

## ARTICLE VII.

## CRITICAL NOTES.

## I.

## CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO HADES.

"He descended into hell"—so runs the venerable and majestic Creed. But the American Episcopal Prayer-book prefixes its timid rubric as follows: "Any churches may omit the words 'He descended into hell,' or may, instead of them, use the words 'He went into the place of departed spirits,' which are considered as words of the same meaning in the Creed." The words which are here made optional have come down to us in an unbroken line of doctrinal succession from the fourth century. They have, indeed been stigmatized as an interpolation, but so early an interpolation might perhaps be called a mature addition. Their omission was favored by the change of meaning in the word "hell," but there was also the feeling that Christ's visit to Hades was of little importance, and is to us not a doctrine, but a matter of mere curiosity.

Now, whatever may be true of the "Apostles' Creed," the Descent into Hades has sufficient New-Testament authority. The first recorded address of Peter contains twofold evidence that the Descent was believed by both speaker and hearers. In the first place, he quotes from a Psalm (xvi.) that had a shaping influence on the belief of the people respecting Hades. Further, he bases an argument and appeal for the resurrection of Christ on the certainty that he would not stay in Hades. "Thou wilt not leave my soul in Hades" (Acts ii. 27).

But what was Hades, and what the significance and importance of Christ's going thither? In a somewhat recent discussion I find these words: "The Saviour was in the same state between death and resurrection as we now are after death."<sup>1</sup> This is, it seems to me, precisely what ought *not* to be said. For this ignores the whole work of Christ in Hades, and leaves them that sleep in Jesus no better off than if he had not risen. Let us put ourselves in the place of the apostles and their fellow disciples, and after we have learned the truth about Hades as it appeared in their thought and forms of statement, then we may, if we can, translate it into our own thoughts and forms of statement. Hades was the region where dwelt the souls that were under the power of death. The souls of the righteous as well as of the wicked

<sup>1</sup> Bibliothec Sacra, Vol. xvi. p. 323.

were under this awful power. Into this region came the soul of the Crucified, but it did not remain there. Going thither was the lowest point in his humiliation, and leaving was the beginning of his triumph. What, then, was the effect *in Hades* of this visit and this departure? But this is the same as to ask, What was the effect, in the spirit-world, of the resurrection? According to the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, or Acts of Pilate,—of perhaps the fourth century,—two of the saints that arose at the resurrection of Christ, Charinus and Lenthius, sons of Simeon, wrote out all that they were allowed to reveal of the coming of Jesus into Hades. This Gospel was the basis of the mediæval miracle-play “The Harrowing of Hell.” The work in Hades, here somewhat grotesquely described, was the deliverance from hell of the ancient saints, and may be summed up in a single one of its own sentences, “And taking hold of Adam by his right hand, he ascended from hell, and all the saints of God followed him.”<sup>1</sup>

I do not say that the Gospel of Nicodemus is to be trusted, but it may be as near the truth as the statement that “the Saviour was in the same state between death and the resurrection as we now are after death”—a statement that would be accepted, probably, by a majority of Christians. But surely the apostles and primitive disciples had no such notion. After they had come to understand the resurrection of Christ and feel its power, they were filled with what may be called the resurrection-enthusiasm. In their view the resurrection-era was already begun. Death and hell [Hades] were vanquished. Wesley’s hymn has the true apostolic spirit:—

“Our Lord is risen from the dead,  
Our Jesus is gone up on high;  
The powers of hell are captive led,  
Dragged to the portals of the sky.”

Just when the resurrection was to take visible effect in themselves, the disciples could not say, and it did not matter. To die was to go and be with him who had risen. And such a dying did not deserve the name of death. It was a sleep; it was the putting off of this tabernacle; it was a departure; it was not the death that all past ages had known, for Jesus had said: “He that liveth and believeth in me shall never die.”

To the question why the *Descensus* is not oftener spoken of in the New Testament, the answer is, that going to Hades is taken for granted as a part of death. It was not necessary to speak of both whenever either was mentioned. In the Revelation, indeed, the two are linked together: “I have the keys of death and of Hades (i. 18); “His name was death, and Hades followed with him” (vi. 8); “And death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them. . . . And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire” (xx. 13, 14). The mention of either was logically sufficient. But the Hades is not a home, even temporarily, for believers. It is Hades triumphed over by him who “brought life and incorruption [exemption from death] to

<sup>1</sup>Gospel of Nicodemus, in the Apocryphal New Testament (London, 1820), chap. xix. 12.

