. The Roman polemicists also show that Beza knowingly departed from the majority view of the fathers on this topic by including his admission

⁶⁹⁵ *Rheims NT*, 294. This would be an interesting text for those in the Roman church who follow von Balthasar in saying that Christ suffered the pains of hell.

⁶⁹⁶ *Rheims NT*, 296.

⁶⁹⁷ *Rheims NT*, 296.

⁶⁹⁸ *Rheims NT*, 296.

⁶⁹⁹ *Rheims NT*, 296.

that “most of the fathers” taught that Christ descended into hell to deliver the Old Testament saints.

At Ephesians 4:9, the Rheims NT merely offers the brief marginal note, “He meaneth specially of his descending to Hell.”⁷⁰⁰ Nothing on the subject is added at the end of chapter annotations. But at 1 Peter 3, the topic is unsurprisingly broached again. This place was a bit trickier for the Rheims’ editors since Augustine had doubted that the descent was taught here. There are no pertinent marginal notes at the text, but there is an extensive note in the annotations section after the third chapter. The editors make note of Augustine’s *Epistle 99*, where he confessed that this text was hard to understand and that it had “many difficulties which he could never explicate to his own satisfaction.” Then they add, “Yet unto the Heretics this and all other texts be easy, not doubting but that is the sense which themselves imagine, whatsoever other men deem thereof.”⁷⁰¹

They go on to point out that Augustine declared in the same work that the descent of Christ into Hell was found in “divers other express words of holy writ,” and namely, in the same Apostle’s sermon in Acts 2. They then quote again his famous statement that only an infidel would deny Christ’s descent. Afterwards, they add, “Calvin then (you see) with all his followers are infidels, who instead of this descending of Christ in soul after death, have invented another desperate kind of Christ’s being in Hell, when he was alive upon the Cross.” In spite of Augustine’s hesitancy regarding that text, they point out that Athanasius, Cyril, Oecumenius and others saw 1 Peter 3 as referring to Christ’s descent.⁷⁰² They add another paragraph about the difficulties of the text and add a qualifier: “that he delivered none deputed to damnation in the lowest hell, and yet not doubting but that he released divers out of places of pain there, which can not be out of any other place than Purgatory.”⁷⁰³ (The idea that none of the wicked were released had been a central tenet with Augustine).

In 1589, William Fulke responded to the Rheims NT by publishing a work in which he set the Rheims NT side by side with the Bishops’ Bible NT and offered contrasting arguments.⁷⁰⁴ A second edition of this work was published in 1601 and

⁷⁰⁰ *Rheims NT*, 518.

⁷⁰¹ *Rheims NT*, 661.

⁷⁰² *Rheims NT*, 661.

⁷⁰³ *Rheims NT*, 661.

⁷⁰⁴ William Fulke, *The Text of the New Testament of Jesus Christ. With a Confutation by William Fulke*. (London: Christopher Barker, 1589).

reprinted in 1617 and 1633. However, Fulke, in his attempt to marginalize the impact of the Rheims NT and its harsh critiques of the Protestants, unwittingly put it into the hands of a much wider audience than it would have otherwise received by publishing it as a part of his work.⁷⁰⁵

John Northbrooke vs. The English Church Formularies

In 1571, the same year in which the Thirty-Nine Articles were approved by Parliament, John Northbrooke wrote a work, dedicated to his bishop, Gilbert of Bath and Wells, in part to defend his view of the descent.⁷⁰⁶ The controversy was sparked when he gave a lecture at Redclif in Bristol on the statement from Psalm 31 (30) “where David commendeth his spirit into the hands of God.” He summarizes his topic where he writes:

I had occasion given me ... to prove that all the souls of the righteous, that died before Christ’s coming in the flesh, were in heaven, and not in any Purgatory, Limbo, or Hell. That Christ’s soul should not need to go down thither to fetch them out. And also declared that Christ used the like words upon the Cross, by which is declared, that his soul (departing from his body) went straight into heaven, and not into hell, the place of the damned: But that the efficacy, virtue, and power of his death and passion, did pierce through and into the very hell itself, by his divine power and Godhead: that all the damned souls, felt their full pain, and just damnation for their infidelity: And Satan himself, felt all the power, and strength of his tyranny, and darkness, was weakened, vanquished, and fallen to ruin and utter decay. &c. And that the souls of all them that died in the faith of Christ (being in heaven) felt the fulness of their redemption: how it was now fully perfected, and ended for them. &c. This being by me taught, it was noised abroad in the people’s ears (and that by no mean men) that I had denied an article of the *Creed*, and that I was an open heretic, and such a one as was not worthy of life, but cruel death.⁷⁰⁷

He admits here that he was writing this treatise, in part, to defend himself against the charge of heresy in the matter of the descent. The response of his audience would suggest that the doctrine was still quite popular. He couches his argument as guarding against any notion of Christ going into any Purgatory, Limbo or Hell (note that he conceptually links these together). There was no need for Christ to go to any of these

⁷⁰⁵ James G. Carleton, *The Part of the Rheims in the Making of the English Bible* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902), 22.

⁷⁰⁶ Northbrooke’s work is briefly mentioned by Wallace in a section on catechetical writings but the overall controversy is not explored. “Puritan and Anglican,” 262. Quantin does not deal with this matter.

⁷⁰⁷ John Northbrooke, *Spiritus Est Vicarius Christi in Terra: A Breefe and Pithie Summe of the Christian Faith, Made in Fourme of a Confession*. (London: Iohn KINGston for W. Williamson, 1571), sig. C.a-b.

places to fetch the just for they were already in heaven. At his death, Christ's soul also went to heaven (taking his cue from Christ quoting Psalm 30 from the cross). But he goes on to argue that the "efficacy, virtue, and power of his death and passion" pierced through to hell itself. The language sounds reminiscent of the view espoused by Abelard in the medieval period, as well as Bullinger and the commentary of Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism discussed above.

When he comes to the exposition of the descent later, Northbrooke explains his view in greater detail. After stating the article from the Creed, he prefaces his words with, "Whom I do steadfastly believe to have descended into hell." Then he explains that Christ descended into hell in four senses: First, he echoes Calvin when he says:

[W]hen our savior Jesus Christ ... when he did sweat blood, when his soul was heavy even unto the death, and when he was hanged most opprobriously, despitefully, and shamefully, betwixt two thieves ... bearing the curse, anger and fury of God, which is a very hell ...⁷⁰⁸

Second, "Or if ye take this word hell, for the grave and sepulcher, then did our savior Christ go down into hell, when he was laid in the grave, and descended into the lower parts of the earth, as the Apostle doth witness, and testify," seeing Ephesians 4 as a reference to Christ's burial in the grave.⁷⁰⁹ Third:

Or if ye doe understand by it, the estate and condition of the dead, then did our savior Jesus Christ go down into hell when he died. But most specially, when he did by his divine power and godly might, make all the elect (whose souls were in Abrahams bosom) to feel the efficacy, strength and virtue, of his death that he suffered for them, and the fruits of his passion, and bloodshedding.⁷¹⁰

Fourth, he descended into the hell of the damned:

[W]hen they did feel, perceive and understand, (through his divine and godly power,) that they were deprived of the merits of his death and passion, and of the grace, health and salvation, that he had brought and purchased unto his elect and chosen children: And when he did, by the virtue, efficacy, and strength of his death, and bloodshedding, break the Serpents head, according to the promise, that was made unto our first parents, *Adam* and *Eve*, that is to say, when he did so overthrow Satan the devil, and all the power of hell, that he and his, can no more prevail against the chosen and elect of God, nor yet against his true church, & faithful congregation.⁷¹¹

⁷⁰⁸ Northbrooke, *A Breefe and Pithie Summe*, fol. 6.a.

⁷⁰⁹ Northbrooke, *A Breefe and Pithie Summe*, fol. 6.a.

⁷¹⁰ Northbrooke, *A Breefe and Pithie Summe*, fol. 6.a.

⁷¹¹ Northbrooke, *A Breefe and Pithie Summe*, fol. 6.a.

Northbrooke's views here are quite interesting as he tries to synthesize Calvin's view (Christ's suffering on the cross), Bucer and Beza's view (his burial), and Bullinger's view (the virtue/power and efficacy of his saving work reached to the depths of hell as well as Abraham's bosom, the location of which he does not specify).⁷¹² What he avoids in all of this is the concept of a local descent of Christ's soul and any thought of the just souls being transferred from Sheol to heaven. In all of this, Northbrooke comes closest to Ursinus, but his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism discussed above was not published until 1587, which might mean that both men were drawing inspiration from another source.

In the same year that Northbrooke's work, *A Brief and Pithy Sum*, was published, Parliament approved the final version of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion and twelve Canons were set forth to accompany them. Canon 6: *Concerning Preachers*, reads:

Preachers shall behave themselves modestly and soberly in every department of their life. But especially shall they see to it that they teach nothing in the way of a sermon, which they would have religiously held and believed by the people, save what is agreeable to the teaching of the Old and New Testament, and what the Catholic fathers and ancient bishops have collected from this selfsame doctrine. And since those Articles of the Christian religion to which assent was given by the bishops in lawful and holy synod convened and celebrated by command and authority of our most serene princess, Elizabeth, were without doubt collected from the books of the Old and New Testament, and in all respects agree with the heavenly doctrine which is contained in them; since, too, the book of public prayers, and book of the consecration (*inauguratio*) of archbishops, bishops, priests, and deacons, contain nothing contrary to this same doctrine, whoever shall be sent to teach the people shall confirm the authority and faith of those Articles not only in their sermons but also by subscription. Whoever does otherwise, and perplexes the people with contrary doctrine, shall be excommunicated.⁷¹³

Here is another instance of the English church's stated principle that whatever is taught should be consistent with the Scriptures, as they were understood by the "Catholic fathers and ancient bishops."

The release of the completed version of the Articles was intended to remove major points of controversy, as the full title suggests:

⁷¹² He makes this cryptic statement later after denying again that Christ went down to deliver the patriarchs and other holy fathers: "But as for *Limbo*, I know none but *Abrahams* bosom, which to say truly, is that most blessed life, (which they that die, in the faith that *Abraham* did) shall enjoy after this world." Northbrooke, *A Breefe and Pithie Summe*, fol. 9.b.

⁷¹³ Henry Gee and William John Hardy, eds., *Documents Illustrative of English Church History* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1914), 476-77.

Articles whereupon it was agreed by the Archbishops and Bishops of both provinces and the whole clergy, in the Convocation holden at London in the year of our Lord God. 1562. according to the computation of the Church of England, for the avoiding of the diversities of opinions, and for the establishing of consent touching true Religion.⁷¹⁴

But we would suspect that this accompanying Canon was surely in some way related to the recent sermons preached by Hughes and Fulke against the traditional understanding of the descent. Preachers were instructed to preach only what was agreeable to the Old and New Testaments in conjunction with what the ancient fathers and bishops had derived from the same. Furthermore, since the Articles and the BCP were agreeable to these principles, all bishops, priests and deacons are told not to contradict them under pain of excommunication.

However, in the very next year, 1572, the non-conformists issued the Second Admonition to Parliament which was critical of both the BCP and the Articles. They said that the Prayer Book was “culled out of the vile popish service book ...”⁷¹⁵ Their critique of the Articles of Religion touches upon our topic:

Other things there are maintained by some of them which are not agreeable with the Scripture: namely the false interpretation of the clause in our Creed (he descended into hell) which is expressly set down contrary to the scriptures in the Creed made in meter in these words: His spirit did after this descend into the lower parts, to them that long in darkness were, the true light of their hearts. If they can warrant this out of the scriptures, then Limbus patrum, & within a while purgatory will be found out there.⁷¹⁶

It is interesting that the non-conformists appear to conflate the meaning of Article III with the metrical version of the Psalter (Sternhold-Hopkins), which was in use among most parish churches and by 1588, and was occasionally bound with the BCP.⁷¹⁷ Their fear is that if the Article and the metrical version of the Creed are maintained, it would not be long before the limbus patrum and purgatory would be believed again. This is another way of expressing the fear that Fulke admitted to in the previous discussion. Here again we see that the non-conformists were opposed to the traditional view of the descent because they perceived a conceptual relation with the idea of purgatory.

⁷¹⁴ Hardwick, *A History of the Articles*, 289.

⁷¹⁵ W. H. Frere and C. E. Douglas, eds., *Puritan Manifestoes: A Study of the Puritan Revolt with a Reprint of the Admonition to Parliament and Kindred Documents, 1572.*, vol. 62, The Church Historical Society (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1907), 93.

⁷¹⁶ Frere and Douglas, *Puritan Manifestoes*, 118.

⁷¹⁷ Hannibal Hamlin, “‘Very Mete to Be Used of All Sortes of People’: The Remarkable Popularity of The ‘Sternhold and Hopkins’ Psalter,” *The Yale University Library Gazette* 75 (October 2000): 41.

Archbishop Whitgift, in the same year of his installation (1583), issued articles for preachers which were similar to those just discussed. None were to be admitted to “preach, read, catechize, administer the sacraments, or to execute any other ecclesiastical function ... unless he consent and subscribe to these Articles following ...”⁷¹⁸ The articles asserted that the BCP “containeth nothing in it contrary to the word of God ...” and that the Articles of Religion are “agreeable to the word of God.”⁷¹⁹ Whitgift’s Articles also required that “one kind of translation of the Bible be only used in public serve ... the same which is now authorized by the consent of the bishops” (a reference to the Bishops’ Bible of 1568).⁷²⁰ This last note was surely aimed at getting rid of the Geneva Bible, at least in any public context. Again, the English church is asserting that the doctrine in the Articles of Religion and the BCP is consistent with Scripture.

Whitgift would be forced to deal with this controversy on several other occasions. In 1586, Sir Christopher Hatton gave a speech to Parliament, which Strype thinks was written by Whitgift, in which he accused some of the non-conformists of “in effect [abrogating] the article of the *Descent of Christ into Hell*.”⁷²¹ In 1589, the Marprelate Tracts accused Whitgift of holding three Popish errors, one of which was the descent.⁷²² Strype writes:

When the libel laid to his charge, as a Popish doctrine, that he held the descent of Christ into hell; [Whitgift] confessed that he firmly believed, that Christ in soul descended into hell. And further added, that all the Martinists [the authors of the Martin Marprelate Tracts] in Christendom were not able to prove the contrary, and they that endeavored it, did but abuse the Scripture, and fall into many absurdities.⁷²³

Whitgift was unwilling to concede that the descent was a “Popish doctrine” because he perceived that it was clearly taught in Scripture.

⁷¹⁸ Gee and Hardy, *Documents*, 482.

⁷¹⁹ Gee and Hardy, *Documents*, 482.

⁷²⁰ Gee and Hardy, *Documents*, 483.

⁷²¹ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 1.491.

⁷²² William Pierce, ed., *The Marprelate Tracts 1588, 1598: Edited with Notes Historical and Explanatory* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1911), 191–92. See also pp. 56, 186, 271, and 280 on this topic as well as Beatrice Groves, *Texts and Traditions: Religion in Shakespeare 1592-1604* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 137.

⁷²³ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 1.583.

Hugh Broughton vs. John Whitgift

In 1593, Henry Barrow, a gentleman, and John Greenwood, a minister, were condemned for “writing seditious books and pamphlets, tending to the slander of the Queen and government.”⁷²⁴ Barrow, who refused the communion of the established church, was accused of being an apostate (likened to Julian).⁷²⁵ Hugh Broughton, a man who was purportedly an expert in Hebrew and denied the traditional view of the descent, implausibly claimed that it was Barrow’s denial of Christ’s descent into hell that was the ultimate cause of his execution.⁷²⁶

In fact, Broughton had his own debate with Whitgift over this topic. He was known to be arrogant, and that streak comes through in his writings and controversies. Whitgift had heard that Broughton held to a contrary view on the descent, so he requested that he come in to discuss the matter. At first, fearing the worst, Broughton considered fleeing the country. But he was told that Whitgift merely wanted to hear his views.⁷²⁷ Not believing this, he fled the realm anyway and wrote some disparaging remarks about Whitgift, calling him a “Latinist,” and marveled that Whitgift thought he could lecture him on the meaning of Greek and Hebrew.⁷²⁸

Strype suggests that Whitgift had believed that the word hell in the Creed referred to the place of the damned. But supposedly, Broughton convinced him that it referred to the unseen world, the “world to come, the world of souls.”⁷²⁹ However, Broughton denied that Christ descended to this place, and rather taught that Christ ascended to paradise, which he took to mean heaven. He also blamed Whitgift for his exile and lack of preferment (which Whitgift denied).⁷³⁰ It is difficult to believe that Whitgift would have agreed with Broughton in all of these points since they seem to be contrary to the Articles that he so strongly supported. In his travels, Broughton ended up in Geneva, which was not too happy to have him since he had criticized Calvin and Beza on the same topic.⁷³¹

⁷²⁴ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 2.186.

⁷²⁵ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 2.187.

⁷²⁶ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 2.188.

⁷²⁷ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 2.220.

⁷²⁸ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 2.221.

⁷²⁹ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 2.321.

⁷³⁰ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 2.321-2.

⁷³¹ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 2.322-3. For further discussion of Broughton’s role in the descent debate, see Wallace, “Puritan and Anglican,” 280-4; and Quantin, *Church of England*, 120-1.

William Perkins vs. John Higin

Whitgift also fielded a complaint in 1595 from William Barret, best known for his part in the predestinarian controversy, about a recent publication from William Perkins.⁷³²

Barret claimed that Perkins, in his English book on the Apostles' Creed:

[D]enieth a certain article of faith, namely, *the descent into hell*. Which article nevertheless is publicly and most firmly believed and confessed by the Church, and the faithful in the Church.⁷³³

Barret's point, which he expressed shortly after this, was that Perkins' work was being published and sold in London, in spite of his denial of the descent. While in his controversy, he "had laid down nothing against the doctrine of the Church," and yet, he was being condemned by some.⁷³⁴

In Perkins' work, he discusses the descent of Christ, along with his execution and burial, as the "three degrees of Christ's humiliation."⁷³⁵ In discussing Christ's crucifixion, he quotes Psalm 22 (Calvin's favorite text on the descent). Perkins does not mention the descent but he does not exactly contradict Calvin either when he says that these words did not express impatience or despair, "but it was an apprehension and a feeling of the whole wrath of God, which seized upon him both in body and soul."⁷³⁶

Later, he comes close to Calvin when he writes:

For in the very midst of his sufferings the Father was well pleased with him. And this which I say doeth not any whit lessen the sufficiency of the merit of Christ: for whereas he suffered truly the very wrath of God, and the very torments of the damned in his soul ...⁷³⁷

Perkins goes on to talk about certain signs that accompanied the death of Christ. He actually quotes Matthew 27:52-3, which we saw earlier as a text associated with the descent:

The sixth sign of the power of Christ is, that *graves did open, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose*, and came out of their graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many. The use of this sign is this: it signifies unto us, that Christ by his death upon the cross did vanquish death in the grave, and opened it, and thereby testified that he was the resurrection, and the life: so that it shall not have

⁷³² Wallace and Quantin only briefly touch upon Perkins' place in this debate. "Puritan and Anglican," 268; *Church of England*, 119-20.

⁷³³ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 2.236.

⁷³⁴ Strype, *The Life of Whitgift*, 2.237.

⁷³⁵ William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole or Creed of the Apostles* (Cambridge: Iohn Legatt, 1595), 302.

⁷³⁶ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 243.

⁷³⁷ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 254.

everlasting dominion over us: but that he will raise us up from death to life, and to everlasting glory.⁷³⁸

He relates the sign to Christ's power over death and a testimony to the resurrection, but he passes over any discussion of exactly who these saints were and where they came from.

Later in his discussion, Perkins makes the well-worn argument that the words were absent from the earliest versions of the Apostles' Creed as well as the Nicene Creed. Then he adds: "Nevertheless considering that this clause hath long continued in the creed, and that by common consent of the Catholic Church of God, & it may carry a fit sense & exposition, it is not as some would have it, to be put forth."⁷³⁹ He notes that the words have been understood in four ways: 1) that Christ's soul after his passion upon the cross, did really & locally descend into the place of the damned; 2) that this refers to his burial; 3) that on the cross, he felt and suffered the pangs of hell; 4) it refers to the fact that when he was dead and buried, "he was held captive in the grave, and lay in bondage under death for the space of three days."⁷⁴⁰

In the course of this discussion, Perkins sets forth arguments against the views that he disagrees with and arguments for the one that he asserts. It should be noted that he frames the first view as that of Christ descending into hell, "the place of the damned" (rather than simply the general realm of the dead, Sheol). His arguments against this view in summary are: if the Evangelists set forth clearly his death, burial and resurrection why not also his descent? If he did descend to the place of the damned, it would have to be either in soul or body or Godhead. His Godhead could not descend because it was already everywhere, and his body was in the grave. Furthermore, his soul did not go there since he told the thief that he would be with him that day in paradise. Third, he returns to his original argument that since the ancient councils in their confessions and creeds omitted the clause, they did not acknowledge any real descent. (As an aside, he claims that Athanasius, in his creed, includes the words "he descended into hell," but he omits the burial, "putting them both for one as he expounds himself elsewhere").⁷⁴¹ The other arguments we have encountered but this final one is an interesting twist. Of course, he is arguing from the fact that Athanasius actually

⁷³⁸ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 283.

