

THE TRADITION OF THE HARROWING

OF HELL IN PIERS PLOWMAN

by

MICHAEL EARL RALSTON, B.A.

A THESIS

IN

ENGLISH

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of Texas Tech University in  
Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for  
the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Approved

Accepted

May, 1976

AC  
805  
T3  
1975  
No. 31  
cop. 2

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with the greatest respect and devotion that I dedicate this work to Dr. Beverly Gilbert. She introduced me to Piers Plowman and instilled in me the love for medieval literature that made this work possible. Throughout the months of research and writing she was a constant source of inspiration, guidance, and confidence. She is a patient and dedicated scholar, a true friend, and the just recipient of much love.

I also wish to thank my Mother for the strength she gave me through her unfaltering belief in my project and my goal. She, too, helped make this work possible.

## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	ii
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
II. <u>THE GOSPEL OF NICODEMUS</u> . . . . .	18
III. <u>CURSOR MUNDI</u> . . . . .	44
IV. THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY <u>HARROWING OF HELL</u> . . . . .	53
V. THE YORK AND TOWNELEY MYSTERY PLAYS . . . . .	69
VI. THE <u>LUDUS COVENTRIAE</u> AND CHESTER <u>MYSTERY PLAYS</u> . . . . .	96
VII. <u>PIERS PLOWMAN</u> . . . . .	128
VIII. CONCLUSION . . . . .	178
NOTES . . . . .	193
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	202

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Piers Plowman is a series of dream-visions joined together by the plight of a man going through life seeking Christian perfection and salvation. The poet creates a macrocosm in which man encounters and suffers good and evil in order to gain a "kynde knowing" of the faith he received at baptism. In this universe, the dreamer, who is, in a sense, Everyman, looks for order and a meaning for his life, though he is continually confronted by worldly evil and temptation. Piers Plowman traces the progress of the questor through numerous visions to show the contrast of good and evil and the attractions of God and the world, between which man must choose to attain peace and salvation.

The composition of Piers Plowman spanned a period of approximately thirty years (1362-1399), in which time three distinct texts appeared. The C-text is the final version of the poem, and it will be used as the basis of this study. It is the longest, most developed version of the poem, although it is constructed in the same manner as the B-text, and is clearly a revision. Like the B-text, C is made up of two main parts, the Visio and the Vita. The first portion, the Visio, presents two visions: 1) the Field of

Folk, Holy Church, and Lady Meed; and, 2) the Seven Deadly Sins, and the Plowman's Pardon. In the Visio, the poet presents the world to his dreamer as it really is, a universe filled with sin, corruption, and danger which will hinder his search for truth and perfection. This world shows the dreamer that man must be allied with good if salvation and perfection are to result.

The second portion of the B- and C-texts, the Vita, is divided into three unequal parts which are apparently intended to represent three stages of life a man must experience in his quest for truth, salvation, and perfection. The nature of these stages has been the subject of a long and inconclusive discussion among scholars of the poem. It has been suggested that they represent the active, contemplative, and mixed lives.<sup>1</sup> The three stages have also been considered as the virtues of patience, charity, and unity with oneself, with one's fellow man and with Christ.<sup>2</sup> In still yet another interpretation, Robert Frank believes that all three sections are not kinds of life or virtues, but simply degrees of one way of life, "the good life of obedience to the law of love, the life which will win salvation." They reveal how man can do well, how man can do better, and how man can do best of all in living "the good life more successfully and with greater hope of salvation."<sup>3</sup>

Vita de Do-wel is the first stage in man's journey; it advocates an active life of patient poverty, keeping the commandments, and ruling oneself. The second part in man's quest is Vita de Do-bet; it is a higher manifestation of the conduct in Do-wel. This period of progression holds charity as its highest aim, specifically, the charity which Christ exemplifies in His life. The climax of Piers Plowman is reached in Do-bet, for it is in this stage that, through the Harrowing of Hell, the salvation of man is depicted. Vita de Do-best shows the establishment of a catholic church and a new life through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This life can only be reached through unity with Christ by living a Christian existence within the church. The poem ends with a renewal of the conflict between good and evil as the church suffers the siege of AntiChrist.

The Harrowing of Hell in the C-text of Piers Plowman is the culmination and, in a sense, the end of the poem. The account of Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell is presented in Passus XXI, the last passus of Vita de Do-bet. This life requires charity and humility if man is to fulfill his quest for salvation; the descent in Piers Plowman concentrates on the virtues of faith, hope, charity, and full trust in God. In this scene, man is joined with these virtues and granted salvation. The emotional intensity of the descent is conveyed through the poet's depiction of

man's suffering on earth and in Hades, Christ's suffering in the Passion and Crucifixion, and the extreme joy which the poet feels when he realizes that Christian virtues are united, and mankind is saved through Christ's sacrifice. The event, which is the strongest display of goodness and love in Piers Plowman, is the most dynamic version of the Harrowing of Hell in Middle English literature, for in its vivid action and dignified tone is found a power able to counteract all the forces of evil appearing before or after the scene.

The use of tradition found in the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman has never been dealt with as in itself a mark of the poet's genius. Different traditional elements found within Passus XXI of the C-text have been studied in isolation, but not collectively. This thesis is designed as a fuller study of the descensus tradition and its use in the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman. A work such as this is necessary, for many scholars seem to share the opinion that the Harrowing of Hell is so familiar and so commonplace to students of Piers Plowman that, as John Lawlor feels, "There is . . . no need to dwell on the Harrowing of Hell itself."<sup>4</sup> D. W. Robertson and Bernard Huppé regard the scene as merely a continuation of the Tree of Charity episode; a scene needing explanation only in its relation to the denouement of the poem, the Siege of Anti-Christ.<sup>5</sup> However, some recognize the Harrowing of Hell as a brilliant scene<sup>6</sup> and

the finest passus of the poem,<sup>7</sup> which embodies and presents the essential idea of struggle between good and evil.<sup>8</sup> The value and power of the Harrowing of Hell is also recognized as an essential link between important scenes in Piers Plowman,<sup>9</sup> for the episode, as Morton Bloomfield says, is the culmination of many scenes and the true end of the poem.<sup>10</sup> Still, however, scholars avoid dealing with the episode in relation to the Harrowing of Hell tradition; instead, scholarship has been somewhat restricted to the traditional imagery of isolated characters and ideas, and speculative interpretations of the same characters and ideas. In many cases also, the scholarly exercises exhibit nothing conclusive or distinctive, and often repeat the same notions. The notes of W. W. Skeat's 1886 edition of the poem remain unsurpassed in their useful suggestions of sources and analogues for the Harrowing of Hell, as for much else in Piers Plowman.<sup>11</sup>

The poet's rich use of tradition has been recognized, but it is not praised as a success; rather, the success of the passus is attributed to the dreamer's "newly-found ability to perceive the world figurally."<sup>12</sup> However, Miriam Halevy considers the use of traditional imagery successful, for she sees the traditional imagery in Piers Plowman as a reflection of that found in medieval drama, especially in the depiction of the demonic characters and the image of Hell.<sup>13</sup> David Fowler has discussed somewhat



the relation between Piers Plowman and the cycle plays, and has touched on the similarity between the traditional imagery in the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman and various mystery plays.<sup>14</sup>

The many characters found in the descensus in Piers Plowman intensify the action, emotion, and, in a sense, mystery in the passus. Some of the characters, like some incidents in the action, warrant no long explanations concerning their characters, for their purposes and places in the scene are easily discernable. Such a character is the traditional Christ-knight figure. However, the explanations of this character make his appearance clearer in meaning and more fitting to the aim of the story. He represents the Incarnation of Christ as the distributor of Charity<sup>15</sup> who has come to save mankind. In combining allegory and tradition, the Christ-knight has been said to be the embodiment of all chivalric virtues<sup>16</sup> and the incorporation of all characteristics of humble characters in the poem.<sup>17</sup> He is a link in Piers Plowman between religious thought and popular romance; he represents the "gentility of God, the principle of noblesse oblige"; he links man's "cause and mortal nature . . . [to] the theme of kinship with Diety."<sup>18</sup>

The debate of the Four Daughters of God and its purpose and place in Passus XXI is the object of much speculation. Nevill Coghill says that their appearance indeed adds a

mixture of a homely naturalism with mystery. They also add the voice of common-sense to the scene in a rather unusual way: they speak colloquial language.<sup>19</sup> Even in their somewhat comic arguing, they heighten the dramatic clash between good and evil.<sup>20</sup> Hope Traver, in her full-length study, The Four Daughters of God, demonstrates that their appearance in Piers Plowman adds originality to the Harrowing of Hell, for in other works, the debate occurs at the time of the Creation of Man, the time of the Fall, or, most frequently, the time of the Incarnation.<sup>21</sup> The Piers poet, however, places the debate just before the Harrowing of Hell, an innovation apparently original with this author.<sup>22</sup> The purpose of the debate is still the same, for its object was traditionally to reconcile justice<sup>23</sup> by uniting man and Christ through the virtues of the godhead.

The character of Book is the final character which perplexes many readers of the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman. Book is the strangest figure in the poem, and he has never been fully understood. R. E. Kaske considers his speech to be "one of the most originally conceived, intellectually controlled and compact passages of allusions in Piers Plowman or elsewhere."<sup>24</sup> Book has been said to be the Bible,<sup>25</sup> who speaks in terms of prophecies.<sup>26</sup> His speech "looks back to the Old Law as contrast and complement to the New and forward to the Resurrection".<sup>27</sup> What he says bears witness of nature and history,<sup>28</sup> and all the elements he

speaks of bear witness to the divinity of Christ.<sup>29</sup> His speech also points toward the unification of man when Christ comes, for in his discourse is found the medieval interpretation of Psalms 18:6, which says that Jesus will come as a giant<sup>30</sup> to unite all men with each other and with God. The speech of Book is so interesting and problematic that many scholars have written about the character and his discourse, but his complexity seems still to elude a full explanation.

The Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman and the descensus tradition itself are also complex. Scholars have dealt with incidents and ideas in the tradition and in Piers, but it encompasses many works and much diverse detail and elaboration. In order to understand fully the tradition and its development, it is necessary first to establish what the tradition of the Harrowing of Hell is, where it came from, and how it developed; then, to present the tradition as it appears in the original work, the Gospel of Nicodemus, and to trace the development of the descent through various Middle English works.

The Harrowing of Hell is the Old and Middle English term for the triumphant descent of Christ into Hell between His Crucifixion and Resurrection, in which He breaks down the gates of Hell, tramples on and binds Satan, and brings salvation to the souls of the prophets and patriarchs held captive in limbo since the beginning of the world. The

theological basis of the Harrowing of Hell is an early, though not completely scriptural, tradition that Christ's first act after His death was to descend to Hades to rescue the souls of the just who could not enter Heaven because of man's damnation due to Adam's sin. The tradition developed in part from the scriptural passage relating the King of Glory's entrance into Zion which is found in Psalms 23:7-10:

Attollite portas, principes vestras,  
Et elevamini, portae aeternales,  
Et introibit rex gloriae?  
Dominus fortis et portens,  
Dominus portens in praelio.  
Attollite portas, principes, vestras,  
Et elevamini, portae aeternales,  
Et introibit rex gloriae.  
Quis est iste rex gloriae?  
Dominus virtutum ipse est rex gloriae.

The notion of Christ's descent also developed from the conception of the first believers concerning eschatology, derived from their traditional beliefs and hopes, and perhaps from certain suggestions from Christ Himself. Nowhere is the descensus idea clearly stated in the New Testament, although it is frequently implied, and there have been speculations concerning whether Jesus referred to a descent. The apostles might have thought He was alluding to His descent into Hell when He stated in Matthew 13:40: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Peter referred to the descent in various passages, and he represented Christ as going to "preach to the spirits in prison." In I Peter 4:6, he

states that the gospel was preached "even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like man, they might live in the spirit like God." To these Biblical speculations and allusions were added the account of Christ's triumph over death, and the testimonies of many contemporary disciples that He was alive and continuing His ministry.<sup>31</sup>

The apocryphal gospels were also instrumental in presenting and promoting the descent tradition. These gospels developed from Jewish eschatological ideas, and from oral traditions which were elaborated when written down. The apocryphal literature is less authoritative than the canonical gospels, but is, nevertheless, important as documentary evidence that the notion of Christ's descent into Hell was popular in the early centuries of Christian history.<sup>32</sup>

The Gospel of Nicodemus established the basis from which all expansion and elaboration grew. There is first the notion that upon His death Christ descended into Hell. Upon seeing Christ descending, Satan is in distress, but there is joy among the captive souls who run to Christ and cry for pity, hoping to be released from Hell and unified with the Lord. Christ then breaks the gates of Hell, binds Satan, and makes a triumphal ascent into Heaven, leading the rescued souls.

The Harrowing of Hell became the most important episode of the Gospel of Nicodemus because of its literary

significance. Legends which developed from the descent became the inspiration of much subsequent literature and art, but these legends may trace their origin and, in many cases, their popularity back to this apocryphal gospel. Drawing upon oral tradition and several written sources, the author fused the various patterns and interpretations of the descensus into a unified whole encompassing the most dramatic and imaginative aspects of the tradition, developed from the original idea of the first century.<sup>33</sup> This work, known both as the Acts of Pilate and as the Gospel of Nicodemus, is found in Latin and in Greek versions, and consists of two parts. Part I relates the trial, passion, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The Gospel of Nicodemus II, called the "Descent of Christ into Hell," or Descensus Christi ad Infernos, is a dramatic account containing the many incidents of the descent tradition.

The date of the origin of the two parts of the Gospel of Nicodemus is debated. According to authorities the two parts originated at different times and in entire independence of each other.<sup>34</sup> The Descensus is the more ancient of the two parts, and in its original form, may have appeared as early as the second or third century. Part I of the Gospel of Nicodemus did not exist in anything like its present form before the latter half of the fourth or early part of the fifth centuries.<sup>35</sup> Even the central idea of the Gospel of Nicodemus II, the delivery of the souls

from Hades, is ancient, for allusions to it appear in many second century writings.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the embellishing episodes, the dialogues of Satan and Hades, the breaking of the gates of Hell, and other dramatic elements which were added to the earliest idea are of early origin, being alluded to in Christian oratory of the fourth century.<sup>37</sup> The author took the many details and incidents of this powerful, emotional story and molded them into a narrative that has remained one of the most influential works of early Christendom. Possibly second only to the canon in influencing Christian thought, this story became a doctrine of the church and a principle of thought concerning the life and work of Christ.

The tradition of the descent of Christ into Hell seems to have been so widely accepted in the early Christian church that it caused little comment. In the first century, theologians began to develop the idea; during the fourth and early part of the fifth centuries, the descensus tradition became more clearly formulated and widely accepted.<sup>38</sup> The formal recognition of the idea of Christ's storming Hell occurred at the middle of the fourth century. It was accepted as a part of the Christian faith when the Fourth Synod of Sirmium in 359, introduced the clause, "He descended into Hell," into the Apostles' Creed.<sup>39</sup> The Gospel of Nicodemus II, which was apocryphal in character and which had undoubtedly aided in spreading the descent story

throughout the Christian world, was at last accepted as an explicit Scriptural basis of the crucified Christ's breaking the gates of Hell, binding Satan, and freeing the souls from Hades.<sup>40</sup> By the tenth century, the story of Christ's descent into Hades had permeated Christian literature and art.<sup>41</sup>

The Harrowing of Hell as presented in the Gospel of Nicodemus greatly influenced the dogma and doctrine of the church, but more importantly, the Descensus was responsible for much literary development until the time of the reformation. There are therefore two necessary starting points for a further discussion of Christ's descent into Hell: on the one hand, the original source for the subject, the Gospel of Nicodemus, well-known in the Middle ages and translated into many vernaculars; on the other, the various medieval renderings of the descensus tradition, for in no other literature is the dramatic Harrowing of Hell so extensively and artistically developed as in Middle English.<sup>42</sup>

The Gospel of Nicodemus was most instrumental not only in presenting the descent, but also main ideas and incidents which appear again and again in literature dealing with Christ's descent into Hell. Many of the ideas transmitted in accounts of the descensus are traditional in their depiction; others vary according to the author's purpose. However, in his study of the descensus tradition, W. D. White



distinguishes two themes which appear consistently in most works; these are the theological and heroic views found in the tradition.

The theological view is that Christ preached to the souls in Hades, promising salvation to those who believed and damning the non-believers. One of the earliest developments of the descensus tradition, that Christ preached in Hell, is not overtly mentioned in the Gospel of Nicodemus. This idea that Christ would reveal himself through preaching was firmly established in the early versions of the doctrine, and considered its main purpose. However, as the descensus tradition developed, the main purpose of the descensus came to be understood as the redemption of all men who had gone to Hell before Christ, and the promise to future men that they too would be saved. The descent shows Christ's power in Hell to be equal to His omnipotence on earth, and His love for man and concern for redemption equal on earth and in Hell.<sup>43</sup>

The heroic view of Christ's descent into Hell is derived from an older popular tradition of a redeemer-hero who wrestles with the powers of the underworld and death.<sup>44</sup> Under the influence of this view, the emphasis shifted from the concept of enlightenment through preaching, to the more popular and dramatic idea of Christ descending as a military hero to break up Hell and overcome the powers of death. Another motive for the descent into Hell found in

pre-Christian mythology is to rescue a loved one and remove him from pain and torment as Orpheus recovered Eurydice. This idea developed because the stronger one's love for the dead was, the stronger would be the effort to rescue the trapped souls.<sup>45</sup> The heroic view combined both motives, and the descent came to be considered merely the triumphal procession of Christ into Hell and back again, for the purposes of gaining victory over Hell and death, releasing the captives, and showing love triumphant over death.<sup>46</sup>

In later developments of the descensus, the combination of the theological and heroic views became a fundamental part of the tradition; in fact, it became the most important idea in demonstrating the belief that salvation was attainable only through Christ, and when He came to Hell as a mighty warrior, strong in His godhead, Hell would be crushed and all men would be saved. His triumph over Hell and death would be absolute, and His love for man would be redeeming.

The literary influence of Christ's descent into Hell was responsible for many legends and the development of many traditional ideas found in descensus episodes in various languages. These varied episodes contain incidents, both major and minor, which stem directly from the Gospel of Nicodemus II, but individual authors altered the incidents and used them for their own purposes. Often a major theme or motif from the Descensus was expanded to such an

extent that it overshadowed the descent into Hell itself; in other instances, an author took an incident and presented it only as a minor detail, thus allowing himself more freedom for imagination and originality. Some of the main details and incidents which appear altered in later renditions of the Harrowing of Hell are the appearance and the meaning of the light in Hell, the conversations of Satan and Hell, the breaking of Hell's gates, the legal ramifications surrounding Christ's claim to the souls in Hell, the binding of Satan, the victory over the fiend, the release of the souls, and the triumphal conclusion in which all men are in accord with each other and with God. At times, tradition was strictly upheld, but at others, the authors exercised their imaginations and presented original work. However, whatever variations occurred, the Gospel of Nicodemus retains its primacy as the work which firmly established in literature the doctrine of Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell, and originated the later descensus tradition.

For this reason, the purpose of this study is to look at incidents and ideas which appear as "tradition" in the Gospel of Nicodemus II and in later Middle English works, notice what aspects of the tradition remain constant and unchanged in the subsequent works, and show how various incidents have been changed in differing versions. It will also be noted what contributions were made by the authors

through their alterations of the descensus and whether these changes were accepted. The Gospel of Nicodemus II is presented as a careful study of the establishment of tradition, for this work is the fount of all the traditional elements of the descensus. In addition to the presentation of the Harrowing of Hell in the Gospel of Nicodemus, the treatments of the descensus in Cursor Mundi, the dramatic, thirteenth-century Middle English Harrowing of Hell, and the Harrowing of Hell mystery plays will be examined. Last, and most important, the account of the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman will be studied to determine to what extent the poet was influenced by tradition and how he altered it.

These works are chosen as the texts to be examined because they represent the major versions of the Harrowing of Hell in Middle English. Although the descensus appears in Old English in the Exeter Descent into Hell, the Cynewulfian poems, and the Christ poems, the present study will treat only the later Middle English works because they are chronologically closer to Piers Plowman, and seem to be more relevant to and influential upon the focal point of this study, the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman.

## CHAPTER II

### THE GOSPEL OF NICODEMUS

The apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus established the basis from which all expansion and elaboration of the descensus grew. It not only presents the tradition itself, but also the main incidents and ideas which appear repeatedly in literature dealing with Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell. In the presentation, characters, and details of the Descensus Christi ad Infernos is the foundation of the tradition. Therefore, it is essential to present the descensus as it appears in the Gospel of Nicodemus in order to establish a basis of traditional comparison between it and the developments of the descent found in later works.

The presentation of the Gospel of Nicodemus II is unusual: in only the Cursor Mundi is the Harrowing of Hell begun as it is in the Descensus Christi ad Infernos. The story of Christ's descent into Hell is related by two men, Karinus and Leucius, the sons of Simeon, who were in Hades when Christ entered its gates as conquerer and deliverer. These two men witnessed the descent into Hell and then rose from the dead in order to tell the wondrous story. They report that while they were in Hell, there was seen a great light, and "there came a golden heat of the sun and a purple

and royal light shining upon us" (Descensus, II, i).<sup>47</sup>

Immediately the saints begin to rejoice for they recognize the light as "the beginning of everlasting light which did promise to send unto us his co-eternal light" (Descensus, II, i). There follows a discussion between Satan and the inhabitants of Hell concerning the light. Adam says that God has sent this light; his statement is confirmed by Isaiah who says: "This is the light of the Father, even the Son of God, according as I prophesied when I lived upon earth" (Descensus, II, i).

He goes on to deliver his prophecy: ". . . the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them did the light shine. And now it hath come and shone upon us that sit in death" (Isaiah 9:2). Simeon, the seer who held Christ in the temple, also recognizes the light as salvation, for he states: "Glorify ye the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God; . . . 'Now have mine eyes seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel'" (Luke 2:30-32).

The appearance of the light in Hell and the symbolism connected with it are effective because of the contrast they present with the darkness of Hades. The light is traditionally a symbol in Christian literature of good, purity, enlightenment, and holiness, as contrasted with the

evil, ugliness, and captivity which is found in the darkness of Hell. The irradiation of Hell by the appearance of Christ contrasts with the darkness and gloom which enveloped the earth at the time of Christ's death; the author constructed his story so that the light from the earth would accompany the soul of Christ to Hell. Into the gloom and darkness of Hell and into the captivity and hopelessness of this realm bursts the bright gleam of light, and with it the radiance of Christ's holiness. The appearance of the light brings with it a sense of freedom, the hope of salvation, and a renewal of life to the souls in Hell.

The question of the meaning of the light is resolved, and the rejoicing of the prophets and patriarchs continues. The elucidation of the light's meaning is handled completely by the souls in Hell. The inhabitants of Hades know that Christ is coming to bring them salvation and release; here, the author of the Gospel of Nicodemus uses the appearance of John the Baptist to affirm Christ's coming. It was natural to the author that Christ should continue His earthly work of salvation in Hades and that John the Baptist, who had been Christ's forerunner on earth, should also prepare the way for Him in Hell. John himself explains his appearance by stating: "And now have I come before His face, and come down to declare unto you that He is at hand to visit us, even the dayspring, the Son of God, coming from on high

unto us that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Descensus II, iii). The appearance of John the Baptist dispels all questions of the light's meaning in the minds of the prophets and patriarchs. This appearance became the traditional means of explaining the light, and also, it enabled the author of the Gospel of Nicodemus II, as well as subsequent authors, to present promises of salvation through other characters. The appearance and words of John and the promises of salvation point toward the ultimate rescue of the saints.

The episode in the Gospel of Nicodemus II which involves Seth's search for the oil of the tree of mercy for Adam is another well-chosen device used to affirm the coming of the Son of Man and salvation. The story assures the patriarchs and prophets that the oil of the tree of mercy is at hand, and that when it is given to man, the souls in Hell will be delivered from the bondage of sin and be given mercy and everlasting peace in Paradise. At Adam's bidding Seth comes forward to, "Declare unto thy sons the patriarchs and prophets all that thou didst hear from Michael the archangel, when I sent thee unto the gates of Paradise that thou mightest entreat God to send His angel to give thee the oil of the tree of mercy to anoint my body when I was sick" (Descensus III, i). Seth then tells of his journey to get the oil of mercy. Upon reaching Paradise, he is informed by Michael that no one would receive the oil of the tree



of mercy until "five thousand and five hundred years are accomplished" (Descensus III, i). At that time the angel promises that the Son of God will come to earth to raise up Adam and the bodies of the dead. Christ will then anoint all who believe in Him with the oil of the tree of mercy, and those anointed ones will have life eternal. The Son of God will then "come down upon the earth and shall bring in our father Adam into paradise unto the tree of mercy." (Descensus III, i).

This story clearly presents the traditional idea of Christ's mercy, grace, and sacrifice for man. The promise of the angel symbolizes the beneficence of Christ, unmerited by man, as it operates even into the realm of the dead. The oil of mercy would come from the tree of mercy, which is the cross. The promise of the angel that Christ would bring the oil of mercy five thousand and five hundred years later is now to be fulfilled in Christ's descent into Hades. The author of the Gospel of Nicodemus II did well in choosing this story to prepare the prophets and patriarchs for the entry of Christ into Hell, for the various prophecies and tales related by the inhabitants of Hades have dispelled all questions concerning the light and what great happening is to come.

However, for other inhabitants of Hell the light which approaches is welcome, but intrusive. Satan welcomes the approach of Christ because he feels that he has at last

triumphed over Jesus and God; however, the prince of death soon discovers that Christ's approach is an intrusion which brings his downfall. The conversations between Satan and Hell which appear in the Descensus story are responsible for depictions of Satan, appearing in later literature, which present him as either a cocky, uncomprehending braggart who fails to see his impending downfall, or as a bumbling buffoon who is too ignorant to sense his danger and too arrogant to realize that he is not omnipotent. Satan, in the Gospel of Nicodemus II, is both a cocky braggart and an uncomprehending fool.

As the prophets and patriarchs continue to rejoice because of the coming of Christ, Satan is preparing his legions to welcome the advent of the Son of Man. Satan tells Hell to "make thyself ready to receive Jesus who boasteth himself that he is the Son of God" (Descensus, IV, i). Here Satan projects an air of triumph; he feels that he has triumphed over Jesus by causing his death. He taunts Jesus because of His seeming fear of death, for he heard Christ say, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." (Matthew 26:38). He boasts because he finally has in his power a man who "hath been much mine enemy, doing me great hurt, and many that I had made blind, lame, dumb, leprous, and possessed he hath healed with a word: and some whom I have brought unto thee [Hell] dead, them hath he taken away from thee" (Descensus IV, i). Satan hates

Christ because many of the devil's works have been undone and rectified by Jesus. Because of this hate, Satan is revelling in his victory over Christ even more. He is both blindly proud of his triumph and ignorantly unaware of his fate. Satan's delusion appeals greatly to subsequent writers who present an account of the Harrowing of Hell. Other writers depict Satan as a comical buffoon, a devious but shortsighted schemer, and a raving maniac.

The author of the Gospel of Nicodemus II enhanced his narrative more by contrasting the rationality of Hell to the delusion of Satan. Hell is skeptical of Satan's victory and asks him to identify more completely this champion that he has ensnared. He asks: "Who is he that is so mighty, if he be a man that feareth death?" (Descensus, IV, ii). Hell continues in saying that all the truly mighty men of the earth are trapped in Hell and held in subjection by Satan's power. The logic of Hell is impressive at this point in the Gospel of Nicodemus II, for he begins to suspect that Satan has been tricked by Christ. Hell questions Satan concerning Christ's power to resist Satan: "If, then, thou art mighty, what manner of man is this Jesus who, though he fear death, resisteth thy power?" (Descensus, IV, ii). He deduces that anyone who is so mighty in his manhood that he resists death, is mighty in godhead and that no man can resist or withstand his power. Hell, unlike Satan, is aware of the power that Jesus has

because he has witnessed the power of God; he knows that anyone who is mighty in godhead cannot be subject to bondage in Hell. Hell also realizes that Christ has tricked Satan by claiming to fear death, thus giving Satan false hope. Hell tells Satan: "And when he saith that he feareth death, he would ensnare thee, and woe shall be unto thee for everlasting ages" (Descensus, IV, ii). In later works the beguiling of Satan becomes a major issue in the descensus tradition.

In the Gospel of Nicodemus II, Hell knows that the power of Satan and the region of Hell itself is soon to come to an end. However, Satan discounts Hell's statements as being only the ramblings of a coward. Satan continues to be proud of his accomplishment because he feels he has completely triumphed over Christ. Instead of fearing the entrance of Christ, he tells Hell that he should be glad that Christ has been overcome. In his pride, Satan discloses to Hell how he managed to have Christ killed. He says: "I have tempted him, and I have stirred up mine ancient people of the Jews with envy and wrath against him. I have sharpened the spear to thrust him through, gall and vinegar have I mingled to give him to drink, and I have prepared a cross to crucify him and nails to pierce him: and his death is nigh at hand, that I may bring him unto thee to be a subject unto thee and me" (Descensus, IV, ii).

