



## HE DID NOT DESCEND INTO HELL: An Appeal for Scripture Exegesis Karl Barth and Wayne Grudem

Tjerlang Munir,<sup>1</sup> Johanes Lilik Susanto<sup>2</sup>  
Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Moriah, Tangerang, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>  
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa<sup>2</sup>  
Email: petrahoney@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The theory of the descent into hell, which holds that after his crucifixion, Jesus went into the realm of the dead to free the souls of the righteous who died before his resurrection, has been a source of contention in Christian theology throughout history. Some theologians and researchers have recently questioned the conventional reading of the relevant scripture texts, claiming that the fall into hell is neither required nor true teaching. In this study, we will argue for a careful and responsible interpretation of the key biblical passages to discern the genuine meaning of the fall into hell. I'll start by looking at the doctrine's historical and theological backdrop as well as its evolution in the early church. Then, using 1 Peter 3:19–20, Ephesians 4:8–10, and Acts 2:27–31 as examples, I will examine the scriptural verses that have been used to support or dispute the notion. I'll look at the passages' linguistic, literary, and theological characteristics, as well as their intertextual and cultural context. Based on this exegetical examination, we will argue that the notion of the descent into hell is a theological inference or hypothesis based on a combination of scriptural and non-scriptural sources rather than a necessary or explicit doctrine in the Bible.

### Article History:

Received: 2 May 2023

Accepted: 28 May 2024

### Keywords:

Descent into hell;  
Scripture exegesis;  
Karl Barth;  
Wayne Grudem.

### Introduction

The fall into hell is not the only creedal expression with a murky background and different interpretations. "the" among Protestants The term "communion of saints" is used by certain Roman Catholics to emphasize the intimate link of heavenly saints with the Church on earth. Both meanings are very suspicious linguistically. Each view represents a certain time in church history, and all readings may, in some ways, complement one another.<sup>1</sup> There are various compelling arguments to keep the creeds in their current form, aside from their antiquity, which cannot be overlooked. We are not the first to discover flaws in the history

---

<sup>1</sup> David P. Scaer, "He Did Descend To Hell: In Defense Of The Apostles' Creed," *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 35, no. 1 (1992): 91–99, <https://www.intoxicatedonlife.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/David-Scaer.pdf>.

and interpretation of contentious creedal expressions, and we may have to concede humbly that we do not have access to all the historical data that led to their inclusion. However, this does not exempt us from confronting the current data.

The teaching about our Lord Christ's descent into hell to those kept until that moment and those under the devil's rule, the former being preached the Gospel, is mentioned in the 5th article of the Apostolic Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and all the Orthodox Church's Creeds. The Orthodox Creed emphasizes that, even if the holy body of Jesus remained in the tomb from Friday evening until dawn on Sunday, it was in the same hypostasis as the soul, which had descended into death, because God does not obey the rules of space and thus is present everywhere at the same time. The Logos' hypostasis therefore secured the link between the body and the soul. The hypostasis of the Logos thereby preserved the link between the body and the soul, even though the two aspects of Christ's person were separated for a while. The Orthodox liturgical ritual embraced this fundamental fact.<sup>2</sup> The Church Fathers agree that the Savior went into hell and imparted the gospel of redemption to the souls of the dead since Adam and until then "to the spirits in prison" (1 Peter 3:19). Christ conveyed the good news to all souls from Adam until the coming of God, including not only those in the Old Testament who had accomplished God's purpose but also the peoples and pagans (Matthew 8:10).

The ancient creeds, notably the Apostles' Creed, should not be regarded as antagonistic to the Scriptures but rather as conserving their most important doctrines, particularly the Christology that forms the gospel. In this theory, the Scriptures are viewed not just as the Word of God but also as manifestations of the writers' faith—that is, the Scriptures are themselves confessions.<sup>3</sup> Scaer believes that rather than restricting the creation of the Apostles' Creed to the years following A.D. 200, we should consider it to have emerged at the same time as the apostolic Scriptures.<sup>4</sup> The outline of 1 Peter 3:18–22 closely resembles our creed: Christ's death and glory; his teaching in the prison (the disputed portion on whether it alludes to his descent into hell); his resurrection; and his ascension. A comparable framework may be found in Colossians 2:9–15. It incorporates a part adapted from 1 Peter 3:18–22 to explain the fall into hell: "He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them" (verse 15).

---

<sup>2</sup> Petcu Liviu, "The Church Fathers on the Soteriological Significance of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ's Descent into Hell," *International Journal of Scientific Research* 5, no. 7 (2016): 255–56, <https://doi.org/https://www.doi.org/10.36106/ijsr>.