⁷³⁹ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 297.

⁷⁴⁰ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 297-98.

⁷⁴¹ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 298.

wrote the Creed that bears his name and therefore, whatever he expounded elsewhere would not have much bearing.⁷⁴² Regarding that Creed, it was suggested above that the burial of Christ's body is assumed as the counterpart to the descent of his soul (that is, to state the descent is to imply his burial and to assert his burial is to imply his soul's descent).

Regarding the second exposition, that the descent refers to Christ's burial, he says it is agreeable to the truth but is not "meet or convenient." Like Calvin and others, he argues that adding a phrase to explain a preceding topic would tend to clarify the former. But in this case, "he descended into hell" is actually less clear than he was "buried." Therefore, "this exposition is also not to be received."⁷⁴³ He then touches on Calvin's view that the descent refers to Christ's suffering on the cross. Again, he agrees that the premise is true enough: that Christ did suffer the pains of hell on the cross. He even adds some interesting texts for further support.⁷⁴⁴ He concludes that "this exposition is good and true, and whosoever will may receive it." But then he goes on to say that it does not fit with the order of the other articles, so it is not his preferred view.⁷⁴⁵

The fourth view is the one he prefers. He writes: "*He descended into hell*, that is, when he was dead and buried, he was held captive in the grave, and lay in bondage under death for the space of three days." His biblical support is found in Peter's Pentecost sermon, the same passage that quotes Psalm 16:10: "God hath raised him up, (speaking of Christ) and loosed the sorrows of death, because it was impossible that he should be holden of it." (Acts 2:24) He muddies the water a bit when he adds: "Where we may see, that between the death and resurrection of Christ, there is placed a third matter, which is not mentioned in any clause of the Apostles' Creed save in this, and that is his bondage under death, which commeth in between his death and rising again."⁷⁴⁶ This would seem to suggest that the wording does not exactly correspond to what is said in the Creed. But then he recovers by appealing to another text, where the patriarch Jacob refuses to allow his son Benjamin to go with his brothers into Egypt because if mischief were to befall him, "then shall ye bring down my gray hairs with

⁷⁴² We saw in chapter 1 that Athanasius did teach the descent of Christ as distinct from his burial.

⁷⁴³ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 301.

⁷⁴⁴ 1 Sam 2:6; Ps 18:5.

⁷⁴⁵ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 301-2.

⁷⁴⁶ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 302.

sorrow to the grave.” (Gen 42:38) This text had been used often in these debates as the rationale for translating “Sheol” as “grave.” Those who took this line suggested that since he mentioned his “gray hairs,” the reference could not have been to some underworld of souls, but rather, a grave for his body. Perkins, however, appears to be referring to this passage because of its allusion to going down to the grave in sorrow (which he saw as matching with Peter’s statement). The fact that the word Sheol was being used for the grave is gravy, so to speak.

Perkins gives two other positive reasons for adopting this view. First, he says, “And this exposition doth also best agree with the order of the Creed; first he was crucified and died, secondly he was buried, thirdly laid in the grave, and was therein held in captivity and bondage under death.”⁷⁴⁷ The order of the descent article, as we have seen, was the Achilles Heel of Calvin’s view; Perkins believes that his view remedies this. Second, he says that these three degrees of Christ’s humiliation (crucified, died, buried), correspond well with the three degrees of his exaltation (resurrection, ascension, exaltation).⁷⁴⁸ He concludes this section by writing: “These last two expositions (Calvin’s and his), are commonly received, and we may indifferently make choice of either: but the last (as I take it) is most agreeable to the order and words of the Creed.”⁷⁴⁹

Perkins’ view would appear to be an expansion of the descent as burial view. The advantage of it is that it offers an explanation for the addition of the descent clause: that is, the first clause notes his burial and then the descent clause refers to his subjection to the power of death for three days. The weakness of the view is that it requires the words Sheol/Hades in the context of Psalm 16:10 to mean grave, which seems untenable in the Hebrew mindset. It would also seem to require the belief that the soul of Christ was in the grave with his body for the span of three days. Otherwise, what would we make of Peter’s statement about Christ being released from the “sorrows of death,” since sorrows are typically related to the soul rather than the body. Or his quotation of Psalm 16 in the same context in reference to Christ, “For you will not leave my *soul* in Hades.”⁷⁵⁰ Perkins’ view would require that Christ’s soul was in the grave since he viewed Hades as the grave.

⁷⁴⁷ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 302.

⁷⁴⁸ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 302.

⁷⁴⁹ Perkins, *Exposition of the Symbole*, 302.

⁷⁵⁰ Acts 2:27a

It would appear that later, in England at least, Perkins' view was adopted alongside of Calvin's view by the Westminster divines. The Westminster Confession of Faith appears to appeal to Calvin when it says that Christ "endured most grievous torments immediately in his soul," and to Perkins when it says shortly after this that he "was buried, and remained under the power of death, yet saw no corruption."⁷⁵¹ It is worth noting that in the accompanying Larger Catechism, the appeal to Calvin is less clear: Christ humbled himself in death "having also conflicted with the terrors of death, and the powers of darkness, felt and borne the weight of God's wrath, he laid down his life an offering for sin ..." ⁷⁵² But the appeal to Perkins is clear in the following question about his humiliation after death: "Christ's humiliation after his death consisted in his being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day; which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, *He descended into hell.*"⁷⁵³ We conclude that Perkins' view offers a better explanation for the descensus clause in the Creed for those that want to deny a local descent. The added benefit is that it allows Calvin's statements on Christ suffering hellish torments on the cross to stand as well. In other words, those who adopted Perkins' view did not have to abandon Calvin in the process.

Perkins was answered by John Higin in a brief work in 1602.⁷⁵⁴ Higin concludes his preface by saying, "And so wishing thee to believe all the Articles of the Creed, and withall wishing thy health in Christ Jesus, I end."⁷⁵⁵ The statement implies that like Barret, Higin thinks that Perkins had denied the doctrine of the descent as it stands in the Creed. The structure of his work is to quote what Perkins had written and then to offer his response, point by point. What follows are a few of the more interesting responses. Perkins had quoted an "ancient father" in saying that the words "he descended into hell" were not found in the Roman church, nor used in the churches of the East, and if they be, they signify his burial. Higin recognizes that he is quoting Rufinus and adds that he failed to note that the same author went on to expound the clause in that work, appealing to several Psalms and the 1 Peter 3 passage.⁷⁵⁶ His

⁷⁵¹ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 4.244.

⁷⁵² Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 4.308.

⁷⁵³ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 4.308.

⁷⁵⁴ Higin's answer to Perkins was not covered by Wallace or Quantin.

⁷⁵⁵ John Higin, *An Answer to Master William Perkins, Concerning Christs Descension into Hell*, (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1602), sig. A2b.

⁷⁵⁶ Higin, *An Answer to Master Perkins*, 3-4.

implied point is that if this ancient father (Rufinus) thought that the descensus clause referred to Christ's burial, then why did he go on to offer an exposition? (a question which we explored in the first chapter).

In responding to Perkins' charge that the Evangelists left this topic out of their work, Higin offers an interesting group of passages (all of which had been explored in the patristic era). He includes Christ's words about the sign of Jonah (Matt 12:40), as well as Luke's report in Acts expounding the prophecy of David (Ps 16:10): referencing both Peter (Acts 2:27) and Paul's statements about the descent (Acts 13:35), and adding that Paul and Peter expound the same truth in their epistles (likely implying Eph 4:9 and 1 Pet 3). He also says that the three young men in the hot oven (Dan 3), Daniel in the den of lions (Dan 6), and Jonah in the belly of the whale were all "signs and figures of Christ's descension," coming forth without hurt; "so Christ from that furnace, from that den of the lion, from that belly of hell, victoriously, as he descended, came forth with valor, with freedom, with triumph."⁷⁵⁷

Higin also responded to Perkins' use of the sorrows of death to speak of Christ being under the power of death for three days. He says that the sorrows of death were experienced by Christ in the garden before his death and ended at his death. Then he states:

But when that death was past, the sorrow the anguish, & sadness were ended; and the joy, the comfort and solace which his soul immediately after received, may very fitly be named, a reviving or quickening" (alluding to 1 Pet 3).⁷⁵⁸

He then added the following note about this same passage: "There is an end why Christ went & preached in hell, and why Peter wrote that he preached there. We must believe the word, though we know not the end."⁷⁵⁹ This shows that in spite of the removal of 1 Peter 3 from Article III, some continued to see it as a reference to the descent, albeit, in Higin's case, with a certain agnosticism as to what it actually meant.

Later, in response to Perkins' description of Calvin's view, he disagrees saying:

We must hold that Jesus Christ the Son of God, dying upon the cross, could neither feel nor suffer the pangs of hell, nor the full wrath of God seizing upon his soul; because it was neither separated from the godhead; nor

⁷⁵⁷ Higin, *An Answer to Master Perkins*, 9-10.

⁷⁵⁸ Higin, *An Answer to Master Perkins*, 33-4.

⁷⁵⁹ Higin, *An Answer to Master Perkins*, 34.

subject unto sin; and also because that laying down his life, he used these words of delivery: *Father into thy hands I commend my spirit.*⁷⁶⁰

He is unwilling to concede that Calvin's interpretation is correct in what it asserts. This argument will be made more forcefully by Bilson below.

Regarding Perkins' own preferred interpretation, Higin responds that Christ was buried and descended into hell; but his body was free from pain, bondage and corruption; and his soul was free from torments, bondage and detention. He then quotes the text that Perkins had used (Acts 2:24) and adds that Christ was *free among the dead* (quoting Ps 88:5, which had been associated with the descent by the fathers). Then drawing a conclusion from the statement that it was impossible that Christ should be holden of death, he writes: "Why was it impossible? Because he is free, & because the gates of hell cannot prevail against his church, much-less against himself which is the head thereof" (alluding to Matt 16:18).⁷⁶¹ Higin concludes his work by also pointing out that Perkins' statement that "secondly he was buried, and thirdly laid in the grave" actually implied two burials.⁷⁶² Higin is representative of those in the Elizabethan church who were committed to the traditional interpretation of the descent as understood in the patristic era. The ultimate impact of his work is unknown. But as we have already seen, Perkins' view began to be preferred among those who wanted to deny a local descent of Christ's soul.

Adam Hill vs. Alexander Hume

Another version of this debate also occurred during the tenure of Whitgift when an Oxford divine, Adam Hill (Hyll), preached a sermon in favor of the traditional view of Christ's descent at Chippenham in Wiltshire. Milward says that in 1592, Hill was "taken up in a private letter by a Scottish schoolmaster, Alexander Hume."⁷⁶³ In this debate, the conformist (Hill) was taken to task by the non-conformist (Hume). Hill responded by publishing his *Defence of the Article* that same year. A year after that, Hume published his *Rejoinder*.⁷⁶⁴ In his dedication to Archbishop Whitgift, Hill gives the reasons why he felt the need to write this treatise: first, to defend himself against the

⁷⁶⁰ Higin, *An Answer to Master Perkins*, 44.

⁷⁶¹ Higin, *An Answer to Master Perkins*, 49-50.

⁷⁶² Higin, *An Answer to Master Perkins*, 51.

⁷⁶³ Of all the debates that he covers, Wallace devoted the greatest amount of space to this one. I have sought to bring out some additional aspects of the exchange. "Puritan and Anglican," 269-73.

⁷⁶⁴ Milward, *Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan Age*, 165.

charge of error; and second, because there was likely to be “as great strife about the true understanding of this Article in England [the descent], as there was in Germany about the true meaning of (This is my body).”⁷⁶⁵ He appeals to Whitgift to deal with this matter in the whole realm when he writes: “If therefore this controversy be not shortly by the providence of almighty God, and your grace his ministry, decided: there will grow among vs envy, strife, sedition, and all manner of evil works.” These statements indicate that even in the early 1590s, Hill could not see an end in sight of this controversy.

The structure of this work is as follows: the first part is Hill’s sermon on the descent; the second part is a dialogue between Hill and Hume, with the latter disputing numerous points from the sermon followed by Hill’s response. Hill sets forth his premise at the beginning: “That Christ descended into hell, it is an article of our faith, and is to be believed as the rest of the articles are: for it is proved by many and manifest Scriptures, as it shall hereafter appear.”⁷⁶⁶ Commenting on Psalm 16:10, he notes that there are some “that deny this place to prove the descending of Christ into hell, say that the word *Nephesh* or soul, doth signify the [whole] person of Christ, and *Sheol* the grave.” He includes Carlile as a proponent of this view and adds, “There were in times past many Heretics, that did deny that Christ had a soul, of whom Appollinaris was one.”⁷⁶⁷ This charge seems a bit misguided since many of those who argued that Christ’s descent was his burial also said that the soul of Christ had gone to paradise (which they interpreted as heaven) at his death. This appears to have been Carlile’s view.

To the point of Psalm 16:10, Hill appeals to several Lutheran scholars, particularly Johannes Aepinus, who said that some contemporary Jewish rabbis had argued that *Sheol* meant grave.⁷⁶⁸ He then quotes Calvin, who alluded to this very issue in his work on the same passage: “I confess (saith *Calvin*) that the old Interpreters both Greek and Latin have drawn those words to another meaning: that the soul of Christ was brought from hell, but it is better to tarry in the natural simplicity of the words, that we be not mocked of the Jews.” Hill adds: “For as much then as *Calvin* can not deny that

⁷⁶⁵ Adam Hyll, *The Defence of the Article: Christ Descended into Hell. With Arguments Obiected against the Truth of the Same Doctrine: Of One Alexander Humes*. (London: William Ponsonbie, 1592), sig. A.3.

⁷⁶⁶ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 1.a.

⁷⁶⁷ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 1.b.

⁷⁶⁸ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 3.a. The appeal to Lutheran scholars on this topic is one of the more interesting developments of the 1590s. In this context, he also mentions Pomeranus, Westmerus, Rhegius, and Lossius. There is some anti-Jewish rhetoric in this discussion that is regrettable.

all the old Interpreters both Greek and Latin have consented in this point of doctrine, I marvel that M. *Calvin* would draw it to a Jewish interpretation."⁷⁶⁹ This interesting tidbit about concern over being mocked by contemporary Jewish scholars may help to explain why Beza would hold so strongly to his interpretation of the word Sheol as grave.⁷⁷⁰

Hill offers a concise and insightful comment on the Psalm 16:10/Acts 2:27 passage:

Here it is opened that death is a separation of the body and the soul, and that the resurrection is a knitting of both parts together: and because Christ was a true man, and had in him both a very body and a true soul. S. *Peter* sheweth that these two parts were not only divided, but also where they were during the time of their separation, and that miraculously neither the flesh did corrupt in the grave, as all other men's do; nor the soul was left in hell, as the sinners souls were. For albeit he was accounted amongst sinners, yet he was none. Therefore wonderfully he came from the grave & from hell: for as every article of our faith is an unsearchable mystery, so is this.⁷⁷¹

Hill also appeals to Philippians 2:5-11, a passage which was employed numerous times for the descent in the patristic era, but rarely mentioned in these later debates.

He even quotes a comment on this text by John of Damascus (8th c.):

Father Damascene interpreteth this place of Scripture, 'the soul of Christ deified, descended into hell; so that as to them which are in earth, there arose the Son of righteousness: so likewise to them which were under earth in darkness and in the shadow of death a light did appear: and as in earth he preached peace, remission to the captives, sight to the blind, and was the cause of salvation to them that did believe ... so did he upbraid them that are in hell, that every knee may be bowed unto him both in heaven, earth, and in hell.'⁷⁷²

Hill also appeals to Ephesians 4:9 as a reference to the descent, saying that Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, Athanasius, and Jerome agreed.⁷⁷³ Then he discusses the important 1 Peter 3 text, giving it a lengthy exposition. One of his more insightful comments is where he appeals to the chronology of the text:

⁷⁶⁹ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 4.b. Hill mentions Calvin numerous times, presumably because Hume had adopted the view of Calvin on the descent.

⁷⁷⁰ Glaser points out that those scholars who appealed to the post-biblical scholarship on the topic of Sheol regarding this issue were somewhat selective. See Eliane Glaser, *Judaism without Jews: Philosemitism and Christian Polemic in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 45-49.

⁷⁷¹ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 6.b.

⁷⁷² Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 8.b.

⁷⁷³ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 9.b-10.a.

[T]he Scripture doth straightly join together the passion of Christ with this perfection and preaching, so that Christ went immediately after his passion to preach to the spirits. Neither doth he divide them, as though now he did suffer & preach long before: for the resurrection and ascension here spoken of succeeded this passion, so did this journey and going into Hell.⁷⁷⁴

Here he offers an alternative to the Augustinian exposition of this passage, pointing particularly to the chronology of the text as it followed the work of Christ from passion to descent to resurrection to ascension. But he supports his conclusion by appealing to those fathers who taught the same: namely Athanasius, Fulgentius, Cyril, Oecumenius, and Vigilus.⁷⁷⁵

Most of his other arguments in the written version of his sermon have been rehearsed before. However, he also seems to emphasize that the traditional argument for the local descent of Christ was not simply an argument from the Papists; rather it had been long-held by the fathers, and had also been widely held by other Protestants: “Last of all because it hath been confidently avouched, that all the reformed Churches beyond the Seas allow not this doctrine, I will therefore here reprove that allegation as most false and untrue.”⁷⁷⁶ After offering some comments on the doctrine by a few of these other Protestants (in the immediate context, Peter Martyr), he then concludes with a list of other Protestants who held the traditional view of the descent:

For *Denmark* we have *Hemingius*: for *Scotland*, *Alesius*: for *Berna*, *Aretius*: for *Mapurge*, *Hipperius*: for *Argentorat*, *Peter Martir*: for *Hambrough*, *Aepnius*: and for other parts of *Germany*, *Luther*, *Siluerer*, *Pomeranus*, *Lucas Lossius*, *Vrbanus Rhegius*, *Musculus*, and the authors of the *Centuries*, whose works be worthy both of eternal memory and credit.⁷⁷⁷

This also helps us to understand why the contemporary Lutheran testimonies noted earlier would be so important to Hill.

Furthermore, he makes the point that his view was that of the established church:

And for our Realm of England, we have the Catechism of M. *Nowell*, a man whom those that know not his face, doo love and honor for his great travails he hath bestowed in the Church of God, but especially for the setting forth of that Catechism for the unity of doctrine, which is the band of perfection.⁷⁷⁸

⁷⁷⁴ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 12.a.

⁷⁷⁵ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 13.a–14.b.

⁷⁷⁶ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 23.a.

⁷⁷⁷ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 23.b.

⁷⁷⁸ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 23.b.

He then quotes Nowell's Catechism and concludes:

And as this was the judgment of that reverend Father, so was it no doubt the judgment of the Synod of learned men assembled together in the convocation house at that time, which was Anno Domini, 1571. who by an injunction there made took this order, that no other Catechism in this Realm should be taught.⁷⁷⁹

He says that if this injunction had been kept, "we should not have so many sects in our Church as we now have, to the great dishonor of God, the joy of our endless adversaries the Papists, and the bitter grief of all the good Ministers of this Land." Finally, he adds that his arguments were also consistent with the doctrine of Edward's reign (quoting Article III of the Forty-Two Articles).⁷⁸⁰

Alexander Hume, later in his *Rejoinder*, warned Hill that if he aligned himself with the views of those that he had quoted in his work regarding the descent, that he would end up siding with the Papists again:

And here I must put you in mind, that if you will join with all, or the most of them that you call forth, to take your part in this quarrel: you must hire workmen to repair the ruinous walls of Limbus patrum, that you have shaken so sore, and shivered yourself heretofore; with the mighty shot of Gods eternal word.⁷⁸¹

The ensuing section offers Hume's critiques with Hill's responses interspersed. Again, most of the ground here has already been ploughed. However, there is an interesting exchange on the idea of Christ delivering the Old Testament saints from hell. Hume says that Jerome and Augustine held a palpable error when they say that "Christ descended to deliver the fathers which to that day had been in prison."⁷⁸² Hill responds in a notable way:

You write that *Jerome & Augustine* did hold a palpable error, that is, that Christ descended to deliver the Fathers. I hope you will not deny, but the Fathers have their deliverance by Christ from hell, therefore by the merits and works of Christ, who I am sure conquered both death and hell. Therefore where you prove that *Augustine & Jerome* do err, I will leave them as I said before, but wherein they speak the truth, I will praise God for them.⁷⁸³

⁷⁷⁹ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 24.a.

⁷⁸⁰ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 24.a.

⁷⁸¹ Alexander Hume, *A Reioynder to Doctor Hil Concerning the Descense of Christ into Hell* (Edinburgh: publisher not noted, 1594), 14.

⁷⁸² Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 35.a.

⁷⁸³ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 35.a.

Hill shows that he is not interested in defending the fathers' view that Christ descended to hell to deliver the Old Testament saints. But he goes on to say that his view is grounded in the Scriptures and was also part of the fathers' view of the descent:

If then the Fathers have added to the scriptures, that the Fathers were set out of hell, there I leave them. And if you change hell into grave, as you do in the *16. Psal, & Act. 2*. I will leave you also: for I stand not upon men's sayings, but upon the word of God. But where you boldly affirm that not one of the Fathers have deemed that which I say, you shew yourself either to be malicious in hiding the truth, or else so ignorant, that you have not read the Fathers: for divers both old and new are of my judgment.⁷⁸⁴

Hill then explains further his own judgment, primarily that Christ descended to hell in an act of victory over the devil and the forces of evil. His primary texts in this regard are Ephesians 4:9 and Colossians 2:15. He concludes this discussion by mentioning two other ends of Christ's descending into Hell from his Sermon: "the one is, the manifestation of his death, the other is, our deliverance from Hell."⁷⁸⁵ But this last statement is vague, appearing to mean that because Christ descended to hell, we will not.

