

HE DESCENDED INTO HELL

J. Duncan M. Derrett

I. Introduction

Cherry-picking amongst the articles of the creeds is commonplace. A frequent casualty is “He descended into hell”. Why was he there and what was he doing? It is possible to recover the answers, but to do so we must go outside the cultural area of the apostles’ birth. The belief is indeed ancient,¹ but it is not primitive within Christianity and reflects an embellishment of the Passion. It appears in creeds only late.² But *Odes of Solomon*

¹ J. Jeremias, *T.W.N.T.* III (1938), p. 146. Ignatius, *Magn.* 9.2; *Trall.* 9; *Gospel of Peter* 10.39-42 (M.R. James, *Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955, pp. 92-93); R.E. Brown, “The Gospel of Peter,” *New Testament Studies* 33/3 (1987), pp. 321-343 at p. 337; *Gospel of Nicodemus - Acts of Pilate*, pt. 2, Latin B VII-X (James, pp. 132-139); *Gospel of Bartholomew* I.9 (James, pp. 167-168); the Christian interpolation at *Test. Levi* 4.1; Tertullian, *de anima* 55; the ridicule of the legend by Celsus defended by Origen, *adv. Cels.* II.43; Origen on John 6:35 (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* XIV, 360B); St John Chrysostom, *hom.* 40.1 on 1 Cor. (Migne, *P.G.* X, 379C); Theodoret on Ps 67:19 (I.1065). Clement, *Strom.* II.9. A.E. Burn, “Hell (Descent into),” in J. Hastings, ed. *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), I, pp. 713-716; E.G. Selwyn, *First Epistle of Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1946), Essay I, pp. 313-362; C. Clemen, *Niedergefahren zu den Toten* (Giessen, 1900); F. Spitta, *Christi Predigt an die Gesiter* (1890) (not seen); J.A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1930); A. Grillmeier, “Der Gottessohn im Totenreich,” *Z.Kath. Theol.* 71 (1949), pp. 1-53, 184-203; W. Bieder, “Die Vorstellung von der Höllenfahrt Jesu Christi,” *Abh. z. Theol. Alt u. Neu Testament* 19 (1949); W.J. Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits* (AB 23; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1965); W. Maas, *Gott und die Hölle: Studien zum Descensus Christi* (Sammlung Horizonte, NS 14; Einsiedeln, 1979); Article, “Descent of Christ unto Hell,” in *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press 31997), p. 472. Dante, *Inferno* IV. 52-63; XII. 32-41.

² J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, 1950), pp. 291, 378-383; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* I. 13,20 (AD 311). Creeds of Sirmium (AD 359); Nicaea (AD 353); Constantinople (AD 360). Roman Catechism (Council of Trent, 1568), pt. 1, ch.5, art. 6,3; 5,6 (*Christi benignitas*) (Rome, 1845, pp. 37-40: 1 Peter is not referred to). 1 Peter is alluded to in the Third of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (*Prayer Book* of Edward VI, 1552), but omitted from the *Prayer Book* of 1563. Cyril, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine understood that Christ liberated souls from hell.

17:9-16; 42:10-20 tell how Christ preaches to and looses the “bound” out of his generosity.³ Whence does this idea come? It is at home in India, and this is not the first time we have found that anomalous exotic elements in early Christian tradition can be illuminated only from that quarter.⁴

That souls in hell could be released by the compassion of their earthly victims is an idea found in Plato.⁵ It is hinted that the latter could be approached by the former, which implies some sort of descent on the former’s part—but there is no suggestion that the victims are Saviours, or that the fantasy is not a mere fragment of Plato’s scenario(s) of metempsychosis.⁶ The *Apocalypse of Peter* (ca. 100 CE)⁷ shows souls in torment confessing their sins and calling on the righteous to have mercy on them. Whether this reflects Plato’s or some similar fancy (cf. Lk 16:24), or an unidentified Jewish idea is unknown.

II. Christ’s Descent⁸

Allusions to the so-called “descent” are vainly sought in the gospels (for Is 53:12 see below).⁹ Judaism does not find God releasing souls from hell (in spite of Ps 16:10). 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6 (AD 81-96)¹⁰ are in fact embarrassing, though 1 Peter is a first-rank early Christian book, not yet out of touch with Judaism.

³ J.H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha II* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), pp. 750-1, 757, 771.