This speech by Satan became the source of much tradition which appeared in later episodes of the Harrowing of Hell. Satan had tried to tempt Christ and win Him as his own, but because he had not been successful in his plans, the fiend redoubled his efforts. When Christ persisted in not bowing to temptation, and even prevented many evil acts, Satan sought revenge against the Lord. In order to have vengeance, Satan planted the seeds of doubt in the Jews, and through envy, skepticism, and anger, stirred them up and brought about Christ's death. When the fiend caused the death of Christ, he was satisfied, for he did not realize that Jesus had the power to destroy him. In other Harrowing of Hell episodes, Satan manipulates the Jews and turns them against Christ, but he realizes that the Lord has the might to destroy him.

The drink of vinegar and gall presented in Satan's speech also became established in tradition as the "death drink." Before He died, Christ was made to drink this concoction; therefore, this mixture came to signify all that is evil. Vinegar and gall are usually associated with Satan and the destruction of his power. Before he is bound by Christ, he is informed that "vinegar and gall will be [his] to drink"; thus, the end of his power is signified.

The dialogue between Satan and Hell continues because Hell is still not certain about this man whom Satan is bringing to Hades. He asks if indeed this is the man who

can take away the dead by just his word instead of being reliant on prayers to God. He also wonders whether this is the same man who "by the word of his command did restore to life Lazarus which was four days dead and stank and was corrupt, whom I held here dead" (Descensus, IV, ii).

When Satan affirms this, Hell implores the prince of Hades not to bring the Lord to the realm of the dead because Hell and his ministries were troubled, and did quake and tremble at the very sound of Christ's command. He continues to say that the legions in Hell were unable to hold Lazarus because of the power of Christ, and any man, he states, who is able to raise the dead is a "God strong in command and mighty in manhood, and . . . the savior of mankind" (Descensus, IV, iii). Hell warns Satan that if such a man is brought to Hades, he will "set free all that are here shut up in the hard prison and bound in the chains of their sins . . . , and will bring them unto the life of his godhead for ever" (Descensus, IV, iii).

The latter part of the conversation between Satan and Hell upholds the heroic view associated with the descensus tradition. Hell knows that Christ is all-powerful; he realizes that this Jesus, whom he so fears, will come to Hades as a victor, mighty in battle, to break the gates of Hell and release the souls of all those held in Limbo. This scene also presents Satan as a character who fails to see that in his deception of mankind and the death of Christ

he himself has been deceived. He believes that he is victorious over Christ and is still master over every inhabitant in Hades.

The breaking of the gates of Hell marks the beginning of the dramatic action found in the Gospel of Nicodemus II. The storming of the gates is introduced into the Descensus by the presentation of Psalms 23:7: Attollite portas, principes, vestras, et elevamini portae aeternales: et introibit rex gloriae. Some portion of this passage appears in every version of the Harrowing of Hell. The command provokes confusion, and hints to Satan his impending downfall. Satan, Hell, and the legions of Hell tremble and shake with fear and argue among themselves concerning who is to blame for this dire situation. The approach of Christ following the light creates chaos as the rulers of Hell rush to shut and bar the entrance to the darkness. When the voice of Christ is heard at the gates of Hell, Satan is finally made aware of how little power he does possess. When confronted by Christ, he knows that he is doomed, but his power is reduced even more by Hell, who casts him out of Hades. Thus, Satan loses his power, and the respect and friendship of Hell. When Hell hears Christ speak, he says to Satan: "Depart from me and go out of my abode: if thou be a mighty man of war, fight thou against the King of glory" (Descensus, V, i). Hell then casts Satan out of Hades and orders his ministers to "shut ye the hard

gates of brass and put on them the bars of iron and withstand stoutly, lest we that hold captivity be taken captive" (Descensus, V, i). In most versions of the Harrowing of Hell, Satan is thrown out of Hades; in others, he cowers behind Hell; however, in every instance, Satan is bound, and the force which holds captivity is taken captive. Also in this version of the descent, the orders are given to make the gates secure against the force of Jesus, but in some versions, the fortifications of Hell appear stronger, for Satan has his ministers arm themselves with weapons. He tells them to "pounce" on the approaching Savior when he appears. He also tells his legions to prepare hot oil and pour it on Jesus; but Satan realizes in every instance that he is doomed, that he, the champion of deception, has been deceived.

At the command of Christ to "Open the gates," and Hell's command to fortify the gates, the saints and prophets begin to shout and rebuke the forces of evil. The souls demand that the gates be opened so the King of Glory may come in. The cries of the damned are strengthened by the prophecies of David and Isaiah concerning the coming of the Lord and the destruction not only of the gates of Hell, but also of the powers of death and evil. Isaiah taunts Hell and death by stating from St. Paul: "O death, where is thy sting? O Hell, where is thy victory?" (I Corinthians 15:55). The anachronistic use of this New Testament passage



presents a traditional cry of triumph over death. Its use also connects the deliverance of the patriarchs with the Resurrection by strengthening the impact of David and Isaiah's prophecies of Christ breaking the gates of Hell.

The prophets and patriarchs continue to demand that Hell open his gates and face his destruction, and Christ again demands: Attollite portas, principes, vestras, et elevamini portae aeternales: et introibit rex gloriae. The command to open the gates appears in every version of the Harrowing of Hell, but the number of times it is stated varies in different works. The least number of times the command occurs is twice, as it is given in Psalms. The Attollite portas verses are repeated in the Gospel of Nicodemus II in order to prepare the reader for the question-answer encounter between Hell and Christ, and also as a means whereby Hell can ask about the identity of the King of Glory and have his curiosity satisfied:

Christ: Attollite portas, principes, vestras  
Et elevamini portae aeternales:  
Et introibit rex gloriae.  
Hell: Quis est iste rex gloriae?  
David: Dominus fortis et potens,  
Dominus portens in praelio.  
Christ: Attollite portas, principes, vestras  
Et elevamini portae aeternales:  
Et introibit rex gloriae.  
Hell: Quis est iste rex gloriae?  
David: Dominus virtutum ipse est rex gloriae.

(Psalms 23:7-10)

As David finishes his explanatory speech with yet another command for "thou most foul and stinking Hell" to

open his gates, Christ appears in the form of a man. Upon His appearance, the eternal darkness is illuminated, and the bonds which could not be loosened are shattered. Christ easily breaks the strong gates of iron and the bars of brass which the demons have secured, and He enters into Hades. The release of the prophets and patriarchs who are held in captivity is effected merely by the presence of Christ in the underworld. His victory is complete even before His entry into Hades, because the rulers of Hell tremble and quake in fear before Him. When the "wicked ministers" see Christ in Hell and are blinded by the great light around them, they cry out, "We are overcome by thee" (Descensus, VI, i). The volley of questions which follows this scene in the Gospel of Nicodemus II found its niche in the Descensus tradition for various reasons. The questions accent the great degree of confusion and fear which prevails in Hell at this time. The demons have been invaded by a power that is much stronger than their own, and they do not know nor can surmise how this has happened. Also the round of questions points out the dual, almost contradictory nature of Christ's character: He is great and small, humble and exalted, kind to those He loves, yet harsh and condemning to sinners. The scene also elucidates the fact that though Christ died as a mere man on earth, He now storms Hell as a powerful, living warrior, mighty in manhood and strong in battle. The demons are made aware of the

uniqueness of Christ because they have never received a dead man who is free from sin; they also marvel at the quality of Christ which allows Him to shine His divine light and undaunted majesty on the sinners in Hell.

In tradition, this scene provided later writers with the means and opportunity to expound on all the characteristics of Christ. The scene became one of the most interesting in the Harrowing of Hell because each author presented the characteristics of Christ which he felt were pre-eminent. However, the most important aspect of this scene is that it is the first direct confrontation of Christ and Hell which takes place in Hades. Hell has been responsible for all the evil deeds which man has committed, and Christ has undergone suffering and death in order to redeem Man and conquer death. This is the first deep conflict present in the Gospel of Nicodemus II; as such, it aroused the imagination of later writers. This scene was the opportunity to show clearly and visibly how the struggle and conflict are acted out through the call to open the gates, the ironical counter-question and doubt of the forces of evil demanding proof of the divine origin of their attacker, the breaking of the gates, and the trampling of death.<sup>48</sup> The presentation of the conflict points toward the final victory of Christ when He releases the prophets and patriarchs. The very content of the question-answer scene

itself indicates the fear, confusion, uncertainty, and, finally, awareness of doom which the demons will suffer.

The passage which immediately precedes the climax of the Harrowing of Hell is interesting because of what it discloses and because of its importance in tradition. Hell states:

Peradventure thou are that Jesus, of whom Satan our prince said that by thy death of the cross thou shouldest receive the dominion of the whole world (Descensus, VI, i).

This statement makes clear that Hell and the demons know that the end is near because they have realized that Christ is divine. The demons also know that Satan was correct in his statement that Jesus was coming. However, a question arises concerning Satan's motives for "receiving" Christ. Previously, Satan was overjoyed that he had captured Christ, but he seemed unaware of the great power that Christ had. In Hell's statement, however, Satan is said to have been aware that the Savior's death on the cross would enable Christ to gain control over the "whole" world; therefore, the discrepancy between Satan's thoughts and words clearly points out his self-deception. Through his greedy, selfish motives, Satan the guiler had been beguiled.

The climax of the Descent of Christ into Hell occurs when the King of Glory tramples upon death and delivers Satan to the power of Hell. In this brief scene, the fulfillment of God's divine plan is achieved. Through His incarnation and the destruction of the devil's power, Christ

has completely triumphed over death and Satan. They have been trampled on and overcome, Hades has been despoiled, and "man who had been taken captive" could be "set free from the bondage of condemnation." The medieval writers who dealt with the Harrowing of Hell concentrated to a great degree on this short scene in which Christ trampled Satan and delivered him to Hell. In many cases, especially in the drama, the utter devastation of Satan comprises more than half of the different episodes of the Harrowing of Hell.

In Hell's rebuke of Satan, the author of the Gospel of Nicodemus II provided the medieval writers with one of the richest sources of literary material. Later writers of the Harrowing of Hell episodes greatly changed the material presented in the Descensus; some maintained the scene of Satan's reproach but heaped more scorn on the already vanquished fiend. Other writers diverged almost completely from the traditional presentation and tone of the reproach, but kept the underlying ideas which are related in the scolding of Satan in the Gospel of Nicodemus II. In still another instance, Christ becomes the reproacher and the conversation is altered to an argument between Jesus and Satan concerning the legal ramifications surrounding Christ's attempts to claim the souls in Hell.

One of the most popular ideas connected with the descent of Christ into Hell is that of the deception of Satan. In his first appearance Satan is a haughty, proud

boaster who joyfully instructs Hell to prepare to receive one who calls Himself the Son of Man, though He is really a man. Satan says that he knows Christ is a man, for he heard Him say: "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." (Matthew 26:38). The notion of Satan's deception has been connected with the doctrine of Atonement, of Christ's offering Himself as ransom for those souls held in captivity. According to this, Christ offered Himself to Satan, and Satan, seeing only the manhood of Christ and not realizing his divine majesty, accepts the offer. Only when Christ descends into Hell as a conquerer does Satan realize he has made a bad bargain and has been deceived, for he does not have the means of ensnaring Christ and holding Him as the ransom.<sup>49</sup>

Another element in the tradition of the deception of Satan is related to the Incarnation. It was believed that Christ took human form to deceive Satan more easily. He was miraculously born of a virgin, but Mary's betrothal to Joseph convinced Satan that Jesus was a mere man, thereby deceiving him.<sup>50</sup> The Gospel of Nicodemus clearly expresses the idea that Satan was deceived through his own stupidity because he believed Christ to be merely a man. Later authors, in many cases, used this idea in a very humorous manner, for they portrayed Satan as a bumbling fool who quickly changes his attitude when confronted by Christ and the realization that he has been beguiled.

The author of the Gospel of Nicodemus II presents the deception through the complete reversal of character which Satan reveals when it becomes clear to him that Christ has fooled him and eluded his power. Satan, who was the confident boaster, cowers behind Hell when Christ enters Hades; now, instead of being the grand ruler of Hades and the victor over Christ, Satan is delivered to the power of Hell who upbraids him for his foolishness and taunts him for his folly:

O prince of perdition and chief of destruction,  
 . . . why wouldest thou do this? Thou wouldest  
 crucify the King of Glory, and at his decease  
 didst promise us great spoils of his death:  
 like a fool thou knewest not what thou didst . . .  
 this Jesus putteth to flight by the brightness  
 of his majesty all the darkness of death, and  
 hath broken the strong depths of the prisons,  
 and let out the prisoners, and loosed them that  
 were bound.

(Descensus, VII)

Satan's stupidity is directly responsible for the loss of both his power in Hades and the souls held there. With Christ in Hell, the souls no longer fear the demons, for they have been loosened from their bonds and no longer fear death.

Hell continues to rebuke Satan for his greed and the deception of mankind which has caused the downfall of Hades. All the power which Satan once enjoyed has now been forfeited because Christ has come to Hell through His death on the tree of the cross. For his grave mistakes, Satan is promised eternal torment:

O prince Satan, holder of the keys of Hell, those thy riches which thou hadst gained by the tree of transgression and the losing of paradise, thou hast lost by the tree of the cross, and all thy gladness hath perished. When thou didst hang up Jesus Christ the King of Glory thou wroughtest against thyself and against me. Henceforth thou shalt know what eternal torments and infinite pains thou art to suffer in my keeping for ever.

(Descensus, VII)

In his speech, Hell makes many comments which became traditionally linked to the descent of Christ into Hell. Satan has lost the keys of Hell because Christ now has power over death and offers salvation to man. Hell echoes Isaiah's prophecy, "O death, where is thy sting? O Hell, where is thy victory?", when he tells Satan that all the gladness and power of Hades have been destroyed. The forces of evil are now bereft of all power, and captivity has truly become a captive.

Hell's statement, ". . . those . . . thou hadst gained by the tree of transgression . . . thou hast lost by the tree of the cross," became a predominant idea in the Harrowing of Hell tradition: Christ's deception of and victory over Satan through the power of the cross is contrasted to the deception of Adam by Satan, and the fall of man through the tree in the garden of Eden. The entire history of the fall and redemption of man is symbolized in this contrast. Adam, as a representative of mankind was condemned and separated from God when he allowed Satan to deceive him into eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge,



contrary to God's command; mankind was redeemed from this fall when Christ, also brought unto death on the tree by the power of Satan, destroys the power of the devil. Men were condemned by Adam's sin at the tree of transgression, but they were redeemed by Christ's sacrifice on the tree of the cross; at the same time, Christ's sacrifice brought salvation to the souls and damnation to Satan and his evil ministers.

In condemning the power of Hell and releasing man, Satan has committed a great injustice to Hell and his legions; they too are now eternally damned. For committing this act, Hell will make Satan "know what eternal torments and infinite pains thou art to suffer in my keeping forever." The idea of retribution is associated with the tree of transgression-tree of the cross notion in the descensus tradition. Satan will receive the pains of retribution because of Christ, Hell, and his being sentenced to live in the pit of Hades forever. In the Gospel of Nicodemus II, Satan will suffer because he has lost dominion over the realm of the dead and over his evil ministers; also, all the captive souls which he has ruled for centuries have been taken away.

The final triumph of Christ over Satan is seen as he binds his enemy's hands, feet, neck, and mouth. He can no longer effect evil in the world, and he can no longer go about deceiving man with his lies. He is bound and given

to Hell for safekeeping until the end of time. In more dramatic versions of the Harrowing of Hell, Satan is cast into the burning pit of Hell, thus making the despoliation of Hades more effective and the triumph over death more complete.

With the gates of Hell broken, and Satan bound and delivered to Hell, Christ needs only to claim His prophets and patriarchs to complete His mission. Christ stretches forth His hand and beckons His saints to him, saying:

Ye that by the tree and the devil and death were condemned, behold now the devil and death by the tree.

The saints then praise the mercy and majesty of Christ by repeating various Psalms which express the saints' adoration of the Lord and His victory over Satan and bondage. After this praise, Jesus makes the sign of the cross over Adam and his saints and leads them from Hell. At this point in the Gospel of Nicodemus II, David sings the words of Psalms 98:1-2:

Cantate Domino canticum novum: quia mirabilia fecit.  
Salvabit sibi dextra eius: et brachium sanctum eius.  
Notum fecit Dominus salutare suum: in conspectu gentium  
revelavit iustitiam suam.

David's song is followed by the prophecies of Habakkuk and Micah, both of which sing of salvation and the glory of God. The singing of praises is traditional in the descensus, and in most versions, the songs of David, Habakkuk, Micah, and Father Adam are presented. In some instances, Moses and John the Baptist join in the praise;

in the Cursor Mundi and the Towneley and Chester Harrowing of Hell plays, all the prophets and patriarchs sing the Te Deum. However, both the singing of the fragments from the Psalms in the Gospel of Nicodemus and the singing of the Te Deum in other works achieve the purpose of showing that all men praise God and are in accord with Christ.

Though the Gospel of Nicodemus clearly presents the idea of the release of souls in tradition, there is some question concerning who specifically will be taken from Hell. The Descensus names Adam, Isaiah, Habakkuk, and various other prophets and patriarchs among the saved. In the work, Christ explicitly states: "Peace be unto thee with all thy children that are my righteous ones" (Descensus, VIII, i). He then makes the sign of the cross over "all his saints," and leads Adam out of Hell, "and all the saints followed him." These references would indicate that Christ saved only the saints and the Old Testament fathers; however, at another point Christ says:

Come unto me, all ye saints which bear mine image and my likeness. Ye that by the tree and the devil and death were condemned, behold now the devil and death condemned by the tree.

(Descensus, VIII, i).

Because all men were created in the image of God, and Christ himself was God, His statements indicate that salvation is now offered to all the dead because they are in the image of Christ. This idea is also supported because all men

were condemned by the tree and the devil and death; thus, Christ is giving salvation to all men. In the Gospel of Nicodemus II, John the Baptist announces that a time of repentance is given in Hades for those who believe, yet those who do not believe will be damned and left in Hades. On the other hand, Hell explicitly states that if Satan brings Christ to Hades, ". . . he will set free all that are here shut up in the hard prison and bound in the chains of their sins . . . and will bring them into the life of his godhead for ever" (Descensus, IV, iii).

In later renditions of the Harrowing of Hell, different authors designate who is saved. In one instance, all men are redeemed except Cain, Judas, Herod, and the people who have committed suicide. In still another version, Christ takes all the souls out of Hades because Satan plans to start filling his darkness again. The importance of this discrepancy concerning salvation and redemption is that the prophets and patriarchs named by the author of the Gospel of Nicodemus II represent the epitome of goodness, and are always included among those redeemed by Christ's descent into Hell.

The remainder of the Gospel of Nicodemus II also found its place in tradition, but the importance of the later occurrences is not as great as those linked directly with the Harrowing of Hell. The incident of Jesus delivering Adam and his followers into the care of Michael is

traditional and appears virtually unchanged in many versions of Christ's descent into Hell. The prophets and patriarchs are led "into the glory and grace of paradise," where they meet two very ancient men who were set in paradise "in the body." These two men, Enoch and Elias, have been chosen by God to fight against the Antichrist with wonders and signs of God; they are to be slain in Jerusalem and ascend alive into the clouds after three and one half days. These two holy men are mentioned throughout literature; their appearance is rarely changed, and their purpose is to show man that God is always battling for him against the forces of evil.

Though minor, the encounter of the saints and the crucified thief is an interesting and traditional incident in the Gospel of Nicodemus II. The scene is a development of the request of the thief and the promise of Jesus while they were on the cross, as related in Luke 23:42-43:

And he said unto Jesus, Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.  
And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

In the Gospel of Nicodemus II, the saints recognize the man as a thief, and he tells them how he, a thief, was able to enter paradise. He "beheld the wonders in the creation which came to pass through the cross of Jesus when he was crucified, and . . . believed that he was the maker of all creatures and the almighty king" (Descensus X).

Christ gave the thief the sign of the cross which would allow him to enter Paradise and join the saints who would soon arrive. The scene is changed very little in subsequent literature except that, in some works, the thief actually carries the cross of Christ. In later versions of the descent, this incident is used as an opportunity to expound on the unselfish grace and total charity which Christ displayed by dying for all men. Also, as Christ bore the burden of man's sins to his death, the cross which the thief bears is to be a reminder to those in Paradise of the sacrifice Christ made for man.

The Gospel of Nicodemus II can logically be considered the source of much tradition found in the Harrowing of Hell episodes which followed it. The importance of the descensus tradition first became apparent with its inclusion in the Apostles' Creed in 359. During the centuries which followed, the tradition became more clearly formulated and widely accepted. The almost universal acceptance of the doctrine enabled it to flourish and become a powerful symbol which appealed to churchmen, artists, and laymen. By the tenth century, the concept of the descensus had permeated all areas of literature and art.

### CHAPTER III

#### CURSOR MUNDI

Cursor Mundi is an encyclopaedic work of the early fourteenth century which presents at length the outstanding events of the Old and New Testaments and treats many aspects of religious thought and knowledge which were of interest to the people of medieval England. This exceptionally lengthy poem consists of a prologue and seven main parts; in the prologue the author states his plan to write an enduring work to the honor of the Holy Virgin, that men might come to know her and her kin. The remainder of the poem is divided into seven portions which correspond to the Seven Ages of the World, beginning with Creation and concluding with Judgement Day. Much of the information in Cursor Mundi is taken from the Vulgate, Peter Comestor's Bible story-book, Historia Scholastica, and from the apocryphal gospels. From wide reading and Biblical knowledge, the author assimilated diverse materials into one work which was widely popular. Probably because of this popularity, Cursor Mundi had a great influence on the later mystery play cycles.<sup>51</sup>

The Gospel of Nicodemus had a profound influence on the Cursor Mundi, especially the episode which presents

Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell. The descent found in the Cursor Mundi (lines 17849-18512) is very similar to the Descensus Christi ad Infernos; the variations in the progression, the story itself, and the presentation are only slight, and the differences change the descensus very little. The author of Cursor Mundi adds a more dramatic touch to the characters' speeches and the action, and he expounds on some incidents more than the author of the Gospel of Nicodemus II. Like the Descensus author, the Cursor Mundi poet was aware of what would appeal to his audience; he also had a gift of assimilation and a rhetorical flair. Because of this, the Harrowing of Hell episode in Cursor Mundi is as lively and interesting as that in the Gospel of Nicodemus II.

The Cursor Mundi episode of the Harrowing of Hell is presented, as in the Gospel of Nicodemus II, through the writings of the two sons of Simeon, Carius and Lenthius. The light appears in Hell, interpreted through the speech of Adam and the prophecies of Isaiah and Simeon as the light which God had said He would send the souls. John the Baptist appears, "þat semed wel to haue ben eremite."<sup>52</sup> The purpose of his appearance is more clearly presented in this work because he explicitly states that he came to Hell to prepare the souls for release as he had come to prepare men on earth for salvation:



Comen am I Ion bifore þat kyng  
 Bodeword of him for to bringe  
 Make 3e redy wiþouten wite  
 Goddes sone comeþ 3ou to visite  
 He þat shal louse 3ou out of bonde  
 Comeþ to se þis lodly londe.

(Cursor, ll. 17919-17924)

As in the Gospel of Nicodemus, Adam has Seth tell the story of the search for the oil of the tree of mercy to explain John's statements and the meaning of the light. The story is presented in the traditional manner: Christ shall come with the oil of mercy to anoint all

þat seken troupe wiþ grace or grip  
 And to alle þo þat ben baptist  
 To lastyng lif in name of crist

[Adam] shal he bringe & his  
 Fro helle to paradis þat blis.

(Cursor, ll. 17966-17972)

Seth's statement implies that those souls now in Hell who lived a good and truthful life will be saved; in addition, he looks forward to the salvation of those men to come by stating that Christ will redeem all men who seek truth and right and are baptized. His statement also introduces the question concerning who will be saved and who will remain damned; but, as in the Gospel of Nicodemus, the discrepancy is not resolved because of conflicting statements.

The dialogue between Satan and Hell is somewhat different in Cursor Mundi from that in the Gospel of Nicodemus because of the change in characters and their statements. The character of Hell, though he asks the

traditional "Why?" questions, appears to be more forceful toward Satan and perceptive about the situation to come. In the Cursor Mundi, Hell realizes the power of Christ, and instead of wondering whether the Savior appeared weak in order to snare Satan, he boldly asserts that Christ stated His fear of death in order to beguile Satan: "whi dredde he deep wostou not no/ Not but for to bigile þe so" (Cursor, ll. 18007-18008). Hell also realizes that when Christ comes to Hades He will destroy Satan: "He wol þe take to wo to wende/ To be þerynne wipouten ende" (Cursor, ll. 18009-18010). In Cursor Mundi, the poet's dramatic additions to Hell's character make Satan appear rather dwarfed. In this work, as in tradition, Satan is blind to his fate and overconfident, and he continues to boast that he manipulated the death of Christ by turning the Jews against him. He encourages Hell to rejoice with him at the entrance of Christ; however, Hell absolutely forbids Satan to bring Christ to Hell because He will destroy the kingdom of evil and darkness as He had undone the wicked works on earth:

I þe forbede þou bringe him hider  
 For whenne in erpe awerd he had  
 I quook for him so was I drad  
 And alle my wickede werkes eke  
 Fordone were þour3e him so meke.

(Cursor, -l. 18052-18056)

This assertion by Hell is a deviation from the Gospel of Nicodemus because in that work he implores Satan not to let

Christ enter; it also accents the fact that Hell is the stronger force of evil in this work.

The presentation of the Attollite portas passage in Cursor Mundi implemented a change in the tradition which was carried on into later works. The phrase is repeated three times, but when the command is first given by Christ, it appears slightly shortened:

3e princes of helle undop 3oure 3ate  
 þe kyng of blis wol have in late.

(Cursor, ll. 18077-18078)

The shortened command appears in later works, and often is found in its most imperative form, attollite portas. The command presented in its longer form was not necessary because tradition, biblical references, and religious ceremonies had made the phrase so well known that its complete meaning and purpose were clear even in an abridged form. Also, the shorter, more imperative form accented the strength of Christ's power.

The power of Christ is presented in the Cursor Mundi as it is in all episodes of the Harrowing of Hell. When He appears in Hell in the form of a man, the forces of evil are overwhelmed by His powers and blinded by His light. Traditionally, His victory is complete upon His entry, for the evil ones shrink from His countenance, cry out, and cower in fear. The prophets and patriarchs rejoice because

He brast be bondes of oure synne  
 And made us heuen a3ein to wynne

Fro þat derkenes þere we lay  
þere euer is ny3t & neuer day.

(Cursor, ll. 18157-18160)

His entry into Hell also creates mental and physical chaos. As the devils run helter-skelter, Hell and Satan fire the traditional questions at Jesus; they ask, "What are þou of þiþ/ . . . þat . . . Condepnest þou al oure pouste?"

(Cursor, ll. 18173-18176) "Who are you, both great and small, who makes the earth quake at death and who can rise to live after being killed on the cross?" The issue presented in Cursor Mundi which most surprises the demons is how a man so great can show love strong enough to save the first sinner:

What art þou þat lousest so  
þe formast synne bond to wo  
þo þat were cast in caitifte  
To formast fredome makestou fre.

(Cursor, ll. 18189-18192)

In this passage, the author of Cursor Mundi presented a lesson which was a favorite medieval subject: that Christ made the ultimate sacrifice by giving his life to save man and show his unequalled love.

The end of Hell's speech is exactly like that in the Gospel of Nicodemus II:

May falle þou art þat ilke Ihesus  
þat sathan oure prince vs of tolde  
And of þi deep on rode so bolde  
þat þour3e þi dep vp on þat tre  
Al þis world shulde bowe to þe.

(Cursor, ll. 18216-18220)

The identity of Christ is discovered, and Satan's plan has been reversed. Christ is to rule the entire world instead of being a thrall to Satan. The contradiction of Satan's statements and those of Hell is clear in the Cursor Mundi as in the Gospel of Nicodemus II; Satan has told his legions to prepare to receive Jesus as a captive, but when Christ appears, Hell states that Satan had said to him that the Savior would rule "Al þis world." Through the contradiction of Satan's thoughts and ideas, his deception is presented clearly and traditionally as he is bound, overcome, and delivered to Hell.

Hell's reproach of Satan appears as it does in the Gospel of Nicodemus. It contains the scolding of Satan for destroying Hades by causing the death of a sinless man; the scorning of the prince of death for capturing man through the "tre wiþ swike" and losing mankind "bi his [Christ's] rode tre"; the presentation that Hell's suspicions have proven true and Satan has "þi self foule betrayed"; and the promise of retribution, that Satan will feel all the pains which he has given man for centuries:

Ful mony peynes shaltou fele  
 Ful fele lastyng & ful harde  
 þou shal dreȝe wiþ ynne my warde.

(Cursor, ll. 18268-18270)

The release of souls is an aspect of the descensus which differs in every episode. In some versions of the

Harrowing of Hell, the souls to be released are named; in the Cursor Mundi, Christ states:

And alle ri3twis men & gode  
To me fro 3ou shal I drawe.

(Cursor, ll. 18288-18289)

Christ limits the "saved" to only the righteous and good men; however, as in the Gospel of Nicodemus II, he continues in saying that all who were damned by the tree of guile are now saved by the "rode tree." He also states that to Adam and all his children, he gives peace, and later the sign of the cross:

. . . Adam I 3yue þe pees  
To þe & to alle childre þyne  
And to alle ri3twis myne.