<sup>3</sup> Scaer, "He Did Descend To Hell: In Defense Of The Apostles' Creed."

<sup>4</sup> Scaer.

Lauber mention about Barth who considers the Apostles' Creed article that confesses that Jesus Christ 'was crucified, dead, and buried; he fell into hell' as a single unit and emphasizes the twofold character of this confession. On the one hand, this expression represents what Jesus Christ went through during his life and death. On the other hand, it explains the significance of this specific life and death in terms of human redemption<sup>5</sup>. The fact that Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and ascended into hell demonstrates the seriousness of his suffering and the totality of his connection with sinful humanity, which includes bearing the consequences of sin at the hands of God's judgment and wrath. Because crucifixion shows a divine curse, Jesus Christ carries a divine curse (Galatians 3:13). He bears a divine punishment since that is what death involves (Romans 6:23). Finally, he suffers the agony of an ordeal permitted by God, as this is what it means to have sunk into hell.<sup>6</sup> While exegetical choices and historical development are crucial in determining what is meant by *descensus ad inferos*, and while they will occasionally advance the discussion below.

This study using library research techniques, also known as desk research or secondary research, is a research approach that involves collecting data and doing analysis utilizing existing information and sources. Conduct a literature review. A literature review entails locating and reviewing previous research and publications on your issue. Collect and evaluate data. After identifying relevant sources, you may collect data by taking notes, summarizing material, and arranging it by topics or categories. The data may then be analyzed to uncover patterns, trends, or gaps in previous studies. Synthesize your results. The last stage of library research is to summarize your findings and form conclusions. Identifying significant themes, summarizing the essential findings, and underscoring potential implications for future studies are all part of this process. This research collects and evaluates data on Christ's descent into hell using databases like books and journals, then categories it into Karl Barth and Wayne Grudem's exegesis.

## Discussion

### Christ's descent into hell (*descensus ad infernum*)

The meaning of the word "hell" is not exhausted by understanding it as a place or condition of endless tortures or punitive divine judgments. It must also be seen as the place of God's triumph in Christ over Satan and evil.<sup>7</sup> The Creed simply states, "He descended into

---

<sup>5</sup> David Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Lauber.

<sup>7</sup> Scaer, "He Did Descend To Hell: In Defense Of The Apostles' Creed."

Hell [Hades]." While Jesus' sign is an excellent approach to proving this teaching, it is not the scripture that was utilized as evidence. The early church turned to Ephesians 4:9 for this, which says, "But what does 'He ascended' mean except that He descended to the lower parts of the earth?" Today, however, an intriguing occurrence happens in the reading of this line: many academicians will find a method to evade the most natural meaning. For example, after establishing that this line most probably refers to the notion that Christ descended into hades, William Bales says, citing David, "I believe the author used the descent phrase in 4:9 metaphorically in order to indicate Christ's sacrificial death." In other words, Paul was employing metaphor to convey an idea that was thought to be literal at the time.<sup>8</sup>

Many people look to Acts 2:27, Romans 10:6-7, Ephesians 4:8-9, 1 Peter 3:18-20, and 1 Peter 4:6 for scriptural justification for Christ's fall into hell. A close analysis of these five Bible verses, however, reveals that none of them are convincing of such a theory. Scaer argues that in any case, Jesus did go someplace after his burial and before his resurrection appearances, according to 1 Peter 3:18-22. The Apostles' Creed sequence (died, buried, fell into hell, arose from the dead) The parallel between 1 Pet 3:18-22 (death [humiliation], alive in the spirit [glorification], resurrection, and going into paradise) is striking. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that 1 Pet 3:18-22 is based on an established creed.<sup>9</sup>

The substance of the announcement made by the deceased and the depiction of Christ's journey to the dead in 1 Peter is brought into sharp focus by contrasting it with the description of Enoch's trip to the fallen angels of Genesis 6 found in the Ethiopian book of Enoch, which most likely served as a model for this section of the Petrine epistle. Whereas Enoch warns that the fallen angels "would find no peace and no forgiveness, and that God would reject their plea for peace and mercy",<sup>10</sup> the descent into hell and ascension thus share a common emphasis on Jesus' absence.<sup>11</sup>

Since the early decades of Christianity, the idea of Christ's descending into hell to release the righteous of the Old Testament—often known as the Harrowing of Hell, after a use first found in Middle English—has been extensively discussed. Although only hinted at in passing in the Holy Scriptures, its veracity was never seriously questioned, and the exegetical tradition quickly adopted it as a pivotal episode in salvation history,

---

<sup>8</sup> Christopher P. Davis, "Revisiting the Afterlife: The Inadequacies of 'Heaven' and 'Hell,'" *Fidei et Veritatis: The Liberty University Journal of Graduate Research* 1, no. 1 (2016): A1, [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=fidei\\_et\\_veritatis](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=fidei_et_veritatis).

