

The Harrowing of Hell: Filling in the Blanks

Introduction

Christ's *descensus ad infernum* has inspired the imagination of theologians, the creativity of artists, and the comfort of laymen. The event is a veritable warehouse of doctrines from which the Church has often rummaged. Yet, one cannot help but be puzzled by the usual parenthetical manner with which the doctrine is handled in most Lutheran circles.

Only a novel approach to the *descensus* can sever it from a discussion of the state of souls in the intermediate period between death and resurrection. After all, Christ's descent is precisely that: the intermediate period between death and resurrection. Unfortunately, speculation on this intermediate state is often met with knee-jerk anti-Romanism. Surely the Confessions – reflecting Luther's hands-off approach to the topic – unintentionally provoke this attitude, speaking of “useless, unnecessary” [Lat. *inutiles et curiosas*; Ger. *unnuklichen, unnotiven bigen*] questions on the descent. But what is “useless and unnecessary” and what is not? What limits are established by the *Epitome* when it formulates the doctrine in its “simplest manner”? Has the modern Church “simplified” the doctrine out of practical existence?

Or is it possible to wrestle with what amounts to the roots of Purgatory and see if the Church may short-circuit the doctrine at its early stages, claim for herself – and resurrect! – a beautiful doctrine purged of its anti-evangelical developments? An odyssey into the terrains mapped by these questions is the purview of this paper.

Descensus ad Infernum: To Sheol and back

An inquiry into the intermediate period between death and resurrection may begin with a discussion of the *descensus ad Infernum* in the Apostle's Creed. The phrase enters the stage of creedal history in the Fourth Formula of Sirmium, 359, which stated that the Lord had “died, and descended to the underworld, and regulated things there, Whom the gatekeepers of hell saw and shuddered.”¹ J.N.D. Kelly notes that Descent themes were prominent in Eastern liturgical material, and it was this Eastern tradition that likely influenced the formularies of the West.²

To the modern mind cultivated by Dante, Hell means fire and eternal damnation. But the slippery nature of afterlife language throughout history makes translation of such words as *infernum* difficult. The Latin *infernum* invokes the typical modern understanding of Hell, that is, as a place of eternal damnation. Yet, Luther praised Jerome for translating the Hebrew *Sheol* as *infernum* in an instance where it very clearly does not mean the place of eternal damnation,³ and he by no means understood Sheol as the place of the eternally condemned. He wrote in 1539

¹J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Essex: Longman House, 1972), 378.

²Ibid. 379.

³AE 18: 71 (1526).

that the saints “enter into their chambers of rest, into Sheol, where they are gathered with their fathers.”⁴ And he wrote elsewhere, “Among the Hebrews Sheol very rarely means the place of punishments.”⁵ Even the word *Hell* has roots in the original Norse *Niflheim*, ruled by the goddess Hel, a place more akin to the Sheol of the Hebrews than the Hell of Dante. In the 14th century, an English preacher was able to say, “when Moyses hym-selfe died he vente to hell, and so dud all other men and wymmen.”⁶

In short, Sheol is revealed in the Old Testament with more nuance than the wooden translation “hell” would indicate. Far from being the place of final, fiery, and eternal punishment traditionally assigned to Hell, Sheol must be seen as a place flexible enough to embrace meanings such as “pit,” “grave,” “punishment,” “sorrow,” “guilt,” and even “depression.” In other words, it is the place where sin, death, and the power of the devil reign supreme.

Significant as a background to Christ’s Descent, all people – the faithful saints and the pagan – went to Sheol. Jacob repeatedly mentions Sheol as the destination for his “gray hair.” (Gen. 37: 35, 42: 38, 44: 29-31)⁷ Solomon speaks without qualification when he writes, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in [Sheol] where you are going.” (Ecclesiastes 9: 10) Job even identified Sheol as a place of repose from his sufferings. (Job 14: 13) Of course, the Psalmist and prophets anticipate the curse of Sheol also for the wicked, even if in several contexts it is not so much punishments in Sheol which are anticipated, but death itself which will bring to naught the self-aggrandizing plans of the wicked. (Ps. 9: 17, 55: 15; Is. 5: 14, 14: 9; et. al.) Yet, in the end the effects of the Fall and its curse are upon all people.

The difference between the righteous and the wicked is not so much of place, as it is of hope. The righteous, while going to Sheol, hope for a restoration to life. The Psalmist demonstrates this truth poignantly when he writes of this restoration as a “morning”: “This is the way of those who are foolish, And of their posterity who approve their sayings. Like sheep they are laid in [Sheol]; Death shall feed on them; The upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; And their beauty shall be consumed in the grave, far from their dwelling. But God will redeem my soul from the power of [Sheol], For He shall receive me.” (Ps. 49: 13-15)

The hope, then, of the faithful Hebrew was redemption from Sheol. In a verse much quoted by Luther, Hannah prays, “The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to [Sheol] and brings up.” This sentiment is paradigmatic for the rest of the Old Testament and brings up the hope of the resurrection. Rabbi Simai wrote, “There is not a single chapter of the Torah

⁴AE 7: 293 (1544).

⁵AE 16: 140 (1530).

⁶Edmund Reiss, *The Tradition of Moses in the Underworld and the York Plays of the Transfiguration and Harrowing*; in an article from *Mediaevalia: A Journal of Medieval Studies*, 1979, v. 5, (Binghamton, NT: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1980), 143.

⁷All Scripture quotes given from the *New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

which does not contain the doctrine of the Resurrection....”⁸ In many places the Psalms invoke the Lord’s redemption from Sheol as an ongoing hope, typified by the verse quoted in Peter’s Pentecostal sermon (Ps. 16: 10, 18: 5-6, 30: 3, 49: 15, et.al.)

What sort of place was this Sheol and what was the state of souls there? Before a general survey of Biblical data is given, a comment should be made on the Hebraic understanding of the person as an animated body, a “living clod of earth,” in contrast to the Hellenic view of the person as an incarnate soul. The Hebrews’ thoughts were terrestrial, appropriate for a people whose Lord spoke, “Dust thou art.” The Lord had appropriated dust as the reception point of His life-giving Spirit, the point at which separate, individual, and unique creations would enjoy the gifts of life. Dust plus God’s Spirit meant life; dust minus God’s Spirit meant death. (Genesis 6: 3) The Genesis account of Creation and Fall thus informed the Hebrew understanding of the state of the dead.