(Cursor, ll. 18304-18306)

The inhabitants of Hell are delivered to Michael and led to paradise. The saints sing praises to the Lord; the praises are presented by the traditional figures of Adam, David, Habakkuk, and Michael, and consist of fragmented psalms which resemble the Te deum as a sign of man's concord with God. In Paradise, the prophets and patriarchs meet the two men, Enoch and Elias, who are to battle the Antichrist, and the thief whom Christ had blessed on the cross. In the Cursor Mundi, the poet ends his account of the Harrowing of Hell with another song of praise which is very similar to the Te deum both in word and meaning:

Blessed be þou lord of heuen  
Fadir of mercy wipouten mys  
þat suche grace hap sent to his  
Synful men for to þus lede

In paradys & hem to fede  
 Into his pasture endeles riche  
 þere lif is lastynge euer I liche  
 To þat pasture he vs brynge  
 þat is oure makere heuen kynge  
 þis ilke pasture is heuen blis  
 þerto vs brynge ihesu wiþ his.

(Cursor, ll. 18440-18450)

The passage accents the majesty and grace of the godhead which man has been given, and the sense of union and accord which the souls feel with each other and with God and Christ.

It is easy to see that the Gospel of Nicodemus II had a great influence on the Cursor Mundi because the progression, presentation, and story itself are almost exactly the same.<sup>53</sup> However, the Cursor Mundi poet expanded tradition with the use of dramatic tones and variations which added much to the depictions of major figures in the Cursor Mundi. The poet bestowed upon Satan and Hell more developed personalities by slightly changing their roles and their actions. The poet also added colloquial language and more interesting interactions to his work. These changes toward more dramatic figures and action help to explain the influence which the Cursor Mundi had on medieval drama and the cycle plays.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY HARROWING OF HELL

The thirteenth century East Midland Harrowing of Hell (c. 1250) is a pseudo-dramatic presentation of the descensus which must be considered one of the most important works of medieval England dealing with the subject. It obviously exerted a great influence on later drama which presented Christ's Descent into Hell, and it may have also influenced the tone and presentation of characters in Cursor Mundi.<sup>54</sup> The thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell exists today in three extant manuscripts, the Digby, the Harley, and the Auchinleck.<sup>55</sup> Whether the work is drama or poetry has been debated;<sup>56</sup> however, later descensus works seem to have been significantly influenced by its highly dramatic form of speeches inserted into a poetical narrative construction.

In the Digby and the Harley MSS., the descensus begins with a short narrative prologue by the author in which he states his intention and introduces the action to follow. In this prologue he tells all men to listen to the story of how "ihesu crist" harrowed Hell, broke the gates, and, according to His father's wishes, brought Adam out of Hell. The statement of intention appears in each of the four cycle plays of the Harrowing of Hell; however, in these Christ is



the speaker who tells man to be meek and await the harrowing which is to follow. In Piers Plowman, the same results are achieved through the discourse of the Four Daughters of God and Book's speech. This introductory statement appears to be a radical change which found a place in the descensus tradition, but the idea is not so far removed from the introduction to the Descensus Christi ad Infernos given by the sons of Simeon in the Gospel of Nicodemus II and Cursor Mundi. Following the statement of intent, the author of the Harrowing of Hell proceeds to present conditions in Hell, who is held there, and the misery they face. In the Digby MS., the author simply states who is held in darkness:

In helle was adam and eve  
 þat veren ihesu crist wel leve,  
 And seint iohan þe baptist  
 þat was neweu ihesu crist,  
 Davit þe prophete and abraham,  
 For þe sunnes of adam;  
 And moni oper holi mon  
 Mo þen ich ou tellen con.

(Harrowing, Digby, ll. 7-14)<sup>57</sup>

In the Harley MS. a rather different presentation appears. The author says that the Devil held so much power that no man would ever go to Paradise. The author names the outstanding inhabitants of Hell and tells the important trait of each: Adam and Eve were beloved of God; Abraham was a truly holy man; King David was of Christ's own flesh; John the Baptist was the follower of Christ; and Moses was the lawgiver. However, in spite of the goodness of these people,

they would remain in Hell until Christ came in "fles and blod/of þe maiden marie god" (Harrowing, Digby, ll. 15-16).

At the end of the prologue, the author tells how Christ suffered after his birth so that He might go to Hell to save men. As in other descensus works, the author presents the passion of Christ which accents His great sacrifice for man and His salvation of the imprisoned souls; then, the Harrowing of Hell begins:

he wes bore for oure nede  
 In þis world in pore wede,  
 In þis world he wes ded  
 forte losen vs from þe qued;  
 þo ihesu heuede shed ys blod  
 for oure neode vpon þe rod,  
 In godhed toke he þen way  
 þat to helle gates lay;  
 þe he com þere þo seide he,  
 asse y shal nouþe telle þe.

(Harrowing, Harley, ll. 33-42)

The transition between the presentation of the passion and the Harrowing itself has traditional overtones because it resembles the statements of Simeon's sons when they begin the actual telling of Christ's journey to Hell in the Gospel of Nicodemus II.

Following the prologue, the remainder of the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell proceeds as a drama. The form of this work is different from the Gospel of Nicodemus II and Cursor Mundi, because although the framework is narrative, the form of the remainder is dialogue in which Adam and Eve, Abraham, David, John the Baptist, and Moses call upon Christ to have their claims acknowledged. This form renders

it suitable for dramatic presentation. For this reason, among others, it must be considered a work which markedly influenced the Harrowing of Hell dramas.

There is also a greater amount of humor, both pure and sardonic, in the Harrowing of Hell which is not present in the Descensus. This humor is one of the contributions which was carried on in subsequent works of drama; it was adopted and greatly expanded in other versions of the Harrowing of Hell. There are also many other differences, both minor and significant, between the Gospel of Nicodemus II and the Harrowing of Hell which appear in and influence later drama and the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman.

The dramatic portion of the Harrowing of Hell proceeds in much the same way as do the later miracle plays. Christ begins the drama by stating that for thirty-three years he has suffered heat, cold, hunger, and thirst for the sake of man, but for His efforts He has received only much shame and woe. He has now been bound, beaten until His blood ran in streams, and hanged on the cross. Christ tells Adam that He has suffered all His woe and made the ultimate sacrifice for man, yet some men still do not love Him. However, He asserts that He will pay no more for mankind's sins; He has suffered enough; today, He "will be bringen of helle pine,/pe, adam, and alle pine" (Harrowing, Digby, ll. 45-46). This speech by Christ is important because the obvious change in tradition from the Gospel of

Nicodemus II is apparent. Christ does not forewarn the souls in Hell of His coming by sending a great light which will be a sign unto them; instead, He comes in person toward the gates of Hell. In the miracle plays, this technique is used in all the versions of the Harrowing of Hell, and it appears to have been a significant change in tradition which was upheld by play-wrights and poets for some time. Also, the speech of Christ explains the situation and events which surround His approach; therefore, the speculation of the prophets and patriarchs which appears in the Gospel of Nicodemus II, Cursor Mundi, and some of the later dramas is omitted in the Harrowing of Hell. Christ states His promise of salvation and His intentions; whereas, in other works, the prophecies of Isaiah, Simeon, and David, and the speeches of Adam, Seth, and John are used for the same purpose.

Though tradition is altered in Christ's speech, it is also upheld to some extent. The coming of salvation is presented in the Harrowing of Hell as it is in other works; and Christ Himself is approaching the gates of Hell. The question of who will be released from Hell is also introduced through Christ's discourse; He implies that Adam and all his descendants will be taken to Paradise. Later He states that only those who believed in and served Him will be rescued. The speech of Christ is a good beginning for

the Harrowing of Hell, because it establishes the dramatic tone and quality and instigates the action to follow.

Satan's first statement, "Wo is þat ich here þere?" (Harrowing, Digby, ll. 47), suggests that the traditional characters of Satan and Hell are combined in this fiend. This question is asked by Hell in the Gospel of Nicodemus and Cursor Mundi. However, it fits the curiosity of the character Satan in those works. He is curious about who is coming to Hell and for what reason; he is also blindly ignorant of his impending disaster. In the Harrowing of Hell this complex personality of Satan appears in the traditional manner; however, the author adds some touches which show distinctly the different aspects of Satan's thought. At first he is curious and wonders to whom the voice belongs and why it is approaching Hell. Satan is also arrogant, for he threatens Christ that if He keeps talking He will become one of the companions of Satan and learn how the inhabitants of Hell "play." His arrogance is also displayed by his delusion of omnipotence, for in every version of the descensus, Satan believes that he cannot be overcome, and will have Christ as a captive.

Satan is also traditionally pictured as a cruel fiend who tries to tempt man away from Jesus. Before he is bound, he tells Christ that He will regret taking the souls from Hell; the prince of death says, "Wo ys hym þat þe knowe ne shal!" (Harrowing, Harley, l. 102). He also tells Jesus

that if he is denied his right to hold the souls, he will soon populate Hades again by going from man to man with temptation and lies.

One of the more interesting facets of Satan's portrayal is that which shows him as a fool who is reduced to grovelling in an effort to persuade Christ to let him remain free with a few "damned souls" in Hades. The different authors change this representation in each of their works; however, in every instance, a sense of humor and comedy is provoked when one sees the Devil reduced to a state resembling humility. In the Harrowing of Hell, Satan humorously tries to reason with Jesus; he attempts to persuade the Lord to be satisfied with the kingdoms he controls in heaven and on earth; after all, what one holds is easier to control than a new realm. At another time, Satan tries to avoid being bound by gaining pity from Christ; he states that no one can hurt him further, because he has already suffered so much woe that he is unconcerned with his fate:

Ne may non me worse do  
þen ich have had hiderto;  
Ich have had so mucche wo  
þat y ne recche whyder y go.

(Harrowing, Harley, ll. 115-118)

His attempts are unsuccessful, but this character of Satan appears quite frequently in other works presenting the descensus. His varied portrayals always add unusual, but welcome, touches of humor.

The rather comic encounter following Satan's speech is used in much the same way as the discussion between Satan and Hell and the patriarchs in the Gospel of Nicodemus II. Satan does not know who Jesus is, but unlike the character of Hell in the Descensus, he asks no questions concerning the origin and purpose of the approaching spirit. In fact, Christ readily volunteers the information which Satan desires. Christ commands him to be silent that he "may wele wite me play." Christ continues by telling Satan the purpose of his entry into Hell and the facts about His identity and origin. He tells him "pat ich wile hauen mine away" (Harrowing, Digby, l. 58). Then, in what seems to be an understatement, Christ asks Satan, "Wost þu neuere wat ich am?" (Digby, l. 59). He then proceeds to tell Satan that He is that one which for thirty years has remained a mystery and unsullied by sin. Satan has been unable to find sin in Jesus as he does in other men; therefore, he should know who He is and that He is above all other men. Christ informs Satan that He will take all his subjects away and leave Satan and his evil companions in pain:

More þen .xxx. winter hit is agon  
 þat þu hauest fonded me  
 fforto witen wat I be;  
 Sunne ne foundest þon neuer non  
 In me as in anoper mon;  
 þou miht wel witen þe bi þon  
 þat ich more þen ani mon;  
 þou salt wel witen þe to-day

pat ich wyle hauen mine away;  
 benne pou letest þe alone,  
 benne pou miȝt grunten and grone.

(Harrowing, Digby, ll. 60-70)

This passage echoes the statements which follow the series of questions in the Gospel of Nicodemus II and Satan's rebuke by Hell. The traditional parallels are very strong because this idea is the foundation upon which the descensus tradition grew: a man without sin goes to Hell, saves the prophets and patriarchs, and leaves Satan in the eternal misery and pain of Hades.

Another instance of tradition somewhat altered in the Harrowing of Hell deals with the legal right of Satan to keep the souls as his own. Satan tells Christ that the souls who are in Hell will remain there, and because of reason and right, Christ cannot take the captives away. In all versions of the descent, Satan states that he has a legal claim to man because mankind was damned by Adam's sin. The tree-of-transgression-tree-of-the-cross relationship occurs in the Harrowing of Hell, but it is presented in a somewhat different way. Satan says that anything that a man buys is his and no one can take it away. Adam came to Satan hungry, asking for relief; Satan gave Adam an apple, and bought him in the process; therefore, he has a claim to Adam and all his kin. According to his reason, Satan has a valid claim to the souls of men; if Christ takes the souls, He is depriving Satan of his "property." The



gaining of the souls by the tree of transgression is clearly presented; the winning of the souls by the tree of the cross is presented only through Christ's statements:

"And seppen me duden one þe rode; . . . Hit wille þe bringen of helle pine" (Harrowing, Digby, ll. 40, 45).

The argument of Satan's captives being held by reason and right continues when Christ pits his reason against that of the devil. The purchase made by Satan is declared void because the apple and the apple tree from which it came were made by Christ and belong to Him. The bargain of Satan is nullified because nothing can be gained when another man's merchandise is used. Because Satan bound man through a possession of Christ, by reason Christ will reclaim man and take him from Hell:

Satanas, hit was min,  
 þe appel þat þou zeue him,  
 þe appel and þe appeltre,  
 Bopen veren maked þoru me;  
 Hou miȝest þou in eni cunnes wyse  
 Of oper monnes þine maken marchaundise?  
 Seppen þou boundest him wiþ min,  
 Wiþ reisoun wil ich hauen him.

(Harrowing, Digby, ll. 81-88)

The battle of reason acquired an established place in the descensus tradition through the Harrowing of Hell; in previous works, the battle of reason is implied, but never stated as it is in some of the cycle plays and Piers Plowman.

After Christ's declaration that his claim to the souls is the stronger and more valid, Satan realizes the identity

of his adversary. He knows well this Jesus who is Lord over all and who has come to rob him. However, Satan is not discouraged, and he tries to make a bargain with Christ: be satisfied with possessing Heaven and earth, let me retain the rule of Hell. Christ scoffs at Satan's offer and reiterates the price He had to pay to regain the souls of man; he will not be satisfied until He has claimed His souls.

Christ also promises Satan that he will feel more pain than any other that is in Hell. The promise of retribution is a part of the descensus tradition which is delivered by Hell in the Gospel of Nicodemus II and Cursor Mundi; but in the cycle plays and later works which present a version of the descent, the promise of great pain is delivered by Christ. In the slight alteration of tradition the hopelessness of Satan's future is not as clearly stated as in other works, but the traditional idea is present.

Another element which entered the descensus tradition for the first time in the Harrowing of Hell is Satan's threat that he will go from man to man tempting them and stealing the souls from Christ. The descent episodes which were influenced by this dramatic work differ significantly from the Gospel of Nicodemus II in this respect, because after the promise of retribution Satan is not found cowering behind; rather he is already scheming to repopulate Hades. He has not yet been reduced to a

powerless state by the approach of Christ, for he appears as a strong, threatening force of evil, rather than a coward, as in the Descensus.

The gatekeeper of Hell appears in the Harrowing of Hell tradition for the first time in the thirteenth-century Harrowing of Hell. The addition is a delightful one which provided the authors of subsequent descent versions a medium through which they could add much more action and humor to their works. In each appearance, the gatewards are cowards who flee in the face of danger. The later authors exercised their imaginations in developing and depicting this character. In some works, the single gatekeeper is expanded into an entire legion of foolish, cowardly guards. The gatekeeper in the Harrowing of Hell is a humorous character who relinquishes his position, much as Satan does in the Descensus, when he hears Christ approaching. He leaves the gates unattended, to be barred by whoever will, thereby offering no resistance to Christ. The development of this character is one to be noted as a delightful, interesting transition, and his presence, a humorous accessory in the descensus tradition.

Christ's approach to the gates of Hell makes up most of the Harrowing of Hell. The intention of purpose, the disclosure of identity, and all conversation between Satan and Christ takes place before Christ comes to the gates of Hell. In some dramatic works, this same technique is used:

only the voice of Christ is heard. This is a change in tradition which was not strictly adhered to, for some works maintained the presence of the light, instead of Christ's voice, as a preceding sign; the voice of Christ is not heard until He demands that the gates be opened.

The breaking of the gates of Hell and the binding of Satan appears in a manner in the Harrowing of Hell that is found nowhere else in the tradition. The scene is the most anticlimactic of the entire drama. Christ does not command Attollite portas, and the idea is not even connected with the breaking of the gates. In no other middle English version of the Harrowing of Hell is the speech or the essence of the Attollite portas omitted. Christ simply states, "Helle gates, here y 3ou felle,/ & seppen wil ich herwe helle" (Harrowing, Auchinleck, ll. 149-150). The binding of Satan is equally bland. There is no action whatsoever involved in the scene. As in tradition, Satan is damned to remain in Hell; however, the slighted presentation of two of the main objectives of Christ's journey to Hell is a major alteration in tradition, a change that is somewhat ineffective.

Helle gates, here y 3ou felle,  
 & seppen wil ich herwe helle;  
 lucifer, here y þe binde,  
 schaltow neuer hepen winde  
 vntil it com domesday.  
 fare þou seppen whare þou may,  
 fore þou seppen ware þou fare,  
 no dostow neuer mon care.

(Harrowing, Auchinleck, ll. 149-156)

The jubilation of the saints appears in the Harrowing of Hell in the traditional manner; however, in each work, the designated patriarchs and prophets vary, as do the praises they sing. In this work each character welcomes the Lord, who introduces himself, tells the Lord why he has a claim to salvation, and pleads for forgiveness. Adam welcomes Jesus as God's son and "God's send": he identifies himself as the "foremost man", the man shaped from the earth and called son. He pleads, "Ihesu crist, bide I þe/þat mine sunnen forʒef þou me" (Harrowing, Digby, ll. 153-154). Eve introduces herself as one very dear to the Lord. She states that she and Adam did wrong to break God's command, but "So longe hauen we ben herinne,/ þa fewe nou bep oure sunne" (Harrowing, Digby, ll. 161-162). Eve prays that Christ will give her and Adam love and take them to Paradise. Christ acknowledges Adam and Eve and their pleas by asking, "Wendest þou I were ded for nowt?" (Harrowing, Digby, l. 169). Christ also blesses the pair with a statement which closely resembles the blessing delivered to the thief on the cross:

To-day þou salt alesed be  
 And comen to paraises blisse,  
 Perof ne salt þou neuere misse.

(Harrowing, Digby, ll. 172-174)

Abraham tells Christ that He is the child born of his own flesh who was prophesied to take the souls from Hell. For this reason, Abraham urges Christ to do as He

promised and "bring me to heueve vp wip þe" (Harrowing, Harley, l. 192). Christ confirms Abraham's reasons for salvation, for He says, ". . . mi suete moder was/Bigeten of þy suete fles" (Harrowing, Digby, ll. 189-190).

Jesus also tells the Abraham that he and all his family will "To-day . . . alesed be/And comen to paradises blisse" (Harrowing, Digby, ll. 192-193). David presents the same claim to salvation as Abraham: that Christ was born of the family of David. Yet David is saved because of his goodness rather than his "sibnesse"; whereas, Abraham is saved for his family ties, and not so much for his righteousness. John the Baptist is granted salvation because he baptized Jesus, suffered martyrdom, and prepared the souls in Hell for the coming of Christ. Moses, the final patriarch presented, is redeemed because he served the Lord and received and held the commandments. Moses will be taken to Heaven with all others who believe in the Lord; the non-believers shall stay with Satan in the pit until doomsday.

The singing of praises is an integral and traditional part of the descensus notion. Every Harrowing of Hell manuscript concludes with Christ being lauded by personal praise, the Psalms, or the Te deum. The prophets and patriarchs who glorify God vary, but they include the traditionally designated souls: Adam, Eve, John the Baptist, David, Moses, Isaiah, and Abraham.

As a whole, the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell is traditional in its presentation of the descensus. The drama sometimes alters the accepted ideas and accents various incidents in order to heighten the dramatic effect and intensify the action. The work also provides more dialogue and interplay between the characters; for these reasons, the influence of this work on the Harrowing of Hell dramas appearing in the mystery cycles is apparent. This East Midland version of the descent is also responsible for much character development and humor which appeared later. It influenced the cycles further by instilling the dramatic tone in medieval literature, and possibly prompting the production and establishment of the descent dramas in the following centuries, which would themselves further develop, change, and establish the tradition of the Harrowing of Hell.

## CHAPTER V

### THE YORK AND TOWNELEY MYSTERY PLAYS

In the fourteenth century, the mystery cycle plays began to flourish. Though they had been popular as early as the thirteenth century, the plays underwent their greatest period of development and reached their peak of popularity and performance in the latter half of the fourteenth century. The plays, influenced by Biblical scripture, the liturgy, and the apocryphal gospels, were religiously oriented and presented most of the chief events of the Old and New Testaments beginning with the Creation and concluding with the Day of Judgement. Of the great cycles of mystery plays, only the texts of four have remained extant as the chief representatives of English drama; these are the York, Towneley (also known as the Wakefield cycle), Chester, and Ludus Coventriae cycles.<sup>58</sup>

The earliest specimens of English religious drama are those depicting Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell.<sup>59</sup> Each of the four cycles of mystery plays contains an episode of the descensus, and the traditional elements of the Harrowing of Hell are clearly presented in all accounts. The different versions of the Harrowing of Hell vary in their presentations, but, because of the obvious traditional



elements found within them, they seem to share the influence of a common work, the Gospel of Nicodemus. In addition to the Descensus Christi ad Infernos, the Harrowing of Hell plays seem also to have been strongly influenced by Peter Comestor's Historia Scholastica, Cursor Mundi, the thirteenth century East Midland Harrowing of Hell, and the Legenda Aurea.<sup>60</sup> The renditions of the Harrowing of Hell vary in each of the cycles; in some, the action is vivid and the characterization realistic. In others, the drama seems static, uneven in quality, and somewhat primitive. However, for the purpose of this study, it is important to note how the descensus tradition is upheld or modified in each of these plays.

The earliest, most extensive English cycle, consisting of forty-eight plays, is the York. The original cycle is believed to have been composed between 1340 and 1350. The earliest notice of the plays is in 1378, and they had evidently been performed for many years, for they are referred to as "of old time"; they are also mentioned in 1394, when again they are spoken of as having existed for a long time.<sup>61</sup> The plays continued to be performed until the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, at which time they were discontinued, being unable to withstand the Reformation.<sup>62</sup>

The York "Harrowing of Hell," the thirty-seventh play of the cycle, is the finest of all the English dramatic

versions of the descensus. It is realistic and has a degree of originality, yet it retains the tone and many of the events of the Gospel of Nicodemus. The characters and action of the York "Harrowing of Hell" are those traditionally found in the Gospel of Nicodemus, but they are elaborated and varied for dramatic effect and easy comprehension by the viewer. There is both humor and pathos found in the characters, which are more numerous in the York than in previous accounts of the descent, and their actions are entertaining and captivating. The descensus tradition is changed somewhat in the York "Harrowing of Hell"; the changes are found in other cycle plays, so that the York play appears to have influenced them, in action, characters, and way of presentation.

The York play, like the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell, begins with a long prologue in which Christ tells man to prepare for the coming of the Lord. He states that He has fulfilled God's plan and has bought with his blood what the "feende þame wanne with trayne";<sup>63</sup> He now comes to Hell, preceded by a great light, to restore mankind to bliss, but, in the meantime, His body will lie in the grave for three days, after which He will ascend to heaven. This speech by Christ is one of the longest which appears as a prologue in any of the plays, and it is also important because it was used to inform the audience of the play what was to happen.

The prologue is unique in the Middle English versions of the Harrowing of Hell in that it contains an exposition of the doctrine of Christ; in addition, it presents the major ideas appearing in every version of the descent which are later dramatized in the action of the play. Christ tells mankind to be mindful of the great sacrifice He has made in order to save man and fulfill the "forward" of God. He has given His life to save the souls trapped in limbo which the devil won through trickery. One should note here that in addition to the long prologue itself, the York playwright waived tradition in mentioning the idea of trickery so early. This notion is major in the descensus tradition, but it usually appears much later in the face-to-face encounter between Christ and Satan. Also, the tree-tree relationship is mentioned much earlier. It is possible that this early mention of the trickery and the tree-tree relationship was used as a means of foreshadowing and preparation for the listening audience. As in most of the earlier versions of the Harrowing of Hell, the light which precedes Christ to Hell plays an important role, and Christ states explicitly that it is to be a sign to the captive souls that salvation is at hand.

Christ also says that His body will lie in the grave for three days and will ascend to heaven when all His deeds are done. In the descensus tradition, and also in theological thinking, the idea of Christ's remaining in the grave,

and for how long is somewhat ambiguous. The question concerns whether Christ descended to Hell in the body and whether He remained in Hell for the entire three days between the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Few versions of the descent clearly state that Christ's body remained in the grave while His spirit went to destroy Hell; the question concerning the length of Christ's sojourn in Hades is also not clearly presented in any episode of the Harrowing of Hell. However, Christ's statement in the York play, that He descended immediately after His death establishes exactly the time of the descent, a detail appearing in later plays and in Piers Plowman. With the aims and intentions of the York "Harrowing of Hell" presented, the drama proceeds in much the same way as the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell.

The drama proper begins in the traditional manner with Adam rejoicing at the sight of "a glorious gleme" which he interprets as a sign which "some schall sesse oure sorowes sadde" (York, l. 44). Isaiah follows, as in the Gospel of Nicodemus II, by stating his prophecy of a great light coming to those who walk in darkness. He says that as he preached on earth that a light would come to save mankind, so the light comes from Christ who approaches Hell. Simeon repeats the tale of his holding the child in the temple, thus fulfilling his dream of seeing the Messiah. He too states that the light is from that one whom he held in

the temple. The appearance and speech of John the Baptist affirm, beyond a doubt, the meaning of the light. John's speech is almost exactly that which is found in the versions of the descent which predated the York. He states that the light comes from Christ whom he baptized in the "flume Jordanne," who God said was His son, and who sent John to Hell to prepare the souls for release as he had prepared the men on earth for salvation.

The speeches of rejoicing which are found in the York "Harrowing of Hell" differ only slightly from tradition. The speeches are almost identical; most of the prophets and patriarchs are the traditionally designated spokesmen, and the resolution of the speeches is the same: that the mysterious light is given a clear meaning and explanation. The appearance of Eve in the rejoicing scene is a somewhat minor addition, for her part consists only of saying that the light means joy, and that through the light, man will be reinstated in Paradise. The inclusion of Moses as one of the prophets appears in the York for the first time in the Middle English descent tradition.

Ordinarily, Seth's tale of the search for the oil of the tree of mercy follows the speech of John the Baptist. In Seth's speech is transmitted the promise of God that the oil of the tree of mercy will come to man at the death of Christ; thus all the questions concerning the light are explained. In a sense, Moses' speech in the York play

accomplishes the same results as that of Seth in other versions. Moses says:

Of þat same light lernyng haue I,  
 To me Moyses he mustered his myght,  
 And also vnto anodir, Hely,  
 Wher we were on an hille on hight.  
 Whyte as snowe was his body,  
 And his face like to þe sonne to sight,  
 No man on molde was so myghty  
 Grathely to loke agaynste þat light,  
 þat same light se I nowe,  
 Shynyng on us sartheyne,  
 Wherefore trewly I trowe,  
 We schalle sone passe fro payne.

(York, ll. 85-96)

Moses has seen the might of Jesus; he has also witnessed His power through the light which radiated from Christ. As Seth knows that when Christ comes to Hell the oil of mercy will be given, so Moses knows that Christ is coming because of the brightness and intensity of the light which he sees and associates with Christ. With his speech and all question concerning the glorious light dispelled, the rejoicing scene ends. This entire scene is traditional because of the souls which speak, the content of their speeches, and the joy which they exhibit. The scene is important because it stresses the contrast of the new joy of the patriarchs to the pain they felt during the absence of God. The unexpected joy of the souls is also used to contrast with the woe which the evil powers encounter; it accents the characters which rule Hades by making them appear foolish, humorous, and vanquished because of their stupidity even before the actual appearance of Christ.

The dramatic action of the York play begins at the moment when the demons hear the rejoicing of the prophets and patriarchs and awaken to the danger that threatens their kingdom. At this same point, the descensus tradition begins to be greatly altered by the York author. The playwright adds many more devils to the tradition, makes them appear more humorous and foolish than ever before, and develops the evil characters fully through their dialogues.

The interlude between the saints' rejoicing and the appearance of Christ is a humorous addition which appears in the York "Harrowing of Hell," and also in some subsequent versions of the descent. It is somewhat different from anything previously found in the tradition, because of the characters and the tone. The devils debate the uproar which they hear and discuss the hopeless plight of the captured souls, much as in the Gospel of Nicodemus II; however, the action and tone are much lighter. The chaos which is evident in this scene is similar to that usually felt by the devils after Christ has appeared and made his command. The first demon, Ribald, shouts to Beelzebub to bind his "boys" for he has never heard such an uproar coming from Hell; his fear is apparent, and he is alarmed at such uproarious behavior because he senses his joy is soon to end. With the appearance of Beelzebub, a conversation ensues which is similar to that between Hell and Satan in

the Descensus. The second demon, Beelzebub, asks Ribald, "Why rooris þou soo?" (York, l. 99); he wants to know what is happening in limbo. Ribald asks him if he cannot hear the ugly noise which emanates from the Jews in limbo. They are talking of many joys and showing great mirth. Beelzebub scoffs and says that the point of mirth is passed for the souls; they shall never have "more hele." Ribald then tells his colleague that the souls are speaking of Christ and saying that he shall save them. Beelzebub appears in the traditional manner of Satan, as an overconfident braggart who believes his power to be much stronger than it is. He shows no concern over Ribald's information; instead he boasts his position to be much stronger than the power of Christ, and the strength of limbo to be no match for the feeble powers of the Lord:

3a, if he saue þame noght, we schall,  
 For they are sperde in speciall space,  
 Whils I am prince and principall  
 Schall þei neuer passe oute of þis place.

