



John Burnett

## 'I hold the keys of death and Hell'

We magnify thee, O Christ, Giver of Life, who for our sakes didst descend into Hades, and with thyself didst raise all things!

—*Megalynarion for Thomas Sunday*

If 'Hell' means what most people mean by it— a place of eternal fiery punishment and conscious torment— then Jesus certainly did not go to *Hell* when he died, even though the Apostles' Creed says, '*he descended into Hell, and rose again on the third day*'. But what is the Creed talking about, then?

For most people today, *Hell* is more or less what the New Testament calls 'the *Gehenna of fire*' (Mt 5.22, 29–30, etc). *Gehenna* is a word found only in the New Testament,<sup>1</sup> but it always refers in one way or another to Isaiah 66.24 and related texts. In fact this is the *only* word in the Bible that might plausibly be translated into *modern* parlance as *Hell*, although the King James bible ("KJV") renders not only *Gehenna*, but also *She'ol* and *Hades*— which are just names for the land of the dead— as *Hell* as well, for reasons we'll see.

But in any case, the modern word *Hell* actually belongs to a different story than the one that the Bible tells about *any* of these places. In fact all the terms *Gehenna*, *Hell*, *She'ol*, and *Hades*— as well as what the Bible and Christian Tradition say about where Christ went when he died, and what he did there, and where we go when we die, and what we do there, are no longer well understood, so they need some discussion.

Let's start with *Gehenna*, then. At the time of Christ, the 'Hinnom Valley' (Hebr. *ge hinnom*; Aram. *ge-henna*), south of Jerusalem, was simply the city dump. Jerusalem is an old city, though, and people remembered that it had once been a place of idolatry and human sacrifice, and hence of defilement and abomination.<sup>2</sup> So Isaiah refers to this dump (though not by name), as the place where God will eventually throw out all the trash that

doesn't belong in his holy city (evil kings, corrupt priests, bankers, murderers, adulterers, and so forth), when he finally restores Jerusalem to the splendor she's supposed to have. After that, 'all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD' (Isa 66.23), and when they're done worshipping, 'they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh' (66.24). Obviously, this isn't a *description* so much as an *image*— a way of saying that all those self-serving bankers and kings etc are just so much trash and will be hauled out with the trash when Judgment Day comes!

But nothing in Scripture suggests that this final, eschatological *Gehenna* even exists yet, for Jerusalem hasn't yet been purified. In fact the Hinnom Valley presently contains only some old tires, fast-food containers, and broken tv's. But our modern notion of *Hell* is based on this biblical idea of *Gehenna*— as well as on some old Germanic myths, Dante's *Inferno* (1300), paintings like those of Hieronymus Bosch (1500), and some Romantic ideas from the 1700s and 1800s.

Nothing in the Bible or in Christian Tradition suggests that when Christ died, he went to *Gehenna*, the city dump of the New (or old) Jerusalem. However, both the New Testament and Tradition tell us that he *did* go to *Hades*. Now, the word *Hades* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *She'ol*, and this *She'ol/Hades* is simply the land of the dead— 'The Grave' (with a capital 'G')— the common destiny of humankind. We might say that the body lies in the *grave* and whatever else there is of us (our personality or 'soul') lies in *She'ol* or *Hades* or, more simply, that to die is just to 'go down to *Hades*' (cf, eg, Gn 37.35; 42.38). So, naturally, when Christ died, they laid him in a new tomb, and he went down to *Hades* just like everyone else. So the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom says,

<sup>1</sup> Mt 5.22, 29–30; 10.28; 18.9; 23.15, 33; Mk 9.43–47; Lk 12.5; Jm 3.6.

<sup>2</sup> More fully described as the 'Valley of (the Sons of) Hinnom': Js 15.8; 18.16; Ne 11.30; idolatry, human sacrifice, defilement, and abomination: 2K 23.10; 2C 28.3; 33.6; Jr 7.31–32; 19.2,6; 32.35.

'In the tomb with the body and in Hades with the soul. . . .'

But the point is, we go down to Hades unwillingly and by force of necessity, whereas *Christ* went there *freely*, in order to *set us free*. That's the story assumed in the Creed, and that's all the word *Hell* means there or any other time we see it in older translations of liturgical texts. But we seriously need to update those translations, because people do get the wrong idea from them! Why would he have to look for *Abraham*, or *John the Baptist*— the 'spirits in prison' (1P 3.18-19; Ps 88.8)— in *Hell*?

But why then do those translations of the Apostles' Creed etc tell us that Christ 'descended into *Hell*'?

