Protestant Theological University

How Low Did He Go?

A Historical Survey of the *Descensus's* Cosmological Framework in the Bible and its Early Christian Context

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Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:9–11 (NRSV)

Abstract: The *Descensus Christi ad inferos,* as found in the apostles' creed, remains one of the most frequently cited, yet controversial doctrines. Its biblical status remains contested and can only be answered through a detailed analysis of its background and worldview. This study surveys a wide range of biblical and extra-biblical sources to understand the cosmological framework out of which the *Descensus* emerged. By reappreciating the Jewish apocalyptic and Greco-Roman background of this belief, this thesis contributes to the discipline of systematic theology by demonstrating the value of the interdisciplinary (historical) methods used in this case study of the *Descensus*.

Keywords: Apocalyptic Judaism, Apostles Creed, Biblical Studies, Cosmology, *Descensus Christi ad inferos*, Early Christianity, Harrowing of Hell, Katabasis, Systematic Theology.

Contents

Part Three: The *Descensus*

1: Introduction

The *Descensus Christi ad inferos* fits in a long and complex tradition of narratives that have as a core motif the ascending and descending between the different realms of the cosmos, e.g. between heaven and earth or the surface of the earth and the abode of the dead below.[1] Many of these traditions can be found within the both the Old and New Testament,[2] however the *Descensus*[3] itself is not as easily found within these biblical traditions. Given the not immediately evident biblical basis for the belief in the *Descensus*, and in light of the very common practice of reciting the *Apostolicum* in almost all of the Church, especially some protestant traditions have expressed doubts whether it is in fact "biblical".[4] This challenge cannot be quickly answered by a brief glance at a concordance or gathering a collection of prooftexts. Underneath this question are often unaddressed assumptions of what it means for something to be "biblical" Underneath this is the deeper theological question of whether it is in fact "true"—implicit is the notion that the Bible holds a certain authority for those asking these questions.

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[1] For a brief introduction to these biblical traditions see, Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen, "Descent into the Netherworld: A Biblical Perspective," in *The Apostles' Creed: "He Descended into Hell,"* ed. Marcel Sarot and Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen, vol. 24, STAR (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 15–25. Most of the articles in this bundle were greatly helpful in forming my initial thoughts on the *Descensus* and its multi-disciplinary approach inspired my own interdisciplinary, i.e. between biblical studies and systematic theology, framework. Where necessary individual contributions will be cited, the work in general deserves to be mentioned on the outset of this thesis.

[2] In light of the theological approach underneath the surface level source focused methodology, I have decided to refer to the writings of the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament as is common practice within the field of systematic theology. Nevertheless, in this thesis both the continuity and discontinuity between these two collections of literature will be discussed. Both the New Testament writings and Old Testament emerge from a primarily Jewish conceptual framework. In expressing this continuity, an important emphasis for Christian theology, OT and NT seems to be the most appropriate labels for this thesis. Where I refer to the OT, the reader may also read Hebrew Bible. At the same time, the continuity should also not be over-stated, there is also much discontinuity between the OT, and the NT and later Judaism.

[3] The *Descensus* usually refers to the belief in *Descensus Christi ad infero*s or *Descendit ad inferna* as it is found in the *Apostolicum*. In this thesis I use *Descensus* as a shorthand to refer to any belief of Jesus descent into the underworld and means more than just the formulation later found in the creed. To prevent anachronisms, since the concept has developed over time and changed or grew in meaning, it is important to distinguish between the later belief as expressed in the *Apostolicum* and beliefs of the early Christianity.

[4] See e.g. the rejection and defence of the *Descensus* by evangelical scholars, Wayne Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed," *JETS* 34, no. 1 (1991): 103–13 and David P. Scaer, "He Did Descend to Hell: In Defense of the Apostles' Creed," *JETS* 35, no. 1 (1992): 91–99. This critique has also found its way in the popular theological discourse, see e.g. John Piper, Did Christ Ever Descend to Hell?, *Desiring God*, March 3, 2008, https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/did-christ-ever-descend-to-hell.

The concept "biblical"—in light of modern historical exegetical methods—has become a problematic concept, because both the Old and New Testament contain a wide variety of theological ideas internally; between the Old and New Testament there is an even greater sense of discontinuity. However, the continuity between these two should not be understated; the unifying factor is that both bodies of literature are part of a larger Jewish collection of writings containing the thoughts, hopes, songs and history of a people wrestling with God. The question of this thesis is to what extent the *Descensus* fits within this larger Jewish framework. The hypothesis is that the belief in the *Descensus*, as found in the apostles' creed, reflects an early Christian belief that is deeply rooted both in the New Testament and its theology. Even more, that it is rooted in the Old Testament itself and the interpretations and reflections on this Testament as found in Jewish apocalypticism of the Second Temple period. The *Descensus* is not "just" biblical, it is rooted in the interconnected tapestry from which the early Jesus movement emerged, which intricately weaves together both biblical and extra-biblical texts, traditions, and worldviews.[5]

1.1 State of Research

Much research has been done on the relation between early Christianity and Jewish apocalypticism and the strong influence of the latter on the former has been established.[6] This is true to a lesser extent for the relation between the *Descensus,* apocalypticism and early

[5] Hindy Najman's inaugural lecture provided a methodological framework for thinking about the complexity of concepts such as 'biblical' or 'canon'; "Thinking about Thinking in Ancient Jewish Texts" (Dirk Smilde Fellowship Inaugural Lecture, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, March 20, 2024). Her ideas, emphasising the vitality of Jewish scripture, were expressed earlier in Hindy Najman, "The Vitality of Scripture Within and Beyond the 'Canon,'" *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 43, no. 4–5 (2012): 497–518.

[6] E.g. James D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1991); James C. VanderKam and William Adler, *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity*, CRINT 3, Jewish Traditions in Early Christian Literature, vol. 4 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1996); Adela Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Alan J. Avery-Peck and William Scott Green, eds., *Earliest Christianity Within the Boundaries of Judaism: Essays in Honor of Bruce Chilton*, BRLA 49 (Boston: Brill, 2016); Benjamin Reynolds and Loren Stuckenbruck, *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017). One of the most recent contributions providing also a brief history of research is, Adela Yarbro Collins, "Apocalypticism and Christian Origins," in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 326–39. For a more general survey of apocalypticism see the rest of this work, John J. Collins, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014) and the earlier, Bernard J. McGinn and John J. Collins, *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003). For a more detailed discussion of apocalypticism see '4.2 Second Temple Jewish Literature and Apocalypticism' below.

Christian writings.[7] Especially Richard Bauckham's *Fate of the Dead* and Bart Ehrman's *Journeys to Heaven and Hell*—one more recent than the other—contributed massively to the understanding of how the *Descensus* fits within these complex traditions of ascending and descending mentioned above.[8] However, most of this research remained within the field of biblical studies and has mainly indirectly impacted the field of systematic theology.[9] This thesis aims to demonstrate how historical studies, engaging with apocalypticism and other extra-biblical sources, can meaningfully contribute to systematic theological discussion, in an attempt to bridge the methodological gap between these two fields. There is no such gap between the study of early Christianity and the historical research on the belief in the *Descensus* given, that they are methodologically more similar.[10] On the development of the *Descensus* from the first centuries to its more formal and universal acceptance within the Church from the fourth century onwards, Rémi Gounelle's *La descente du Christ aux enfers* remains the most thorough analysis to this day. The three most important factors that he argues led to its formal acceptance are: (1) The Arian controversy in the West, (2) the interpretation of the Psalms in light of the New Testament soteriology in Asia, and (3) the growing importance of the victory-motif in Egypt and Palestine.[11]

Most historical surveys on the *Descensus* focus on its interpretation history and development within the first centuries of Christianity. How it emerges in the early Christian apocrypha has been sufficiently demonstrated, but studies having the *Descensus* as their focal point rarely discuss any sources preceding the New Testament literature, even more lacking is

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[7] Jan N. Bremmer, "Descents to Hell and Ascents to Heaven in Apocalyptic Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 340–57; J. H. Charlesworth, "Exploring the Origins of the Descensus Ad Inferos," in *Earliest Christianity Within the Boundaries of Judaism: Essays in Honor of Bruce Chilton*, ed. Alan J. Avery-Peck and William Scott Green, BRLA 49 (Boston: Brill, 2016), 372–95; Jonathan Knight, "The Descent into Hell: Its Origin and First Development," *JTS* 72, no. 1 (2021): 155–91.