We may wonder, how could Hill and others of this period deny the near-consensus of the patristic era: that one of the purposes of Christ's descent was to deliver the Old Testament saints who had died before his coming? The only plausible explanation is that which has already been alluded to: that the concept of souls being delivered from Sheol was too closely related to souls springing from purgatory. This is true of most of the authors that we have seen in this period who otherwise, held to a traditional view of the descent. It should also be noted that both Hume and Hill seem to agree that the reference to "hell" in their arguments was consistently about the place of the damned. That there might be a "good side" of Sheol/Hades/hell appears to have never crossed their minds.⁷⁸⁶

Hill offers one other intriguing detail near the end of the work: "Indeed I was brought up under Bishop *Jewel*, who catechized me in this faith, & therefore I will not easily or rashly depart from it."⁷⁸⁷ He obviously means Bishop John Jewel, author of *The Apology of the Church of England*. This would seem to imply that Hill had learned his understanding of the descent from Jewel, which would support the assertion made

⁷⁸⁴ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 35.b.

⁷⁸⁵ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 36.b.

⁷⁸⁶ See especially the discussion in Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 44.a-45.a.

⁷⁸⁷ Hyll, *The Defence*, fol. 69.a.

earlier in this chapter that Jewel's methodology would seem to require that he would adopt a patristic view of the descent. However, what Jewel believed regarding the deliverance of the fathers is unknown. Hill is an example of those in the Elizabethan church who continued to appeal to the fathers for a right understanding of Christ's descent (excluding the idea of the deliverance of the Old Testament saints). He was also interested in showing that the English Protestants who held a more traditional view of the descent were not alone (appealing to other Protestants from the continent). That is, the literal descent was not a "Papist" doctrine.

Thomas Bilson vs. Henry Jacob

The final major debate which occurred during the Elizabethan period was between Thomas Bilson, Bishop of Winchester, on the conformist side; and Henry Jacob, on the non-conformist side.⁷⁸⁸ The controversy was sparked once again in response to some sermons which Bilson had preached at Paul's Cross and elsewhere in London.⁷⁸⁹

Bilson's Paul's Cross sermon of 1597 was expanded into a full treatise and published in 1599 as *The Effect of Certain Sermons Touching the Full Redemption of Mankind ...*⁷⁹⁰ His arguments and responses to critics were incorporated into another work, published in 1604 entitled *The Survey of Christ's Sufferings*.⁷⁹¹ Quantin says that Bilson, the main champion on the conformist side, was a prominent bishop and "his views had a semi-official character." This argument is based on his claim that "he started the controversy with the full approval of Whitgift and continued it on the express order of Queen Elizabeth."⁷⁹²

Like Hill before him, Bilson made special use of Lutheran sources. Milton writes:

Certainly, no writers in the 1630s displayed any of the diligence shown in the 1590s by Bilson in his mapping out of the arguments of contemporary

⁷⁸⁸ This debate received extensive treatment by Wallace, "Puritan and Anglican," 273-7. Quantin supplemented Wallace with some additional insights. I have sought to bring out some other details of the exchange in this section.

⁷⁸⁹ Milward, *Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan Age*, 165.

⁷⁹⁰ Thomas Bilson, *The Effect of Certain Sermons Touching the Full Redemption of Mankind by the Death and Blood of Christ Jesus*. (London: Peter Short, 1599).

⁷⁹¹ Thomas Bilson, *The Survey of Christs Sufferings for Mans Redemption and of His Descent to Hades or Hel for Our Deliuerance*. (London: Melchisedech Bradwood for Iohn Bill, 1604).

⁷⁹² Quantin, *Church of England*, 114-15. Bilson makes note of the fact that he was encouraged to write on the topic by Whitgift and was ordered to continue his work by the Queen. In his dedication to King James I, he regrets not being able to complete it before her departure.

Lutheran authors for his literal and triumphalist reading of Christ's local descent into hell ...⁷⁹³

Again, by appealing to the Lutherans, he could essentially say, Here are some other Protestants who believe in the traditional view of Christ's descent without holding to the doctrine of purgatory.

In the introduction to his first published work on this topic, Bilson recalls the setting of his sermons. It was approaching the feast of Easter, and he was moved to preach on the descent at Paul's Cross because many, who were "too much addicted to novelties," were in their "Catechizings and readings" pushing the view that Christ suffered the very pains of hell in his soul on the cross [Calvin's view]. Perceiving that this view was on the rise, he felt it his public duty to "warn them that were forward in defending this fantasy, to take heed how far they waded in that late sprung speculation."⁷⁹⁴ He admits that there are passages from Scripture which may be applied to Christ, such as David's statement, "the sorrows of hell besieged me," or Jonah's, "Out of the belly of hell I cried," but these are to be metaphorically interpreted as signifying the "sorrows and fears, which pursue the saints in this life." But to make them refer literally to Christ is "an erroneous and dangerous addition to the mystery of our salvation."⁷⁹⁵

Bilson says that he labored to prove four points to his audience: 1) that no where in the Scriptures was it taught that "Christ suffered the true pains of hell," so the consciences of the faithful could not justly believe such a strange assertion; 2) that the many terrors and torments of the damned, described in the Scriptures as "extreme darkness, desperation, confusion, utter separation, rejection, and exclusion from the grace, favor, and kingdom of God," could not be ascribed to the Son of God; 3) that the death and blood of Christ Jesus "were evidently, frequently, constantly set down in the writings of the Apostles as the sufficient price of our redemption;" 4) "that Christ died

⁷⁹³ Milton, *Catholic and Reformed*, 442.

⁷⁹⁴ Bilson, *The Effect*, sig. A.2.a. The word "fantasy" was "fansie" in the original.

⁷⁹⁵ Bilson, *The Effect*, sig.A.2.a-b. He expands upon this later in the work when he writes: "If we take hell pains METAPHORI-CALLY for great and intolerable pains; in which sense the word may be used; then it is no danger to say, Christ suffered on the cross the pains of hell: because there can be no doubt, but HIS PAINS were exceeding GREAT, and more SHARP, then we can conceive or utter. But this is not the meaning of the Creed in that Article he descended into Hell; by reason there are words before inferring the pains, which he SUFFERED, when he was CRUCIFIED." Bilson, *The Effect*, 139.

for our sins, and by his death, destroyed him that had the power of death, even the devil, and reconciled us, when we were strangers and enemies.”⁷⁹⁶

Bilson implies that he originally intended to simply refute the view that Christ suffered the pains of hell on the cross and did not intend to get into the subject of Christ’s descent. However, some (who probably held Calvin’s psychological view of the descent) speculated that if Christ had not suffered the pains of hell on the cross then the clause that “he descended into hell” was added to the Creed in vain. In essence, it was this notion that drew him into the subject of Christ’s descent. He continues:

Wherein I resolved as by perusing the later part of this treatise will better appear, that Christ’s descent to the very place of hell after his death, did best concord both with the Creed, and with the truth of Christian religion, so we took care not to swerve from the Scriptures, in setting down the cause why he went thither: which was to overthrow & destroy the kingdom & might of Satan in the place of his greatest strength, even in hell, and as our head to free all his members from danger and fear of coming thither: the sorrows and terrors whereof he loosed with his presence, treading them under his feet, and rose again into a blessed and immortal life, leading captivity captive, and taking from hell and Satan all power to prevail against his elect.⁷⁹⁷

How all of this played out in one sermon or multiple sermons is something of a mystery. The fact that he was compelled to write such a lengthy treatise against any notion of Christ suffering the pains of hell in his soul on the cross would imply that Calvin’s view had taken deep roots, at least in some parts, of England. That is why the first part of this work is devoted to denying that Christ suffered the pains of hell and the second part is an exposition of his view of the descent. In the passage quoted above, he gives in summary form his view: that following his death, Christ went “to the very place of hell,” to overthrow and destroy the kingdom and might of Satan, and as our head, to free us from the danger and fear of going there. He alludes to Ephesians 4:9, about Christ “leading captivity captive,” but he does not explain what that means at this point. His exposition goes on to unfold these themes.

He sets forth his methodology when he writes:

But I have been and am the more willing to bear the reproachs of maligners, because I seek not myself herein, but that the church of Christ here in England should hold fast that ancient and sure foundation of faith which hitherto it hath kept; and profess that doctrine touching our

⁷⁹⁶ Bilson, *The Effect*, sig. A.2.b-A.3.a.

⁷⁹⁷ Bilson, *The Effect*, sig. A.4.a.

Redemption by Christ, which as well the public laws of this realm, as all the catholic fathers do uphold and allow.⁷⁹⁸

Before publishing the work, he said that he had others examine it for their approval. Apparently, word got out about the book since “one more hasty than either advised or learned, calling himself H. I.,” apparently felt the need to “traduce it and confute it before he saw it.”⁷⁹⁹ This was Henry Jacobs, who would write a critique of it after it was published.

One of the more intriguing arguments on the first matter is where Bilson uses Psalm 16:10 to argue against Calvin’s interpretation of Psalm 22:1:

And out of this complaint, that he was forsaken, if we infer the pains of hell, we conclude directly against Christ’s words in the 16. Psalm ... Thou wilt not forsake my soul in hell. Christ’s soul was not forsaken in hell; if then it were forsaken on the cross, it is evident that there it suffered not hell, for in hell it was never forsaken.⁸⁰⁰

This is a clever argument. He is saying, in essence, if David was prophetically speaking in the person of Christ in both instances, how could Psalm 22:1 mean he was forsaken in the torments of hell when Psalm 16:10 said he would not be forsaken in hell? By making this argument from this particular text, Bilson perceives that he is striking at the heart of Calvin’s view.

Regarding Christ’s purpose in submitting to death and descending to hell to vanquish Satan’s kingdom, Bilson echoes the fathers when he writes: “The strength of Samson pulling the house on his own and his enemies’ heads, doth it not declare the voluntary death of Christ, to be the destruction of death and hell, which insulted at him on the cross?”⁸⁰¹ And along these same lines he writes:

Whether therefore we resemble the body and blood of Christ to a PRAY that brake the teeth of the devourer; to a BAITE that held fast the swallower; to a PRICE that concluded the challenger; to a RANSOME that freed the prisoner; or to a CONQVEST that overthrew the insulter; in effect it is all one: Satan by killing him, that was the author of life, lost both him and all his members; the Lorde rising again by his own power, and raising them all, that could not be severed from him, by the might and merit of his death and suffering.⁸⁰²

⁷⁹⁸ Bilson, *The Effect*, sig. A.4.b.

⁷⁹⁹ Bilson, *The Effect*, sig. B.1.b.

⁸⁰⁰ Bilson, *The Effect*, 40-1.

⁸⁰¹ Bilson, *The Effect*, 56.

⁸⁰² Bilson, *The Effect*, 69.

In texts like these, Bilson proves to be using arguments developed in the patristic era, here alluding to the theme of divine deception discussed in the first chapter. His work is filled with lengthy quotes from the church fathers. In fact, as he suggested in the quote above, he wanted to make sure that the church of England would “profess that doctrine touching our Redemption by Christ ... as all the catholic fathers do uphold and allow.”⁸⁰³

In this regard, he charges those who adopt Calvin’s view with embracing novelty:

And since it is nowhere witnessed in the Scriptures, nor any way proved, that Christ suffered the pains of hell; why strive we to establish a mere conceit of men, never written or spoken of, before our age? bear we so small regard to the Church of Christ, and to all the learned fathers and teachers in the same, It should somewhat move us, that hell pains were never added to Christ’s cross for 1300 years since the Apostles’ time, that for thirteen hundred years no man ever knew or heard the right way, and true mean of our redemption and reconciliation to God, till the pains of hell were lately devised?⁸⁰⁴

He also argues that this view is contrary to the doctrine of the church of England. He appeals to the “sermon of the salvation of all mankind” from the First Book of Homilies issued under Edward (discussed in chapter 2), as well as the two Elizabethan Homilies concerning the death and passion of Christ (discussed earlier in this chapter). To this he adds:

And thus much let me speak in the Honor of her majesty, and this realm; I see no cause, why the doctrine of the church of England so plainly warranted by the Scriptures, so fully confessed by all the Fathers, so long continued in Christs church without contradiction, so sufficiently authorized, so generally acknowledged, should be controlled or corrected, either by the dangerous devices of some late writers, or by the unsettled humors of some late teachers.⁸⁰⁵

However, the issue of Christ delivering the Old Testament saints from hell appears to have been a matter which he struggled with greatly. He spent many pages discussing the topic because that concept had been so pervasive in the church fathers. He skirts around the issue somewhat when he derives two truths from a quotation of Fulgentius: The first is, “the place whither he descended was hell ... The cause of his descent, was to free all the faithful from the beginning of the world to the end thereof from coming thither.”⁸⁰⁶ He clarifies the first point on the very next page, “When I speak

⁸⁰³ Bilson, *The Effect*, sig. A.4.b.

⁸⁰⁴ Bilson, *The Effect*, 135.

⁸⁰⁵ Bilson, *The Effect*, 135-6.

⁸⁰⁶ Bilson, *The Effect*, 177.

of hell, I speak of the place of the damned.” This view will not allow him to see how any of the Old Testament saints could have been there. He is somewhat agnostic as to where exactly they were.⁸⁰⁷ He appeals later to Jesus’ story about the Rich Man and Lazarus and argues that Abraham’s bosom was a great distance from the place of suffering.⁸⁰⁸ Like Hill before him, he shows that he has no concept of a “good side” to Sheol/Hades. This is something which Augustine had also struggled with, and Bilson interacts with his writings on the same subject.

Regarding the second point, rather than delivering the souls of the fathers from hell, Bilson qualifies what he says by asserting that Christ went to hell so that none of his people would go there. Again, this is related to the view taken by Hill above. Presumably, by taking this position, this would allow him to interpret the statements of the fathers about Christ delivering their souls from hell as saying that his journey there shut the gates for them, so to speak, rather than opening them to let them out. Once again, this seems to be another instance where the conceptual connection with souls springing from purgatory appears to be too close for comfort.

He states this again where he writes:

As the place whither Christ descended, is expressly named in the scriptures to be hell ... where the wicked are everlastingly tormented; The end of Christ’s descent to hell, was the destruction of Satan, and deliverance of man. So the purpose of his descent is plainly professed in the same, to be the spoiling of Satan, and delivering of man from the power of hell. And these two are so linked together, that the one is always included in the other; Christ entering Satan’s house to this end, that he might divide the spoils.⁸⁰⁹

Here again, Bilson is appealing to a text favored by the fathers: Matthew 12:29, where Christ tells the story of the stronger man entering the strong man’s house to plunder it. He too sees this as a reference to Christ descending into Satan’s abode to spoil *him* and to deliver man from the power of hell. He has tweaked the text to serve his purpose. The passage says, following the interpretation of the fathers, that Christ bound Satan and took his spoils (which to them, meant the Old Testament saints who had been held there after their death). Bilson cannot go there so he says that Christ spoiled Satan (whatever that might mean) and delivered man from the power of hell: meaning, that he made it so that those who belong to Christ would not go there.

⁸⁰⁷ Bilson, *The Effect*, 178.

⁸⁰⁸ Bilson, *The Effect*, 193.

⁸⁰⁹ Bilson, *The Effect*, 184.

Besides the matter of Christ delivering the Old Testament saints from hell, Bilson basically follows all of the other patristic arguments. He obviously struggled over this aspect of the doctrine but simply could not adopt that view for two reasons: his view that “hell” meant the place of the damned; and that the release of souls from one place to another was too close to the teaching of the Roman church. Bilson viewed his position as more consistent with the Scriptures.⁸¹⁰ Quantin asserts that Bilson (appealing to Vincent of Lérins) made a distinction between the fathers’ “‘maine consent’ in the rule of faith, and their private opinions ‘in other questions of lesse importance wherein they sometimes differed from each other ...” This “enabled him to invoke the Fathers as to the fact of the descent and to abandon them as to its purpose, that is the deliverance of the souls of the patriarchs.”⁸¹¹

Subsequent to the actual publishing of this work, the aforementioned “H. I.” (Henry Jacob) came out into the open in public dispute. Jacob responded with his treatise in 1598. His 175 pages are less than a third the size of Bilson’s first work. He says in his introduction:

[The] sufferings of Christ our Savior which for us he endured, & how he conquered the power of Hell & Satan to free us therefrom, is a matter for all Christians ... especially now seeing of late great injury hath been done by no mean Prelate, to this point of Christian verity, in such wise as no Protestant hath ever done the like heretofore, neither hath brought more offense to the godly, or disquietness to the Churches in England.⁸¹²

Like Bilson before, Jacob says that he could not forbear and keep silence on this matter, so he labored “to clear from all the corrupt fancies & vain imaginations of men in this behalf.”⁸¹³

Jacob said that his whole work hinged on two truths: 1) The Christ suffered for us the wrath of God; 2) That Christ after his death on the Cross, went not into Hell in his Soul.⁸¹⁴ Regarding the first argument, Jacob essentially follows Calvin: “And hitherto it sufficeth to have taught from the Scriptures That Christ suffered for us both in his soul and body the wrath of God and hellish torments, to ransom us from the same.”⁸¹⁵ To his point, he quotes several church fathers in support of his view. Then he writes:

⁸¹⁰ Bilson, *The Effect*, 197-223.

⁸¹¹ Quantin, *Church of England*, 124.

⁸¹² Henry Jacob, *A Treatise of the Sufferings and Victory of Christ, in the Work of Our Redemption*. (London: Richard Schilders, 1598), 3.

⁸¹³ Jacob, *A Treatise*, 3.

⁸¹⁴ Jacob, *A Treatise*, 4.

⁸¹⁵ Jacob, *A Treatise*, 84.

But to come to the Protestant Writers, let this be chiefly noted: I do not say some of them, or the most, or the best, but all & every one both Churches and Writers in the world, who are Protestants, teach as we do. Never was there any voice heard anywhere openly to the contrary, before now in London of late, except only the whorest and cunningest Papists, Jesuits, Priests, and Friars, who indeed always to this day, have had this controversy with all Protestants, & all Protestants against them.⁸¹⁶

To say that all Protestants agreed with his view is entirely inaccurate. And his attempt to link Bilson with the Papists is disingenuous since he argued against them in numerous places. But in that context, the quickest way to sideline someone's arguments was to smear them by linking them with the Papists.

Jacob then moves to cover his second topic, the question of Christ's descent. He first discusses the Apostles' Creed, making the common argument that it was not made by the Apostles but was put together over time, in part to refute heretics. But besides this, speaking for himself and those who hold his beliefs, he says:

Here then, let all men know, we deny not this Article of our Creed, but we embrace it unfeignedly, and do hold it to have been properly added, when it was first put into the Creed, when and by whomsoever it was, so that the reason and meaning thereof be wisely and rightly regarded.⁸¹⁷

But he says that the fathers especially corrupted the meaning of the word Hades, which simply means "the state of the dead, the world of the dead, the world of the souls departed."⁸¹⁸ He actually quotes Plato, where he says that the soul goes to another place, noble and invisible. Jacob concludes that Plato's use of "Hades" here means "heaven."⁸¹⁹ After quoting other ancient authors as well as some contemporary Protestants, he concludes: "Thus comparing the Latin Inferos, & the Greek hades together, we see that the ancient and late authors do signify by them both the general state of the dead, the world of the dead, containing heaven for the blessed, as well as hell for the wicked indifferently." He goes on to say that this is the problem: that they were lumped together. "Here indeed is the occasion of all this error and of all the controversy at this day about Christ's going down into Hell."⁸²⁰

He is right that the misunderstanding of the word Hades is at the center of this debate. But he is wrong in his understanding of the solution.⁸²¹ He is unaware of the

⁸¹⁶ Jacob, *A Treatise*, 87.

⁸¹⁷ Jacob, *A Treatise*, 94-95.

⁸¹⁸ Jacob, *A Treatise*, 97.

⁸¹⁹ Jacob, *A Treatise*, 97-8.

⁸²⁰ Jacob, *A Treatise*, 102-3.

⁸²¹ See "The Terminology Associated with the Doctrine" section in Chapter 1.

understanding both in the classical world and in the Hebrew mindset, that Hades/Sheol referred to the common receptacle of the dead: with both a “compartment” for the just and another for the unjust. The only conclusion that he can draw is that when the word Hades is used in a positive sense, it refers to heaven. Of course, his opponent, Bilson, shared an equally misguided view. When he speaks of the word “hell,” as it is used in the Creed, he takes it to always mean “the place of the damned.” This appears to be an impasse that was unsolvable, in part, because of these misunderstandings about the ancient views of the unseen world. We would imagine that if someone were to step into this argument and say that there were two “compartments” in Sheol/Hades, that both of them would accuse this person of being a Papist (assuming that the second “compartment” must be a reference to purgatory).