⁴ J.D.M. Derrett, “St John’s Jesus and the Buddha,” *Journal of Higher Criticism* 6/2 (Fall, 1999), pp. 162-174.

⁵ Socrates’ myth in Plato’s *Phaedo* 107C to 114C. J.A. Stewart, *Myths of Plato* (London: Macmillan, 1905), PiD. 77-114.

⁶ R. Kraut, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 230. Pythagoras at Diogenes Laertius VIII.4-5,14,36,44, 45. Plato, *Phaedo*, 82A; *Tim.* 31DE; 41E-42E, 90E; *Rep.* 611A, 617D-E, 618A-B, 620A; *Meno* 81A-B; *Laws* 870E; *Phaedrus* 248D-249B.

⁷ James, *Apocryphal New Testament* (supra, n. 1), pp. 517- 6

⁸ E.H. Browne, *An Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles* (London: Longmans Green, 121882), 78-97. F. Loofs, “Descent to Hades (Christ’s),” *Encycl. Rel. Ethics* IV (1911), pp. 654-663 (Not due to non-Jewish or non-Christian influence: p. 662, § 11). J.D. Quinn, “Descent of Christ into Hell” In *New Catholic Encyclopedia* IV (1967), pp. 780-793.

⁹ Jn 5:19-29 (Selwyn, pp. 346, 353); Mt. 8:11/Lk 7:22; Lk 13:29; Mt 8:27:52-53 (very doubtfully relevant). 1 Thes 1:10 is inconclusive; Rom 10:6-9 speculative; Phil 2:10 irrelevant; Mt 16:18 ambiguous; Rev 1:18 suggestive.

¹⁰ W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1966), pp. 298-299. D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (London: I.V.P., 1974), p. 796 (taking the author to be Peter).

3:18 For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which circumstances he went¹¹ and made proclamation (preached) even to the spirits in prison¹² (Is 42:7; 49:9; Rev 20:7), 20 who did not obey in former times, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah,¹³ during the building of the Ark, in which a few, that is eight persons (Gen 7:13, 23) were saved through water...

4:5 They (sceptics) will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason why the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been sentenced to punishment¹⁴ in the flesh as human beings, they might live in the spirit as God does.

1 Peter is sadly obscure here.¹⁵ The author alludes to something that eludes us. If Christ could visit antediluvian "spirits,"¹⁶ whom he had admonished by way of the Ark-building¹⁷ we possess a pre-"Peter" midrash: the damned expect such compassion. In the "Descent into Limbo" fresco in the side chapel at Kariyeh Djami (Constantinople) (14th century) Christ draws Eve and Adam by the hand from their tombs. In window 6 of the fifteenth-century series at Fairford (Gloucestershire) he talks to

¹¹ Not a semitic pleonasm as at 2 Sam 5:10 LXX; cf. Eph 2:17.

¹² He freed the bound: Coptic Creed, § 139 in Hahn, *Bibliothek der Symbole* (Breslau: Morgenstern, VIII. 31. 31897). For "bonds" see Diogenes Laertius VIII. 31.

¹³ Gen 6:5-8,11-13; 7:1. Mishnah, *Avot* V.2. Noah is said to have warned the neighbours. The generation of the Flood were in hell only twelve months: Mishnah, *Eduy.* II.10.

¹⁴ Not the righteous dead. Taking *krithosi* in the sense of "punished upon conviction," e.g. by the fires of hell (Lk 16:24d), *krinein* meaning "to punish" as at Jn 7:51; Lk 19:22; Acts 25:10. See also Jn 3:17,18ab, 12:47a,48; Acts 7:7; Rom 2:12, 3:68; 1 Cor 11:31-32; 2 Thes 2:12; Heb 10:30, etc. Baur-Arndt-Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (University of Chicago Press, 1957), s.v. *krino* 4ba.

¹⁵ So Beza. 1 Pet 3:18-20 tied commentators into knots by 1669 (M. Plous, *Synopsis Criticorum* V, *ad locum*). E. Stauffer, *Die Theologie des Neue Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 41948), p. 3. 1 Enoch 67.4-69.1, 67.12. Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter and Jude* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 109-115, 119. P. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 252-262 at p. 255 cites Jub 7:26; 1 Enoch 6-16; 18:12-19:2, etc.