[8] Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Bart D. Ehrman, *Journeys to Heaven and Hell: Tours of the Afterlife in the Early Christian Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022). Their historical surveys will be discussed throughout this thesis.

[9] Cf. Larry R. Heyler, "The Necessity, Problems, and Promise of Second Temple Judaism for Discussions of New Testament Eschatology," *JETS* 47, no. 4 (2004): 597–615. The field of systematic theology could greatly benefit from interdisciplinary research as is argued in, Arnold Huijgen, Koert van Bekkum, and Hans Burger, "Biblical Exegesis and Systematic Theology: Toward Mutual Benefit," JRT 16 (2022): 173–93. They observe four developments in Biblical Studies and Systematic Theology, two of which are of great importance for this thesis: "Emphasis on historical and literary diversity" and "New attention to Judaism", see 184–85.

[10] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, 1960); Martin F. Connell, "Descensus Christi Ad Inferos: Christ's Descent to the Dead," *TS* 62 (2001): 262–82; Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries*, IPM 43 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002).

[11] Rémi Gounelle, *La descente du Christ aux enfers: institutionnalisation d'une croyance*, EAA 162 (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 2000), see 371–86.

the serious engagement with extra-biblical sources like the Jewish apocalypses or Greco-Roman katabaseis. This larger scope is frequently found in historical studies on less niche subjects, e.g. on the development of views of the afterlife.[12] In these studies on hell, the *Descensus* is sometimes mentioned *en passant* but does not receive the attention this enigmatic theologoumenon deserves. This present study hopes to contribute to the study of the *Descensus* by engaging with a wide range of sources starting with the Old Testament, going all the way to the first centuries of Christianity. The New Testament section of this thesis will also contribute to the interdisciplinary study of the *Descensus* by bringing together critical scholarship of the most important passages that are usually cited by systematic theologians when discussion the *Descensus,* but who do not always reflect the most recent scholarly insights into these texts.

1.2 Methodology

The core question, as stated above, is to place the *Descensus* within its larger conceptual framework in order to answer the theological challenge of its biblical status. The structure of this thesis is threefold: (1) Before any attempt is made to look for references to it elsewhere, the possible references to the *Descensus* or its core elements in the Bible need to be critically evaluated. This will be done in chapter two and three which survey the Old and New Testament respectively. The texts are primarily selected based on the motif of descending and ascending and other references to the underworld.[13] To this are added the texts otherwise important, i.e. so frequently cited in relation to the *Descensus* that they cannot be ignored despite not containing the descending and ascending motif. (2) Any elements of the *Descensus* (see following) not found within the biblical texts will be searched for in extra-biblical texts and connections with the biblical texts will be made for the elements already found there. The working hypothesis for this thesis, was that the "gap", i.e. the missing elements, could be closed by looking for these elements in apocalyptic literature from the Second Temple period. In chapter four this body of literature will be discussed in relation to the *Descensus*. Chapter five provides a brief survey of Greco-Roman literature that could further help close the gap. (3) The development of the *Descensus* is studied in chapter six, analysing the core elements that I argue

[12] E.g. Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996) or Bart D. Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

[13] This is achieved by lexical analysis of the Hebrew and Greek texts in Bible software, searching for καταβαίνω/ἀναβαίνω and ירד/עלה, for the underworld, ᾅδης, שְׁאוֹל and parallels.

are the essential parts of the belief in the *Descensus*. The *Descensus* as it came to be understood necessarily contains all these elements: Descent, Death, Victory, Ministry, Liberation and Ascent.[14] These elements together form the most basic structure: Christ died, and therefore descended to the realm of the dead below. In this realm he overcame the power of death and rose victoriously from the grave. To this extend, the *Descensus* is "just" filling in details of the "death, burial, resurrection"-pattern evidently already present in the New Testament—this filling in of details is often at the core of biblical interpretation. More distinctive are the elements describing his activity in the realm below, administering the benefits of the gospel to the saints imprisoned there which leads to their liberation from the realm of the dead.

Special attention will be given to the cosmological framework behind the various texts that will be studied. What cosmology emerges in these different sources and how does this relate to the belief in the *Descensus*? If there is no well-developed concept of a realm below the earth—and a stronger emphasis on the present life lived on the earth itself or fascination with the heavenly realms above—the language of a descent to the realm below does not nearly make as much sense. Therefore, the development of the *Descensus* can be best explained within a cosmology containing a complex and detailed realm of the death below.[15]

[14] The element of descending and ascending is discussed throughout this thesis, a descent and ascent is evidently a required element for the *Descensus*. The other core elements, that say something about the context and meaning of this descent and ascent will be discussed in detail in chapter six and used as evaluative framework for the previous chapters. These elements, or categories, are the authors.

[15] Abbreviations follow SBLHS and otherwise use the convention of the publisher. Citations in English, Hebrew, and Greek are from the NRSV, BHS and NA28 respectively.

2: Old Testament

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter the often-overlooked Old Testament background of the *Descensus* will be analysed by surveying the most significant texts containing the ascent- and descent-motif. These texts are historically, literary and theologically complex. Nevertheless an attempt will be made to describe the Old Testament's shared conceptual framework regarding the *Descensus* by surveying the texts through the lens of the following elements: Descending, Death, Victory, Ministry, Liberation and Ascending. The guiding elements for this chapter are ascending and descending, where they occur brief attention will be given to the other elements as well. First, the cosmology in the Old Testament will be discusses with special attention given to the concept of the underworld, i.e. Sheol. This is followed secondly by analysing the texts describing humans crossing the boundaries—whether that is "below" or "above" the earth—between the human (earth) and non-human realm (heaven or underworld) and thirdly by looking at the passages describing divine agents or beings crossing these same boundaries.

2.2 Cosmology

The most fundamental claim—at least regarding cosmology—of the Old Testament, despite the wide variety and lack of uniformity within the different texts, is that everything that exists is part of the Gods creation. Whether this creation is the result of theomachy, i.e. the cosmic battle between primal gods and the eventual suppression of chaotic powers associated with the sea (יָם) and primaeval ocean (תְּהוֹם) out of which order emerges, or of an orderly and peaceful creation process according to some external rationale, e.g. wisdom (חָכְמָה), the role of YHWH as chief creator is never questioned. Even in the many texts that allude to a cosmic battle, they do always describe these events as far in the past and do not hint at any "serious" battle.[16] Despite all of the cosmos being under (in)direct control of the creator God, there is a clear

[16] E.g. in the book of Job, the Leviathan is reeled in with a fishhook (Job 41:1) and the Behemoth is described as part of creation (40:15, 19) and not something that had to be overcome for order to emerge. In the creation narrative in Gen 1 the deep primaeval ocean is divided without any battle taking place. Cf. the Ba'lu Myth (1.86), *Enuma Elish* (1.1111) in William W. Hallo et al., *COS*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2003); David Noel Freedman, ed., *ABD*, 1st ed, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. COSMOGONY, COSMOLOGY; Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst, *DDD*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1999) s.v. SEA ים, TIAMAT , תהום.