(York, ll. 109-112)

Beelzebub then calls for a council of devils to devise a way to destroy such happiness among the prophets and patriarchs. He commands:

Calle vppe Astrotte and A[naballe]  
 To giffe þer counsaile in þis case.  
 Bele, Berit, and Belial,  
 To marre þame þat swilke maistries mase.  
 Say to Satan oure sire,  
 And bidde þame bringe also,  
 Lucifer louely of lyre.

(York, ll. 113-119)



The council of devils is an addition which appears per se only in the York "Harrowing of Hell." In most versions of the Harrowing of Hell, the "council" consists of only Satan and Hell, and does not concern how to dispel the saints' mirth, rather it is a discussion about the approach of Christ and what is to be done about the situation. The council also identifies the many devils which the York playwright added to his work. In no other Middle English version of the Harrowing of Hell do all these demons--Astrotte, A[naballe], Bele, Berit, Belial, Satan, Lucifer, Ribald, and Beelzebub--appear together; also, such a great number of devils appears nowhere else in the tradition. The devils may have been so numerous in order to show the extent of the evil power of Hell in contrast with the power of Christ, and later the futility of so much power when Christ comes, harrows Hell, and dissipates the power found in Hell. The devils are responsible for much comic humor which appears in the York "Harrowing of Hell" and later versions of Christ's descent into Hell. Together, they exemplify all the characteristics traditionally associated with Satan: fear, deceit, overconfidence, foolishness, pride, and confusion.

The command of Christ appears again in this work in an abridged form:

Attollite portas principes,  
 Oppen vppe 3e princes of paynes sere,

Et eleuamini eternaes,  
 Youre yendles 3atis pat 3e haue here.

(York, ll. 121-124)

Introibit rex glorie is omitted, yet Satan seems to know that the Prince of Glory waits outside the gates, for he asks what "lad" makes such a demand and calls himself a king over the devils. The following scene condenses and rearranges the episodes in the Gospel of Nicodemus II where Satan and Hell discuss the identity of Christ, the resurrection of Lazarus and the power of the Lord, and give the command to bar the gates. When Satan asks who is at the gate, David appears and elucidates the identity and attributes of the Lord; he paraphrases Psalms 24, as in the Descensus:

He is a kyng of vertues clere.  
 A! lorde, mekill of myght,  
 And stronge in ilke a stoure,  
 In batailes ferse to fight,  
 And worthy to wynne honnoure.

(York, ll. 128-132)

Unlike in many other versions, Satan remains unaffected by David's statements, and scoffs at the idea of Christ's having any honor. He believes Christ is a mere man who is to become his thrall, because to be a lord a man must have owned propoerty while on earth, but Christ "hadde never 3it herberowe, house, ne halle" (York, l. 137). The scene progresses in the accepted manner except that the bulk of the action, usually assigned to only Satan and Hell, is presented by Ribald, Belial, Satan, and Beelzebub. Ribald

tells Satan that the devils are frightened for "hydously  
I herde hym calle" (York, l. 138). Belial then gives the  
command to "spere oure 3ates" with all haste, assigns more  
men to watch the walls, and if He call or cry

To make vs more debate,  
Lay on hym þan hardely,  
And garre hym gang his gate.

(York, ll. 141-144)

Belial's command accents the confusion and ignorance found  
in Hell, for he expects a physical confrontation and  
battle with Christ. Unlike in the Gospel of Nicodemus  
where only Satan is commanded to go fight with the Lord,  
all the legions of Hell prepare to subdue the approaching  
Savior. In later versions of the Harrowing of Hell, the  
idea of preparing for war against Christ is expanded even  
farther, and the defenders include archers, men armed with  
stones, and forces prepared to pour oil on Jesus.

When Belial identifies Christ as, "þe Jewe þat Judas  
solde For to be dede, þis othir daye" (York, ll. 147-148),  
Satan laments the coming of Christ, for He is always a  
troublemaker; Satan commands his legions to see that Christ  
does not enter Hell because He will be hard to hold as a  
captive. Beelzebub agrees and, in the traditional words  
of Hell, says that He will not go away, rather He prepares  
to destroy Hell. Satan defies him and says that Christ  
will not succeed in His venture to destroy Hell.

The idea of trickery and guile is presented in Satan's speech, but, ironically, his statements refer to Jesus' guile, rather than to his own. The Devil states that he knows all of Christ's tricks, for He deals only "with gaudis and with gilery." Satan continues to say that because of this trickery, Christ was caused to be put to death. Because Christ, by the use of tricks, made Lazarus to rise from the grave, Satan "gaffe to þe Jewes counsaile, þat þei schulde alway garre hym dye" (York, ll. 163-164). Satan entered Judas, "þat forwarde to fulfille" (York, l. 166), and he concludes that because of His use of trickery, Christ was killed and must have as His reward eternal life in Hell. The idea of "the guiler beguiled" is stated here, as in every version of the descent, but the York playwright assigns the role and downfall of the guiler to Christ at this point rather than to Satan. Very likely he did this to accent the ignorance and arrogance of Satan, and to prepare for the complete devastation of the misguided fiend.

Satan's statement encourages the demons to be brave and have confidence in their master. Instead of being doubtful of Satan's power as was Hell after the disclosure of Christ's identity, Beelzebub feels that if Satan could cause the Jews to kill Jesus, Satan himself can now conquer Jesus. He states also that if Jesus does "depriue

vs of oure praye, We will 3e witte whanne þei are wente" (York, ll. 175-176). He feels that though Christ may take away the souls, Satan has the power to regain them. Satan is reassured of his power, and his confidence is bolstered by the words of Beelzebub; he feels that he is a match for Christ. He tells his legions to "be noȝt abashed", but be ready to strike Christ down. Satan remains confident and brave until Christ appears; then, Satan cowers in fear, and he is exposed as a grovelling, powerless coward.

The scene in the York "Harrowing of Hell" which includes the second command of Christ and His entry into Hell is very traditionally presented. Hell is destroyed, the chaos in Hades reaches a peak, and the devils recriminate one another for the downfall of Hell. In this version of the Harrowing of Hell, unlike the scene in other descent episodes, the command and entry of Christ is climactic and artistically and realistically presented. Christ states for the second time

Principes, portas tollite,  
 Vndo youre ȝatis, ȝe princis of pryde,  
Et introibit rex glorie,  
 þe kyng of blisse comes in þis tyde.

(York, ll. 181-184).

He then enters Hades, and Satan bewails this event because he finally realizes who Christ is and also how powerful He is. In the York play, as in almost every other rendition of the descent, David appears just before Christ shatters the gates of Hell to tell Satan that he had foretold that

the gates would be broken down and the works of evil destroyed:

þat may þou in my sawter see  
 For þat poynte of prophicie.  
 I saide þat he schuld breke  
 Youre barres and bandis by name,  
 And on youre werkis take wreke,  
 Nowe schalle 3e see þe same.

(York, ll. 187-192)

Immediately following David's speech, Christ commands for the third time, "Opyne vppe and latte my pepul passe" (York, l. 194). The gates of Hell are shattered, and Hades is thrown open. Once again the York playwright presents a scene which echoes the questioning speech between Satan and Hell in the Gospel of Nicodemus II. Ribald is seized with fear and cries out that the defense of Hades is broken and the bands of brass are shattered. Beelzebub shouts that Limbo is lost, and this loss is the worst thing that ever happened in Hell. However, Satan shifts from fear to arrogance and defiance, and commands that

If he made maistries more,  
 Do dyngge þat dastard doune,  
 And sette hym sadde and sore.

(York, ll. 202-204)

To this Beelzebub replies in the same manner as Hell:

3a, sette hym sore, þat is sone saide,  
 But come þi selffe and serue hym soo,  
 We may not bide his bittir braide,  
 He wille vs marre, and we wer moo.

(York, ll. 205-208)

Since his legions have deserted him, Satan rebukes them and prepares to meet Christ in a physical confrontation.

The idea of Satan's arming himself for battle is presented elsewhere in the descensus tradition, but never as clearly as in the York "Harrowing of Hell." The planned physical battle appears in later works which present the descent; however, it is important to note that in no version of the Harrowing of Hell is there an actual physical fight. The question game and the ensuing verbal confrontation between the rulers of Hell and Jesus is the only battle which appears in the descent, and it is also found in the York play. Satan asks Christ by what power and for what purpose He is in Hades: "What maistries makes þou here?" (York, l. 216) Christ answers with His traditional reply that He only wants His people; He tells Satan that even though the souls have remained in Hell as thralls to the Devil and Death, man is not doomed to remain in Hades forever; they have only been temporary wards for the devil:

Im make no maistries but for myne,  
 þame wolle I saue, I telle þe nowe,  
 þou hadde no poure þame to pyne,  
 But as my prisonne for þer prowē.  
 Here haue þei soiornd, noght as thyne,  
 But in thy warde, þou wote wele howe.

(York, ll. 217-222)

Satan answers Christ's statement by advocating that by right the souls belong in Hell, and Christ may not approach them at this time or ever. However, because the souls have

only been temporary wards in Hell, Christ, representing His Father, will take the prophets and patriarchs from pain into mirth, because God has ordained this time for the delivery of the captives.

After Christ's speech, the doctrine of Incarnation is presented in the York "Harrowing of Hell" perhaps clearer than in any other previous descent episode. Satan has believed that Christ was no special person, and had no extraordinary power; he parleys with Christ about His background:

Thy fadir knewe I wele be sight,  
 He was a write his mette to wynne,  
 And Marie me menys þi modir hight,  
 þe vttiremeste ende of all þi kynne.  
 Who made þe be so mekill of myght?

(York, ll. 229-233)

This statement is in accord with the early Christian belief that part of God's plan to destroy Hell and release the souls was to send His son, born of lowly, ordinary parents, in order to deceive Satan completely. Christ argues with Satan and makes an effort to substantiate His claim to power, and to show Satan how foolish he is and how futile are his efforts to resist divine power:

þou wikid feende, latte be thy dynne,  
 Mi Fadir wonnys in heuen on hight,  
 With blisse þat schall neuere blynne.  
 I am his awne sone,  
 His forward to fulfille.  
 And same ay schall we wonne,  
 And sundir whan we wolle.

(York, ll. 234-240)



The deception of Satan has been successful for he does not believe that God's son would be satisfied to live a simple life of sorrow and poverty. In His following statement, Christ confirms the plan to deceive Satan. He states that He lived in sorrow in order to save man's soul, and to confound Satan and make him insane. His godhead was hidden in His birth to an earthly woman, so that neither Satan nor any of his legions would know of His divinity:

þat was for hartely loue I hadde  
 Vnto mannis soule it for to saue;  
 And for to make þe mased and madde,  
 And by þat resoune þus dewly to haue,  
 Mi godhede here I hidde  
 In Marie modir myne,  
 For it schulde noȝt be kidde,  
 To þe nor to none of thyne.

(York, ll. 245-252)

The descensus tradition is not complete in any work unless Satan and Christ argue about reason and right when the salvation of the saints is concerned. Rarely is the essential argument changed, but the tone and content vary in every presentation. In the York "Harrowing of Hell", Satan reproaches Christ for having the audacity to try to save the captives. He shows his remarkable ability to use the scriptures for his own benefit, and to present logically his somewhat questionable reason. He tells Christ that if He tries to free the inhabitants of Hell, He will be working against the orders of God, His Father. God sentenced mankind to "þe myre" because they broke "his bidding"; however, Satan delightfully admits that they broke

the bidding "at my desire." Because of the insurrection, Got "fro paradise he putte þame doune In helle here to have þer hyre" (York, ll. 259-260). He continues, maintaining his good reason, in saying that Christ Himself has taught "al men emong, To do resoune and right" (York, ll. 262-263); therefore, he concludes that Christ is working in contradiction to everything He professes. Satan is saying that Christ does wrong to teach men to act with reason and right when they are already condemned to Hell because of Adam's sin. He also believes that Jesus is wrong in trying to gain what another man has rightfully won.

Christ's rebuttal to Satan's logic is markedly different from that found in any other version of the descent. Christ does not mention that what is won by trickery is easily lost, nor that the guiler is often beguiled;<sup>64</sup> He does not speak of the abomination Satan committed by gaining mankind by the use of the tree of knowledge.<sup>65</sup> The relationship between the loss of man by the tree of transgression and his salvation by the tree of the cross is omitted.<sup>66</sup> Also, the concept of overwhelming Hades--saving the souls lost by the tree, the devil, and death through the destruction of the devil and death by the tree--is lacking from Christ's argument.<sup>67</sup> Instead, Christ states that He works no wrong by freeing His people from Hell, as Satan will soon see; but, He uses as His main argument the prophecies of the patriarchs which foretold His

death, descent into Hell, and the salvation granted to the souls in Hell. He will work as the prophecies stated, and they will be fulfilled, for having bought the souls with sorrow, He will take them to paradise.

Mi prophetis playnly prechid it,  
 All þis note þat nowe be-gynne.  
 þai saide þat I schulde be obitte,  
 To hell þat I schulde entre in,  
 And saue me seruauntis fro þat pitte,  
 Wher dampned saulis schall sitte for synne.  
 And ilke trewe prophettis tale  
 Muste be fulfilled in mee,  
 I haue þame broughte with bale,  
 And in þlisse schal þei be.

(York, ll. 267-276)

As the battle of reason and right continues, Satan shows his ability to use scripture to further his own purpose. This skill of Satan is a new touch to the descensus tradition and is used in some of the other plays. The addition is especially noticeable in Piers Plowman, for Satan uses the same scriptures as those in the York play for the same purpose. In Satan's speech, he tells Christ that if He insists on breaking the laws with such reason, He will either be convicted of His injustice or be divided from those He draws near Him; in fact, the very souls He plans to save will turn against Him. Satan also says emphatically that no one in Hell shall be removed; he substantiates his assertion by quoting Solomon<sup>68</sup> and Job:

Salamon saide in his sawes,  
 þat whoso enteres helle withynne,  
 Shall neuer come oute, þus clerkis knawes,--

. . . . .

Job, þi seruaunte also,  
 þus in his tyme gune telle,  
 þat nowthir frende nor foe  
 Shulde fynde reles in helle.  
 (York, ll. 281-283: 285-288)

The basis of the scriptures is found in Job 7:9: "Sic qui descenderit ad infernos, non ascendit." Thus having provided such proof, Satan tells Christ to "leue þi dynne" (York, l. 284).

As innovative to the descensus tradition as Satan's use of scripture is the answer which Christ makes, and the way it is made. He acknowledges that Satan is correct in quoting Job's scripture, but Christ interprets the message found therein somewhat differently. As adroitly as Satan used scripture to his advantage, Christ also uses scripture to further His cause: to condemn Satan to the eternal torments of Hades. Christ tells the Devil that the scripture pertains only to him, that he will never find release in Hell; his sorrows shall never cease; however, the captive souls will pass forth from Hell, leaving Satan to fulfill their woe:

He saide full soth, þat schall þou see,  
 þat in helle may be no reles,  
 But of þat place þan preched he,  
 Where synffull care schall euere encrees,  
 And in þat bale ay schall þou be,  
 Whare sorowes sere schall neuer sesse,  
 And for my folke þer fro wer free,  
 Nowe schall þei passe to þe place of pees.  
 þai were here with my wille,  
 And so schall þei fourth wende,

And þi selue schall fulfille,  
þer wooe with-outen ende.

(York, ll. 289-300)

At this point, the discrepancy concerning the souls to be released is presented again. In the earlier Harrowing of Hell works, Christ is somewhat vague as to whether all the captives in Hell will be saved or only a select few, mainly the prophets and patriarchs. In the York "Harrowing of Hell," Satan again implores Christ to put a limit to His harm and "some mesure with malice to melle" (York, l. 302); he is delighted to find that Christ intends to leave some souls in Hell

. . . þou sais all schall noȝt gang,  
But some schalle alway with vs dwelle.

(York, ll. 303-304)

Christ confirms Satan's statement, and names explicitly those who will and will not be taken from Hell:

ȝaa, witte þou wele, ellis were it wrang,  
Als cursed Cayme þat slewe Abell,  
And all þat hastis hem selue to hange,  
Als Judas and Archedefell,  
Datan and Abiron,  
And alle of þare assente,  
Als tyrantis euerilkone  
þat me and myne turmente.  
And all þat liste noght to lere my lawe,  
þat I haue lefte in lande nowe newe,  
þat is my comyng for to knawe,  
And to my sacramente pursewe.  
Mi dede, my rysing, rede be rawe,  
Who will noght trowe þei are noght trewe,  
Vnto my dome I schall þame drawe,  
And juge þame worse þanne any Jewe.  
And all þat likis to leere  
My lawe and leue þer bye,

Shall neuere haue harmes heere,  
But welthe as is worthy.

(York, ll. 305-324).

Satan is pleased with the bargain that he has been given. He feels that he has gained the upper hand over Christ and that the bargain is "playnly for oure prow" (York, l. 326). Satan becomes overconfident and begins to scheme about how he may re-populate Hades. As in the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell and contemporary descent stories, Satan boasts to Christ that soon he will have more men in Hell than Christ has in Heaven; he intends to walk east and west and make men work badly and sinfully. In turn, Satan's boast prompts his binding:

Naye, feende, þou schall be feste,  
þat þou schalte flitte not ferre.

(York, ll. 335-336)

In spite of his protests, Satan is bound by Michael and commanded to "go doune, In-to thy selle where þou schalte sitte" (York, ll. 341-342). As he sinks into the pit, defeated and "woode oute of my witte," Beelzebub makes the statement, in other versions attributed to Hell, advocating retribution and eternal torment:

Sattan, þis saide we are,  
Nowe schall þou fele þi fitte.

(York, ll. 345-346)

In this scene, the York playwright displays his remarkable talent by unifying all the preceding actions and ideas of the play. Christ's power was hidden from

Satan and the legions of Death by His Incarnation. Through the guise of a man, Christ intended to confuse Satan, drive him insane, and ultimately defeat him. When Christ's power is finally revealed, the desired results are attained: Satan is confused, defeated, bound and driven insane, and he must now suffer the torment he imparted to others. The unification was so masterfully contrived and presented that the York author influenced subsequent drama.

The final scene of the York "Harrowing of Hell" is probably one of the most traditional portions of the entire drama. A select group of prophets and patriarchs rejoice in the defeat of Satan and the coming of salvation. The characters chosen to laud Jesus in the York drama are Adam, Eve, John the Baptist, and David. The praises they speak are as traditional as the characters themselves: Adam praises the might and beneficence of Christ for granting His mercy to the captives held so long in the dark; Eve states that man deserved to suffer, but instead was made better by the mercy and power of the Lord. John the Baptist thanks Jesus for letting him be the messenger and preparing the souls in Hell for salvation; he also states that through Christ's descent into Hell all prophecies have come true. David, the final figure to appear, repeats a plea in which he asks the Lord not to leave his soul in the depths of Hell where only damned souls, sorrow, and filth are found. He echoes Psalms 16:10:

Ne derelinquas, domine,  
Animam meam [in] inferno.

(York, ll. 374-375).

Christ then draws Adam and all His friends close and tells Michael to deliver them into Paradise. Jesus bestows the blessing of bliss "with-uten ende" upon the saints, and returns to His grave so that He might be resurrected as God ordained. As the drama ends, Adam asks the newly delivered band "for solas . . . [to] syng, Laus tibi cum gloria" (York, ll. 407-408).

The York "Harrowing of Hell" is a very significant link in studying the tradition of Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell. The foundation for the drama is the Descensus found in the Gospel of Nicodemus; however, the York playwright was a masterful creator and assimilator. He presented innovations in his drama that became established parts of the tradition. Because of the nature of drama itself, it was necessary for him to create additional characters and to develop these characters more fully. Through the numerous characters he increased the humor and intensified the action of the play. The additional dialogue worked as a device to create suspense and to prepare the audience for the very powerful, moving scenes when Christ breaks the gates of Hell, binds Satan, and takes the souls from pain to bliss. The York "Harrowing of Hell" is significant both in its treatment of tradition and in its



innovations as a major influence on medieval literature, especially drama, where an account of the descent is found. It provides the pattern used extensively in the other three Harrowing of Hell plays of the mystery cycles. When considered from all the points of view of age, extent, quality, and influence, the York account of the descent is the most important of the English cycles.

Another great cycle of mystery plays is the Towneley, also known as the Wakefield cycle. This cycle, consisting of thirty-two pageants, shows strong similarities to the York plays, and in some instances, there is extensive material in the Towneley plays which appears to have been taken directly from the York. In the cycle is treated a range of religiously oriented subjects, similar to those in the York, which show the influence of Biblical scripture, the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, Cursor Mundi, and the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell.<sup>69</sup> The plays are believed to have been written between 1380 and 1410.<sup>70</sup>

The Towneley "Harrowing of Hell" added very little to the descensus tradition because it is so similar to the York. The word choice is essentially the same and the action in the drama and the presentation of the play itself differ only slightly. The characters in the plays do not vary at all, except that the speeches attributed to the characters differ somewhat in the Towneley play, especially the speeches given by the devils. Also, the dialogue in

the Towneley play is expanded, at certain times, in order to develop the characters, create more suspense, accent climactic scenes, and create realism. One difference between the two plays is the final line found in each.

In the York "Harrowing of Hell," the saints sing, Laus tibi cum gloria; in the Towneley, they sing the Te deum laudamus.

The message in both the songs is essentially the same and traditional because every descent story ends with praises to God; however, the Te Deum became the song which was established as the song of praise in the descent tradition.

Another significant difference between the two plays occurs after David's speech in the closing scene; in this instance, the York play is more closely linked to the Gospel of Nicodemus II and the descensus tradition as a whole. The reason is that the York play includes two speeches by Adam which begin the songs of praise. In the Towneley, the first speech is attributed to Moses, the second, to Isaiah. Also, in the York play, like the Gospel of Nicodemus II, Christ draws the prophets and patriarchs to Him, and upon the request of Michael, blesses the crowd of released souls. The differences between the two plays are slight, but are somewhat significant because both the York and the Towneley, through the York, influenced to a great extent the other cycle plays and later descensus episodes.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE LUDUS COVENTRIAE AND CHESTER MYSTERY PLAYS

Among the four mystery play cycles, the Ludus Coventriae has generally been considered the one most inferior in literary merit. It seems to lack the development, appeal, and emotion that is present in the other cycles. In the opinion of its editor, K. S. Block, it does not project the genuine feeling of the York cycle, nor does it compare with the pathos of the Chester cycle or the humor of some of the Towneley plays.<sup>71</sup> The Ludus Coventriae cycle, consisting of forty-two plays, is believed to have been composed in the first half of the fifteenth century.<sup>72</sup> Of the four extant cycles of mystery plays, the Ludus Coventriae is the one most closely related to liturgical drama and has a higher religious tone.<sup>73</sup> Like the other cycle plays, it shows a wide range of influences, for John E. Wells notes a significant influence of the "spurious gospels of the New Testament Apocrypha," the Vulgate, the liturgy, hymns, paraphrases of scripture, and, especially in "The Descent into Hell" and "The Harrowing of Hell," the reliance on the Gospel of Nicodemus II.<sup>74</sup> However, though the Ludus Coventriae plays and the other cycles show many common influences, it exhibits few

clear signs of borrowing from other extant cycles, and only slight resemblances to the York or Towneley.

The presentation of the descensus in Ludus Coventriae is rather ineffective. The essence of the tradition is evident in the play, but because of its unusual arrangement and lack of development, the rendition of the descent lacks the appeal and power found in the other versions of the Harrowing of Hell. Rosemary Woolf thinks that the treatment of the Harrowing of Hell in the Ludus Coventriae is typical of the daring experimentation of the dramatist, but is not dramatically successful.<sup>75</sup> The presentation of the descensus in the Ludus Coventriae is composed of two parts; the first, "The Descent into Hell" immediately follows "The Crucifixion." Approximately three hundred lines later, after "The Burial" and "The Guarding of the Sepulchre," "The Harrowing of Hell" is presented, immediately preceding "The Resurrection." This dramatic arrangement shows a clumsiness which is rare in the mystery cycles because it prevents the inclusion of the prophets' speeches concerning the light approaching Hell and the coming of the Savior. With that omission the episode presenting the prophets' songs of praise loses its emotional impact and seems to be merely a formal tribute to Christ, rather than a display of joy.<sup>76</sup>

In its beginning, the Ludus Coventriae "Harrowing of Hell" resembles both the York play and the thirteenth

century Harrowing of Hell because of the statement of intention which Christ presents. However, the tone is more religious than that in the other works. The Lord's lengthy dramatic monologue is used effectively in lieu of the speculations of the prophets in Hell. Christ Himself calls on all mankind to lift up their hearts and feel all the joy that can be afforded to a man's soul which is locked in Hell. In His continuing speech, He elucidates His purpose, which is to fulfill the ordinance of God and to complete the function of both His sojourn on earth and His death: to bring salvation to man. In His statement Christ echoes the idea presented on the cross that today He would be in Paradise, instead of pain. This speech serves the purpose of the light which precedes Christ to Hell and the speeches of the prophets and patriarchs in other works. In this play, however, neither the light nor Christ's voice precedes His appearance in Hades. This point is interesting to note, for among the works studied here, only in the Ludus Coventriae are both signs omitted.

The second portion of Christ's speech is one which truly accents the ecclesiastical tone of the play. It is interesting because it includes portions of speeches traditionally attributed to David, or Satan, or presented by a narrator:

I am þe sowle of cryst jhesu  
 þe which is kynge of all vertu  
 my body is ded þe jewys it slew  
           þat hangyth 3itt on þe rode  
 rent and torn all bloody red  
 ffor mannys sake my body is deed  
 ffor mannys helpe my body is bred  
           And sowle drynk my bodyes blode.<sup>77</sup>

He states that He is the king of all virtue, an idea usually presented by David; only in the Ludus Coventriae does Christ Himself say He is the king of virtue. Christ also says that He was killed by the Jews, and although this statement is in other works attributed to Satan, the condemnatory feeling toward the Jews and the intense suffering are clearly presented because the Lord makes the statement. The picture of Christ being still on the cross and His body being "rent and torn for mannys sake" accents further the suffering of the Lord and the ultimate display of love and charity which Christ gave to man. The liturgical tone is clearly presented in the last lines for they refer directly to the Eucharist, which is a display of Christ's unequalled love for man and also gives man the opportunity to show his respect and love for and dependance on Christ. It is also, like the blessed thief's cross, to be a constant reminder to man of Christ's sacrifice for his sake.

The notion of Christ's body remaining in the grave while His soul is in Hell is presented clearly again in Christ's last speech before entering Hades. He states that

though He has been slain and is destined to remain in the grave until His resurrection on the third day, He will now go to Hell to "fetch from the fiend" all His friends that dwell within. However, the "friends" are not named; thus questions of who will be saved remains unsolved:

and feche from þe fendys felle  
 all my frendys þat þer-in dwelle  
                   to blysse þat lestyth ay.

(Ludus Coventriae, ll. 991-993)

Christ's appearance at the gates of Hell and His command for Satan to "open up" are perhaps less inspiring in the Ludus Coventriae than in any other work in this survey of the descensus tradition. The tone is flat, there is little excitement, and almost no action found in the scene. Christ comes to "helle gatys" and delivers the traditional command:

Attollite portas principes vestras et eleuamini  
portae eternales et introibit rex glorie.

However, the command seems to lack any emotion or force because of the overall tone of the scene. Christ again delivers His order, but the second time in English. The repeated command presents more directness and a more forceful quality, but one inferior to similar scenes in other works. In the interlude, Christ reaffirms His intentions and purpose in coming to Hell, and in His speech, only a slight amount of hostility and a subdued tone of damnation is directed toward Satan:

here comyth now þe kyng of glorie  
                   these gatys for to breke  
 3e develys þat arn here with-inne  
 helle gatys 3e xal vn-pynne  
 I xal delyvere mannys kynne  
                   ffrom wo I wole hem wreke.

(Ludus Coventriae, ll. 996-100)

Satan's reply to the statement of Jesus is also unlike any other found in the descensus tradition. It contains no argument, no doubting of Christ's divinity, and no resistance to Christ's command or entrance. After a minor show of despair following the Savior's provocation, "Alas Alas out and harrow," (Ludus Coventriae, l. 1003), Satan resigns himself completely to Christ. He acknowledges that Christ is Lord and that nothing can stand against Him. Satan's speech and character are quite out of the ordinary, in respect to the traditional presentation of the devil. His speech is devoid of any argument, buffoonery, or humor, and his character is lifeless and uninteresting.

The breaking of the gates of Hell in Ludus Coventriae is as anticlimactic as the speeches which precede it. However, the scene in which Christ shatters the gates also contains one of the strongest affirmations of the power of the godhead found in this drama. The Savior states that the strong powers of Hell are weak and will not stand against the power of the "kyng of glorie." Therefore, He throws down the dark doors of death in order that His "fayr



ffrendys" will know that Christ has come, and with Him, salvation.

A<sub>3</sub>ens me it wore but wast  
 to holdyn or to stondyn fast  
 helle logge may not last  
                   A<sub>3</sub>ens ' þe kynge of glorye  
 þi derke dore down I throwe  
 My fayr ffrendys now wele I knowe  
 I xal hem brynge reknyd be rowe  
                   Out of here purcatorye.

(Ludus Coventriae, ll. 1010-1017).