¹⁶ *Pneuma* can mean "ghost" (Lk 24:37,39) or spirit of the dead (Heb 12:23), but usually means (a) good or (b) evil non-human spirits: Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich, s.v. 4b, 4c. Cf. *animae* ("dead" at Verg., *Aen.* 6.264, 411, 486, 713).

¹⁷ The emphasis is not on Noah, but on the living work of the Spirit: J. Horst, *T.W.N.T.* IV (1942), p. 389 n. 111.

them while a third (an impenitent?) lurks behind red-hot bars. Not only Adam and Eve but also John the Baptist are rescued by Christ in the fresco by Giusto Menabuoi (1375-8) in the baptistry of the Cathedral of Padua. In the same city Giotto (d. 1337) painted a similar scene in the Scrovengi Chapel. Meanwhile Christ would send the wicked to hell (Mt 5:22; 8:12; 10:38; 11:23; 16:18; 23:15), without hope of emerging (Mt 5:26). Those whose conduct manifests faith in him (1 Peter 4:15) share in his resurrection and avoid hell: but that is a different tradition. The "Harrowing (i.e., robbing) of Hell," as at Chaldon (Surrey) (ca. 1200) and on the celebrated Norman font at Eardisley (Herefordshire) is an apocryphal event, tenuously based on Is. 53:12 ("he shall divide the spoils of the strong"): the good who died before Christ's coming were saved.¹⁸ The *Gospel of Nicodemus* shows hell trembling at Christ's approach. If the "Harrowing" is not repugnant to canonical passages, they at any rate do not anticipate it.¹⁹

Or would it make better sense if we separated 1 Peter 4:6 from 3:19-20? Some have optimistically tried this. But the "dead" can indeed be "spirits" (Heb 12:23). Perhaps those who died before Christ (cf. Col 2:13) required a gospel to be preached to them (in all fairness) by Christ or others (cf. Gal 1:16).²⁰ "Peter's" "dead" at v. 6 are the same as the "dead" at v. 5, assuming that all descendants of Adam suffer death (Gen 3:17-19; 1 Cor 15:22).²¹ The "news" is that they are not eternally lost. The dead may attain to eternal life (1 Cor 15:46).²²

In fact 1 Peter 3:18-20, 4:6 failed, until very late,²³ to prove a Descent. It has troubled scholars.²⁴ The words tell²⁵ that the

¹⁸ Langland, *Piers Ploughman, B. version*, ed. Skeat (EETS 38; Oxford University Press, 1869, 1964), XVIII.110-431, esp. 313-319, trans., J.F. Goodridge, Langland (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), pp. 258-268; W.H. Hulme, ed., *Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus* (EETS 100; London, 1907); J.H. Kirkland, *A Study of the Anglo-Saxon Poem, Harrowing of Hell* (Halle, 1885). It is the Holy Trinity who rescues Adam from Hell at Eardisley (ca. 1150): R.E. Kaske, "Piers Plowman and local iconography. The Font at Eardisley, Herefordshire," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 51 (1988), pp. 184-186 (a reference supplied to me by Mr. Neil Spencer).

¹⁹ Bigg, *The Epistles of St Peter and St Jude* (ICC; Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1987), pp. 162-164; G. Friedrich, *T.W.N.T.* II (1935), pp. 714, lines 14-17; 716, line 10; Hauck-Schulz, *T.W.N.T.* VI (1965), pp. 577, 578 n. 87.

²⁰ So opinions at Polus, *Synopsis* V, col. 1529.

²¹ Rom 5:14, 21; 6:4-7, 23; 8:6-10.

²² Stauffer, *Theologie* (n. 15 above), p. 191 n. 700 (see p. 296).

²³ Note 2 above.

gospel was preached to the dead who needed it in order to have life (cf. Rev 14:13). Christ released the dead, the apostles being his assistants.²⁶ The church by that time evidently wished to mitigate the severity of hell.

If 1 Peter is singular, no surviving Jewish apocalyptic parallels it.²⁷ Did "Peter" understand Christ to have received the repentance of the dead? Successful preaching entails a tender of conditional salvation, the hearers' repentance,²⁸ and forgiveness of them.²⁹

In the Vulgate of Ecclesiasticus 24:45 there appears an interpolation of unknown age: "I shall penetrate all the lower parts of the earth (cf. Eph 4:9), and look upon all those that sleep, and bring light to all those who hope in the Lord." Note the idea of light and the absence both of preaching and of pagans.