Carrying this line of thinking over to the Creed, he says that it should be translated, “He descended among the Dead.”⁸²² Anticipating a follow-up question, he says: “Whereof if any do ask particularly, Whither is this? I answer, namely into heaven: For whither should the Saints go else?”⁸²³ He goes on to anticipate a follow-up question, “But further you will say, this word He descended to the Dead, doth show, it seemeth, that the place was downward, whither he went, and not upward to heaven.” To which Jacob replies, “That is nothing,” and then he quotes the well-worn passage where the patriarch Jacob says, “I shall go down mourning to my son among the dead” and reasons, “Yet Jacob thought not to go to Hell to his son, but among the souls of the godly dead, that is to say into Heaven ...”⁸²⁴ These are some serious hermeneutical gymnastics as he tries his best to make Hades to be heaven and going down to really mean going up. The rest of Jacob’s work is spent working out similar conundrums from various passages.

It took Bilson six years, but he managed to respond with another hefty tome on the topic. We noted above that he claims to have continued this work on the order of Elizabeth, but he was unable to complete it before her death. On his title page, he quotes Augustine, “Who but an infidel will deny Christ was in hell?” (intriguingly, the same statement chosen by the Rheims editors against Fulke and the editors of the Geneva Bible).

⁸²² Jacob, *A Treatise*, 126.

⁸²³ Jacob, *A Treatise*, 128.

⁸²⁴ Jacob, *A Treatise*, 129.

In the Introduction, he reasserts essentially the same argument on the descent which he had made in his first treatise:

And concerning that Article of our Faith, Christ descended to Hell; I taught, it might not by the course of the Creed be referred to Christ living, but to Christ dead, and safely note the conquest which Christ's manhood after death had over all the powers of darkness, declared by his resurrection, when he rose Lord over all his enemies in his own person; Death, Hell, and Satan not excepted; and had the Keyes (that is, all power) of death and hell delivered him by God, that those in heaven, earth, and hell should stoop unto him, and be subject to the strength and glory of his Kingdom.⁸²⁵

Here again, Bilson asserts that the Creed is talking about something that happened subsequent to Christ's death (contra the Calvinist view), where he manifested his conquest over the powers of darkness, Death, Hell and Satan, and had the keys of death and hell given to him (alluding to Rev 1:18), so that all in heaven, earth and hell should be subject unto him (Phil 2). So Christ's descent was about his power over death, hell and the devil.

In the course of his discussions, he calls Jacob "the Treatiser" probably not to grant him any further public exposure. Concerning the discussion of the word Hades, he disagrees with Jacob and writes:

"This loud and lewd Proclamation he maketh against all Christian Writers, Greek, Latin, and English, since the first foundation of the Church, and yet therein erreth most absurdly and shamefully. For the Greek Fathers use the word Hades, as the Apostles and Evangelists did; for the place where torments after this life are prepared for the wicked; and the prophane Grecians (one conceit of Socrates excepted) did always take it for a place of darkness under the earth, whither they thought good and bad descended; the wicked to punishment, the better sort to such delights, as carnal men dreamt of after death in their Elysian fields."⁸²⁶

Remarkably, Bilson shows here that he is familiar with the classical understanding of the idea of Hades, but he seems to dismiss it as coming from the "prophane Grecians." He erringly says that all Christian writers use the word Hades for the place of torments.

While some of his contemporaries argued that Abraham's bosom was another way to speak of heaven, Bilson showed that he was not willing to go there. He says:

Where Abraham's bosom was, neither was, nor is agreed amongst the learned: only Austen rightly inferreth out of Christ's words, That being a place of comfort, and far off above Hades (where the rich man was

⁸²⁵ Bilson, *Survey of Christ's Sufferings*, sig. ¶ 4.a.

⁸²⁶ Bilson, *Survey*, sig. A.2.a.

tormented) with a great gulf settled betwixt those two places, it could be no part, nor member of hell.⁸²⁷

Augustine [Austen] had said that he could not find anything positive said of hell so he could not see how Abraham's bosom could be there. Bilson is satisfied with this and simply asserts that it is "a place of comfort ... far off above Hades" without specifying its locale.

Bilson then picks up on the argument of Jacob that "Christ suffered for us the wrath of God." Bilson essentially says, that this was not the issue that he was taking exception to. He acknowledges such but he takes issue with Jacob conflating this idea with his assertion that Christ suffered the pains of hell on the cross.⁸²⁸ He says:

The question is not whether Christ bare the burden of all our sins on the tree, or whether he were touched and tempted in all things like to his brethren, yet still without sin, but whether it can be proved by the Scriptures that Christ must bear all and the self same burdens of our sins which we should have borne in this life, and the next, and which the damned do and shall bear.⁸²⁹

In some sense, this is an argument over literal or figural interpretation. Bilson is charging Jacob with being overly literal because as we already saw above, he was not opposed to figural language being applied to Christ in his suffering.⁸³⁰

The overwhelming majority of this work is given to discussing the death of Christ and seemingly, every possible inference. By contrast, much less is said about the actual descent. One wonders whether Bilson thought that he had covered most of his bases in the first work, or whether, after spending so much time and effort on the first topic, he ran out of steam on the second (his desire to get the work published in Elizabeth's reign could have been a factor in this). He said that he did not need to spend as much time on it because it is an Article of the Creed, derived from the Scriptures, confessed by all antiquity, and "confirmed by authority of this whole Realm, as well as in the Book of Common Prayer, as in the Articles of Religion ratified by Prince and Parliament, it is not for an English man directly to dispute against it ..." ⁸³¹

He returns again to the subject of Abraham's bosom and says:

That Christ after death went to the place, where the faithful were in expectation and desire of his coming to redeem the world; the Fathers

⁸²⁷ Bilson, *Survey*, sig. A.6.a.

⁸²⁸ Bilson, *Survey*, 3.

⁸²⁹ Bilson, *Survey*, 5.

⁸³⁰ See further his discussion of this on pp. 17-18.

⁸³¹ Bilson, *Survey*, 539.

affirm; but that he went no whither else, or that he went not to the place of the damned as well to discharge and release his members thence, that is from all fear and danger thereof, as to destroy the power of the devil over all his, and to triumph over the force and fury of Satan in his own person, that every knee of things under the earth should bow to him, as well as of things in heaven and earth, in this you utterly mistake the consent of the Fathers, which you so much talk of ...⁸³²

Again, he is unsure of where this place is. In fact, he argues that the righteous remain in this place until the day of the resurrection.⁸³³ Wherever this is, it is not in the immediate presence of God, where Christ sits at his right hand. He discusses the topic of Paradise, drawing on Paul's statement about it being the third heaven. He speculates that this may be the same place as Abraham's bosom.⁸³⁴ Once again, this would seem to be another instance of avoiding any discussion of souls being transported from one place to another to avoid the charge of believing in purgatory. On the other hand, as he notes, some of the fathers used this same sort of language.

Much of the rest of Bilson's second work rehashes old ground, responding to Jacob's criticisms, especially by supplementing more quotes from the church fathers and contemporary writers who agreed with him (he especially appeals to Peter Martyr, and the Lutheran writers who were dealing with the same matter in their own context).⁸³⁵ At times, the discussion is strained and laborious; but he leaves few stones unturned in seeking to refute Jacob and those who think as he does. He is representative of the conformists that we have discussed in this chapter, arguing for the patristic understanding of the descent in essentially every respect, with the exception being Christ's deliverance of the Old Testament saints from Sheol.

Summary

The debate over Christ's descent into hell covered the entire reign of Elizabeth I. It began at the Convocation of 1562/3 with Bishop Alley's plea to settle the matter in a clear manner. The only change from the Edwardian formularies was to remove the 1 Peter 3 text from Article III of the Thirty-Nine Articles. This was probably due to the

⁸³² Bilson, *Survey*, 543.

⁸³³ Bilson, *Survey*, 543-6. This view was held by Tertullian in the early church. Some later Anglican writers would continue to take this view. See "The State of the Faithful Departed" in Arthur James Mason, *Purgatory, The State of the Faithful Departed, The Invocation of the Saints: Three Lectures* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1901), 58-111.

⁸³⁴ Bilson, *Survey*, 541-3.

⁸³⁵ For a full discussion of this, see: Truemper, "The Descensus Ad Inferos."

widespread knowledge of Augustine's alternate interpretation of that passage. This meant that the Church of England affirmed the fact of Christ's descent but failed to articulate the purpose of his descent. Towards the end of the era, some in the established church sought to remedy this by affirming a triumphalist view (Christ descended to defeat the devil) but refused to affirm the rescue of the Old Testament saints because that view was conceptually too close to the view of the Roman church (and perceived by many at this time as being the view of the "Papists"). The affirmation of the triumphalist view of Christ's descent allowed the established church to claim that their view was consistent with that of the patristic era. But without affirming the rescue of the saints this was only partially true.

There was also increasing terminological confusion during this era. Many began to see the word "hell" as a reference to the place of the damned rather than a word encompassing the entire underworld. Another related term which was being reinterpreted was the word paradise. We saw that in the early church, the fathers also had varying views on this concept (some seeing it as a reference to the "good compartment" of Hades, some as the "third heaven," and others for the general concept of heaven). But the majority view from that era (as well as the medieval era), was to see paradise as the good part of the underworld (synonymous with "Abraham's bosom"). The shifting meaning of these terms, along with the translation of these terms in the various Bibles being produced in the sixteenth century, added to the confusion over the doctrine.

Despite the fact that the established church moved away from the rescuing of souls aspect of the descent, challenges were issued from many corners. The church did not do itself any favors on this controversy when it allowed and even promoted foreign works which espoused alternative views (namely, Bullinger's *Decades*, Calvin's *Institutes*, and the Heidelberg Catechism). The popularity of the Geneva Bible and some of the popular catechisms during this period also promoted these alternative views, which must surely have caused confusion among the laity. Threats were made during Whitgift's tenure against those who espoused differing views, but rarely were these threats carried out.

Calvin's view appears to have been the most popular among those who opted out of the traditional view of the doctrine. Even in the last years of Elizabeth's reign, Bilson was still arguing vehemently against it. But as we saw, another view was proposed by

William Perkins which would eventually gain steam among the non-conformists. The chief benefit of his view was that it allowed for what Calvin taught about Christ suffering hellish torments on the cross while putting forth the idea that Christ being under the power of death for three days as the true meaning of the descent. This view was ultimately embraced by the Westminster divines.

At the end of the Elizabethan era, we find the established church seeking to maintain some consistency with the patristic era on this doctrine. It affirmed the fact of Christ's descent, and even viewed it as his triumph over the forces of evil (aligning themselves with the Lutheran theologians who were affirming the same). But the other views of the doctrine (especially of Calvin and Perkins), were being embraced by many within the English church. In fact, this was one of the doctrines that fed the increasing separatist tendencies of some (particularly those involved in the Marprelate controversy). This is what led Wallace to view the established church's affirmation of a more literal view of the descent as "an early, hesitant step toward a distinctly Anglican theology different from the theology of Puritanism."⁸³⁶ This carried over into the seventeenth century. Quantin writes: "In the mid-1630s, at the zenith of Laudianism, there was a remarkable project of turning the doctrine of the descent into a test of conformity: 'ministers and lecturers' of the diocese of London were to be asked to subscribe *inter alia* to the proposition 'That Christ descended locally into hell.'"⁸³⁷

⁸³⁶ Wallace, "Puritan and Anglican," 286.

⁸³⁷ Quantin, *Church of England*, 130.

Conclusion

I began this work by asserting that the English reformers during the Tudor period, in response to the charge of being theological innovators by Roman polemicists, argued that their theological principles were derived from the teaching of the early church fathers. In light of this, I chose one particular theological debate of the period, the question over the meaning of the phrase “he descended into hell” in the Apostles’ Creed, in order to measure whether they were true to their claim.

This led us to explore in Chapter 1 what the fathers taught regarding the doctrine of Christ’s descent. There were differing opinions in the sixteenth century about this. Bishop William Alley of Exeter asserted at the Convocation of 1562/63 that the descent of Christ’s soul into hell was plainly affirmed by the fathers. He raised the topic because there were alternate views being proffered in his diocese. He said that all of the fathers, “with one universal consent have assertively written from time to time, by the space of 1100 years, not one of them varying from another.” In contrast, John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes*: “This much is certain: that it [Christ’s descent] reflected the common belief of all the godly; for there is no one of the fathers who does not mention in his writings Christ’s descent into hell, though their interpretations vary.”⁸³⁸

Both authors agree that all of the fathers taught the descent of Christ into hell. But they disagree as to whether they agreed with one another over their interpretation: Alley said that not one varied from another while Calvin said their interpretations did vary. Each of these men had their reasons for making these assertions: Alley was seeking to suppress dissenting views in his diocese; Calvin was looking for cover to forge his own interpretation, which was not taught by the fathers. Even though he overstates his opinion, Alley is closer to the truth here than Calvin.

In our exploration of what the fathers taught on the descent, we uncovered that they saw hints and echoes of this doctrine in many biblical texts. In fact, in Appendix I, we noted that the fathers made use of fifty-seven Old Testament texts, seven passages from the Apocrypha, and thirty-eight passages in the New Testament in discussing the descent. And I am sure that this number could be expanded through further exploration. This is a far cry from some later authors who suggest that the doctrine may be taught in only three or four texts. Much of this comes down to a question of

⁸³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.8.

hermeneutics. The fathers saw the doctrine being taught clearly in passages such as Psalm 16, Acts 2, and Ephesians 4, which led them to look for other allusions elsewhere in the scriptures. This was standard practice for the fathers, and they argued that they learned this principle from the apostles. Paul's discussion of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea (1 Cor 10:1-13) and Peter's allusion to Noah and his family being saved through the ark (1 Pet 3:20-1) as images of baptism would be two examples of this practice.

We found that the fathers taught that subsequent to his death, Christ's soul (with his divinity) descended to Sheol/Hades. In doing so, he was experiencing what had happened to every other person who died before him. But unlike those who had died before him, he was not subject to death. Instead, he descended for the purpose of defeating death. The fathers also taught that in his descent, Christ defeated the devil, and by doing so, released those who were wrongly held captive by him. The central text which they appealed to in this regard was Jesus' story about the stronger man entering into the strong man's house to plunder it.⁸³⁹ The fathers viewed this text not only as demonstrating Christ's power over the demons during his earthly ministry, but also essentially as a prophecy of what he would do after his death when he went to the devil's house, the realm of the dead, to release from oppression all of the righteous who had died prior to his ministry.⁸⁴⁰

However, it is on this final point that we saw two variations in the teaching of the fathers. First, there is Tertullian's idea that Christ merely announced a future deliverance to the Old Testament saints in Hades without actually transporting them to heaven. This idea appears to flow from his notion that only martyrs were received into the heavenly sphere at death. But it should also be noted that Tertullian was guarding against any notion that salvation had already been fully achieved by the transportation of souls to heaven apart from the resurrection of their bodies.⁸⁴¹ The second variation is the concept proposed by Clement of Alexandria that 1 Peter 3 suggested the opportunity of a "wider hope," a possibility for salvation after this life. Clement appears to have had in mind the "righteous pagans" (particularly, the Greek philosophers) who had not heard the gospel. His argument was that it would be an injustice for them not to have the opportunity to hear the good news and to repent. So, appealing to 1 Peter 3, he

⁸³⁹ Matt 12:22-29.

⁸⁴⁰ Heb 2:14.

⁸⁴¹ This concept was found in Greek philosophy and was exploited by the Gnostics.

argued that at Christ's descent, he made the gospel known to them. Following after Clement, Origen and Gregory Nyssen appear to have expanded his vision to consider the possibility that Christ's preaching at the descent was so effective that he emptied hell.⁸⁴² It should be noted that these were variations from the mainstream of patristic thought and had minimal acceptance in the Medieval and Reformation periods. But in the modern era, various forms of Christian universalism have become popular, and the writings of Origen and Gregory Nyssen have allowed those who proffer these views to claim them as ancient witnesses to their positions.⁸⁴³

In Chapter 2, we saw how the themes developed in the patristic era were collected and popularized in the apocryphal work known as the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. The mystery plays inspired by this work give us a sense of how the descent was popularly understood. Influential homiletical works by Gregory the Great, Caesarius of Arles, and Aelfric followed the patristic understanding of the descent, and in some ways, even broadened its appeal by exploiting the Old Testament imagery of David and Samson as conquerors over the enemies of the people of God (foreshadowing what Christ did at his descent). These themes were repeated in *The Lay Folks' Catechism* and in the liturgies of the Sarum Missal during this period. In some places, the descent was even dramatized during the liturgy of Holy Week.

It was also during this era that the doctrine of purgatory was developed, which would have a great impact on the debate over the descent in the Tudor period. The fact that the descent was taught prior to this development is significant and should have had some bearing on those debates. In other words, the descent to Hades was held long before purgatory was really codified, so it should have been fairly easy to dismiss the notion that the one was necessarily related to the other, but that argument was not made as clearly as one might think in the later debates.

During the latter part of the medieval era, we began to see some divergences from the broad consensus on this doctrine in the patristic era. Peter Abelard argued that Christ's soul did not locally descend to hell; rather, it was the effect of his saving work (his power) that "descended." His view was strenuously rejected by Bernard of Clairvaux. Thomas Aquinas basically held to the patristic consensus, even though he also taught the doctrine of purgatory. He taught a local descent of Christ's soul but also

⁸⁴² On this topic, see especially Hilarion's *Christ the Conqueror*.

⁸⁴³ See especially McClymond's work, *The Devil's Redemption*.

appeared to adopt one aspect of what Abelard had said by suggesting that Christ descended in effect to the damned, which appears to be saying that his power had some impact in the realm of the damned, namely, to confirm their condemnation.

In the fifteenth century, the German cardinal, Nicholas of Cusa, espoused a novel interpretation of the descent. He taught that Christ descended into hell to suffer. The French humanist, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, briefly followed Cusanus' view before being convinced to back away from publicly teaching it. Cusanus' view was enthusiastically embraced in the twentieth century by some prominent Roman Catholic theologians, though not without out some recent criticism.⁸⁴⁴ Also in the fifteenth century, and importantly for our purposes, on English soil, Bishop Reginald Pecock questioned whether the descensus clause should even be included in the Apostles' Creed. He did so on three grounds: first, because he was not convinced that the descent was taught in scripture; second, because the Apostles' Creed was not really written by the Apostles; and third, because he asserted that the earliest expositions of the Creed did not discuss the descent (particularly, Augustine's). Some of this was apparently in response to John Duns Scotus, who thought that the doctrine was absent from scripture and rested merely upon tradition.⁸⁴⁵ As we saw, Pecock was tried for heresy for this and other matters, and ultimately, was forced to recant while also losing his episcopal see. Pecock's assertion that the descensus clause does not belong in the Creed has been repeated many times in the modern era.⁸⁴⁶ These medieval developments were significant since each of them resurfaced during the Tudor period.

In the sixteenth century, the theologians on the European continent offered a spectrum of views on the descent. We saw how early in his career, the humanist Erasmus held to the traditional view. In fact, his exposition of Psalm 86:13 develops many of the biblical texts and themes from the fathers.⁸⁴⁷ But in his later years, he questioned the use of some of these biblical texts in relation to the descent and said that

⁸⁴⁴ See especially Pitstick's work, *Light in Darkness*.

⁸⁴⁵ Pecock, *Book of Faith*, 303-5; Izydorczyk, "The Legend of the Harrowing of Hell," 16.

⁸⁴⁶ A noteworthy debate over this matter took place at the establishment of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States. There were some who repeated Pecock's assertions (most notably, Bishop William White). The Proposed Prayer Book of 1786 omitted the descensus clause altogether. But a compromise was reached before the Prayer Book was approved in 1789 and the clause was reinstated. See Massey Hamilton Shepherd, Jr. *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 16. For further discussion, see Paul Victor Marshall, *One, Catholic and Apostolic: Samuel Seabury and the Early Episcopal Church*, (New York: Church Publishing, 2004).

⁸⁴⁷ See Baker-Smith, ed., *Expositions of the Psalms*, 82-6.

they were dark with the mist of allegory and received diverse and manifold interpretations.⁸⁴⁸ Vermigli, Melancthon and Zwingli appear to have been satisfied with how the descent had been understood in the patristic era (though, the last two were inclined to agree with Clement of Alexandria in seeing 1 Peter 3 as Christ proclaiming the gospel to the “righteous pagans,” and Vermigli appears to have been open to this idea as well).⁸⁴⁹

Luther frequently spoke of Christ experiencing the pains of hell upon the cross, but he also held to a local descent of Christ subsequent to his death. His support of the traditional view led him, in what is called the Torgau Sermon, to point his parishioners to the stained-glass windows and paintings in the churches to help them understand the descent. Luther also had the added notion of Christ’s corporal presence in hell, though admittedly, this could be read of his pronouncement of victory there just prior to his emergence from the tomb on the third day.

Calvin reinterpreted Christ’s descent by relocating it entirely to his suffering on the cross. He saw Christ’s quotation of Psalm 22:1 from the cross as his “psychological” descent into hell (to quote Rakow). We pointed out that the Achilles Heel of this view is the fact that it appears to be out of step with what the compilers (and editors) of the Creed meant, since the clause was inserted after his burial rather than after his crucifixion. Furthermore, even though Calvin did not go here, it would seem that a denial of Christ’s local descent could ultimately lead to a denial of his local ascent as well.