light." When he ascended on high he led captivity captive" (Eph. iv. 8). Death was "swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. xv. 54). The resurrection-enthusiasm of the New Testament is the response of faith to those glorious words "I go to prepare a place for you" which place was not in Hades. The same divine enthusiasm refused to recognize any "intermediate state," the old abolished Hades under a new name. Stephen did not say, "Behold, I see the Son of man in Hades." Can we wonder that the early disciples looked for a speedy return of the Lord? Does one say, It was an error? It was not; for it was necessary to the highest truth. The resurrection-spirit refused to see the long interval of waiting. As has been said of the prophets that they looked from one mountain-top of history to another, and could not see the low-lying valleys between, so we may say of the apostles, that they saw the triumph over death and hell as a complete victory, and they would have been false to the *power* of the truth, if they had not looked upon it as gloriously near. "The reign of Death is over; Hades is abolished; Life and Immortality have come"—this is the key-note of the resurrection-spirit. Christ's resurrection might as well be called a resurrection from Hades as from the grave.

I will not dwell on the preaching to "the spirits in prison" (1 Pet. iii. 18-20). It cannot be needful that there should be a thousand and one expositions of that passage, instead of simply a thousand; but the point of view we are taking has to do with it in at least two particulars:—

1. The Descent was necessary without any regard to the preaching. The Descent itself, however, was a proclamation of unspeakable meaning. The inhabitants of the spirit-world were not in solitary confinement or unconscious sleep. They saw the Redeemer at the lowest point in his work of redemption, and at the beginning of his triumph.

2. This preaching looks backward to the past. This is in harmony with the idea that Hades was now abolished, and the spirit-world revolutionized. We might *imagine* that the object of the Descent was to plant the Christian church in Hades and ordain for it a succession of Hades-apostles, and so forth, but the view of Peter was that Hades came to an end. The preaching was once for all. Why the antediluvians are referred to may perhaps be explained by the fact that so vast a number going to their death in an awful catastrophe, made them the representatives and types of the Hades-world. It might have given the name of Antediluvian under-world. If one asks, Why should not those who have since died hear the preaching also? the Scripture gives no answer. A perpetual Hades with perpetual preaching in it is nowhere revealed.

In regard to the whole question of the relation of the wicked to the resurrection, we need not wonder at the infrequent allusions to the risen wicked. The epistles of the New Testament are addressed to Christians. Paul's great argument in 1 Cor. xv. runs into a grand anthem of Christian triumph. We cannot suppose that the enthusiasm of the apostles would rise over the fate of the wicked as over the redemption of the saints. But the resurrection-influ-

ence certainly reaches the wicked. One saying of the Master settles that: "They that have done good unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done ill unto the resurrection of judgment" (Jno. v. 29). This did not need for its certainty the echo of Paul "There shall be a resurrection both of the just and unjust" (Acts xxiv. 15). The judgment scene in Matt. xxv. implies the resurrection of the wicked. The resurrection period ends with the judgment. The divine foreshortening places the coming in glory close by the resurrection.

But we have the right to follow apostolic example, and avert our eyes from the fate of the wicked, and rejoice in the glory of the redeemed. Christ's Descent opened the resurrection-era in the spirit-world as well as on earth, and began the fulfilment of the promise "I go to prepare a place for you." Shall we translate the apostolic thoughts and visions into modern thoughts and views? We cannot expect to comprehend fully the results of Christ's death and resurrection in the unseen world. That it was a revolution is the unspoken testimony of our hearts whenever we think of those dear to us who sleep in Jesus, and whenever we look forward to our own death, which hope names a resurrection-sleep. We are still living in the resurrection-era. When we die we shall not pass beyond the resurrection-influence. How shall we express this hope and faith? Shall we say, in the words of the shorter Westminster, "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory"? But to show the very heart and substance of the doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hades—its depth of humiliation, its triumph, and its glorious fruits—the *Te Deum* is better than the Catechism:—

"When thou had'st overcome the sharpness of death,  
Thou did'st open the kingdom of heaven to all believers."

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## II.

### SANCTIFICATION AFTER DEATH.

MANY Christians die while yet imperfect. What is the status of these souls immediately after death, or between death and the general judgment? The common theory among Protestants has been that the soul of the believer is fully sanctified at death, and, so, instantaneously fitted, as it were, for entrance into heaven. Much difficulty has been and is felt with this theory; and, to escape from these difficulties, many among Protestants suppose an intermediate state, something like the Roman Catholic Purgatory, only it is a spiritualized Purgatory, in which imperfect believers and those dying in infancy, and perhaps some other classes, are purged or developed until, at the general judgment or before, they enter the Paradise of God.