George Foot Moore best summarizes the Hebraic understanding of the dead: “dead, limp shades, the semblance of their former selves bereft of all strength.”⁹ The miry existence of their bodies (Ps. 40: 2) paralleled that of their soul, and the Psalms often speak of the lack of remembrance in Sheol. (Ps. 6: 5; cf. Ecc. 9: 5 & Is. 38: 18) The arrogant and proud lose their edge, presumably deprived of their knack for self-aggrandizement (Is. 14: 10).

Grounded in a terrestrial faith, the hope of the dead naturally resided in the Promised Land. As the special, unique and elect location of the Lord’s promises for restoration, it was the hope of every Hebrew to be buried in the “land of the fathers,” namely, Abraham’s Bosom, the bosom of the land of promise acting as a womb from which new birth would arise. Joseph’s desire to be buried in the Promised land comes to mind. Such terrestrial and literalistic hopes are demonstrated comically in Rabbi Simai’s solution to the problem of diaspora Jews buried outside of Palestine: “The Holy One, blessed be He, will burrow the earth before them, and their bodies will roll through the excavation like bottles, and when they arrive at the land of Israel, their souls will be reunited to them.”¹⁰

Prior to any such burrowing, however, it was the generally accepted view that the faithful of God awaited their redemption in a state of repose in Sheol. Luther reflected the mainstream of ancient Judeo-Christian thought when he wrote, “Jacob did not ascend into heaven; nor did he descend into hell. Where, then, did he go? God has a receptacle in which the saints and the elect rest without death, without pain and hell. But what it is named and what kind of place it is, no one knows.”¹¹ He suggests elsewhere that this place is Christ’s point of reference in the phrase, “Abraham’s Bosom.” In this same context he quotes Wisdom 3: 1 which refers to the safety of the Lord’s saints “in His hand.” He compares the righteous dead to a baby in the womb of his mother, alive, completely unaware of his existence, and awaiting birth unto the fullness of

⁸Sifre Deut., Ha’azinu, 306, f. 132a fin.; quoted from *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books), 607.

⁹George Foot Moore, *Judaism*, Vol. II (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 289.

¹⁰T.f.Ket. XII, 3, f. 35b, line 13; Ket. IIIa; *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 600.

¹¹AE 8: 315ff.

life. His language here calls to mind the imagery of II Esdras, where the revealing angel Uriel compares the “righteous in their chambers [in Hades]” to a woman in travail. (II Esdras 4: 42)

Rabbis such as Samuel bar Nehmani expressed teachings similar to that of Luther’s: “Do days die? But it means that at the death of the righteous, their days cease from the world, yet they themselves abide, as it says ‘In whose hand is the soul of all the living’ (Job 12: 10). Can this mean that the living alone are in God’s hand, and not dead? No, it means that the righteous even after their death may be called living, whereas the wicked, both in life and death, may be called dead.”¹² However, at moments such as Saul’s seance, the Lord may release a soul from His hand. And revealingly, Samuel complains that Saul has “disturbed” him, presumably from his rest.¹³

If the righteous existed in restful repose in the “hand of God” while yet in Sheol, in a place called “Abraham’s Bosom,” what of the unrighteous? Is there Biblical validation for a topography of Sheol which accommodates various regions? At this point, Moses’ reference to the “lowest Sheol,” which Hebrew parallelism would place at the “foundations of the mountains,” comes into play. (Deut. 32: 22) Prompted by this verse later writers zealously worked various levels or regions into their geography of Sheol. Apocalyptic writers recounted their tours of these levels by the revealing angel, and rabbis would debate over the nature of punishments in these regions.¹⁴ Luther was content at least in 1515 to accept the notion of levels in Sheol, referring to the upper and lower hells, the upper being reserved for those who died prior to Christ’s advent.¹⁵ In this he was influenced by Augustine, who himself is preceded by a host of church fathers.

Jesus Himself presents the fates of the righteous and wicked (Lazarus and the rich man) as existing on the same plane, separated only by a large gulf. A proper translation of Jesus’ words would read, “And in Hades, he [the rich man] lifted up his eyes, being in torments.” Notably, *Hades* is a thought distinct from those *torments* which are in Hades, and the translation of the NIV – “In hell, where he was in torment” – must be understood as an anachronistic rendering of Christ’s words. In other words, Jesus’ language certainly accommodates a general place of the dead known as Hades or Sheol, which has within it at least two regions, one which might be identified with Gehenna, and one which might be identified with Abraham’s Bosom.

¹²Tanh. B., Berakahb. fin.; A Rabbinic Anthology, 580-581.

¹³To be sure, church fathers from Tertullian to the present have argued that the apparition was a “ventriloquistic spirit” or demon. Tertullian wrote, “God forbid, however, that we should suppose that the soul of any saint, much less of a prophet, can be dragged out of (its resting place in Hades) by a demon.” Compare Hippolytus’ commentary on Kings, which notes that the deceiving demon inferred Saul’s fate the way a physician might predict the result of a disease; Hippolytus interprets the demon to be in error as to the day of Saul’s death. Yet, the Scriptures assign the personhood of Samuel to the being (“Samuel said...”). While the witch confuses the being with God (using the Hebrew *elohim*, translated as *theous* in LXX), upon description of the being she is corrected by Saul. Saul recognizes the being as Samuel on account of his mantle. There is no suggestion in the context that the being is anything other than the bodiless person of Samuel. The burden of proof lies with those who would force an interpretation contrary to the obvious language of the text.

¹⁴Among the many debates between the rabbis Shammai and Hillel was that concerning the state of souls in the afterlife. The stricter and more literalist Shammai (50 BC - 30 AD) argued for a purgatorial Gehenna on the basis of Zech. 13: 9; Hillel (70 BC - 10 AD) tipped the balance in favor of God’s mercy, arguing from Ex. 36: 6 and Ps. 116: 6; Hillel also believed in the annihilation of condemned souls at the end of 12 months.

¹⁵AE 30: 175 (1522).