III. Jewish Hopes

There is no way from Abraham's bosom to the damned (Lk 16:26). But late rabbinism accepted not only that all the dead (besides the children of Korah [Num 26:11]) might praise God and leave Gehenna,³⁰ but that the prayers of the righteous (cf. Gen 20:17) might enable the dead to rise to a holy life. Yet information more along our line of enquiry does exist.

Someone claims to have read³¹ in *Midrash Rabbah Bereshit* (Genesis) the following passages:

²⁴ Note 15 above.

²⁵ I concur with H. Alford, *Greek Testament*, new edition, IV (London: Rivingtons, 1880), p.368, col. 2 (on 1 Pet 3:18-20).

²⁶ So Grotius and Vorstius: *ekeruxen, euengelithe*, normally taken to suggest Christ's activity, literally leave the other possibility open. The apostles preached: 2 Cor 5:20; Acts 13:47; Rom 15:16; Gal 2:8; Eph 2:17. Did the apostles go to the Underworld on their way to their Master's feast? Hermas, *Sim.* 9.16,3.

²⁷ So Bo Reicke, Achtemeier (supra, n. 15) and P.H. Davis, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 138-143, 153-154.

²⁸ Clement, *Strom.* VI.9, 48 (Migne, P.G. IX. 272A). Bigg (supra, n. 19), p. 163. Origen says the *converted* denizens of hell (c. *Cels.* II. 43).

²⁹ A priest who learnt from disciples of the apostles said Jesus preached remission of sins to denizens of hell who believed in him: Irenaeus (AD 180), *adv. haer.* IV.42.

³⁰ H. Strack & P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament IV/2* Munich: Beck, 1924, 1969), pp. 1040, 1047-1048; 1058, 1075, 1102, 115-116. C.G. Montefiore & H. Loewe, comp., *Rabbinic Anthology* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1963), pp. 587 (§ 1623), 604 (§1654).

³¹ Bigg (n. 19 above), p. 163 cites Weber, quoting (?) Ernst Kühl. A.E. Burn at Hastings (supra, n.1), I, p. 714 col. 1; Selwyn (supra, n. 1), p. 346 n.2.

But when they that are bound,³² they that are in Gehinnom, saw the light of the Messiah,³³ they rejoiced to receive him. This is what stands written, 'We shall rejoice and exult in Thee.'³⁴

When? When the captives climb out of hell, with the Presence (of God) at their head.

These are ignored by commentators, including Billerbeck and Jeremias, who had access to the *Midrash Rabbah*. Yet the "rejoicing" fits the Day of the Messiah.³⁵ The passages may not be forgeries. Billbeek copies³⁶ from A. Jellinek's *Bet ha-Midrash* (1853-7) the following (at iii. 72,17):

In that hour will he (the Messiah) arise and bring the good news to those that sleep in the double cave (Gen 49:29) and will say, 'Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, arise, you have slept enough.' And they will answer and say, 'Who is it that has taken the dust of the grave from us?' And he will say to them, 'I am the Messiah of God. Salvation has come near. The Hour has arrived.' And they answer him, 'If that be truly so, go further and bring good news to the first man, so that he is the first to rise again (cf. I Thess 4:16)... Immediately the first man will be resurrected, and all his generation, and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, (who were never in torment), and all the righteous and all the patriarchs and all generations from one end of the world to the other, and they will be enabled to hear the voice of Jubilation and Song, for it is said, 'How lovely on the mountains are the feet of them that bring good news' (Is 52:7).³⁷

No one, apparently, is left in hell. The resemblance to Jn 5:25, 28 ("the dead will hear his voice") is striking. Apparently the doctrine of the resurrection has absorbed a notion which is over-generous to the wicked.

Furthermore *Yalqut Sim'oni* III, 53c (13th century?) has the following:

Three days before the Messiah appears Elijah stands on the mountains of Israel and mourns for them. His voice is heard from the world's end to the world's end. He says, 'Peace has

³² For the "prison" see Bab. Talm., *Ber.* 28b (R. Johanan b. Zakkai).

³³ Prov 4:18; Is 60:1. *Pesiqta' Rabbati* 36:2 (trans., W.G. Braude [n. 38 below]) II, p. 682. St Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.* III 52.4 on 1.

³⁴ An allusion to Ps 85:6?

³⁵ Strack-Billerbeck (n. 30 above), IV/2t Excursus 29.