With this speech, the first portion of the Ludus Coventriae "Harrowing of Hell" concludes. It differs radically from other versions of the Harrowing of Hell in many respects. It does not have the conversations of the patriarchs and prophets regarding the glorious gleam of light or the voice heard outside of Hell. Also, the interesting, humorous encounter between Satan and Hell is omitted; instead, the contents of their conversation are partially presented in Christ's statement of intention. The character of Satan himself lacks development in the "Descent into Hell", thus depriving this portion of the descensus of much humor and appeal found in many other versions of the Harrowing of Hell. Because of these deficiencies, the primary part of the descent in the Ludus Coventriae appears underdeveloped and dramatically inferior. In addition, it does nothing to enhance the actual Harrowing of Hell found in this cycle. Much action is left out which is necessary for making the

second portion of the descent as powerful an event as it ordinarily appears in tradition.

The actual "Harrowing of Hell" in the Ludus Coventriae occurs more than three hundred lines after Christ's appearance in Hades. The action found between the "Descent into Hell" and "The Harrowing of Hell" contains "The Burial" and "The Guarding of the Sepulchre." It would seem that the large division between the two parts of the descensus would render ineffective the continuity and connection of the portions, and in part, this is the case. However, much of the gap is filled with essentially the same information which is presented in the descent tradition: the affirmation of Christ's divine nature; the notion that only Christ can save man because of His unsullied nature; the doctrine of Incarnation; and the exaltation of Christ.

"The Harrowing of Hell" begins with Christ beckoning Adam, Eve, and all His friends to come forth and be led to Paradise and bliss. He also states, for the first time, that Satan is to be bound in woe. The contents of His speech are conventional, but they are rarely presented altogether in the same speech. In most instances, the latter part of the speech appears long before the prophets and patriarchs are drawn to Christ, and only immediately before the exodus from Hell does Christ bring His "frendys" to Him.

The speeches of praise which a select group of prophets and patriarchs present are ecclesiastical in tone and express some of the basic doctrines of the church. Among the chosen who exalt the Lord for deliverance are Adam, Eve, John the Baptist, and Abraham. In their speeches, the influence of tradition is apparent, not only because of the speakers, but also because of content. Adam, the traditional first speaker, thanks the Lord for forgiving him his "grett trespace." He then makes statements concerning the doctrine of original sin, the Virgin birth, Christ's incarnation, and man's atonement with God, by telling the abbreviated story of man's being "fforlorn" through sin and saved by the Lord's great sacrifice:

I thanke þe lord of þi grett grace  
 that now is for-<sub>3</sub>ovyn by grett trespace  
 now xal we dwellyn in blysfyl place  
 In joye and endeles myrthe  
 Thorwe my synne man was fforlorn  
 and man to saue þou wore all torn  
 and of a mayd in bedlem born  
 þat evyr blyssed be þi byrthe.

(Ludus Coventriae, ll. 1352-1359)

Eve next expresses her praises. Unlike her speeches in other works, she does not tell the Lord how she and Adam have suffered, nor why they should be saved. Instead she is much more humble and concerned with the troubles that Christ has undergone in order to afford salvation to the souls. She is much aware of the sacrifice Christ has made on the cross and also of His boundless mercy. Eve's speech expresses a greater amount of praise than is found

in the York and Towneley plays, and also a more sincere, religious tone.

The delivery of John is one of the most traditional speeches in the Ludus Coventriae "Harrowing of Hell." Whenever his praise appears in the descent tradition, it varies little. John states that he is Christ's cousin who baptized Him in the Jordan River, and because of this baptism, grace will now be given to man. The ecclesiastic tone is apparent in John's speech of praise, because the souls in Hell are afforded the opportunity for redemption through baptism just as every man is given the chance for salvation through this holy sacrament. Unlike that in some previous versions of the Harrowing of Hell, John's speech in this work seems to be more sincere because he pleads for salvation for all men instead of just himself.

Abraham's speech seems to be a direct plea for man's salvation, rather than a song of praise. As in the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell, he uses his status as "fadyr trowe þat reyned after noes flowe" as the basis of his appeal. He, like Adam, tells of man's fall to "care" because of the "sory synne" of Adam, and man's being redeemed because Christ "with his blood oure bonde hath brokyn helle logge lyth unlokyn Ffro fylth with frende we fare" (Ludus Coventriae, ll. 1381-1383).

The finale of the Ludus Coventriae "Harrowing of Hell" is also traditional in its presentation and content.

Christ states that since His friends have been taken from "grevance," He will now bind the devil. The notion of the guiler beguiled is found at this point, but Christ alludes to the serpent in the tree of knowledge, rather than the tree itself, as the medium of trickery:

As wyckyd werme þou gunne Apere  
to tray my chylderyn þat were so dere

(Ludus Coventriae, ll. 1388-1389).

The Lord says that He will keep all the men He has bought with His blood, and He condemns Satan to eternal bondage and torment. He also says that Satan will suffer all the retribution which he deserves; he will not be able to roam about the land in search of souls, for he will be in Hell, never to come out:

þerfore traytour heuer-more here  
newe peynes þou xact evyr ffynde.

Thorwe blood I took of mannys kynde  
Ffals devyl I here þe bynde  
In endles sorwe I þe synde  
þer-in evyr-more to dwelle  
now þou art bownde þou mayst not fle  
Ffor þin envyous cruelte  
In endeles dampnacion xalt þou be  
And nevyr comyn out of helle

(Ludus Coventriae, ll. 1390-1399).

This speech embodies all the condemnations delivered by Hell and Christ to Satan in other versions of the Harrowing of Hell: Satan has been beguiled through his own trickery; he will no longer have freedom of movement because of his bondage; Satan has lost forever the souls bought by Christ's blood; and he will feel the eternal torments of retribution.

As Satan sinks into the hell-pit, he laments his doom and feels that all his joy is gone. At this point, his character shows more feeling, but still lacks the degree of pathetic humor often found in the descensus tradition. With the devil having been bound, Christ takes leave of the prophets and patriarchs to re-enter His body, which the "jewys nevyr so wode" have crucified and entombed, so that it might "a-ryse both flesch and blode" (Ludus Coventriae, l. 1414).

The departure of Christ to His body marks the end of the Ludus Coventriae "Harrowing of Hell." It is, in fact, one of the most underdeveloped versions of the descent, and it could be declared a dramatic failure. Its characters lack development and show scarcely any emotion. There is also a great lack of action and a slowness of movement that is rarely found in any version of Christ's Descent into Hell. However, the descensus tradition is infused in the Ludus Coventriae "Harrowing of Hell," and this fact cannot be denied. The important elements of the descent notion are present: the great sacrifice Christ made for man; the journey of Christ to break the gates of Hell; the Attollite portas command delivered by the King of Glory; the futility of Satan's resistance to the Lord; Satan's affirmation of Christ's omnipotence; the praise of the saints; the notion of the guiler beguiled; the idea of the tree of knowledge being Satan's downfall; the binding

of Satan; and the deliverance of the souls in Hell. The presence of so many characteristics proves that, though the Ludus Coventriae playwright did not present these aspects of the descensus tradition as well as other writers, he was certainly familiar with the Harrowing of Hell tradition itself.

One additional element found in the Ludus Coventriae "Harrowing of Hell" indicates the influence of the descensus tradition found in the play.

harde gatys haue I gon  
 And peynes sofryd many on  
 Stomblyd at stake and at stone  
 ny<sub>3</sub> thre and thretty <sub>3</sub>ere  
 I lyght out of my faderys trone  
 ffor to Amende mannys mone  
 my flesch was betyn to þe bon  
 my blood I bledde chere.

Ffor mannys laue I tholyd dede.

(Ludus Coventriae, ll. 1416-1424).

This speech by Christ which appears at the beginning of "The Resurrection" in Ludus Coventriae contains almost exactly the same information found in Christ's first speech in the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell, the York play, and the Towneley version of the descent. Christ states that He has suffered many pains for thirty-three years in order to fulfill God's plan and bring man from Hell. He has been beaten, stoned, made to bleed upon the cross, and killed for man's love. The similarities among the works are too great to be discounted, for the Ludus

Coventriae "Harrowing of Hell" and the thirteenth century

Harrowing of Hell even begins with the same words:

Hard gates have y gon  
& suffred pines mani on.

(Harrowing of Hell, Auchinleck 11, 43-44)

The last cycle of mystery plays which contains a version of the Harrowing of Hell is the Chester cycle. As a group they have more of a narrative rather than a dramatic texture.<sup>78</sup> They are more serious and religious in tone than the other cycles, for they display a strong liturgical influence.<sup>79</sup> The cycle contains a diversified quality that shows the influence of many varied works, both Latin and English, such as the Vulgate, the Legenda Aurea, Peter Comestor's Historia Scholastica, the apocryphal gospels, and religious hymns and legends. However, in dealing with the seventeenth play of the cycle, de Descensu Christi ad Inferos, it is important to note that the Chester "Harrowing of Hell" keeps closer to the design of the Gospel of Nicodemus II than any of the other mystery cycle plays.<sup>80</sup>

The earliest references to the Chester plays appear in 1463 and 1471; however, the cycle is referred to as being old and established. It is possible that the plays originated as early as 1340 or 1350. They continued to be performed until the very late sixteenth century, and at that time were considered "objects of antiquarian interest."<sup>81</sup>



The Chester "Harrowing of Hell" begins in a manner unlike any other of the descensus plays. There is no prologue, no statement of intention or purpose by Christ, or presentation of objectives by the author. Instead, the drama begins with the patriarchs rejoicing because they have seen a great light coming to Hell. The souls who speak and the speeches themselves are almost exactly the same as found in the Gospel of Nicodemus II. The speeches are often expanded to strengthen the drama, but they remain essentially the same. Adam begins his speech by echoing his words found in the Descensus praising the Lord as the "Author" of the light which appears in Hell. It is the sign which the Lord has promised would save the "folke" in Hell from the "Devill." Adam's speech, though it maintains the initial laudatory tone, is expanded and includes some statements which he presents in other works after he has been drawn to the bosom of the Lord. He says that he was the first man, made of clay, who was responsible for the damnation of all men; but now the Son of man comes with the power of the Holy Spirit to redeem all men.

Isaiah's speech identically parallels his traditional speech found in the Gospel of Nicodemus: this is the light which "comes from gods sonne almight" as he prophesied while living. His prophecy has been fulfilled, for indeed, populus qui ambulabat in tenebris vidit lucem magnam (Isaiah

9:2). The discourse of Simeon which follows also closely resembles his speech in the Descensus, and in the tradition. After his birth, the child was brought to him in the temple, and his eyes beheld the salvation of man; therefore, he asked: Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine, Secundum verbum tuum in pace (Luke 2:29). Simeon now affirms that the light comes from God, for,

. . . he had ordayned for mans heale,  
ioy to the people of Israell,  
nowe is it wonnen, that<sup>82</sup> ilk weale,  
to vs, withouten weene.

John's speech confirms that the light represents the advent of a man sent by God. He preceded Christ on earth to prepare man for salvation; he baptized Jesus "in flood Iordan"; now, he has come to Hades to tell the souls

. . . that thou [Christ] common was  
mankynd of Bale to bringe.

(Chester, ll. 63-64)

John concludes his traditional speech by telling the prophets and patriarchs that Christ is at hand, coming to the souls who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. The Lord is coming to take away the sins of the world: Ecce agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata mundi.

The account of Seth's journey to Paradise for the oil of mercy is an integral part of the descensus tradition because it is used as the final, unquestionable affirmation of the light and Christ's purpose in Hell. Though the story

appears only occasionally in versions of Christ's descent into Hell, it is presented in the Chester "Harrowing of Hell." Seth tells the group of souls that after having gone to procure the oil of the tree of mercy for his ailing father, Adam, he meets Michael at the gates of Paradise. Michael tells him that the oil of mercy cannot be given to man, in spite of his works, weeping, or prayers, until "fyve Thousand years were gone, and five hundreth eeke" (ll. 79-80), when the Son of God comes to redeem the damned.

The laudatory speech of David which appears in the Chester "Harrowing of Hell" does not appear at this point in the Gospel of Nicodemus II or any of the other cycle plays. However, it is appropriate that David, the Psalmist, should receive the honor of presenting the last of the initial speeches of praise. He says nothing which confirms the meaning of the light, but he praises God and Christ, and hopes that the time of man's deliverance from Hell has come:

A! high god and king of blisse,  
 worshiped be thy name, iwis!  
 I hope that tyme now come [n] is  
 to deliuer vs of danger.  
 Come, lord! come to Hell everychon,  
 for those years are fully gone  
 with mankind first came heare.

(Chester, ll. 81-88)

The traditional material found in the speeches of praise is apparent because of the undeniable parallelism

between the Chester play and the Descensus. Other evidence of the Chester playwright's dependence on the Gospel of Nicodemus II is that he retains the Latin scripture and presents the verses after the laudatory speeches of the prophets and patriarchs as a summary of the speeches. In very few instances (Piers Plowman, Chester "Harrowing of Hell") is this technique used.

In the rest of the drama the playwright follows tradition somewhat inconsistently, for in many cases significant speeches and characters are deleted from the Chester play. However, in other instances, the expansions of speeches and the character development thus achieved add an interesting touch to the play through its cohesion and vibrant, fast-moving action. The characters which rule Hell are different from those in the Descensus; Satan still delivers the speeches which are attributed to him, but Secundus Demon and Tertius Demon present the speeches normally assigned to Hell.

Upon hearing the rejoicing of the captive souls, Satan tells his "Hell hownds" to prepare themselves for the "fearly freak" who is approaching Hell. He says that Christ is a dangerous fellow who could cause some trouble in Hell, but he adds that the "morsell" is Jesus, God's noble son, who is coming to Hades to dwell in darkness. He continues to say that, in truth, He is a man, for He greatly feared death. Satan demands that his demons bind

this man who has spoiled many of the fiend's evil works. This speech is traditional in that Satan wants Christ as his captive. However, unlike in the speculating Satan of the Descensus, the Chester Satan asserts that Jesus is the Son of God, but he does not realize His omnipotence.

The Demons' statements which follow contain essentially the same ideas as those of Hell, but their natures are more pessimistic than inquisitive, as were Hell's; the two followers of Satan are also more doubtful of his power. Secundus Demon asks:

. . . what man is he  
that should thee pryve of thy posty?  
how dare he doe agaynst thee  
and dread his Death to day?

(Chester, ll. 105-108).

He goes on to say that he believes Christ is greater than Satan, and that soon the fiend will be "Degraded of thy Degree" and "pryved of thy pray." Tertius Demon is as curious about the nature of the "fearly freak" which Satan awaits. He seems to be more positive about the situation than his fellow, but he also feels that any action taken against Jesus will inevitably be to no avail. He hints, too, that Satan will suffer the worse fate when Christ overpowers the realm of Death:

wete he vs with any wrong,  
he shall singe a sory song;  
but on thee, Sathanas, it is long,  
and his will ought avayle.

(Chester, ll. 117-120)

In the traditional manner, Satan continues to be overconfident, even after his cohorts suggest that Satan may have been tricked because he believed Christ had so little power. However, the archfiend prevails in his misguided logic, and states that he has the advantage over Christ because he was powerful enough to cause His death. He stirred up the Jews against Jesus, made them give Him "ayesell and Gall to his Dinner", and prompted them to "hange him on a Rood Tree." Therefore, Satan believes that since he was the manipulator of Christ's destruction, he holds the supreme power. Even after being asked by Secundus Demon whether this is that "Syre" who raised Lazarus, the devil believes that Christ's attempts to harrow Hell will be futile. As in the Gospel of Nicodemus II, this speech by Satan indicates his traditional tricks which backfire and cause his own downfall: the destruction of Christ through manipulation, the "ayeselle and Gall" which become death's drink, and Christ's death on the tree of the cross which nullifies Satan's claims to the prophets and patriarchs because of Adam's sin and the tree of transgression.

Secundus and Tertius Demons, like Hell, in the Gospel of Nicodemus, do not share Satan's confidence; rather they implore him not to bring Christ into Hell. The plea of the second devil is precisely that of Hell in the Gospel

of Nicodemus II:

Yea sickerly, and he come here,  
 passed is cleane our power.  
 for all this fellowship in feere  
 he may take away when he would;  
 ffor all be at his Commandment:  
 Lazar, that was with vs lent,  
 mawger our Teeth away he went,  
 and him might we not howld.

(Chester, ll. 137-144).

The demon's speech echoes the familiar notion that a man so mighty in the godhead is not to be dealt with lightly, and the sense of panic, as usual, appears to become much more intense: "Out, out! alas, Alas!" (Chester, l. 133).

The scene in which Christ delivers His command is full of action and humor. The action is very similar to that in the Gospel of Nicodemus, and it is infused with a boisterous tone and foolishly ignorant characters. After Christ delivers His command, Attollite portas principes vestras et elevamini portae aeternales, et introibit Rex gloriae,<sup>83</sup> all order in Hell changes to chaos. The devils become defiant and demand that Christ leave Hell, for He will gain no souls:

Goe hence, Poplard, from this place!  
 or thou shalt haue a sory grace;  
 for all thy Boste and thy manase  
 these men thou shalt[e] misse.

(Chester, ll. 149-152)

Satan laments hearing such joy from the captured souls, for he has never heard such bliss since he became the prince of Hades. He also says that Christ is a stubborn, unjust fellow

who has come to "reve" him of his power. One of the major characteristics of the descensus tradition is the debate between the devil and the Lord concerning who legally should own the souls in Hell. Satan always feels he is being robbed of his possessions and power when Christ claims the prophets and patriarchs.

Tertius Demon becomes violent and disgusted with Satan in this scene, and, like Hell in the Descensus, orders the devil to go fight the Lord, for he will no longer be Prince of Hell if he is not brave enough to fight:

Yea, Sathanas, thy Soverainty  
 fayl[e]s  
 for no longer in this See  
 here shalt thou not sytt.  
 Goe forth! feight for thy degree!  
 or ells our Prince shall thou not be,  
 for now passeth thy postye,  
 and hence thou must flitt.

(Chester, ll. 161-168)

Satan is then stripped of his powers and thrown from Hell. The mass confusion presented in this portion of the play accelerates the pace and accents the futility with which the demons try to keep Christ from Hell, retain their charges, and, above all, protect themselves. The overwhelming desire for self-preservation, a traditional characteristic found among the demons in many versions of the Harrowing of Hell, makes them appear foolish because they feel they can keep Christ out of Hell. Their ignorance adds to the humor found in this scene, because they do not realize they



are struggling in vain to stop Christ. In their plight, they desert each other, and thus compound the already disastrous situation.

In the Chester "Harrowing of Hell," Satan realizes that he and the realm of the dead are doomed because Christ has come to the underworld. He knows that the souls which he won through deception and "intycement" will be taken away, and he will be sentenced to live in Hell for ever:

Out! Alas! I am shent.  
 my might fayles verament,  
 this Princ that is now present  
 will spoyle from me my pray.  
 Adam, by my Intycement,  
 and all his bloud through me were blent;  
 now hence they shall all be hent  
 and I in hell for aye.

(Chester, ll. 169-176)

It is unusual in the descensus tradition for Satan fully to realize that his power is waning and that his charges are soon to be taken away from him. Equally extraordinary is Satan's confession that he caused the downfall of man through his enticement of Adam. Satan's concession of defeat at this point is also out of the ordinary because there has been no verbal or physical encounter between the fiend and the Lord.

Upon Christ's second command that the gates of Hell be opened, the verbal encounter between Satan and Christ begins; though it is short, it is interesting. Christ demands that the "Princes of pine" raise the gates and let

the "kinge of blisse" enter, that He might fulfill His intent. It now becomes obvious to Satan that the "intent" of the Lord is to destroy his power and to fulfill the ordination of God. Satan asks, "Say, what is he, that Kinge of blisse?" (l. 181). (Quis est iste rex gloriae? Psalms 24:8). Christ then fully identifies Himself, points out the power of the godhead, and elucidates His intentions. He tells Satan that He is the Lord Almighty, the King of all joy, whose power is greatly in excess of everything and everyone. Because His power is so great, man, "that sometye did amis," will be brought to Paradise by the omnipotence of Christ. This speech presented by Christ in the Chester play is usually presented by David as an introduction of Christ before His appearance, and also as the final declaration that Satan, Hades, and all the evil ministers found therein are damned.

In the Chester "Harrowing of Hell" the souls of the prophets and patriarchs are drawn to Christ before Satan receives his sentence. Christ grants peace to Adam and all his offspring that lived righteously on earth. They will now be taken from "blisse", and they will live with the Lord forever. The prophets and patriarchs are delivered to the care of Michael. In his speech, Michael clearly presents the notion of man's being damned by Satan through the tree of transgression and being saved by Christ through His death upon the cross. The salvation of the souls is

granted by Christ, but, as is often found, there is a discrepancy about who will be released from Hell. Christ states explicitly that Adam and all his offspring who lived righteously on earth will be saved; thus the number of released souls will be limited. However, Satan states that "my Prisoners and all my pray" are taken away by the Lord.

After the souls are taken from Hell by Michael, and before Christ returns to His grave, Satan is bound and forced to remain in the underworld forever. Though he has obviously admitted that he gained the souls by devious means, Satan continues to feel that he was treated wrongly by Christ and "fowle" reaved of his right. Satan's last appearance in the Chester "Harrowing of Hell" shows him bound and condemned to Hades forever, lamenting his fate and cursing the powers of Christ:

Out, alas! now goeth away  
 my Prisoners and all my pray,  
 and I might not stirr one Stray,  
 I am so streitly dight.  
 Now comes Christ; sorrow I may  
 for me and my meny for aye.  
 Never sith god made the first day,  
 were we so fowle of right.

(Chester, ll. 205-212).

The meeting between the prophets and patriarchs and Elias, Enoch, and the thief crucified with Christ is found in the Chester "Harrowing of Hell" as it is in the Gospel of Nicodemus II. The action and the conversations are very similar in both works. Adam expresses surprise at finding

two earthly men in Paradise, and he asks them how they came to be there while all other men were damned to Hell. Enoch and Elias state that they were chosen by God and placed in Paradise to await the time when they would go to do the Lord's bidding. The two men never suffered bodily death, but they have been ordained by God to go to Jerusalem to fight against the Anti-Christ. They are to be slain by him, but will rise from the dead to Paradise after three and one half days. The thief who was crucified with Christ then appears in Paradise, bearing a cross upon his shoulders. He tells Adam that he is Latrus who saw the signs which proved that Jesus was God's son, devoutly prayed to Jesus, and was blessed: "this day in Paradice with me thou shalt be aye" (ll. 250-251). As in the Gospel of Nidocemus II, he was made to carry the cross as a sign to Michael and a token to man of Christ's sacrifice. The prophets and patriarchs then accept these men among their company and sing praises to the Lord: Te Deum laudamus, te Dominum confitemur. The Chester play is unusual in having only one man, Adam, singing songs of praise. This play differs from the tradition because of the lack of laudatory statements; however, on the other hand it contains the traditional singing of the Te Deum.

The remainder of the Chester "Harrowing of Hell" is unique. The traditional presentation of the descent ends with the songs of praise. The Chester play contains a

humorous addition warning innkeepers of the fate they face if they cheat their customers and dilute their ale. (The "Harrowing of Hell" in the Chester Cycle was presented by Cooks and Innkeepers).

This addition begins with the discourse of the Mulier who comes to Hell giving an account of what she did on earth which condemned her to eternal torment. She rues the time that she came to Hell, and she is sorrowful because she must suffer "endles paines and sorowe cruel." However, she knows why she was sent to Hell, and she resigns herself to her fate, promising to please Satan as long as he so desires. On earth, she was an innkeeper and a "gentill gossipe" who brewed good wine and ale; however, in her brewing, she wrought her damnation. She kept no account of what she had, and sold her "cuppes" at her pleasure, deceiving many men. The Mulier made her ale strong and good, but she blended "ashes and Erbes" into it and marred her product. She became rich and greedy through her deception, and now, she sighs in sorrow that she ever dealt with men the way she did. In Hell, she issues a warning to all innkeepers and tapsters who sully their malt and brew their ale thin for the sake of becoming rich. She tells such people that Hell is ordained for such evil-doers, and should these people come to Hades, they will experience all the joy and bliss of a man who is being hanged. She also warns man that for selling mixed wines at higher prices

and diluting ale with water, he will be the recipient of sickness and disease. When these evil-doers die, they will come to dwell with her "sweete mayster, sir sathanas," whether they like it or not.

The statements and actions of the demons upon the arrival of the Mulier provide riotous humor. The realm of Hell has been stripped of all its captives when suddenly a woman wends her way into the darkness of Hades. Satan is delighted to have gained a soul so soon after "Iesus be gone with our meanye." He tells her that because she came after the exodus of all the souls, she shall abide with him, "in pain with oute Ende." Secundus and Tertius Demons are more comical in their speeches; at the same time, they are more straightforward about the lady's eternal torment. Secundus Demon welcomes her to Hades and vows that he will marry her, so that she must always remain there. He also tells her that she will suffer many pains in Hell because of the suffering her ale caused men on earth:

welckome, dere ladye, I shall thee wedd!  
for manye a heavye and droncken head,  
cavse of thy ale, were broughte to bed,  
farre worse then anye beaste.

(Chester, ll. 313-316)

Tertius Demon also promises her a dismal fate. He tells her that because on earth she made men feel pains, and practiced all sorts of sin and vice, she will have a veritable feast in Hell, being surrounded forever by such

evil activities:

welckome, dere darling, to endles balle;  
vsinge cardes, dice, and cupes smalle,  
With manye false outhes to sell thy ale;  
nowe thou shalt haue a feaste!

(Chester, ll. 317-320)

The Chester cycle "Harrowing of Hell" is neither the best nor the worst of the descent plays. It is lacking somewhat in action and fullness when compared to the York and Towneley plays. On the other hand, the humor found in the Chester play is enhanced by the addition of Secundus and Tertius Demons and the appearance of the Mulier in Hell. The demonic duo present essentially the same dubious, cynical ideas as Hell in the Gospel of Nicodemus, but the characters are more developed. The liturgical tone of the Chester is not as strong as that found in the Ludus Coventriae, but the religious nature of it is strengthened by the use of quotations from the Vulgate after the speeches of the prophets and patriarchs, and following the major scenes of the play.

The major elements of the descensus tradition are presented in the Chester "Harrowing of Hell" as they are in the York, Towneley, and Ludus Coventriae cycle plays. The variations of the traditional elements which appear in each cycle did not stifle the development of the descensus tradition; rather, they enlarged the tradition and made it more popular for both medieval viewers and writers. Some traditional elements appear repeatedly in the cycle,

while the presence of others is limited; however, in each case, the elements became more strongly engrained in the descensus tradition. The introduction to the action, whether presented through Christ's statement of intention, the author's purpose of the play, or the speeches of the souls in Hell, became an integral part of the Harrowing of Hell through its presence in the cycle plays. The doctrine of Christ also was clarified in the plays; for the first time, some of the major ideas associated with the life and purpose of Christ were openly related. The great sacrifice of Christ was shown to be the only way man could gain salvation and be released from the powers of Hell. In the devastation of Hades, the various playwrights presented the omnipotence of Christ and the futility of Satan's resistance. The legal ramifications which Satan and Christ present in an effort to claim the souls multiplied and became important notions in the descensus. The argument of reason and right was presented through the damnation of man by the tree of transgression and his salvation through the tree of the cross and the notion of the guiler beguiled. The confrontation is finally resolved when Satan is rightly bound and sentenced to remain in Hell and Christ leads His souls to Paradise. The descensus tradition was strengthened through the various renditions which appeared in the cycle plays, and the influence of each play furthered the development of the Harrowing of Hell.



For almost three hundred years, the descensus was subjected to much alteration at the hands of medieval playwrights and poets. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries mark the time of the greatest flourishing of the descensus in England, for in addition to the great mystery plays, Piers Plowman was written during this time. Because the cycle plays and Piers Plowman are contemporaries, it is necessary to deal with the presentations of the Harrowing of Hell in each. Already the tradition has been found to be presented and developed in diverse manners in the plays, but Piers Plowman, though much of the original tradition is presented therein, shows influence from the cycle plays. The physical presentation of the plays may have influenced the entire poem, but in the Harrowing of Hell episode,<sup>84</sup> the action seems to have been greatly enhanced by the vivacious characters and fast-paced action in the plays. In addition, the dialogue from the plays is, in many instances, presented almost verbatim in Piers Plowman; thus, the poem is full of lively characters who present the action through their own words rather than through a narrator. Last, the plays, through characters, dialogue, and action, contributed to the enormous amount of traditional imagery that is found throughout the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman. It must be noted, however, that though the poet of Piers Plowman presented many ideas from the original tradition in the Gospel of Nicodemus

and was influenced by the cycle plays, he created a work which shows not only a radical development and alteration of the tradition but also the evidence of many original additions to the descensus tradition.

## CHAPTER VII

### PIERS PLOWMAN

The Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman is the most dynamic version of the descensus found in Middle English literature, for its vivid action embodies a dignified tone combined with realism and emotion. Vita de Do-bet advocates the necessity of charity and humility if man is to fulfill his quest for salvation; the descent in Piers Plowman concentrates on the Christian virtues of faith, hope, charity, and full trust in God, and in this sense, man is joined with these virtues and is able to attain salvation. The realism and emotion are made apparent through the poet's depiction of man's suffering in Hades, Christ's suffering in the Passion and Crucifixion, and the extreme joy felt by the poet when he realizes that the Christian virtues and eternal life are given to man when the Savior sacrifices His life in order that He might descent to Hell, bind Satan, and rescue mankind.