To review the data thus far, the Old Testament reveals Sheol as the fate of all people, the curse of sin. Still, within this place there is reserved the faithful of God Who are protected in His hand. These faithful are the elect of Israel, whose status as a type of the full redemption of all humanity parallels the status of the Promised Land as a type of the full redemption of the earth. Both the promised people and Promised Land await the fulfillment of this restoration, and do so in a sort of soul sleep. Those who willfully reject the Lord's promises through unbelief and wickedness experience the punishment of flames in Sheol, residing in the lowest regions of Sheol. They are reserved for an everlasting death and condemnation (cf. Is. 34: 8-10, Jer. 49: 33, 50: 39, 51: 26, Ezek. 27: 36, 28: 19, Obad. 1: 10, Dan. 12: 2; cf. Rev. 20: 13-14).

The preceding background illuminates many New Testament passages, which all too often are given forced meaning through a certain form of Protestant allegory or metaphor rather than in their plain language. Equipped with an honest reading of the Old Testament data, many of the New Testament passages can be grounded in a more literal and smooth reading of the text.

For example, Jesus says to John in the Apocalypse, "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." (Rev. 1: 18) One can easily fit this in the context of the Old Testament. Several Old Testament passages had already introduced the image of gates barring Sheol. (Job 17: 16; cf. Is. 38: 10) These gates were a powerful force preventing any escape from its grips (Ps. 49: 15, 89: 48; Hos. 13: 14). If Jesus has the keys to Hades, certainly this would imply that He has and will use these keys for the purpose of opening some door, specifically a door which holds prisoners. Matthew 18: 19 ties together these themes. Jesus gives St. Peter the Keys and says that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the Church. The only way to make sense of the gates in this passage is to see them as gates barricading people that are meant to be liberated. In other words, Jesus leads the Church out of the gates of Hades, and the gates cannot prevail against the Church.¹⁶

This is obviously the exact meaning behind the vast repertoire of art, literature, and Medieval drama depicting Christ's "Harrowing of Hell." Common themes in the "Harrowing of Hell" iconography included the victory flag of resurrection, the cross, broken gates, the opening of the jaws of a great fish (the abyss), and Christ grabbing the hands of Old Testament saints, usually Adam. The Harrowing was also a popular theme of religious drama, forming an essential part of the Corpus Christi mystery cycle.¹⁷ In Lutheran circles, both Durer and Cranach portrayed vivid depictions of Christ's assault on the gates of Hades. The *Epitome* references a sermon of Luther's at Torgau in 1533 which presented the traditional view of Christ's Descent.

¹⁶The only alternative reading of this passage would be to say that (1) the church will be bursting through the gates *into* hell (but why this odd occurrence?), (2) the gates of hell will become detached from hell and go forth throughout the world attacking churches, or (3) the other possibility is that "gates" is a metaphor for the power of the devil. In the latter two readings, one must ask the question: does this understanding of "gates" have biblical precedence? Is that the normal reading of the text? One would have to stretch an argument to answer in the positive. However, it certainly does not go against Scripture to assert that Jesus has the keys to Hades, gave them to Peter and the other apostles, and among their tasks was liberating people from the shackles of Sheol, Sheol being defined as the place where sin, death, and the power of the devil reign supreme (cf. Eph. 2: 2).

¹⁷Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, ****), *****

He preached, “it is customary to represent Christ in paintings on walls, as He descends, appears before hell, clad in a priestly robe and with a banner in His hand, with which He beats the devil and puts him to flight, takes hell by storm, and rescues those that are His. Thus it was also acted the night before Easter as a play for children.” He continued, “it is appropriate and right that we view it literally, just as it is painted, that He descends with the banner, shattering and destroying the gates of hell; and we should put aside thoughts that are too deep and incomprehensible for us.”¹⁸

What is demonstrated vividly in art is rooted in the less picturesque language of I Peter 3: 19, where it is written that Jesus by the Spirit preached to the prisoners in Sheol. (cf. I Peter 4: 6) A question which vexed the Fathers may be posed here: Did Jesus preach the Gospel or only the Law?

John 5 is now operative. Verse 25 testifies that “the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” Who are the dead? Given the background already cited about Sheol, it is easy to see that the dead are those who are imprisoned in Sheol, Sheol being the domain of sin, death, and the power of the devil. Thus, at this point in John 5, a metaphorical meaning could be rendered, and Jesus is simply saying that those who are dead in their sins will hear the Gospel and live. However, the meaning of Sheol as the *grave*, the domain of the physically dead, is clearly the meaning given in verse 28, where it is written, “for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.” When is this hour? Matthew 27: 52 offers one answer: “the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” The hearing of the voice of Jesus occurred sometime between His death and resurrection. At this point, Christ led the Church Triumphant out of Hades. The gates could not prevail against her, for Jesus had the key to Hades and ensured the eternal effect of their power through His apostolic ministers.

Christ’s “harrowing of hell” rests on the assumption that prior to His advent (or the advent of preaching, as will be seen), those who died were not immediately judged unto eternal damnation or heaven. Revelation 20: 13 says as much when it refers to the first death and the second death. The first death refers to Hades, or Sheol. And markedly, all those in Hades and Sheol are made alive again to face the judgment. It is *from Hades* that some go to everlasting life and some go to everlasting death. Verse 14 first introduces a clear reference to the place of eternal damnation, namely, the lake of fire. Revelation specifically refers to this lake of fire as “the second death.” The first death is Hades/Sheol, where Christ descended, where the dead were reserved, where the Old Testament saints were reserved. The second death is a lake of fire.

It would be the case, then, that no Old Testament saint went to heaven, as understood as the beatific communion in the presence of God. Jesus Christ says as much when He says in John 3: 13, “No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of

¹⁸cited by F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*; [introduction to] *Triglot Concordia* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 192-193.

man.”¹⁹ Luther’s own words (*supra*) on the fate of Jacob clearly support this conclusion.

Is it the case, then, that the final judgment occurs not at death, but at the end of time? Several implications seem to be to this effect. The Revelation verse cited above places the assignment of Hades and Death into the Lake of Fire at the end of time. And II Peter 3: 7 speaks of a reservation of heaven and earth for fire. II Peter 2: 4 also refers to demons being reserved for judgment, which parallels the binding of Satan until the end of time (cf. Rev. 20: 2).

A host of patristic teaching – marked by a literalism which is refreshing – was prompted by these same Scriptures. Agreed on the basic premise that Christ descended into Sheol for some act of liberation, there is yet disagreement among the Fathers. Generally speaking, the views of the Fathers may be divided up into three categories.