distinction between the realm of the divine and the non-divine; heaven (שָׁמַיִם) and earth (אֶרֶץ). Traditional introductions to the cosmology of the Old Testament will distinguish a third realm or layer of the cosmos, namely that which is below the earth: the realm of the dead.[17]

This distinction between the earth and the realm below is significant, for it puts the dead in a categorically different realm, both physically and ontologically, than the living. However, it is precisely this tripartite conception found especially in Stadelmann's *The Hebrew Conception of the World* that Jonathan Pennington challenges.[18] Pennington opens with a summary of Cornelis Houtman's argument which argues against this simplistic tripartite conception of cosmology (*Weltbilt)* in the Old Testament and counters with a "fundamentally dualistic" worldview (*Weltanschauung)* that only shares the unanimous understanding that YHWH is the creator. [19] In looking at the word-pair שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ,—which occurs over one hundred and eighty times—it is easily observed that this word-pair is often supplemented by a reference to the sea or the deep. [20] However, there is a problem in drawing the conclusion, as Stadelman and J. Edward Wright have done, that the word-pair alone was insufficient in describing everything that was part of the cosmos.[21] Pennington provides two reasons: "(1) despite the quoting of biblical passages, they fail to present a clear case for anything other than a bipartite cosmology; and (2) they confuse the categories of the argument by slipping between descriptions of the earth and Sheol when the biblical record supports no clearly distinct third realm." [22]

According to him there are no biblical reference that structures the cosmos in three distinct tiers. This is further substantiated by the appeal to David Tsumura's study on another word pair אֶרֶץ and תְּהוֹם which demonstrates that תְּהוֹם is not to be considered separate from אֶרֶץ

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[17] Freedman, *ABD*, 1167–8.

[18]Jonathan T. Pennington, "Dualism in Old Testament Cosmology: Weltbild and Weltanschauung," *SJOT* 18, no. 2 (2004): 260–61; Luis I. J. Stadelmann, The Hebrew Conception of the World: A Philological and Literary Study, AnBib 39 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970).

[19] Pennington, "Dualism in Old Testament Cosmology", 261–262; Cornelis Houtman, *Der Himmel im Alten Testament: Israels Weltbild und Weltanschauung*, OtSt 30 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 283–317. This critique towards to quickly constructing a tripartite unanimous cosmology applies to the defence of the bipartite cosmology contracted below as well. Clearly there is variation in the OT and not all images follow the same logic. The key question here is the following: Is there one primary division in the created realm or two? Even if exceptions are granted arguing for a third realm, this dividing barrier is ontologically on a lower scale than the division between heaven and earth in the OT.

[20] E.g. Exod 20:11, Deut 5:8, Ps 135:6, Hag 2:6, see Pennington, "Dualism in Old Testament Cosmology.", 263.

[21] Stadelmann and Wright list a couple of passages, most significant is Amos 9:2-3 which Wright only cites the first half of in order to show that Sheol and heaven can be seen as places not on earth, one below and one above. However, by reading the whole verse two parallels are found arguing for a bipartite cosmology, namely sheol/ deep sea and heaven/ Mt. Carmel, see Pennington, 263–65.

[22] Pennington, 263.

but is a part of it.[23] Psalm 148 is used to demonstrate this bipartite structure, v.1-6 refer to heavenly phenomena and v.7-14 to earthly ones. The structure he suggests is one that separates the heavenly realm, which includes the astral, meteorological and angelic aspects, and the earthly realm both with its land of the living and the dead, with its mountaintops and deep seas.[24]

Following this convincing argumentation, Pennington brings up again the nuance between physical cosmology and ontological cosmology based on the "semantic flexibility of heaven in the pairing of heaven and earth."[25] Both remain fundamentally dualistic, however it is in the latter that the "heavens" are grouped with the earthly realm which in this ontological context can better be described as the created realm.[26] This somewhat lengthy nuance of the cosmology of the Old Testament—to the extent that it is possible to speak of one unanimous cosmology—helps in emphasizing that both the heights and depths described in the Old Testament are always part of the same realm. In general—the exceptions will be described in the next paragraph—all human activity and being is limited to this earthly realm. At the same time there is a certain sense of depth to this realm: mountains are closer to the heavens and therefore a natural meeting point between humans and the divine, the unknown deep sea or pit is as far as one can attempt to flee from Gods presence.[27]

Before turning to the conceptions of the underworld, it is worth reiterating the significance of mountains in the Old Testament as places where the lines between the earthly and heavenly realm begin to blur. As will be demonstrated below, many of the encounters between humans and the divine take place on top of a mountain and when God's dwelling place or divine assembly is situated within the earthly realm, it is always on a high place.[28]

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[23] Pennington, 265–66. Cf. David T. Tsummura, "A 'Hyponymous' Word Pair: ʾrṣ and Thm(t) in Hebrew and Ugaritic," *Bib* 69 (1988): 265–66.

[24] Pennington, "Dualism in Old Testament Cosmology.", 268.

[25] Pennington, 275.

[26] Pennington, 275–76.

[27] See the '2.3.1 Ascending' below for the importance of mountains and the last paragraph of '2.4 Divine Movement' on not being able to escape Gods presence. E.g. Ps 139:7–12 expresses the idea that the whole earthly realm God is equally with the author. For texts often read as representing the tripartite cosmology, for example "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them." (Exod 20:11) Cf. Ps 146:6, Jer 51:48) see Pennington, 263.

[28] See the traditions of mountains in the Old Testament, e.g. Mt. Horeb, Zion and also potentially the garden of Eden, as discusses in Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, HSM 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 98–181. Cf. also the Canaanite traditions around Mt. Zaphon and the Mesopotamian ziggurats which might have functioned as man-made mountains.

More important to this study, however, is not the height of the earthly realm but its depth. As stated above, there is no ontological separate realm underneath the earth. Nevertheless, the cosmology of the Old Testament does have a place underneath the earth in the physical sense which starts right below the dust of the land. The most common term for this place is שְׁאוֹל (or שְׁאֹל) which is often simply transliterated (Sheol) and otherwise translated as "grave" in contemporary Bibles.[29] Underworld, wasteland or void does more justice to the complexity of the concept which is rendered as ᾅδης in LXX and *infernum* or *inferni* in the Vulgate.[30] In parallel to שְׁאוֹל, the Old Testament frequently uses מָוֶת. Both of these can also be personified and are often described as having a strong appetite swallowing and devouring the living reminiscent of the Ugaritic môt.[31] Other concepts are בּוֹר (pit) and שַׁחַת (trap, grave), that amongst the many other less occurring ones share some clear elements: It is a dark, empty place for the dead where there is no possession, joy or praising God, somewhere deep under the earth.[32] Although the place cannot be directly identified with the grave as being nothing more than that, the place does starts wherever a body is buried and the earth covers a corpse. At the same time the underworld is more than just a collective grave, it is the place where both the wicked and the righteous go after death and lead a shadowy existence.[33]

2.3 Human Movement

A cosmology of two distinct realms, heaven and earth, and a geographic conception of the earth, was established above. Attention has only been given to the vertical level (mountains vs the

[29] Shaul Bar, "Grave Matters: Sheol in the Hebrew Bible: Jewish Bible Quarterly," *JBQ* 43, no. 3 (July 2015): 145.

[30] Ludwig Köhler, Walter Baumgartner, and M. E. J. Richardson, *HALOT*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), s.v. שְׁאוֹל. The rendering of שְׁאוֹל as ᾅδης in the LXX however facilitates the later projection of Greek conceptions of the underworld unto the OT cosmology which leads, amongst other reasons, to the NT slowly leaning towards a tripartite cosmology.

[31] Freedman, *ABD,* s.v. DEAD, ABODE OF THE; Toorn, Becking, and Horst, *DDD*, s.v. MOT מות.