Bullinger clearly tried to downplay the doctrine of the descent. He denied a local descent of Christ’s soul to the underworld. Instead, he echoed Abelard in suggesting that Christ’s power descended to hell. But he added further confusion to the doctrine by equating Abraham’s bosom with heaven. Marshall writes, “By the end of the Middle Ages, the dominant trend of Catholic theology was to identify this place [Abraham’s bosom] with the *limbus patrum* harrowed by Christ, thus locating it within the macrocosm of the subterranean infernal world.”⁸⁵⁰ But Bullinger and others rejected this notion because they could not see how Abraham’s bosom could be any part of hell.⁸⁵¹

⁸⁴⁸ Erasmus, *A Playne and Godly Expositon*, 81.

⁸⁴⁹ Vermigli, *Early Writings*, 43-4.

⁸⁵⁰ Marshall, *Beliefs*, 193.

⁸⁵¹ Augustine also struggled with this topic. See *Letters 156-210*, 234-5.

During the reign of Henry VIII, the views of the descent espoused by the continental reformers do not appear to have had much impact (Richard Taverner's adaptation of Calvin's Catechism was one of the few exceptions). The view of the fathers on the descent was largely held. The clearest exposition of these themes may be found in Marshall's Primer and in the Bishops' Book. I claimed that the Bishops' Book, which was essentially catechetical material in the form of homilies, offered an explanation of the descent that was entirely consistent with the patristic era. Furthermore, these works explained the descent in a clear, pastoral manner, showing the importance of the doctrine for every Christian.

Intriguingly, one of the themes which Henry subtracted from the section on the descent in his revision of *The Bishops' Book* was the idea of the righteous dead being transferred from Hades.⁸⁵² We suspect that he might have recognized a potential link between this and the doctrine of purgatory, which he was seeking to dismantle since it served his purposes to weaken the pope's jurisdiction in England and to dissolve the monasteries.⁸⁵³ That is, since he reworked the section on Purgatory for *The King's Book*, it is likely that he perceived that there may have been a conceptual link with Christ delivering the saints at his descent, so he removed any sense of that.⁸⁵⁴

The one controversy over the descent during Henry's reign involved John Bale's supposed denial of the doctrine. He responded by saying that he had not denied it. Rather, he claimed to be merely following Rufinus in saying that the descensus clause was not in the earliest versions of the Creed. And he took the opposite stance from Luther by telling his audience *not* to take seriously the portrayal of the descent in the stained-glass windows and paintings. Then he made the audacious claim that the descensus clause had been added by Aquinas. He was skating awfully close to what Pecock had said in the previous century, but he appears to have survived the accusation against him.

During the reign of Edward VI, the English church continued to offer a traditional view of the descent in the official formularies as well as in the writings of the main teachers. Cranmer's Catechism (adapted from Osiander's work), Becon's Catechism, the

⁸⁵² Appendix III.

⁸⁵³ On this topic, see Chapter 2 of Marshall, *Beliefs*.

⁸⁵⁴ See chapters 4-5 of Alan Kreider, *English Chantries: The Road to Dissolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). See also Marshall, *Beliefs*, 76.

Book of Common Prayer (both 1549 and 1552 versions), the Forty-Two Articles of Religion and the Book of Homilies all offered a consistent and coherent view of Christ's descent. Many of the biblical texts from the patristic era were employed, but the text that runs most consistently through these works was 1 Peter 3. It was offered as the scriptural rationale for the doctrine in Article III of the Articles of Religion. The text was even appointed in the Prayer Book as the Epistle Lesson for Holy Saturday, recognizing the traditional place of the descent in the Church Year. That text was also employed by the most influential of the foreign theologians that Cranmer imported, Peter Martyr Vermigli. We even saw how Cranmer creatively employed the descent in his debates over the Eucharist.

However, we also saw during this period how the continental views made some inroads in the Edwardian church. Martin Bucer taught his descent as burial view and this was embraced by some. John à Lasco managed to steer the Strangers' Church away from denying the descent altogether (as DeLoenus had proposed) and ended up essentially adopting Calvin's view. Bishop Hugh Latimer tentatively opted for a view that was consistent with Cusanus, that Christ descended into the hell of the damned to suffer, but he did not have many followers on this. We also saw that a man named Putto apparently denied that Christ descended to hell and was forced to a public recantation by Cranmer himself. Bishop Hooper opted for Calvin's view, albeit, rather tentatively. The end of Edward's reign saw the controversy gain steam when Christopher Carlile denied the descent in his graduation sermon from Cambridge. However, the death of Edward likely put the matter on the back burner until it was revived in Elizabeth's reign.

In the opening of Chapter 3, we explored the developments concerning the doctrine of the descent during the reign of Mary Tudor. This resulted not from what happened in England, since the medieval view was essentially re-adopted, but from what happened with the exiles in Frankfurt and Geneva. We saw how the "Knoxian" group of exiles went to Geneva where they basically adopted Calvin's view of the descent through adaptation of his catechism. The Geneva Bible reinforced this through its study notes on the pertinent passages of scripture. When the exiles returned to England, they brought these works back with them, and more importantly, they brought their convictions on the topic back with them, setting up the debates of the Elizabethan era. The popularity of the Geneva Bible was surely a significant factor in these debates.

At the beginning of Elizabeth I's reign, she quickly called for a reissuing of the BCP in 1559. This placed the appointed liturgy of the church essentially back to where it had been at the end of Edward's reign. At the Convocation of 1562/3, Bishop Alley raised concerns over the doctrine of the descent because diverse views were already being espoused within his diocese. He encouraged the bishops to strongly assert an understanding of the descent that was consistent with the patristic era. But instead of bolstering Article III, they ended up weakening it by removing the allusion to 1 Peter 3. It is unclear why they did not opt for a less controversial passage such as Acts 2:27 or Ephesians 4:9. Haugaard said, "The reverend fathers merely eliminated part of the appropriate article, leaving the unembroidered credal statement. Apparently they preferred to avoid the issue rather than adjudicate it."⁸⁵⁵ Regardless of the fact that Article III was less clear, it continues to teach that Christ's descent was distinct from his burial (contrary to Bucer), and that it occurred after his death (contrary to Calvin). But this removal of 1 Peter 3 also meant that while the fact of Christ's descent was maintained, its purpose was removed. Judging by the ensuing debates, the revised Article did not have the desired effect of shutting down debate over the topic. If anything, it made matters worse since there was no longer a clear biblical text included for support. This could be perceived as lending credence to the charge that the descent was not clearly taught in scripture.

The other official and semi-official formularies of Elizabeth's reign largely maintained the traditional view of the descent. Even though Jewel did not explicitly address the descent in his *Apology*, his stated purpose of aligning the doctrine of the church of England with the fathers would seem to indicate that his view would coincide with theirs or he would be charged with inconsistency. The Second Book of Homilies did argue for the fathers' view, even alluding to many of the associated biblical texts. The same was true of Nowell's Catechism, which was also semi-official in character since it was approved by the bishops. While Nowell sounds like Calvin in asserting that Christ "wrestled as it were hand to hand, with the whole army of hell" on the cross, he also went on to argue for an actual descent of his soul subsequent to death, at which time he overthrew the devil and presented his finished redeeming work to those "on the other side" of Sheol.⁸⁵⁶ A notable absence from the traditional view in these formularies,

⁸⁵⁵ Haugaard, *Elizabeth and the English Reformation*, 252.

⁸⁵⁶ Corrie, *Nowell's Catechism*, 159-61.

however, is the idea that Christ delivered the Old Testament saints from Sheol and transferred them into heaven. We are left to wonder, Did he merely make his victory known to them and leave them there, awaiting the last day?

The established church, however, likely made another misstep regarding the descent by promoting not only Bullinger's *Decades* and Calvin's *Institutes* at the universities, but also by prescribing the Heidelberg Catechism for use (at least at Oxford). This work promoted Calvin's view. These works were broadly consistent with the official formularies of the church of England but not regarding Christ's descent. If these works were going to be required reading at the universities, one would at least expect that their diverging views would be pointed out, either through notes in the texts or in the tutorials. It is possible that this happened in the latter, but I have been unable to find notes in those published works which clarified these divergences.⁸⁵⁷ Seemingly, what you would be left with was each man choosing his own view, which appears to be what happened, and this had the effect of exacerbating the debate.

We also saw how the competing Bible translations of this period factored into this debate. The Roman polemicists saw an opening to accuse the Protestants of dissimulation because they chose to translate Sheol/Hades with the word "grave;" and at one point, used the word "body" instead of "soul" in Acts 2. What is remarkable is that those who favored the Geneva Bible actually admitted that this was purposely done to guard against any notion of a local descent of Christ to rescue souls out of a fear that this was conceptually too close to the idea of purgatory. The established church sought to marginalize the Geneva Bible's influence by issuing the Bishops' Bible, which was more in line with the tradition on this matter. Regardless, the Roman apologists issued the Rheims NT with copious notes pointing out the flaws in the Geneva Bible and painting all Protestants with the broad brush of heresy.

But despite the efforts of the English church to maintain a modified traditional view of the descent, dissenting voices continued. Various authors opted for the views of either Calvin (a psychological descent of Christ on the cross), Bucer (Christ's burial was his descent), or Bullinger (Christ's power descended). The most popular of these

⁸⁵⁷ It should be noted, however, that the British delegates at the Synod of Dort in the next century did register their disagreement with the Heidelberg Catechism on the descent. Milton, *Catholic and Reformed*, 412. Anthony Milton, ed., *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)*, vol. 13, Church of England Record Society (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2005), 197-98.

dissenting views was surely that of Calvin,⁸⁵⁸ whose view was propagated in England through several catechisms (the one by Calvin himself, Dering, Gifford, Greenham, and Openshaw/Paget). But toward the latter part of the Elizabethan era, the view of William Perkins gained popularity. He argued that the descent of Christ into hell was a reference to him being under the power of death for three days. That is, he connected the descent with Christ's humiliation rather than his victory over the power of evil. His view offered two benefits for those who held it: first, it made better chronological sense of the statement in the Creed, that the descent was subsequent to Christ's death; second, for those who adopted this view, they could also simultaneously hold to Calvin's psychological descent on the cross. The fact that Perkins' view was essentially adopted by the Westminster Confession of Faith in the next century demonstrates its attractiveness as an alternative.

We are left with the question, Did the reformed Church of England have a view of Christ's descent that was consistent with that of the church fathers, since they argued that this was one of their central theological principles? During the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI, the answer is in the affirmative. But during the reign of Elizabeth I, the view was definitely modified. The English church continued to assert a local descent of Christ's soul (with his divine nature) into "hell" subsequent to death. They also maintained the view that this was associated with his victory over the powers of evil, disarming and defeating the devil, as the fathers had. But on the issue of Christ delivering the Old Testament saints, they clearly departed. They appear to have conceded that this was the Roman Catholic view and therefore, no longer attractive. This was surely related to their denial of the doctrine of purgatory. The patristic view envisioned Christ descending to Sheol (the "good compartment," Abraham's Bosom) and transferring the righteous of the Old Testament period into heaven at his resurrection/ascension. But the English theologians of the Elizabethan period, by and large, considered that this concept was too close to Roman teaching for comfort. In other words, there was a fear that if this view was maintained, then it would not be long before purgatory was re-adopted.

The denial of this aspect of the descent also led to some confusion over where the Old Testament saints were currently located. Some theologians adopted a different

⁸⁵⁸ This was one of Wallace's main conclusions in his article, "Puritan and Anglican," 284.

geography of the afterlife, locating Abraham's bosom in heaven. That is, they argued that the righteous had always gone to heaven at death. But since that view was not consistent with the majority view of the patristic era (that no one entered heaven prior to Christ), a unique strand of English theology was developed: that the souls of the Old Testament saints remain in the "good side" of Sheol until the Last Day, when they shall be raised up with their bodies.⁸⁵⁹ This view is certainly not consistent with the majority view from the patristic era, but one could argue that Tertullian was an earlier example of this line of thinking.⁸⁶⁰

However, there were some during Elizabeth I's reign who continued to teach that Christ delivered the Old Testament saints at his descent, such as Bishop Alley and John Higin. Russ Leo asserts that Edmund Spenser also creatively argued for the traditional view through his popular work *The Fairie Queene*.⁸⁶¹ But the choices made over this doctrine during the Elizabethan era would have lasting effects on English theology in the ensuing centuries. The final result is a fair amount of confusion over the purpose of Christ's descent and the location of the righteous departed.

At the end of the Elizabethan era, we would conclude that the church of England was consistent with the fathers in maintaining a literal descent of Christ into hell; but it was not entirely consistent regarding the purpose of his descent. It continued to teach, with the fathers, that Christ descended to the abode of the dead subsequent to death (as those who lived before him had done, though he was not subject to death). It also continued to associate Christ's descent with his triumphal victory over the devil and the powers of evil (contrary to many of the continental reformers who associated Christ's descent with his suffering). But on the topic of the deliverance of the Old Testament saints from Sheol, it chose to depart from the view of the fathers. It would appear that the cause of this departure was a fear of lending any credence to the concept of purgatory. This meant that the view of the English reformers at the end of Elizabeth I's reign concerning Christ's descent was at odds with many of their protestant contemporaries but not entirely consistent with the fathers.

⁸⁵⁹ See especially "The State of the Faithful Departed" in Mason's, *Purgatory*, 58-111.

⁸⁶⁰ Mason argues that Irenaeus and Justin also held a similar view, but they appear to be arguing against those who held a Gnostic view against the resurrection of the body in the passages he quotes. *Purgatory*, 79-81.

⁸⁶¹ Leo, "Medievalism without Nostalgia," 105-47.

Appendix I

Biblical Passages Associated with Christ's Descent into Hell

It is frequently suggested by modern authors that there are only a few passages of Scripture that touch upon Christ's descent into hell. But the theologians of the patristic and medieval periods would beg to differ. Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis have attempted to bring out as many of these as possible, but space would not allow an exhaustive listing. This appendix lists the plethora of texts which these earlier authors saw as being connected in some way with this topic. I have also included a few passages from the Apocrypha (Deuterocanonical books) that were also read in light of the descent. I sought to be as thorough as possible, but since I have continued to add to this list throughout four years of research, I am certain that even this is not exhaustive. I have chosen the English Standard Version, primarily because it tends to use the words Sheol and Hades.

Old Testament

Genesis 46:3-4 – *“Then he said, ‘I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes.’”*

Exodus 14:21-31 – *“Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. And in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily. And the Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians.’ Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen.’ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the LORD threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.”*

Deuteronomy 30:1-5 – *“And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God*

will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.”

Judges 14:5-6a – “Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat.”

Judges 16:28-30 – “Then Samson called to the LORD and said, ‘O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.’ And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. And Samson said, ‘Let me die with the Philistines.’ Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.”

1 Samuel 2:6 – “The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.”

1 Samuel 17:34-36 – “But David said to Saul, ‘Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.”

1 Samuel 17:48-51a – “When the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. And David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone and slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground. So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him. There was no sword in the hand of David. Then David ran and stood over the Philistine and took his sword and drew it out of its sheath and killed him and cut off his head with it.”

1 Samuel 28:11-14 – “Then the woman said, ‘Whom shall I bring up for you?’ He said, ‘Bring up Samuel for me.’ When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman said to Saul, ‘Why have you deceived me? You are Saul.’ The king said to her, ‘Do not be afraid. What do you see?’ And the woman said to Saul, ‘I see a god coming up out of the earth.’ He said to her, ‘What is his appearance?’ And she said, ‘An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped in a robe.’ And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and paid homage.”

2 Samuel 22:1-7; 17-20 – “And David spoke to the LORD the words of this song on the day when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. He said, ‘The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence. I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. For the waves of death encompassed me, the torrents of

destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I called. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry came to his ears...He sent from on high, he took me; he drew me out of many waters. He rescued me from my strong enemy, from those who hated me, for they were too mighty for me. They confronted me in the day of my calamity, but the LORD was my support. He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me.”

Job 14:13-14 – *“Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my renewal should come.”*

Job 28:20-24 – *“From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, ‘We have heard a rumor of it with our ears. God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens.”*

Job 38:17 – *“Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?”*

Psalms 6:4-5, 9 – *“Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love. For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?...The LORD has heard my plea; the LORD accepts my prayer.”*

Psalms 9:13-14 – *“Be gracious to me, O LORD! See my affliction from those who hate me, O you who lift me up from the gates of death, that I may recount all your praises, that in the gates of the daughter of Zion I may rejoice in your salvation.”*

Psalms 16:9-11 – *“Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”*

Psalms 18:4-6, 16-17 – *“The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears...He sent from on high, he took me; he drew me out of many waters. He rescued me from my strong enemy and from those who hated me, for they were too mighty for me.”*

Psalms 22: 19-22 – *“But you, O LORD, do not be far off! O you my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion! You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen! I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you...”*

Psalms 23:4-6 – *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”*

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Psalm 24:7-10 – "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory! Selah"

Psalm 30:3 – "O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit."

Psalm 40:2 – "He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure."

Psalm 49:14-15 – "Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd, and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. Selah"

Psalm 68:20 – "Our God is a God of salvation, and to GOD, the Lord, belong deliverances from death."

Psalm 71:20 – "You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again."

Psalm 74:13 – "You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters."

Psalm 77:16 – "When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled."

Psalm 86:13 – "For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol."

Psalm 88:2-6 – "Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry! For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep."

Psalm 107:13-16 – "Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! For he shatters the doors of bronze and cuts in two the bars of iron."

Psalm 113:7-8 – "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people."

Psalm 116:3-6 – *“The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!’ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. The LORD preserves the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me.”*

Psalm 118:24-27a – *“The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!’ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. The LORD preserves the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me.”*

Psalm 139:7-8 – *“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!”*

Song of Songs 2:10-14 – *“My beloved speaks and says to me: “Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away, for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.”*

Song of Songs 6:1-3 – *“Where has your beloved gone, O most beautiful among women? Where has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you? My beloved has gone down to his garden to the beds of spices, to graze in the gardens and to gather lilies. I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine; he grazes among the lilies.”*

Isaiah 9:1-2 – *“But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.”*

Isaiah 14:9 – *“Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come; it rouses the shades to greet you, all who were leaders of the earth; it raises from their thrones all who were kings of the nations.”*

Isaiah 25:8 – *“He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.”*

Isaiah 26:19 – *“Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.”*

Isaiah 42:1-7 – *“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the*

coastlands wait for his law. Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: 'I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.'"

Isaiah 43:6-7 – "I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Isaiah 45:1-2 – "Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: 'I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron...'"

Isaiah 49:8-9 – "Thus says the LORD: "In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture..."

Isaiah 52:1-2 – "Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean. Shake yourself from the dust and arise; be seated, O Jerusalem; loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter of Zion."

Isaiah 53:8-12 – "By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors."

Isaiah 60:1 – "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you."

Isaiah 61:1-2 – "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn..."

Ezekiel 37:1-14 – *“The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ And I answered, ‘O Lord GOD, you know.’ Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.’ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.”*

Daniel 3:25 – *“He answered and said, ‘But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”*

Daniel 6:18-23 – *“Then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions. The king declared to Daniel, ‘May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!’ And a stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him. Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, ‘O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?’ Then Daniel said to the king, “O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm.’ Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.”*

Daniel 12:1b-3 – *“But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”*

Hosea 6:1-2 – *“Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.”*

Hosea 13:14 – *“Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.”*

Jonah 2:1-10 – *“Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, ‘I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!’ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.”*

Zechariah 9:11-12 – *“As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.”*

Malachi 4:2 – *“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”*

The Apocrypha (Deuterocanonical Books)

Tobit 13:1-2 – *“Then Tobit said: Blessed is God who lives forever, and blessed is his kingdom, because he chastises, and he shows mercy, he leads down to Hades below the earth, and he himself raises up again from great devastation, and there is nothing that can escape his hand.”*

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-8 – *“But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an evil thing, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial whole burnt offering he accepted them. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth and run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them forever.”*

Wisdom of Solomon 10:1-2 – *“Wisdom protected the first-formed father of the world, when he alone had been created; she delivered him from his transgression and gave him strength to rule all things.”*

Wisdom of Solomon 16:13 – *“For you have power over life and death; you lead people down to the gates of Hades and back again.”*

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 24:45⁸⁶² – *“I will penetrate to all the lower parts of the earth, and will behold all that sleep, and will enlighten all that hope in the Lord.”*

Prayer of Azariah 66 – *“Bless the Lord, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever; for he has rescued us from Hades and saved us from the hand of death and delivered us from the midst of the burning fiery furnace; from the midst of the fire he has delivered us.”*

2 Esdras 2:16, 31 – *“And I will raise up the dead from their places and will bring them out from their tombs, because I recognize my name in them...Remember your children that sleep, because I will bring them out of the hiding places of the earth and will show mercy to them; for I am merciful, says the Lord Almighty.”*

New Testament

Matthew 8:11 – *“I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”*

Matthew 11:2-6 – *“Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.’”*

Matthew 12:29 – *“Or how can someone enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.”* [See also parallels Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21-22]

Matthew 12:39-40 – *“But he answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.’”*

Matthew 16:18 – *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”*

Matthew 27:33 – *“And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull)...”*

⁸⁶² This passage is not found in most modern translations of the Apocrypha. This translation is the Douay-Rheims Version. Aquinas quotes this text in his Exposition of the Apostles’ Creed, *The Catholic Tradition*, 214.

