

“He Descended to the Dead”: The Burial of Christ and the Eschatological Character of the Atonement

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INTRODUCTION

Expositions of Christ’s atoning work tend to emphasize the crucifixion and resurrection, and rightly so. Good Friday and Easter Sunday are of paramount importance in what Jesus accomplished, as the Nicene Creed puts it, “for us and for our salvation.” And yet there is more to the atonement than the cross and the empty tomb. There is Christ’s life and ministry, his burial, ascension, giving of the Spirit, and his return. Although each of these other atoning acts of Jesus are significant, the particular focus of this essay will be Christ’s burial, one of the most neglected events in explications of the atonement. As Mark Davis explains,

... even when the burial remains in a church's reading as part of the Passion Sunday or Good Friday lection, it is overlooked in lieu of the crucifixion itself, or of the hints of the resurrection found in the elaborate detail of the posting of guards and the Chief Priest's anticipations of foul play with Jesus' body by the disciples. After all, touching though it is, one is tempted to see Joseph's burial of Jesus as just a necessary moment along the way from the cross to the empty tomb, as opposed to having meaning in itself.¹

This is not, however, the picture Scripture gives us about Christ's burial. Paul, at least, connects Christ's burial with the *euangelion* in 1 Corinthians 15:4 and with the new nature of believers in Romans 6:4. The church has confessed throughout its history that Christ was buried, and in the context of the creeds' emphasis on Jesus' work, this implies atoning significance. Therefore this paper will argue that this neglected act in the theo-drama of salvation, the burial of Christ, is vicarious and can be considered salvific in a variety of ways.

I do not wish to stop, though, at only showing how Christ's burial is atoning, but also hope to establish how Christ's time in the tomb demonstrates the eschatological location of the atonement. Each of the events in Christ's work of salvation, seen cumulatively as the united atoning act of Jesus, is eschatological in character. While the atonement is typically located within Christology, soteriology, theology proper, and ecclesiology, this eschatological character of the atonement is sometimes left to the margins. Perhaps this is due to the modern revision of eschatology to include only "last things" (e.g., death, judgment, the eternal state). And yet the Bible and the early church speak of Christ's work of salvation in terms of the "last days."² The economy of salvation, centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ, is eschatological in the sense that it inaugurates the new age of the kingdom of God.

This essay seeks to focus on these two underappreciated aspects of the atonement: the burial as a vicarious act and the burial as an eschatological event.³ To anticipate the biblical and theological argument, Christ's time in the tomb on Holy Saturday is an eschatologically charged, vicariously salvific act because it is at this point in Jesus' work that he takes his Sabbath rest after finishing his new creation, embodies the already/not yet tension inherent in salvation, represents the firstfruits of the intermediate state in his sleep, and defeats death, Hades, and the Dragon. The essay will proceed by examining

these four main eschatological implications of Christ’s burial, and in doing so will connect the burial of Christ to a number of eschatological doctrines, including the millennium, universalism, and the intermediate state.

ESCHATOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CHRIST’S ATONING BURIAL

The Burial of Christ and the Descent to the Dead: Historical Perspective

While Christ’s burial has been somewhat neglected in both soteriology and eschatology, it has not been completely abandoned. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the doctrine most associated with Holy Saturday—Christ’s descent to the dead. There are numerous historical and exegetical problems with this particular creedal affirmation, including how early it was included in any creed or formula, the change from *inferos* to *inferna* in the Apostles’ Creed,⁴ and the exegetical basis for it. Passages used in exegetical support by a particular theologian or commentator are almost as varied as the explanations they give for what exactly *descensus ad inferos* means. Over time⁵ 1 Peter 3:18–21, many times in conjunction with 1 Peter 4:6, became a popular plank in building a theology of the descent.⁶ Ephesians 4:9–10,⁷ Romans 10:7,⁸ and Revelation 20:6⁹ are also texts upon which supporters of the *descensus* doctrine rely heavily. Other passages utilized include Jesus’ reference to Jonah in Matthew 12:40,¹⁰ Peter’s reference to Jesus’ mortem state in Acts 2:24–28, a possible allusion to the gates of Hades in John 10:1–5¹¹ and Psalm 24,¹² Jesus’ parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16, and a host of OT texts that discuss Sheol and perhaps imply the Messiah’s journey there (e.g., Pss 16:10; 18:4–5, 16–20; 71:20; 107:15–16). Later, in ancient Christian writings such as the *Odes of Solomon*¹³ and the *Gospel of Nicodemus*,¹⁴ the authors rely heavily on these same OT and NT texts in their explanation of the *descensus*. Although the doctrine, and even the event itself, is questioned today, it is clear that the early Christian theologians, and subsequently most of historic Christianity, have affirmed that Jesus descended to the dead and accomplished something there. The question throughout the history of doctrine has been what exactly Christ accomplished in his descent.

