

THE ORIGIN OF THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE ON THE 'DESCENSUS CHRISTI AD INFEROS'¹

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show that the origin of the Christian Doctrine on the 'Descensus Christi ad Inferos' can be found in Jewish Christianity. It will also be argued that the development of Jewish hope offered the groundwork for the origin of this doctrine. In order to prove this, this paper will discuss the development of Jewish hope, the development of Jewish beliefs in Hades, and the early occurrences of the doctrine. The paper will then conclude that the vast occurrences of the doctrine in Jewish Christianity, gives enough evidence to substantiate a Jewish Christian origin.

1. Introduction

The authenticity of the Christian Doctrine, the '*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*' has long been debated. Opinions on the meaning of this doctrine vary significantly, and have varied from the first century CE (as will be shown in the literature quoted). The most popular interpretations are:

- It merely meant that Christ died; in other words, Christ's soul went to Hades – as did the soul of every person.
- Christ had to preach salvation in Hades as He did on earth,
- The victory of Christ over Hades.

¹ This article is an adaptation of a section of my MA (Ancient Language and Cultural Studies) "A study of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6. An investigation into the historical background of the doctrine of Christ's descent into Hades" This paper was also read in the *Jewish-Christian Hermeneutics* subgroup, at the 2007 NTSSA conference.

This study will attempt to show that this doctrine was part of the earliest Christian beliefs. Furthermore, it definitely did not develop as late as the Fourth Creed of Sirmium in 359². The '*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*' simply developed from Jewish faith. We find the beginnings of the Jewish faith in the Old Testament, and the later Jewish faith in the Inter-Testamental literature, and finally its effusion in the Jewish Christian literature – where we also find the first occurrences of the doctrine.

During the Inter-Testamental period, the Jewish people endured many sufferings and hardships. This added to the development of their hope and faith in an afterlife, and God's post-mortem judgment and blessing of the wicked and righteous respectively. This faith then developed in accordance to the Christian belief that Christ is the Messiah.

In order to achieve these aims, the study will start by defining 'Jewish Christianity'. This will be followed by a survey on the development of Jewish beliefs in Hades, and the development of Jewish hope. An overview will then be given on the occurrences of this doctrine in Early Christianity. The study will then be concluded with a summary on the findings of the paper.

2. What is understood under Jewish Christianity?

According to Daniélou (1964:7) the term 'Jewish Christianity' has three possible references:

a) It can refer to the Jews who recognised Christ as a prophet or even a Messiah, but they did not accept Him as the Son of God, for example the Ebionites;

b) It can also refer to the Christian community of Jerusalem, which was dominated by James. After the fall of the temple in 70 CE these Christians, sometimes named the Nazarenes, slowly disappeared;

c) Lastly it can refer to a type of Christian thought expressing itself in forms borrowed from Judaism. This term covers a much wider field, even including Christian who did not come from Judaism.

Apart from this Daniélou (1964:9) goes even further in saying that the term 'Judaism' also has three possible references:

a) It can simply refer to the continuing use of the Old Testament, which in itself is of great importance for Christianity;

b) It can also refer to the Judaism that was contemporary with Christ, in other words the Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots;

² The Arian formulary: The Fourth Creed of Sirmium was the first Creed to include the doctrine, and the Apostles' Creed was the first official Creed to include the doctrine.

c) The last possibility is the rabbinical, legalistic Judaism, which developed after the fall of Jerusalem. There was a continual war between this type of Judaism and Christianity.

How do we then decide which literature can be classed as the direct product of Jewish Christian thought? The first criterion will be to decide when it was written. According to Daniélou (1964:11) the Jewish Christian period extends from the beginnings of Christianity to approximately the middle of the second century. The second criterion involves the literary genre, with the third criterion being the doctrinal contents. Daniélou (1964:11) argues that Jewish Christian works are constructed to more or less a similar pattern with certain characteristic categories of ideas³.

In this study, the term 'Jewish Christianity' refers to '*a type of Christian thought expressing itself in forms borrowed from Judaism*', while the term 'Judaism' refers to the '*Judaism that was contemporary with Christ, in other words the Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots*', which in itself will include the continuing use of the Old Testament. This, however, also needs to include the literature between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. According to Nickelsburg (1981:1), the study of early Christianity must reckon with this period (inter-testamental) and with the literature that grew out of it and reflects it. He stresses that this is important because fundamental and far-reaching changes⁴ shook the Jewish people during these centuries. These changes made a great impact on their life, religion, and thought.

