

Harrowing of Hell

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The **Harrowing of Hell** (lat. *Descensus Christi ad Inferos*) is a doctrine in [Christian theology](#) referenced in the [Apostles' Creed](#) and the [Athanasian Creed \(Quicumque vult\)](#), which states that [Jesus](#) "descended into [Hell](#)". His [descent to the underworld](#) has been termed the most controversial phrase in the *Apostles' Creed*.^[1]

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[\[edit\]](#) Terminology



 *Christ's Descent into [Limbo](#)* by [Andrea Mantegna](#) and studio, c. 1470.

The [Greek](#) wording in the *Apostles' Creed* is *κατελθόντα εἰς τὰ κατώτατα*, ("katelthonta eis ta katôtata"), and in [Latin](#) *descendit ad inferos*. The Greek *τὰ κατώτατα* ("the lowest") and the Latin *inferos* ("those below") may also be translated as "[underworld](#)", "netherworld", or as "abode of the dead". Thus, sometimes this phrase is translated as "descended to the dead." The first use of the English "harrowing" in this context is in homilies of [Aelfric](#), *ca.* 1000. *Harrow* is a by-form of *harry*, a military term meaning to "make predatory raids or incursions"^[2]. The term "Harrowing of Hell" refers not merely to the idea that Christ descended into Hell, as in the Creed, but to the rich tradition that developed later, asserting that he triumphed over *inferos*, releasing Hell's captives, particularly [Adam and Eve](#), and the righteous men and women of [Old Testament](#) times.

[\[edit\]](#) Biblical sources

The doctrine is inferred from a particular interpretation of the following verses.

- [Acts 2:27](#) and [Acts 2:31](#) declare in effect that Hades ("place of the dead") could not hold the crucified Christ.
- Two passages of [1 Peter](#) principally have been used as a basis for the ancient doctrine.
 - 1 Peter 3:19–20 says that Jesus "went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah..."^[3]
 - 1 Peter 4:6 says that the gospel was "proclaimed even to the dead..." ([NRSV](#)). ("*εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ νεκροῖς εὐηγγελίσθη...* ")

A reference in 2 Corinthians 2:14 has been interpreted^[citation needed] by some^[who?] to include the harrowing of Hell: "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him"^[4]



The Harrowing of Hell, depicted in the *Petites Heures de Jean de Berry*, 14th c. [illuminated manuscript](#)

- [Ephesians 4:8–10](#) has also been understood by others to suggest a Harrowing of Hell doctrine:

This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the Heavens, in order to fill the whole universe). (NRSV)

διὸ λέγει, ἀναβάς εἰς ὕψος ἠχμαλώτευσεν αἰχμαλωσίαν, ἔδωκεν δόματα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις. τὸ δὲ ἀνέβη τί ἐστὶν εἰ μὴ ὅτι καὶ κατέβη εἰς τὰ κατώτερα [μέρη] τῆς γῆς; ὁ καταβάς αὐτός ἐστιν καὶ ὁ ἀναβάς ὑπὲρ πάντων τῶν οὐρανῶν, ἵνα πληρώσῃ τὰ πάντα.

This is a truncated paraphrase adapting [Psalm 68:18](#), with a changed point of view: "When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train; you received gifts from men, even from the rebellious—that you, O LORD God, might dwell there." (NIV) The parenthetical verses 9–10 of Ephesians are widely read as an [exegetical gloss](#) on the text. The word for "lower parts" (the comparative form: τὰ κατώτερα) is similar to the word used for "Hell" in the Greek version of the [Apostles Creed](#) (the superlative form: τὰ κατώτατα, English: "lowest [places]"). Noted New Testament theologian Frank Stagg identifies three views of this passage from Ephesians:^[5]