<sup>9</sup> Scaer, "He Did Descend To Hell: In Defense Of The Apostles' Creed."

<sup>10</sup> Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell*.

<sup>11</sup> David R. Law, "Descent into Hell, Ascension, and Luther's Doctrine of Ubiquitarianism," *Theology* 107, no. 838 (July 20, 2004): 250-56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X0410700403>.

foreshadowing the Last Judgment and the entrance of the just into the heavenly kingdom. The story immediately became a classic, and poets expanded on its dramatic aspect, adding narrative and psychological nuances. Indeed, it became a popular theme in early medieval plays.<sup>12</sup>

Derrett argues that references to the so-called "descent" are searched in vain in the gospels. Despite Psalms 16:10, Judaism does not believe that God releases souls from torment. 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6 (AD 81–96) are humiliating, even though 1 Peter is a first-rate early Christian work that is still in touch with Judaism.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the idea most connected with Holy Saturday: Christ's ascension to the grave. There are various historical and exegetical issues with this creedal assertion, including how early it was incorporated in any creed or formula, the transition from inferos to inferna in the Apostles' Creed, and its exegetical foundation.<sup>14</sup> The passages utilized in exegetical support by a certain theologian or commentator are virtually as diverse as the answers they provide for what exactly descensus ad inferos entails.

Pearson, for one, believes it is impossible for Christ to experience the torments of hell. It must not and cannot be recognized that Christ suffered all the torments that the cursed endure, and hence it is not and cannot be true that he went into hell by experiencing them. There is a worm that never dies, which could not lodge within his breast; that is, a remorse of conscience, seated in the soul, for what that soul hath done; but such a remorse of conscience could not be in Christ, who, though he took upon himself the sins of those who would otherwise be damned, that act of his was a most virtuous, charitable, and glorious act, highly conformable to the will of God.<sup>15</sup> The New Testament authors tried hard to compress history into a single time, following the evolution of the universe from creation to an unending afterlife. To name a few of the most important points, the Virgin Birth, the Temptation, the Crucifixion, the Ascension into Hades, the Resurrection, and the Mythical Future (the

---

<sup>12</sup> Maria Elena Ruggerini, "A Just and Riding God: Christ's Movement in The Descent into Hell," in *Myths, Legends, and Heroes*, ed. Daniel Anlezark (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 206–24, <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442662056-014>.

<sup>13</sup> J. Duncan M. Derrett, "He Descended Into Hell," *The Journal of Higher Criticism* 9, no. 2 (2002): 234–45, [https://depts.drew.edu/jhc/Derrett\\_Descended.pdf](https://depts.drew.edu/jhc/Derrett_Descended.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Y. Emerson, *He Descended to the Dead: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday*, 1st ed. (London: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2019); Matthew Y. Emerson, "He Descended to the Dead": The Burial of Christ and the Eschatological Character of the Atonement," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 19, no. 1 (2015): 115–31, <https://equip.sbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2015/06/ST-216-2015-SBJT-19-1-Spring-2015-A7.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> John Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899).

Parousia, the General Resurrection, and the Last Judgment) are just a few examples. It largely relies on the essential parts of Jewish religion.<sup>16</sup>

Ruud mentions that "descending into hell" does not always refer to a hellishly terrible Near-Death Experience (NDE). In the contemporary Creed, 'hell' is a late-medieval name, most likely influenced by and flavored by popular notions about the nature of this location at the time.<sup>17</sup> However, in the original Greek form of the Apostles' Creed, the label "the deepest" is used, which is more in line with the apocryphal texts "Hades" or "underworld". This "Hades" or "underworld" was a realm of forgetfulness, wandering, and a dreary dead-end scenario—maybe like the "void" sort of disturbing NDE—whereas the Christian "hell" was a place of endless torment and suffering for sinful, disloyal souls.