While exegetical options and matters of historical development¹⁵ are important in untangling just what is meant by *descensus ad inferos*, and while

they will at times further the discussion below, the focus here is on how Christ's time in the tomb helps locate his atoning work within the doctrine of the last things. In other words, our focus in the sections that follow will not include arbitrating between different views of the descent or assessing their biblical warrant, but rather will remain on understanding how they demonstrate the connection between Christ's burial and eschatology. The descent to the dead, and the multiple understandings of its meaning throughout church history, provides one of the clearest examples of how the burial of Jesus is an eschatological atoning act. In what follows I will sketch the various options for how to understand the *descensus* doctrine and how they locate the atonement within eschatology.

The Patristic and Orthodox View

There are at least five possible interpretive options found in the history of the doctrine. First, there is the Patristic and subsequent Orthodox view of the descent,¹⁶ which is primarily understood as Jesus' healing of the first Adam through his role as the second Adam. Jesus descends to the dead in order to conquer Death and Hades¹⁷ and, in doing so, to liberate all those held captive.¹⁸ In his discussion of the early church's view on the descent, Jared Wicks summarizes Origen's view thusly: "Christ broke death's oppressive power once and for all, for the benefit of all humankind, including death's prisoners, and so Paul rightly says in the passage being explained, 'death no longer has dominion over him' (Rom 6:9)."¹⁹ There is here a strong sense of Christ as victor, but victory is combined with liberation. Cyril of Alexandria, for example, combines these two motifs in his understanding of the descent, arguing that Christ defeats both Hades *and* Adam's sin and its effects, which thereby liberates the entire human race from its captivity to Satan and death.²⁰ Similarly, Syrian theology, represented most notably by Ephrem, affirmed that "... Christ, through his saving work, has undone the consequences of the fall and removed the curse from humanity [see, e.g., *Nisbene Hymn* 36:1]."²¹

One of the more common ways that the early church theologians discussed Christ's victory in the descent is through tying it to his baptism, and sometimes also to his incarnation. In both of these other descents, the God-man descends to a watery locale and, as a result, crushes Satan's head.²²

In doing so, Christ is victorious over Adam’s jailer and thus liberates him and his progeny from bondage. In the Patristic sources, which gives rise to Orthodox reflection, there is, then, a strong affirmation that Christ’s descent to the dead is universal in its atoning significance, especially in the sense that it a) defeats the universal enemies of Death, Hell, and Satan and b) at least provides the possibility for universal salvation, since Christ’s liberating work affects all those formerly bound by death. That is, it liberates Adam’s entire race from the effects of his sin.²³

The Roman Catholic View

A related view is the traditional Roman Catholic understanding of the *descensus*, also referred to as the Harrowing of Hell.²⁴ Here, Christ descends to the uppermost part of Hades (and not to the supposed lower three regions), the limbo of the fathers. Its inhabitants are virtuous pagans and faithful Jews who died before Christ’s first advent and therefore did not have the opportunity to respond to the gospel. Christ’s descent, understood as the referent of 1 Peter 3:18, is for that very purpose—to preach the good news to those who have already died. In response to that proclamation by Jesus, inhabitants of the *limbus patrum* can respond with faith or unbelief. If the former, they are taken out by Christ. In distinction from what became standard in Orthodoxy, Jesus does not in this view lead every human being out, but instead saves those who were prepared for it in the era before Christ. There is less emphasis on universal possibilities (although that is certainly not excluded)²⁵ and more on providing salvation to virtuous pagans and faithful Jews who lived and died before Jesus’ advent.²⁶

The Reformers: Martin Luther and John Calvin

In Luther, Christ’s descent is almost solely couched in victorious terms. Jesus, in descending to the dead, has broken the gates of Sheol and triumphed over the devil. According to Richard Klann, “Luther taught that after Christ’s burial, after He became alive again in the grave and before His emergence from the grave, the God-man descended to hell in a supernatural manner, conquered the devil, destroyed hell’s power, and took from the devil all his might (Article IX, Tappert ed., p. 610).”²⁷ Notice that for Luther the Patristic

perspective on Christ's victorious descent is decoupled from their liberating motif, at least in the sense that it universally liberates humanity from Adam's bonds. Luther does not seem to draw on either the Orthodox or Roman Catholic liberating overtones. Notice also that Luther places Christ's spirit in Hades *after* his resurrection; this is rare in terms of timing.

Calvin, on the other hand, focused more on Christ's substitution for sinners in the *descensus* than on the victory accomplished by it.²⁸ In his view, the descent happens on the cross as Jesus experiences the full separation from the Father due to bearing the weight of sin, expressed in the cry of dereliction. Jesus, in his humanity, experiences the torments of hell, most notably the separation from God, on the cross in the place of those who receive him by faith.²⁹ Calvin, and later Lightfoot, saw the descent doctrine not only as teaching substitutionary atonement but also as anti-Apollinarian.³⁰ Christ did not only suffer in his body but in his body and his soul, thus maintaining the unity of his human person. It thus has implications in Calvinist thought for the intermediate and eternal states. Though Calvin's view is important in the history of the doctrine, it is less helpful here since its focus is on Christ's crucifixion and not on his burial.