One view posited that Christ preached the Gospel to all people in Sheol. This position was held by Clement, Cyril of Alexandria, Hillary of Poitiers, Amrosiaster, and Ambrose.²⁰ Clement of Alexandria, for example, argued from the universal economy of Christ’s redemptive act that His preaching in hell liberated not only the Hebrew saints, but all who would hear Him. He wrote:

“What then? Did not the same dispensation obtain in Hades, so that even there, all the souls on hearing the proclamation, might either exhibit repentance, or confess that their punishment was just, because they believed not? And it were the exercise of no ordinary arbitrariness, for those who had departed before the advent of the Lord (not having the Gospel preached to them, and having afforded no ground from themselves in consequence of believing or not) to obtain either salvation or punishment. For it is not right that these should be condemned without trial, and that those alone who lived after the advent should have the advantage of the divine righteousness. But to all rational souls it was said from above, ‘whatever one of you had done in ignorance, without clearly knowing God, if, on becoming conscious, he repent, all his sins will be forgiven him.’...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?”²¹

Clement further taught that the apostles upon their own deaths continued Christ’s harrowing work, preaching in Hades to the Gentiles.²²

¹⁹Thus, the statement that the heavens received the chariot of Elijah must be understood in light of Jesus’ statement, and not vice versa. Christ’s statements always stand as overarching principles, to which all Old Testament passages must submit. One solution to the seeming contradiction is that “heavens” simply referred to the sky, as often it does in the Old Testament. Another solution is that Elijah and Moses, the characters of the Transfiguration, are the exception to the rule. Yet, it remains that Christ says, “No one has ascended into heaven but He who has descended from heaven.”

²⁰Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescure for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 102-105.

²¹*Stromata*, Bk. 6, Ch. 6. Quoted from the Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 491. Citations from the Ante-Nicene Fathers will henceforth be abbreviated to ANF, Vol., pp.)

²²*Ibid.*, 491.

A second view held that Christ preached only to the Old Testament saints. This view was held by Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Chrysostom, and Augustine.

Irenaeus, for example, wrote:

“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, which sins we should not lay to their charge, if we would not despise the grace of God.”²³

Tertullian argued for the two levels in Sheol but held the opinion (based on Rev. 6: 9) that martyrs get immediate transference to heaven. All other people – Christians and heathen – go to Hades, with the believers rising to meet Christ at the Second Coming.²⁴ He refers to “Abraham’s Bosom” as a place “not in heaven, ...yet higher than hell.”²⁵

Augustine and Chrysostom manifestly rejected the notion that Christ offered salvation to any but the Old Testament saints in His descent. Chrysostom feared that any hope of a “second chance” for pagans would weaken the Church’s call to repentance in this life. Augustine wondered why Christ would have given pagans a “second chance” before His resurrection, but not afterwards. And he mocked the notion apparently current in his time that there was a remembrance of Christ’s preaching for those latter pagans.²⁶

A final position on Christ’s preaching in Sheol placed His descent in the greater framework of the total restoration (paracatastasis) of the fallen world. Suggesting Neoplatonic influences current in Alexandria, Origen argued for the necessary return of all creation – including demons – to the perfect order. The fires of hell were purgatorial, not punitive. Gregory of Nyssa too argued from his Platonizing views on God that the punishments in hell were medicinal, part of the total plan of pre-determined restoration.

This extensive survey of the full range of patristic authors – from Lyons to Carthage to Alexandria – demonstrates that the earliest Church generally embraced the depiction of the hereafter as revealed in the Old Testament. With virtual unanimity, the Fathers held that Sheol/Hades was the resting place of those saints who died prior to Christ’s Advent. Christ’s Descent liberated at least those saints and perhaps more.

Purgatory: A doctrine in need of purging

Obviously the immediate reaction to the interpretation of the data thus far given is that it flirts dangerously close to the fires of Purgatory. Can the Lutheran approach these teachings

²³*Against Heresies*, Bk. 4, ch. 27. (ANF, Vol. 1, 499.)

²⁴*Treatise on the Soul*, Ch. 55. (ANF, Vol. 3, 231.)

²⁵*Against Marcion*, Bk. 4, Ch. 34. (ANF, Vol. 3, 406.)

²⁶Augustine, *Epistles*. 164: 4, 13.

and not be singed? It is hoped not. Chemnitz dealt sufficiently with the issue, and a modern history of Purgatory (such as Jacques Le Goff's *The Birth of Purgatory*) friendly to the Lutheran position need not be reviewed here. What this paper will rather probe are those impulses which hijacked the Hebrew doctrine of Sheol and developed the doctrine of Purgatory.

To accomplish this, it is necessary to appraise the Hellenistic forces which had changed the paradigms of Hebrew theology in the intertestamental period. Martin Chemnitz centered his critical examination of Purgatory in this exact period and cited the influence of both Platonism and Apocalyptic literature on that period.²⁷

One would assume that the strong Jewish nationalism of the Maccabean period – with its high suspicion of things Hellenistic – would foil any attempt of Orpheus, Theseus, Herakles, or Plato to invade Sheol as they did Hades and come back with descriptions more suitable to their pagan views of the afterlife. Yet, in terms of literary tropes, this is precisely what happened; the freight loaded on to themes and motifs introduced in the Old Testament in many cases were derived from Hellenistic impulses.

On a pure literary level, the apocalyptic writers took a two-dimensional portrayal of Sheol from the Hebrew canon – with its vague references to levels, gates, mountains, and rivers – and added an exaggerated depth to it. Contact with Hellenism in Egypt surely encouraged this development. Le Goff wrote of Egyptian views of the afterlife, “When it came to the topography of Hell, the Egyptian imagination knew no limits: the dead were lodged in a bewildering variety of houses, chambers, niches, and various other places.”²⁸ Particularly creative, the Egyptians out-Dante’ed Dante in their sketches of the afterlife depicting walls, gates, muddy marshes, lakes of fire, and tortures. However, too often scholars assume syncretism wherever mere cultural contact occurs. In many cases, history contrapuntally argues for a conservatism amongst isolated ethnic groups swallowed up in a majority culture. But waves of seismic cultural change cannot easily be dodged. A far more powerful invasion stormed the defenses of the intertestamental mind than a few literary snatches of ancient Egyptian musings. This was Hellenistic philosophy.