Luke 16:23, The phrases are sometimes interpreted to signify nothing more than the preceding *sepultus est*. In this interpretation, Hades is understood in its broad sense of Sheol, the country of the dead, without regard for the fact that the New Testament occasionally uses the name Hades in its restricted connotation of the place of the damned. In addition to this Ephesian scripture, Roma 10:6–8 might have been utilized or alluded to. The clearest statement in the New Testament regarding Christ's descent, however, is 1 Peter 3:18–20. A thorough examination of these Scriptures will provide us with an understanding of what our Bible says and does not say on this issue:

"Because even Christ died once on behalf of sins, a just man taking the place of sinful people, that He might present you to God, having been done to death with respect to His body but brought to life with respect to the spirit." During this time, He went and made proclamation even to the spirits in prison, to those who had refused to come to faith long ago, when God's patience waited for them in the days of Noah, as the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were safely brought through by water (Scharlemann, 1989).

Scharlemann argues that, to summarize, 1 Peter 3:18–29 clearly teaches us that Christ, according to His exalted body, went into the pit to proclaim Himself as the Messiah. This was the first stage in His exaltation, in which He "disarmed principalities and dominions and displayed them openly, triumphing over them" (Colossians 2:15) through the cross.

Thirteenth-century theologians attempted to weave together a more or less cohesive set of imagery and conceptions about the afterlife inherited from the Patristic era, as well as unique advances from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The concept of a perpetual hell for

---

<sup>16</sup> Yusak Tanasyah, "THE DEVELOPMENT OF HELL FROM JEWISH TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: A Biblical Guide to Hell and Its Existence," *QUAERENS: Journal of Theology and Christianity Studies* 4, no. 1 (October 16, 2022): 27–41, <https://doi.org/10.46362/quaerens.v4i1.80>.

<sup>17</sup> W. van Ruud, "Was Jesus Christ's Descent into Hell a near-Death Experience?," *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 27, no. 4 (2009): 261–65, [https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc461742/m2/1/high\\_res\\_d/27-4\\_10\\_LtE\\_van\\_Wees\\_Perera\\_FINAL.pdf](https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc461742/m2/1/high_res_d/27-4_10_LtE_van_Wees_Perera_FINAL.pdf).

the damned was conventional in Christianity, but there was already a broad range of hypotheses and pictures concerning its location, circumstances, and (potential) modifications among the Church Fathers. The concept of a unique purgatory emerged in the fourth century. This was viewed as a location where the souls of individuals who died in a condition of grace and whose guilt had been forgiven were purified by experiencing transitory penalties for sins committed during their lifetimes but not yet expiated.<sup>18</sup>

Kim Hyung-Nong Park's Christology provides a succinct explanation of the subject of Christ's fall into hell. He notes that the sentence "He descended into hell" appears after the declaration about Jesus' suffering, death, and burial in the Western Church's Apostles' Creed, but it has been removed from the Korean Protestant version of the Apostles' Creed. In comparison to the other articles in the Apostles' Creed, Park emphasizes that "He descended into hell" is not a universal confession. He further adds that the phrase is not mentioned in the Scriptures; hence, the remark is not founded on a straight scriptural truth.<sup>19</sup>

As Kim agrees in the Apostles' Creed, Jong-Sung Lee gives a short narrative of Christ's fall into hell. Lee emphasizes that the phrase "He descended into hell" signifies that Jesus Christ first walked the path of humanity by giving himself up to death on the Cross.<sup>20</sup> Second, in Christ, Jesus' death and burial create a contradiction. Christ, being the genuine God, did not need to die, yet Jesus was buried at the hands of sinners. This was a perplexing phenomenon that was beyond human explanation. Third, Christ's journey into hell indicates that Christ's dominion and power extended across the entire globe. Jesus Christ revealed himself as the Lord of all creatures, the Alpha and Omega, through his journey into hell. Finally, Christ's descent into hell represents a voyage into the depths of all depths as well as preparation for his ascension to the highest point.<sup>21</sup>

### Karl Barth: hell on the cross and hell on Holy Saturday

In this enigmatic statement about the "primeval sphere of human transgression and divine patience," Barth appears to be making at least three points. First, he rejects that 1 Peter

<sup>18</sup> Harm J. M. J. Goris, "Thomas Aquinas on Christ's Descent into Hell," in *The Apostles' Creed 'He Descended Into Hell'*, ed. Marcel Sarot and Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, 1st ed. (Leiden: BRILL, 2018), 93–114, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004366633\\_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004366633_007).

<sup>19</sup> Dae Hee Kim, "The Soteriological Significance of Christ's Descent into Hell: A Study of the Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell Based on Reformed Theology in Korean Religious, Historical, and Cultural Contexts" (Toronto School of Theology, n.d.), [https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/109673/3/Kim\\_DaeHee\\_202111\\_PhD\\_thesis.pdf](https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/109673/3/Kim_DaeHee_202111_PhD_thesis.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Kim.

<sup>21</sup> Kim.