Hans Urs von Balthasar's View

Balthasar's explanation of the descent has provided an opportunity for much reflection and debate. Depending on one's perspective, he has either radically departed from Roman Catholic orthodoxy³¹ or provided a legitimate explication of the doctrine that furthers the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of it.³² In any case, Balthasar combines many of the themes in Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation theology and provides a unique picture of Christ's descent. Balthasar desires to unite some of the disparate models of the atonement in his understanding of soteriology, especially victory, liberation, and substitution.³³ The climax of Christ's atoning work, especially in terms of substitution, comes for Balthasar on Holy Saturday. Unlike Calvin (and later, Barth³⁴), Balthasar places Christ's descent on Saturday in the tomb instead of on Friday on the cross. Like Calvin, though, the purpose of the descent is to stand for humanity, experiencing the pains of hell with them and for them.³⁵

While this may seem rather innocuous, since all that has happened is a

date change to this point, there is a reason Balthasar’s position is considered radical by some. He posits that Jesus, in his descent to hell, experiences all that is included in the torment of hell, and especially the separation from the Father due to the presence of sin.³⁶ Problematic for many is the fact that, unlike Calvin, Balthasar wants to place this separation not only between the human spirit of Jesus and God but between Christ’s divine nature and the Father as well.³⁷ His motivation seems to be to head off Nestorianism.³⁸ Balthasar does attempt to defeat any criticism here by first arguing that there is already separation between Father and Son *vis-a-vis* eternal generation, a separation that does not negate fellowship within the Godhead.³⁹ Second, he argues that the separation experienced is only subjective, not objective, and thus not technically an ontological split between persons of the Trinity.⁴⁰ Third, he argues that the entire point of this separation is so that it might be defeated via the love that exists between Father and Son as expressed in the Spirit.⁴¹ Hell and its effects are thus swallowed up and transformed by being taken into the life of the Trinity. Here again we hear echoes of the universalism⁴² of the Patristic period combined with the substitution language explicit in Calvin and implicit in the Roman Catholic tradition. Balthasar is also clear that the descent destroys hell, and so the victory element, so prominent in the Fathers and Luther, is retained as well.⁴³

Contemporary Evangelicals and the Descent

Finally, there are some evangelical theologians who abandon the *descensus* doctrine altogether, most notably Wayne Grudem.⁴⁴ 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 place, in that he ties it almost exclusively to the harrowing of hell, and thus to a view of justification and the salvation of Old Testament saints alien to Protestant theology. It is unclear, though, how Grudem deals with Jesus’ burial apart from denying particular views about it.

This is not to say that all contemporary evangelicals deny the descent doctrine. On the contrary, David Scaer responds directly to Grudem, arguing for retention of the creedal formula.⁴⁵ Millard Erickson, while not endorsing the doctrine, does note that there is room for confessing evangelicals to affirm it,⁴⁶ and Tom Nettles gives a contemporary Calvinian understanding of the

descensus.⁴⁷ Keith Johnson provides a unique perspective by arguing that, rather than importing the events of Good Friday or Easter Sunday into Holy Saturday, we should understand on its own terms. This means seeing it as Jesus' willingness to descend even to the depths of hell to rescue his people, which then allows his people to "confront any evil ... with full confidence that Christ himself ... has gone before us into the depths and goes with us still."⁴⁸ In any case, even if some evangelicals deny the *descensus*, they do affirm that Jesus "died and was buried." There are still implications of Christ's time in the tomb even if one does not affirm that Jesus' descended to the place of the dead during that time.⁴⁹ In other words, while one may not wish to speak of Jesus' burial as a descent, his burial still carries many of the same eschatological and soteriological connotations. In the section below, then, I will discuss the implications of all of these views together, and distinguish between them only when necessary.

Atoning Significance and Eschatological Impact

Judgment and Victory

We can see a number of different soteriological and eschatological threads running through the various interpretations of the Jesus' burial. First, there is a strong sense of victory and liberation. One also finds substitution well represented specifically in explications of the *descensus*, especially in the Roman Catholic view and in Balthasar.⁵⁰ Thus for these theologians the burial of Jesus, specifically seen through the lens of the descent, is as much a part of the atoning work of Christ as are the cross and the resurrection. What we have also seen, though, is that for the Roman Catholic tradition the atoning work accomplished on Holy Saturday is eschatological, specifically with respect to the final judgment and to the defeat of God's enemies. Typically, victory and judgment are left to discussions of the empty tomb and the cross, but, for Roman Catholics, the descent highlights both of these accomplishments in Jesus' burial.

For those who affirm the Roman Catholic view of the *descensus*, then, Christ's substitutionary burial is eschatological because in it, Christ takes the believer's place in final judgment. Jesus receives condemnation in the sinner's place and on their behalf, condemnation that would be their lot in the final

judgment. Final judgment is thus averted and atoned for via Christ’s work, and, at least in Balthasar, it is in his burial that Jesus takes on the full brunt of that final judgment. One would need to ask, though, whether or not the Roman Catholic view and Balthasar’s subsequent revisions deal adequately with the biblical data, especially with respect to the place of the dead and to the nature of Christ’s substitution.⁵¹

Another eschatological impact of Christ’s descent is the defeat of God’s enemies. In the OT expectation and the NT explication of the “last days,” Yahweh’s rule over those who oppose him is a major theme.⁵² The Orthodox view, while not necessarily comfortable with the substitution language of the West, emphasizes this eschatological victory, noting that atonement comes in the form of healing humanity. Luther, too, emphasizes victory, although it is less clear that he highlights any aspect of substitution or healing.