A popular form of philosophy known as “Middle Platonism” – a hybrid between Platonism and various eastern mystical traditions (Orphism and Zoroastrianism) – infiltrated the Jewish mind in the intertestamental period. After his death, Plato’s philosophy had quickly dissolved into a more or less quasi-religious way of life involving renunciation of the flesh, contemplation of the virtues, and mystical communion with the divinity. Plato’s successors identified a kinship with the eastern mystical traditions, and the syncretistic impulses of Hellenism fused the two together as a formidable mystical-philosophical force.²⁹

There is a focus on individual ethical improvement in Platonism and its hybrid which is a theological departure from the communal morality of the Torah. If the Torah begins with God’s Self-giving love and ends with love of neighbor, Platonism begins with one’s own self, and

²⁷Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part III (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 231ff.

²⁸Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 19-20.

²⁹D.S. Russel, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 20-25.

through an internal, mystical path ends with beatific vision of the divinity. Death for the Platonist is escape from individuation. The afterlife is where the soul is drawn back into the divinity through fiery purging of “earthbound” thinking. Hades is one’s individual and personalized reform program. Punishment is doled out by the gods (daimones) in proportion to the sins (cf. Republic 10: 615a-b). When the purgation/punishment is complete, the soul enjoys a period of mystic union with the divinity, after which its lust for individuation kicks in, and it returns to the material world in whatever new form is allotted for him by the divinity.

This mystical program had a broad attraction across religious boundaries. Certainly Judaism was not immune to its draw. Mystical Platonism sabotaged Hebrew theology, imposing a new hermeneutic upon the Torah. The charter through which God embraced His people became a book for ethical self-improvement. Put another way, the communal, liturgical cradle of God’s Promise(s) became a Self-help book. St. Paul attests to this evolution in Jewish theology. He notes, for example, the relapse of the Galatian congregation into a bondage to “beggarly elements” and the observation of “days and months and seasons and years.” Yet, it is exactly such pedantic observances which permeate the Book of Enoch,³⁰ a work of the highly mystical Essenes.

This transformation in Jewish thought radically altered their view of the afterlife, where the stamp of Hellenism left its mark. For example, there is a strong cosmic determinism in the Apocalypses which parallels Platonism (and Stoicism). God, being good but deterministic, could not possibly be allowing the evil in the world, thus, the afterlife became necessary as an arena where the wrongs of history were righted. Theology of the afterlife became theodicy. Also, Plato’s understanding of the deity as an absolute, transcendent, and unchanging Being hardened the merciful Lord of the Scriptures to pleas for mercy. 4Ezra, for instance, recounts Ezra’s repeated attempts to ask for mercy on behalf of the people of Israel, only to be told finally to accept the paradox that, no, the Lord will not have mercy, but yes, the Lord is more loving of the Jews than anyone! If there was to be mercy (as other apocalypses would allow), it would only be through purgation, the changing of man for God, certainly not vice versa. Finally, a certain Manichaean battle between good and evil pervades the apocalypses, good being defined as those who pursue a rigid ascetical lifestyle loosely based on the Torah, and evil being defined as those who join the common mass of greedy and immoral opportunists.

To underscore, then, the subtle but profound role of Hellenistic philosophy on Jewish views of the afterlife: As is seen throughout history amidst a looming cultural imperialism, syncretism of ideas, philosophies, and religions paradoxically abet an internalization and individualization of religion. This process took place in Judaism when confronted with Hellenism. And coupled with the loss of Jewish self-sufficiency and self-determination (the loss of which is paradoxically the flip side of nationalism) and the rise of the diaspora, this syncretism

³⁰1 Enoch 41: 5: “And I saw the storerooms of the sun and the moon, from what place they come out and to which place they return, and their glorious return – how in their travel one festival is celebrated more than the other.” (Quoted from *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 1, ed. by James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 32.)

The role of Platonism in the development of Jewish ethics and especially in the erosion in the doctrine of justification in Judaism and in the early church is certainly a topic for further study.

served to weaken Jewish cultural bonds and lead to more individualized preoccupations. The seeming anachronism of the Lord's promise of land and blessings – as little Israel got swallowed up in a great sea of Hellenism – encouraged a universalism with monotheists of other more philosophical and mystical persuasions, an evolution of methodology justified by the similarity between the Torah and, say, the *Republic* or *Timaeus*, with a little help from allegory. Add an ascetic spirit, a moralizing ethic, a martyrdom complex, and abandonment from society, and the resultant mix generated a mind fixated on eschatology, cosmic battle, and a rigid code of ethics.

The caution with which traditional rabbinical thought approached the mystically-motivated apocalyptic writers is evidenced in the Tosefta tractate: “The books of Ben Sira and all books which were written from then onwards do not defile the hands.”³¹ It was the rabbinical belief that hands which handled the inspired scrolls in the liturgical worship were defiled through contact; those which did not defile the hands, then, were not to be considered part of the accepted canon. Rabbi Akiba wrote that those who have “no share in the world to come” include “he that reads the outside books” [that is, in the Jewish liturgical, public reading].³²

Why were such books rejected as uncanonical? First, it was the Jewish view that prophecy had ceased from Israel after Daniel; the succession of the line of prophets going back to Moses (Deut. 18) had ceased with Daniel.³³ Second, though generally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, the rabbis were skeptical about the Hellenistic character of intertestamental literature. For example Jason of Cyrene, the author from whose work Maccabees II was abridged, was trained in a Greek school of language and literature. As Moore wrote, “what Philo would have loved, the Pharisees would have hated.”³⁴ Fourth, Apocalyptic writers were fanning the flames of zealotry, fueling the destruction of the Temple; the rabbis tended toward more diplomatic relations with Rome. Fifth, Christians were using the Apocalyptic literature.

This last reason is problematic and segues into the heart of the reason for the rise of Purgatory: Christians were more inclined to receive apocalyptic traditions, which in turn were highly influenced by Hellenistic (and therefore, purgatorial) views of the afterworld.

To be sure, a Christianity inspired by the Pentecostal Spirit was less absolute in its declaration of the end of prophecy. On the contrary, “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams.” (Acts 2: 17) This animus prepared the way for all sorts of flirtation with apocalyptic literature. Yet, even as there was an internal debate on the legitimacy of apocalypses in Jewish circles, so was there such a debate among the Christians.

Using the Joel prophecy as a foundation, Tertullian writing on the martyrdom of Perpetua

³¹Tosefta tractate, Yadaim ii. 13.