[32] See e.g. Ps 6:5, Job 10:21–22. Cf. Freedman, s.v. DEAD, ABODE OF THE, B, 1.

[33] Freedman, s.v. DEAD, ABODE OF THE, B, 3. For some detailed studies on this complex subject, see N.J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament*, BibOr 21 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969); Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, AOAT 219 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986); Philip Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002). In general Christopher B. Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in the Iron Age II and Its Rhetorical Uses in Proto-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2015) will be followed as the most recent study on the underworld for the rest of this chapter. Much more can be said on the underworld in the OT, given the difficulty of speaking about the concept in generalisations, attention will be given to specific texts and patterns in the rest of the chapter. For the inhabitants of the underworld as shades cf. Ps 88:10 and Isa 26:14.

underworld) given the focus of this thesis, yet a horizontal parallel does exist in the contrast between the centre, i.e. the city or temple of God, and the chaotic periphery, e.g. the sea or "the east".[34] In this section the vertical movement, i.e. the ascending and descending, of humans on this established playing field will be briefly surveyed. The survey of texts is not exhaustive in any regards, nevertheless it will help illustrate the significance of these movements. Significant because, as will be shown below, many important figures or events are associated with it or otherwise contain the ascent- and descent-motif.

2.3.1 Ascending

The Hebrew עלה (ascend, go up), besides describing the basic directional movement upward, is frequently used metaphorically. It is a movement to the centre, i.e. the land of Israel on the horizontal level, going up from Egypt in the exodus narrative or in the return of the exiles from Babylon. On the vertical level, it is the mountain of God, i.e. Jerusalem, to which one goes up during the yearly pilgrimages.[35] It is also worth noting the word for the burnt offering (עֹלָה and עוֹלָה) has the connotation of making the sacrifice go up towards the heavens. Despite the centrality of this verb, it is sometimes clear that a narrative describes ascents without using this exact verb, e.g. Abraham's ascent to Mt. Zion (or Mt. Moriah).[36] Most significant is the narrative around Mt. Sinai in the book of Exodus, where Moses goes up (וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה) to the very top (רֹאשׁ הָהָר) and God comes down (וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה) to that same top in order for them to meet and give the Law. It is after the first forty days that Moses spent on the mountain that he descends with the tablets containing the words of the Law.[37]

This motif of ascending the mountain of God is most directly repeated in the narrative of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kgs 19:9–17. It is this same Elijah who is one of the two exceptions to the humans being limited to the earthly realm. When the moment of his death comes, he is taken by God (לקח) and is made to go up (הַעֲלוֹת, hip'il of עלה) by the Lord. Elijah goes up to heaven

[34] Corinna Körting, "A Look behind the Scenes: Worldview in Dreams and Visions in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament," *STK* 95, no. 4 (2019), 257.

[35] Köhler, Baumgartner, and Richardson, *HALOT*, s.v. עלה. Cf. also the Psalms of ascent (שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת).

[36] Gen 22:1–19.

[37] Cf. Exod 19 (esp. v.20), 24:9–18, and 34:29–35. It is this tradition of ascending and descending to the top of a mountain that will be reworked in the tradition of Moses's heavenly ascent and descend, most notably in the *Tg.* Ps 68:19 as discussed in chapter three of W. Hall Harris, *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4:7-11 and Traditional Hebrew Imagery*, AGJU 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 64–122. Note here that there is a historical development from situating special revelation on the highest points of the earthly realm to situating them even higher, i.e. in the heavenly realm.

in a whirlwind and a chariot (רֶכֶב) and horses of fire separate between Elijah and Elisha.[38] There is a certain parallel with Moses, who is buried by God resulting in no one knowing the location of hid body, to Elijah that is seen no more.[39] However in the case of Elijah, despite the mourning, there is no mentioning of his death which suggests that this might not have happened. The other exception is found in Gen 5:24 which surprisingly lacks many details and only informs the reader that God took Enoch (לקח). The pattern of the repeating וַיָּמֹת in the genealogy of Genesis 5 is broken, once again suggesting death did not come for Enoch.[40]

It is only in the later books of the Old Testament that the heavens become slightly more approachable to human beings. In the postexilic book of Ezekiel, in v. 1:1 the heavens are opened for a human to be able to see into the realm of God, which occurs here first and is picked up in later apocalyptic texts.[41] The book of Daniel, which contains the intriguing but controversial scene in heaven of the ascension of the "son of man" (בַּר אֱנָשׁ) who is seen coming on the clouds, is the best Old Testament example of this apocalypticism.[42] These visions of Daniel 7–12 should most likely be dated to the Maccabean period—with chapter 7 possibly going back to an older tradition—and is therefore an example of the internal development of the Old Testament. As the last written book of the Old Testament canon, it fits equally well in

[38] Which calls to mind the introduction of Gods chariot in Ezekiel and the much later Merkavah Mysticism. The word מֶרְכָּבָה does not appear directly in Ezek 1 and 10, but the other imagery of fire whirlwinds suggests intertextuality. For this later rabbinic tradition see Ithamar Gruenwald, "Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism," in *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). This later rabbinic tradition serves as yet another example of the wide range of ideas that developed around the concept of humans crossing the border between earth and heaven, tracing its roots back to the OT writings.

[39] Many other parallels can be found between Moses and Elijah, e.g. both of these end-of-life narratives take place in Moab. Cf. Deut 34:5–6. It is no surprise that these enigmatic passages lead later traditions in rabbinic Judaism and even within the NT cf. Jude 6:9 and the Transfiguration narratives in Mark 9:2–8 and parallels.

[40] It is worth noting the parallel between Enoch and the seventh antediluvian king or sage in the *Sumerian King List*, in the complete form the seventh king is Enmenduranki, who is the king of Sippar, the centre of the Shamash cult and the founder of a guild of diviners (bārû) and a recipient of revelations. Enoch's status as someone who received special revelations and who is associated with the 365-day calendar (his number of days) contains clear parallels. See the Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973); John Walton, "The Antediluvian Section of the Sumerian King List and Genesis 5," *BA* 44, no. 4 (1981): 207–8. For an intertextual reading to which we will return in the next chapter see, Helge S. Kvanvig, *Primeval History: Babylonian, Biblical, and Enochic: An Intertextual Reading* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

[41] Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, WBC 28 (Dallas, TX: Word Incorporated, 1994). Allen here writes that this is the first occurrence of the opening of the heavens, this should be nuanced if the vision in Isa 6 is to be understood as pre-exilic—which it does seem to be. Deut 30:12, antedating Ezekiel, asks the rhetorical question of who will ascend to heaven to which the answer is simple: no one will. Different theological traditions might have developed this idea already before the exile, however it becomes more widespread after the exile.

[42] The current scholarly consensus is that this "son of man" should be understood as an angelic figure, probably Michael, in light of the apocalyptic literature outside the canon to John J. Collins, "Current Issues in the Study of Daniel," in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, ed. John J. Collins, Peter W. Flint, and Cameron VanEpps, vol. 1, FIOTL 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 8–9.

the category of apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple period.[43] The Old Testament canon does not contain one simple understanding of human ascent, throughout the surveyed texts an increased attention towards the heavens and the possibility of human visions of or ascent into these realms can be observed.