Matthew 27:52-53 – *“The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.”*

Luke 1:68-71 – *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us...”*

Luke 4:18 – *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed...”*

Luke 16:19-31 – *“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house--for I have five brothers-- so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”*

Luke 23:43 – *“And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’”*

John 5:21-29 – *“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”*

John 11:43-44 – “When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’”

John 12:24 – “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

John 12:32-33 – “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.”

Acts 2:22-28 – “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know--this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him, ‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’”

Acts 13:34-37 – “And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.’ Therefore he says also in another psalm, ‘You will not let your Holy One see corruption.’ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, but he whom God raised up did not see corruption.”

Romans 6:4-5 – “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Romans 10:6-7 – “But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).”

Romans 14:9 – “For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”

1 Corinthians 2:7-8 – “But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

1 Corinthians 15:20-23 – “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”

1 Corinthians 15:51-57 – *“Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Ephesians 4:8-10 – *“Therefore it says, ‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.’ (In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)”*

Ephesians 5:14b – *“Therefore it says, ‘Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”*

Philippians 2:5-11 – *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

Colossians 1:18 – *“And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”*

Colossians 2:11-15 – *“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”*

2 Timothy 2:8 – *“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel...”*

Hebrews 2:14-15 – *“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”*

Hebrews 10:19-23 – *“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the*

curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."

Hebrews 13:20-21 – "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

1 Peter 1:20-21 – "He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God."

1 Peter 3:18-22 – "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him."

1 Peter 4:6 – "For 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."

1 John 3:8 – "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil."

Revelation 1:4-5a – "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth."

Revelation 1:17-18 – "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."

Appendix II Patristic Texts on Christ's Descent into Hell

Text 1 – Ignatius of Antioch, *Magnesians*, 9:

If, then, those who had lived in antiquated practices came to newness of hope, no longer keeping the Sabbath, but living in accordance with the Lord's Day, on which our life also arose through him and his death (which some deny), the mystery through which we came to believe, and because of which we patiently endure, in order that we might be found to be disciples of Jesus Christ, our only teacher, how can we possibly live without him, whom even the prophets, who were his disciples in the Spirit, were expecting as their teacher? Because of this he for whom they rightly waited raised them from the dead when he came.⁸⁶³

Text 2 – *The Odes of Solomon*, 17:

And all who saw me were amazed,
and I seemed to them like a stranger...
And from there he gave me the way of his paths,
and I opened the doors which were closed.
And I shattered the bars of iron,
for my own iron(s) had grown hot and melted before me.
And nothing appeared closed to me,
because I was the opening of everything.
And I went toward all my bondsmen in order to loose them;
that I might not abandon anyone bound or binding.
And I gave my knowledge generously,
and my resurrection through my love.⁸⁶⁴

Text 3 – *The Odes of Solomon*, 31:

Chasms vanished before the Lord,
And darkness was destroyed by his appearance . . .
[Christ speaks]
Come forth, you who have been afflicted,
And receive joy.

And possess yourselves through grace,
And take unto you immortal life.

And they condemned me when I stood up,
Me who had not been condemned.

Then they divide my spoil,
Though nothing was owed them.

But I endured and held my peace and was silent,

⁸⁶³ Ignatius of Antioch, "The Epistle to the Magnesians," in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*. Edited and revised by Michael W. Holmes. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 155. [(3rd ed; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 209].

⁸⁶⁴ James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Volume 2 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 750-1.

That I might not be disturbed by them.

But I stood undisturbed like a solid rock,
Which is continuously pounded by columns of waves and endures.

And I bore their bitterness because of humility;
That I might save my nation and instruct it.

And that I might not nullify the promises made to the patriarchs,
To whom I was promised for the salvation of their offspring.

Hallelujah.⁸⁶⁵

Text 4 – *The Odes of Solomon*, 42:

Sheol saw me and was shattered,
and Death ejected me and many with me.
I have been vinegar and bitterness to it,
and I went down with it as far as its depth.
Then the feet and the head it released,
because it was not able to endure my face.
And I made a congregation of living among his dead;
and I spoke with them by living lips;
in order that my word may not fail.
And those who had died ran toward me;
and they cried out and said, ‘Son of God, have pity on us.
And deal with us according to your kindness,
and bring us out from the chains of darkness.
And open for us the door by which we may go forth to you,
for we perceive that our death does not approach you.
May we also be saved with you,
because you are our Savior.’
And I heard their voice
and placed their faith in my heart.
And I placed my name upon their head
because they are free and they are mine.⁸⁶⁶

Text 5 – *Epistle of the Apostles*, 27:

For to that end went I down unto the place of Lazarus, and preached unto the righteous and the prophets, that they might come out of the rest which is below and come up into that which is above; and I poured out upon them with my right hand the water (?) (baptism, *Eth.*) of life and forgiveness and salvation from all evil, as I have done unto you and unto them that believe on me.⁸⁶⁷

⁸⁶⁵ Charlesworth, *OT Pseudepigrapha*, 2.762-3.

⁸⁶⁶ Charlesworth, *OT Pseudepigrapha*, 770-1.

⁸⁶⁷ M. R. James, *Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 494. The “Lazarus” mentioned here is most likely the character in the story of Jesus in Luke 16. It is hard to imagine that it would be a reference to the Lazarus who was resuscitated in John 11 since he was only in Hades for a few days before being restored to life.

Text 6 – Justin, *Dialogue With Trypho*, 72:

And from the sayings of Jeremiah they have cut out the following: ‘I [was] like a lamb that is brought to the slaughter: they devised a device against me, saying, Come, let us lay on wood on His bread, and let us blot Him out from the land of the living; and His name shall no more be remembered.’ And since this passage from the sayings of Jeremiah is still written in some copies [of the Scriptures] in the synagogues of the Jews (for it is only a short time since they were cut out), and since from these words it is demonstrated that the Jews deliberated about the Christ Himself, to crucify and put Him to death, He Himself is both declared to be led as a sheep to the slaughter, as was predicted by Isaiah, and is here represented as a harmless lamb; but being in a difficulty about them, they give themselves over to blasphemy. And again, from the sayings of the same Jeremiah these have been cut out: ‘The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the graves; and He descended to preach to them His own salvation.’⁸⁶⁸

Text 7 – *The Gospel of Peter*, 38-42:

When now the soldiers saw this, they awakened the centurion and the elders—for they also were there to assist at the watch. And whilst they were relating what they had seen, they saw again three men come out from the sepulcher, and two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following them, and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was led of them by the hand overpassing the heavens. And they heard a voice out of the heavens crying, ‘Thou hast preached to them that sleep’, and from the cross there was heard the answer, ‘Yea.’⁸⁶⁹

Text 8 – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.27.2:

It was for this reason, too, that the Lord descended into the regions beneath the earth, preaching His advent there also, and [declaring] the remission of sins received by those who believe in Him. Now all those believed in Him who had hope towards Him, that is, those who proclaimed His advent, and submitted to His dispensations, the righteous men, the prophets, and the patriarchs, to whom He remitted sins in the same way as He did to us...⁸⁷⁰

Text 9 – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.31.1:

For they do not choose to understand, that if these things are as they say, the Lord Himself, in whom they profess to believe, did not rise again upon the third day; but immediately upon His expiring on the cross, undoubtedly departed on high, leaving His body to the earth. But the case was, that for three days He dwelt in the place where the dead were, as the prophet says concerning Him: ‘And the Lord remembered His dead saints who slept formerly in the land of sepulture; and He descended to them, to rescue and save them.’ And the Lord Himself says, ‘As Jonas remained three days and three nights in the whale’s belly, so shall the Son of man be in the heart of the earth.’ Then also the apostle says, ‘But when He ascended, what is it but that He also descended into the lower parts of the earth?’ This, too, David says when prophesying of Him, ‘And thou hast delivered my soul from the nethermost hell;’ and on His rising again the third day, He said to Mary, who was the first to see and to worship Him, “Touch Me not, for I have not

⁸⁶⁸ Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew,” *ANF*, 1.234–235. [PG 6.645a].

⁸⁶⁹ Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL Wilson (The Westminster Press, 1963), 186.

⁸⁷⁰ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” *ANF*, 1.499. [PG 7.1058b].

yet ascended to the Father; but go to the disciples, and say unto them, I ascend unto My Father, and unto your Father.⁸⁷¹

Text 10 – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.31.2:

If, then, the Lord observed the law of the dead, that He might become the first-begotten from the dead, and tarried until the third day ‘in the lower parts of the earth;’ then afterwards rising in the flesh, so that He even showed the print of the nails to His disciples, He thus ascended to the Father;—[if all these things occurred, I say], how must these men not be put to confusion, who allege that “the lower parts” refer to this world of ours, but that their inner man, leaving the body here, ascends into the super-celestial place?⁸⁷²

Text 11 – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.27.3:

In addition to his blasphemy against God Himself, he advanced this also, truly speaking as with the mouth of the devil, and saying all things in direct opposition to the truth,— that Cain, and those like him, and the Sodomites, and the Egyptians, and others like them, and, in fine, all the nations who walked in all sorts of abomination, were saved by the Lord, on His descending into Hades, and on their running unto Him, and that they welcomed Him into their kingdom. But the serpent which was in Marcion declared that Abel, and Enoch, and Noah, and those other righteous men who sprang from the patriarch Abraham, with all the prophets, and those who were pleasing to God, did not partake in salvation.⁸⁷³

Text 12 – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.23.1:

It was necessary, therefore, that the Lord, coming to the lost sheep, and making recapitulation of so comprehensive a dispensation, and seeking after His own handiwork, should save that very man who had been created after His image and likeness, that is, Adam, filling up the times of His condemnation, which had been incurred through disobedience...For if man, who had been created by God that he might live, after losing life, through being injured by the serpent that had corrupted him, should not any more return to life, but should be utterly [and for ever] abandoned to death, God would [in that case] have been conquered, and the wickedness of the serpent would have prevailed over the will of God. But inasmuch as God is invincible and long-suffering, He did indeed show Himself to be long-suffering in the matter of the correction of man and the probation of all, as I have already observed; and by means of the second man did He bind the strong man, and spoiled his goods, and abolished death, vivifying that man who had been in a state of death. For at the first Adam became a vessel in his (Satan’s) possession, whom he did also hold under his power, that is, by bringing sin on him iniquitously, and under colour of immortality entailing death upon him. For, while promising that they should be as gods, which was in no way possible for him to be, he wrought death in them: wherefore he who had led man captive, was justly captured in his turn by God; but man, who had been led captive, was loosed from the bonds of condemnation.⁸⁷⁴

⁸⁷¹ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” *ANF*, 1.560. [PG 7.1208a-1209a].

⁸⁷² Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” *ANF*, 1.560. [PG 7.1209b-1210a].

⁸⁷³ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 1.560. [PG 7.689a-b]. It should be noted that this is not like later authors who hint at the harrowing of hell because Marcion implied that the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament remained in Hades.

⁸⁷⁴ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 1.455-6. [PG 7.960a-c].

Text 13 – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.21.1:

Christ completely renewed all things, both taking up the battle against our enemy and crushing him who at the beginning had led us captive in Adam, trampling on his head, as you find in Genesis that God said to the serpent, ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and the seed of the woman. He will be on the watch for your head, and you will be on the watch for his heel.’ From then on it was proclaimed that he who was to be born of a virgin, after the likeness of Adam, would be on the watch for the serpent’s head. This is the seed of which the apostle says in the letter to the Galatians, ‘The law of works was established until the seed should come to whom the promise was made.’ He shows this still more clearly in the same epistle when he says, ‘But when the fullness of time was come, God sent his Son, made of a woman.’ The enemy would not have been justly conquered unless it had been a man made of woman who conquered him. For it was by a woman that he had power over man from the beginning, setting himself up in opposition to man. Because of this the Lord also declares himself to be the Son of Man, so renewing in himself that primal man from whom the formation of man by woman began, that as our race went down to death by a man who overcame, and as death won the palm of victory over us by a man, so we might by a man receive the palm of victory over death.⁸⁷⁵

Text 14 – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.21.3:

For as in the beginning he enticed man to transgress his Maker’s law, and thereby got him into his power; yet his power consists in transgression and apostasy, and with these he bound man [to himself]; so again, on the other hand, it was necessary that through man himself he should, when conquered, be bound with the same chains with which he had bound man, in order that man, being set free, might return to his Lord, leaving to him (Satan) those bonds by which he himself had been fettered, that is, sin.⁸⁷⁶

Text 15 – Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, 55:

By ourselves the lower regions (of Hades) are not supposed to be a bare cavity, nor some subterranean sewer of the world, but a vast deep space in the interior of the earth, and a concealed recess in its very bowels; inasmuch as we read that Christ in His death spent three days in the heart of the earth, that is, in the secret inner recess which is hidden in the earth, and enclosed by the earth, and superimposed on the abysmal depths which lie still lower down. Now although Christ is God, yet, being also man, ‘He died according to the Scriptures,’ and ‘according to the same Scriptures was buried.’ With the same law of His being He fully complied, by remaining in Hades in the form and condition of a dead man; nor did He ascend into the heights of heaven before descending into the lower parts of the earth, that He might there make the patriarchs and prophets partakers of Himself. (This being the case), you must suppose Hades to be a subterranean region, and keep at arm’s length those who are too proud to believe that the souls of the faithful deserve a place in the lower regions. These persons, who are ‘servants above their Lord, and disciples above their Master,’ would no doubt spurn to receive the comfort of the resurrection, if they must expect it in Abraham’s bosom. But it was for this purpose, say they, that Christ descended into hell, that we might not ourselves have to descend thither. Well, then, what difference is there between heathens and Christians, if the same prison awaits them all when dead? How, indeed,

⁸⁷⁵ *Against Heresies*, 5.21.1, quoted in Andrew Louth and Marco Conti, *Genesis 1–11*, ACCS OT 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 90–91. [PG 7.1179a-c].

⁸⁷⁶ *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, 550. [PG 7.1182a].

shall the soul mount up to heaven, where Christ is already sitting at the Father's right hand, when as yet the archangel's trumpet has not been heard by the command of God,—when as yet those whom the coming of the Lord is to find on the earth, have not been caught up into the air to meet Him at His coming, in company with the dead in Christ, who shall be the first to arise? To no one is heaven opened; the earth is still safe for him, I would not say it is shut against him. When the world, indeed, shall pass away, then the kingdom of heaven shall be opened. Shall we then have to sleep high up in ether, with the boy-loving worthies of Plato; or in the air with Arius; or around the moon with the Endymions of the Stoics? No, but in Paradise, you tell me, whither already the patriarchs and prophets have removed from Hades in the retinue of the Lord's resurrection. How is it, then, that the region of Paradise, which as revealed to John in the Spirit lay under the altar, displays no other souls as in it besides the souls of the martyrs? How is it that the most heroic martyr Perpetua on the day of her passion saw only her fellow-martyrs there, in the revelation which she received of Paradise, if it were not that the sword which guarded the entrance permitted none to go in thereat, except those who had died in Christ and not in Adam? A new death for God, even the extraordinary one for Christ, is admitted into the reception-room of mortality, specially altered and adapted to receive the new-comer. Observe, then, the difference between a heathen and a Christian in their death: if you have to lay down your life for God, as the Comforter counsels, it is not in gentle fevers and on soft beds, but in the sharp pains of martyrdom: you must take up the cross and bear it after your Master, as He has Himself instructed you. The sole key to unlock Paradise is your own life's blood. You have a treatise by us, (on Paradise), in which we have established the position that every soul is detained in safe keeping in Hades until the day of the Lord.⁸⁷⁷

Text 16 – Hippolytus, *On Christ and Antichrist*, 26:

After a little space the stone will come from heaven which smites the image and breaks it in pieces, and subverts all the kingdoms, and gives the kingdom to the saints of the Most High. This is the stone which becomes a great mountain, and fills the whole earth, of which Daniel says: 'I saw in the night visions, and behold one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and was brought near before Him. And there was given Him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom; and all peoples, tribes, and languages shall serve Him: and His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom shall not be destroyed.' He showed all power given by the Father to the Son, who is ordained Lord of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth, and Judge of all: of things in heaven, because He was born, the Word of God, before all (ages); and of things on earth, because He became man in the midst of men, to re-create our Adam through Himself; and of things under the earth, because He was also reckoned among the dead, preaching the Gospel to the souls of the saints, (and) by death overcoming death.⁸⁷⁸

Text 17 – Hippolytus, *On Christ and Antichrist*, 45:

He [John the Baptist], on hearing the salutation addressed to Elisabeth, leaped with joy in his mother's womb, recognising God the Word conceived in the womb of the Virgin. Thereafter he came forward preaching in the wilderness, proclaiming the baptism of repentance to the people, (and thus) announcing prophetically salvation to the nations

⁸⁷⁷ Tertullian, "A Treatise On the Soul, 55" *ANF*, 3.231. [PL 2.787b-790a].

⁸⁷⁸ Hippolytus of Rome, "Treatise on Christ and Antichrist," *ANF*, 5.209. [PG 10.748c].

living in the wilderness of the world. After this, at the Jordan, seeing the Saviour with his own eye, he points Him out, and says, "Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world!" He also first preached to those in Hades, becoming a forerunner there when he was put to death by Herod, that there too he might intimate that the Saviour would descend to ransom the souls of the saints from the hand of death.⁸⁷⁹

Text 18 – Hippolytus, *Commentary on Luke*, ch. 23:

For this reason the warders of Hades trembled when they saw Him; and the gates of brass and the bolts of iron were broken. For, lo, the Only-begotten entered, a soul among souls, God the Word with a (human) soul. For His body lay in the tomb, not emptied of divinity; but as, while in Hades, He was in essential being with His Father, so was He also in the body and in Hades. For the Son is not contained in space, just as the Father; and He comprehends all things in Himself. But of His own will he dwelt in a body animated by a soul, in order that with His soul He might enter Hades, and not with His pure divinity.⁸⁸⁰

Text 19 – Melito of Sardis, *Homily on the Passion*, 100-102:

...but he [Christ] arose from the [dead to the heights of the] heavens, God who put on man, and suffered for the sufferer, and was bound for him who was bound, and judged for him who was condemned, and buried for him who was buried. [And he] arose from the dead and cries thus [to you]: 'Who is he that contendeth against me? Let him stand before me. I freed the condemned, I made the dead to live again, I raise him who was buried. Who is he who raises his voice against me? I,' he says, am the Christ, I am he who put down death, and triumphed over the enemy, and trod upon Hades, and bound the strong one and brought man safely home to the heights of the heavens; I,' he says, 'Christ.'⁸⁸¹

Text 20 – Melito of Sardis, *Homily on the Passion*, 103-105:

So come all families of people,
adulterated with sin,
and receive forgiveness of sins.
For I am your freedom.
I am the Passover of salvation,
I am the lamb slaughtered for you,
I am your ransom,
I am your life,
I am your light,
I am your salvation,
I am your resurrection,
I am your King.
I shall raise you up by my right hand,
I will lead you to the heights of heaven,

⁸⁷⁹ Hippolytus of Rome, "Treatise on Christ and Antichrist," *ANF*, 5.213. [PG 10.764b].

⁸⁸⁰ Hippolytus of Rome, "Fragments from Commentaries on Various Books of Scripture," *ANF*, 5.194. [PL 10.701b].

⁸⁸¹ Campbell Bonner, ed, *The Homily on the Passion by Melito Bishop of Sardis and Some Fragments of the Apocryphal Ezekiel* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940), 180.

there shall I show you the everlasting father.⁸⁸²

Text 21 – Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, 6.6:

And, as I think, the Saviour also exerts His might because it is His work to save; which accordingly He also did by drawing to salvation those who became willing, by the preaching [of the Gospel], to believe on Him, wherever they were. If, then, the Lord descended to Hades for no other end but to preach the Gospel, as He did descend; it was either to preach the Gospel to all or to the Hebrews only. If, accordingly, to all, then all who believe shall be saved, although they may be of the Gentiles, on making their profession there; since God's punishments are saving and disciplinary, leading to conversion, and choosing rather the repentance than the death of a sinner; and especially since souls, although darkened by passions, when released from their bodies, are able to perceive more clearly, because of their being no longer obstructed by the paltry flesh.⁸⁸³

Text 22 – Origen, *Commentary on Romans*, 5.10, 10-12

Christ, like Jonah in the belly of the sea monster, entered into this death, namely to that place which the Savior himself called the heart of the earth, where he says the Son of Man was going to spend three days and three nights, following the precedent of Jonah in order to release those who were being held there by death. For it was on this account that he also took up the form of a slave, that he might be able to enter that place where death was holding dominion, in accordance with what the prophet also says under the *persona* of [Christ], 'And I was reckoned with those who go down to the pit'; and again, 'What profit is there in my blood when I go down to corruption?'

In order that this might be perceived still more clearly, we shall again make use of this kind of parable. Let us imagine an upright and noble king who wants to wage war against some unjust tyrant, but in such a way that he should not seem to conquer by means of a violent and bloody conflict; for even the soldiers serving under the tyrant were his own men whom he was not willing to destroy but to liberate. Therefore under a better plan he assumes the dress of those who were under the tyrant, and in appearance he becomes like them in every way until, while placed under the tyrant's sphere of rule, he persuades at least those who were serving him to leave off and turn back to the rightful kingdom. Then at the opportune time he binds the strong man and despoils his powers and principalities and leads away the captives which had been seized and were being held by the tyrant.