³²Tosefta tractate, Sanhedrin x. i.

³³Josephus wrote, “Our history has been written since Artaxerxes very thoroughly, but it has not been considered of equal authority with the earlier records by our forefathers, because there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time.” (*Against Apion*, I, 37-43)

³⁴Moore, 295.

and Felicitas states, “And thus, we... acknowledge and reverence, even as we do the prophecies, modern visions as equally promised to us.”³⁵ (That the conservative and orthodox Tertullian could so easily become a Montanist argues strongly for a pristine Church more accepting of post-Pentecostal prophecy, against which a developing Church would eventually reformulate its understanding of the Joel prophecy.) Origen used the Joel prophecy to champion his allegorical approach to Scripture; the prophecy is fulfilled when a believer is not captivated by the “corporeal meaning” of Scripture.³⁶ His hermeneutic conflated well with fellow Alexandrian Clement, who identified the Logos of the Scripture with the logos of Platonism, and Justin, who argued the universal “spermatika logos” in all pursuits of truth.³⁷ In each of the preceding thought processes can be seen a distinct justification for the incorporation of both apocrypha and philosophy on the basis of the Joel prophecy.

On the other side, Jerome took a decidedly anti-apocryphal stance in the Vulgate, and there is seen a marked drop in apocalypses around the time of the 4th and 5th centuries. Augustine too took a more conservative position.

Yet, the damage had been done. Martin Chemnitz referred to the “apocryphal fables”³⁸ which served as the basis for Purgatory, and it is precisely the adoption of these works which generated the rise of Purgatory. Of these apocalypses, scholars generally identify the Apocalypse of Peter as the “Q” of such other works as the Christian *Apocalypse of Ezra*, the *Vision of Paul*, and the *Passion of S. Perpetua*. This apocalypse was among the disputed books, but was included in the canon of the Muratorian fragment and the *Catalogus Claramontanus*, an Eastern canon. Both Clement and Methodius regarded it as inspired Scripture. Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* has the first documented evidence of doubt regarding this apocalypse, listing it among the spurious books.

The *Apocalypse of Peter* calls to mind the Platonic-Orphic tradition, and includes such wonderful Orphic images as the boiling cauldron of filth. W.K.C. Guthrie wrote of the influence of Platonic-orphism on Christian eschatology: “It is in the realm of eschatology, and perhaps there alone, that we find Christian writers offering dogmas which have their ultimate origin in the Orphic books.”³⁹ Orphism, like Platonism, was a highly individual and internalized program of mystical self-improvement. The flesh is a place of trial for the soul, and the afterlife is the place for one’s personal reform program.

Despite Augustine’s doubts about the apocalypses and their presentation of the afterlife, the purgatorial imagery of the apocalyptic works and Platonic-Orphic philosophy had already

³⁵Tertullian, *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas*. (ANF, Vol. 3, 594.)

³⁶Origen, *De Principiis*, ch. 7. (ANF, Vol. 4, 285.)

³⁷Clement, *Stromata*, ch. 13. (ANF, Vol. 2, 504)

³⁸Chemnitz, 243.

³⁹W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966), 269.

taken root in the popular mind. The seeds of this doctrine sprouted and grew into the perverse Medieval doctrine it became. Augustine in fact reluctantly codified the existing traditions and become the springboard from which the Medieval doctrine took off.⁴⁰

Luther – obviously a critic of Purgatory – was given over to great skepticism about any possible subtle handling of Sheol or the afterlife. He wrote of the Fathers’ view on Limbo: “Thus in former times horrible darkness was brought into the church because of such madness.” He speaks of the “countless disputes and questions on the part of the ancients...sharp disputes [concerning regions in Sheol] and...various arguments that do not particularly impress me.”⁴¹ In this same context he wrote of the fathers in another place, “their laziness in matters of Scripture disgusts me.”⁴² But again, this language of Luther must be seen in his original context; he most certainly accepted the notion of Sheol as a place where all people go, a place where the wicked suffer but also where the righteous rest in the hand of God. He left many issues up for debate, as he wrote elsewhere, “If anyone chooses to maintain that after Christ had died on the cross, He descended to the souls and preached to them there, I will not stand in the way. These words could give such a meaning.”⁴³ He himself, however, took the position which has been handed on as canonical by consequential Lutheran theologians.

Universalism and Christ’s Harrowing of Hell: Filling in the Blanks

This paper will now divert course, break with canonical tradition, and raise a question: Did Christ’s harrowing of hell fill in the blanks implied by God’s universal promise of salvation? To instigate thought, another simple question will be asked: Is it possible to speak of God’s universal *promise* of salvation outside of the universal *proclamation* of salvation?

A brief review of modern universalism should quickly dismiss David Scaer’s claim that the view which follows is “inherently universalistic, in that [it teaches] that people originally condemned or not having heard the Gospel are given a chance to repent.”⁴⁴ By using the term “universalistic” without qualification, he invokes the negative animus which a good Lutheran will have against the generally accepted universalism of popular Christianity.

A survey of the history of modern universalism would alert any faithful Christian to the dangers of going down this path. The story begins with Charles Chauncy, a congregationalist who denied the Trinity. Prompted by the lexical point that *aionos* need not mean “forever,” he argued that the fires of hell were by no means eternal, but purgatorial. John Murray (1741-1815), a Calvinist, continued the battle, arguing that the elect include all men. Christ had a “consanguinity” with all men, and so His death atoned for all men. Elhanan Winchester (1751-

⁴⁰Le Goff, 61-85.

⁴¹cf. AE: 7, 293ff (1544).

⁴²AE: 20, 96ff (1527).

⁴³AE: 30, 113 (1522).

⁴⁴David P. Scaer, *Christology* (Fort Wayne: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1989),

1797), an anti-slavery Baptist, held the “restorationist” position, that a 50,000 year period of purgation would cleanse all men of their sins. Hosea Ballow, a Calvinist-Baptist, believed that finite sin cannot contain an infinite God; Christ’s work was the deterministic actuation of God’s desire to lead all men out of the misery of sin.