2.3.2 Descending

Where the narratives of ascending are quite common in the Old Testament, the descending-motif is mainly found within poetic or wisdom books, most notably in the book of Psalms. The focus of this section are all the descents to the underworld that do not fit within the standard pattern: death, burial and no return to the land of the living, as found also in the *Umwelt.* [44] Besides the example of Samuels shade being brought up (עלה) in 1 Sam 28:3-25, the idea of the dead still being gathered in a place from where they could possibly still influence the living is not strange to the Old Testament. The fact that necromancy is so frequently forbidden illustrates how this possibility was part of the worldview, just as the cult of the dead ancestors might have been prominent before a Yahwistic redaction purged the Old Testament of most references.[45]

As described above, the underworld is often portrayed as opening its mouth to receive the dead. Usually this is "just" an image for being laid in the grave, however in Num 16:20–35 the house of Korach is swallowed by the earth that opens its mouth, and they descend (ירד) into the underworld alive. Besides this text, the only two narrative descriptions of the underworld and the descent therein are found in the prophetic books: Isa 14:3–21 and Ezek 32:17–32 describing the destruction of Gods enemies in a day to come.[46] In both texts the descent is a dramatic description of defeat and death resulting in their burial. Significant in Ezekiel is the description of all Gods other enemies already being present in the pit observing the arrival of the Egypt. Death here is not the end of existence or consciousness but a descent from the from the land of the living to the grave where the dead are collected. All other descents into the underworld in the Old Testament, rely on rhetorical use of death. The descent of Jonah blurs the lines between

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[43] Collins, 6. See also chapter 4.

[44] Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 16.

[45] Hays, *A Covenant with Death*, 166–75; On this gathering of the dead, and the expression 'to be gathered to one's kinsmen' , see Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament*, 168–71.

[46] Mark J. Boda and J. G. McConville, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 1. In the case of Isa 14:3–21, note the reversal of the one who fell (נפל) from heaven (v.12) who attempted to ascend to the heavens (אֶעֱלֶה הַשָּׁמַיִם) in v.13 but is instead brought down to Sheol (אֶל־שְׁאוֹל תּוּרָד) in v.15.

really describing a descent to the bottom of the earth and a poetic description of narrowly escaping his death. The verb ירד is a *Leitmotif* in the book of Jonah and the description of the underworld which is said to have bars that enclose the dead is picked up later in describing the *Descensus*.[47] In the description of all creation, in Gods answer to Job in 38:16–17 this motif of the deep sea and the gates of death is found as well.[48] Where Sheol and its gates are located exactly is more complex; when a body is buried it is seen as Sheol opening its mouth yet, when digging deep under the ground only darkness (צַלְמָוֶת) is found.[49]

Most references to the underworld and escaping death are found in the books of the Psalms. At moments of intense crisis, the language of death and descent into the underworld is often used. Bauckham summarizes it as follows:

> When the psalmists feel themselves to be so close to death as to be virtually certain of dying, they speak of themselves as already at the gates of the underworld … or even already in the depths of the underworld… They have already made the descent to the world of the dead and only Yahweh's intervention brings them up again.[50]

Here, and elsewhere, it is important to not draw to much of a distinction between language, worldview and imagination. That the psalmists use certain language metaphorically does not mean that they did not believe in the reality of this worldview. On the contrary, language is deeply influenced by their contemporary worldview and vice versa. Describing places no one has been or no eye has really seen, can only be done with language readily available to the authors. The belief that God can narrowly save one from death—and the language found in the ancient texts of the Old Testament—developed in the (post-)exilic period first into the eschatological hope of national restoration and eventually even individual resurrection, post-mortem judgement, punishment and reward.[51]

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[47] See chapter six, for the 'bars' (בְּרִיחַ) see Jonah 2:6.

[48] It is this verse which is the only proof given to the earliest appearance of the *Descensus*, in "the Fourth Formula of Sirmium, the Dated Creed of 359" in Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 378.

[49] Cf. Job 28:1–6. The point here that humans are eventually limited and cannot gain access to חָכְמָה by mining under the earth. Maybe the same principle could be applied to humans not being able to dig down all the way to Sheol. Regardless, it challenges the bipartite cosmology argued for in this chapter. This is best explained by internal variety in the OT, I hold this case to be an exception to the standard view.

[50] Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 16. The number of psalms using this language is enormous and space does not allow for a thorough analysis. For a great introduction and overview see, John Goldingay, "Death and Afterlife in the Psalms," in *Judaism in Late Antiquity 4. Death, Life-After-Death, Resurrection and The World-to-Come in the Judaisms of Antiquity*, ed. Alan J. Bar and Jacob Neusner, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 61–85.

[51] The valley of the dry bones in Ezek 37:1-14 is most explicit in expressing the hope of national restoration, but the theme is found in throughout the prophetic literature, see Boda and McConville, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, 2-4. The belief in individual resurrection might be behind certain prophetic texts, e.g. Isa

2.4 Divine Movement

In the brief survey of human movement between the earthly and heavenly realm above it has become clear that the default place for humans is the earthly realm which they, in general, never leave. When they go to its highest points, they can encounter the divine and when they die, they are assembled under the ground. For the divine, the default realm is not the earth but the heavens. Therefore the ascending-motif is extremely uncommon, if the divine is said to ascend, a previous descent is implied.[52] The descending however is quite common and the general idea is clear: it is not for humans to cross between these boundaries but for the divine. If humans and the divine interact, it is usually in the human earthly realm. "Who has ascended to heaven and come down?" asks Proverbs 30:4, and the answer here is straightforward: "God moves between heaven and earth. The idea of a human making such a move to flee from God is entertained by the psalmist in Ps 139:8, only to be recognized as impossible.[53]

Below a short overview will be given of divine descending from the heavens to the earth below followed by the description of God being almighty even over the depths of the underworld. Since Gods presence is usually mediated through divine agents, e.g. angels, and theophanic manifestations the more neutral "divine" will be used to include all of the above. Just as humans are not supposed to cross into the heavenly realm, divine beings in general are bound to their heavenly realm, only God and his mediators can cross between the two. When this pattern is broken evil, chaos and destruction follow.[54]

In its most essential form, since it has been established above that almost all contact between humans and the divine takes place in the earthly realm, any encounter between these two realms can be associated with the descent of the divine. It is therefore helpful to distinguish between theophanies and other forms of communication to humans, e.g. the word of the Lord coming to prophets (וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה). Theophanies, besides the verbal component have a visual

25:8, 26:19 and 53:10-11 but the reference in Dan 12:2 leaves no doubt. "This is the only book of the Hebrew Bible that speaks clearly of individual resurrection" in Collins, "Current Issues in the Study of Daniel", 1. For a compact but detailed historical overview of the development see chapter six and seven in Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell*.

[52] If one understands the 'son of man' in Dan 7:13 as an angelic being, as is the current consensus (see n.41) in it seems that this exaltation is the result of a successful return from the earth, Michael being a natural candidate for identification. In Ezek 10–11 the glory (כָּבוֹד) of God leaves the temple and a return, i.e. ascent to heaven, is implied but after the previous descent in Ex 40:34.

[53] Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC 22 (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 228. This calls to mind a similar question in Deuteronomy 30:12 where the answer also is that no human ever will.

[54] Cf. Gen 6:1-4.

component as well and are therefore more explicitly present in the earthly realm.[55] Most common are angels (מַלְאָךְ), sometimes the angel of the Lord, the glory (כָּבוֹד) and the face (פָּנֶה) as terms for the divine presence.[56] מַלְאָךְ are not always immediately recognized and appear like a human being.[57] The opposite is true of the כָּבוֹד which is publicly discernible and seen descending on the tabernacle and resting there.[58] These theophanies are also often associated with natural phenomena, e.g. fire, smoke or earthquakes.