Nickelsburg (1981:2) states that the seedbed of the church was first-century Judaism. Jesus and his disciples literally 'breathed' this religious and cultural environment. In this paper the argument of Nickelsburg (1981:3) that theological conceptions does not arise in a vacuum but in response to historical circumstances, is accepted. Therefore, it is extremely important to consider every aspect that could have had an influence on the development of the doctrine on the '*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*'.

3. The development of Jewish beliefs in Hades

According to Powys (1997:67), the early Old Testament view of death corresponded directly to their view of life - it was simply the dissolution of that which was alive. Hanhart (1966:17) states that it did not mean annihilation, but simply a non-life. Death was a fact of life and therefore not the subject of much reflection. Powys (1997:68) also mentions that death was

³ For a detailed discussion on the works included under Jewish Christian works, and on which grounds, please consult Daniélou (1964:pp11-54)

⁴ The Persian Empire fell; Alexander the Great conquered the East and introduced the Greek culture and language; the Jews were persecuted by the Macedonian king – Antiochus IV.

viewed as final and irreversible. In these early traditions, death was seen more as an event than a state, but still the Hebrew language used the word *שׁוֹל* to give reference to the prospect or state of death. Sheol was seen as the general habitat of the dead (Ps. 49:12 & 1); it was under the earth (Deut. 32:22; Is. 7:11); it was a place of darkness and silence, void of love hate, envy, work, thought, knowledge and wisdom (Eccles. 9:6, 10); and no one returned from there (Job 10:21; 17:13-16). Hanhart (1966:16) also states that the sentences ‘They are in the grave’; ‘They are in Sheol’; and ‘They are in the grip of death’ all meant exactly the same thing to people of the Old Testament.

During the period of the divided kingdom and the exile, a new understanding of judgement was construed (cf. Powys 1997:82). From this also developed changes to the Israelite conceptions of life and death. Sheol is mentioned more frequently here but was still seen as the place of all the dead. However, there are eight instances where Sheol is construed as a place of condemnation⁵. This is seen mostly in the Wisdom literature. In Ezekiel 32 we find the first suggestion of distinctions within Sheol while Psalm 16:10-11 and Psalm 49:14-15 are the closest approach to the idea of post-mortem bliss, a type of protest against a neutral fate for all (cf. Powys 1997:83).

The inter-testamental literature constructed divergent scenarios for the wicked dead, including annihilation (4 Ezra 7:61; 1 Enoch 48:9) and endless torment (Jub. 36:11; 1 Enoch 27:1-3). Through the rise of belief in the resurrection, Sheol becomes a temporary dwelling, distinguished from the final place of punishment (1 Enoch 18:9-16; 51:1). This final place of judgment was usually located in a valley south of Jerusalem, known in Hebrew as *Ge Hinnom* and in Greek as *Gehenna*. This valley was notorious for the child sacrifices to Molech during the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, and it was prophesied as the place of God’s future fiery judgment (Is. 30:33; 66:24; Jer. 7:31-32).

Since the idea of judgment and retribution are closely connected with resurrection, and this ultimate judgment is foreshadowed in the abode of the dead. This is portrayed very elaborately in 1 Enoch 22:1-14⁶. According to

⁵ Ps. 9:17; 16:10; 49:14,15; Prov. 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; 15:24; 23:14

⁶ 22:1 And thence I went to another place, and he showed me in the west another great and high mountain of hard rock.

2. And there were four hollow places in it, deep and very smooth: three of them were dark and one bright; and there was a fountain of water in its midst. And I said: “How smooth are these hollow places, and deep and dark to view”.

3. Then Raphael answered, one of the holy angels, who was with me, and said unto me: “These hollow places have been created for this very purpose, that the spirits of the souls of the dead should assemble therein, yea that all the souls of the children of men should assemble there”.

4. And these places have been made to receive them till the day of their judgment and till their appointed period, till the great judgment comes upon them.

5. I saw the spirit of a dead man making suit, and his voice went forth to heaven and made suit.

Hanhart (1966:23), the purpose of the pericope seems to be, to give assurance that God's justice will prevail. There is thus a variety of views offered in late Jewish writings. It seems clear, however, that there is an obvious distinction made between the righteous and the wicked.

Hanhart (1966:18) argues that the ideas of resurrection, the afterlife, increased demonology, and angelology betray Iranian influence. He also says that the belief in man's immortal soul may reflect Orphic or Platonic influence among the Jews during the Diaspora. In this study, the footnote (2) of Hanhart (1966:18) is, however, followed together with the argument that Jewish belief developed in response to their circumstances. This may include syncretism to some extent but it was mainly due to their difficult situations ever since the exile; their faith in the midst of oppression.

Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 portrays additional features of this state. Here an unbridgeable chasm separates the wicked and the righteous dead. The rich man experiences torment while Lazarus rests at Abraham's bosom. All are still believed to go to Hades while the wicked are punished (2 Pet 2:9) and the righteous are blessed (2 Cor 5:8; Luke 23:43).

Hanhart (1966:32) states that according to J. Jeremias⁷, however, it is fundamental for our understanding of the New Testament to make a sharp distinction between Hades and Gehenna. Hades is used exclusively for the interim period, Gehenna on the other hand for a state of punishment after the last judgment. In Hades, the punishment is provisional, in Gehenna eternal.

6. And I asked Raphael the angel who was with me, and I said unto him: "This spirit which maketh suit, whose is it, whose voice goeth forth and maketh suit to heaven?"

7. And he answered me saying: "This is the spirit which went forth from Abel, whom his brother Cain slew, and he makes his suit against him till his seed is destroyed from the face of the earth, and his seed is annihilated from amongst the seed of men.

8. Then I asked regarding all the hollow places: "Why is one separated from the other?"

9. And he answered me saying: "These three have been made that the spirits of the dead may be separated. And this division has been made for the spirits of the righteous, in which there is the bright spring of water.

10. And this had been made for sinners when they die and are buried in the earth and judgment has not been executed upon them in their lifetime.

11. Here their spirits shall be set apart in this great pain till the great day of judgment, scourging and torments of the accursed forever, so that there may be retribution for their spirits. There He shall bind them forever.

12. And this has been made for the spirits of those who make their suit, who make disclosures concerning their destruction, when they were slain in the days of the sinners.

13. And this has been made for the spirits of men who shall not be righteous but sinners, who are godless, and of the lawless they shall be companions; but their spirits shall not be punished in the day of judgment nor shall they be raised from thence.

14. Then I blessed the Lord of Glory and said: "Blessed art Thou, Lord of righteousness, who rulest over the world". (Translation from Charles 1913).

⁷ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament p22 & p. 113.

He further states that Paradise can be used for an intermediate state and that it is not located in Hades, but in Heaven. Nevertheless, J. Jeremias also warns that the ideas were in a flux in Jesus' time. He is not certain whether Lazarus was thought to be in a blessed state in Hades or in Paradise. Hanhart (1966:37), however, feels that this is not so clear-cut to him. The terms Hades and Paradise are used only a few times in the New Testament. Hades appears ten times where it does not appear in Mark, John or any of the epistles⁸. A synonym *ἄβυσσος* appears once in Luke and Romans and five times in Revelations⁹. Gehenna appears only in the Synoptics and in James, while Paradise appears in Luke, II Corinthians, and Revelations¹⁰.

According to Hanhart (1966:33), the term Hades in the New Testament is used the same way as in the Old Testament. It still means the underworld, the power of death and is still connected with the lowest regions. In Matthew 12:40 Jesus was in the belly of the earth during the *triduum mortis* just as Jonah. Peter also uses Psalm 16:8-11 (cf. footnote 51) to prove that Christ was meant and not David since David's grave are still with us, but Christ was not abandoned to Hades¹¹. Hanhart (1966:35) also shows that the passages that refer to Gehenna are almost exclusively found in the sayings of Jesus in which he calls men to obedience to the will of God. For Jesus there is no doubt that man will receive either punishment or reward from God. Gehenna indicated the final fate of him who disobeys, but it is not clear whether Jesus foresaw a temporary state of the dead in Hades before their punishment in Gehenna.

4. The development of Jewish hope

The first forms of hope developed from a covenantal appreciation during the time of exile, expecting that the nation would repent one day and be delivered. This hope, however, ended in this life, while life after death was not an issue (cf. Powys 1997:77-82).

In the later Old Testament traditions, there was a movement towards stress on the punitive judgment of God. The rise of this concept had an emphasis on covenant, and particularly on blessings and curses to follow. This concept became the unbending literal consequences of faithfulness and sinfulness. The conceptions of 'life' and 'death' as they were understood under this understanding of divine retribution were mostly untenable (cf. Powys 1997:88). However, life was not like that; the righteous often suffered while the wicked often prospered. This tight system prompted both hope and protest.

⁸ Mt. 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27,31; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13,14.

⁹ Luke 8:31; Rom. 10:7; Rev. 9:1, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:3.

¹⁰ Luke 23:43; II Cor. 12:2; Rev. 2:7.

¹¹ Acts 2:27; 31.

They started to believe that God's faithfulness and sovereignty could even transcend death. At first, the expectation was that God would preserve the lives of faithful ones despite death, but this then developed to a hope that one day God would raise the faithful dead¹² to participate in the profits of His judgement (cf. Powys 1997:88).