The common thread here, for those who affirm and for those who deny the descent, is that in Jesus’ burial, he defeats the last enemy, which is death (1 Cor 15:26), and crushes Satan’s head. Death is swallowed up in death. Jesus thus accomplishes what will happen on the Day of the Lord: the defeat of Satan, sin, death, hell, and the grave. Indeed, his Passion is the Day of the Lord. The burial of Christ is an eschatological act in its defeat of Hades, both accomplishing that victory and anticipating its culmination at Jesus’ return.⁵³ Again, even if one does not affirm a Catholic, Orthodox, or Lutheran perspective on the descent, Jesus was still dead for three days and, in being dead, defeated death. His burial can thus be affirmed by all traditions as eschatologically salvific because it gains the victory over God’s enemies.

The Millennium

Another possible eschatological implication derived from Jesus’ descent comes with respect to the millennium of Revelation 20. On the one hand, if Satan is defeated and thrown into the abyss through Christ’s victorious descent, this may point to an amillennial reading of Revelation 20:1–6. In the LXX, the word for “abyss” is used on occasion to speak of the place of the dead or as a parallel to Sheol, and in Revelation it is used to speak of the realm where God’s enemies dwell and from whence they arise (e.g., Rev 11:1). If Jesus has already descended to the place of the dead and defeated

it, it may lead readers of Revelation 20 to assume that Jesus has already cast Satan into the abyss in that eschatologically atoning act. So, perhaps, affirming the descent may lead to affirming a more spiritual or idealistic reading of Revelation 20:1–6.

On the other hand, what about the dead saints who come to life in Matthew 27:52?⁵⁴ This seems to be a direct result of Christ's defeat of death, accomplished particularly in his crucifixion in Matthew 27 but also in his burial in the history of doctrine. Both the Orthodox and Roman Catholic versions of the doctrine affirm that Jesus not only descended to the dead but also led captives out of it. For those who affirm these two versions of the *descensus*, is it possible that the resurrected saints in Matthew 27:52 are a foreshadowing of the "first resurrection" in Revelation 20 as seen in a historic premillennial position? The point here is not to use the burial of Christ and its atoning work as a solution to the problem of the millennium, but only to note that Jesus' time in the tomb may have implications for this eschatological issue.

Universalism and Cyril of Alexandria

Finally, as seen especially in the early church and Orthodox understandings of the descent,⁵⁵ there is the question of universalism. Origen's doctrine of *apokatastasis* is many times linked in the secondary literature to his understanding of the descent,⁵⁶ and Cyril of Alexandria likewise notes the universal implications of Jesus' work on Holy Saturday. As Keating argues, though, Cyril is not a strict universalist.⁵⁷ Yes, Christ's descent accomplishes something with universal atoning consequences, but that does not mean, for Cyril, that all will experience life with God in eternity. That is still left to whether or not one is united to Christ in faith. One possible *via media* is that Christ's burial is universally atoning *only in the sense that it defeats death for all humanity*. In other words, the reason that all are raised to life prior to the final judgment (Rev 20:4–5, 12–15; cf. Dan 12:2) is that Christ's defeat of death does in fact defeat what Revelation calls "the first death" for all humanity. But that would not negate final judgment, where one either experiences eternal life or eternal death. Further, the recognition of Jesus' burial as eschatologically atoning may provide a solution to the problem of the resurrection of *all* the dead, believing and unbelieving, at the final judgment that does not necessarily

entail a strict universalism. This view of the burial may also have implications for the tension in Calvinism and Arminianism between unlimited and limited atonement. If Jesus’ burial defeats death for all humanity, then it is universal. But if, as Cyril argued, one still only receives eternal life on the basis of faith in Christ, then the atonement is also limited in its application. In any case, the question of universalism, an eschatological question, is raised many times in direct response to the atoning work of the burial of Jesus.

Other Eschatological Atoning Aspects of Christ’s Burial

The Intermediate State and Christological Anthropology

There are a number of other eschatological atoning aspects of Christ’s time in the tomb. One of the intriguing connections between eschatology and the atonement as seen in Christ’s burial is the intermediate state. While much has been said on this issue regarding theological anthropology, the burial of Jesus is hardly mentioned in any discussion.⁵⁸ And yet in Christ we see the firstfruits not only of the resurrection but also of the intermediate state. Jesus experiences death vicariously for humanity, not only in his descent but also in his simply being dead. His body lying in the grave is atoning, not only because it evokes Day of Atonement imagery, seen especially in John’s echoes of the Holy of Holies in his description of Jesus’ tomb,⁵⁹ but also because by it he redeems the state of death for all those who united to him. Death for Jesus is not the final word, and thus it is not the final word for those united to him (more on this in the “Already/Not Yet” section below).