The core descent in the Old Testament is God's presence on the tabernacle and later the temple in Jerusalem. Although the temple reflects the imagery of a cosmic mountain, a careful distinction is made between God who dwells in heaven and only his name (שֵׁם) which dwells in the earthly temple below.[59] Most descents of the divine are described in the Pentateuch, they become less common after God has a fixed dwelling place with his people. In writings following the destruction of the temple there is a longing for a day that God would descend again from heaven, e.g. Isa 64:1. Most of the descending is focused on bringing relief to Gods people, e.g. Exod 3:8, 2 Sam 22:10 or in relation to the signing of the covenant at Mt. Sinai. However, especially in Gen 11:5 and 18:21, the descending is in the function of observing the evil of mankind and anticipates judgement. The dream vision of Jacob at Bethel (Gen 28:12–16), with the angels of God ascending and descending and God himself speaking, does not neatly fit in any of those categories but does demonstrate the manner in which God is both portrayed as staying in heaven while at the same time mediating his presence on earth.[60]

That leaves the question of the underworld, of which it is never said that God descends into it. On the one hand there is the now outdated view proposed by scholars such as Sigmund Mowinckel that the preexilic God is exclusively the God of the living.[61] He is not present in the underworld and there is no praise or remembrance of him either.[62] This is, however, too simple of an argument because it directly challenges Gods omnipotence which is asserted throughout the Old Testament. On the other hand, there is the view that—in light of this omnipotence—

[55] George W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative*, JSOT 420 (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 6.
[56] Savran, 50.
[57] Savran, 78–80.
[58] E.g. Exod 24:16–17 and 40:34–35.
[59] Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, 178.
[60] Note here that the order is reversed, i.e. ascending and descending. Although striking, it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions regarding the way in which ascents and descents were understood here.
[61] Hays, *A Covenant with Death*, 184. Cf. Luke 20:38.
[62] Cf. e.g. Ps 6:5.

God is the god of both the living and the dead, even of the underworld itself. Amos 9:1-2 is most likely the earliest texts claiming Gods full power over the underworld.[63] God can bring down to Sheol and bring up again (1 Sam 2:6), kills and makes alive (Deut 32:39). On the rare occasion of Elisha and the Shunammite women this power is powerfully demonstrated through his prophet.[64] Admittedly there is a development in the Old Testament, which coincides with the development of a strict and explicit monotheism, that all contesting powers of death and the underworld are pushed to the side which might not accurately reflect the belief of ancient Israel. Nevertheless, the view that God is present even in the underworld—as attested in the exilic Ps 139:7—eventually became the dominant one.[65]

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter the complex and diverse traditions of descending and ascending in the Old Testament have been described, how do these traditions relate to the elements described in the introduction above? Human descents are almost always the direct result of their death. Given the bipartite cosmology argued for, this means they do not descend to a different realm but just move under the ground. God often descends to the earth to be with his people, minister to and liberate them. In light of the bipartite cosmology, it could be inferred that this descent to earth would include Sheol. However, despite God having power over Sheol, he is never described as descending to this place. Human ascents to heaven are rare and an exception to the rule that only the divine can transcend the division between the earthly and heavenly realm. The belief in ascents from the grave, i.e. resurrection, emerges in the post-exilic texts of the Old Testament. In these later texts heaven also becomes more readily available for prophets and ancient heroes favoured by God. The element that is missing most is that of the descent in an underworld that is an ontologically separate realm from the earth. The earth as the land of the living and the grave as the place for the dead start to grow apart quite naturally over time, as more and more details and traditions develop.[66] When the heavenly realms and the realms under the earth have become increasingly complex concepts in Second Temple Jewish literature and the New Testament, all that is said about Gods descent to the earth, his ministry and liberation

[63] Dated in the eighth-century, see Hays, *A Covenant with Death,* 185.
[64] Hays, 186–7. Cf. 2 Kgs 13:20–21 where a man, when he is put in an apparently the same grave as Elisha and touches his bones, is brought back to life.
[65] Hays, 189–92.
[66] As already said above, the influence of Greek mythology is facilitated by the appearance of ᾅδης in the LXX.

of his people in this earthly realm, cannot directly be projected unto this realm below. The next step is to see how descending and ascending works in the New Testament cosmology—and what can be said about a descent into the underworld—and how the elements of the *Descensus* are further developed.

3: New Testament

3.1 Introduction

This chapter follows the same structure as the previous, first some general comments are made on the New Testament cosmology followed by surveying texts describing human and divine ascending and descending. In the conclusion, the findings will be summarized and analysed in light of the six core elements. The division between divine and human movements proves to be more problematic in the New Testament; in which category does Jesus fit exactly—in light of his two natures? In the Old Testament texts, it has been observed that legendary and sometimes near-divine statuses were attributed to the humans who ascended or saw into the heavenly realm. This immediately leads to a historical question about the development of early Christian Christology which is beyond the scope of this thesis; was Jesus made divine at some point, e.g. by adoption, raising from the dead or by ascending to heaven or was Jesus always God, becoming human by descending to the earth, i.e. the incarnation? Although this question is historically complex, (proto-)orthodox Christianity has explicitly confessed the latter. On the basis of this theological argument, all the texts about Jesus descending and ascending will be listed under "3.4 Divine Movement", despite the good arguments that exist to place these texts in the human category.

3.2 Cosmology

Most of the time ascending and descending, or descending or ascending are two sides of the same coin; what goes up eventually comes down again. Humans go up to heaven to receive a revelation and return to share its contents on earth, Jesus descends to earth and ascends back to heaven. When deciding whether texts should be categorized under ascending or descending the question is whether the focus is on the ascent or the descent. In the Old Testament the movement is more permanent, when humans go down into the grave they stay there and when God descends to be with his people, the divine presence stays with Israel for most of the described history. In the New Testament there is a lot more divine movement as will be seen below, this is partially explained by the shift towards a tripartite cosmology. In a bipartite cosmology ascending and descending is an easy concept, there is a lower and higher realm. In a tripartite

cosmology descending can either mean from heaven to earth or from earth to a realm below and vice versa for ascending.

In the previous chapter the natural development of different places in the created, i.e. earthly, realm was noted. The sky and the celestial bodies were also considered part of the heavens and the widening gap between the deep, dark places within the earth, and the collecting place of the dead quite naturally lead to a rapidly growing number of heavens and the development of the underworld which ontologically becomes a separate realm. Similarly to the Old Testament, the New Testament does not share a single consistent cosmology, so do Sean McDonough and Pennington conclude in their lengthy study on New Testament cosmology.[67] In general, the New Testament assumes the Old Testament cosmology and maintains the primary ontological divide to be between the heavenly realm as Gods dwelling place and the earthly one as the place for humans. In the New Testament, the earth has a more negative connotation and is sometimes understood as unspiritual in contrast to the spiritual heavenly realm. In this manner the personified underworld functions as the enemy of the Church. [68]

The realm below is portrayed even more negative, ᾅδης functions similar in the NT as in the LXX but separation is usually made between the wicked who are punished and the righteous who are rewarded.[69] The general idea is that all the dead are temporarily there, to be released in the final day: "Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done."[70] The place of eschatological punishment then is a fiery place called Gehenna mentioned in the synoptic Gospels.[71] Implicit here is the assumption that hell is located below the earth, it remains possible that the language used to describe this realm and the descend is symbolic. This also depends on one's understanding of this realm below, is it the place where the dead are waiting for their judgment (Hades) is it the place where the dead are being punished (Gehenna), is it the realm in which the demons and fallen angels are imprisoned,[72] or the realm of the evil powers over which Satan holds dominion.[73] As will be

[67] Jonathan T. Pennington and Sean M. McDonough, eds., *Cosmology and New Testament Theology*, LNTS 355 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 189.

[68] Pennington and McDonough, 190. Cf. Matthew 16:18, note also the gates also mentioned in the Old Testament.

[69] Freedman, *ABD,* s.v. DEAD, ABODE OF THE, D. Hades in the New Testament. Cf. the story of 'the Rich Man and Lazarus' in Luke 16:19–31. Not always are the righteous considered to be in Hades, alternatives are: paradise, heaven or being with Christ, cf. e.g. Luke 23:43, 2 Cor 5:8 and Rev 7:9.

[70] Rev 20:13b.