3:19's 'preaching to the spirits' refers to a preaching activity undertaken by Jesus Christ between his death on the cross and his resurrection; this verse does not support the confession that Jesus Christ descended into Hades or hell.<sup>22</sup> Second, the spirits in prison who were disobedient during the Flood (das Flutgeschlecht) serve as a metaphor for all types of human transgression. The term 'spirits in prison' does not relate to a specific group of individuals; rather, it refers to all unredeemed people who lived and died prior to the historical reality of Jesus Christ. Finally, 1 Peter 3:18–19 demonstrates God's patience. Those who were condemned during the Great Flood have hope; God is patient (2 Peter 3:9) and provides a method for the gospel to be preached to them as well.

Barth also finds no support for the teaching of the descent into hell in the 'ascending' and 'descending' motif found in Romans 10:6 and Ephesians 4:8–10. Barth interprets these passages as emphasizing the exaltation or ascension of the Son of Man that occurs in the humiliation or descending of the Son of God and as affirming the unity of these states. Barth also rejects Peter's Pentecost speech, as reported in Acts 2, as the scriptural basis for the doctrine of the fall into hell. According to Barth, the significance of Acts 2:22–28 lies not in the description of Christ's state in his death as the 'pangs (or pain) of death', from which God raised him up, but in the clause that immediately follows: "because it was not possible for him to be held by it [the pangs of death]". This is noteworthy because it identifies Jesus Christ as "the one for whom the resurrection from the dead was impossible."<sup>23</sup>

Barth clearly traces his interpretation of descendit ad inferos as expressing what happens to Jesus as 'the misery of an ordeal' to Calvin's understanding of Mark 15:34. Barth defends such an understanding of Jesus Christ's death and scream of abandonment with the theological thesis that in Jesus Christ, God becomes personally concerned with humanity's tragic and sinful condition. The exegesis of Christ's death in terms of descendit ad inferos is only feasible because of the premise that "what happens in the life and, most importantly, in the death of Jesus of Nazareth is God's self-surrender to the state and fate of man." According to Barth, the New Testament understanding of hell is distinct in that it refers to God's punishment of sinful mankind. Hell is typically interpreted in the New Testament as a tangible and real threat to sinful mankind because it is intimately tied to what wicked humans deserve.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell*.

<sup>23</sup> Lauber.

<sup>24</sup> Richard E. Burnett, *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

The central role that Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross plays in Barth's discussion of the descent into hell indicates that Barth does not believe that the descent into hell is a distinct event of Jesus Christ's passion. For example, in his commentary on Calvin's catechism, he interprets Jesus' cry of abandonment as indicating that "as soon as the body is buried, the soul goes to hell, that is, instantaneously." Nonetheless, he continuously associates Christ's fall into or experience of hell with the incident of the cross. As a result, Barth faces the same criticism as Balthasar does of Calvin because they both believe that Christ endured the tortures of hell on the cross in the place of sinful mankind, and hence there is no need for the dead Christ to undergo hell on Holy Saturday (Lauber, 2017). Barth's theological thought on the existence of hell is founded on two distinct perspectives: the Old and New Testament ideas of hell. To begin, he notes that in the Old Testament, hell is "the place of torment" and "complete separateness," in which the dead live "only as a non-being".<sup>25</sup>

In this text, we find Barth's interpretation of Christ's descent into hell as a sign of both the depth of Christ's suffering—the extreme of his humility—and the victory for mankind that this suffering and humiliation earned. Barth is firmly rooted in the Reformed tradition, accepting Calvin's concept of the fall into hell as an interpretation of the cry of dereliction. At the same time, Barth insists on affirming the triumphal and victorious aspects of the journey into hell. Because of the intensity of Jesus Christ's suffering on the cross, the fall into hell is a victory. In this text, we find Barth's interpretation of Christ's descent into hell as a sign of both the depth of Christ's suffering—the extreme of his humility—and the victory for mankind that this suffering and humiliation earned. Barth is firmly rooted in the Reformed tradition, accepting Calvin's concept of the fall into hell as an interpretation of the cry of dereliction. At the same time, Barth insists on affirming the triumphal and victorious aspect of the journey into hell. Because of the intensity of Jesus Christ's suffering on the cross, the fall into hell is a victory.

### Wayne Grudem exegesis on decent to hell

The Church Fathers agree that the Savior went into hell and imparted the gospel of redemption to the souls of the dead since Adam and until then "to the spirits in prison" (I Peter 3:19). Christ conveyed the good news to all souls from Adam until the coming of God, including not only those in the Old Testament who had accomplished God's purpose but also to the peoples and pagans (Matthew 8:10). Grudem comes to the following conclusion:

---

<sup>25</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publisher, 1959).

