

## **My Response to Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston**

In a series of sermons, Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston, an Orthodox Church leader of distinction, made some remarkable statements concerning Jesus' descent into Hades. Quoting from Wisdom of Sirach 39:18 " At His commandment is done whatsoever pleases Him; *and none can hinder, when He will save.*"

He declares that " in order to judge mankind fairly, our Saviour will give every person who ever lived on earth the opportunity to espouse or reject His teaching. Whether this happens while a person is still living or in Hades – whenever it happens – he or she will have the opportunity to make that choice."<sup>1</sup>

The articles I examined, *Awake Sleeper!*, *Sheol Delenda Est!* and *Not a Second Opportunity*, reveal a compassionate and insightful presentation of Christ's pursuit of souls. The resulting controversies that arose from the publication of these articles suggest that they cannot be deemed as representative of Orthodox Christian interpretation of Jesus' descent into Hades/Hell but, nonetheless, they do represent a significant contribution to this area of theology.

Metropolitan Ephraim's contention is that, due to His absolute conquest and destruction of Hades at the resurrection, Jesus continues to preach the gospel to the souls in Hades who never had the opportunity to espouse or reject the true teachings of Christ while they lived.

The logic of this position seems sound when we consider that scripture declares Jesus has defeated death and has the keys (authority) of Hell. It seems reasonable that he should be able to continue to preach in His newly conquered realm subsequent to His ascension into Heaven. If this could be shown as viable then there is no reason to be concerned about the death of souls ignorant of the gospel since there could be no better preacher than Jesus to convince them of righteousness and to save them from useless torment.

In order to come to the conclusions he has come to, Metropolitan Ephraim makes several assumptions upon which his theory depends.

- 1) He assumes that Jesus preached in Hades proper and not only in Paradise/Abraham's Bosom, the place that held the

righteous covenant keeping saints like Abraham, Moses and David.

- 2) That Jesus' conquest of Hades and death secured His influence over all the souls there which Jesus will personally exploit.
- 3) That Hades is "outside the bounds of earthly time"<sup>ii</sup> and cannot be divided in B.C. and A.D. since it is timeless, therefore every past present and future denizen of Hades would be present to Christ at His descent.
- 4) That erroneous teachings in life, Roman Catholic, Protestant or heretical theologies, do not qualify as a first chance at salvation. The true 'Orthodox' or 'straight in line with the Fathers of the Church' teaching would have to be presented even to those souls who thought they had heard it, before they could be judged as to their espousal or rejection of the Good News.

### **1) Did Jesus Preach in Hades Proper or in the Annex of Paradise/ Abraham's Bosom? :**

If Jesus had preached the gospel in Hades/Hell proper then indeed every soul would have heard the truth and been set free if they so chose, to enter Heaven along with the Lord. There are many problems with this notion however.

Is it possible that God consigned His covenant people to the torments of Hell/Hades? Some of His people had received the anointing of God, Adam, Moses, Elisha, for example. It is an eternal gift since it is a gift of the eternal God. God's glory, however affected by the sin of souls, had the power to change the rules on earth. It would do the same in Hell. It is not logical to think that the glory on Moses, no matter how much it had faded, would not have wrought changes to Hell once it came into contact with it.

By covenant promise God had sworn to protect His chosen people and deliver them. Could His promise have been abrogated by the power of death so that He would be forced to hand those same people into the power of devils to torment them? I cannot accept that the blood covenants God made could be limited in their effectiveness by death.

The state of those who died in covenant relationship with God, whether by covenant or by their seeking of a relationship with Him in ignorance of anything except the witness of creation that declared God's goodness to them, must be different from the state of those who had rejected God or never had any type of relationship with Him at all.

An annex of Hell, separated by a "chasm no man could cross"<sup>iii</sup> is a logical necessity if we accept Jesus' description of Hell and God's faithfulness to His covenants. Covenant separated a people out from all the peoples of the earth, Israel. It could do the same in Hell.

Hell/Hades would have ceased to exist at the moment Christ preached to all its denizens. The gospel is Final Judgment. There could be no possibility of Hell's continued functioning once their irrevocable choice had been made. Only the Lake of Fire would be a sufficient place for the now eternally damned souls. But according to the book of Revelations, final judgment takes place in Heaven not in Hell.

The souls Jesus brought with Him to Heaven were not free. "He took captivity captive."<sup>iv</sup> Jesus presented the captives of His enemy as the prey/spoils of His victory. They were the gift presented to the Father that was required to gain entrance to the presence of glory. Not until His blood was applied to the Heavenly mercy seat was the salvation and freedom of those souls accomplished. If this timeless presentation had taken place for the past present and future denizens of Hades they would not have entered Heaven as captives but as free.

## **2) Jesus' Conquest of Hades/Hell Gave Him Rights to All Souls There.**

Jesus' victory was complete. He gained the right to preach the gospel to everyone who ever was or ever will be in that place. In the same way, His victory over sin and death gave Jesus the right to preach the gospel to every living soul as well.