All of these forms of hope survived strongly during the inter-testamental era, although the ones believing in God's faithfulness transcending death gained in prominence. There was no single dominant form of hope, which stood out in response to the politico-cultural challenges of the Greek and Hasmonean eras (the inter-testamental era). The hopes evolved from this-worldly forms of hope to forms of hope beyond this existence, although the former was not abandoned. There was a rising sense that the unrighteous would be brought to account after death (cf. Powys 1997:142). In II Maccabees 7 we see how especially martyrdom raised the question of a future life for an individual. According to Hanhart (196:20), the Jews were confronted during this time with the question whether they should or should not stay faithful to the Torah. The concern here is definitely with the afterlife of the individual and not the nation. According to 2 Maccabees 7:30-42, only the righteous will be resurrected. This righteous only included the martyrs. This variety of concepts and images provided rich resources for eschatological innovation; this can clearly be seen in 1 Enoch.

According to Powys (1997:247), 'fulfilment' is one of the most prominent themes in the New Testament. Throughout the New Testament, the conviction is shared that God's promises to Israel were being fulfilled in Jesus. Powys (1997:247) also states that this hope is mostly strains of the Jewish hope as it developed through the Old Testament and inter-testamental period. Although Christ is the fulfilment in the here and now, the final fulfilment of God's rule will only be at the future appearing of Christ. The basic expectation of post-mortem compensation is most clearly evidenced in the Palestinian Targums and early Rabbinic materials which according to Powys (1997:228) is the most significant indicators of Jewish beliefs by the end of the Second Temple period. Powys (1997: 228) also argues according to Josephus and the New Testament that the Pharisees are the promoters of this expectation from the 'doctrinal confusion' we find by the time of the inter-testamental period.

5. Early Occurrences of the Christian Doctrine

• *Gospel of Peter* 41-42

'Hast thou preached to them that sleep? And the Cross answered: Yes'

In this apocryphal gospel, we find the primitive theme of the *Descensus*. This theme refers to the righteous of the Old Testament who died before the

¹² Is. 25, 26; Dan 12:2,3

Incarnation of Christ. The verb κοιμάω when used in the passive or middle refers to the sleep of death.¹³ When compared to Matthew 27:52 this phrase refers to the righteous of the Old Testament. We find the same phrase and meaning in the *Apocryphon of Jeremiah*.

- Irenaeus, *Adversus haereticos* IV, 27:2¹⁴
‘the Lord descended into the regions beneath the earth, preaching (*evangelizantem*) His advent there also and the remission of sins received by those who believe in Him’

Irenaeus here quotes an Elder who taught that those ‘who had hoped in Him’ in other words the Old Testament saints received salvation (cf. Daniélou 1964:235).

- *Apocryphon of Jeremiah*
‘The Lord God remembered His dead, the saints of Israel that have fallen asleep in the dust of the tomb, and He went down unto them to proclaim the good news of the salvation which he was bringing to them’.

This fragment is quoted by Justin, (*Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo* LXXII, 4¹⁵) and by Irenaeus, (*Adversus Haereses Libri*. III, 20:4¹⁶; IV, 22:1¹⁷; 33:1, 12¹⁸; V, 31:1¹⁹; *Sermone de fide ad Demetrium* 78²⁰). In this text, the author refers specifically to the ‘dead of Israel’, and the place of the dead is specifically in the depths of the earth. It is the descent (κατέβη) in the strict sense of the word with a very specific object, and furthermore, it is a proclamation of the good news. This proclamation according to other versions of the *Apocryphon* is to be seen as the combination of proclamation and deliverance.

This is thus the first text where the aim of Christ’s descent is the actual deliverance of the righteous and not only the proclamation of their deliverance in the future. It is also obvious that the resurrection is of the bodies and not only the liberation of souls. This shows again on the already established hope in Jewish Christianity of a bodily resurrection.

- Ignatius, *ad Magnesios* IX, 2²¹

¹³ Cf. Liddel & Scott (1888:440)

¹⁴ Cf. *Patrologia Latina* V2, cols. 15-16

¹⁵ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V6, cols. 669-672

¹⁶ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V7, cols. 942-945

¹⁷ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V7, cols. 1046-1047

¹⁸ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V7, cols. 1072-1083

¹⁹ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V7, cols. 1208-1210

²⁰ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V7, col. 1231

²¹ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V5, col. 670

‘How shall we be able to live apart from Him? Seeing that even the prophets, being His disciples, were expecting Him as their teacher through the Spirit. And for this cause He whom they rightly awaited, when He came raised them from the dead.’