- Jesus' burial, or
 - His descent into the underworld or Hell, or
 - His [Incarnation](#) as an act of deep humility. (see [Philippians 2](#))
- [Zechariah 9:11](#) refers to prisoners in a waterless pit. "As for thee also, by the blood of thy covenant I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water." The verses' reference to captives has been presented as a reflection of Yahweh's captives of the enemy in [Psalm 68:17–18](#): "God's chariots were myriad, thousands upon thousands; from Sinai the Lord entered the holy place. You went up to its lofty height; you took captives, received slaves as tribute. No rebels can live in the presence of God."
 - [Isaiah 24:21–22](#) also refers to spirits in prison, reminiscent of Peter's account of a visitation to spirits in prison: "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall punish the host of the high ones that are on high, and the kings of the earth upon the earth. And they shall be gathered together, as prisoners are gathered in the pit, and shall be shut up in the prison, and after many days shall they be visited."

[\[edit\]](#) Early Christian teaching



In *Harrowing of Hades*, fresco in the *parecclesion* of the [Chora Church, Istanbul](#), c.1315, raising Adam and Eve is depicted as part of the Resurrection icon, as it always is in the East.

The Harrowing of Hell was taught by [theologians](#) of the early [church](#): St. [Melito of Sardis](#) (died *ca* 180) *Homily on the Passion*; [Tertullian](#) (*A Treatise on the Soul*, 55), [Hippolytus](#) (*Treatise on Christ*


and *Anti-Christ*) and [Origen](#) (*Against Celsus*, 2:43). and, later, St. [Ambrose](#) (died 397) all wrote of the Harrowing of Hell.

The Gospel of Matthew relates that immediately after Christ died, the earth shook, the veil in the Temple was torn in two, and many people rose from the dead and walked about in Jerusalem and were seen by many people there. According to the apocryphal [Gospel of Nicodemus](#), the Harrowing of Hell was foreshadowed by Christ's raising of [Lazarus](#) from the dead prior to his own crucifixion. The hymns proper to the weekend suggest that John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus in Hell by prophesying to those held there that Christ would soon release them, just as he prepared the way for Jesus on Earth.

In the [Acts of Pilate](#)—usually incorporated with the widely-read medieval *Gospel of Nicodemus*—texts built around an original that might have been as old as the 3rd century A.D. with many improvements and embroidered interpolations, chapters 17 to 27 are called the *Decensus Christi ad Inferos*. They contain a dramatic dialogue between Hades and prince Satan, and the entry of the King of Glory, imagined as from within Tartarus (see link below). The richest, most circumstantial accounts of the Harrowing of Hell are found in medieval dramatic literature, such as the four great cycles of English [mystery plays](#) which each devote a separate scene to depict it, or in passing references in [Dante's Inferno](#). The subject is found also in the Cornish mystery plays and the York and Wakefield cycles. These medieval versions of the story do not derive from the bare suggestion made in the Epistle ascribed to Peter, but come from the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.^{[citation needed](#)}

[\[edit\]](#) Conceptions of the afterlife



 *Christ leads the patriarchs from Hell to Paradise*, by Bartolomeo Bertejo, Spanish, ca 1480: [Methuselah](#), [Solomon](#) and the [Queen of Sheba](#), and [Adam](#) and [Eve](#) lead the procession of the righteous behind Christ.

The [Old Testament](#) states that [Job](#) and other righteous men went to [Sheol](#) when they died, as did [David](#) and the other [psalmists](#). No Hebrew figure ever descended into Sheol and returned, although an apparition of the recently deceased Samuel briefly appeared to Saul when summoned by the [witch of Endor](#). Parts of the New Testament can be read as drawing a distinction between Sheol, the common "place of the dead" in Hebrew [sh^oʾôl], and [Gehenna](#), the lake of eternal fire where the evil dead are tormented. English accounts are not always mindful of this distinction, and the two destinations may both be rendered *Hell*.

The Hellenistic views of heroic descent into the Underworld and successful return follow traditions that are far older than the [mystery religions](#) popular at the time of Christ. The [Epic of Gilgamesh](#) includes such a scene, and it appears also in *Odyssey* XI. Writing shortly before the birth of Jesus, [Vergil](#) included it in the *Aeneid*. What little we know of the [worship](#) in mystery religions such as the [Eleusinian Mysteries](#) and [Mithraism](#) suggests that a ritual death and rebirth of the initiate was an important part of their [liturgy](#). Again, this has earlier parallels, in particular with the worship of [Osiris](#).