Jesus’ intermediate state is thus helpful in articulating the intermediate state of those united to him with respect to the question of the unity of the person. The hypostatic union is not severed here. Jesus the God-Man is still fully human and fully divine, and so he experiences death in this united state. His humanity is not severed between body and soul, either, but he experiences death in his humanity as a psychosomatic unity. Further, Jesus experiences death as fully human and fully divine. Here we may wish to appeal to the notion of reduplication, the *qua* humanity/*qua* divinity distinctions, so as not to posit that God the Son dies and is separated from the other persons of the Trinity. (Note that this would exclude Balthasar’s explication as a legitimate option for the *descensus*.) This, though, is the point – because

his full humanity fully experiences death *while still united* with his divinity, death is swallowed up by the Triune God and defeated. Christ vicariously experiences death and conquers it fully and completely precisely because he is the God-Man. Thus, for those who are united with Christ, they too can experience the intermediate state with hope. They can hope and believe, first, that their entire person will still be united when Christ returns. Christ remained fully human—body and soul—during death, and believers will remain fully human during death. They can hope, second, that because this unity is maintained they, like Jesus, will be raised bodily and in continuity with their life pre-mortem (1 Cor 15:35–49).

Jesus' intermediate state in the grave may also speak to the question of soul sleep. Jesus' death is vicarious and also the firstfruits of believers' death, and so whatever we want to say about Jesus' time in the tomb has implications for those united with him.⁶⁰ Depending upon how one interprets Jesus' burial, soul sleep is either more or less likely as an option for the intermediate state of humanity. In other words, if one is willing to affirm that Jesus' human soul is "asleep" during his time in the grave due to its unity with his dead body, then soul sleep appears to be a legitimate option for humanity's intermediate state. Likewise, if one is a material monist, one needs to consider the implications of that position for how they view Jesus' time in the grave. If, on the other hand, Jesus' soul is "awake" during Holy Saturday, this may preclude soul sleep as an option.⁶¹

Finally, one's interpretation of the *descensus* has implications for the intermediate state of believers. So, if Jesus descended only to Paradise, and only as part of his "being dead," this tells us about the nature of the intermediate state for the believer.⁶² If, though, one takes a view of the descent in which Jesus descends to the dead in order to vanquish Hades, then from a more Roman Catholic view this opens up the possibility of purgatory and speaks to the exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist debate.⁶³ Finally, the Orthodox perspective, on the descent provides the *possibility* for a universal occupation of Paradise since Jesus in this view defeats death and liberates all humanity from its grip.⁶⁴

Sabbath Rest

Another eschatological implication of Christ's burial is that it is, in some ways, his Sabbath rest.⁶⁵ Although his ascension also should be characterized

thusly, because Jesus is crucified on the sixth day and in the tomb on the seventh, the burial does have sabbatarian symbolism.⁶⁶ Jesus finishes his work of salvation on the cross on the sixth day, rests on the seventh, and then on the eighth day rises again, inaugurating the new creation. The Sabbath for which the people of God hope (Heb 4:1–11)—the eschatological rest promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—is inaugurated in Christ’s burial. Jesus’ Passion inaugurates the last days in many ways, but the eschatological Sabbath rest is inaugurated specifically in Christ’s burial.

Embodiment of Already/Not Yet

Finally, Jesus’ burial is eschatologically vicarious for all who are united with him because in it he embodies the already/not yet tension⁶⁷ inherent to believers in the church age. He sleeps, and in sleeping takes on the inevitable state of all those who live and die before his return. Although those who are buried with him are also raised to new life (Rom 6:1–4), they still “fall asleep” (1 Thess 4:14) if they die before Jesus’ return. There is thus a tension in their hope for the resurrection promised to them. There is hope in that because Christians are united to Christ *in his death*, they also anticipate that they will be united to him in his bodily resurrection (Rom 6:5; also Paul’s language of sowing and reaping in 1 Cor 15:48–49). Because Christ has already experienced death, and experienced it *pro nobis*, Christians have hope that death is not the final experience. Rather, “since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess 4:14). Still, though, this hope is “not yet.” Those united to Christ have yet to experience physical resurrection. Christ’s burial embodies this same tension, with the OT promises of resurrection standing in apparent (but not real) conflict with Christ remaining in the grave. There is much here in common with the previous point about Christ’s death being victorious, although here the specific point is that the death believers experience, and the subsequent tension between death and a promised resurrection, is experienced vicariously by Christ. This already/not yet character of Jesus’ burial thus demonstrates yet another way in which Christ’s burial is both atoning and eschatological.

CONCLUSION

The burial of Jesus, although neglected in the doctrines of atonement and eschatology, proves to be both more important to each than is often acknowledged and also a nexus between them. By understanding how the burial of Jesus is atoning, in that by it he defeats God's enemies, vicariously experiences the intermediate state, experiences and brings Sabbath rest, and embodies the already/not yet tension, we see also how it is thoroughly eschatological. Like the rest of Jesus' work, his burial inaugurates the last days, brings victory over Satan, sin, and death, and is vicarious for those united to Christ. The burial of Jesus is thus an integral piece of his vicarious work and helps to demonstrate the eschatological character of his full work of atonement.