In this work of Ignatius of Antioch there are only two elements left; the descent into Hell and secondly the resurrection of the dead. The only object of the *Descensus* is here the resurrection of the Old Testament righteous, and not the proclamation. This was obviously then a widespread view by the end of the first century.

- *Epistle of the Apostles 26-27*

‘I willed to give their reward to those whom I had caused to set their hope upon it. Therefore I descended, and spake with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and with your fathers and Prophets, and proclaimed to them in Hell that rest in Heaven to which they are to come. With my right hand I gave them the baptism of life, pardon and remission of all evil, as I did for you.’

Here we find the necessity of baptism for salvation²², but Christ is again the one who descended. He also only gave the baptism to ‘those who had hoped’, in other words the righteous of the Old Testament. There is also no suggestion of an immediate resurrection, but only the remission of sin.

Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs

Here a new aspect of the descent appears, that is the conflict with the Devil who has the power over their souls. This means in effect that the struggle with Satan has now moved from the Cross (cf. Col. 2:15) to the infernal regions during the descent.

- *The Testament of Levi IV, 1*

‘The rocks are rent, and the sun quenched, and the water dried up, ... the invisible spirits mourn, and Hell is despoiled through the Passion of the Most High.’

According to Daniélou (1964:240), the expression ‘Hell is despoiled’ in this context definitely refers to the resurrection of the saints of Matthew 27:52. However, Daniélou (1964:240) argues that the stress is no longer on the resurrection of the saints but on Death, which is overcome.

- *The Testament of Dan V, 10-11*

‘And there shall arise unto you from the tribe of Judah and of Levi the salvation of the Lord; and He shall make war against Beliar and shall obtain the victory of your fathers. And the captivity shall he take from Beliar, the

²² The necessity of baptism is also stated by the *Shepherd of Hermas*, but since he refers to the Apostles descending into Hades, it will not be discussed in full here.

souls of the saints, and turn disobedient heart unto the Lord, and give to them that call upon him eternal peace’

Although the descent into Hell is not expressly mentioned, Bieder (1949:164) is convinced that when compared to other passages in the *Testaments* this without a doubt refers to the combat in Hades.

The three main ideas – captivity, gift, and conversion of the disobedient is also found in Psalm 67:18 and later as interpreted by Paul in Ephesians 4:8-9. It is, however, obvious that this Psalm was very differently interpreted by the writer of the Testament than by Paul.

- *The Testament of Benjamin IX, 5*

‘...And He shall ascend from Hades and shall pass from earth to heaven’
The use of the expression ἀνελθών makes it quite positive that Christ first went down to Hades.

- *The Ascension of Isaiah IX, 16-17*

‘And when He hath plundered the angel of death, He will ascend on the third day, ... And then many of the righteous will ascend with Him and He will send His teachers all over the earthly globe and will ascend into heaven’

Once again, the dead are held captive in Hell, Christ wins a combat the holder of the captives, and it is still the Old Testament righteous who ascends with Him. In this passage, it is also obvious that this despoiling happens on Easter day. It is also very important to note that there is a careful distinction in this text between then ascension from Hell, and the ascension proper.

- *The Ascension of Isaiah X, 8-14*

‘Go forth and descend through all the heavens; and after that thou shalt descend to the firmament and the terrestrial world, even as far as to the angel in Sheol; nevertheless to Haguel thou shalt not go. And thou shalt become like unto the likeness of all who are in the five heavens, and to the form of the angels of the firmament, and also of the angels who are in Sheol... Afterwards from the realms of death thou shalt ascend to Thy place, and thou shalt not be transformed in each heaven.’

In this passage, we do not find any of the popular purposes of the descent: Signifying the death of Christ; The salvation of the patriarchs; or the victory over Satan. It is merely confirming the hidden character of Christ’s coming.

- *Sibylline Oracles VIII, 310-312*

‘He shall go into Hades to proclaim hope to all saints, the end of the ages and eternal day; and he will fulfil the law of death by sleeping for three days.’

At first the descent is once again reduced to the proclamation of salvation, while the ‘common law of humanity’ is a purely Greek theme according to Bieder (1949:159).

The Odes of Solomon (2nd century CE)

According to Daniélou (1964:244), *The Odes* introduces a final stage in this topic, namely the linking of the theme of Christ’s victory over death in Hell and the liturgical theme of Baptism.

- *Ode XVII*, 8-11

‘I opened the doors that were closed and I brake in pieces the bars of iron; and the iron became red-hot and melted before me; nothing any more appeared closed to me, because I was the Door of everything. Then I went forth to all my prisoners to loose them.’