³⁶ *Ibid.* III, p. 10c, copied by G. Friedrich, *T.W.N.T.* II (1935), p. 714 n. 105.

³⁷ Rom 10:15; Eph 6:15. A Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (London: Longmans Green, 1906), II, p. 727.

come to the world'. The wicked rejoice and say to one another, 'Peace has come upon us (i. e. we escape from hell).'

More to the point, in a Jewish sermon (*Pesiqta' Rabbati* 36.1)³⁸ in a collection made before the 9th century³⁹ we are told that the Messiah made a vow to suffer for sinners to save all Israel, including those who died from Adam onwards and including even those not yet created. All this when God decrees it (1 Sam 2:6). This has been accused of being infected with Christian doctrine.⁴⁰ But rabbis have striven to avoid contamination with sectarian doctrines since 70 CE at the latest.⁴¹ The hypothetical source of this sermon suggests an authority behind the untraced *Midrash Rabbah Bereshit* passages (above). The suffering and power of the Messiah depicted in *Pes. Rabb.* 36.1 surpass all Platonic fancies.⁴² For the victims in the *Phaedo* merely react to the tortures of the wicked. We may come now to the true source, about which we may observe that though the relevant authorities are separated they form a single conception.

IV. Buddhist Saviours from Hell

While early Christian doctrine was being finalised both the early (Hinayana) and the developed (Mahayana) schools of Buddhism existed side by side amicably. Ideas developed in the Mahayana in course of time even modified the

³⁸ *Pesiqta' Rabbati* 36 (161a) is translated at Strack-Billerbeck (supra, n. 30), II, p. 349; by Montefiore-Loewe (supra, n. 30), pp. 584-586, and by W.G. Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati* (YJS 18; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), II, p. 679. It comments on Ps 36:10 (MT=9 KJV).

³⁹ Supposedly a part of the *Ruah ha-Qodes* homilies. Strack-Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, ⁷1982), pp. 273-279.

⁴⁰ Braude, II, p- 678 n.5, citing Abraham Farisol, Azariah del Rossi, Eppenstein (M.G.W.J. 55, 1911, pp. 626-628) and Bamberger (H.U.C.A. 15, 1940, p. 429) disagreeing with all of them, pointing to *Pes.R.* 37.1 (Braude, II, p. 685 n.2).

⁴¹ Bab. Talm., *Sanh.* 43a, 107b; *Gitt.* 56b-57a; *Yoma* 66b; *A.Z.* 16b-17a; 27b (t.Hul. II. 22-23); *Sab.* 116a-b; *Hag* 15a. J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (EV; New York: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 18-54; esp. 39-40, 44, 47. S. Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin, 1902); H.L. Strack, *Jesus, die Häretiker und die Christen nach ältesten jüdischen Angaben* (Munich: Beck, 1910).

⁴² J.D.M. Derrett, *The Bible and the Buddhists* (Sardini, Bornato in Franciacorta, 2000), Appendix I "Redemptive Suffering". On the applicability of Is 53 to the Messiah see E Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (175 BC-AD 135), New English Version, rev. edn., by G. Vermes and others, II (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), pp. 547-549; but they reserve references to "later midrashim" at p. 549 n. 124 (but who can date a midrash?).

traditions of Gotama the Buddha whose “Lesser Vehicle” (Hina-yana) did not originally contain them.

Gotama said his enemy Devadatta was “incurable” because his stay in the hell Avici could never be ended.⁴³ Karma is irrevocable, inexorable.⁴⁴ Malefactors stew in hell,⁴⁵ from whence rescue is impossible.⁴⁶ After a period of years, Devadatta excepted, sinners migrate into other worlds or conditions, which do not concern us here. By the beginning of our era a Bodhisattva (future Buddha) called Avalokitesvara (the Lord who pities),⁴⁷ impelled by unselfish compassion, was said to descend into the hell Avici and rescue beings there. Bodhisattvas assist those in trouble. The Bodhisattva’s vow, to postpone his enjoyment of *nirvana* in order to assist others to achieve liberation, causes joy in hells.⁴⁸ Avalokitesvara⁴⁹ and other Bodhisattvas were models for lay Buddhists who committed themselves to a life of benevolence.

