

# *NOT A SECOND OPPORTUNITY*

or

*Aloha, Christ God!*

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Recently, someone wrote that the Metropolitan of Boston (i.e., yours truly) teaches the error that everybody will be given a "second" opportunity in Hades either to reject or accept the teachings of Christ.

When asked where he found this teaching in Metropolitan Ephraim's writings, he quoted the following text from the article "Awake, Sleeper":

"Essentially, what Saint Philaret (and the Church Fathers) say is 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 the person is still living or in Hades—whenever it happens—he or she will have the opportunity to make that choice."

To the above, our correspondent voices his objection:

There is nothing [*sic*] written by the Holy Fathers that supports this notion. I used the word "second" because this so-called chance in the next life that "everyone" will have makes the opportunities given to us in this life much less urgent.

How easy it is to put words into people's mouths!

"Awake, Sleeper" tells us that everyone will be given an opportunity either in this life, *or* in the next (it did *not* say, "both in this life *and* in the next").

Also, when people say things like, "There is nothing written by the Holy Fathers that supports this notion," — are we to assume that these people have read *all* the writings of the Holy Fathers and are in a position to say this??

Well, as a matter of fact, the patristic texts that we have read have a *great* deal to say about this matter.

Others, long before our time, have asked about these very issues: Who benefited from our Saviour's descent into Hades? To whom did He proclaim His Gospel in Hades? Whom did He rescue out of Hades, and who entered Paradise?

To these questions, the Holy Fathers answered in different ways, and the same Father sometimes gave a different answer, depending, perhaps, on the people he was addressing.

In general terms, it may be said that the Eastern Fathers tended to be more optimistic about who accepted our Saviour's preaching in Hades, while the Western writers were more pessimistic. More on this later.

Our correspondent, as we saw above, wrote: "I used the word 'second' because this so-called chance in the next life that 'everyone' will have makes the opportunities given to us in this life much less urgent."

What "opportunities"? Since "Awake, Sleeper" was clearly speaking about people who have *never* been given an opportunity to hear the *true* (i.e., not false) Orthodox Christian message — what "second" opportunity is our correspondent talking about?

### **What About Hawaii?**

What about the millions of people, for example, who were living on the Hawaiian Islands for centuries before the European missionaries appeared on their shores for the first time in the nineteenth century? What "opportunity" were *they* given to hear the Christian message before this?

And what a "Christian" message our Protestant friends brought!

Anselm's "Satisfaction Theory," Augustine's teaching of predestination and inherited guilt, the private interpretation of the Scriptures, etc., etc., etc.

That is to say, it was a *distorted* Christian message that our Hawaiians heard!

If our writer considers *that* an "opportunity" to accept or reject the Christian message in this life, then why are we making all this fuss and bother in support of *true* Christianity — true *Orthodox* Christianity?

As a matter of fact, the Hawaiian people were offered an erroneous version of Christianity, so how can they be held to the same standard as those who were and are exposed to true Orthodox Christianity? Likewise, when Methodists or Lutherans, for example, are presented *only* with an *ecumenistic* version of Orthodox Christianity, have they heard the *real* thing? So, how can they be held as equally accountable as those who have known and cleaved to *true* Orthodoxy?

Indeed, Saint Dorotheus of Gaza makes exactly this point in his work, *That We Should Not Judge Our Neighbor*.

The Saint writes:

I remember once hearing the following story. A slave ship cast anchor in a certain town where a saintly virgin lived, earnestly struggling in the ascetical life. Learning that the boat had arrived she was glad, because she had wanted to buy a little girl for herself. She thought to herself, "I'll get a little girl and raise her myself, so that she'll never know the evil of this world." Thus, she sent for the boatswain, and found that he had two little girls exactly like she wanted. She happily paid the price at once, purchasing one of the two little girls for herself. The boatswain departed, but he had not gone far when he met a wretched chorus girl. The chorus girl saw the other little girl with him and decided she wanted to have her. So she agreed on a price, and the chorus girl left with the other little girl.

Can you see the mystery of God? His judgement? Who is able to interpret it? The saintly virgin took one girl and raised her with the fear of God, imbuing her with every virtue, teaching her every detail of the monastic life, and making her able to sense the holy commandments of God. The other unfortunate girl was taken by the wretched chorus girl and made into an instrument of the devil. What could riotous living teach her,

other than the destruction of her soul? What can we say about this terrible judgement? Both the two girls were small, both sold without knowing where they were going, and one was put into the hands of God, whilst the other was given to the devil. *Is it possible that what God asks from the one, He also asks from the other? By no means! One had learned about the judgement and Kingdom of God and she lived with the words of God night and day. The other pitiable child never knew or heard anything good; on the contrary, she learned everything shameful and demonic. How then could one demand the same standard for both?*

Wherefore, man can know nothing about the judgment of God. Only God is the One Who understands and can judge everything as only He knows.

(par. 73-4)

Saint John Chrysostom, in his "Homily on the Cemetery and the Cross," writes:

So Christ, by His death, bound the chief of robbers and the jailer, that is, the devil and death, *and transferred their treasures, that is, the entire human race, to the royal treasury. . . The King Himself came to the prisoners. . .*

(*Homily on the Cemetery and the Cross,*

PG 49:395-396)

The "entire human race"? Even the Hawaiians?

How about the Hawaiians who lived many centuries later? This is what Saint Cyril of Alexandria says about *them*:

Death, unwilling to be defeated, is defeated; corruption is transformed; unconquerable passion is destroyed. While Hades, diseased with excessive insatiability and never satisfied with the dead, is taught, even if against its will, that which it could not learn previously. ***For it not only ceases to claim those who are still to fall [in the future], but also sets free those already captured, being subjected to splendid devastation by the power of our Saviour. . .*** Having preached to the spirits in Hades, once disobedient, He came out as conqueror by resurrecting His temple as the beginning of our hope and by showing to [our] nature the manner of the raising from the dead, and giving us along with it other blessings as well.