Metropolitan Ephraim deduces from this that Jesus does the preaching of the gospel to those under His dominion therefore every denizen of Hades will hear Jesus preach the gospel to them. If Jesus is as good a preacher as I think He is, almost everyone would accept salvation and go to Heaven. If this is true then people are more likely to accept salvation in Hell than when they live. The Church is unnecessary.

But, is this how Jesus has treated the living souls He also won by victory? No. In fact Jesus preached the gospel to very few people after His resurrection. He gave the job of proclaiming the message of salvation among the living to the Church. "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature ..... the Lord working with them and confirming the word with signs following."<sup>v</sup> Jesus promised to work with the Church and verify its right to speak for Him. Certainly it is Jesus' right to be heard, as Lord of all humanity. "None can hinder when He will save."<sup>vi</sup> But it is Jesus who determines the way in which He will be heard. He has chosen the Church to be His voice in the earth.

It is the Body of Christ that does the preaching of the gospel. The Head of the Church is in Heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father. Jesus' body on the earth – the Church, is gifted with the privilege and responsibility of getting the preaching of the gospel done before the return of Jesus. Would Jesus have given a partial gift to His Bride? If we are so trustworthy in His eyes as to be given the gospel for the living does it not make sense that we would be entrusted to preach to the damned as well? "All the earth" – Jesus said. Hell is part of the earth not part of Heaven.

### **3) Hades is Outside of Time.**

Another presupposition on which Metropolitan Ephraim bases his thesis is that Hades/Hell is outside of time and therefore every soul who would ever go there could have been present to Jesus at His descent and conquest of Hell. This alleviates the necessity of Jesus having to return to Hell to preach to the next harvest of death. If this were the case what would Jesus have preached? The price for sin had not yet been presented to the Father on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies in Heaven.

Jesus himself was subject to time. When He arose and appeared at the tomb to Mary Magdalene He said, "Do not touch me for I am not yet ascended to My Father."<sup>vii</sup> Certainly this was a reference to the law that forbade the touching of the High Priest on the Day of his entrance into the earthly Holy of Holies to present the sacrifice on behalf of the people. Later Jesus invited Thomas to touch Him so touching is not the issue, the sequence of time is.

Hades/Hell is not eternal - the state of being outside of time. Eternal things have no end. That is what makes them eternal. Death and Hell do have an end. They will be destroyed following the Final Judgment.<sup>viii</sup> Only the Lake of Fire is defined as eternal, a reality separated from the love and presence of God.

Hell is within time. Only the souls present at the time of Jesus' harrowing of Hell could have heard Jesus preach. That means Jesus would be guilty of missing the late coming souls and therefore be guilty of neglecting the possibility of their salvation unless He was willing to get up from His seat in Heaven at the right hand of the Father to return to Hell. This assumption is untenable.

### **4) Heterodox Teaching Does Not Disqualify a Soul From Ever Hearing the Truth of the Gospel.**

Heterodox means not straight, not true, heretical, not according to the teachings of the Fathers of the Church. To label Roman Catholic and Protestant presentations of the gospel as equally insufficient and heretical is a contentious statement arising more out of the spirit of division than the Spirit of Truth. I deal with this divisiveness in my book *Mary and the Unity of the Church* so I will not repeat that discussion here. I invite you to read it for yourself.

It may be that a soul simply cannot comprehend the manner in which a Protestant presents the gospel. Certainly I am guilty of preaching some incomprehensible sermons in my time. It is not dogma, alone which can prevent a true hearing of the gospel. Sometimes it is the arrogant manner of the preacher or the hypocritical life they are known to lead which disqualifies their witness to Jesus' love.

In a court of law it is comprehension of the information imparted that determines whether or not the subject is guilty of willful rejection of the law. If ignorance or some other mitigating factor can be proven to be involved then the person cannot be held entirely guilty of breaking that law. Only Jesus our judge is competent to rule on whether the gospel presented to a soul was sufficiently

comprehensible to save them or whether, in fact, that soul has never been presented with the choice of the gospel.

As the Church, I believe it is our right to pray on behalf of souls who never heard the gospel at all or never understood well enough to decide on it. We can petition the justice of God for a true presentation to be made to those souls whether they be alive or with the damned in Hell. In this I agree with Metropolitan Ephraim.

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- <sup>i</sup> article: Awake Sleeper, Metropolitan Ephraim
  - <sup>ii</sup> article: Not a Second Opportunity, Metropolitan Ephraim
  - <sup>iii</sup> Luke 16:26
  - <sup>iv</sup> Ephesians 4:8
  - <sup>v</sup> Mark 15: 15,20
  - <sup>vi</sup> Wisdom of Sirach 39:18
  - <sup>vii</sup> John 20: 17
  - <sup>viii</sup> Revelations 20:14