[71] Freedman, *ABD,* s.v. Gehenna.

[72] Cf. Ταρταρόω in 2 Peter 2:4 or ἄβυσσος in Luke 8:31 and Revelation 20:3.

[73] Cf. "τὸν ἄρχοντα τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ ἀέρος" in Ephesians 2:2 and "τοὺς κοσμοκράτορας τοῦ σκότους" and "τὰ πνευματικὰ τῆς πονηρίας ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις." in 6:12.

seen below, at least this last category should not be located below the earth according to the New Testament.

3.3 Human Movement

3.3.1 Ascending

The New Testament is not nearly as concerned with other human movements and spends—understandably so—most of its attention on Jesus's descent and ascent. Categorising Jesus's movements under the Divine section renders this one relatively brief. First ascents from the grave will be discussed followed by ascents to the heavens.[74] Most frequently the verb ἐγείρω is used in the many miracle stories of humans being brought to life. Although this has a connotation of vertical movement, even when it is used to mean resurrection, there are only two instances where the bodies actually emerge from the grave: John 11:17–44 and Matt 27:51–53. In the raising of Lazarus, the word ἀνάστασις is used instead, the miracle anticipates Jesus's own resurrection later in John. The enigmatic passage in Matthew describes the rocks splitting and tombs opening during the crucifixion at the exact same moment of Jesus's death but releasing their dead only after Jesus's resurrection.[75] The passage echoes the (proto-)apocalyptic Old Testament texts of Ezek 37:12, Dan 12:2 and Zech 14:5b. The textual status of this tradition is debated, and understood by some as an interpolation after the tradition of Jesus's *Descensus* had already developed.[76]

Texts referring to ascension from earth to the heavens are slightly more common although it remains difficult to distinguish between corporal and non-corporeal visits of heaven, e.g. in the case of Paul's vision of the third heaven which happened either "in the body or out of the body"[77] or the vision of John (of Patmos) while he was "in the spirit"[78] In the case of the stoning

[74] This approach that starts with the crossing of the divide between earth and what is below, will set the structure for the following paragraphs as well.

[75] It is in the death of Jesus and the descent into the grave that other graves are opened, it is possible that the saints only leave the grave—despite already being brought back to life—after Jesus's resurrection in order that he could be the first one rise from the grave, cf. 1 Cor 15:20. Although the text does not make the explicit connection, the idea of the saints rising up together with Christs ascent from the realm below could be behind this two stepped sign.

[76] Manuscript evidence does not lead to this conclusion, however the verses 51b–53 are not cited or alluded to before the Council of Nicaea (325 CE). There is a possible allusion in the Akhmîn Gospel fragment to it, which according to Evans, should be dated no earlier than the late second century. See, Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*, NCBC

[77] 2 Cor 12:3.

[78] Cf. Rev 1:10, 4:1–2. John is told to come up (ἀναβαίνω) to heaven in 4:1 but being in ἐν πνεύματι in v.2 appears to be a trance-like state in contrast to a bodily ascension.

of Stephen, the heavens are opened he only looks up into heaven without ascending to it.[79] These passages do illustrate the familiarity of the New Testament with humans being sometimes being allowed by God (and through the Spirit) to transcend the boundaries between heaven and earth as is also present in the later Old Testament texts mentioned in the chapter above.[80]

3.3.2 Descending

Regarding human descents, no significant change can be observed from the Old Testament idea of the dead being in Sheol which became Hades in the New Testament. As described above in "3.2 Cosmology", besides sometimes considering different places for the righteous, the common view is that all the dead still go to Hades to await the eschatological judgement. The language of a descent in not used to describe death in the New Testament, but still implied given the understanding that Hades is below the earth.

3.4 Divine Movement

3.4.1 Ascending

In the case of divine movement asides from Jesus, just as in the previous chapter, there is no real ascent-motif. Two levels of ascent need to be distinguished, between earth and heaven and between the underworld and the earth. In the case of Jesus both of these require a previous descent which will be discussed in the next paragraph. The ascent from the grave, i.e. the resurrection and the ascent to heaven, i.e. the ascension, of Jesus are both very well attested in the New Testament. The resurrection is described in the same language as other human resurrections mentioned above.[81] The primary narrative description of the ascension is found in the ending of Luke 24:51 and the slightly longer version in Acts 1:1–9.[82] The ascension of Jesus

[79] This still happened while filled with the Spirit: "πλήρης πνεύματος ἁγίου ἀτενίσας εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν" in Acts 7:55.

[80] These text of the late OT and in the NT fit within the framework of apocalypticism and will be discussed in depth in the next chapter.

[81] See primarily Matt 28:1–10 and parallels. Often ἐγείρω is used in the passive, where it is God who raised Jesus from the dead. Cf. 1 Cor 15:42 for the analogy of a seed being planted underground perishable and raised up an imperishable state.

[82] The ascension fits within the pattern of divinely favoured humans being taken into heaven, for a study on how Lukes Ascension fits within this first century Jewish/Christian framework, see A.W. Zwiep, *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology*, vol. 87, NovTSup (Leiden: Brill, 1997). On the narratives importance of the ascension for the book of Acts, see Matthew Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts*, SNTSMS

to heaven is described with the verb ἀναφέρω, which is frequently used in Hellenistic accounts of journeys to heaven.[83] Just as with the resurrection, Jesus is passive in ascending, it is God who brings up him up as was the case for Elijah and Enoch. In the ascension narrative in Acts—besides the promise of the parousia, i.e. subsequent descent following this ascent—especially the mentioning of the clouds is noteworthy because they echo the ascension of the cloud-riding son of man in Dan 7:13–14 mentioned above. Many more texts, e.g. Rom 8:34, Eph 1:20–21 or Phil 2:9–11—which are dated before the ascension account in Acts—already contain the early Christian belief in the exalted status of Jesus in heaven.

In these ascension narratives the focus is not on Jesus's activity once he arrives in heaven. All that is described is that he sits at the right hand of the Father and the promise is made that he will return from there once to inaugurate his kingdom welcomed by the saints.[84] That does not mean there is no activity however, e.g. in Hebrews 10 there is a detailed description of Jesus ministry in heaven, namely the offering of his own blood in the heavenly tabernacle in the priestly order of Melchizedek.[85] Implicit in the book of Acts is that, through the Spirit, Christ is in fact still active, guarding and guiding his church. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is much more active, e.g. as the Lamb who breaks the seals and shows himself to be in control in heaven over the last days of the old creation.

The following two texts, Eph 4:7–11 and 1 Pet 3:18–4:6 are probably the most cited texts in defence of the *Descensus*, however, I will argue below that they do not speak about a descent and instead should be categorized here under "Ascending".

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146 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). The unity and authorship of Luke-Acts as recently been debated, a brief state of research and defence for the unity based on the narrative structure can be found in Joel B. Green, "Luke–Acts, or Luke and Acts? A Reaffirmation of Narrative Unity," in *Reading Acts Today: Essays in Honour of Loveday C.A. Alexander*, ed. Steve Walton et al., LNTS 427 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 101–20.

[83] John Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, WBC 35C (Dallas, TX: Word Incorporated, 1993), 1228. Nolland refers to Gerhard Lohfink, *Die Himmelfahrt Jesu: Untersuchungen zu den Himmelfahrts- und Erhöhungstexten bei Lukas*, SANT 26 (München: Kösel, 1971), 42, 171.

[84] Cf. 1 Thess. 4:16–17. According to Ehrman "It is usually thought that Paul does not mean that people will live forever hovering in the air between earth and heaven but that the believers in Jesus have gone up to meet him there to escort him down to earth, where he will establish his kingdom" based on similarities to welcoming ceremonies of high-ranking Roman officials, see Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell*, 162.

[85] David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, NovTSup 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 215–95.