To start with, a more literal translation of the Apostles' Creed's *descendit ad inferos* would go a long way toward making sense of this— Christ 'descended to those below'. 'Those below', obviously, are the *dead*, the people in *Hades*. Note that the Nicene Creed, which was based on but supersedes the Apostles' Creed, only says, 'he suffered, and was buried'. Obviously, for the fathers of the Church, who would not have permitted any loss or change of doctrine, being 'buried' and 'descending to those below' meant one and the same thing. Christ descended to those below, as St Peter puts it, 'that he might bring us to God... he went and proclaimed [freedom] to the spirits in prison' (1P 3.18-19).

So how does the Bible describe this *She'ol*, this *Hades*— this *prison* to which Christ descended? Conveniently, Hebrew poetry makes heavy use of parallelism, stating an idea once and then repeating it in different words, so we have lots of synonyms. For example,

Ps 16.10 You will not abandon my soul to *She'ol*;  
nor let your Holy One undergo *decay*.

Ps 18.5 The cords of *She'ol* surrounded me;  
the snares of *death* confronted me.

Ps 30.3 You have brought up my soul from *She'ol*;  
you have kept me alive,  
that I would not go down to the *pit*.

If we look at all the places where *She'ol/Hades* appears in poetic parallels, we find that its synonyms are always words like *grave*, *pit*, *abyss*, and most commonly, *death*. However, *punishment* is not particularly in view. The problem is *death itself*, not *sin*.

Now if you take the trouble to look up all the passages that translate *She'ol/Hades* in your KJV,<sup>3</sup> you'll find that

<sup>3</sup> *She'ol*: Gn 37.35; 42.38; 44.29, 31; Nm 16.30, 33; Dt 32.22; 1Sm 2.6; 2Sm 22.6; 1K 2.6, 9; Isa 5.14; 14.9, 11, 15; 28.15, 18; 38.10, 18; 57.9; Ez 31.15–17; 32.21, 27; Ho 13.14; Am 9.2; Jon 2.3; Hk 2.5; Ps 6.6; 9.18; 16.10; 18.6; 30.4; 31.18; 49.15–16; 55.16; 86.13; 88.4; 89.49; 116.3; 139.8; 141.7; Jb 7.9; 11.8; 14.13; 17.13, 16; 21.13; 24.19; 26.6; Pr 1.12;

sometimes the English renders it as *grave*, and sometimes as *Hell*. Either the KJV translators were confused, or they didn't make the clear distinction we do, between "Hell" as a place of eternal conscious torment, and "the Grave" as a place where the dead lie. But in Greek or Hebrew, '*She'ol/Hades*' never means anything but 'the Grave' (with a capital 'G'), and that's where Christ went when he died. When the Bible talks about *Gehenna*, it says *Gehenna*— but that's a distinction our translations sometimes fail to make!

Moreover, the meaning of *Hell* has shifted. *Helle* was the Old English word for any pit or hole— the words *Hell* and 'hole' are even related— and it was used more or less as *She'ol* or *Hades*. But the matter was confused by the fact that there was also a Nordic goddess named 'Hel' who presided over an underworld of torment, also called 'Hel', where evil people were said to end up. Northern European Christianity retained vestiges of the old mythology, so the biblical notion of *She'ol/Hades* (and *Helle*, in that sense) and the Nordic myth of Hel and her hellish realm got somewhat mixed up, so that both *She'ol/Hades* (e.g. Gn 37.35; 42.38) and *Gehenna* came into English as *Hell*. Dante's lurid political tract (*The Inferno*), and later, paintings like that of Hell in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* then firmly established for popular culture the picture of Hell that we still have in our minds today. At the same time— again not least because of Dante— the idea of 'Heaven' as the destination of the righteous took hold. Thus Western culture gradually began to forget the resurrection and started thinking of an 'afterlife' in binary and judicial terms: when people die, they 'shuffle off this mortal coil' and go either to Heaven or to Hell (with perhaps a temporary stay in Purgatory if you're Catholic). So, under this new system (which was really the old, pagan one), where you end up is no longer just death itself, but a matter of whether you were good or bad. And if people now speak of the resurrection at all, they tend to fit it in to this other story. However— shocking as this may be— none of that is in the Bible. The biblical view of death as a descent to *She'ol/Hades* is quite different from the binary reward or punishment scheme of popular Western culture— and different too, from other ideas such as reincarnation, which have become popular since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the Bible, when you die, you just go

5.5; 7.27; 9.18; 15.11, 24; 23.14; 27.20; 30.16; Sg 8.6; Qo 9.10. In the Septuagint (*Hades*), all of the above plus 1K 2.35; Es 13.7; To 3.10; 13.2; 2Mc 6.23; 3Mc 4.8; 5.42, 51; 6.31; Ps 93(94).17; Pr 2.18; 14.12; 16.25; Ec 9.10; Sg 8.6; Jb 33.22; 38.17; Ws 1.14; 2.1; 16.13; 17.13; Si 9.12; 14.12, 16; 17.27; 21.10; 28.21; 41.4; 48.5; 51.5–6; Sol 4.13; 14.9; 15.10; 16.2; Isa 14.19; Bar 2.17; 3.11, 19; Dn 3.88. In the NT: Mt 11.23; 16.18; Lk 10.15; 16.23; Ac 2.27, 31; Rv 1.18; 6.8; 20.13–14.