'The notion of Christ's "descent into hell" is by no means presented clearly or explicitly in any text of Scripture,' and 'this thought is not taught in Scripture at all'. Because of this seeming lack of scriptural support, Grudem urges the removal of the phrase "He descended into hell" from the Church's confession, saying, "[He descended into hell]" is at best confusing and, in most cases, misleading for modern Christians".<sup>26</sup>

In my opinion, it would be all gain and no loss if it were removed from Creed once and for all.<sup>27</sup> Wayne A. Grudem takes the next logical step, saying that this section of the Apostles' Creed should be omitted entirely. Grudem states, after providing several interpretations of verses that appear to demonstrate Christ's descent: Aside from the fact that there appears to be little if any Biblical support for Christ's descent into hell, other NT writings appear to negate the notion of Christ's traveling to hell after his death. "Today you will be with me in paradise," Jesus said to the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43), implying that once Jesus died, his soul (or spirit) went straight to the presence of the Father in heaven, even though his body remained on earth and was crucified.<sup>28</sup>

Emerson quote certain evangelical theologians, most notably Wayne Grudem, reject the consensus theory entirely. Grudem's primary arguments are exegetical in the first place (he disagrees that 1 Peter 3:18–21 teaches a descent to the dead) and theological in the second (he ties it almost entirely to the harrowing of hell and thus to a view of justification and the salvation of Old Testament saints alien to Protestant theology).<sup>29</sup> However, it is unclear how Grudem deals with Jesus' burial other than refuting specific beliefs about it.<sup>30</sup> According to the Old Testament, believers who died before Christ's death went on to be with the Lord (see Genesis 5:24; Luke 16:22). As David stated, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Psalm 23:6): "Do not spend a thousand years or so in torment until Christ returns.

---

<sup>26</sup> Wayne Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell : A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 1 (1991): 103–113, [http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/he-did-not-descend-into-hell\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/he-did-not-descend-into-hell_JETS.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Randall E. Otto, "Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 (1990): 143–50.

<sup>28</sup> Davis, "Revisiting the Afterlife: Visiting the Afterlife: The Inadequacies of 'Heaven': The Inadequacies of 'Heaven' and 'Hell' " and 'Hell.'"

<sup>29</sup> Wayne Grudem, "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19–20 in Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature," *Trinity Journal* 7, no. 2 (1986): 3–31, <http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Christ-Preaching-Through-Noah-1-Peter-3-19-20-in-the-Light-of-Dominant-Themes-in-Jewish-Literature.pdf>; Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell : A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed."

<sup>30</sup> Emerson, *He Descended to the Dead: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday*; Emerson, "He Descended to the Dead": The Burial of Christ and the Eschatological Character of the Atonement."

According to 1 Peter 3:18, the Spirit of Christ preached solely to "those who disobeyed in the days of Noah."

This embracing of death was the entire goal of the incarnation: Christ took on a bodily body in order to die in it as God. As a result, the power of death was "fully expended" on him, resulting in the "dissolution of death" and the resurrection of the faithful. This is what Paul means when he says, "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54). As the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ vanquished death on the cross by dying a human death, and everything that transpired after the cross—including his descent and resurrection from the dead—worked out the implications of this triumph for our redemption (Johnson, 2014). It is said here that the objective of Christ's descent to Hell was to rescue the whole human species that lived before, during, and after the Law. Trumbower quote In Sanctum Pascha, chapter 58, Pseudo-Hippolytus' homily could be usefully added to the actually rich report of texts on the descensus ad inferos (chapter 5): here it is argued that the purpose of Christ's descent to Hell was to save the entire humanity that had lived before the Law, under the Law, and after Christ's coming.<sup>31</sup>

Grudem has some idea of Augustine rejects the view that Christ preached in hell, and his arguments are all about the mission of the church now, in this life. First and foremost, if Christ preached in hell to rescue those who lived prior to the incarnation, what about all those who have died and continue to die following Christ's resurrection who have not heard the gospel? Because the latter are not excused for not hearing the gospel, neither are the former (Eph. 164.4.12). Second, others believe that the memory of Christ's sermon is preserved in hell so that those who go there now might hear it and repent. "Then the gospel ought not to be preached here, because all will certainly die, and they ought to reach hell without the guilt of despising the gospel, so that they may have the advantage of believing there!" Augustine responds. He claims that this is an illogical but natural conclusion if postmortem redemption is allowed (Ep. 164.4.13).<sup>32</sup>

De Lacy O'Leary proposed that our Apostles' Creed's sentence 'descended into Hell' was based on the tradition of 'the harrowing of Hell' as related in the Gospel of Nicodemus. He disputed that such doctrine had any actual foundation in Holy Scripture and traced its origins back to pre-Christian Italian stories regarding Orpheus' entrance into Hades (Burn,

---

<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead. The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Trumbower.

