

26.19

1 Peter 3:18–20 and 4:6—Harrowing of Hell

First Peter contains two passages that seem to suggest Jesus traveled to the realm of the dead in order to preach to “spirits in prison” and possibly rescue souls from hell.

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he 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, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. (1 Pet. 3:18–20)

For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does. (1 Pet. 4:6)

The same concept might also be referenced in this passage from Ephesians:

It is said, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.” (When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) (Eph. 4:8–10)

These passages would be the origin of a doctrine that is often called “the harrowing of hell.” It receives a nod in one line of the Apostles’ Creed, developed in the fourth century, and was also the inspiration for a fourth-century poem by Prudentius.

The Apostles’ Creed

The Apostles’ Creed is a ritual confession of faith used in the liturgies of many churches. Its origins are somewhat obscure: its earliest presentation is in a letter from Ambrose around 390, but that letter mentions it as something already ancient, which the church has “always kept and preserved undefiled.”

The most commonly accepted version of the Apostles’ Creed in use today states:

I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day, he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and will come to judge the living and the dead.

Other translations and versions do exist. The line “he descended to the dead” is sometimes rendered “he descended into hell,” especially in versions used by more traditionally minded Roman Catholic

churches. The choice of wording (“to the dead” or “into hell”) is a question of how to translate the Latin phrase *descendit ad inferna*. Most scholars agree that the word *inferna* refers somewhat generically to the place where spirits of departed persons dwell, a place that sometimes but not always is assumed to be a realm of eternal punishment. Thus either translation is justifiable, though there has been a clear preference for “the dead” in recent years.

It is also noteworthy that the phrase is sometimes missing altogether in ancient manuscripts of the creed. The line does appear in the first known rendition mentioned above (ca. 390), but after that it appears to have vanished from the creed until 650. By 800, however, the manuscript tradition had stabilized and the reference to Christ’s descent (either to the dead or into hell) had become a standard part of Christian confession.

Hymn by Prudentius (348–ca. 405)

Prudentius was a Roman Christian poet who lived in Spain and wrote numerous hymns based on biblical or theological themes. His meditation on the birth of Christ, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” remains a popular Christmas hymn in many churches to this day.

He also wrote the following hymn, reflecting his understanding of the harrowing of hell, which occurred while Jesus’s physical body was still on the cross or in the tomb (while there was darkness over the face of the earth)

Yea, that they might know salvation who in Hades' prison were
pent,

In His mercy condescending through Hell's gloomy gates He
went;

Bolt and massy hinge were shattered, adamantine portals rent.

For the door that all receiveth, but releaseth nevermore,
Opens now and, slowly turning, doth the ghosts to light restore,
Who, the eternal laws suspended, tread again its dusky floor.

But, while God with golden glory floods the murky realms of
night,

And upon the startled shadows dawns a day serene and bright,
In the darkened vault of heaven stars forlorn refuse their light.

For the sun in garb of mourning veiled his radiant orb and
passed

From his flaming path in sorrow, hiding till mankind aghast
Deemed that o'er a world of chaos Night's eternal pall was cast.

Excerpt from *Hymn 9*¹

1. Aurelius Prudentius, *The Hymns of Prudentius*, trans. R. Martin Pope (London:
J. M. Dent and Co. Aldine House, 1905).