The tradition of the descensus abounds in Passus XXI of the C-text, and adheres fairly strictly to the Gospel of Nicodemus II, in content, ideas, and progression. W. W. Skeat believes that the Legenda Aurea was the poet's chief source rather than the Gospel of Nicodemus since the

Legenda Aurea is simply a summary of the other work. Therefore, for the sake of clarity and continuity, I will continue to refer to the basis of the tradition as found in the Gospel of Nicodemus.<sup>85</sup> In addition, the Harrowing of Hell also shows the strong influence of the Vulgate, the liturgy, the very earliest descensus drama (the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell), scores of ancient and contemporary writings, and popular fourteenth century secular and religious thought. In addition, the Piers poet made his own alterations and contributions, thus creating one of the most outstanding scenes found in Piers Plowman.

There are two main traditions found in Passus XXI of the C-text, the allegorical tradition of the Four Daughters of God, and the Harrowing of Hell itself. The allegory of the Four Daughters of God developed from the exegetical interpretation of Psalms 84:11: Misericordia et veritas obviaverunt sibi; Iustitia et pax osculatae sunt. The other primary tradition is that of the Harrowing of Hell itself. By combining these two traditions, the Piers poet presents the resolution of the struggle between good and evil. The predominant theme in the entire poem is the tension between justice and love, both of which are necessary for man to be reconciled with God. When Christ comes to Hell to defeat the evil powers and destroy Hades, the four virtues of God--mercy, peace, truth and righteousness--are unified. In

their oneness, man is united with God and granted salvation because the forces of evil have been devastated because of the sacrifice of the Lord.

The tradition linked with the Harrowing of Hell is presented in a rather unusual way in Piers Plowman. The descensus, as related to that found in the Gospel of Nicodemus II, actually begins with the appearance of the Four Daughters of God and the debate which ensues; however, traces of the doctrine appear frequently before the daughters' debate. Passus XXI begins when the poet falls asleep during Lent and experiences a magnificent dream. He finds himself in Jerusalem where he sees a man riding barefoot on an ass; the man, he says, resembles both the Good Samaritan and Piers Plowman, and seems to be a knight who has come to joust. In this man he sees similarities of the two individuals in Piers who represent the virtues of Christian charity and humility, the traits which a man must have if he is to know God. The virtues are combined in one being, Christ, who comes as an adventurous knight. The notion of the Christ-knight is ancient<sup>86</sup> and supports the heroic idea in the descensus that the Lord comes, mighty in battle, to destroy Hell.

The dreamer, however, does not realize that Christ is the knight, and after he hears Faith praise the son of David and the Jewish people sing, Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini, he asks, "What al that fare by-mente."

Faith informs him that Jesus has come to joust "and fecche that the feond cleymeth--Peers frut the Plouhman" (Piers, l. 18). The fruit which Christ fights for is mankind, the product of the Tree of Charity. The purpose of Christ's descent is revealed in this scene: He will struggle with Satan to regain the souls that the devil has captured. Faith continues in his explanation of how the Lord will recapture the "fruit":

for loue hath vndertake  
 that this Iesus of hus gentrise shal Iouste in Peers  
armes,  
 In hus helme and in hus haberion humana natura;  
 That Crist be nat knowe for consummatus deus,  
 In Peeres plates the Plouhman this prykiere shal  
ryde;  
 For no dint shal hym dere as in deitate patris."  
(Piers, ll. 20-25)

The Lord will save man through His Incarnation: by assuming the form of Piers the Plowman, fighting in the guise of human nature, and being victorious because of his divinity. Faith also asserts that Jesus is fulfilling the ordinance of God, because for the love of mankind, He undertakes the challenge.

The challenge is to beat the fiend and death. Satan has vowed that he will destroy, and thereby capture, all that lives on land or in water and bring them down to Hell. In his plan, Satan exalts his supposed omnipotence; however, Christ, as Lyf, says that Satan lies and deceives himself because the plan will fail. The impending struggle between Life and Death is clearly presented when Christ

states that He has but His life as a pledge that whatever Death (Satan) can do, He can undo within three days, the length of time Christ's soul can be in Hades between His Crucifixion and Resurrection. Jesus further claims that He will walk down to Hades, take the fruit of mankind from the fiend, bind Lucifer, and devastate misery and death forever:

Deth seith he wol for-do and a-doun brynge  
 Al that lyueth other liketh a londe and a watere.  
 Lyf seith that he lyeth and hath leyde hus lyf to  
wedde,
 That for al that Deth can do with-inne thre dayes,  
 To walke and fecche fro the feonde Peers frut the  
Plouhman,
 And legge hit ther hym lyketh and Lucifer lynde,  
 And forbete and bringe adoun bale and deth for euere;  
O more, ero mors tua!

(Piers, ll. 28-34)

In the preceding passage, the purpose of Christ's descent into Hell is presented. This statement of intentions is a traditional part of the descensus, and serves as a prologue to the action which follows, in the same manner found in the thirteenth-Century Harrowing of Hell and some of the mystery plays.

The Passion of Christ which follows fulfills the first step in God's plan for man's salvation. For love He has undertaken the task of fighting against Satan, but to be able to go to Satan's realm to joust and completely destroy the fiend, Christ must first suffer degradation and death at the hands of the Jews. Also, by meeting the

first demand of God's ordinance, dying upon the cross, Christ fulfills the divine plan of salvation.

In the rather concise presentation of the Passion, the event appears and progresses in the same way as in the canonical gospels. Christ is tried before Pilate, and His Crucifixion is demanded on the charge of blasphemy for stating that if Solomon's temple were destroyed, He could rebuild it to its former state of grandeur within three days. The Lord is convicted, scourged, taunted, and crucified. During the Crucifixion scene, many events appear in Piers Plowman in much the same manner as in the works immediately preceding the Harrowing of Hell in the Gospel of Nicodemus, Cursor Mundi, and the medieval mystery plays. After being nailed "with three nayles," Christ is given the bitter poison, "gall and ayesell," to drink. This drink speeds Christ's death on the Cross,<sup>87</sup> and it becomes Satan's death drink in the descensus, because it is associated with the events which led to the destruction of Hades.

When Christ does die, the natural upheavals of the world are seen as the sun withdraws its light, the wall of the temple is split, the earth shakes and cracks as if it were alive, and men rise from the dead to proclaim that in this darkness Life and Death have met each other to decide which shall have mastery upon earth:



Lyf and Deth in this deorknesse her on for-doth  
 Ac shal no wi<sub>3</sub>t wite witerliche ho shal haue the  
 Er Soneday, a-boute sonne-rysynge.

(Piers, ll. 68-70)

This passage alludes to the traditional idea that upon his death, the soul of Christ immediately went to Hades. At this time also, the Light of the World is taken from the earth and, in the form of Christ, goes toward Hell. The light which has disappeared from the face of the earth is in many versions of the descensus, and in Piers Plowman, the sign which arouses the curiosity and speculations of the inhabitants of Hell, and which precedes the actual appearance of the Lord in Hades. In Piers Plowman, as in other descent versions where the light of Christ's coming is present, the light plays an integral part in the instigation of the action in the Harrowing of Hell.

In the scene between the joining of light and darkness and the debate of the Four Daughters of God, two short but important scenes are presented, and both are founded on tradition. One concerns the blind centurion, Longinus, who pierced the side of Christ with a spear. When drops of Christ's sacred blood fell upon the blind knight's eyes, he miraculously regained his sight. He begs mercy from Christ for his crime, and is blessed. Longinus first appeared in the Gospel of Nicodemus, and his legend became

popular in medieval literature and art. Longinus appears, for example, in the Towneley and Chester plays of the Passion.<sup>88</sup> The purpose of Longinus in Piers Plowman could be interpreted variously. The ludicrous joust between Christ and the blind knight presents a reversed image of the true, meaningful confrontation which the Lord is undertaking. The revelation of the power and divinity of Christ which appears to Longinus parallels a similar awakening in the poet when he witnesses Christ's destruction of Hades and the salvation of mankind. Also, this incident marks the first example of a man who is redeemed because of his involvement in a trick of which he was unaware. The other knights around the cross are too cowardly to attack Jesus themselves, so they make the blind Longinus do it. The miraculous healing of the knight foreshadows the notion of the "guiler beguiled" which is presented so clearly and traditionally in the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman. In his plea for forgiveness and in his confession of his crime, he exhibits the virtues of humility and charity which must be found in every man who wishes to gain salvation.

The other scene between the darkness and the debate of the Four Daughters of God is the conventional pronouncement of the curse upon the Jews for the death of Christ. This episode is in direct contrast with the bestowing of mercy upon Longinus because he was forgiven for his assault on

the body of Christ; however, the "foule vyleynye" of the Jews will cause much suffering among their race. In the discourse of Faith, he tells the Jews that the blind centurion has gained the gift of salvation through his act, but that the Jews and all their descendants will suffer servitude forever. He continues in stating that all hope of salvation for the Jews is gone for they have destroyed Life, which will have mastery over all creation. He concludes by quoting the prophecy stated by Daniel: Cum uenerit sanctus sanctorum, cessabit unctio uestra (Piers, l. 115).<sup>90</sup> The passage is interpreted here as a prophecy that proclaims that the sin and curse of the Jewish nation at the coming of the Lord will cause the downfall of the race.

Following the curse of the Jews, the scene in the passus changes and the episode of Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell begins. Here, the poet uses the fusion of familiar words from the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed to provide the means by which he can conveniently change the scenes and signal the divine event which is about to occur. The dreamer states that for fear of this wonder and the Jews he drew back into that darkness to descend to Hell and truly saw there secundum scripturas:

Ich drow in that deorknesse to descendit ad inferna.  
And ther ich seyh sothliche secundum scripturas.

(Piers, ll. 116-117)

The poet does not clearly state which darkness he draws into. It is possible that he retreats into the world darkened by the absence of the Light of the World. If this were the case he would not be able to observe the descent of Christ. The better interpretation is that he drew back into the darkness of his dream, and descended into Hell in still another dream. In Hell, the dreamer sees secundum scripturas.<sup>91</sup>

Before the dreamer can present the action which takes place in the depths of Hell, there is a long pause in the action during which God's plan for man's salvation is heatedly debated by the Four Daughters of God--Mercy, Peace, Truth, and Righteousness. The presentation of the Four Daughters of God and their debate is the first of two main traditions which appears in the Piers Plowman Harrowing of Hell. The allegory of the Four Daughters of God, founded upon Psalms 84:11: Misericordia et veritas obviaverunt sibi; Iustitia et pax osculatae sunt, was widely popular in the Middle Ages.<sup>92</sup> The Piers poet seems to have been influenced by two major works which presented a debate between the Four Daughters of God, even though his own presentation of it is singular and unique, for the allegory of the Four Daughters of God appears in no other version of the Harrowing of Hell. The two influential works are the Cursor Mundi and Robert Grosseteste's Chateau D'Amour.

In both these works, the daughters debate whether man is worthy of receiving salvation. In the Casteau D'Amour, the allegory begins when the author tells of a king of great power and knowledge who has a son of the same power who carries out the king's wishes in his realm. He also has four daughters, Misericorde, Verite, Justice, and Peis, who are each endowed with one of the king's virtues and who help the king judge his subjects justly. The king also has a servant who has proven himself unfaithful and has been delivered to his enemies for torture and imprisonment. When the daughters hear the news, they each come before the throne of their father and argue for man's soul, according to their respective virtues. Mercy (Misericorde) is so filled with pity when she sees the captive in torment that she is unable to contain herself; therefore, she presents herself before the king and pleads for the servant's release and forgiveness. She states that the servant was deceived through the falsehood of his enemies and the foul treason of the fiend. She first recites her virtues and then begs that the servant be granted mercy. Without mercy, she says, she cannot remain the king's daughter, for being the eldest daughter of a king of mercy, she was given the right to cry for grace without cease. Truth (Verite) then comes forward and expresses her astonishment that her sister would attempt to redeem the man by the virtues of her sweetness. Truth also states that if Mercy

saved all the men she cried for, the king's power would dwindle to nothing. To pardon a man who is wicked is not righteous, for the man should suffer the punishment he deserves. Righteousness comes to support the argument of Truth that man was damned to prison by very just reason. She says that when man was free he had all the sisters to help him, but he turned away from them; for this scorning of virtues, the prisoner deserves neither mercy nor pity, and by reason, his punishment is just.

Following the speech of Righteousness, the author presents the predicament that the prisoner is in:

Alas catyf prisonn now has thou no frende  
 Bot mercy that praies for a gode ende  
 Sothfastnes has accused the  
 And ri<sub>3</sub>twisnes has dampned the

And ri<sub>3</sub>twisenēs of the no mercy has  
 And mercy may no<sub>3</sub>t be herd

When no forgifnes may be

All mankynde dyes and is put to payn.

(Chasteau, ll. 229-242)<sup>93</sup>

Pece now approaches the throne and states that she must be heard above all the other sisters because, "Thou art endles of pece prince and also king," (Chasteau, l. 254). She says that obviously the daughters have forgotten that their primary purpose is to establish and maintain peace in the king's realm, but two of her sisters have forsaken Mercy and herself and made the judgement themselves. The sisters therefore will accomplish nothing because of the discord

between them; the judgement of Truth and Righteousness must be voided; and Peace must flee the country until all the sisters are of one accord, for:

Ther for hit sal no<sub>3</sub>t ben of recorde  
Til we four ben all of on acorde.

(Chasteau, ll. 262-263)

She concludes with the statement of how the discord may be ended and man may be saved. She alludes to Psalms 84:11 and the necessity of Atonement--a ransom being paid for mankind--for the delivery of the prisoner:

If sothfastnes mete with mercy  
Then sall kiss ri<sub>3</sub>twisnes and y  
Til for him be paied al his raunsonn  
And he be delivered out of prisonn.

(Chasteau, ll. 274-279)

The unity which Peace insists must be between the sisters is the main idea presented in the tradition of the Four Daughters of God. The sisters represent the four virtues found in the godhead, and they must be unified if salvation is to come to man. As in Piers Plowman, the sisters will be brought together when God gives to man his most precious possession as the ransom for the prisoner. The biblical notion of God's son being the ransom for man is the solution presented in this tradition and in the descensus tradition; redemption will come to the souls in prison through the sacrifice of the king's son.

The king's son appears immediately after the speech of Peace and offers himself as the solution to the discord.

He has seen the debate between the virtues of the godhead and realizes that he must show his power through his father's love and unify the sisters by punishing the evil-doers:

All on in substance if we be  
 Never the les in persons we are thre  
 Thurgh me the warld thou made of no3t  
 Thurgh me agayn let hit be boght

Wil y suffre that prisoner for to save  
 On this maner sothfastnes and mercy  
 Sal sone be made gode freneds verraly  
 Also pece and ri3twisnes.

(Chasteau, ll. 289-306)

The king acknowledges the son's offer and tells him that the fate of the world "hynges in thi keping," and through the sinless son will the prophets be accorded and man will be taken out of the prison. The Four Daughters of God reconcile and kiss, and in the remainder of Chasteau d'Amour, the son dies and goes to break down Hell.

Thus, in the Chasteau d'Amour, the allegory of the Four Daughters of God is presented in a similar way as it is in Piers Plowman, except that the sisters debate among themselves and not before God (the king) about man's salvation. Also, in Chasteau d'Amour the appearance does not immediately precede the Harrowing of Hell as it does in Piers Plowman.

The account of the Four Daughters of God in Cursor Mundi is very similar to that in Chasteau d'Amour, but it is more compact. The poet of Cursor Mundi states that he



will tell a story "out of seint robardes boke" (Cursor, l. 9516),<sup>94</sup> of a king who had one son, who was rich in wisdom and one with the father. The king also had four daughters without whom he could not reign and a false servant who was given to his foe because of a trespass he committed. Mercy came before the king and pleaded for the servant because he had been beguiled by his enemy. She also states that she would not be the daughter of the king if he showed no pity. Truth then comes and says that truth should guide mercy; if all deeds were pardoned, no misdeeds would be punished; the prisoner deserves to suffer. Justice asserts that the prisoner deserves to suffer because he had mercy and truth when he was free; by his own sin and fault he departed from the sisters and was placed in prison. The final daughter, Peace, comes forward and says that there is no peace in the land if all doom is judged according to truth. She states that the prisoner's fate should be tried by Peace. She combines the four daughters' judgements, and asserts that only through one assent could a legitimate judgement be rendered. Are not, she asks, truth and justice to keep peace in the land, so that mercy may be heard? The common assent of the sisters will bring peace to the land, and peace is the end of all good works, wisdom, and labor.

At this point, the king's son, seeing the sisters' strife, says that he will accord Justice with Mercy by

taking on the guise of the prisoner and suffering his doom. The son's statements refer directly to Christ's Incarnation and Atonement for man. The ransom of the son for the prisoner is the solution to the discord of the sisters in Cursor Mundi as it is the Chasteau d'Amour and Piers Plowman. In Cursor Mundi, there is no mention of the descent of the son or the harrowing of Hell in this part of the poem.

The use of the Four Daughters of God in Piers Plowman is untraditional because of its position in the action, the purpose of the debate, and the discourse of the sisters themselves. The Four Daughters of God usually debate about the worthiness of man to receive salvation, but the allegory sometimes concerns the birth of Christ. These two different ideas are combined in the scene in Piers Plowman, for both the birth of Christ and man's redemption are discussed in the debate of the Four Daughters of God. In the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman the debate is used both as a prologue and an epilogue. When the poet proceeds from his dream of the Passion of Christ to descendit ad inferna, he sees a "benygne burde," "buxum of speche" come out of the west; the "wenche" is Mercy.<sup>95</sup> The dreamer then sees the sister, Truth, a comely creature, come walking out of the east. When the sisters meet, they ask each other



but He suffered death at midday. With His death, the darkness came upon the earth and closed out the sun. The meaning of the death and darkness was that man would now be given the salvation which was prophesied in the Old Testament. Christ, with the light, would proceed to Hell, blind Satan with the gleam, and rescue, by virtue of the death of the Lord on the tree of the cross, all that was brought to damnation by the tree of transgression and Death. In Mercy's speech, she also includes the notion that God's plan of salvation is about to be fulfilled: the rood tree will cause the downfall of the devil's power, which was gained through the tree of transgression and death.

The speech of Truth which follows begins the debate between the daughters of God. Her speech is gloomy and strongly resembles the ideas expounded by Satan in many versions of the descensus. Truth tells her sister that what she says about man's impending salvation is an insane idea that will never come true. Like Satan, she says that Adam, Eve, Abraham, and other prophets and patriarchs will never be brought from Hell. She affirms the "truth" that whatever is once in Hell shall never come out, by quoting Job 7:9: Quia in inferno nulla est redempcio.

Mercy tries to refute Truth's statements by arguing that Adam and Eve shall be saved because the devil's method of procuring his souls will be his downfall. The sister

states that as "venym for-doth venym" Adam and Eve shall be saved. In her earlier speech, she said that death will bring down death; she continues this idea by speaking of the scorpion, and where he stings, no medicine can heal the wound. The scorpion of which she speaks is Satan, and just as the venom of the scorpion can cause his own death, the evil of Satan caused the death of the Lord, and will prompt the fiend's destruction. The notion of evil being destroyed by its own devices is expanded by the poet's use of the second and third verses of the "Pange, lingua, gloriosi" for Good Friday. The hymn presents the grief of God when He saw man sin and fall into death; He therefore, marks a tree to undo the harm done by a tree. The plan of man's salvation is also stated by the song: the craftiness of God will be victorious over the cunning of Satan, and the arch-guiler will be deceived:

De parentis protoplasti  
Fraude Factor condolens,  
Quando pomi noxialis  
In necem morsu ruit:  
Ipse lignum tunc notavit.  
Damna ligni ut solveret.

Hoc opus nostrae salutis  
Ordo depoposcerat;  
Multiformis proditoris  
Ars ut artem fallaret.  
Et medelam ferret inde,  
Hostis unde laeserat.

The idea of the guiler beguiled is presented very clearly in Mercy's speech. She states that the foremost man, which Satan beguiled, will be restored to his original

grace through the "good sleithe" of Jesus. Mercy concludes her speech with the quotation from the Pange, lingua, which combines the plan by which Satan will fall, man will be saved, and Christ will be victorious:

Ars ut artem fallaret.

The notion of the guiler being beguiled appears as a major issue in the descensus tradition. In Piers Plowman, the strongest defenders of this idea are Mercy and Christ, but in later discourses, Satan and his legions in Hell also come to acknowledge their doom in terms of this idea.

The appearance of the two other sisters, Peace and Righteousness, and their comments which ensue provide more traditional elements to the debate of the Four Daughters of God. Their coming also creates an interruption and establishes a clear symmetry of thought representing the equally powerful, yet dichotomous, attitudes concerning man's worthiness of salvation. At this point, Mercy and Truth have not resolved the meaning of light among themselves, and Mercy has not convinced Truth that man is going to be saved.

When Mercy and Truth are deadlocked in their debate, they see Peace and Righteousness approaching and decide to ask them about the light. They conclude that Righteousness will know the meaning of the light; she knows more because she has been on earth for a long time. Also, Peace will know the correct answers because Love is her sweetheart.

The relationship which is presented between Peace and Love alludes to the ideas found in Chasteau d'Amour and Cursor Mundi that the son goes to save man to support the virtue of peace found in the king. The notion is strengthened for Peace has also received a letter from Love telling her "what this light bymeneth."

The two sisters, Peace and Righteousness, meet, and the fiery debate begins anew. Righteousness asks Peace where she is bound, and receives the reply that Peace is going to welcome all the many whom she has not seen because of the darkness of sin. She says that Adam, Eve, Moses and many others shall sing of mercy, for Jesus jousted well, and "Ioye by-gynneth to dawen" (Piers, l. 185). The traditional ideas associated with the Four Daughters of God clearly reappear in Peace's continuing statements. She states that her sweetheart, Love, (an allusion to the king) has designated that she and Mercy shall save mankind. God has forgiven the sins because Christ has jousted well; therefore, through His grace and sacrifice, He has granted peace and pity to the souls judged by righteousness. The combination of pity and peace as the saving virtues comes directly from the Chasteau d'Amour and Cursor Mundi when the son persuades his father to forgive the miserable servant when Peace is returned to the kingdom. The fusion of the two virtues also brings to mind the necessity for reconciliation and unity between Peace and Righteousness,

Mercy and Truth in order for man to gain salvation. Peace concludes her speech by asserting that the Lord's grace shall endure forever:

Lo, here the patente! quath Pees in pace in idipsum--  
And that this dede shal dure--dormiam et requiescam.

(Piers, ll. 192-193)

The speech by Righteousness vehemently upholds the righteous, truthful judgement of man. She verbally attacks her sister and argues that man will never leave Hell, for that is where he belongs. This speech is interesting for it contains the exact argument which Satan uses against Christ in the descensus tradition. She states that this light does not have the power to unlock Hades and save man's soul. At the beginning of the world, God decreed that if man touched the tree or ate the fruit, Adam, Eve and "hus issue alle" would die and dwell in darkness forever. Adam, she says, disregarded the Lord's command and followed the inclinations of his flesh and the devil's work; man damned himself by going "agens reson and ryghtwysnesse." Truth has recorded that man is to suffer perpetual pain, and can be aided by no prayers. She urges her sisters not to chide each other, but let man "chewe as thei chose." This traditional thought between the sisters that man gained what he deserved is paralleled later in the Harrowing of Hell by the notion that Satan gains what he deserves. Righteousness tells her sisters to resign themselves to man's fate; however, the tone she uses



and even her word choice foreshadow the idea of retribution which is found later when Satan's drink of death cancels the damnation man received through "the byte that thei eten." It also brings to mind the sentence which Christ gives to Satan that he must "drynk that thou madest!"

Peace, however, is not disheartened by her sister's comments, and she firmly, through a series of opposites, continues her defense for man's impending redemption. Her speech has no clear traditional basis, but she uses allusions to religious events and doctrines to support her argument. Peace says that no man could know happiness if he had suffered no woe, feel hunger if he had never lacked, or understand color if all the world were white. God placed Adam in the solace of Paradise to let him experience joy, and placed him in Hell to teach him the woe that accompanies disobedience and sin. However, God then took man's nature, and became "man of a mayde" in order to show what He suffered in three places, in heaven, on earth, and in Hell. By doing this, man has had the opportunity to test everything and decide what life is desireable before the Lord's appearance in Hell. Peace concludes her speech, and the first part of the daughters' debate, by stating that this was God's plan, and it has been fulfilled. Through the Virgin Birth, Incarnation, and Atonement, man shall learn what love is and will live in continual bliss where peace reigns:

Onmia probate; quod bonum est tenete.

(I Thessalonians 5:22)

This long interruption in the action provided by the Four Daughters of God is the traditional debate which attempts to reconcile the justice of man's sinful act with the mercy of God. It is also an attempt to combine, through the sisters' discourse, the lessons of the Old Testament, which damned man, and the merciful, loving teachings of Christ found in the New Testament. The debate is an interesting addition to the Harrowing of Hell tradition. Unlike other versions of the debate, in Piers Plowman the sisters meet immediately after Christ's Crucifixion and dispute His proposed release of the souls. Their position in the Passus enabled the Piers poet to present very traditional scenes in a wholly unusual manner. The debate is presented in the same manner as the discussion of the prophets and patriarchs concerning the glorious gleam of light and its meaning, and also the possibility of salvation being granted to the souls. The discourse of the sisters is also most similar to the conversations of Hell, Satan, and their ministers, for both deal with the natural upheavals on earth, the meaning of the light approaching Hell's gates, the justice by which man is locked in Hades, and the absurd idea of Christ "reaving Satan of his right" to hold his captives by granting mercy to the souls.

The meeting of the daughters of God represents a clear symmetry of thought which runs throughout Piers Plowman and is reconciled only in the final actions of the passus; the necessity of peace and pity which is clearly advocated by Mercy and Peace is foreign to Truth and Righteousness, for they only know the demand for damnation which appears in Genesis. Their confrontation also reflects the obligation that, even as the sisters must be in agreement for the king's realm to continue, so man must be in unity with God before he can be saved. The laws of Moses subjected man to punishment: this idea is upheld by Truth and Righteousness. Through the actions and teachings of Christ, man is granted pity, mercy, and grace; through Peace and Mercy, God bestows this gift upon man.

When the Four Daughters of God end their debate, nothing has been resolved. Their confrontation seems to be a narrative technique enabling the author to raise questions which will be answered by characters and actions later in the Harrowing of Hell. Their arguments have not only raised discrepancies concerning nature and Biblical history, but also questions concerning Christ's divinity and His plan for mankind. Their statements and speculations prepare the reader for the vivid action to come by instilling into the poem a feeling of suspense and anticipation which is an integral part of the descensus tradition.

At this point a character called Book abruptly interrupts. He is an unusual figure whose purpose is rather

baffling and whose presence in the passus has never been adequately explained.<sup>96</sup> His speech supports the view of Mercy and Peace by recording the proofs in nature of the divinity of Christ at all points in his life, from Nativity to Passion. He begins his bold speech by saying that "by the body of God," he will relate the natural events supporting Christ's divinity. He first refers, at some length, to the birth of Christ, the Epiphany, and the fantastic natural occurrences which he presents as the manifestations of Christ's holiness. He states that by all the signs accompanying His birth and "alle the elemens . . . [that] here-of bereth witnessse," He was designated to fulfill God's plan for man's salvation:

That such a barn was ybore in Bethleem the cyte,  
That mannes soule sholde saue and synne destruye.

(Piers, ll. 244-245)

He continues his support of Christ's divinity with a brief reference to Christ's walking on the water, a testimony of the miracles He performed during His ministry. The account of the witnessing elements concludes with a reference to the events surrounding the Crucifixion. He tells how the sun locked in its light, of the din of the sun and the sea at the death of the Lord, and how the earth, "for heynesse," trembled "to-quashte the roches!"

The appearance and speech of Book is only found in the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman. The purpose of

this bold speech by the "beau-pere" with two broad eyes has never been explained, but it is an important speech, and it does seem to have a purpose. The construction and position of his discourse itself provide some clues to its function. It must be noted that the first portion of his speech presents strictly Biblical proofs to attest Christ's divinity. Because it immediately follows the debate of the Daughters of God, which presents a conflict hopelessly incompatible under the Old Law, and immediately precedes the Harrowing of Hell, which presents the fulfillment of God's plan through reconciliation produced by the New Law, the speech of Book can be considered a device used by the author to stress the necessity of the unity of the Old and New Laws. He says that by relating the prophecies of the Old Testament in a truthful manner and supporting them by events in the New Testament, he will prove the divine nature of the Lord. Further, when the two laws are brought together, man will be saved, and the fusion is imminent.

In another way also, the structure and content of Book's speech can be interpreted as a means to reconcile both man and God, and the laws. He presents his discourse in three distinct time references, the past, present, and future. He has supported the prophecies and events of the past and the occurrences of the present by using Biblical references; however, in dealing with the events to come,

the references come directly from the apocrypha, specifically the Gospel of Nicodemus II. When he concludes talking about the natural upheavals at Christ's death, he states that Hell opened up and released "Symondes sones" to witness the Crucifixion. This allusion is to Leucius and Karinus who supposedly witnessed the Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell, and wrote the account for the Jewish elders, in order that they might be enlightened. Book's statements continue to deal with events to come in a purely apocalyptic manner. He alludes to Psalms 18:6 in saying that Christ will come to Hell as a giant with an indomitable power to "breken and to bete a-doun alle that ben a-gayns hym, And to haue out alle of hem that hym liketh" (Piers, ll. 254-265).<sup>97</sup> When He has destroyed Hades and Satan and delivered the souls, the omnipotence of the godhead and the divinity of Christ will be undisputable. He concludes his testimony by saying that the two laws will be fulfilled and displayed through the events expounded upon in the apocrypha. Man will be brought out of misery; he will be comforted; and the Jewish people will act as the primary example of man's reconciliation because they will accept the Messiah, honor the cross, and believe in the New Law.