2015).<sup>33</sup> Sometime after his resurrection, the spirit of Christ proceeded to preach release from unbelief to the souls of the faithful of the old covenant who were in their own captivity of anguish. Only the confirmation of their verdict was announced to the godless. In this way, Gehenna imagery replaces Sheol imagery as more accurately expressing the depths of torment. In the Apostolicum, hell is therefore characterized by the cross. Hell is the state of being abandoned by God. Entering such a condition is a descent into hell. But it also means victory. Christ died on the cross for us, bringing us eternal redemption.<sup>34</sup>

Wayne Grudem continues to advocate for a similar interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18–22. Grudem, like Augustine, believes that the proclamation was given to sinful mankind by the preexistent Christ at work in the person of Noah. Grudem departs from Augustine's over-allegorical understanding of the incarceration of these souls. As already stated, Augustine saw the fulakh as a metaphorical prison of sin rather than a reallocation of punishment. Grudem rejects this idea, stating that the jail stated in verse 19 is a real place or state. The crux of Grudem's argument is that the spirits to whom Christ taught were not imprisoned at the time of the proclamation. Rather, Christ preached to human spirits through Noah while they were still alive on earth prior to the flood; now, nevertheless, having been destroyed in the flood, they have been imprisoned.<sup>35</sup>

Grudem continues to support his claims with data from 1 Peter as a whole. He contends that the pneumata referenced in verse 19 might relate to human spirits based on comparable usages in the New Testament and early Jewish literature<sup>36</sup>. This view, in his opinion, accords more fully with the more popular understanding of the account of Noah and the deluge recorded in Genesis 6.44. He observes that Genesis 6 is more preoccupied with the human sin that caused God to send the flood than with other celestial characters. According to Grudem, God is preoccupied with mankind and their sin. As a result, by mentioning Noah, the author of 1 Peter is most likely referring to people rather than angels.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, Grudem is compelled to adopt this interpretation because, in his opinion, it better represents 1 Peter's overall message, which is to encourage its readers to witness

---

<sup>33</sup> Clint Burnett, "Going Through Hell; TAPTAPOΣ in Greco-Roman Culture, Second Temple Judaism, and Philo of Alexandria," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 4, no. 3 (May 14, 2013): 352–78, <https://doi.org/10.30965/21967954-00403004>; Burnett, *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth*.

<sup>34</sup> Johan Buitendag, "Descendit Ad [in] Inferna: 'A Matter of No Small Moment in Bringing about Redemption,'" *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (September 10, 2009): a273, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v65i1.273>.

<sup>35</sup> Grudem, "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19–20 in Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature."

<sup>36</sup> Grudem.

<sup>37</sup> Grudem.

boldly in the midst of hostile unbelievers and to reassure them of their salvation and the coming judgment. As a result, God's patience mentioned in 1 Peter 3:20 alludes to God's desire for mankind to repent, and the proclamation is one of redemption and hope.<sup>38</sup> According to Wayne Grudem, both datives should be interpreted as referring to the "realm" of existence and action. As a result, Grudem concludes that Christ was crucified "in the fleshly realm" and raised to life in the "spiritual realm." To make his case, Grudem believes that "it would be somewhat unusual for readers to see exactly the same grammatical structure (in Greek) in parallel parts of the same sentence and yet know that Peter wanted the two parts understood differently".<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

My argument is that the exegesis of Christ's descent into hell or to the dead offers a more comprehensive and profound understanding of Christ's redemptive work, based on theological reflection on the entire sequence of events, which includes the Son's incarnation, suffering, death, descent into hell, and resurrection. Christ's saving work must be thoroughly described in terms of his complete redeeming activity. In conclusion, Barth and Grudem both give exegesis decent into hell with the meaning of death, resurrection, and ascension, having met the demands of divine judgment to rescue his people and set an example in the face of suffering.

## References

- Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. New York, NY: Harper & Row Publisher, 1959.
- Buitendag, Johan. "Descendit Ad [in] Inferna: 'A Matter of No Small Moment in Bringing about Redemption.'" *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (September 10, 2009): a273. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v65i1.273>.
- Burnett, Clint. "Going Through Hell; ΤΑΠΤΑΡΟΣ in Greco-Roman Culture, Second Temple Judaism, and Philo of Alexandria." *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 4, no. 3 (May 14, 2013): 352–78. <https://doi.org/10.30965/21967954-00403004>.
- Burnett, Richard E. *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

---

<sup>38</sup> Grudem.