It was certainly in this way, then, that Christ also emptied himself voluntarily and took the form of a slave and endured the dominion of the tyrant, having become obedient unto death. Through that death he destroyed him who was holding the power of death, i.e., the devil, so that he could liberate those who were being held fast by death. For when [Christ] had bound the strong man and triumphed over him by means of his cross, he even advanced into his house, the house of death in the underworld, and from there

⁸⁸² Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha: With the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans*, ed. John Behr, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, Popular Patristics Series, Number 20 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 65–66.

⁸⁸³ Clement of Alexandria, "Miscellanies," *ANF*, 2.490-1. [PG 9.268c].

he plundered his possessions, that is, he led away the souls which [the devil] was keeping.⁸⁸⁴

Text 23 – Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel*, 4.12:

Now the laws of love summoned him even as far as death and the dead themselves, so that he might summon the souls of those who were long dead. And so, because he cared for the salvation of all for ages past, and in order that ‘he might destroy him who has the power of death,’ as Scripture teaches, here again he underwent the dispensation in his mingled natures. As a man, he left his body to the usual burial, while as God he departed from it. For he cried with a loud cry and said to the Father, ‘I commend my spirit,’ and departed from the body free, in no way waiting for death, who was lagging as if in fear to come to him. Nay, rather, he pursued death from behind and drove him on, trodden under his feet and fleeing, until he burst the eternal gates of his dark realms, making a road of return back again to life for the dead there bound with the bonds of death. Even his own body was raised up, and many bodies of the sleeping saints arose and came together with him into the holy and real city of heaven, as rightly is said by the holy words. ...

The Savior of the universe, our Lord, the Christ of God, called victor, is represented in the prophetic predictions as reviling death and releasing the souls that are bound there, by whom he raises the hymn of victory. And he says these words: ‘From the hand of Hades I will save them, and from death I will ransom their souls. O Death where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?’ ‘The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.’⁸⁸⁵

Text 24 – Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.13.19:

Now indeed will I keep silence, since I have been sent to proclaim the word publicly. But to-morrow assemble for me all thy citizens, and I will preach in their presence and sow among them the word of God, concerning the coming of Jesus, how he was born; and concerning his mission, for what purpose he was sent by the Father; and concerning the power of his works, and the mysteries which he proclaimed in the world, and by what power he did these things; and concerning his new preaching, and his abasement and humiliation, and how he humbled himself, and died and debased his divinity and 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.⁸⁸⁶

Text 25 – Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, 3.57:

To be troubled was proper to the flesh, and to have power to lay down his life and take it again when he wanted was no property of people but of the Word’s power. For human beings die not by their own power but by necessity of nature and against their will. But

⁸⁸⁴ Origen, *Origen: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans Books 1-5*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 372–73. [PG 14.1051b-1052a].

⁸⁸⁵ Erik M. Heen and Philip D. W. Krey, *Hebrews*, ACCS NT 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 45–46. For the expanded context of this quote which contains more on the descent, see Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Proof of the Gospel: Being the Demonstratio Evangelica of Eusebius of Caesarea*, ed. W. J. Sparrow-Simpson and W. K. Lowther Clarke, trans. W. J. Ferrar, vol. 1, Translations of Christian Literature: Series 1: Greek Texts (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), 186–187. [PG 22.281d-284b].

⁸⁸⁶ Eusebius of Caesaria, “Church History,” *NPNF 2*, 1.102. [PG 20.128b-129a].

the Lord, being himself immortal but having mortal flesh, had power as God to become separate from the body and to take it again when he wanted to. Concerning this David speaks in the psalm: "You shall not leave my soul in hades, neither shall you suffer your holy One to see corruption." For it was appropriate to the flesh, corruptible as it was, that it should no longer after its own nature remain mortal, but because of the Word who had put it on, it should remain incorruptible. For since he was conformed to our condition, having come in our body, so we when we receive him partake of the immortality that is from him.⁸⁸⁷

Text 26 – Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 45.4-6

But if a man is gone down even to Hades, and stands in awe of the heroes who have descended thither, regarding them as gods, yet he may see the fact of Christ's Resurrection and victory over death, and infer that among them also Christ alone is true God and Lord. For the Lord touched all parts of creation, and freed and undeceived all of them from every illusion; as Paul says: 'Having put off from Himself the principalities and the powers, He triumphed on the Cross:' that no one might by any possibility be any longer deceived, but everywhere might find the true Word of God.⁸⁸⁸

Text 27 – Aphrahat, *Select Demonstrations*, 21.19:

Hananiah also and his brethren were persecuted as Jesus was persecuted. Hananiah and his brethren were persecuted by Nebuchadnezzar; and Jesus, the people of the Jews persecuted. Hananiah and his brethren were cast into the furnace of fire, and it was cold as dew upon the righteous. Jesus also descended to the place of darkness, and burst its gates and brought forth its prisoners. Hananiah and his brethren came up from the furnace of fire, and the flame burned their accusers; and Jesus revived and came up from the midst of darkness, and His accusers and they that crucified Him shall be burned in flames at the end. When Hananiah and his brethren came up from the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar the King trembled and was amazed; and when Jesus arose from the abode of the dead, the people that crucified Him were terrified and trembled. Hananiah and his brethren worshipped not the image of the King of Babylon; and Jesus restrained the nations from the worship of dead images. Because of Hananiah and his brethren, the *nations and languages glorified God Who had delivered them from the fire*; and because of Jesus, the nations and all languages shall glorify (God) Who delivered His

⁸⁸⁷ Athanasius, "Four Discourses against the Arians," *NPNF 2*, 4.424. [PG 26.444b-c].

⁸⁸⁸ See "On the Incarnation of the Word," *NPNF 2*, 4.61. [PG 25.177b] Another quote strikes similar themes: "For whereas man sinned, and is fallen, and by his fall all things are in confusion: death prevailed from Adam to Moses (cf. Rom 5:14), the earth was cursed, Hades was opened, Paradise shut, Heaven offended, man, lastly, corrupted and brutalised (cf. Ps 49:12), while the devil was exulting against us;— then God, in His loving-kindness, not willing man made in His own image to perish, said, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go?' (Isa 6:8). But while all held their peace, the Son said, 'Here am I, send Me.' And then it was that, saying 'Go Thou,' He 'delivered' to Him man, that the Word Himself might be made Flesh, and by taking the Flesh, restore it wholly. For to Him, as to a physician, man 'was delivered' to heal the bite of the serpent; as to life, to raise what was dead; as to light, to illumine the darkness; and, because He was Word, to renew the rational nature (τὸ λογικόν). Since then all things 'were delivered' to Him, and He is made Man, straightway all things were set right and perfected. Earth receives blessing instead of a curse, Paradise was opened to the robber, Hades cowered, the tombs were opened and the dead raised, the gates of Heaven were lifted up to await Him that 'cometh from Edom' (Ps 24:7, Isa 63:1). Why, the Saviour Himself expressly signifies in what sense 'all things were delivered' to Him, when He continues, as Matthew tells us: 'Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest' (Matt 11:28). Yes, ye 'were delivered' to Me to give rest to those who had laboured, and life to the dead." "On Luke 10:22 (Matt 11:27)," *NPNF 2*, 4.87-8.

Son, so that He saw no corruption. On the garments of Hananiah and his brethren the fire had no power; and on the bodies of the righteous, who have believed in Jesus, the fire shall have no power at the end.⁸⁸⁹

Text 28 – Aphrahat, *Select Demonstrations*, 22.4-5:

And when Jesus, the slayer of Death, came, and clothed Himself in a Body from the seed of Adam, and was crucified in His Body, and tasted death; and when (Death) perceived thereby that He had come down unto him, he was shaken from his place and was agitated when he saw Jesus; and he closed his gates and was not willing to receive Him. Then He burst his gates, and entered into him, and began to despoil all his possessions...Then when Jesus had fulfilled His ministry amongst the dead, Death sent Him forth from his realm, and suffered Him not to remain there. And to devour Him like all the dead, he counted it not pleasure. He had no power over the Holy One, nor was He given over to corruption.

And when he had eagerly sent Him forth and He had come forth from his realm, He left with him, as a poison, the promise of life; that by little and little his power should be done away. Even as when a man has taken a poison in the food which is given for (the support of) life, when he perceives in himself that he has received poison in the food, then he casts up again from his belly the food in which poison was mingled; but the drug leaves its power in his limbs, so that by little and little the structure of his body is dissolved and corrupted. So Jesus dead was the bringer to nought of Death; for through Him life is made to reign, and through Him Death is abolished, to whom it is said:—*O Death, where is thy victory?*⁸⁹⁰

Text 29 – Ephrem, *Homily on Our Lord*, 3.2:

Since death was unable to devour Him without a body, or Sheol to swallow Him without flesh, He came to a virgin to provide Himself with a means to Sheol...And with a body from a virgin He entered Sheol, broke into its vaults, and carried off its treasures...When death came confidently, as usual, to feed on mortal fruit, life, the killer of death, was lying in wait, so that when death swallowed (life) with no apprehension, it would vomit it out, and many others with it.⁸⁹¹

Text 30 – Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity*, 23.13:

All these changes did the Merciful One make,
stripping off glory and putting on a body;
for he had devised a way to reclothe Adam
in that glory which he had stripped off.
He was wrapped in swaddling clothes,
Corresponding to Adam's leaves,
He put on clothes
In place of Adam's skins;
He was baptized for Adam's sin,
He was embalmed for Adam's death,
He rose up and raised Adam up in His glory.
Blessed is He who descended,

⁸⁸⁹ Aphrahat, "Select Demonstrations," *NPNF 2*, 13.399–400.

⁸⁹⁰ Aphrahat, "Select Demonstrations," *NPNF 2*, 13.402-3.

⁸⁹¹ Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 61.

Put on Adam and ascended.⁸⁹²

Text 31 – Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns*, 36.13:

The death of Jesus to me is a torment;
I prefer for myself his life rather than his death.
This is the dead whose death (lo!) is hateful to me;
In the death of all men else I rejoice,
But his death, even his, I detest;
That he may come back to life I hope.
While he was living he brought to life and restored three that were dead;
But now by his death at the gate of Sheol they have trampled on me,
The dead who have come to life,
Whom I was going to shut in.⁸⁹³

Text 32 – Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.11:

He was truly laid as Man in a tomb of rock; but rocks were rent asunder by terror because of Him. He went down into the regions beneath the earth, that thence also He might redeem the righteous. For, tell me, couldst thou wish the living only to enjoy His grace, and that, though most of them are unholy; and not wish those who from Adam had for a long while been imprisoned to have now gained their liberty? Esaias the Prophet proclaimed with loud voice so many things concerning Him; wouldst thou not wish that the King should go down and redeem His herald? David was there, and Samuel, and all the Prophets, John himself also, who by his messengers said, *Art thou He that should come, or look we for another?*⁸⁹⁴

Text 33 – Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 14.17:

And when we examine the story of Jonas, great is the force of the resemblance. Jesus was sent to preach repentance; Jonas also was sent: but whereas the one fled, not knowing what should come to pass; the other came willingly, to give repentance unto salvation...The one was cast into a whale's belly: but the other of His own accord went down thither, where the invisible whale of death is. And He went down of His own accord, that death might cast up those whom he had devoured, according to that which is written, *I will ransom them from the power of the grave; and from the hand of death I will redeem them.*⁸⁹⁵

Text 34 - Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechetical Lectures*, 20.4:

After these things, ye were led to the holy pool of Divine Baptism, as Christ was carried from the Cross to the Sepulchre which is before our eyes. And each of you was asked, whether he believed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and ye made that saving confession, and descended three times into the water, and ascended again; here also hinting by a symbol at the three days burial of Christ. For as our Saviour passed three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, so you also in your first ascent out of the water, represented the first day of Christ in the earth, and by

⁸⁹² The quote is primarily about the “descent” of the Incarnation but it demonstrates the close connection between Adam and Christ and the ultimate purpose for Christ’s mission which included raising up Adam from Hades. Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 64.

⁸⁹³ Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 142.

⁸⁹⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, “Catechetical Lectures,” *NPNF 2*, 7.22. [PG 33.469b].

⁸⁹⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem, “Catechetical Lectures,” *NPNF 2*, 7.98-9. [PG 33.845c-848a].

your descent, the night; for as he who is in the night, no longer sees, but he who is in the day, remains in the light, so in the descent, as in the night, ye saw nothing, but in ascending again ye were as in the day. And at the self-same moment ye were both dying and being born; and that Water of salvation was at once your grave and your mother.⁸⁹⁶

Text 35 – Gregory of Nazianzus’s *On the Son*, (Oration) 29.20:

He surrenders his life, yet has the power to take it again. Yes, the veil is rent, for things of heaven are being revealed, rocks are being split, and dead men have an earlier awakening. He dies but he brings to life, and by death he destroys death. He is buried, yet he rises again. He goes down to hades, yet he leads souls up, ascends to heaven, and will come to judge the quick and dead.⁸⁹⁷

Text 36 – Basil the Great, *Homily on Psalm 49 [LXX 48]*:

‘They are laid in hell like sheep: death shall feed upon them.’ [49:14] He, who carries away into captivity those who are beastlike and who are compared to senseless herds, like the sheep, which have neither the intelligence nor the ability to defend themselves, since he is an enemy, has already cast them down into his own prison and has handed them over to death to feed. For death, tended them from the time of Adam until the administration of Moses, [Rom. 5:14] until the true Shepherd came, who laid down his life for the sheep and thus, making them rise together and leading them out from the prison of hell to the early morning of the Resurrection, handed them over to the righteous, that is to say, to his holy angels to tend them.⁸⁹⁸

Text 37 – Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 15.35:

How then are we made in the likeness of His death? In that we were buried with Him by baptism. What then is the manner of the burial? And what is the advantage resulting from the imitation? First of all, it is necessary that the continuity of the old life be cut. And this is impossible unless a man be born again, according to the Lord’s word; for the regeneration, as indeed the name shews, is a beginning of a second life. So before beginning the second, it is necessary to put an end to the first...How then do we achieve the descent into hell? By imitating, through baptism, the burial of Christ. For the bodies of the baptized are, as it were, buried in the water.⁸⁹⁹

Text 38 – Gregory of Nyssa, *Easter Sermons: On the Three-day Period of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ*:

You wish to learn something about the three-day waiting, too? It is enough to say just this, that in so short a space of time the omnipotent Wisdom, coming into the heart of the earth, was able to make utterly foolish that great ‘Mind’ which dwells in it; for that is what the prophet calls him ‘Great Mind’ and ‘Assyrian’ ...For since it was impossible for the prince of darkness to engage with the presence of the Light having observed no portion of flesh in him, when he saw the Godbearing flesh and saw the miracles done through it by the deity, he consequently hoped that, if he were to seize the flesh through death, he would also get hold of all the power in it. For this reason, having swallowed

⁸⁹⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, “Catechetical Lectures,” *NPNF 2*, 7.147-8. [PG 33.1080b-c].

⁸⁹⁷ There are allusions here to John 10 (the power to take up his life again), Matt 27:52-3 (rocks were split and dead men have an earlier awakening), and 1 Cor 15 (by death he destroys death). From his Theological Oration “On the Son,” quoted in Heen and Krey, *Hebrews*, ACCS NT 10, 45–46. [PG 36.101c].

⁸⁹⁸ Quoted in Hilarion, *Christ the Conqueror*, 56-7. LXX Ps 48:15. [PG 29.452c-453a].

⁸⁹⁹ Basil of Caesarea, “On the Holy Spirit,” *NPNF 2*, 8.21–22. [PG 32.129a-b].

the bait of the flesh, he was pierced with the fishhook of deity, and so the snake was caught with the fishhook; just as he says to Job, when he announced in advance what was to happen through him, and says 'You shall catch the snake with a fishhook.'⁹⁰⁰

Text 39 – Gregory of Nyssa's *Easter Sermons: On the Three-day Period of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ*:

And still my discourse has not proclaimed the special point of the present grace [presumably, the resurrection since he is preaching at the Easter Vigil]. This [the resurrection] undid the pain of death, this was midwife to the firstborn from the dead, in it the iron gates of death were crushed, in it the brazen bars of Hades were shattered. Now death's prison is opened, now pardon is proclaimed for the prisoners, now there is a recovering of sight for the blind, now those who sit in darkness and death's shadow are visited by the sunlight from on high.⁹⁰¹

Text 40 – Ambrose *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, 4.1.8:

Enoch had been translated, Elias caught up, but the servant is not above his Master. For 'No man hath ascended into heaven, but He Who came down from heaven;' and even of Moses, though his corpse was never seen on earth, we do nowhere read as of one abiding in celestial glory, unless it was after that the Lord, by the earnest of His own Resurrection, burst the bonds of hell and exalted the souls of the godly. Enoch, then, was translated, and Elias caught up; both as servants, both in the body, but not after resurrection from the dead, nor with the spoils of death and the triumphal train of the Cross, had they been seen of angels. And therefore [the angels] desiring the approach of the Lord of all, first and only Vanquisher of Death, bade their princes that the gates should be lifted up, saying in adoration, "Lift up the gates, such as are princes amongst you, and be ye lifted Up, O everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in."⁹⁰²

Text 41 – Rufinus, *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, 14:

A triumph is a token of victory over an enemy. Since then Christ, when He came, brought three kingdoms at once into subjection under His sway (for this He signifies when he says, "That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth"), and conquered all of these by His death, a death was sought answerable to the mystery, so that being lifted up in the air, and subduing the powers of the air, He might make a display of His victory over these supernatural and celestial powers.⁹⁰³

Text 42 – Rufinus, *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, 16:

As, therefore, if a fish seizes a baited hook, it not only does not take the bait off the hook, but is drawn out of the water to be itself food for others, so He Who had the power of death seized the body of Jesus in death, not being aware of the hook of Divinity inclosed within it, but having swallowed it he was caught forthwith, and the bars of hell being burst asunder, he was drawn forth as it were from the abyss to become food for others. Which result the Prophet Ezekiel long ago foretold under this same figure, saying, 'I will

⁹⁰⁰ Andreas Spira and Christoph Klock, *The Easter Sermons of Gregory of Nyssa: Translation and Commentary*, Patristic Monograph Series 9 (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1981), 35–36. [PG 46.605d-608a].

⁹⁰¹ Spira and Klock, *The Easter Sermons*, 35. [PG 46.605c].

⁹⁰² Ambrose, "Exposition of the Christian Faith," *NPNF 2*, 10.263. [PL 16.644b].

⁹⁰³ Rufinus, "A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed," *NPNF 2*, 3.549. [PL 21.353a-b].

draw thee out with My hook, and stretch thee out upon the earth: the plains shall be filled with thee, and I will set all the fowls of the air over thee, and I will satiate all the beasts of the earth with thee.' The Prophet David also says, "Thou hast broken the heads of the great dragon, Thou hast given him to be meat to the people of Ethiopia." And Job in like manner witnesses of the same mystery, for he says in the person of the Lord speaking to him, "Wilt thou draw forth the dragon with a hook, and wilt thou put thy bit in his nostrils?"⁹⁰⁴

Text 43 – Rufinus, *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, 28:

That He descended into hell is also evidently foretold in the Psalms, where it is said, 'Thou hast brought Me also into the dust of the death.' And again, 'What profit is there in my blood, when I shall have descended into corruption?' And again, 'I descended into the deep mire, where there is no bottom.' Moreover, John says, 'Art Thou He that shall come (into hell, without doubt), or do we look for another?' Whence also Peter says that "Christ being put to death in the flesh, but quickened in the Spirit which dwells in Him, descended to the spirits who were shut up in prison, who in the days of Noah believed not, to preach unto them;" where also what He did in hell is declared. Moreover, the Lord says by the Prophet, as though speaking of the future, 'Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption.' Which again, in prophetic language he speaks of as actually fulfilled, 'O Lord, Thou hast brought my soul out of hell: Thou hast saved me from them that go down into the pit.'⁹⁰⁵

Text 44 – Rufinus, *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, 29:

He returned, therefore, a victor from the dead, leading with Him the spoils of hell. For He led forth those who were held in captivity by death, as He Himself had foretold, when He said, "When I shall be lifted up from the earth I shall draw all unto Me." To this the Gospel bears witness, when it says, "The graves were opened, and many bodies of saints which slept arose, and appeared unto many, and entered into the holy City," that city, doubtless, of which the Apostle says, "Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the Mother of us all."⁹⁰⁶

Text 45 – Jerome, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 2.4.10:

Therefore the Son of God descended to the lower parts of the earth and ascended above all the heavens, so that he might fulfill not only the Law and the Prophets but also certain hidden dispensations which only the Father knew. He also descended to the lower parts and ascended to heaven, so that he might bring fulfillment to those who were in those regions, so far as they were able to receive. From this we know that before Christ descended and ascended everything was void and in need of his fullness.⁹⁰⁷

Text 46 – Ambrosiaster, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 4.9:

Therefore, after his triumph over the devil, he descended to the heart of the world, so that he might preach to the dead, that all who desired him might be set free. It was

⁹⁰⁴ Rufinus, "A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed," 550. [PL 21.355a-b].