The statement in which Book says that he will be burned but Christ will rise to live prompts some unusual speculations concerning Book's identity and purpose. Keeping

in mind the events which have come before and those which follow his statement, one could easily associate Book with the Bible.<sup>98</sup> He is used as the transition between the Old Law and the New Law because he has related that the prophetic past will be joined with the present and future events through Scriptural testimony.

Book's speech can also be considered an extension of the debate of the Four Daughters of God, for it provides answers to all the questions raised by the sisters and offers a resolution to their dispute. In it is found a summary which contains information from the Old and New Testaments, through the Incarnation and Atonement. By completing the debate and directing the reader forward to the very important episode to come, the Piers poet has created an original, effective means of combining two distantly separated traditions into one large tradition--Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell.

The actual Harrowing of Hell begins in a somewhat traditional manner immediately following the speech of Book. The scenes in Hell which follow, though full of tradition, show many instances and examples of the poet's original departures from tradition. The Piers poet has introduced into his work characters which descend from those found in the Gospel of Nicodemus and the descensus dramas. The principal powers of evil in Piers Plowman are Lucifer and Satan, but Satan now appears as Lucifer's

subordinate instead of the ruler of the realm of darkness. In addition, the author adds other devils who help run Hell, in the same way as such characters appear in the drama.<sup>99</sup> In direct contrast with the increased number of evil characters, the number of prophets and patriarchs is cut drastically. There is no praise sung by the souls, no speculation from Adam or Isaiah, and no affirmation by Seth and John the Baptist. Instead, their roles are filled through the speeches of Book, the Four Daughters of God, both preceding and following the harrowing scene, Christ, and the menagerie of demons found in Hades.

The poet of Piers Plowman also gives more emphasis to various traditional motifs in his work. The ideas appear in almost every descensus version, but through the author's constant reiteration through statements and allusions, the ideas acquire more force and importance. Some of the more important notions are the ideas that the guiler will be beguiled; the confrontation of reason and right on the part of Lucifer and Christ concerning the redemption of the souls; the salvation of man being gained through the tree of the cross; and the idea that what was gained by the devil through death and the tree of transgression will be lost because of the death of Christ on the tree of the cross which doomed the devil. The main idea which is presented through the use of each and every one of these notions is the necessity for man to

---



be in accord with himself and the Lord if salvation is to be granted.

With the poet's fusion of the familiar ideas and his own characters, the Piers poet created a work that was unique in the descensus tradition. It is vivid, alive, and constantly teeming with action; it combines humor and pathos through the actions and fates of some characters. It also combines the feelings of despair and hope until the end of the episode when man is united with Christ. For these reasons, the account of the Harrowing of Hell is an appropriate ending and culmination of action of Vita de Do-bet in Piers Plowman. The action which has reigned throughout the descent and Harrowing of Hell is still felt at the end when the daughters are reconciled, but there is an overwhelming sense of peace.

The action begins immediately following Book's speech. The speeches by the prophets and patriarchs are not found in the Harrowing of Hell proper, as in tradition, because the purpose of the speeches has been fulfilled by earlier scenes. The action begins rather abruptly when Truth makes a statement similar to that of Hell in the drama:

Suffre we, saide Truthe ich huyre and seo bothe  
 A spirit speke to helle and bit vnsperre the gates.  
 (Piers, ll. 271-272)

Her statement indicates that when Christ descended into Hell the light did accompany him, also the voice preceded

the Lord to the gates of Hell. In the descensus tradition, the Lord usually projects either His voice or His light as a warning to the devils and a sign to the souls, but the presence of both is unusual. The short assertion by Truth also leads into the Lord's command. This slight departure from tradition is important for it gives some indication of the poet's use of transition from the speeches to the true action of the descent.

Attollite portas, principes vestras; et elevamini porte eternaes is the traditional command which Jesus delivers at the gates of Hell. As in other works, the demand is repeated; however, the second time Christ speaks, his imperative statement is somewhat different:

'Princes of this paly prest vndo the gates,  
For here cometh with coroune the kynge of alle glorie.'  
(Piers, ll. 274-275)

The notion of Christ being the King of all Glory is found in the traditional use of Psalms 24, but the idea of his coming with a crown is a new touch to the command. It suggests an allusion to the future when at Judgement Day Christ will come with a crown of angels to judge all men.<sup>100</sup>

The effect of the Attollite portas command is always the same in every version of the descensus, for it causes complete chaos in Hell. The first speech of Satan is directed toward all the legions of Hell, and it is more closely allied with the traditional speeches of the character Hell than with Satan. In Piers Plowman, Satan

realizes that the light which approaches Hades is dangerous, for it is the same light which "fetched" Lazarus from the clutches of death. The poet departs from tradition even more by presenting Satan as a very wise, knowledgeable character, who knows that if Christ comes into Hell, He will take mankind away, and he himself will be bound. What is so unusual about Satan's statement is that he rarely realizes that Christ will take his souls, until the Lord enters Hades. He states that for many years the prophets and patriarchs have talked about such a lord and a light coming to rescue them. Satan here alludes to the Old Testament prophecies which Book, the four sisters, and the souls in other descensus works present to affirm the meaning of the approaching light; however, in no other work of the descent thus studied has Satan made a direct statement referring to the prophecies. He also affirms the notion that the prophecies from the Old Law are being fulfilled through the events secundum scripturas, and in their realization, Hell is doomed.

In the York and Towneley plays, Satan tells his fiendish legions, comprised of Astarot, Anabelle, Berith and Belial,<sup>101</sup> to prepare to defend the region of Hell against the attack of Christ. In Piers Plowman, Satan again tells his cohorts to stop this light and Lord, but in this poem, additional devils, Ragamoffyn, Mahon and Gobelyn, are ordered to defend Hades. The tone in Piers

is more medieval than in the dramas because Satan mentions weapons of the period as his source of defense. Among these defense tactics to be used are rocks, a "mangonel" (a catapult), boiling brimstone, crossbows, and "kalke-trappes" (hooks to push down ladders). As in other descensus versions where such a scene appears, Satan is confident that he can stop Jesus by strongly fortifying Hades.

When Lucifer appears to enlighten Satan, the distinctions between the two are important to note. Satan is designated as the Prince or Duke of Death, but Lucifer is the Prince of Hell. The confusion between the two characters is expanded because the traditional speeches attributed to the respective demons are altered; also, in Piers Plowman, the temptation of mankind is ascribed to Lucifer, not to Satan. Lucifer's speech is a combination of the discourse of Satan and Hell found in the Gospel of Nicodemus II. He begins by telling Satan that for a long time he has known this lord and this light. He attests to the omnipotence of the godhead with the statement that nothing can harm this lord, and where He wishes to go, there He goes:

May no deth this lord dere ne no deoueles queyntise,  
And wher he wole, is hus wey.

(Piers, ll. 299-300)

From the comments normally associated with Hell, Lucifer shifts and begins to speak in a manner that exactly

echoes the statements of Satan in the Descensus Christi ad Infernos. Lucifer says that Christ is powerful, but He should be aware of the "perils" which face Him. At this point, the Prince of Hell begins to argue about the legal ramifications surrounding the souls trapped in Hell. He says that if the Lord "reve me of my ryght he robbeth me by mastrie" (Piers, l. 301). Christ will commit a grave injustice against Lucifer if He tries to take the souls by force, for by reason and right, the souls in Hell, whether good or bad, belong to Lucifer. The discrepancy concerning reason and right is one of the most accepted notions of the descensus tradition, and Lucifer argues with all the fervor and legality of Satan in the Gospel of Nicodemus and Truth and Righteousness in the tradition of the Four Daughters of God that because of God's command and the sin of Adam, all men were condemned to Hell.

Lucifer maintains that the Lord Himself said

That Adam and Eue and al hus issue  
 Sholden deye with deol and here dwelle euere,  
 Yf that thei touchede a treo other toke ther-of an  
 appel.

(Piers, ll. 305-307)

For the seven thousand years that the devils have been condemned by the Lord, God has been true to His work and kept the demons in Hell; now, says Lucifer, He will not take away the souls lest He damn the ideas He believes in--truth, reason and right.

Satan and Gobelyn refute the logically unsound discourse of their master by expressing doubts and

counter-reasons which support Christ's claim to the souls. Their statements are packed with traditional ideas found in other versions of the descent. Satan answers that Lucifer is correct in saying that the Lord made the decree which man disobeyed, but he sorely doubts the strength of Lucifer's claim. Satan uses as the basis of his argument the accepted idea that what is gained through guile, treason, treachery, and the use of another man's merchandise (property) is weakly held. He says that Lucifer broke into God's garden in the deceitful guise of an adder, and through trickery, enticed Eve to eat the fruit. By treason and treachery, Adam and Eve were tricked and brought to Hell. Satan concludes with a strong summarizing statement: "Hit is nat greythly getyn ther gyle is the rote" (Piers, l. 324).

Following Gobelyn's comment that God will not be beguiled, Satan presents a rather diverse, somewhat traditional speech concerning the truth associated with guile and reason. He states that just as Lucifer tricked God by going in the shape of an adder, the Lord has now tricked Lucifer and all his evil companions by going in the shape of a man. Gobelyn continues to expound upon the point expressed by Satan that the Incarnation of Christ will be the downfall of Hades. For thirty years, Jesus has lived in the shape of a man, and Gobelyn, performing the task generally associated with Satan, has assailed Him with sin

and tempted Him. As presented in the Canonical Scriptures, Christ would not stoop to temptation, nor would He acknowledge being God or God's son. To the dismay of Gobelyn, Christ lived a clean, sinless life. The demon, however, states that he could perceive the fact that if Christ died He would bring ruin to the devil's work; therefore, Gobelyn tried to prevent the death of Christ to keep Him out of Hades. Hell presents the same idea in the Gospel of Nicodemus II and various descensus dramas, for both Hell and Gobelyn realize that the love and charity which Christ displayed on earth would follow Him to Hell and "doun brynge ous alle."

The castigation of the Prince of Hell appears in almost every version of the descensus as an important and ordinarily humorous scene. The chiding of the demons places all the blame for all the woe felt by the devils upon the ignorance of the ruler of Hades. In Piers Plowman, Gobelyn reproaches Lucifer for all his lies which now cause Christ to "cometh seilinge hiderwardes With glorie and with gret light" (Piers, ll. 344-345). Gobelyn continues in his verbal attack to blame all the devils' undoing on Lucifer. He associates the fall of the devils from heaven because of Lucifer's pride to the loss of dominion on earth and in Hell because of Lucifer's deceit. For his lying, Gobelyn wishes that Lucifer would know "al the wrecchednesse that wrouht is on erthe." The

mention of the devil's fall from Heaven is not presented in any other version of the descent, but the Piers poet seemed to present the combination of the devils' fall from heaven and their devastation in Hell to accent the evil which the demons have made for themselves. It is also interesting to note that Gobelyn curses Lucifer with all worldly wretchedness in the same manner that Hell promises to make Satan feel the same pains he has doled out for eternity.

The conclusion of Gobelyn's speech contains a unique digression concerning liars and their rewards. It is a somewhat irrelevant insertion which the author used to make an appropriate transition between Gobelyn's reproach of Lucifer, his prediction that Hell would fall because of the Prince's lies, and the fulfillment of his fears. Through the passage, the author also morally condemns Lucifer and warns men about what happens to people who lie and deceive. In his characteristic way, he adds substance to his statement by quoting Psalms 5:7:

Odisti omnes qui operantur iniquitatem, et perdes omnes que loquntur mendacium.

The poet's digression ends promptly when he realizes that he is off his subject and speaking only for the sake of teaching.

When the action commences again, Christ is demanding entrance into Hades once again. The scene between Lucifer



and Christ follows the traditional narrative rather closely; the conversation echoes the statements found in Psalms 24. Lucifer asks, "What lord art thou?" Christ answers with a paraphrase of the conclusion of the Psalm:

The lord of myght and of mayn that made alle thynges.  
 Duke of this dymme place a-non vndo the <sup>3</sup>gates,  
 That Crist mowe comen in the kynges sone of heuene.

(Piers, ll. 364-366)

The gates of Hell are then shattered, the prophets and patriarchs held in darkness are enveloped in the Lord's light, and they sing with Saint John, "Ecce agnus dei." Lucifer is blinded and overwhelmed by the Lord's great light. The scene of the shattering gates being flung open and the souls being enveloped by the Lord's presence is a very traditional rendering of the episode. As in the Gospel of Nicodemus and various dramatic accounts of the descent, the main notions of right and reason and of Lucifer being undone by his own treachery are, in a sense, the only ideas presented in Christ's very long discourse, but their emphasis is unusually strong.

The argument which follows shows that the claim of the devil to the souls of mankind has been satisfied, and that Christ has recovered the souls by establishing a new and better claim. Before He delivers the souls who await Him, Christ justifies His action, according to the laws of reason and right. The Lord concedes that He had said that if Adam and Eve ate the apple they would die, but the souls

were not eternally condemned to Hell, they were only Hell's temporary wards. Christ also states that He has the stronger claim, for Lucifer used deceit to make man commit his sin. Christ links His claim with justice in a most unusual way at this point, but a similar relationship is also present in the Harrowing of Hell dramas. He tells Lucifer that his claim to man is void because man was gained through guile in an unjust manner. Falsely, like a thief, the devil broke into Christ's "paleis" in the form of an adder. In his treachery of invading Paradise and using another man's merchandise to further his aims, Lucifer "by-glosedest hem and bygyledest hem . . . A-<sub>3</sub>eyns my loue and my leyue" (Piers, ll. 383-384).

In the continuation of Christ's speech He further supports His claim through the lessons of the Old Law. The idea which the Lord presents is that notion generally associated with retribution in the descensus tradition. However, in Piers Plowman, Christ uses the passage from Exodus 21:24: Dentem pro dente, et oculum pro oculo, not merely to condemn the devil, but also to justify His claim to man. It seems unusual too that Christ would rely upon the Old Law of revenge instead of the New Law of turning the other cheek, but He does this to show Lucifer that he will get his just reward for using guile. Christ also implies that He is fulfilling the Old Law by giving His life for the lives of the sinners. As the eye of the sinner is



the souls captured and held by the fiend. Christ continues using parallels to tell Lucifer that all man has done wrong, He, in the guise of man, amended through His Incarnation and atonement. Also, He states that all the injustices which Death (identified with the fiend) made man commit through sin, the death of the Lord has absolved, and the trick which Lucifer used against man has been reversed through the coming of grace. Therefore, the Lord tells Lucifer not to believe that the souls are being unjustly gained by force, for through the evil of the demon, Christ was killed, and He now is in Hell to pay the ransom for man. With the ransom paid, the Lord, by reason and right, claims His souls.

In Christ's discourse, the Atonement is stressed because of its importance in man's salvation. One of the traditional ideas in the descensus is that the life of Christ baffled the demons because they believed Him to be merely a man. The deception of the fiends and results of their guile have damned them and brought them from power. Christ reflects upon their deception and damnation when He alludes to their guile being successful with Adam through the tree of transgression, but a complete disaster on the tree of the cross. Christ continues in a very logical fashion by telling Lucifer that he must accept what he has gained. The love of the Lord has enabled Him to grant grace to the souls, but the devil has been snared by his

own evil devices. The traditional presentation of man's being damned by the tree, the devil, and death, and being saved from the devil and death by the tree, accents the strong juxtaposition of good and evil in the Harrowing of Hell by which man is to be saved and Lucifer is to be bound.

The drink of death is an accepted idea in the descensus tradition, and it is clearly presented in Piers Plowman. In the speech of Righteousness, she said that Adam and all his descendants should be forced to "chewe as thei chose." Christ makes the same statement to Lucifer:

The biternesse that thow hast browe now brook  
hit thyself;  
That art doctour of deth drynk that thou madest!  
(Piers, ll. 404-405)

The drink of death which hastened Christ's demise must now be drunk by Lucifer for eternity. On the other hand, Christ says that His drink is love, and for that drink, the "lord of lyf" died. The evil of the devil is contrasted to a greater degree with the goodness of Christ through the poet's presentation of the respective drinking vessels which Lucifer and Christ will use. Lucifer shall have Hell as his "bolle", but Christ will take His drink of love, not from any deep source or only the learned clergy, but from all true Christian souls. "Comune coppes [of] alle Christene soules" as Christ's vessel alludes to the Eucharist, in the sense that it is the source from which

men receive salvation and share in the love of the Lord. It also is an indication that Christ is giving universal salvation to men joined with Him through His sacrifice of blood, the Eucharistic blood of the Lord, or the blood shared by brothers under God.

The remainder of Christ's speech deals with man's salvation which is come and the future Judgement Day. Tradition is found scattered throughout the discourse, but, to a large degree, the poet is original in his treatment of the coming of salvation. Christ says that because He has fought so for man's soul, He thirsts still. No drink will be able to quench the Lord's desire for love "Til the vendage valle in the vale of Iosaphat." This idea comes from Joel 3:2, 12-13, which states that the valley of Jehoshaphat is supposed to be the future scene of the resurrection of mankind. At that time the Lord will be fulfilled through resurreccio mortuorum and He will no longer lack love. He will come again as a king, "with coroune and with angeles," and take all men from Hell.

Christ then speaks of what factors will be considered on Judgement Day when all men stand before the Lord. The entire concept is scriptural in origin, but much of this part of Christ's speech does not appear even slightly in the versions of the descent thus studied. Jesus, continuing His reference to the resurrection of the dead in the valley of Jehoshaphat, says that all "feondes and

feondekenes" will stand before Him and be sentenced to bliss or pain. As in the Harrowing of Hell dramas, Christ says that all men who follow Him and become His brothers in blood and baptism shall have mercy, and once taken from Hell, they shall never return.

The poet makes a rather interesting parallel between man's salvation and a legal custom concerning the hanging of felons. The custom was that if a man survived the hanging, he would receive a pardon from the king.<sup>102</sup> Christ says that if the criminal looked upon the king, he would be saved; by the same token, He states that if a condemned sinner, be he thief or traitor, looks upon the Lord for a blessing, he will receive grace from the "kynges over kynges." However, those men who continue to do wickedness, will suffer the vengeance of the Lord.

Christ also states that through the basis of kinship, He will grant man mercy. Through His Incarnation, Christ became God as man; therefore, because He is partially divine and partially human, all men are His half-brothers. This unity which prevails between man and God will afford mercy to mankind, even as a man would be merciful to his brother:

Whether thei deye other deye nat dude thei neuere so ille.  
 Be hit eny thyng dere about the boldness of here synne,  
 Ich may do mercy of my ryghtwisenesse and alle myne wordes  
 trewe.

And so of alle wyckede ich wolle here take veniaunce,

And 3ut my kynde, in my kene yre shal contrarie my wil--  
Domine, ne in furore tuo arguas me, neque in ira tua  
corripias me--

To beo merciabie to menye of my half-brethren.  
 For blod may seo blood bothe a-thurst and a-cale,  
 Ac blod may nat seo blod blede, bote hym rewe.

Ac my ryghtwisnesse and my right shal regnen in helle,  
 And mercy and mankynde by-for me in heuene.

(Piers, ll. 432-442)

The blood which Christ shares with and gave for mankind  
 will grant them salvation.

Before binding the devil and leading His souls to  
 Paradise, Christ concludes His speech to Lucifer in a  
 most appropriate manner. Throughout His discourse, He has  
 presented His right to reclaim His souls by justice and  
 reason. He also states that mankind will be taken to  
 Paradise and remain there only if he shows mercy and good  
 will toward His fellow man, and asks the Lord for blessings.  
 The unity of man is gained through the goodness and love of  
 the Prince of Peace, and to maintain this unity, Jesus  
 elucidates His plan to control evil and still offer salva-  
 tion to man through His everpresent grace:

Ac my ryghtwisnesse and my right shal regnen in  
 helle,  
 And mercy and mankynde by-for me in heuene.  
 For ich were an vnkynde kynge bote ich my kyn  
 holpe,  
 And nameliche at suche a neode that neodes help  
 asketh.

(Piers, ll. 441-444)

The conclusion of the Harrowing of Hell proper is one  
 of the more traditional presentations found in the passus.



The Lord has already verbally beaten down and destroyed Lucifer and his power; all that remains for Him to do is bind the Prince of Hell, and lead the redeemed souls away. As in other versions of the Harrowing of Hell, Christ, at this time, designates whom He will take from Hades. In Piers Plowman, no specific names are mentioned; Christ says, "lede ich wol fro hennes All that ich louye and leyuede in my comynge" (Piers, ll. 445-446). The Lord then condemns Lucifer to remain in Hell forever, and binds him in a very traditional but undramatic manner:

Ac for the lesynge that thow, Lucifer lowe til Eue,  
Thou shalt abygge bitere, quath god and bond hym  
with cheynes.

(Piers, ll. 447-448)

The Lord then leads the souls "which hym luste" to Paradise as the angels, not the rescued souls, sing praises to Jesus: Culpat caro, purgat caro, regnat deus dei caro.<sup>103</sup>

The reconciliation of the Four Daughters of God which appears immediately following the Harrowing of Hell represents the harmony gained through the divine actions of Christ. The sisters agree that peace has been brought to the world through the power of the godhead, and the prophecies of the Old Law have been fulfilled by the events of the New Testament, for indeed the Son of God destroyed Lucifer and eliminated sin through His mercy and love. When charity and peace are masters of the world, there will be no discord; therefore, the sisters join together to praise

the glory of God and the unity of man:

Misericordia et ueritas obuiauuerunt sibi; iusticia et pax osculate sunt.

Treuthe trompede tho, and song 'Te deum laudamus;'  
And then lutede Love in a lowd note,

'Ecce quam bonum et quam iocundum est habitare fratres in unum!'

(Piers, ll. 468-471)

Their final delivery also serves as the affirmation of the speeches of Peace, Mercy, and, especially, Book. All their statements demand the unification of man with the Lord through the combination of pity and mercy, and the fulfillment of the prophecies through the birth, life, death, and descent of Christ. The last appearance of the sisters, though untraditional, ends with two statements which are found in many versions of the descent. The first is the singing of the Te deum laudamus by Truth. The hymn is the final praise of God found in many episodes of the Harrowing of Hell; it is sung in the other works by the prophets and patriarchs as they are being led from Hell. In all the works in which it appears, the song affirms the majesty of God, and proclaims Him Lord and Master over all things.

The last praise which is presented is extremely important, for it expresses the epitome of the descensus tradition and the main idea found in the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman. The passage is the first verse of Psalms 132, called a Psalm of Holy Unity in the Divine Office:



Christ's descending into the lower regions and destroying the forces of evil, and creates one of the most powerful renditions of the descensus in literature. The appeal of the descent legend had been established by the time the poet wrote his version; however, through his additions, his emphasis on certain theological virtues, and the development of his primary theme of what man should do to save his soul, the author created a poem both original and traditional in which man is granted salvation, evil is destroyed, and man is able to know the saving truth of the Lord.

The Piers poet was relatively faithful to the established notions found in the descensus tradition, and it is apparent that he was dependent on other works in writing his poem. However, in many instances, the poet diverged from the established pattern and introduced or omitted ideas in his work. His changes were for a purpose; this purpose will be considered in the final chapter of this thesis.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

As stated previously, the version of the descensus in Piers Plowman is traditional; however, the poet did, in many instances, depart from the accepted notions of Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell. After having examined the tradition of the Harrowing of Hell, it is possible to consider the main divergences which the poet made and present the purpose he achieved through his alterations. It is also possible at this point to consider more particularly the relation between Piers Plowman and the Harrowing of Hell in the mystery plays.

With the poet's addition of the Four Daughters of God to the action, he departed from two traditions--the debate of God's Daughters and the Harrowing of Hell. The speculations and speeches of the prophets and patriarchs concerning the meaning of the light which approaches Hell and their impending salvation, and their laudatory songs which are presented upon their deliverance from Hell are integral parts of the descensus tradition. In Piers Plowman, the Four Daughters of God serve the same function: the sisters discuss the meaning of the light and the din; they debate man's worthiness of salvation before the

Harrowing of Hell; and they praise the power and glory of God following the destruction of Hell. The content and purpose of the debate of the Four Daughters of God in Piers Plowman and the accepted presentation is also a departure from tradition. The debate generally concerns whether the King's erring servant is worthy of the King's son giving his life as restitution for the servant's mistakes. Also, the dispute usually occurs immediately before the son's sacrifice, or the Crucifixion, rather than immediately following his death. The double appearance of the Four Daughters of God, both before and after the Harrowing of Hell, is an unusual revision made by the Piers poet. Their presence is, in most cases, limited to only one time, which is before the son gives his life for the servant. In versions other than Piers Plowman, their reconciliation is made known by the mere quoting of a passage from Psalms 84:11:

Misericordia et veritas obviaverunt sibi: iusticia et pax osculate sunt.

The character of Book is one of the most unusual, unexplainable additions in Piers Plowman. Where the idea of such a figure originated is unknown, but his comments and purpose in the poet's work are important and consistent with the general idea found in this version of the descensus. His speech confirms the speeches of Mercy and Peace, for he says that the prophecies of the Old Testament are to be

fulfilled through the events of the New Testament; therefore, the two laws will be joined together, and man will be saved. He also advocates the unity of all men by asserting that everyone, Jews and Gentiles, will be joined together through a common Savior who sacrifices His life for all men. One can only speculate about Book, his true purpose, and origin, but it cannot be denied that he is an enthralling character.

Satan's deception which causes his downfall is a predominant notion that appears in every English version of the descensus. The idea came from the Gospel of Nicodemus, but in that work, it is implied rather than stated. The origin of the belief was that the devil tricked Adam and Eve into eating the apple, and thereby condemning themselves to death for partaking of the tree of knowledge. The fiend also led the Jews to crucify Christ, but in Christ's death on the cross, His Atonement was complete, and He was able to save mankind from the devil and death by the virtue of the tree of the cross. Satan, then, by tricking Adam and lying to the Jews, tricked himself. The idea is clear and very important in the descensus tradition.

However, the poet of Piers Plowman grasped this idea and developed it at even greater length. The proverbial "guiler beguiled"<sup>104</sup> appears sixteen times in this episode, always referring to Satan's self-deception. The same idea

is explicit in the Ars ut artem falleret which occurs two times. By the poet's strong emphasis of the phrases, his mention of the tree of the cross negating the effects of the tree of transgression, and his seeming digression on the fate of liars, he elaborates the idea beyond its presentation in any other work.<sup>105</sup>

The appearance and speeches of Lucifer and Satan are still other examples of the Piers poet's departure from tradition. For the first time in the descensus tradition, the identity of the arch-fiend is split: Lucifer is named the Prince of Hell, and Satan appears as his subordinate, the Prince of Death. In other versions of the Harrowing of Hell, Satan is presented as the unquestionable ruler of Hades, having to answer to no one. The author also slightly changed tradition by attributing the Temptation to Lucifer rather than Satan. There is also a fusion of the speeches of Lucifer and Satan in Piers Plowman which either Hell or Satan present in other versions of the descent. In Piers, Lucifer, rather than Satan, is the bold, assertive demon who confronts Christ, argues reason and right, and is bound; Satan, like the traditional character of Hell, appears to be somewhat dubious about Lucifer's victory.

The importance of death's drink appears throughout the tradition of the Harrowing of Hell. It originates from



the Biblical passage found in Matthew 27:34: Et dederunt ei vinum bibere cum felle mistum. Generally, when Christ sentences the fiend to remain in Hell forever, He tells him that he will drink the drink of death forever. In Piers Plowman the same idea is presented for Christ tells Lucifer that he will drink the "biterness that thow hast browe . . . and deop helle thy bolle" (Piers, ll. 404,410). However, in this same work, the poet introduces the drink of love, and Christ says that since He is "lord of lyf loue is my drynke," and He will drink from the common cups of "alle Christene soules." In Piers Plowman is the only mention of two drinks, that of love and that of death; and, in the respective vessels, Christ condemns Lucifer to Hades but grants grace to man.

In His reference to drinking love from all common cups, Christ appears to give salvation to all man. The idea of redemption is common in the descensus tradition; however, in Piers Plowman, Christ's statement presents an idea found in no other rendition of the Harrowing of Hell: when He destroys Hades the Lord will take with Him the souls who loved Him and believed in His coming. The Piers poet expanded Christ's statements and verged on the doctrine of universal salvation by implying that at His Second Coming, the Lord would save all men, whether Christian or pagan, because of their Christian beliefs or their blood relation to the Lord.

The purpose of the poet's departures from tradition in Piers Plowman is to emphasize the necessity of man's being in accord with Christ, himself, and other men if salvation is to be attainable. This idea is never so clearly or strongly presented in the versions of the descensus studied, but in Piers Plowman, unification is of utmost importance. Unification will only be attained through a reconciliation of justice and love; justice must be satisfied in order for man to gain love. Through the reconciliation of Mercy and Peace and Truth and Righteousness--Misericordia et ueritas obuiauuerunt sibi; iusticia et pax osculate sunt and Ecce quam bonum et quam iocundum est habitare fratres in unum--through Book's unification of the Old and New Laws and the Jews and Gentiles, and through Christ's statements of men being joined to Him by blood and baptism, reconciliation and the concord of man through love are clearly expressed as the purpose of the poet's work and the ultimate goal of man.