The ancient homily on *The Lord's Descent into Hell* may mirror these traditions by referring to [baptism](#) as a symbolic death and rebirth. (cf. [Colossians 2:9–15](#)) Or, these traditions of Mithraism may be drawn from early Christian homilies.

[\[edit\]](#) Interpretations of the doctrine

[\[edit\]](#) Roman Catholic

There is an ancient [homily](#) on the subject, of unknown authorship, usually entitled *The Lord's Descent into Hell* that is the second reading at [Matins](#) on [Holy Saturday](#) in the [Roman Catholic Church](#).

The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) states: "By the expression 'He descended into Hell', the Apostles' Creed confesses that Jesus did really die and through his death for us conquered death and the devil 'who has the power of death' ([Hebrews 2:14](#)). In his human soul united to his divine person, the dead Christ went down to the realm of the dead. He opened Heaven's gates for the just who had gone before him."^[6]

As the Catechism says, the word "Hell"—from the Norse, *Hel*; in Latin, *infernus*, *infernium*, *infernus*; in Greek, *ᾍδης* ([Hades](#)); in Hebrew, *שְׁאוֹל* (*Sheol*)—is used in Scripture and the Apostles' Creed to refer to the abode of all the dead, whether righteous or evil, unless or until they are admitted to Heaven (CCC 633). This abode of the dead is the "Hell" into which the Creed says Christ descended. His death freed from exclusion from Heaven the just who had gone before him: "It is precisely these holy souls who awaited their Savior in Abraham's bosom whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into Hell", the Catechism states (CCC 633), echoing the words of the [Roman Catechism](#), 1,6,3. His death was of no avail to the damned.

Conceptualization of the abode of the dead as a place, though possible and customary, is not obligatory (Church documents, such as catechisms, speak of a "state or place"). Some maintain that Christ did not go to the place of the damned, which is what is generally understood today by the word "Hell". For instance, [Thomas Aquinas](#) taught that Christ did not descend into the "Hell of the lost" in his essence, but only by the effect of his death, through which "he put them to shame for their unbelief and wickedness: but to them who were detained in [Purgatory](#) he gave hope of attaining to glory: while upon the holy Fathers detained in Hell solely on account of [original sin](#), he shed the light of glory everlasting."^[7]

While some maintain that Christ merely descended into the "limbo of the fathers", others, notably theologian [Hans Urs von Balthasar](#) (inspired by the visions of [Adrienne von Speyr](#)), maintain that it was more than this and that the descent involved suffering by Jesus.^[8] Since both [John Paul II](#) and [Benedict XVI](#) have lauded the theology of Balthasar, and because some do not see a precise doctrinal position of the Church on this point, some maintain that this is a matter on which differences and theological speculation is permissible without transgressing the limits of orthodoxy.^[9]

[\[edit\]](#) Eastern Orthodox



[Russian icon](#) of Christ leading the righteous out of [Hades](#) (17th century, [Solovetsky Monastery](#)).

Saint [John Chrysostom](#)'s [Paschal Homily](#) also addresses the Harrowing of Hades, and is typically read during the [Paschal Vigil](#), the major service of the Eastern Orthodox celebration of [Pascha](#) (Easter).

In the [Eastern Orthodox Church](#), the Harrowing of Hades is celebrated annually on [Holy and Great Saturday](#), during the [Vespereal Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil](#). At the beginning of the service, the [hangings](#) in the church and the [vestments](#) worn by the clergy are all somber [Lenten](#) colours (usually purple or black). Then, just before the [Gospel](#) reading, the [liturgical colors](#) are changed white and the deacon performs a [censing](#), and the priest strews [laurel](#) leaves around the church, in celebration of the harrowing of Hades then taking place, and in anticipation of Christ's imminent resurrection.



Harrowing of Hades, an icon by [Dionisius](#), from the [Ferapontov Monastery](#).