This is either an allusion to Isaiah 45:2 or Psalm 106:16, which were both part of the oldest collections of *testimonia*. They are also both frequently used in connection with the descent into Hell.

- *Ode XXXI*, 1ff

‘The abysses were dissolved before the Lord: and darkness was destroyed by His appearance: error went astray and perished at His hand: and folly found no path to walk in ... He opened His mouth and spake grace and joy ... His face was justified, for thus His holy Father had given to Him. Come forth, ye that have been afflicted and receive joy, and possess your souls by His grace, and take to you immortal life.’²³

- *Ode XLII*, 15-26

‘Sheol saw me and was overcome; Death suffered me to return and many with me. I was gall and bitterness to him, and I went down with him to the utmost of his depths. I held an assembly of living men among the dead, and I spake to them with holy lips; and those who had died ran towards me, they cried and said: Son of God have pity on us, and deal with us according to thy loving kindness; bring us out from the bonds of darkness, and open to us the door, that we may come forth to thee. For we see that our death has not come nigh thee. As for me, I heard their voice, and I traced my name upon their heads; therefore they are free men and they are mine.’

It is interesting to note that in this passage, Christ also descends to the deepest part of Sheol i.e. where death abides (cf. Bieder 1949:179). This idea was forthrightly denied in the *Ascension of Isaiah* X, 8-14. Daniélou (1964:247) sees this as proof that Death is here identified with Satan, who is no longer in the firmament but in the bowels of the earth.

This is also the first time that the dead appealed to Christ, and that the preaching of Christ was associated with the theme of the conflict with Death. This whole idea was then to be taken up in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, and was

²³ Translation was taken from Bernard (1915:291)

to become a common theme. The dead is also baptised as is seen in the *Shepherd of Hermas*.

- Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE) *Stromata* VI, 6²⁴
‘the Lord descended to Hades for no other end but to preach the Gospel to both righteous Jews and pagans who had died prior to his coming. They had been captives, for they had been chained and kept in confinement and prison. Further, the Gospel (Matt. 27:52) says, ‘that many bodies of those who slept arose,’ – plainly as having been translated to a better state. There took place then, a universal movement and a translation through the economy of the Saviour.’
- Hippolytus (170-236 CE), *Demonstratio de Christo et Antichristo* 26; 45²⁵
26 ‘... all power has been given to Christ ... under the earth because he has been counted among the dead, ... triumphing over Death by his death’
45 ‘He (Christ) also ... became a forerunner there (in Hades) when he was put to death by Herod, that there too, He might intimate that the Saviour would descend to ransom souls of the saints from the hand of death.’
- Origen (185-255 CE), *Comm in Matthaicum* 16:8²⁶
‘In dying, Christ fools Satan into thinking he had succumbed in weakness. Satan introduces him to the darkest shadow of his empire where Christ defeats him, returning glorious from the dead.’
- Origen, *Comm in Epistle ad Romanus* V²⁷
‘Christ emptied himself, taking the servant’s form, and suffering the ‘rule of the tyrant’. By his death he destroyed him who had power over death, the Devil that He might free those held by Death. Binding the strong one, He went into Death’s house, Hades, and plundered his goods, i.e., drew forth the souls he held. As a result, the kingdom of Death is destroyed and its captives taken away.’
- Origen, *Hom VI in Exodum* 6²⁸
‘Our Lord descended, not only to earth, but to the lower parts of the earth, and there He found us devoured and sitting in the shadow of death. Hence He led

²⁴ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V9, cols. 265-275; Translation taken from Peel (1979:46).

²⁵ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V10, cols. 748-749; Translation taken from Peel (1979:43,45).

²⁶ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V13, cols. 1378-1399; Translation taken from Peel (1979:43).

²⁷ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V14, cols. 1003-1055; Translation taken from Peel (1979:42).

²⁸ Cf. *Patrologia Graeca* V12, cols. 331-340; Translation taken from Peel (1979:46).

us forth, not to an earthly place to be again devoured, but He prepared for us a place in the kingdom of Heaven.’

• *The Teachings of Silvanus* in the fourth treatise of Codex VII of the Nag Hammadi Library²⁹ (End of third to beginning of fourth centuries CE) 103, 23-104, 14

“... O soul, laggard, in what ignorance you exist! For who is your guide into the darkness? How many likenesses did Christ take on because of you? Although he was God, he was found among men as a man. He descended to the underworld. He released the children of death. They were in travail, as the Scripture of God has said. And he sealed up the heart of It. And he broke its strong bows completely. And when all the powers had seen him, they fled so that he might bring you, wretched one, up from the Abyss and might die for you as a ransom for your sin. He saved you from the strong hand of the Underworld.”