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- 1 Mark Davis, "Matthew 27:57-66," *Interpretation* 60.1 (2006): 76-77.
 - 2 John A. McGuckin, "Eschatological Horizons in the Cappadocian Fathers," 193-210 in *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity* (Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History; ed., Robert J. Daly, SJ; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 194-95.
 - 3 When scholars do tie in atonement with eschatology, it is typically only with respect to the resurrection and its implications for creation and anthropology in the new heavens and new earth.
 - 4 I have chosen to retain the more ancient *inferos*, thus the title of the paper: "He Descended to the Dead" (as opposed to using *inferna*, "He Descended to Hell"). See, for instance, Martin F. Connell, "Descensus Christi Ad Inferos: Christ's Descent to the Dead," *TS* 62 (2001): 264, n. 3.
 - 5 On the history of the descent, including the relevant passages used in support of various understandings of the doctrine, see J. A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (London: T&T Clark, 1930).
 - 6 See, for example, A. T. Hanson, *The New Testament Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SPCK, 1980), 122-34. Recently, though some contemporary evangelical theologians have called this interpretation of 1 Peter 3 into question. See, John Feinberg, "1 Peter 3:18-20, Ancient Mythology, and the Intermediate State," *WTJ* 48 (1986): 303-36; Wayne Grudem, "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19 - 20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature," *TrinJ* 7 (1986): 3-31; and idem, "He Did Not Descend Into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed," *JETS* 34.1 (1991): 103-113.
 - 7 William Bales, "The Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9," *CBQ* 72 (2010): 84-100.
 - 8 Bales, "The Descent," 98.
 - 9 Hanson, *The New Testament Interpretation of Scripture*, 127.
 - 10 John Woodhouse, "Jesus and Jonah," *The Reformed Theological Review* 43.2 (1984): 33 - 41; and Dominic Rudman, "The Sign of Jonah," *The Expository Times* 115.10 (2004): 325-28.
 - 11 Adele Reinhartz, "The Shepherd and the Sheep: John 10:1-5 Reconsidered," *Proceedings* 9 (1989): 161-77.
 - 12 Allen Cabaniss, "The Harrowing of Hell, Psalm 24, and Pliny the Younger: A Note," *Vigiliae Christianae* 7.2 (1953): 65-74; and Milton McCormick Gatch, "The Harrowing of Hell: A Liberation Motif in Medieval Theology and Devotional Literature," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36 (1981): 79.
 - 13 See, for example, William Romaine Newbold, "The Descent of Christ in the Odes of Solomon," *JBL* 31.4 (1912): 168-209; and, more recently, Ute Possekel, "Expectations of the End in Early Syriac Christianity," 160-74 in *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity* (Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History; ed., Robert J. Daly, SJ; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 169-71.