The Harrowing of Hades is generally more common and prominent in Orthodox [iconography](#) compared to the Western tradition. It is the traditional [icon](#) for [Holy Saturday](#), and is used during the [Paschal season](#) and on Sundays throughout the year.

The traditional Eastern Orthodox icon of the [Resurrection of Jesus](#) does not depict simply the physical act of Jesus' coming out of the [Tomb](#), but rather it depicts what Orthodox Christians believe to be the spiritual reality of what his [Death and Resurrection](#) accomplished.

The icon shows Jesus, vested in white and gold to symbolize his divine majesty, standing on the brazen gates of Hades (also called the "Doors of Death"), which are broken and have fallen in the form of a cross, illustrating the belief that by his death on the cross, Jesus trampled down death (see [Paschal](#)

[troparion](#)). He is holding [Adam](#) and [Eve](#) and pulling them up out of Hades. Traditionally, he is not shown holding them by the hands, but by their wrists, to illustrate the theological teaching that mankind could not pull himself out of his [ancestral sin](#), but that it could come about only by the work (*energia*) of God. Jesus is surrounded by various righteous figures from the [Old Testament](#) ([Abraham](#), [David](#), etc.); the bottom of the icon depicts Hades as a chasm of darkness, often with various pieces of broken locks and chains strewn about. Quite frequently, one or two figures are shown in the darkness, bound in chains, who are generally identified as personifications of [Death](#) and/or the [Devil](#).

[edit] Lutheran

[Martin Luther](#), in a sermon delivered in Torgau in 1533, stated that Christ descended into Hell.

The [Formula of Concord](#) (a Lutheran confession) states, "we believe simply that the entire person, God and human being, descended to Hell after his burial, conquered the devil, destroyed the power of Hell, and took from the devil all his power." (Solid Declaration, Art. IX)

Many attempts were made following Luther's death to systematize his theology of the descensus, whether Christ descended in victory or defeat, unable to fully comprehend the genius of Luther's theology of the cross, in which the defeat or "humiliation" of Christ is never fully separable from His victorious glorification. Some argued that Christ's suffering was completed with His words from the cross, "It is finished," but this would obviously make His subsequent death and burial completely superfluous, while also obviating the need to suffer the penalty promised sinful man (death) as a substitute (the "substitutionary atonement" being a chief principle of Lutheran soteriology). Luther himself, when pressed to elaborate on the question of whether Christ descended to Hell in humiliation or victory responded, "It is enough to preach the article to the laypeople as they have learned to know it in the past from the stained glass and other sources."

[edit] Calvinist

The [Calvinist](#) position is that if Christ had descended into Hell (place of eternal suffering), he would have had to bear [God's Curse](#).^[*citation needed*] [John Calvin](#) expressed his concern that many Christians "have never earnestly considered what it is or means that we have been redeemed from God's judgment. Yet this is our wisdom: duly to *feel* how much our salvation cost the Son of God." Calvin's conclusion is that "Christ's descent into Hell was necessary for Christians' [atonement](#), because Christ did in fact endure the penalty for the sins of the redeemed."^[10] On the cross, Christ suffered hell, being separated from His Father and enduring God's wrath for the sins of humanity, but after He died He went to Paradise (Heaven), just as he told the criminal next to Him.

[edit] Latter-day Saints

The Harrowing of Hell has been a unique and important doctrine among members of [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) since its founding in 1830 by Joseph Smith, although members of the church ("Mormons") usually call it by other terms, such as "Christ's visit to the spirit world." Like Christian exegetes distinguishing between Sheol and Gehenna, Latter-day Saints distinguish between the realm of departed spirits (the "spirit world") and the portion (or state) of the wicked ("spirit prison"). The portion or state of the righteous is often referred to as "paradise".

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Latter-day Saint beliefs regarding the Harrowing of Hell is their view on the purpose of it, both for the just and the wicked. [Joseph F. Smith](#), the sixth president of the

Church, explained in what is now a canonized revelation, that when Christ died, "there were gathered together in one place an innumerable company of the spirits of the just, . . . rejoicing together because the day of their deliverance was at hand. They were assembled awaiting the advent of the Son of God into the spirit world, to declare their redemption from the bands of death" (D&C 138:12, 15-16).