110, 14-111, 4

“... Know who Christ is and acquire him as a friend, for this is the friend who is faithful. He is also God and teacher. This one, being God, became man for your sake. It is the one who broke the iron bars of the Underworld and the bronze bolts. It is the one who attacked and cast down every haughty tyrant. It is he who loosened from himself the chains of which he had taken hold. He brought up the poor from the Abyss and the mourners from the Underworld. It is he who humbled the haughty powers; he who put to shame the haughtiness through humility; he who cast down the strong and the boaster through weakness; he who in his contempt scorned that which is considered an honor so that humility for God’s sake might be highly exalted; and he who has put on humanity.”

In these accounts, we find the following major motifs:

- The author of the *Teachings* identified the descent into Hades with the Incarnation of Christ. In other words, he saw the present world also as ‘Hades’. We see this in that the readers were also brought up from the Abyss; and in that the descent was undertaken on the reader’s behalf. According to Peel (1979:33), this idea is clearly Gnostic.
- According to the author of the *Teachings* Christ was disguised when He descended. From the text, it would seem that the reason of this disguise was to fool Satan, and the human beings. This is also a

²⁹ According to Peel (1979:24) this tractate is viewed as one of the few in the Nag Hammadi Library which is not Gnostic, although we do find passages in it with Gnostic characteristics. Peel (1979:25) also states that the author of the *Teachings* used ideas from biblical; Philonic; Late Stoic; Gnostic and Alexandrian Christianity. It is also believed that the *Teachings* were written in Egypt, by an Egyptian Christian sometime around the third and fourth centuries CE. The translation was taken from Peel (1979:28-29).

familiar Gnostic (cf. Peel 1979:37) theme, but we do find it in Jewish Christian Christology as well (cf. Daniélou 1964:206-10).

- The purpose of the descent is portrayed as the conquest of Hades. This happened in two phases namely, 1) The destruction of Hades' defences; and 2) The conquest of Hades' rulers.
 - The purpose of the descent is also portrayed as the release of the captives. This was the primary purpose of the descent.
- *Gospel of Nicodemus* (Elliott (1993:164-166) dates the work in its current form at around the sixth century CE, but admits that Epiphanius (375 CE) refers to details known to us now from the Acts)³⁰

4(20).1. 'And while they were all so joyful, Satan the heir of darkness came and said to Hades, 'All devouring and insatiable one, listen to my words. There is one of the race of the Jew, Jesus by name, who calls himself the Son of God. But he is a man, and at our instigation the Jews crucified him. And now that he is dead, be prepared that we may secure him here. For I know that he is a man, and I heard him saying, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." He caused me much trouble in the world above while he lived among mortals...'

5(21).1. While Satan and Hades were speaking thus to one another, a loud voice like thunder sounded, 'Lift up your gates, O rulers, and be lifted up, O everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.' When Hades heard this, He said to Satan, 'Go out, if you can, and withstand him.' So Satan went out. Then Hades said to his demons, 'Secure strongly and firmly the gates of brass and the bars of iron, and hold my bolts, and stand upright and keep watch on everything. For if he comes in, woe will seize us... 3. Again the voice sounded, 'Lift up the gates.' When Hades heard the voice the second time, he answered as if he did not know it and said, 'Who is this King of Glory?' The angels of the Lord said, 'The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.' And immediately at this answer the gates of brass were broken into pieces and the bars of iron were crushed and all the dead who were bound were loosed from their chains, and we with them. And the King of Glory entered as a man, and all the dark places of Hades were illuminated....'

8(24).1. 'While Hades was thus speaking with Satan, the King of Glory stretched out his right hand, and took hold of our forefather Adam and raised him up. Then he turned to the rest and said, 'Come with me, all you who have died through the tree which this man touched. For behold, I raise you all up again through the tree of the cross.' With that he sent them all out...'

³⁰ Translation taken from Elliott (1993:185-190).

9(25).1. ‘Thus he went into paradise holding our forefather Adam by the hand, and he handed him and all the righteous to Michael the archangel...’

These extractions from the *Gospel of Nicodemus* are enough to show us that it is by far the most elaborate of the accounts discussed here. Firstly, we see that the true identity of Christ is hidden, for Satan thought Christ to be a mere man. Secondly, we find that Christ broke into pieces the gates of brass and crushed the bars of iron. Thirdly, everyone had the opportunity to repent his or her sins. Fourthly, they were raised immediately and went with Him to paradise.

