



Did Christ Descend Into Hell?

Dear D.,

Christ is risen!

The huge problem here is in defining hell. In the scripture and throughout church history, the English word hell has been used to translate and describe all sorts of things. As you probably know, there are at least four different biblical words/concepts that are translated commonly as hell.

(Hebrew) the abyss/sheol/grave/pit/etc. All of these refer to the condition of being dead (both for the righteous and unrighteous)—with no hint of afterlife. “The dead cannot praise Thee” (Psalm 115: 17, et. al.).

(Greek 1) hades/hell Which in Greek thinking is the place of the dead (both for the righteous and unrighteous)—with a clear sense of afterlife: hell is where the dead dwell.

(Greek 2) Tatarus/deepest hell Which in Greek thinking is the place of the most notoriously unrighteous dead. St. Peter uses it to refer to where the demons are bound. It is a region of hell.

(Greek 3 used only in N.T. by Jesus) Gehenna/fire/torment. Gehenna was the name of the dump outside Jerusalem: where the fire always burns and the worm never dies. It is used as a reference to being in torment.

Then, if this were not complicated enough, there are the apocalyptic descriptions such as lake of fire, river of fire, and the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. As apocalyptic pictures, they are not meant to be taken literally (do we take the four horsemen literally?). Nevertheless, people often use these images to describe “hell”—or use the word hell to refer to these images.



Adding to this are the many Medieval visions (often influenced by European mythologies and Scholastic speculation) of hell. Examples are Dante's inferno in the Roman Catholic West and the toll houses in the Orthodox East.

Finally, as materialists—or at least living in a materialist culture—we tend to think of hell and heaven as “places” other than where we are. Heaven and hell in contemporary culture are “places” people “go” when they die. These places are two: heaven were the good go and are happy and maybe rewarded for being good and/or accepting Christ (Armenian), or just being lucky and chosen (Calvin); and hell is where the bad go and suffer and are punished for all the evil things they have done.

So you can see why, for a contemporary non-Orthodox Christian, it makes no sense for Jesus to descend into hell—“Why would he go there? That's where the bad go to suffer what they deserve.”

However, in the Orthodox Church and in the early church and the scripture, hell was understood as the condition of being dead, or as the dwelling of the dead, synonymous with “the tomb.” Therefore, in as much as Christ really died, he really entered hell and raised all mankind—which will be manifested in the general resurrection on the Last Day.

As far as suffering and torment are concerned, these are conditions which have nothing to do with a place one goes after he or she dies, but everything to do with an inner disposition of the soul. Just as one need not die before beginning to experience eternal life, so one need not die to begin experiencing eternal torment. Death only brings the experience that we have begun in this life into the next life, which is not a place so much as it is a new condition of existence.

So, D., the problem here is semantic. What is hell? If hell is the place where bad people go to suffer the punishment they deserve, then certainly it makes no sense for Christ to go there. But such a hell does not exist as far as Orthodox Christians are concerned. Hell for us is the “dwelling” of the dead; so in as much as Christ really died, Christ really entered hell. And, in as much as Christ rose from the dead, all who die and have died are raised: “Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5: 28, 29).