down to *She'ol / Hades / the Grave*. That's not a delightful place, but it's not particularly a place of torment, either. It's ruled by Death, not Satan. It's the 'home of silence' (Ps 94.17), about which the psalmist cries, 'Will your wonders be made known in the dark, or your righteousness in the land of oblivion?' (Ps 88.12). It's a place of lifeless inertness, a land of shadows where 'the slain that lie in the grave, whom you remember no more... are cut off from your hand' (Ps 88.5). 'There is no mention of you in death; in Sheol who will give you thanks?' (Ps 6.5); there, 'the dust does not praise you' (Ps 30.9). Since gratitude to God is part of the fullness of life, this final inability to praise God is in fact the ultimate sign of the hapless condition not just of *evildoers*, but of *all humankind* after Adam sinned. 'Those who go down into the dust' (Ps 22.29) are 'in prison and cannot get forth' (Ps 88.8). In short, those who dwell in Hades are just *dead*.

And Christ descended into death in order to free the dead. That's the significance of Matthew's note that at Jesus' death, 'the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many' (Mt 27.52-53). That's also what Jesus meant when he said to Peter, 'I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it' (Mt 16.18)— in other words, 'My Church will not be shut in by death'.

So the descent of Christ to Hades, or to the Grave, is the very *story* of the Gospels, and Eastern Orthodox hymnography, in particular, explores it at great length. It's the whole meaning of Holy Saturday, whose icon shows Christ descending into the tomb, grasping Adam and Eve by the forearm and pulling them up— and this is the icon used for *Pascha (Easter) itself!* Christ went down into *Hades* but was 'not tested by it'; he was 'free among the dead' (cf Ps 88.5), for 'he was not abandoned to *Hades*, nor did his flesh see corruption' (Ac 2.27,31, quoting Ps 16.10).<sup>4</sup>

We've already noted Chrysostom's prayer that starts, 'In the tomb with the body and in Hades with the soul', but there's more to it—

... in Paradise with the thief and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit, wast Thou, O boundless Christ, filling all things!

'Filling all things'?— what's *that* about? Well, you have to look at the big picture: In the beginning, God created a Temple. We know that creation is a Temple, because in

<sup>4</sup> In both Ac 2.27,31 and Ps 16.10, the KJV has *Hell*, but the underlying Hebrew is *She'ol* (Gr. *Hades*). At this point, the KJV and the usual translations of the Apostles' Creed are using *Hell* in the same way.

Exodus, Moses built a Tabernacle 'according to the pattern God had shown him on the mountain', and he built it in the same order. And just as in the beginning God placed Adam in his temple as his God-image and also as his High Priest, so Moses installed Aaron as High Priest and 'Adam'<sup>5</sup> in the Tabernacle. Now, a priest is ordained to bring God's blessing into the world, and to bring the world to God. But Adam died, and became mere bones in the Grave. He could no longer fulfill his priestly role. Creation itself then lacked its God-given mediator and became subject to what St Paul calls 'emptiness' or 'futility' (Rm 8.20).<sup>6</sup> So the Messiah came as High Priest and Second Adam, to fulfill in himself what the first Adam had left undone, and to raise Adam back up to his proper, priestly function, which is to praise God his Creator.

With this in mind, we might re-read Romans 8.10-11:

If the Messiah is in you, the body [may be] dead because of sin but the spirit is life because of [your covenant membership].<sup>7</sup> But if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then he who raised the Messiah from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwells in you.

St Paul goes on to teach what this implies for the world:

... with anxious longing, creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God. For creation was subjected to emptiness, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it [i.e., Adam, when he fell]; [yet] in hope, because creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that all creation is groaning together and giving birth together until now. And not only this, but even we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we groan within ourselves, eagerly awaiting our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For we have been saved in hope. . . . ' (Rm 8.19-25)

Nothing in the Bible suggests that people 'go to *Hell*' (or are cast into *Gehenna*) before the final judgment, or in-

<sup>5</sup> This might not be obvious, but if you follow the genealogies of Genesis and Exodus, you will discover that they run from Adam to Aaron and his grandson. Adam = Aaron; Aaron = Adam.

<sup>6</sup> Gr. *mataiotēs*, 'vanity... the state of being without use or value, emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness'.