⁹⁰⁵ Rufinus, "A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed," 553-4. The biblical texts here include Pss 22:15; 30:9; 49:2; Luke 7:20; 1 Pet 3:18-20; Pss 16:10; 30:3. [PL 21.363c-364b].

⁹⁰⁶ Rufinus, "A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed," 554. [PL 21.364c-365a].

⁹⁰⁷ M. J. Edwards, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, ACCS NT 8. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 164-165. [PL 26.499c].

necessary for him to ascend. He had descended to trample death underfoot by the force of his own power, then only to rise again with the former captives.⁹⁰⁸

Text 47 – Ambrosiaster, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 4:10:

This is what the Lord says: *No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.* The same thing is found in the psalm which says: *Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them.* First of all he descended to the earth where he was born as a man. Later he died and descended to hell, from which he rose again on the third day, and before any mortals he ascended into heaven in order to show that the death of creation had been undone.⁹⁰⁹

Text 48 – Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Romans*, 14:9:

The creation was made by Christ the Lord, but because of sin it has become separated from its maker and taken captive. But God the Father sent his Son from heaven to earth to teach his creation what to do in order to escape the hands of its captors, so that his work should not perish. For this reason he allowed himself to be killed by his enemies, so that by going down to hell he could condemn sin, because he was killed as an innocent man, and liberate those whom the devil held there. Therefore, since he showed the way of salvation to the living and offered himself for them and also delivered the dead from hell, he is Lord of both the living and the dead. For he has turned the lost into his servants.⁹¹⁰

Text 49 – Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hebrews (10:19-23)*, 19.2:

‘For the entrance into the holiest.’ What does he mean here by ‘entrance’? Heaven, and the access to spiritual things. ‘Which he hath inaugurated,’ that is, which He prepared, and which He began; for the beginning of using is thenceforth called the inaugurating; which He prepared (he means) and by which He Himself passed. ‘A new and living way.’ Here He expresses ‘the full assurance of hope.’ ‘New,’ he says. He is anxious to show that we have all things greater; since now the gates of Heaven have been opened, which was not done even for Abraham. ‘A new and living way,’ he says, for the first was a way of death, leading to Hades, but this of life. And yet he did not say, ‘of life,’ but called it ‘living,’ (the ordinances, that is,) that which abideth.⁹¹¹

Text 50 – Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew (1:1)*, 2.1:

Herein standeth the trophy of the cross, glorious, and conspicuous, the spoils won by Christ, the first-fruits of our nature, the booty of our King; all these, I say, we shall out of the Gospels know perfectly. If thou follow in becoming quietness, we shall be able to lead thee about everywhere, and to show where death is set forth crucified, and where sin is hanged up, and where are the many and wondrous offerings from this war, from this battle.

Thou shalt see likewise the tyrant here bound, and the multitude of the captives following, and the citadel from which that unholy demon overran all things in

⁹⁰⁸ Edwards, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 164. [PL 17.409a].

⁹⁰⁹ Bray, *Commentaries on Galatians-Philemon: Ambrosiaster*, 48. [PL 17.409b].

⁹¹⁰ Gerald Bray, ed., *Romans (Revised)*, ACCS NT 6 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 331–332. [PL 17.176d-177a].

⁹¹¹ John Chrysostom, “Homilies on Hebrews” *NPNF 1*, 14:454–455. [PG 63.139c].

time past. Thou wilt see the hiding places, and the dens of the robber, broken up now, and laid open, for even there also was our King present.

But be not thou weary, beloved, for if any one were describing a visible war, and trophies, and victories, wouldest thou feel no satiety at all; nay, thou wouldest not prefer either drink or meat to this history. But if that kind of narrative be welcome, much more this. For consider what a thing it is to hear, how on the one side God from Heaven, arising "out of the royal thrones, leaped down" unto the earth, and even unto hell itself, and stood in the battle array; and how the devil on the other hand set himself in array against Him; or rather not against God unveiled, but God hidden in man's nature.

And what is marvellous, thou wilt see death destroyed by death, and curse extinguished by curse, and the dominion of the devil put down by those very things whereby he did prevail. Let us therefore rouse ourselves thoroughly, and let us not sleep, for lo, I see the gates opening to us; but let us enter in with all seemly order, and with trembling, setting foot straightway within the vestibule itself.⁹¹²

Text 51 – Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon on Luke 11:5*, 54.4:

[This passage in one of Augustine's sermons on Luke 11 sounds very much like the phraseology of the Athanasian Creed]:

That Bread will not come to an end, but it will put an end to thine indigence. It is Bread, God the Father, and it is Bread, God the Son, and it is Bread, God the Holy Ghost. The Father Eternal, the Son Coeternal with Him, and the Holy Ghost Coeternal. The Father Unchangeable, the Son Unchangeable, the Holy Ghost Unchangeable. The Father Creator, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The Father the Shepherd and the Giver of life, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The Father the Food and Bread eternal, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Learn, and teach; live thyself, and feed others. God who giveth to thee, giveth thee nothing better than Himself.⁹¹³

Text 52 – Augustine of Hippo, *Letter to Evodius*, 164.2.3:

It is established beyond question that the Lord, after He had been put to death in the flesh, 'descended into hell;' for it is impossible to gainsay either that utterance of prophecy, 'Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell,'—an utterance which Peter himself expounds in the Acts of the Apostles, lest any one should venture to put upon it another interpretation,—or the words of the same apostle, in which he affirms that the Lord 'loosed the pains of hell, in which it was not possible for Him to be holden.' Who, therefore, except an infidel, will deny that Christ was in hell?⁹¹⁴

Text 53 – Augustine of Hippo, *Letter to Evodius*, 164.5.16:

Those who have inferred from the words, 'He preached to the spirits in prison,' that Peter held the opinion which perplexes you, seem to me to have been drawn to this interpretation by imagining that the term 'spirits' could not be applied to designate souls which were at that time still in the bodies of men, and which, being shut up in the darkness of ignorance, were, so to speak, 'in prison,'—a prison such as that from which

⁹¹² John Chrysostom, "Homilies on St. Matthew," *NPNF 1*, 10.9. [PG 57.24c-25a].

⁹¹³ Augustine of Hippo, "Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament," *NPNF 1*, 6.431. [PL 38:620a].

⁹¹⁴ Augustine of Hippo, "Letters of St. Augustin," *NPNF 1*, 1.515-16. [PL 33.710a].

the Psalmist sought deliverance in the prayer, 'Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy name;' which is in another place called the 'shadow of death,' from which deliverance was granted, not certainly in hell, but in this world, to those of whom it is written, 'They that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.'⁹¹⁵

Text 54 – Augustine of Hippo, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 12.64:

So it is, as I said above, that I have not yet found—and am still looking, so far without any luck—I have not found anywhere in the scriptures, at least the canonical ones, where the netherworld occurs in a good sense, while I cannot imagine anyone allowing that the bosom of Abraham and the restful ease to which the poor man was carried by angels could be understood in any but a good sense. And therefore I do not see how we could possibly believe that it is in the netherworld.⁹¹⁶

Text 55 – Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, 20.15:

For if it does not seem absurd to believe that the ancient saints who believed in Christ and His then future coming, were kept in places far removed indeed from the torments of the wicked, but yet in hell, until Christ's blood and His descent into these places delivered them, certainly good Christians, redeemed by that precious price already paid, are quite unacquainted with hell while they wait for their restoration to the body, and the reception of their reward.⁹¹⁷

Text 56 – Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, 17.11:

For He shall so live and not see death, that yet He shall have been dead; but shall have delivered His soul from the hand of hell, whither He had descended in order to loose some from the chains of hell; but He hath delivered it by that power of which He says in the Gospel, "I have the power of laying down my life, and I have the power of taking it again."⁹¹⁸

Text 57 – Augustine of Hippo, *Unfinished Tractate against Julian*, 6.22 (Commenting on *Wisdom of Solomon* 10:1):

The Christ, who died for us, descended into the realms of death, not of necessity but by power, and loosed the pains of hell. In this way it must be understood that Wisdom released Adam from his crime. Not without reason does the church believe that he was released from those bonds by the holy flesh of the only Son of God—of whom Adam was the progenitor, being the father of the human race and thus also the father of the Christ, who was made man for the salvation of human beings—not by his own merit but by the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.⁹¹⁹

⁹¹⁵ Augustine of Hippo, "Letters of St. Augustin," *NPNF 1*, 1.519-20. [PL 33.715c].

⁹¹⁶ Saint Augustine, *On Genesis* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2004), 502. [PL 34.482b].

⁹¹⁷ Augustine of Hippo, "The City of God," *NPNF 1*, 2.435. [PL 41.681b].

⁹¹⁸ Augustine of Hippo, "The City of God," *NPNF 1*, 2.350-1. [PL 41.544d].

⁹¹⁹ Sever J. Voicu, *Apocrypha*, ACCS OT 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 122-123. [Voicu cites Nuova Biblioteca Augustiniana 19/2:1129].

Appendix III
A Comparison of *The Bishops' Book* and *The King's Book* on the Descent

The Bishops' Book	The King's Book
<p>"I BELIEVE assuredly in my heart, and with my mouth I do profess, that this our Saviour Jesu Christ, after he was thus dead upon the cross, he descended immediately in his soul down into hell, leaving his most blessed body here in earth, and that at his coming thither, by the incomparable might and force of his Godhead, he entered into hell. And like as that mighty man, of whom St. Luke speaketh, which entering into the house of another strong man, first overcame him, and bound him hand and foot, and afterward spoiling him of all his armour and strength, wherein he trusted, took also away from him all the goods and substance he had; and like as strong Samson slew the mighty lion, and took out of his mouth the sweet honey: even so our Saviour Jesu Christ, at his said entry into hell, first he conquered and oppressed both the devil and hell, and also death itself, whereunto all mankind was condemned, and so bound them fast, that is to say, restrained the power and tyranny which they had before, and exercised over all mankind, that they never had sith that time, nor never shall have any power finally to hurt or annoy any of them that do faithfully believe in Jesu Christ; and afterward he spoiled hell, and delivered and brought with him from thence all the souls of those righteous and good men, which from the fall of Adam died in the favour of God, and in the faith and belief of this our Saviour Jesu Christ, which was then to come. And I believe that by this descending of our Saviour Jesu Christ into hell, not only his elect people, which were holden there as captives, were delivered from thence, but also that the sentence and judgment of</p>	<p>"And after he was thus crucified, and dead upon the cross, he descended in soul into hell, and loosed the pains and sorrows thereof, wherewith it was not possible that he should be holden, and conquered and oppressed both the devil and hell, and also death itself, whereunto all mankind was condemned by the fall of our forefather Adam into sin.</p> <p>The process of our Saviour Jesu Christ's life, death, burial, and descense to hell, thus declared, it is specially to be noted, and to be believed for a certain truth, that our said Saviour, in all the time of his most bitter and grievous passion, and in suffering his most painful and cruel death, not only endured and sustained for our redemption all the pains and injuries, and all the opprobries and ignominies which were done to him, most patiently, without resistance, and like an innocent lamb, but also that he did willingly and gladly suffer this cross and this kind of death for our example, that we should follow the steps of him in patience and humility, and that we should bear our own cross, as he did bear his, and that we should also hate and abhor all sin, knowing for surety that whosoever doth not in his heart hate and abhor sin, but rather accounteth the breach and violation of God's commandment but as a light matter, and of small weight and importance, he esteemeth not the price and value of the passion and death of Christ according to the dignity and worthiness thereof."⁹²¹</p> <p><i>"And the third day he arose again from death.</i> BY this article it appeareth, how our Saviour Jesus Christ, after he had conquered and spoiled the devil and hell, he returned again from thence, like a</p>

⁹²¹ Lloyd, *Formularies*, 233–34.

the malediction and of eternal damnation (which God himself most rightfully pronounced upon Adam and all his posterity, and so consequently upon me) was clearly dissolved, satisfied, released, and discharged, and that the devil and hell both have utterly lost and be deprived of all the rights, claim and interest which they might have pretended to have had in me by the authority of that sentence, or by reason of any sin that ever I had or have committed, be it original or actual. And that the devil, with all his power, craft, subtilty, and malice, is now subdued and made captive, not only unto me, but also unto all the other faithful people and right believers in Jesu Christ that ever was or shall be sith the time of Christ's said descending into hell. And that our Saviour Jesu Christ hath also, by this his passion and this his descending into hell, paid my ransom, and hath merited and deserved that neither my soul, neither the souls of any such as be right believers in Christ, shall come therein or shall finally be encumbered with any title or accusation that the devil can object against us, or lay unto our charge.

And I believe that this our Saviour Jesu Christ, after he had thus in soul conquered and spoiled the devil and hell of all their force, power, and tyranny, and made them subject unto me, and all true Christian men, in like case as they were unto Adam before his fall, he returned again from hell, like a most mighty king and conqueror, in triumph and glory, and came unto the sepulchre, where his blessed body lay buried, and so resuming and taking again the very same body upon him, the third day after his said death he lived again, and so rose out of that sepulchre in his natural and perfect manhood, that is to say, in his soul, and in the selfsame body which was born of the virgin Mary, and did hang upon the cross.

most mighty king and conqueror, in triumph and glory, and so resumed and took again his natural body, the third day after his said death."⁹²²

⁹²² Lloyd, *Formularies*, 234.

And I believe also and profess, that after he had so done, he lived in the world by the space of forty days, in the which time he was conversant, and did eat and drink with his apostles and his disciples, and preached unto them, and authorized them to go forth into the world, to manifest and declare that he was the very Christ, the very Messias, and the very God and man, which was promised in scripture to come and save, and to redeem all those that would believe in him.

And I believe assuredly, that by this descending of Christ into hell, and this his resurrection again from death to life, Christ hath merited and deserved for me and all true and faithful Christian men, not only that our souls shall never come into hell, but also that we shall here in this life be perfectly justified in the sight and acceptation of God, and shall have such grace, might, and power given unto us by him, that we shall be made able thereby to subdue, to mortify, and to extinguish our old Adam, and all our carnal and fleshly concupiscences, in such sort, that sin shall never afterward reign in our mortal bodies, but that we shall be wholly delivered from the kingdom of sin, and from spiritual death, and shall be resuscitated and regenerated into the new life of the Spirit and grace.

And whereas I and all other Christian men should have been the most miserable of all other creatures in the world, and should have died like heathens and pagans, without all hope of everlasting life, or of rising again after our death, if Christ our Head and Saviour had not risen again to life after his death; I believe and trust now assuredly, that by the virtue and efficacy of this descending of Christ into hell, and of his resurrection again from death to life, not only our corporal death and all the afflictions which we may sustain in this world shall not annoy us, but shall rather turn unto our profit, and be as entries and

occasions of our greater glory; but also that we after our corporal death be preserved from the captivity of hell, and shall be made partakers of Christ's resurrection, that is to say, that we shall arise and live again in the selfsame bodies and souls that we now have, and so shall utterly overcome death, and in like manner as our Head and our Saviour Jesu Christ hath done before us, and shall finally live with him immortally in joy and felicity." ⁹²⁰	
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⁹²⁰ Lloyd, *Formularies*, 40–43.

Appendix IV
John à Lasco's Additions to His 1553 Catechism⁹²³

In à Lasco's 1551 Catechism, there is no explicit reference to the descent. There is a concise phrase on the resurrection which may be perceived as alluding to it: "Therefore, by his divine power he surmounted death and hell, and on the third day he rose anew, and appeared in life to his disciples impassible and immortal." However, after Walter Deloenus publicly denied the article of the descent, à Lasco must have concluded that he would need to say something on the subject. Perhaps he thought that if the official church got wind of the fact that the Strangers' Churches were denying an article from the Apostles' Creed that their existence in England might be in peril. He ended up adding seven questions to his Catechism, which was published in England in 1553, the year of King Edward's demise. The following shows the original Dutch with an English translation.⁹²⁴

<p>Vraghe. Wat salmen by dat wordt Helle verstaen/ tot de welcke Christus neder ghedalet is?</p> <p>Andtworde. Gheen versiert voorburcht der Hellen/ om de oude heylige vaders daer wt te verlossen/ want zy altijdt in vruechde geweest zijn, en in de heylighe schriftuere wert oock nergens by den naem der Hellen sodanich voorburcht verstaen.</p>	<p><i>Question: What should men understand by the word Hell, to which Christ descended?</i></p> <p><i>Answer: Certainly not as the bailey [gatehouse] of Hell, from which to rescue the ancient holy fathers—for they had always been in joy—and in the holy scriptures is there nowhere by the name of Hell such a bailey understood.</i></p>
<p>Vraghe. Waer voor werdt dan dit wordt Helle inde Schriftuere ghenomen?</p> <p>Andtworde. Aldereerste voor de plaetse der verdoemde/ tot de welcke Christus niet ghedaelt is. Want hy alle lijden/ in het cruyce/stervende veruult heeft/ daer door hy de Sonde/ en alzo de doodt, duyvel, ende Helle/die alleen om des sonden wille/ teghe ons krachtich ware/ ouerwonnen heeft.</p>	<p><i>Question: For what then was this word "Hell" used in the Scriptures?</i></p> <p><i>Answer: First for the place of the damned, to which Christ did not descend. For he, fulfilling all suffering through his death on the cross through which he overpowered sin—as well as death, the devil, and Hell, which have their power against us solely for the sake of sin.</i></p>

⁹²³ Johannes à Lasco, *De Catechismus, Oft Kinderleere, Diemen Te Londen, in de Duydtsche Ghemeynte Was Ghebruykende* (Ghedrukt te Embden: Gellium Ctematium, 1557), folio 67-69.

⁹²⁴ I am grateful to the Rev. John Boonzaaijer for translating this text for me.

<p>Vraghe. Hoe werdt dit wordt Helle meer in de Schriftuere ghenomen?</p> <p>Andtworde. Ten eersten/ voor een graf/ ende also de conditie der dooden menschen. Ten anderen/ voor eenen wtersten ancxt en benautheyt der zielen. Ende in dese twee manieren mach desen artikel/ va de nederdalinge Christi/ oprechtelijck verstaen wesen.</p>	<p><i>Question: How else was this word “Hell” used in the Scriptures?</i></p> <p><i>Answer: First, for a grave, and thus of the condition of dead people. Additionally, for the supreme dread and terror of souls. In these two ways is the article of the descent of Christ rightly understood.</i></p>
<p>Vraghe. Hoe so?</p> <p>Antwoord. Aengaende d’eerste/ dat hy waerachtelijck so ghestoruen ende begrauen sy/ dat zyn siele tot de tydt der verrijsenisse/van den lichaeme verscheyden zynde/ niet mit den menschen op der aerden geweest is/ maer daer de verscheyden Sielen der gheloouighen zyn/ namelick/ in't Paradys.</p>	<p><i>Question: How so?</i></p> <p><i>Answer: Regarding the first, that he thus verily died and was buried—that his soul until the time of his resurrection was separated from his body, not with anyone on earth—but where the separated souls of the faithful are, namely, in Paradise.</i></p>
<p>Vraghe. Wat troost hebben de gheloonighen hierinne?</p> <p>Andtworde. Dat haer zielen/ tot den dach der verrysenisse/ van de lichamen/ door de doodt verscheyden zynde/ niet vergaen of slapen/ maer in blyschap zyn met Christo in zyn rycke/ als het den moordenaer toeghezeyt was.</p>	<p><i>Question: What comfort do those who believe have herein?</i></p> <p><i>Answer: That their souls, separated from their bodies until the day of resurrection, are neither lost nor sleeping, but are rather in joy with Christ in his kingdom, as was said to the thief on the cross.</i></p>
<p>Vraghe. Hoe mach dezen artikel van Christo op die ander wijze verstaen wesen?</p> <p>Andtworde. Dat hy in sijn siele ghesmaect heeft/ alle pynen ende acxsten des torens Gods en onser verdoemenisse/ in al sijn leuen: maer in sonderheyte aen het houdt des cruyces/ ouermidts dat hy de straeffe der sonden des werelts op hem ghenomen hadde.</p>	<p><i>Question: How may this article be understood in the other sense?</i></p> <p><i>Answer: That Christ in his soul tasted every deepest pain and terror of God’s wrath and of our damnation, in all his life: but particularly on the wood of the cross because he there had taken upon himself the punishment for the sins of the world.</i></p>

Vraghe. Wat vrucht is in dit verstandt des ancxt Christi gheleghen?

Andtworde. Dat hy niet alleen in sijn lichaem het cruycighen/ sterven ende begrauen (waeraf alder eerst ordenlick/ in den Simbolo kortelick verhaeldt werdt) maer oock in sijn siel/ den swaren toorn Gods om onser sonden wille/ gheleden heeft/ in alle dinghen/ sonder sonde gheproeft/ op dat wy/ niet alleen in de sware lasten des lichaems/ maer oock in alle benaut heden der sielen/ ia in de swaarste aenuchtinghe der wanhopicheyt/ in dit lijden Christi/ sekeren troost hebben soudē.

Question: What fruit lies in this understanding of the terror of Christ?

Answer: That he not only in his body suffered crucifixion, dying, and burial (which were in themselves soon accomplished) but also in his soul suffered the heavy wrath of God because of our sins—without tasting sin—so that we, not only in the weighty burdens of the flesh, but also in the terrors of the soul, yea in the very heaviest assaults of despair, may in this suffering of Christ always own the surest comfort.

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