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, but it is not primitive within Christianity and reflects an embellishment of the Passion. It appears in creeds only late. But Odes of Solomon


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.

JHC 9/2 (Fall 2002), 234-245.
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 Descent 8

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.

5 Socrates’ myth in Plato’s Phaedo 107C to 114C. J.A. Stewart, Myths of Plato (London: Macmillan, 1905), PiD. 77-114.
7 James, Apocryphal New Testament (supra, n. 1), pp. 517-6
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.
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, in which circumstances he went\(^{11}\) and made proclamation (preached) even to the spirits in prison\(^{12}\) (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 punishment\(^{14}\) 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-building\(^{17}\) 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) (14\(^{th}\) 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

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\(^{11}\) 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. 3.1897). 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 *kríthos* in the sense of “punished upon conviction,” e.g. by the fires of hell (Lk 16:24d), *krín* 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 II: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. *krín* 4bα.


\(^{16}\) *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 baptistery of the Cathedral of Padua. In the same city Giotto (d. 1337) painted a similar scene in the Scrovegni 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


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. The church by that time evidently wished to mitigate the severity of hell.

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

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 rabbinnism accepted not only that all the dead (besides the children of Korah [Num 26:11]) might praise God and leave Gehenna, 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 read in Midrash Rabbah Bereshit (Genesis) the following passages:

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24 Note 15 above.
26 So Grotius and Vorstius: ekeruxen, euangeliste, 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.
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.
But when they that are bound, they that are in Gehinnom, saw the light of the Messiah, they rejoiced to receive him. This is what stands written, 'We shall rejoice and exult in Thee.'

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. The passages may not be forgeries. Billbeek copies 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).

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 overgenerous 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
DERRETT: HE DESCENDED INTO HELL

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 9\(^{th}\) century\(^{39}\) 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

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\(^{39}\) 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” (Hinayana) did not originally contain them.

Gotama said his enemy Devadatta was “incurable” because his stay in the hell Avici could never be ended.\(^\text{43}\) Karma is irrevocable, inexorable.\(^\text{44}\) Malefactors stew in hell,\(^\text{45}\) from whence rescue is impossible.\(^\text{46}\) 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),\(^\text{47}\) 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 \textit{nirvana} in order to assist others to achieve liberation, causes joy in hells.\(^\text{48}\) Avalokitesvara\(^\text{49}\) 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 \textit{Bodhicaryavatara} makes abundantly clear. Meanwhile we consult chapter 24 of the \textit{Lotus Sutra}, a chapter perhaps as late as 150

\(^\text{46}\) Milindapanha, p. 67, trans., I, p. 92.
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. 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, 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 and gives them food and drink. The beings who are liberated from those realms are reborn in the paradise Sukhavati (heavenly bliss). Avalokitesvara points the

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


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 conception and birth. 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. 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, and to obtain the highest power. 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.

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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.
In the Mahayana Akshobhya can preach in hell. The Lalitavistara says the Buddha himself went to Avici, the realm of Yama, lit it up, and filled the inhabitants with joy: their torments were over. The parallel between Avalokitesvara’s and Christ’s descents was seen by E.B. Cowell 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. M. Winternitz rejected any historical connection, as did R. Garbe. 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. 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.

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

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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.
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).
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*. 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!) 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.

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\[^{69}\text{Ibid.}, \text{pp. 32-33.}\]

\[^{70}\text{When the cult of Avalokitesvara passed over the mountains into China, the Bodhisattva of Compassion became Kwan-yin, Goddess of Compassion (ed.).}\]