<sup>39</sup> Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell : A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles ' Creed"; Grudem, "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19-20 in Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature."

- Davis, Christopher P. "Revisiting the Afterlif Visiting the Afterlife: The Inadequacies of "Heaven: The Inadequacies of 'Heaven' and 'Hell' " and 'Hell.'" *Fidei et Veritatis: The Liberty University Journal of Graduate Research* 1, no. 1 (2016): A1.  
[https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=fidei\\_et\\_veritatis](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=fidei_et_veritatis).
- Derrett, J. Duncan M. "He Descended Into Hell." *The Journal of Higher Criticism* 9, no. 2 (2002): 234–45. [https://depts.drew.edu/jhc/Derrett\\_Descended.pdf](https://depts.drew.edu/jhc/Derrett_Descended.pdf).
- Emerson, Matthew Y. *He Descended to the Dead: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday*. 1st ed. London: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2019.
- . "He Descended to the Dead": The Burial of Christ and the Eschatological Character of the Atonement." *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 19, no. 1 (2015): 115–31.  
<https://equip.sbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2015/06/ST-216-2015-SBJT-19-1-Spring-2015-A7.pdf>.
- Goris, Harm J. M. J. "Thomas Aquinas on Christ's Descent into Hell." In *The Apostles' Creed 'He Descended Into Hell'*, edited by Marcel Sarot and Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, 1st ed., 93–114. Leiden: BRILL, 2018. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004366633\\_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004366633_007).
- Grudem, Wayne. "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19-20 in Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature." *Trinity Journal* 7, no. 2 (1986): 3–31.  
<http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Christ-Preaching-Through-Noah-I-Peter-3-19-20-in-the-Light-of-Dominant-Themes-in-Jewish-Literature.pdf>.
- . "He Did Not Descend into Hell : A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles ' Creed." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 1 (1991): 103–113.  
[http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/he-did-not-descend-into-hell\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/he-did-not-descend-into-hell_JETS.pdf).
- Kim, Dae Hee. "The Soteriological Significance of Christ's Descent into Hell: A Study of the Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell Based on Reformed Theology in Korean Religious, Historical, and Cultural Contexts." Toronto School of Theology, n.d.  
[https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/109673/3/Kim\\_DaeHee\\_202111\\_PhD\\_thesis.pdf](https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/109673/3/Kim_DaeHee_202111_PhD_thesis.pdf).
- Lauber, David. *Barth on the Descent into Hell*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Law, David R. "Descent into Hell, Ascension, and Luther's Doctrine of Ubiquitarianism." *Theology* 107, no. 838 (July 20, 2004): 250–56.

- <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X0410700403>.
- Liviu, Petcu. "The Church Fathers on the Soteriological Significance of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ's Descent into Hell." *International Journal of Scientific Research* 5, no. 7 (2016): 255–56. <https://doi.org/https://www.doi.org/10.36106/ijsr>.
- Otto, Randall E. "Descendit in Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum." *Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 (1990): 143–50.
- Pearson, John. *An Exposition of the Creed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899.
- Ruggerini, Maria Elena. "A Just and Riding God: Christ's Movement in The Descent into Hell." In *Myths, Legends, and Heroes*, edited by Daniel Anlezark, 206–24. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442662056-014>.
- Ruud, W. van. "Was Jesus Christ's Descent into Hell a near-Death Experience?" *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 27, no. 4 (2009): 261–65.  
[https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc461742/m2/1/high\\_res\\_d/27-4\\_10\\_LtE\\_van\\_Wees,\\_Perera\\_FINAL.pdf](https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc461742/m2/1/high_res_d/27-4_10_LtE_van_Wees,_Perera_FINAL.pdf).
- Scaer, David P. "He Did Descend To Hell: In Defense Of The Apostles' Creed." *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 35, no. 1 (1992): 91–99.  
<https://www.intoxicatedonlife.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/David-Scaer.pdf>.
- Tanasyah, Yusak. "The Development Of Hell From Jewish To Christian Theology: A Biblical Guide to Hell and Its Existence." *QUAERENS: Journal of Theology and Christianity Studies* 4, no. 1 (October 16, 2022): 27–41. <https://doi.org/10.46362/quaerens.v4i1.80>.
- Trumbower, Jeffrey A. *Rescue for the Dead. The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.