- ¹⁴ See MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell*, 152–73.
- ¹⁵ For the history of the doctrine, including the change in the Latin phrasing, Rufinus' role in perpetuating *inferna* rather than *inferos*, and the different options held by a variety of theologians throughout church history, see, for example, Martin Connell, "Descensus Christi Ad Inferos"; Gatch, "The Harrowing of Hell," 75–88; C. E. Hill, "Hades of Hippolytus or Tartarus of Tertullian: The Authorship of the Fragment *De Universo*," *Vigiliae Christianae* 43 (1989): 105–106; and Randall Otto, "Descendit Ad Inferna: A Reformed Review of a Creedal Conundrum," *WTJ* 52 (1990): 143–50.
- ¹⁶ Here I am not attempting to equate fully Patristic views with subsequent Orthodox understandings, but am simply a) discussing them together because of similarities and b) acknowledging that Orthodox views on the descent are largely reliant on the Patristic, and especially Eastern Patristic, sources covered in this section.
- ¹⁷ One reason that such a wide variety of views exist on the descent is that there are an equally wide variety of views on the meaning of Hades, Sheol, Gehenna, Hell, and Death, as well as into which of these places Jesus descended. On the biblical language about death and the afterlife, see Dimitris J. Kyrtatas, "The Origins of Christian Hell," *Numen* 56 (2009): 282–97; and Gary Yamasaki, "Jesus and the End of Life in the Synoptic Gospels," *Vision* (5.1): 40–47.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Malcolm L. Peel, "The 'Descensus Ad Inferos' in 'The Teachings of Silvanus (CG VII, 4),' " *Numen* 26.1 (1979): 39–49. See also McGuckin, "Eschatological Horizons in the Cappadocian Fathers."
- ¹⁹ Jared Wicks, S.J., "Christ's Saving Descent to the Dead: Early Witnesses from Ignatius of Antioch to Origen," *Pro Ecclesia* 17.3 (2008): 306.
- ²⁰ Daniel Keating, "Christ's Despoiling of Hades: According to Cyril of Alexandria," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 55.3 (2011): 253–69.
- ²¹ Irina Kukota, "Christ the Medicine of Life," *Road to Emmaus* 6.1 (2005): 47.
- ²² Here, the abode of the Dragon is in the waters of chaos, and thus Christ's step into the waters means that he is stepping onto Satan's head, crushing it. On parallels between the descent and the incarnation, see, for example, Kukota, "Christ, the Medicine of Life," 19–20; Peel, "The 'Descensus ad Inferos,'" 35–36. On parallels between baptism and the descent, see, for example, Georgia Frank, "Christ's Descent to the Underworld in Ancient Ritual and Legend," 211–26 in *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity*, 217, 224–25; and especially Kilian McDonnell, "The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan and the Descent into Hell," *Worship* 69.2 (1995): 98–109.
- ²³ Although we should note here that many of the Patristic theologians were careful about how they articulated this universal significance. Both Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine saw universal significance in Christ's descent but not universal salvation. See, respectively, Keating, "Christ's Despoiling of Hades," and Connell, "Descensus Christi Ad Inferos," 270–71.
- ²⁴ See, for example, Martin Connell's summary of Aquinas' view, for a representative Roman Catholic understanding. Connell, "Descensus Christi ad Inferos," 271–75. See also Alyssa Lyra Pitstick's summary of the "traditional" Roman Catholic view in *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1–86. Note, though, Paul J. Griffiths' rejoinder concerning Pitstick's alleged overreach in "Is There a Doctrine of the Descent into Hell?" *Pro Ecclesia* 17.3 (2008): 257–68.
- ²⁵ See Thomas Joseph White, "On the Universal Possibility of Salvation," *Pro Ecclesia* 17.3 (2008): 269–80; and See Steffen Lösel, "A Plain Account of Christian Salvation? Balthasar on Sacrifice, Solidarity, and Substitution," *Pro Ecclesia* 13.2 (2004): 153.
- ²⁶ "The typical 'Catholic' position, at least since the time of the Catechism of Trent, has been to define Christ's descent into hell as simply the triumphal rescue of the dead awaiting the Messiah's advent, resulting in an enumeration of different hells, where the 'hell of the damned' is that designated for those without faith in Christ (as either coming or having come)." Joshua R. Brotherton, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Redemptive Descent," *Pro Ecclesia* 22.2 (2013): 168.
- ²⁷ Richard Klann, "Christ's Descent into Hell," *Concordia Journal* (1976): 43. Also Martin Luther, "The Third Sermon, on Easter Day," *Logia* 12.3 (2003): 37–50.
- ²⁸ This does not mean, though, that Calvin did not see any victorious elements in Christ's burial. Rather, Calvin's interpretation of the *descensus* creedal affirmation in particular has the substitutionary interpretation. In the previous section, on the phrase "he died and was buried," Calvin very clearly affirms that Christ's death and burial is victorious over death and the grave. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. I (The Library of Christian Classics; ed., John T. McNeil; trans., Ford Lewis Battles; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960; repr. 2006), 511–12.
- ²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 512–20.
- ³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 520; Chad B. van Dixhoorn, "New Taxonomies of the Westminster Assembly (1643–52): The Creedal Controversy as Case Study," *RRR* 6.1 (2004): 93.

- ³¹ That is, Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*. For another critical view of Balthasar's position, see Gavin D'Costa, "The Descent into Hell as a Solution for the Problem of the Fate of Unevangelized Non-Christians: Balthasar's Hell, the Limbo of the Fathers and Purgatory," *IJST* 11.2 (2009): 146–71.
- ³² Edward T. Oakes, "The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *IJST* 9 (2007): 184–99. See also his response to critics of Balthasar, including Pitstick and D'Costa, in "Descensus and Development: A Response to Recent Rejoinders," *IJST* 13.1 (2011): 3–24.
- ³³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Part IV: The Action (trans., Graham Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 317–19.
- ³⁴ Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 (trans., G. W. Bromily; ed., G. W. Bromily and T. F. Torrance; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), §59.2, esp. 244–56. See also David Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell: God, Atonement and the Christian Life* (eds., John Webster, Hans Anton-Drewes, and George Hunsinger; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), who notes that Barth "... basically endorses Calvin's position" (80).
- ³⁵ There is some shifting in language in Balthasar between "solidarity" with humanity and "substitution" for humanity. See Lösel, "A Plain Account of Salvation?" esp. 150–54.
- ³⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* IV, 335. See also Lauber, *Barth on the Descent into Hell*, 74.
- ³⁷ For a highly critical articulation of Balthasar's position on this issue, see Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 205–207.
- ³⁸ Oakes, "The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday," 192–93.
- ³⁹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* IV, 330–32.
- ⁴⁰ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* IV, 338. Balthasar also argues that, in descended to the dead in both his humanity and divinity, Christ is totally passive. *Ibid.*, 335. This is yet another point of contention among contemporary theologians about the validity of Balthasar's approach and whether or not he departs from the tradition. For a sympathetic assessment, see Oakes, "Internal Logic," 192.
- ⁴¹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* IV, 338, 349–51.
- ⁴² See Oakes, "Internal Logic," who argues that Balthasar's universalism is necessarily inclusivist because of the centrality of Christ's work within its schema.
- ⁴³ In this regard, Moltmann also attempts to combine these major themes and to follow in a combined fashion Luther, Calvin, and Balthasar on the descent. See Nigel G. Wright, "Universalism in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann," *EQ* 84.1 (2012): 33–39.
- ⁴⁴ Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell." See also Grudem, "Christ Preaching through Noah," and Feinberg, "1 Peter 3:18–20."
- ⁴⁵ David P. Scaer, "He Did Descend to Hell: In Defense of the Apostles' Creed," *JETS* 35.1 (1992): 91–99.
- ⁴⁶ Millard J. Erickson, "Did Jesus Really Descend into Hell?" *Christianity Today* 44.2 (2000), 74.
- ⁴⁷ Tom J. Nettles, "He Descended into Hell," *Modern Reformation* 11 (2002): 38–41.
- ⁴⁸ Keith L. Johnson, "He Descended into Hell," *Christian Reflection* 50 (2014): 27–34.
- ⁴⁹ At this point, though, one would need to ask where Jesus' human soul was during his time in the grave. This will be discussed more in the section on soul sleep, but the point here is that, unless one affirms material monism and/or soul sleep, Jesus' human soul was presumably doing what all other human souls do during death. The biblical evidence seems to point to a place of the dead, with Luke 16:19–31 clarifying that, for those who trust in Yahweh, Abraham's Bosom awaits. This is presumably the same place that Jesus calls Paradise in Luke 22:43.
- ⁵⁰ Substitution is also a major implication for Calvin and Barth, but their view of the descent is that it occurs on the cross, not in the burial.
- ⁵¹ I am not convinced that the Roman Catholic view of the descent or Balthasar's subsequent revisions adequately reflect the biblical data.
- ⁵² See, for example, G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 88–116, 129–60.
- ⁵³ So Gatch, "The Harrowing of Hell," 78.
- ⁵⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, Melito of Sardis, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen make this connection between the descent and the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27, although they do not then tie it to the question of the Millennium. See Wicks, "Christ's Saving Descent," 304, 309.
- ⁵⁵ Of course, there is a strong universalist strain running through Balthasar and his subsequent interpreters as well. See Oakes, "Internal Logic" and "Descensus and Development," as well as D'Costa, "The Descent into Hell." Both Oakes and D'Costa focus on the creation of purgatory and its implications for the solution to the problem of world religions and the unevangelized.
- ⁵⁶ Wicks, "Christ's Saving Descent to the Dead," 304. Connell, "Descensus Christi ad Inferos," 269.
- ⁵⁷ Keating, "Christ's Despoiling of Hades," 261–69.