The poet of Piers Plowman created a magnificent work by adhering to tradition in most instances, and also departing from the accepted notions occasionally to accent an issue or heighten the action of a scene. He was successful in his diversions, as well as his traditionalism, for the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman is the culmination of action, and the turning point in the quest for Saint

Truth which is maintained throughout the work. Through His victory, Christ gave the dreamer hope in his future endeavors and travels, for now the man can go and realize that whatever evil may befall him, good, in the form of Christ's everpresent grace, will be the ultimate victor over the forces of evil, and the final redeemer of mankind.

By studying the tradition of the Harrowing of Hell as it is presented in various English works, it is easy to perceive that the descensus was a powerful, popular, and universally accepted notion. From the origin of the descent tradition as early as the second century, it grew and became a major literary idea and religious doctrine. Obviously the Descensus Christi ad Infernos influenced all the later versions of the Harrowing of Hell; it is safe to conclude that the epitome of the Descensus in the Legenda Aurea, the Cursor Mundi, and the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell were significant influences on the descensus drama and the episode of Christ's Descent and the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman.<sup>106</sup> However, at this point, the influential suppositions must cease, for one wonders whether Piers Plowman influenced the dramatic versions, or if the Piers author was prompted to write his rendition of the episode after viewing the cycle plays.

As previously stated, Piers Plowman and the cycle plays were largely contemporary works; however, the moving rendition of the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman could well have been inspired by actual performances of the dramas witnessed by the poet, for it is remarkable how much of the imagery and how many of the similarities could have come from seeing the cycle plays. Not forgetting that both are steeped in tradition, I firmly believe that the York, Towneley, Ludus Coventriae, and Chester cycle plays influenced the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman, and for this bold supposition, I will present what I think to be logical proofs.

First, there is the construction of the works to consider. The plays and Piers Plowman all contain a prologue in which the intentions of Christ and the purposes of the descent are presented. Also found there are facts of Christ's life and death. The Christ-knight scene in Piers Plowman is very similar to such a scene found in the Towneley "Crucifixion," for in each instance, Christ must joust to prove himself the Son of God and victor:

In fayth, syr, sen ye callyd you a kyng,  
 You must prufe a worthy thyng  
     That falles vnto the were;  
 Ye must iust in tornamente;  
 Bot ye sytt fast els be ye shentt,  
     Els downe I shal you bere.

(Towneley, Crucifixion," ll. 89-94)

'And ho sholde Iusten in Ierusalem?' 'Iesus,' he seide.  
 'And fecche that the feend cheymeth Peers frut the  
 Plouhman.'

(Piers, ll. 17-18).

The imagery of a tournament in both these instances is followed by a scene where the joust seems to be judged by a group of men. In Piers Plowman, the observers come to see if Christ will be victorious:

Thenne came Pilatus with mucche people · sedens pro  
tribunali,  
 To seo hou douhtiliche Deth sholde do · and deme herd  
 beyer ryght.

(Piers, ll. 35-36)

This resembles the language of the torturers in the Towneley "Crucifixion:"

Stand nere, felows, and let se  
 how we can hors oure kyng so fre,  
 By any craft;  
 Stand thou yonder on yond syde,  
 And we shall se how he can ryde,  
 And how to weld a shaft.

(Towneley, "Crucifixion", ll. 107-112).

It is possible, of course, that the cycle plays and Piers Plowman represent separate developments of the Christ-knight theme. However, the similarities of these points must be considered.<sup>107</sup>

Before Longinus pierced Christ's side to prove that He is actually dead, the Piers poet stresses that no one dared to touch the Lord's body because of his rank:

Ac ther was no boye so bolde · godes body to touche,  
 For he was knyght and kynges sone · kynde for-3af that  
 tyme

That no boye hadde hardinesse · hym to touche in  
deyinge.

(Piers, ll. 78-80)

In the Ludus Coventriae, this exact point is emphasized  
by Pilate:

I charge 3ou all at þe be-gynnyng  
as 3e wole Answere me b-forn  
þat þer be no man · xal towch 3our kyng  
but yf he be knyght · or jentylman born.

(Ludus Couentriae, "The Condemnation and Scourging,"  
ll. 654-658).

In addition to the previously presented examples, a  
person might note one other very specific instance in  
which the Piers poet might have been influenced by the  
cycle plays. At the end of the Chester "Harrowing  
of Hell," after the souls have been delivered from their  
captivity, a female tavern keeper comes to Hades to live  
with Hell:

sometyme I was a tavernere,  
a gentill gossipe and a tapstere,  
of wyne and ale a trustie brewer,  
which wo hath me wroughte.

(Chester, "Christ's Descent into Hell," ll. 269-272).

She continues saying that she was condemned to Hell because  
of her occupation, the pain her products brought to men,  
and because, against the Lord's teaching, she cheated and  
stole from men.

In Passus XXII of Piers Plowman, as Conscience orders  
men to dig a moat for the protection of Truth in the seige  
of Unity, a similar character appears. A brewer steps

forward and says that he will not be ruled by Jesus, for he sells ale and will not pursue holiness:

'ȝe, bawe!' quoth a brewere 'ich wol not be ruelede  
 By Iesu! for al ȝoure iangelynge after spiritus  
iusticie,  
 Ne after Conscience, by Crist for ich couthe selle  
 Both dregges and draf and drawe at one hole  
 Thicke ale and thynne ale and that is my kynde,  
 And not to hacke after holynesse; hold thy tonge,  
 Conscience!  
 Of spiritus iusticie thou spekest muche an ydel!'

(Piers, XXII, ll. 398-404)

The similarities seem to be more than coincidence for both characters are taverners, they cheat their customers, and they deny Christ; in addition, the appearances of the two individuals occur at a similar time in both works. The woman appears after man has been delivered from Hades and the fiends are trying to repopulate their realm; the brewer also appears at a time after the Harrowing of Hell, but when the forces of evil are making an assault on mankind in an effort to gain control of the world and destroy truth.

The last indication that Piers Plowman was influenced by the cycle plays is found in the presentation of the action itself. The basis of the proof here is gathered from the changes in the presentation of the descensus through its characters and action. The Gospel of Nicodemus and the Cursor Mundi are largely narrative, but with the thirteenth century Harrowing of Hell, the legend came to depend almost entirely upon dialogue for its presentation.

Granted, that is the nature of drama, but it seems that the drama influenced Piers Plowman, for it shows a stronger dependency upon action stemming from dialogue than upon action presented through narration.

Also, in the Gospel of Nicodemus, most of the characters are prophets and patriarchs; there are more good than evil characters. Once again, as the tradition of the Harrowing of Hell developed and was changed, there sprang up, generally, many more evil characters, devils, and ministers of Hell until in the Harrowing of Hell proper in Piers Plowman, all but one of the clearly defined characters are evil. They consist of Lucifer, Satan, Gobelyn, and the other henchmen of the Prince of Hell.

The proofs here presented seem to validate the claim that the overall magnificence of the Harrowing of Hell in Piers Plowman was due in part to the cycle plays. The characters, the dialogue, and the presentation of the four extant Harrowing of Hell plays were used in a very serious manner to show their audiences that the forces of evil are real, dangerous, and terribly cruel and unjust. The author of Piers Plowman also seemed to write his version of the descent of Christ with such a purpose in mind. He showed that evil was a constant threat to mankind, and like the cycle plays, he stressed the fact that if man would believe in God, have faith in Christ's coming, and



live a virtuous life, he would be saved through the loving sacrifice of Jesus.<sup>108</sup>

Because the Harrowing of Hell ends the Vita de Do-bet in Piers Plowman which is structured around charity, one would suppose that the poet would concentrate on the Crucifixion or Resurrection as the greatest expression of Christ's love and the culmination of the Do-bet section, rather than the Harrowing of Hell. The poet did have a purpose for this focus, and it was a successful choice. First, the Harrowing of Hell is much more dramatic and fits into the poet's scheme better. His artistic progress by debate and conflict is strengthened by the dramatic clash between Satan and Christ. This dramatic confrontation is made even more effective by the inclusion of the debate of the Four Daughters of God into the scene. The Harrowing of Hell is the resolution of their conflict and is presented partially through their eyes and their reports. This conflict surrounding a conflict, unique in the traditions of the Four Daughters of God and the Harrowing of Hell, is an effective literary technique used to fulfill the poet's artistic scheme.

Secondly, the concentration in this scene enables the poet to reconcile love and charity with justice and reason. In the Harrowing of Hell, reason and love become one, and life triumphs over death. The just who lived by

faith are saved by the divine love, and the balance of force is reestablished. Christ's action is both an act of love and an act of justice, but until the just are freed from Hell, Satan is bound, and Hades is destroyed, His sacrifice is not complete. The deliverance of the souls is the final necessary step in establishing divine justice. When justice is attained, mankind is united with Christ and granted salvation through the majesty and power of the Lord.<sup>109</sup>

Third, the poet concentrates on the Harrowing of Hell because it is the supreme manifestation and display of Christ's love and power. Through the Harrowing of Hell, Christ can extend His love to its limit, encompass all men, and unify them in His love; whereas if the poet had concentrated on the Crucifixion or Resurrection, Christ could not have bestowed His love to such great limits, because of the more personal, rather than universal, commitments which the Lord had during the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Finally, the Harrowing of Hell is the only display of Christ in Piers Plowman before His return in the final scene; the Descent of Christ and the Harrowing of Hell foreshadow the Last Judgement. The Harrowing of Hell and the anticipated victory over Anti-Christ are the most powerful expressions of His power, and concerning judgement,

reconciliation and salvation, this is the aspect of Christ that is most important.<sup>110</sup>

In the truest sense, the dynamic scene of the Harrowing of Hell is the end of Piers Plowman. The quest for Christian perfection is able to be achieved through the Lord's sacrifice and display of strength. The descensus is the time when the persecutions of the just will be ended, man will be delivered from his fate, and love and complete faith in Christ will flourish.

The culmination found in the Lord's actions in Piers Plowman is the message which is found in all versions of the descensus. In each and every work studied, the great message it imparts is that Christ cannot be hindered, deceived, or defeated; He will always be victorious, and man will share in His victory.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Henry W. Wells, "The Construction of Piers Plowman," in Interpretations of Piers Plowman, ed., Edward Vasta (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 13-22.

<sup>2</sup>E. Talbot Donaldson, Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1949), pp. 170-96.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Frank Worth, Jr., Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation: An Interpretation of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup>John Lawlor, Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, Ltd., 1962), p. 166.

<sup>5</sup>D. W. Robertson, Jr. and Bernard F. Huppé, Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 213-15.

<sup>6</sup>Worth, Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation, p. 94.

<sup>7</sup>Greta Hort, Piers Plowman and Contemporary Religious Thought (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, n.d.), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup>Miriam Halevy, The Evolution of Medieval Drama (London: Jewish Literary Publications, Ltd., 1974). p. 88.

<sup>9</sup>Ruth Ames, The Fulfillment of the Scriptures: Abraham, Moses, and Piers (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 187.

<sup>10</sup>Morton W. Bloomfield, Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1961), pp. 123-25. See also Elizabeth D. Kirk, The Dream Thought of Piers Plowman (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 173.

<sup>11</sup>W. W. Skeat, ed., The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts together with Richard the Redeless by William Langland, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1886). All quotations from Piers Plowman are from this text.

<sup>12</sup>Mary Carruthers, The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 139.

<sup>13</sup>Halevy, Evolution of Medieval Drama, pp. 85-94.

<sup>14</sup>David C. Fowler, Piers the Plowman: Literary Relations of the A and B Texts (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961), pp. 133-146.

<sup>15</sup>Bloomfield, Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse, p. 123.

<sup>16</sup>Wilbur Gaffney, "The Allegory of the Christ-Knight in Piers Plowman," PMLA 46 (1931): 155-68.

<sup>17</sup>Carruthers, Search for St. Truth, p. 140.

<sup>18</sup>Lawlor, Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism, p. 164. See also Fowler, Piers the Plowman: Literary Relations of the A and B Texts, pp. 127-29, for his discussion on the Christ-Knight as a romance tradition in Piers Plowman.

<sup>19</sup>Nevill K. Coghill, "God's Wenches and the Light that Spoke: Some Notes on Landland's Kind of Poetry," in English and Medieval Studies, Presented to J.R.R. Tolkien on the occasion of his Seventieth Birthday, 22, ed. Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1962), p. 214. See also Lawlor, Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism, p. 166, on the "Common-sense" of the Four Daughters of God.

<sup>20</sup>Bloomfield, Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse, p. 124.

<sup>21</sup>Hope Traver, The Four Daughters of God: A Study of the Versions of this Allegory with especial reference to those in Latin, French, and English, Bryn Mawr College Monographs, Monograph Series, 6 (Philadelphia, 1907), pp. 147-152, 164-5.

<sup>22</sup>See Robert Worth Frank, Jr., Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation, p. 93.

- <sup>23</sup> Ames, The Fulfillment of the Scriptures, p. 184.
- <sup>24</sup> R. E. Kaske, "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Defense," in Interpretations of Piers Plowman, ed. Edward Vasta (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1968), p. 330.
- <sup>25</sup> Coghill, "God's Wenches and the Light that Spoke," p. 216.
- <sup>26</sup> E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Grammar of Book's Speech" in Piers Plowman, in Style and Symbolism in Piers Plowman: A Modern Critical Anthology, ed. Robert J. Blanch (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1969), p. 264.
- <sup>27</sup> Richard L. Hoffman, "The Burning of 'Boke' in Piers Plowman," MLQ 25 (1964): 59.
- <sup>28</sup> Carruthers, The Search for St. Truth, p. 141.
- <sup>29</sup> Ames, The Fulfillment of the Scriptures, p. 185.
- <sup>30</sup> R. E. Kaske, "Gigas the Giant in Piers Plowman," JEGP 56 (1957): 177.
- <sup>31</sup> W. D. White, "The Descent of Christ into Hell: A Study in Old English Literature" (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas, 1959), p. 25.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 37.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 55.
- <sup>34</sup> William Henry Hulme, ed., The Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus, Early English Text Society no. 100 (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd. 1907), p. lxi. All quotations from the thirteenth-century Harrowing of Hell are from this text and are distinguished by manuscripts.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. lxi.
- <sup>36</sup> Montague Rhodes James, trans., The Apocryphal New Testament being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts Epistles, and Apocalypses with other narratives and fragments (London: The Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 95. I was unable to obtain a Latin version of the Gospel of Nicodemus.
- <sup>37</sup> White, "Descent of Christ into Hell," p. 95.

- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 43.
- <sup>39</sup> Hulme, Middle English Harrowing of Hell, p. lxiii.
- <sup>40</sup> Thomas Rendall, "Bondage and Freeing from Bondage in Old English Religious Poetry," JEGP 73 (1974): 500.
- <sup>41</sup> Hulme, Middle English Harrowing of Hell, p. lxiv.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. lxvii.
- <sup>43</sup> White, "Descent of Christ into Hell," pp. 8-20.
- <sup>44</sup> S. L. Bunstein, "The Harrowing of Hell," Folklore 39 (June 1928): 114.
- <sup>45</sup> White, "Descent of Christ into Hell," p. 16.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-1.
- <sup>47</sup> Montague Rhodes James, trans., The Apocryphal New Testament being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts Epistles, and Apocalypses with other narratives and fragments (London: The Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 128, II,i. All quotes from the Desensus are from this text.
- <sup>48</sup> White, "Descent of Christ into Hell," p. 90.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 70.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 70.
- <sup>51</sup> Albert C. Baugh, ed., A Literary History of England, 2d ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), pp. 206-7.
- <sup>52</sup> Richard Morris, ed., Cursor Mundi, Early English Text Society, no. 62 (London: N. Trubner and Co., 1876), p. 1027, line 17900. All quotations from Cursor Mundi are from this text.
- <sup>53</sup> John Edwin Wells, A Manual of the Writings in Middle English: 1050-1400 (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1930), p. 341.
- <sup>54</sup> The treatment in this thesis of the thirteenth-century Harrowing of Hell after Cursor Mundi does not follow the chronological relationship of these works, but the purpose of this positioning is to form a logical transition

between the completely narrative works of the Gospel of Nicodemus and Cursor Mundi to the entirely dramatic mystery plays. The thirteenth-century Harrowing of Hell provides an appropriate intermediary between the different works because of its dramatic narrative construction.

<sup>55</sup>Hulme, Middle English Harrowing of Hell, p. viii.

<sup>56</sup>Baugh, Literary History of England, p. 162.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 2., Digby, lines 7014.

<sup>58</sup>J. E. Wells, Manual, pp. 549-68.

<sup>59</sup>Charles Mills Gayley, Plays of our Forefathers and Some of the Traditions upon Which they were Founded (New York: Duffield and Company, 1907), p. 125.

<sup>60</sup>J. E. Wells, Manual, pp. 549-568.

<sup>61</sup>Lucy Toulmin-Smith, ed., York Plays: The Plays Performed by the Crafts or Mysteries of York on the day of Corpus Christi in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1885), p. xlv. All quotes from the York Plays are from this text.

<sup>62</sup>Toulmin-Smith, York Plays, p. xii.

<sup>63</sup>Toulmin-Smith, York Plays, p. 373, line 9.

<sup>64</sup>This idea appears in the Descensus, Cursor Mundi, the thirteenth-century Harrowing of Hell, and Piers Plowman.

<sup>65</sup>This idea is presented in the Descensus, Cursor Mundi, the thirteenth-century Harrowing of Hell, and Piers Plowman.

<sup>66</sup>This notion is found in the Descensus, Cursor Mundi, the thirteenth-century Harrowing of Hell, the Ludus Coventriae "Harrowing of Hell," the Chester "Harrowing of Hell," and Piers Plowman.

<sup>67</sup>Christ states this concept in the Descensus, Cursor Mundi, the thirteenth-century Harrowing of Hell, the Ludus Coventriae "Harrowing of Hell," the Chester "Harrowing of Hell," and Piers Plowman.



<sup>68</sup>I was unable to find the specific verse which Satan attributes to Solomon; however, Kenneth Sisam suggests that the idea he is referring to is a fusion of several verses: Proverbs 2:18-19, taken with 7:27 and 9:18. See Kenneth Sisam, ed., Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 260; (see note on lines 281 ff. of the York "Harrowing of Hell"). The reference to Job is correct; the verse is Job 7:9

<sup>69</sup>J. E. Wells, Manual, p. 559.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 557.

<sup>71</sup>K. S. Block, ed., Ludus Coventriae or The Plaie called Corpus Christi, Early English Text Society, no. 120 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1922), p. lv. All quotations from the Ludus Coventriae are from this text.

<sup>72</sup>Sidney W. Clarke, The Miracle Play in England: An Account of the Early Religious Drama (New York: Haskell House, 1964), p. 43.

<sup>73</sup>Block, Ludus Coventriae, p. liii.

<sup>74</sup>J. E. Wells, Manual, pp. 563-64.

<sup>75</sup>Rosemary Woolf, The English Mystery Plays (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 274.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>77</sup>Block, Ludus Coventriae, p. 305, lines 979-986. The Christ which appears in this passage is only the Lord's soul; thus the questions concerning whether the Savior's soul went to harrow Hell is resolved in the Ludus Coventriae.

<sup>78</sup>Baugh, Literary History of England, p. 282.

<sup>79</sup>J. E. Wells, Manual, p. 550.

<sup>80</sup>Woolf, English Mystery Plays, p. 270.

<sup>81</sup>J. E. Wells, Manual, p. 549.

<sup>82</sup>John Manly Matthews, ed., The Chester Plays, Part II, Early English Text Society, no. 115 (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 320, lines 53-56. All quotations from the Chester play are from this text.

<sup>83</sup>The command which Christ delivers at the gates of Hell is presented in the Chester play as a marginal insertion immediately before His appearance in Hades. Though the spelling in the command varies, the results of its deliverance are traditional.

<sup>84</sup>In his notes, W. W. Skeat points out many similarities between Piers Plowman and the cycle plays. The resemblances in characters, action, and dialogue indicate, as Skeat says, that the Piers poet was influenced by actually viewing the presentations of the mystery plays.

<sup>85</sup>Yacobis a Voragine, Legenda Aurea, 3d ed., ed. Theodore Graesse (Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1965).

<sup>86</sup>See also Wilbur Gaffney, "The Allegory of the Christ-Knight in Piers Plowman," pp. 155-68, and Mary Carruthers, The Search for St. Truth, pp. 139-141.

<sup>87</sup>In Skeat's notes on line 53 he calls attention to an interesting variation between the B and C-texts. The B-text states that the drink was to shorten Christ's life, while the drink was to lengthen His life in the C-text.

<sup>88</sup>The scenes in the Towneley and Chester Mystery plays in which Longinus appears are very similar to the presentation in Piers Plowman; see Towneley "Crucifixion," lines 597-606, and Chester "Passion," lines 775-805.

<sup>89</sup>Carruthers, The Search for St. Truth, p. 140.

<sup>90</sup>This passage is a rather spurious interpretation of Daniel 9:24.

<sup>91</sup>The poet's fusion of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds indicate that dreamer entered into his second dream anticipating both the Harrowing of Hell and the promise of the Resurrection. I will here give the relevant passages from the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed to show clearly the poet's plan.

The Apostles' Creed:

[Iesum Christum, filium eius unicum, dominum nostrum, qui conceptus est de Spiritu sancto, natus ex Maria virgine. passus sub Pontio Pilato, crucifixus, mortuus et sepultus, descendit ad inferna, tertia die resurrexit a mortuis, ascendit ad caelos, sedet ad dexteram die patris omnipotentis, inde venturus est iudicare vivos et mortuos.];

## The Nicene Creed:

[Crucifixus etiam pro nobis: sub Pontio Pilato passus, et sepultus est. Et resurrexit tertia die, secundum Scripturas.]

<sup>92</sup>Traver, Four Daughters of God, p. 5.

<sup>93</sup>Robert Grasseteste, Chateau D'Amour to which are added 'La Vie de Sainte Marie Egyptienne' and an English Version of the Chateau d'Amour, ed. M. Cooke, Publications of the Caxton Society, no. 15 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1967). pp. 140-41. All quotations from Chateau D'Amour are from this text and are given exactly as they appear, i.e., without punctuation.

<sup>94</sup>Richard Morris, ed., Cursor Mundi, Early English Text Society, part 2, no. 59 (London: N. Trübner and Co., 1875), p. 549.

<sup>95</sup>See Nevill Coghill, "God's Wenches and the Light that Spoke," pp. 200-18 concerning the use of colloquial language by the Four Daughters of God.

<sup>96</sup>See E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Grammar of Book's Speech," pp. 264-70; Richard Hoffman, "The Burning of 'Boke'," pp. 57-65; and R. E. Kaske, "Gigas the Giant," pp. 177-85.

<sup>97</sup>See R. E. Kaske, "Gigas the Giant," pp. 177-78.

<sup>98</sup>See Richard Hoffman, "The Burning of 'Boke'," pp. 58-59.

<sup>100</sup>Possibly an allusion to Second Thessalonians 1:7-10: "And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. In fire take vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power: When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day." (Westminster Study Edition).

<sup>101</sup>See Skeat's notes on the demons in Hades; lines 283, 289, and 449.

<sup>102</sup>See Skeat's notes on lines 425 ff. concerning laws and incidents of hanging.

103 In his notes to the Latin quotation following line 452, Skeat says it comes from the third and fourth lines of the fourth stanza of the hymn beginning "Aeterne rex altissime," used in the Office of the Ascension at Matins, in the Roman Breviary. I was unable to find such a hymn or lines quoted.

104 The C-reviser increases the occurrence of the "guiler beguiler" and Ars ut artem falleret from ten and one in the B-text.

105 The notion of the "guiler beguiled" is found in John Gower's Confessio Amantis, Book VI, The Romance of the Rose, line 5762, and at the end of Reeve's Tale.

106 It is also a question of influences when one asks, as David Fowler does, did the poet in Piers Plowman recall the Palm Sunday Procession in the cycle plays for the beginning of Passus XXI? Was his depiction of this scene influenced by the Canonical gospels or the practices of the Church? In this instance, it seems that Piers Plowman could easily have been more influenced by the drama because of the liveliness of the action which is presented there. See David Fowler, Piers Plowman: Literary Relations of the A and B Texts, p. 139.

107 Fowler, Piers Plowman: Literary Relations of the A and B Texts, p. 140.

108 I do regret that I was not able to present a more detailed study of the relationship between Piers Plowman and the mystery play cycles; however, that endeavor itself would constitute a great work, for the similarities between Piers and the plays are numerous.

109 Bloomfield, Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse, p. 124.

110 Ibid., p. 124.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ames, Ruth. The Fulfillment of the Scriptures: Abraham Moses, and Piers. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970.
- Baugh, Albert C., ed. A Literary History of England. 2d ed. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967.
- Block, K. S., ed. Ludus Coventriae or the Plaie called Corpus Christi. Early English Text Society, no. 120. London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1922.
- Bloomfield, Morton W. Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1961.
- Burstein, S. R. "The Harrowing of Hell." Folklore 39 (June 1928): 113-32.
- Carruthers, Mary. The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972.
- Clarke, Sidney W. The Miracle Play in England: An Account of the Early Religious Drama. New York: Haskell House, 1964.
- Coghill, Nevill K. "God's Wenches and the Light that Spoke: Some Notes on Langland's Kind of Poetry." In English and Medieval Studies, Presented to J.R.R. Tolkien on the occasion of his Seventieth Birthday, 22. Edited by Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn. London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1962, pp. 200-18.
- Donaldson, E. Talbot. "The Grammar of Book's Speech in Piers Plowman." In Style and Symbolism in Piers Plowman: A Modern Critical Anthology, pp. 264-70. Edited by Robert J. Blanch. Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1969.
- Donaldson, E. Talbot. Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1949.

- Fowler, David C. Piers the Plowman: Literary Relations of the A and B Texts. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961.
- Gaffney, Wilbur. "The Allegory of the Christ-Knight in Piers Plowman." PMLA 46 (1931): 155-68.
- Gayley, Charles Mills. Plays of our Forefathers and Some of the Traditions upon which They were Founded. New York: Duffield and Company, 1907.
- Grossetests, Robert. Chasteau D'Amour to which are added 'Le Vie de Sainte Marie Egyptienne' and an English Version of the Chasteau D'Amour. Edited by M. Cooke. Publications of the Coxton Society, no. 15. New York: Burt Franklin, 1967.
- Halevy, Miriam. The Evolution of Medieval Drama. London: Jewish Literary Publications, Ltd., 1974.
- Hoffman, Richard L. "The Burning of 'Boke' in Piers Plowman." MLQ 25 (1964): pp. 57-65.
- Hort, Greta. Piers Plowman and Contemporary Religious Thought. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, n.d.
- Hulme, William Henry, ed. The Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus. Early English Text Society, no. 100. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., Ltd., 1907.
- James, Montague Rhodes, trans. The Apocryphal New Testament being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts Epistles, and Apocalypses with other narratives and fragments. London: The Clarendon Press, 1924.
- Kaske, R. E. "Gigas the Giant in Piers Plowman." JEGP 56 (1957): 177-85.
- Kaske, R. E. "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Defense." In Interpretations of Piers Plowman, pp. 319-38, Edited by Edward Vasta. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1968.
- Kirk, Elizabeth D. The Dream Thought of Piers Plowman. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1972.
- Langland, William. The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts together with Richard the Redelss. Edited by W. W. Skeat. 2 Volumes. Oxford University Press, 1886.

- Lawlor, John. Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism. London: Edward Arnold Publishers, Ltd., 1962.
- Matthews, John Manly, ed. The Chester Plays, Part II, Early English Text Society, no. 115. London: Oxford University Press. 1959.
- Morris, Richard, ed. Cursor Mundi. Early English Text Society, part 2, no. 59. London: N. Trübner and Co., 1875.
- Morris, Richard, ed. Cursor Mundi. Early English Text Society, part 3, no. 62. London: N. Trübner and Co., 1876.
- Randall, Thomas. "Bondage and Freeing from Bondage in Old English Religious Poetry." JEGP 73 (1974): 497-512.
- Robertson, D. W., and Huppé, Bernard. Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951.
- Sisam, Kenneth, ed. Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1970.
- Toulmin-Smith, Lucy, ed. York Plays: The Plays Performed by the Crafts or Mysteries of York on the day of Corpus Christi in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1885.
- Traver, Hope. The Four Daughters of God: A Study of this Allegory with especial reference to those in Latin, French, and English. Monograph Series, 6. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Bryn Mawr College Monographs, 1907.
- a Voragine, Jacobus. Legenda Aurea. 3d ed. Edited by Theodore Graesse. Osnabruck: Otto Zeller, 1965.
- Wells, Henry W. "The Construction of Piers Plowman." In Interpretations of Piers Plowman, pp. 13-22. Edited by Edward Vasta. Notre Dame: Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.
- Wells, John Edwin. A Manual of the Writings in Middle English: 1050-1400. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1930.
- White, W. D. "The Descent of Christ into Hell: A Study in Old English Literature." Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas, 1959.

Woolf, Rosemary. The English Mystery Plays. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.

Worth, Robert Frank, Jr. Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation: An Interpretation of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1957.