This is the point at which to interject a factor of importance. Avalokitesvara (and certain other Bodhisattvas) are objects of veneration. This veneration is accompanied by the worshipper’s confession of his sinfulness and unworthiness. One who does not make confession is not a believer in Avalokitesvara, as the *Bodhicaryavatara* makes abundantly clear. Meanwhile we consult chapter 24 of the *Lotus Sutra*, a chapter perhaps as late as 150

⁴³ J.D.M. Derrett, “Diffusion: Korah and Devadatta,” *Archiv Orientalni* 63 (1995), pp. 330-333 at p. 331 n. 7, and p. 332, n. 18.

⁴⁴ Milindapanha p. 189, trans., Horner, I, pp. 268-269. W.D. O’Flaherty, ed., *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 15, 34-35. L. Rocher, *ibid.*, pp. 62-89; J.P. McDermott, *ibid.*, pp. 176, 190-192. The Puranas, presenting popular Hindu thought, show that pilgrimages, renunciation, meditation, and prayers to deities may turn the force of *karma* into a qualified inevitability (O’Flaherty at pp. 25-26: Matsya-purana 221.1-12; Linga-purana 1-86, 15-21).

⁴⁵ Milindapanha, pp. 148-149, trans., Horner, I, pp. 208-209. Unless counter-vailing merit exempts the offender: Majjhima-nikaya iii, p. 214, trans., Horner, iii, pp. 261-262.

⁴⁶ Milindapanha, p. 67, trans., I, p. 92.

⁴⁷ For other explanations see Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine* (London: Kegan Paul, 1932), p. 47. H. Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 180.

⁴⁸ *Mahavastu*, ed. Senart (1882-1897), I, 40, 97, cited by Har Dayal (n. 47 above), p. 62.

⁴⁹ E. Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958), pp. 78-80. G.C.C. Chang, ed., *A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), p. 263. He can appear in those realms, p. 267.

CE, appended to a text (chh.1-22) of the 1st century CE; and the *Avalokitesvara-guna-Karanda-vyuha*, verse portions of which are said to have existed by the fourth century CE.⁵⁰ The relatively late date of such works has no bearing on the age of the ideas they contain. The *Lotus Sutra* tells us:

“If some creature... shall be bound in wooden or iron manacles, chains or fetters, be he guilty or innocent, then those manacles (etc.) shall give way as soon as the name of the Bodhisattva Mahasattva (Great Being) Avalokitesvara is pronounced” (trans. Kern, pp. 407-8, 414; Soothill, XXV, p. 247).

“Birth, decrepitude, and disease will come to an end for those who are in the wretched states of existence, in hell, in brute creation (by metempsychosis) and in the realm of Yama,⁵¹ for all beings (through Avalokitesvara)” (Kern, p. 415; Soothill, XXV, p. 250).

The Karanda-vyuha tells how a Bodhisattva (Avalokitesvara) is the personification of mercy. He nullifies the law of *karma*, as he visits the hell Avici and makes it cool and pleasant (p. 6). He goes to the realm of ghosts and⁵² gives them food and drink. The beings who are liberated from those realms are reborn in the paradise Sukhavati⁵³ (heavenly bliss). Avalokitesvara points the

⁵⁰ M. Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature II* (New Dehli: Oriental Books, 1977) (original edn., 1927) and H. Nakamura (n. 47 above) (p. 319) agree that the verse part existed before the fourth century CE, the prose portion being later. For the text see H.Kern & B. Nanjio (Bibliotheca Buddhica 10, St Petersburg, 1912); trans. H. Kern, *Saddharmapundarika or the Lotus of the True Law* (SBE 21: Oxford University Press, 1884, reprinted New York: Dover, 1963). See pp. 408, 412, 413 v.4, 415 (v. 10). E. Conze ed., trans., *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 194-195. For the *Karanda-vyuha*, text ed. Samasami (Calcutta, 1873), pp. 6, 43, 48-49, trans., E.J. Thomas, comp., *The Perfection of Wisdom* (London: John Murray, 1952, 1992), pp. 72-75; L. de La Vallee Poussin, *E.R.E. II*, p. 259; Thomas, *History of Buddhist Thought* (London: Kegan Paul, 1933), pp. 190-193; Winternitz (supra, n. 50), pp. 306-309; Har Dayal, pp. 48-49; P. Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism* (1989), p. 232 (“hell is well and truly harrowed”).

⁵¹ For Yama and hell see Majjhima-nikaya iii, pp. 179-186, trans., iii, pp. 224-227. Anguttara-nikaya i, p. 141.