- ⁵⁸ I am here excluding those who affirm some form of the *descensus* doctrine that includes rescuing people from Hades or Hell, since those views are necessarily applicable to the interim state (so notes 58 and 59). Those who do not affirm either the Roman Catholic or Orthodox versions of the doctrine, though, do not usually mention Christ’s burial as normative for the anthropological makeup in the interim state. For example, the following theologians make no mention of Jesus’ time in the tomb in their discussion of the intermediate state: Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 1179–90; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996; rev. ed., 2000), 810–27; Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 92–108; Michael S. Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 910–15; John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 66–92, 103–112; and Helmut Thielicke, *Death and Life* (trans., Edward H. Schroeder; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 213–17. Although Erickson and Horton do note that Jesus “commends his spirit” to the Father in Luke 23:46, they do not connect this with the burial of Jesus in any way or speak to its anthropological and eschatological implications.
- ⁵⁹ Nicholas P. Lunn, “Jesus, the Ark, and the Day of Atonement: Intertextual Echoes in John 19:38–20:18,” *JETS* 52.4 (2009): 731–46.
- ⁶⁰ Of course, not everything that happens to Jesus in the tomb is repeated in believers’ experience. This is particularly true of his victory over Satan in his burial. Nevertheless, this victory still has implications for those united to Christ, in that they are freed from death and the power of sin. The point here is that what happens to Jesus in his humanity has implications for the intermediate state of those united to Christ.
- ⁶¹ I find texts such as Luke 16:19–31; 23:43, 46; Phil 1:23; and Rev 6:9 to be indicators that soul sleep is not in accordance with biblical language about death. The point here, however, is not to take a position on the issue but to point out that Christ’s time in the tomb grounds whatever else we might say about the intermediate state, and specifically here about soul sleep.
- ⁶² On early Christian views of the hypostatic union and whether Christ descended bodily, see Wicks, “Christ’s Saving Descent,” 307–309.
- ⁶³ For example, Oakes, “Internal Logic”; idem, “*Descensus* and Development,” esp. 23; and D’Costa, “The Descent into Hell.”
- ⁶⁴ So Kukota, “Christ, the Medicine of Life,” 54. The language is much stronger in Moltmann; universalism is not just a possibility but a definitive result. See Wright, “Universalism in the theology of Jürgen Moltmann.”
- ⁶⁵ One recent theology of Holy Saturday is Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). Lewis is heavily dependent upon Balthasar and, to a lesser extent, Moltmann, and focuses on Holy Saturday as Jesus’ Sabbath. In doing so, however, Lewis focuses on Jesus’ time in the tomb as a “dark” and “atheistic” Sabbath rather than a positive rest. See *ibid.*, 31, 56, 78.
- ⁶⁶ Paul L. Redditt, “John 19:38–42,” *Interpretation* 61.1 (2007): 68–70.
- ⁶⁷ Note that this tension is inherent in the rest of the eschatological implications we have already mentioned. See, for example, Lösel, “A Plain Account of Salvation?” 155, on the already/not yet tension in Christ’s victory through the descent.