<sup>7</sup> Literally, 'righteousness', but this word and its cognates refer to another commonly misunderstood idea. Generally, 'covenant membership' or 'covenant acceptance' gets us closer to Paul's thinking than the juridical categories that our notion of 'righteousness' or 'justification' conveys. Romans and Galatians generally are about how the Gentiles have been brought in, through faith, to the covenant relationship that Abraham enjoyed with God. 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted as covenant acceptance for him' (Rom 4.3 and Gal 3.6, quoting Gn 15.6).

deed that Christ went there. Indeed, before the final judgment, nothing is final, and the hope of every sinner is He who gave himself up for him (or her). But we don't go to heaven, either, which probably means every funeral eulogy, if not funeral sermon you've ever heard is nonsense: We don't go 'home' to Heaven when we die. Our bodies go into the ground, and our souls go to Hades, just as Christ did. Heaven was never the place where we belonged; it is not our home; we never lived there before; God did not create us so that we might live there again; and he doesn't take us 'back' there when we die. As Ps 115.16 puts it, 'The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD's: but the earth he has given to the sons of men.' And that would be *just fine*, except for *death*. And the problem of death is not *sin*, for God can easily *forgive sin*— *but death itself is the problem*— and it needs a *cure!* And that's why Christ went down into *Death* precisely to fill it with his own Life and to make the *Grave* itself the antechamber of our final *Resurrection*. It's also why the same pattern is found in the very last chapters of the Bible, when *heaven* itself comes down to *earth*—

And I, John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, *coming down from God out of Heaven*, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of Heaven saying, Behold the tabernacle of God among men, and he will tabernacle among them, and they shall be his peoples, and God himself will be with them— their God. . . . and death will be no more. (Rv 21.2-3).

Note the plural— 'they shall be his *peoples*'. God originally promised Abraham, 'In you all the families of the earth will be blessed' (Gn 12.3; also 18.18, 22.18; 26.4; etc). This is the blessing finally bestowed at the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem. Revelation 21-22 repeatedly emphasizes that all the nations, not just the Jews, will finally enjoy God's favor. So the Christian story is not about going to heaven or to Hell, but about the rescue of the *nations*, and indeed of God's *entire creation*— and about how this entailed, as we've seen, heaven's descent to earth, even as far as the Grave— and the resurrection, from there, with him who is *himself* heaven, of all the dead.

St Augustine says somewhere that it's not so much that we 'go to heaven', as that 'God is our place in heaven'. We might thus say, metaphorically, that the dead are 'in heaven' to the extent that they're *in God*, or rather that God is in them. But in the body, they're still in the grave, and in the soul, they're still in Hades, awaiting the resurrection. But 'when Christ our life is revealed, then we too will be revealed in glory with him' (Col 3.3).

So the Good News proclaimed in the New Testament includes the fact that Death and Hades will be abolished, and that, even for now, both are changed. 'The people that sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sit in the land and shadow of death, light has dawned' (Mt 4.16, quoting Isa 9.1-2). The Spirit of Christ dwells in those who trust what God has done in his Messiah, and by the Spirit they enjoy 'a place of brightness, a place of refuge, a place of green pasture, whence all sickness, sighing, and sorrow have fled away', as an ancient prayer for the dead has it— they 'dwell in light' *even as they await the destruction of death and their resurrection from Hades*. Christ even associates them with his own work in the present, and that's why they occasionally appear, as they did on the day of his resurrection (Mt 27.52-53), to teach and to guide; to constantly intercede for us, and to mediate his power through healings and other signs. For Christ has overcome death, and he manifests his victory in his saints, by his Spirit. The closer we are to him, the more he does this— and the *fullness* of his life will be manifest on the Last Day, when he raises our souls from Hades and our bodies from the grave, and frees all of his creation from subjection to 'emptiness'.

This is the universal teaching of the New Testament and of all the Fathers of the Church, both East and West, up till at least the twelfth century. After that, the West got confused by other ideas, and we now tell stories of a binary and judicial afterlife of 'Heaven' and 'Hell' that combines elements of Renaissance Platonism, Dante, Nordic myth, and Romantic imagination to speak of salvation or damnation for each individual, apart from earth and community. And, no longer satisfied with the senseless cruelty of eternal punishment, we have begun to imagine what reincarnation would be like. But Christianity is not about being 'saved' as an individual, escaping a material world that God plans to destroy anyway, and going to heaven. It's about the rescue of the *nations*, and indeed of God's *entire creation*.

We have a great need to recall this original, biblical story in all its clarity today. As the icon of the Resurrection shows, Jesus didn't arise in the magnificent but lonely isolation imagined by Western painters. Instead, he went down to rescue, restore, and fulfill God's 'very good' creation at last— and as he firmly grasps the arms of Adam and Eve and pulls them up out of their coffins, we are all caught up in his ascent from Hades. As long as we keep telling that *other* story, *all* our theological, spiritual and even social efforts will be, and remain, misdirected, because we still don't get the *renewal* that God has inaugurated in the Resurrection of his Son, our Lord, Jesus, the Messiah of Israel.