In the LDS view, while Christ announced freedom from physical death to the just, he had another purpose in descending to Hell regarding the wicked. "The Lord went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth, to teach them; but behold, from among the righteous, he organized his forces...and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men; and thus was the gospel preached to the dead . . . to those who had died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth, or in transgression, having rejected the prophets" (D&C 138:29-30, 32). From the Latter-day Saint viewpoint, the rescue of spirits was not a one-time event but an ongoing process that still continues. (D&C 138).

[[edit](#)] In literature



 *The Harrowing of Hell*, by [Michael Burghers](#) (1647/8–1727)

- The earliest surviving Christian drama probably intended to be performed is the [Harrowing of Hell](#) found in the eighth-century [Book of Cerne](#).
- In [Dante's Inferno](#) the Harrowing of Hell is mentioned in Canto IV by the pilgrim's guide [Virgil](#). Virgil was in Hell in the first place because he was not exposed to Christianity in his life time, and therefore he actually describes in generic terms Christ as a 'mighty lord' who rescued the Hebrew forefathers of Christianity, but left him behind in the very same circle. It is not clear that he fully understands the significance of the event.
- The Medieval romance of [Sir Orfeo](#) has often been seen as drawing parallels between the titular character and Jesus freeing souls from Hell.
- In [Stephen Lawhead's](#) novel *Byzantium*, a young [Irish monk](#) is asked to explain Jesus' life to a group of [Vikings](#), who are particularly impressed with Jesus' "[Helreið](#)."
- In [I.L. Peretz's](#) short story *Neilah in Gehenna*, a Jewish [hazzan](#) descends to Hell and uses his unique voice to bring about the repentance and liberation of the souls imprisoned there.

[[edit](#)] References

1. [^](#) [D. Bruce Lockerbie](#), *The Apostle's Creed: Do You Really Believe It* (Victor Books, Wheaton, IL) 1977:53-54, [on-line text](#).
2. [^](#) [OED](#)
3. [^](#) New Revised Standard Version. In the original Greek: "ἐν ᾧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεῖς ἐκήρυξεν, ἀπειθήσασιν ποτε ὅτε ἀπεξεδέχετο ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ μακροθυμία ἐν ἡμέραις Νῶε... ."

4. [^] [NRSV](#) "τῷ δὲ θεῷ χάρις τῷ πάντοτε θριαμβεύοντι ἡμᾶς ἐν τῷ χριστῷ καὶ τὴν ὁσμὴν τῆς γνώσεως αὐτοῦ φανεροῦντι δι' ἡμῶν ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ."
5. [^] [Stagg, Frank](#). *New Testament Theology*. Nashville: Broadman, p. 311.
6. [^] [Catechism of the Catholic Church 636–7](#)
7. [^] [Summa Theologica, III, 52, art. 2](#)
8. [^] [Reno, R.R.](#) [Was Balthasar a Heretic?](#) First Things, October 13, 2008
9. [^] [Reno, R.R.](#) [Was Balthasar a Heretic?](#) First Things, October 13, 2008
10. [^] [Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics](#)

[[edit](#)] See also

- [Christian mythology](#)
- [Descent to the underworld](#)

[[edit](#)] External links



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- [Catholic Encyclopedia: Harrowing of Hell](#)
- [Encyclopedia Britannica: Harrowing of Hell](#)
- [Gospel of Nicodemus: Descensus Christ ad inferos](#)
- [The Gospel of Nicodemus](#) including the Descent into Hell
- [Harrowing of Hell](#) in the [Chester Cycle](#)
- [Le Harrowing of Hell dans les Cycles de York, Towneley et Chester](#), by *Alexandra Costache-Babcinschi (ebook, French)*
- [Lord's Descent into Hell, The](#)
- [Russian Orthodox iconography of the Harrowing of Hell](#)
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