Bishop Martensen, on page 457 of his "Dogmatics," says: "As no soul leaves this present existence in a fully complete and prepared state, we must suppose that there is an intermediate state, a realm of progressive development, in which souls are prepared and matured for the final judgment. Though the Romish doctrine of Purgatory is repudiated because it is mixed up with so many crude and false positions, it nevertheless contains the truth that the intermediate state must in a purely spiritual sense be a Purgatory, designed for the purifying of the soul." Van Oosterzee, Dorner, and now Professor Briggs, seem to hold a similar view.

Are we shut up to such an hypothesis as this, in order to escape from the difficulties of the theory of instantaneous sanctification at death? Must we construct an extra-biblical intermediate state? Is it not better to reconstruct our ideas of heaven in harmony with the general tenor of what God has revealed to us on this subject?

Is it true that only beings who have reached a state of ideal perfection are fitted to enter heaven? If so, then the theory of an intermediate state, which is advocated by Dorner, Martensen, and Briggs, fails to meet all the difficulties of the case; for, according to this theory, the second advent of Christ, or the general judgment, terminates this intermediate state. How, then, will the great multitude of imperfect Christians, and of infants, who are in the body on the earth at the moment of Christ's coming, be perfected, since they are deprived of the help of an intermediate state?

May not the requirements for entrance into heaven be of such a nature as to relieve all difficulty with reference to imperfect Christian souls at the time of our Lord's great appearing and also at his appearings now through all the ages, and when he comes "to receive" every individual believer at death as he has promised? What are the conditions of entrance into Paradise? We read (Rev. xxi. 27), "And there shall in no wise enter into it anything unclean, or he that maketh an abomination and a lie: but only they which are written in the Lamb's book of life;" and (xxii. 15), "Without are the dogs, and the sorcerers, and the fornicators, and the murderers, and the idolators, and every one that loveth and maketh a lie." Christ tells us in Luke x. 20, "But rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

It would seem as if every real Christian has his name recorded in Christ's book up there, and also that those whose names are in that book will be admitted to heaven without farther purification after death. In Luke xvi. 22, we read that when the poor beggar, who was doubtless very imperfect, died, the angels carried him at once to Abraham's bosom. Christ said to the dying thief, "To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." Whosoever confesses Christ before men, him will Christ confess before his Father who is in heaven.

Paul tells us in 2 Cor. v. 6 and 8, that "whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord," and that he was "willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord;" and also in Phil. i.

21, 23, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." "But I am in a strait betwixt the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ; for it is very far better." It seems clear from these and other passages, that the believer goes at death immediately into the presence of Christ in heaven.

We are nowhere told that absolute perfection is a requisite for entrance into heaven. It is the soul who by living faith in Christ is united to him, that is prepared to enter into heaven. Christ tells us that the soul who has believed on him "*hath* everlasting life, and *is passed* from death into life." He tell us very clearly that all who are his abide in him, and he in them, as the branch abides in the vine, etc. They are the temple of the Holy Spirit, who abides with them forever. He is the body, and we are the members; he is the head, and we are the body; he is the bridegroom, and we are the bride, etc. Paul expresses this oneness with Christ as so real and vital that he was crucified with Christ, and yet he lived, because Christ lived in him (Gal. ii. 20).

Must we suppose that a soul who has thus passed from death into eternal life, and who is thus united to Christ in living and vital union, must at death be shut out of that place where Christ dwells, until the time of the general judgment at the end of the world, in order that he may be perfected? It seems to me that this is contrary to the general tenor of all which God has revealed to us on this subject, and contrary to reason itself.

Can there be any place better adapted to help imperfect souls who are united to Christ, than the heaven where Christ and myriads of perfected beings are, who can lead and help and teach them? Can there be any more joyous service in heaven, or one more pleasing or more full of praise to God, than to lead and teach such souls who are thus united to Christ? Being in this vital union to Christ, they will not oppose him nor the truth. They will not resist the loving leading of those around them; hence there will be no jars, nor disappointments, nor want of harmony. There would be nothing connected with this which would be a source of danger to more perfected souls. There would seem to be nothing in it to detract from the joy or the glory of heaven. Such a service as this would seem greatly to add to the joy and zest of the heavenly life.

This view enables us to suppose that Christ's words and Paul's words, quoted above, mean just what the words express; that Christ comes at death to receive each soul to himself who is spiritually united to him, that he meant just what he said to the dying thief, "To-day thou shalt be with me in Paradise;" and that Paul was right when he said, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." We can also understand why Paul had "a desire to depart and be with Christ, for it is far better."