Universalism continued as a popular liberal movement. The typical universalist was a Jeffersonian Democrat. In the 20th century, the movement took a more humanistic course, and eventually united with the Unitarians. Universalism died down after other mainline denominations basically accepted its premises.⁴⁵

The essential difference between the argument for universalism which follows and the survey just given is spelled out clearly by this teaching of Hosea Ballow: “the divine grace of reconciliation may be communicated to those *who have never been privileged with the volume of divine revelation*, and who *have never heard the name of a Mediator proclaimed*, as the only way of life and salvation.”⁴⁶ [italics mine]

That is, this paper makes a vastly important distinction between the universal *salvation* of all men and the universal *proclamation* of the Gospel to all men. The impetus for positing universal salvation is ultimately fueled by the tension between Calvinistic determinism and the love of God. “If only the elect are saved in accordance with God’s determined purpose, but God is love, why can’t it simply be said that all are elect” is the resolution to this tension for the modern universalist.

An argument for universal *proclamation*, however, is compelled by no philosophical tensions, but by the very Lutheran and Biblical teaching that “God...is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.” (I Tim. 4: 10) The faithful Lutheran can rest assured that God will still put people in hell, for universal proclamation in actuality has little to do with universal salvation.

The universal *proclamation* of the Gospel begins with the universal *promise* of the Gospel. The Church confesses: “one, holy, *catholic*, and apostolic church.” *Catholic* means universal; it is the antidote to the universal corruption of humanity. (Romans 5: 18) God’s election of Israel was indeed for the purpose of making His Name known among *all peoples* (Deuteronomy 7: 7, 14; 10: 15; 28: 10; I Kings 8: 43; II Chronicles 6: 33.). David’s Psalm in I Chronicles 16 summarizes the theology of God’s election of Israel, in which he prays: “tremble before Him, all the earth” (v. 30). And Isaiah prophecies about the latter days when “all nations” shall flow to the Lord’s holy mountain (2: 1), where the Lord will prepare a banquet, swallow up death, and remove the veil spread over “all nations” (25: 6 - 7). Again, Daniel prophecies about the messianic reign in which “all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.”

The Advent of the Christ corresponds to this universal message, as the angel proclaims “I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.” And as Simeon speaks, “For my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples.” And the prologue of St. John reads, “That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming

⁴⁵*The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 733.

⁴⁶Ernest Cassara, *Universalism in America: A Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 42.

into the world.” And Jesus says, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” And for this reason, the focus of the message of salvation is to “all nations.”

That all ears will hear the Gospel is in fact indicated in Philippians 2, where every knee, including those in the underworld, will bow before Christ and proclaim Him Lord. (v. 11; cf. Revelation 5: 13) The question for this paper is whether this knowledge and confession of Christ’s Lordship will have been given too late for those in the underworld. As if to answer this question, St. Paul writes in Colossians – using the aorist! – that the Gospel they have heard *was preached* “to every creature under heaven.” He of course is speaking eschatologically here, and it is the depths of this eschatological preaching that is here explored.

Too often, a sort of Nestorian view of God’s revelation drives an understanding of God’s universal decrees. That is, it may be confessed that indeed God has made such universal decrees as demonstrated above, but then it is maintained that this universal decree cannot be understood as an incarnate reality. God may be thinking it, and telling a few people about it, but the reality is far different from what is going on in the lofty, transcendent, sovereign mind of God.

Yet, Amos 3: 7 reads, “Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.” Of course, revelation understood Christologically presents the Incarnate One as *the* prophet (Acts 3: 22, 7: 37), and more to the point, the very mind, face, hands, and Word of God in the world (cf. John 1: 18, 5: 37-39, 12: 49-50). In other words, by implication, the Lord’s universalistic declarations are manifested in the preaching of Christ (the genitive understood subjectively and objectively here); hence, St. Paul can indeed say that “every creature under heaven” heard the Gospel. Obviously, St. Paul was not so confident in his missionary prowess that he believed the Gospel at his time to have entered the ear of every creature under heaven. He is speaking eschatologically, or economically, a manner of speaking which fits well in the economic theology presented in his letter to the Colossians (and Ephesians).

The challenging of this “Nestorian” view of revelation calls for the defense an analysis of Acts 17: 30.

In his proclamation to the Athenian philosophers, St. Paul references the former/latter times distinction as one split precisely at the point of his own preaching: “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.” Here is seen a clear universal decree on the part of God that all men repent. The “Nestorian” approach would be to say that at some point after the fulfillment of Christ’s mission, perhaps at Pentecost, God made a decree in the heavens that all men are to repent. This decree is binding as of May 24th, 9 AM, 29 AD, upon all of humanity, Aztec and Inca alike. If Aztec and Inca do not actually *hear* this decree, well, this is an occasion for a theodicy, a vindication of God’s justice, explaining how—even though God promised the Gospel for all people—yet many (indeed, the huge majority) do not hear.

But such a separation between God’s decrees and the preaching of that decree is precisely the sort of Nestorianism which is here challenged. One can only maintain this position by establishing a separation of God’s divine nature (and His gracious judgments and promises) from His incarnational presence through the preaching of Christ.

Rather, it is perhaps more in keeping with Lutheran theology and the Scriptural witness to understand God’s decrees as enacted in and through preaching. In other words, when St. Paul

proclaimed that “God now commands all men everywhere to repent” he was in fact speaking eschatologically (or economically), unfolding (or administering) God’s decree for *those men at that time* in *Athens*.

Indeed, to speak of the “Day of the Lord,” not as a specific day, but as an unfolding of the single day of Christ’s death, is evidenced throughout Scripture. The very giving out of the Holy Spirit stretches the day of the Lord across the span of time. Christ says He is not given until His death (John 7: 39). Yet the Old Testament is inspired by Him (II Peter 1: 21), and He fell upon the judges. Obviously He alighted on Christ at His baptism. Is the promise of His coming fulfilled at the precise moment of Christ’s death? (John 19: 30) Or at the institution of holy absolution (John 20: 22)? Or on Pentecost? (Acts 2: 4) Or later? (Acts 8: 14-17, 19: 1-6). The only way to understand this dilemma is eschatologically, or economically, that is, as an installment plan, an unfolding or administration of the single day of Christ’s death through preaching to each subsequent (and preceding) age.⁴⁷

In Romans 1, St. Paul writes, “the wrath of God is *being revealed* against all ungodliness,” even as the righteousness of God is “being revealed.” And immediately upon speaking of this ongoing revelation of the wrath and righteousness of God, St. Paul turns to the administration of this plan specifically for his Roman audience, a move dramatically enhanced by the switch of pronouns from chapter one to chapter two (“they” to “you”). Both Acts 2: 17 and Hebrews 1: 2 refer specifically to the last days as contemporaneous with their age. Truly it is the case that everything associated with the “latter days” – from the banquet on the Lord’s holy mountain to the accounting of sins to the righteous judgment of the Lord – is an occurrence in the Divine Service on the Lord’s Day, Sunday.