(*Fifth Festive Letter, PG 77: 473*)

Saint Romanus the Melodist says the same thing:

Not only will you, [O Hades,] give back  
those whom you have taken and whom I have resurrected  
and now take with Me, as I leave here,  
but also those who ***in the future*** will be sent  
to you will arise. .

(*Kontakion 45, Sources chrétiennes 128, 594*)

According to the *Octoëchos* (composed by Saint John of Damascus), Christ "descended even unto Hades and dispelled the darkness there, and hast shown the light of the Resurrection unto the nations" (verses for "Lord, I have Cried," Plagal of First Tone).\*

Then, also in the *Octoëchos*, we find the following:

Unto Him Who abolished death's dominion, and Who rose in glory from the grave, *saving the race of men*, give praise, O ye priests...

(Ode 8 of Sunday Matins, Grave Tone)

And also:

Having raised up all the dead out of the dark abysses by His life-bestowing hand, Christ God, the Giver of life, hath bestowed the Resurrection upon mortal nature; for He is the *Saviour* and Resurrection and Life of all, and the God of all.

(Kontakion of Sunday Matins, Pl. of 2<sup>nd</sup> Tone)

### **A Quick Trip to Spain**

Indeed, it would be rather odd if we were to believe that our Saviour descended into Hades and aroused the sleeping, dead pagans — *who had never seen or heard of Him before this* — only to proclaim to them: "Rejoice! Clap your hands, all ye nations! I bring you tidings of great joy! You're all damned eternally!!!"

So far, we must admit that we have not detected this cynical teaching in the Church's joyous and triumphant hymnology for the Resurrection of Christ.

It says in the Gospel, "They that have done good shall come forth unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil shall come forth unto the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:29). Who are they that have done good, and who are they that have done evil? This is a question only God can answer. How do we know whether even a fierce persecutor of the Christians, like the Roman emperor Trajan, might at some point in his life felt a profound grief and wept over the fact that his own daughter — who had become a Christian — had suffered martyrdom at his orders? In fact, we do not know. Only God knows.

Certainly, after death, there is no change in man's character. But here we are speaking specifically about those who had *never* heard the Gospel of Christ during their lives. Christ's resurrection freed all these dead also, giving them a chance to make a choice — according to the character and virtues they had cultivated *in life*, according to their consciences as people who "have not the Law, but by nature do the things contained in the Law" (Rom. 2:14). This would be their opportunity, they would have the choice, at last, to express their remorse over their former idolatry and believe in and accept the true God, Christ, Who, until that moment, had been for them "the Unknown God."

The doctrine that there is no conversion in Hades for the dead pagans who had never seen or heard of Christ in their lifetime was promulgated, in fact, in Spain, at the Council of Toledo in

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\*In the Christian context, the Greek word used here, *ethnê*, can mean "nations," "pagans," "pagan nations," or "heathen." This shift in the word's meaning came into the Greek language from the influence of the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament.

A. D. 625. This was confirmed at the Council of Toledo in A. D. 633 — *the very Council that also added the filioque to the Creed!*

These unhappy developments in the West are due to the baneful influence of the teachings of Augustine of Hippo, according to whom the vast majority of mankind is — thanks to its inherited guilt — *predestined* to eternal damnation.

Whereas it is a teaching of the Church that those outside the household of the believers who came *before* Christ were given the opportunity to accept or reject Christ when He descended into Hades, we have sought to demonstrate in many articles that the Lives of the Saints, the writings of many Church Fathers and the hymnology of our Church accord the same possibility (if not probability) to those who came *after* Christ. Both groups lived and died without knowing about Christ and, thus were never given the chance to accept or reject Him. What is so special about the "B. C." group, which is *given* a choice, as opposed to the "A. D." group, which is *not*?

Our Saviour's descent into Hades and His preaching there are dogmas of the Church. The Holy Fathers, as we mentioned earlier, have *no* consensus about who did or did not follow Him into Paradise. This lack of consensus makes this particular point a *theologoumenon* (a teaching that has *not* been defined as a dogma). But we have quoted abundantly from many Orthodox Christian sources to shed light on this question so that everyone can draw his own conclusions about this matter.

### **Back to Hawaii**

So, as we have seen in the texts we quoted earlier, according to Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Cyril of Alexandria, Saint Romanus the Melodist and Saint John of Damascus, not just the righteous of the Old Testament, but even the Hawaiians who lived centuries "after" our Saviour's descent into Hades could be accounted worthy to hear our Saviour's preaching and be given their *first* opportunity to accept or reject His teaching and thereby accept or reject salvation.

*No* "second" opportunities. Not even if you live in Hawaii (although Saint John of Damascus is willing to give the benefit of the doubt to people who did not "grasp" the Christian message when they were living; and Saint Amphilochius of Iconium is willing to go even further than that).

*Only* God knows who has heard His *true* message of salvation!

Therefore, taking into account all that we have said above — even if one does not understand or believe that Christ's descent into Hades to preach was outside the bounds of earthly time, as also is the soul when it is separated from the body — yet, one thing is certain and undeniable: Holy Scripture proclaims that *all* the dead of all ages past will stand before the Righteous Judge, all will see and know the Merciful Christ, to be judged only then and finally at the end of time, when the supplications and intercessions of the Church will cease.

*Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall stand; for God is able to make him stand.*

(Rom. 14:4)