We can also understand something of the condition of that great company of little ones, half the race probably, who pass from earth before they have known sin, and who are yet imperfect. They, too, need not be kept out of heaven, and away from Christ and the teaching and influence of the most perfect beings. They can come in, and be taught and trained under the most favorable

conditions, so favorable, we may believe, that the work of the Holy Spirit, using the truth and these heavenly ministries and minstrelsiess, will keep every one of them from going into sin; keep them forever loving and loyal citizens of the heavenly kingdom. The fond mother who is suddenly called from the midst of a family of little ones on earth will at once find absorbing and loving service in the greater family in heaven; she *may* be more needed there than here.

May not this same principle also explain how that, "in every nation, he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him" (Acts x. 35)? Yes: acceptable to him, and received at death by him into his home in heaven, although some of them may not yet have heard the name of Christ. May we not believe that there are many souls groping for light and salvation in the dark places of this world, who, though they find not here the full light and joy of realized salvation, yet possess an inchoate righteousness, which will admit them at death to the presence of the king of righteousness, that Saviour whom, not having seen or known on earth, they have sought with all their hearts? There certainly seem to be a few, at least, such souls among the millions of those who know not God.

If any such soul in the darkest valley of this earth, conscious of his sin, repenting of it, led by that Spirit whom God gives to all men, seeks with all his heart to escape from sin and find light and life and salvation, and dies in that attitude of mind, so that the first impulse when his eyes are opened to the vision of heaven is to fall in loving adoration at the feet of the glorified Christ with the rapturous thought, Oh, this is he whom I long have sought! must such a soul be shut out of heaven? Is not heaven the place for such a soul? And can there be any more joyous service, or any more pleasing to him who gave his life for all men, than to teach and help such souls on to perfection?

Just here the question may be asked, "Do you not, then, make it possible for some souls to repent and be saved after death?" In reference to this dark and difficult problem, I can only briefly say here, that such a possibility does not follow from the theory above outlined. So far as God's revelation gives us any light, it is vital soul-union to Christ which admits to Christ's presence in heaven. For any one who is in such an attitude toward truth as that outlined above, so that, as soon as Christ appears on his vision, there is a joyful response, filling the soul with conscious union to Christ, that soul, it seems to me, was a saved soul in God's sight and one to whom Christ had united himself, one who had within himself the promise and potency of salvation and justification before death, even though he had never heard of Christ.

On the other hand, a soul who dies in such an attitude of indifference or opposition to the truth, that when God and Christ and heaven burst upon his vision at death, he turns his back upon all, and will not enter heaven, where is there any intimation in God's revelation that such a soul will ever be reached and saved after that? What hope does the light of reason give us? May not this deliberate turning against the light and truth which he cannot doubt or deny,

set and fix his soul forever? Is there any hope that after some years or centuries of such continued rejection, he will afterward yield? If there are one or two surface ripples in God's word which, considered alone, might give us some hope, it seems to me that the great ocean currents of Scripture are all against such a hope.

With one other thought, I close. May it not be true that God is accumulating moral sanctions to restrain from evil in his universe, as fast as he wisely can, influences which are to last as long as he will last? Among these influences would be the glorified Christ and his infinite work, showing forth the love of God and the awfulness of sin; also, "the great multitude which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues," whom Christ "has redeemed;" also the spectacle of the Satanic spirits, and those souls who "will not come" to Christ that he may give them life.

May not the "end," of which Paul speaks in 1 Cor. xv. 24-28 be that time, when the present dispensation of redeeming and regenerating activity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit shall cease, when the world shall come to an end, when such strong motives to obedience shall have been accumulated, and such an innumerable host of witnesses to the truth of God and the love of God shall have been secured, that, when the lights of the great judgment-day are turned on, vividly flashing into every soul in the universe the results of sin and of salvation through the ages, the incorrigibly evil will find that their power to lead good souls into sin is gone forever, so that, though they may have only rebellion in their hearts, they will be forever powerless to lead others in their evil ways; and the good will gladly remain forever loyal and loving, never yielding to sin? The universe is subjugated to God; Christ can give up this part of his great work and kingdom to the Father; the universe is safe; no new rebellion will ever break forth. And then, who shall say that God may not safely go on creating new beings whom the host of those who are already perfected by trial and experience shall teach and train, thus filling up the great universe of God, whose limits no human eye has ever yet discovered?

Nay, more, may he not go on forever enlarging and forever peopling this universe with happy beings, sure that the accumulated influences, with the ever increasing army of glad and loving teachers, will keep them in loyal union to him and to each other forever?

Such a heaven and such an eternal service as are briefly outlined in the above lines, would seem to me to be in harmony with God's nature, with his revelation, and with the aspirations and desires of all his loyal children.

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