⁵² Majjhima-nikaya iii, pp. 154, 179, 184, trans., iii, pp. 224, 228; Anguttara-nikaya iii, p. 211, § 179, trans., iii, p. 155; p. 339, § 39, trans., iii, p. 239. Milindapanha p. 357, trans. Horner, ii, p. 218. Unable to profit from assigned merits: Milindapanha p. 294, trans., ii, pp. 123-124.

⁵³ *Karanda-vyuha* p. 14; trans., Thomas, *Perfection of Wisdom* (n. 50 above), p. 78. Sukhavati is incompatible with hells, animal births, etc. *Smaller Sukhavati - vyuha*, § 6, trans. Max Müller in *id.*, ed. *Buddhist Mahayana Texts* (SBE 49; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894, reprinted New York: Dover, 1969), ii, pp. 96-97; Thomas (above), p. 83.

way to *nirvana* for those who have gone to hell. He wishes to abolish all woeful states (cf. Rev 20:14). A certain Buddhist adept declares, “hell is destroyed for me” (*khina-nirayo ‘mhi: Digha-nikaya* XVI 2,8) , but the meaning is taken further—a Bodhisattva can come “down” and release the sinner.

The inhabitants of hell rejoiced to see the radiance of the Buddha’s conception⁵⁴ and birth.⁵⁵ They thought they were being visited: therefore even the Lesser Vehicle anticipated such ideas. In the *Avidure Nidana* (C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Birth Stories*, p.151) the Buddha’s incarnation caused prisoners to be freed, fires to be extinguished in every hell, and ghosts’ hunger and thirst to be allayed. Bodhisattvas’ radiance saves sufferers in hell and rouses them to enlightenment—so says *Lotus Sutra* I.30 (Kern, p. 13; Soothill, I, p. 62).

To pity, and to cool, beings in hell (cf. Lk 16:24), is a task adopted by Bodhisattvas who may not perhaps shorten individuals’ stay there. Those to whom others’ sufferings are as significant as their own plunge into Avici as geese onto a cluster of lotus-blossoms.⁵⁶ We hear that Vajrapani and Manjughosha benefit those in hell (*Bodhicaryavatara* 10:11-12, 14-16). Amitayu and Mahasthama shine with the light of wisdom over all beings and cause them to be removed from hells, ghostly existence and animal-births,⁵⁷ and to obtain the highest power.⁵⁸ By 300-400 CE a school even of the Lesser Vehicle declared that Sariputra and Mahamaudgalyayana, the Buddha’s star pupils, visited Devadatta in hell and gave him the good news that the Buddha had foretold he would eventually become a Buddha.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Majjhima-nikaya CXXIII, iii, p. 120, trans., iii, p. 165. Hells’ fires were quenched: Burmese version: C. Bennett, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1851; M. Edwardes, ed., *Life of the Buddha* (London: Folio Society, 1939), P. 17.

⁵⁵ Majjh., iii, pp. 123-4, trans., p. 169. Cf. Edwardes, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁵⁶ *Bodhicaryavatara* 8. 107, trans., Crosby and Skilton, p. 97. Cf. 8.118; 10:12.

⁵⁷ *Buddha-carita* XIV.22, trans., Cowell (SBE 49) (supra, n. 53), p. 150.

⁵⁸ *Amitayur-dhyana-sutra* § 19, trans., Takakusu at SBE 49 (supra, n. 53), p. 184.

⁵⁹ For the *Mulasarvastivada-vinaya* (Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism*, pp. 52-53) see S. Bagchi, *Mulasarvastivada-vinaya-vastu* II (BST 16; Darbhanga, 1970), pp. 191-192; R. Gnoli, *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Sanghabheda-vastu* (S.O.R. 49; Rome, 1978), II, p. 262; J.L. Panglung, *Die Erzählstoffe des Mulasarvastivada Vinaya analysiert auf Grund der Tibetischen Übersetzung* (Tokyo: Reiyukai Library, 1981), p. 124.