6. Conclusion

Although the doctrine was only accepted into Christian creeds around the fourth century CE, the widespread existence of it and belief in it is widely attested. According to some (cf. Peretto 1992:229 & Cross 1997:472) it is already demonstrated in the New Testament in Acts 2:24-31; Matt 12:40; 27:52ff; Luke 23:43 and 1 Peter 3:18-22; & 4:6. However, we find the first proper elaborations of this belief in the earliest Jewish-Christian literature of the first century CE and some first century ante-Nicene fathers such as Irenaeus, Ignatius, and Justin.

In this paper, it was shown that this doctrine developed from the Jewish hope. In the earlier parts of the Old Testament, the Jews did not really reflect on an afterlife. The belief was simple; once you die, you go to Sheol, whether you were good or bad. Sheol was a place of darkness, void of anything that can give pleasure (including God). Sheol was also equal to the grave, and thus the statement ‘He went to Sheol’ meant exactly the same as the statement ‘He died’. Anyone who accepted the Jewish cosmogony believed that at death every soul passed to this region. The death of Christ thus also involved Him to first descend to Hades. According to Bernard (1915:28), no one in the Apostolic or sub-Apostolic age would have been prompted to insert the descent as an article in the baptismal creed, since it was just saying that Christ died. From this developed the hope in later-Judaism that God’s power and love was able to stretch over the boundaries of death. By the time of the Hasmonean era, the Jews had a prominent hope in a life after death where the righteous would be blessed and the wicked damned (cf. Powys 1997:141-142). This happened because of the persecution of the Jews.

After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Christians were bound to reflect on the matter. Since Judaism was the cradle of Christianity (meaning that Christianity is based on the same literature as Judaism; Jesus was a Jew; the disciples were imbedded in the Jewish religious and cultural environment)³¹, it is just understandable that they were to think first about the

³¹ Cf. Nickelsburg (1981: 2).

righteous of the Old Testament. The Jewish-Christians, in other words were concerned about what happened to those who were righteous before the coming of Christ, and were already in Sheol.

From this concern developed the beginnings of the doctrine '*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*'. Originally, Christ descended to proclaim to the Old Testament righteous their future salvation at the second coming of Christ (cf. Feinberg 1986:303 & Peel 1979:48); but this also developed to an immediate resurrection of their bodies and freedom from Sheol. On the other hand, the Christians also started to feel that God's mercy would stretch to all who lived before Christ, and not only the Old Testament righteous.

The purpose of the descent also changed over the centuries. From around the second century the purpose was the victory of Christ over death and Hades, with the inclusion of the release of the souls in its power. In other words, Christ's victory moved from the cross to Sheol. We even find versions where Christ had to defeat death in order to free himself and not only the souls in Hades. Another idea that became prominent was that Christ was disguised when He descended. We read that Satan believed Christ to be a mere man until Christ broke the gates of Hades and defeated Satan and Hades.

Daniélou (1964:233) shows that the doctrine of the Descent of Christ was also intruded into other themes. The first being the *katabasis* where it is integrated with the general theme of Christ's descent to earth (cf. Eph 4:9; Phil 2:7). In Philippians 2:10, however, we find a comprehensive cosmology. According to Daniélou (1964:234) this (the cosmology) prompted writers to amalgamate the two themes in one vision (cf. Ascension of Isaiah 10:8-10). This was also a common development in Gnostic literature (cf. the discussion on the Teachings of Silvanus). Secondly, this doctrine has been intruded into Christ's combat with the evil angels in His passion. According to the ideas of the Jewish Christians, the habitat of the fallen angels is in the air, and Christ's struggle with them must take place there. However, this intrusion had the effect that by the end of the second century CE this struggle took place in hell after Christ's passion.

In the last occurrence of the doctrine that was considered in this study, the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, we find a very elaborate account of the doctrine. However, it has been found that it is merely a combination of the earlier accounts, because we do not find any new motifs. It thus becomes clear that the roots of the *Descensus* narrative can be found in Jewish beliefs, which developed as their circumstances and concerns developed.

When we take into account that the most primitive forms of this doctrine is clearly Jewish-Christian, and that most of the accounts are in Jewish-Christian literature, we must conclude the origin of this doctrine is Jewish-Christian (which most probably developed in line with Jewish hope). This is not a new argument since to Peretto (1992:229) it is a fact that the *Descensus* doctrine is of Judaeo-Christian origin; and Daniélou (1964: 233)

clearly accepts this. This paper, however, have shown that the doctrine originated in Jewish-Christianity. This was done by showing the ample occurrences of the doctrine in Jewish Christian literature.

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