Thus, to return to Paul’s engagement with the Athenian philosophers and his reference to former times, the distinction between “former times” and “latter times” is not time specific, but fluid. And Christ Himself – that is, His proclamation – is the exact point where the two times are split. Christ was the first to pave the way from former times to latter times through His death; however, the latter times were inaugurated later for the apostles, as it was for certain people on the Day of Pentecost, as it was for the Athenian philosophers, as it was for the subjects of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, as it is for people today. By implication, there are people yet today who remain in “the former times.” Indeed, everyone is born in “the former times,” and if the point be pushed, the Christian steps into the Church on the Lord’s Day each weekend from “the former times”!

The “latter times” are easy for the Christian to understand. These are the times of the Kingdom, of faith, of Gospel, of sacraments, of salvation. But what of these “former times” prior to Christ’s advent? In St. Paul’s proclamation to the Athenian philosophers, he refers to the “former times” as “these times of ignorance” which “God overlooked.” Such “overlooking” certainly implies an aspect in the economy of salvation which is perhaps mysterious, but should not be confounding. Such “overlooking” implies an act of grace on the part of God, that those who worshiped idols or false gods were not to be judged in accordance with their ignorance. (Acts 14: 16; Romans 3: 25) Of course, at the exact point of St. Paul’s proclamation, God’s

⁴⁷cf. AE 30: 114 (1522).

“overlooking” ended. The Lord’s Day of reckoning was at hand, and the Athenian philosophers entered into the Last Days.

Now, what is to be done with this time of “God’s overlooking”? When Homer, Hammurabi, or the Aztec peasant died in 700 BC, what happened to them? Does God’s “overlooking” imply that He simply excused their ignorance and let them into heaven?

Of course not. Rather, when they died, they went to the place where everyone went, that is, Sheol. Sheol was the holding grounds for people who died in “the former times,” until that time when Christ would descend into Hades, preach the Gospel, and lead those who believed out of the gates of Hades and into heaven. And again, to push the point, Sheol is the holding grounds for those living even today who die under the “former” dispensation of Law and sin, whose lives are overwhelmed by the encroaching curse of sin, death, and the devil. The Psalmist beautifully mouths the cry of all people when he says, “The pains of death surrounded me, And the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me; I found trouble and sorrow.” (Psalm 116: 3) But the Psalmist is answered with the Descent of Christ into Sheol and His preaching there, and so can confess: “I was brought low, and He saved me.” (v. 6b) Christ’s preaching in Sheol thus serves as the economic source of all preaching, administered to all people throughout all time, be it Adam, Moses, Hammurabi, the Aztec peasant, the apostles, the Athenian philosopher, the modern Christian, the Jew up the street who knows nothing of Christ, the tribesman, or the unborn baby. What is not heard in this world will be heard in Sheol. St. Paul could speak with confidence that the entire creation *had* heard the Gospel. And in response to the question “Have they not heard?”, he answers in the positive: “Yes indeed: ‘Their sound has gone out to all the earth, And their words to the ends of the world.’” (Romans 10: 18)

Thankfully removed by this argument is the twisted theodicies of those who, in effect, have to argue that old Abe the Jew who died the day after Jesus’s resurrection without faith in Christ – but who awaited the messiah – would go straight to hell. Gone are the drifting thoughts of what God may or may not do in His mercy outside of Christ, to which even Luther was prone in Table Talk discussions on the fates of Zwingli and the Anabaptists.⁴⁸ Ended is the “bate and switch” sort of Lutheran theology which speaks abstractly of Christ’s death for all men, but then slips into Calvinism when forced to explain why all do not hear; indeed, the “bate and switch” sort of theology becomes cynically typified in Christ’s Descent: Christ shows what will not be given. Speaking of Calvinism, wonderfully stamped out is the sort of theodicy which begins not with the Lord’s mercy, and explains His sovereignty from that perspective (as this paper does), but which begins with the Lord’s sovereignty, and explains His mercy in light of that sovereignty. And finally silenced forever is the pious message of Gospel urgency, which in effect imposes upon all Christians the burden that they personally are responsible if a neighbor or co-worker (or distant tribesman through their giving!) does not hear the Gospel and consequently goes to hell. No, Christ has seen to the full proclamation of the Gospel, for He “Who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things. And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers...”

⁴⁸AE: 54, 152.

Conclusion

The universalistic urge was strong in the first centuries of Christendom. The mocking polemic of pagans Celsus, Porphyry, and Galen emphasized the novelty of the Christian faith. How could a small faction, recently spawned, have any universal claim to the truth? Against these attacks, the apologists employed the Logos and “spermatikos logos” theology mentioned above, and proposed the idea of “the righteous pagan.” The ancient pagan was inspired by the Logos, or Reason, and those who lived righteously according to the law/Logos in their hearts were saved. This was the position of Justin. Origen’s infamous position on universalism speculated that Christ paved the way for the restoration of the entire creation, including demons. All people would be restored, even if through purgation. One can see the Platonic determinism at work in his system. His system had interesting heirs in the *miseriordes* mentioned above. Gregory of Nyssa represented a universalism of the Neoplatonic variety. Using arguments echoed by Hosea Ballou, Gregory posited that the subjection of all things to Christ (I Cor. 15: 28) necessitated the subduing of finite evil to infinite goodness. God’s punishments, therefore, at best can be described not as eternal, but as medicinal.

One can see in ancient universalism the strong taint (again!) of Platonism, the sort of which was avoided by others who subtly argued almost verbatim what this paper also argues. Indeed, the re-entry of the Christian Church into a pre-Constantinian-like era – with both paganism and syncretism prevalent – calls the Church to find kinship with the Church of that era and wrestle with similar issues. Roman Catholicism is the result of a syncretism between Hellenism and Christianity (especially with Purgatory), but the Church need not follow her path. Simply offered in this paper is a modest proposal that it is indeed possible to restore the views of Irenaeus, Tertullian, the rabbis, and many others on Sheol (including Luther!) without dabbling in the Platonizing forces which gave birth to Purgatory.