



The Harrowing of Hell: The Descent of Christ Into the Underworld (Understanding Scripture (New Testament) Book 2)

R. Verspoor

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There is very little if anything known or written in modern times about the descent of Christ into ‘hell’ for three days, much less what he was doing down there for three days and nights prior to his ascent or resurrection. This descent, known historically as the ‘harrowing of hell’, has been an integral part of Christian writings and teachings until fairly recently. Now, it is being increasingly ignored or regarded simply as a figurative reference to the painful experience of the crucifixion itself (much in the sense we use the term ‘hell on earth’ to describe an excruciatingly painful experience – mentally, emotionally and/or physically). And yet the scriptural record is clear for anyone who cares to examine it.

While scripture itself remains untampered with, though translations can be used to obscure, attendant documents are subject to altering. In some cases, the reference to the descent itself is being dropped from the newest versions and printings of the Apostle’s Creed. For example, The United Methodist Hymnal, 1989 has, for the ‘Traditional Version’: “was crucified, dead and buried; the third day he rose from the dead,” but has an * after the first reference to ‘dead’ with a note: “Traditional use of this creed includes these words: ‘He descended into hell’.” The ‘Ecumenical Version’, on the same page, however, contains the complete reference: “was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.”

Conjacent to this is the lack of a clear understanding as to the meaning of the term ‘hell’. The rather modern and popular meaning as a place of ‘hell-fire and damnation’ for ‘unbelievers’ is a rather narrow understanding of the place of the dead, which has a more complex topography. This narrow view also begs the question as to why the Christ would descend into such a region, which may also explain the tendency to downplay, ignore and even attempt to remove such references to his ‘descent into hell’.

There are a number of issues here:

- Why has the knowledge and memory of this important aspect of the crucifixion and resurrection of the Christ been essentially neglected, increasingly interpreted in a figurative manner, and largely forgotten?
- Why has the concept of ‘hell’ become so narrow, moralistic and condemnatory?
- Why has the very idea of Christ’s descent into ‘the heart of the earth’ become something to downplay, avoid and even seek to treat as an anachronism unbecoming a modern time?

To help answer these questions, we first need a closer examination and understanding of the various scriptural and other traditionally accepted passages, such as ‘creeds’ or agreed statements of faith, dealing with Christ’s descent and activities in the underworld, the ‘harrowing of hell’. Second, we need to examine the source documents in their original languages. Any cursory glance at an inter-linear translation will reveal more than one term in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek where one is used in English, or the same word in one of the source languages rendered differently in English depending on context. Thus, any effort at understanding has also to involve an understanding of the original terms, which itself is further complicated by the progressive materialisation and abstraction of the original meaning of Hebraic and Greek terms.

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