In the Mahayana Akshobhya can preach in hell.⁶⁰ The Lalitavistara⁶¹ says the Buddha himself went to Avici, the realm of Yama, lit it up, and filled the inhabitants with joy: their torments were over.⁶² The parallel between Avalokitesvara's and Christ's descents was seen by E.B. Cowell⁶³ who, comparing the Indian myth with the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, derives the former from the latter (a tactful hypothesis). The *Lotus Sutra* does indeed provide parallels with Christian materials, with various implications.⁶⁴ M. Winternitz rejected any historical connection, as did R. Garbe.⁶⁵ But the myth of Avalokitesvara, whose popularity developed as early as the first century, can well have inspired fantasies in non-Buddhist environments such as may have inspired the imaginary hero himself. Other Bodhisattvas, expert preachers, rescued the dead from hell.⁶⁶ And so the idea continued to flourish in the Mahayana. A monk might vow to cause the planes of hell-dwellers, etc., no longer to exist.⁶⁷

Hindu traditions were affected. Yudhishtira wanted to remain in hell (where he was under an illusion) to comfort his brothers there by means of a cool breeze.⁶⁸ The virtuous Vipascit visited hell and the air from his body relieved the sufferings of

⁶⁰ Chang, *supra*, n. 49, p. 331.

⁶¹ Winternitz (*supra*, n. 50), pp. 248-256 at p. 255.

⁶² J.A. MacCulloch at *E.R.E.* IV, 653, §6, gives this excellent material citing Lalitavistara 51, 240, 257, 341, 79-80 in that order.

⁶³ Winternitz (*supra*, n. 50), p. 308, n. 1, cites E.B. Cowell, *Journal of Philology* 6 (1876), pp. 222ff (reprinted in *Indian Antiquary* 8, 249ff).

⁶⁴ Derrett, *The Bible* (2000), at numerous places. James (n.1 above) pp. 117, 119, 123-142.

⁶⁵ R. Garbe, *Indien und das Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1914), pp. 77-78. An English version of this interesting work, by L.G. Robinson, has appeared (La Salle: Open Court, 1959).

⁶⁶ Gadgadasvara supports beings in hell: *Saddharmapundarika (Lotus Sutra)* XXII, trans. Kern, pp., 401-402. T. Richard, *The New Testament of Higher Buddhism* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1910), p. 238. Bodhisattvas emit radiance and save creatures in hell: Lotus Sutra I.30, trans. Kern p. 13. The Bodhisattva Mahastama at *Amitayur-dhyana-sutra* § 19, trans. Takakusu (above, n. 58), p. 184. Vajrapani and Manjusri at *Bodhicaryavatara* 2:53, 10:11-15. Tara, too, rescues from hell(s): *Arya-tarabhattacharitanam astottara-satakastotra* 53, trans., Conze, *Buddhist Texts* (n. 50 above), p. 201. Note Nakamura at J.M. Kitagawa & M.D. Cummings, edd., *Buddhism and Asian History* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 367: "A Bodhisattva could, if he chose, born in one of the various hells to be a boon to its denizens." P. Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 51. For Akasagarbha and Kshitigarbha see Crosby-Skilton, *Bodhicaryavatara*, p. 149 on II.52.

⁶⁷ Chang (*supra*, n. 49), p. 341.

⁶⁸ O'Flaherty (*supra*, n. 44), p. 32.

sinners. They cried, "Save me," and he remained asking the god Indra to allow sinners to be free from hell on the strength of whatever good he had done (merit being transferable, even as a pledge). Indra complied, and hell-dwellers entered other worlds as determined by their *karma*.⁶⁹ So the notion is thoroughly Indian.

V. Conclusion

Chronologically the myth of Avalokitesvara, with a future within Buddhism and even in Hinduism, is the most likely source of *Pesiqta' Rabbati* 36.1, and, somewhat earlier, of the troublesome 1 Peter passage(s). It is not impossible that Plato's *Phaedo* remotely prepared the ground for this process, but this would be hard to prove. It will be admitted that the origin of Avalokitesvara himself (or herself!)⁷⁰ is unknown, but this has no bearing on our present voyage. What we have found is that Christ, not behind Bodhisattvas in point of compassion (Mk 5:19; 8:2; Lk 19:42; Jn 11:35) was thought to have equalled them in respect even of those sinners whom he could *not* convert in their lifetimes. Missionaries making for lands in which Buddhists made headway could use the legend of which 1 Peter provides echoes. And if some rabbis thought the idea befitted the Messiah we can hardly disdain such a coincidence, of which our creeds are a protected monument.



⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

⁷⁰ When the cult of Avalokitesvara passed over the mountains into China, the Bodhisattva of Compassion became Kwan-yin, Goddess of Compassion (ed.)