Ephesians 4:7–11

This passage is frequently alluded to by early Church fathers such as Tertullian and Irenaeus and still heavily debated in modern scholarship.[86] The core of the passage, with regard to the question of the *Descensus*, is the quotation of Ps 68:18 in 4:8 and what Lincoln calls the "Christological midrash" of that Psalm in 4:9–10.[87] The basic pattern of the text is that of ascent which in implies a previous descend, but this immediately raises the question: ascending from where and to where? In Harris's history of interpretation three answers are given: (1) Previous descent to the underworld from which Christ ascends leading up with him captives (ἠχμαλώτευσεν αἰχμαλωσίαν). This could either refer to the prisoners of war that Christ saved, e.g. the Patriarchs or other people belonging to him but imprisoned by Satan. The other option is that these are his own prisoners which he captured in the lower regions, e.g. the devil or other powers who previously reigned in the underworld.[88] (2) The descent refers to Christ's incarnation and the ascend refers to his return, i.e. the ascension the heaven. Necessary in this interpretation is the understanding of τῆς γῆς as an appositive, or epexegetical, genitive to μέρη, resulting in the reading: "the lower regions, namely the earth"[89] instead of a partitive or comparative genitive (lowest region of the earth, regions below the earth resp.).[90] (3) The descent is the gift of the Spirit (of Jesus) after Jesus's bodily ascension to heaven. It is this interpretation that Harris argues: "[O]ffers the best possible explanation at the present time of all available evidence…"[91] If correct, this interpretation of Eph 4:7-11 does not necessarily lead to a rejection of either the belief in the *Descensus* or the incarnation, however it shifts the focus of this text from descending to ascending.[92]

His argument consists of three main steps: (1) Removing some small obstacles by the arguing for the text-critical omission of πρωτον in v. 9 and for reading τῆς γῆς as a appositive

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[86] For a brief history of interpretation see Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 3–30. Since Harris works with vv.7–11, I will follow this example for the sake of clarity, although arguably the pericope could end at v.10.

[87] Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1990), 244.

[88] The former interpretation of saints to be saved is found in Tertullian, *De anima* 55.2. The latter is found in a homily on this text by John Chrysostom who list a whole list of captives that is referred to by the αἰχμαλωσία, see Harris, *The Descent of Christ,* 4–5.

[89] Harris, 15.

[90] Harris, 14–23, for a more elaborate discussion of the genitives see the first part of the second chapter, 46–54.

[91] Harris, 23–31, 197.

[92] The first of these proponents was H. von Soden in 1891. He was followed by T. K. Abbott in 1897. Others who have embraced this stance are G. B. Caird, C. H. Porter, R. P., see the state of research in Harris, 23–30.

genitive in the same verse.[93] (2) Arguing for the association with Moses's ascent primarily in light of Psalm 68:19.[94] (3) Describing the liturgical context of Psalm 68 at Pentecost and the giving of the Spirit.[95] I will now evaluate his argument, and argue for why I agree that interpretation (1) should be rejected but disagree with his conclusion that (3) is the best explanation and instead this text should be interpreted as pertaining to the incarnation and ascension (2).

Much ink has been spilled on the use of this Psalm, writes to Hoehner, who provides a helpful comparison between the NT, LXX and MT. The LXX (Ps 67:19) is a near verbatim translation except the action of receiving of gifts from among the people, the defeated foes, is changed by the author to the giving of gifts to the people, the believers.[96] This is best explained in light of the *Targum* of Ps 68:19, of which Harris provides a translation: "You ascended to the firmament, Prophet Moses; you led captive captivity; you learned the words of Torah; you gave them as gifts to the sons of men."[97] Aware of the problems of appealing to Rabbinic traditions which post-dates Ephesians, *Tg.* Ps 68:19 is the starting point of his quest for the "Moses-traditions regarding a heavenly ascent connected with Sinai and the giving of the Torah in all extant literature, rabbinic and otherwise, at our disposal."[98] The ascent-descent pattern of Moses is the background of Eph 4:7-11, according to Harris, and should therefore give weight to the interpretation that fits this pattern also.

The problem, however, is that it remains difficult to prove the antiquity of this source, preceding Eph 4:7-11. In an attempt to solve this problem, he moves away from the Psalm and looks at earlier hints of a "Moses-tradition" in other literature, e.g. the works of Philo, Josephus or the equally difficult to date Testament of Moses.[99] He does successfully demonstrate the circulation of "Moses-traditions" that (likely) predates the composition of Ephesians. But by completely losing sight of Ps 68:19—which was the only reason to look for a "Moses-tradition" in the first place—and finding this tradition elsewhere, He does not meaningfully contribute

[93] See the argument in the first two chapters in Harris, 32–45 for the textual problems and 46–54 for the discussion of the genitive.
[94] Mainly chapter three which is the core of the study, also for Moses's ascent in other texts than Ps 68 see chapter four in Harris, 64–122, 123–42.
[95] Chapter five in Harris, 143–70.
[96] Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 523–25.
[97] Harris, *The Descent of Christ,* 65.
[98] Harris, 64–5.
[99] Harris, 123–42.

anything to the understanding of Ephesians. Hoehner, in his seven-point argument against Harris's interpretation, opens with a similar critique which is convincing: Even is these traditions circulated "how much would the Gentile audience in Ephesus be acquainted with them?"[100] Even if it can be argued that some (oral) tradition influenced the author of Ephesians, it would have no meaning to the recipients and therefore this interpretation becomes a lot less convincing.

However, if despite its problems, the premise of an underlying "Moses-tradition" in Eph 4:7-11 is granted, where does that leave us? Harris shows that the association of Pentecost (Feast of Weeks) with the giving of the Torah existed prior to Ephesians, most clearly shown by comparing Jub. 1:1 and 15:1 which makes these two days coincide.[101] Yet from here he moves rather quickly to the identification of the ascended Christ with the descent of Christ's Spirit at Pentecost as found in Acts. To this Hoehner objects by asking why no explicit connection is made between Pentecost and the "Moses-tradition" or the receiving of the Torah in general in Acts 2?[102] This is further complicated if one were to grant a parallel with Moses's ascension and descension, for Moses descended as he had ascended, i.e. bodily and not only in his spirit.[103] Leaving aside the potential problematic theological understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit—which admittedly is still quite undeveloped at this point—Harris's interpretation that this texts fits the pattern of ascent first followed by a descent, must be rejected until the influence of the "Moses-tradition" can be further substantiated.

The first two interpretations described above remain open: (1) the traditional *Descensus* interpretation and (2) the interpretation of incarnation and ascension. Either of these interpretations describe a descent first followed by an ascent, the question remains; how low or deep did Jesus's descend according to Eph 4:7–11?

Since the author of Ephesians shows familiarity with the Jonah 2 LXX, it is possible that Eph 4:7–11 does indeed refer to the *Descensus*. Jonah 2:7 LXX describes Jonah as going down into the earth (κατέβην εἰς γῆν) and the abyss (ἄβυσσος) encircles him in v.6.[104] Nevertheless, this needs to be rejected as well in light of some not insignificant objections. The most

[100] Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 532. To this he also adds that this "Moses-tradition" remains difficult to prove, and therefore the problem which was already observed for *Tg*. Ps 68:19 is not solved either.
[101] Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 152.
[102] Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 527, 533.
[103] Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary,* 533.
[104] Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 62–63.

straightforward objection is that the focus of the texts is on the ascension alone and no *Descensus* naturally enters the picture, or as Lincoln says: "it is quite difficult to see how such a descent into Hades could be logically deduced from Christ's ascent, which, after all, appears to be the force of the argument here."[105] Ephesians also works with a bipartite cosmology, with no mention of the underworld and only two realms: heaven and earth. Even the powers of evil are not housed underneath the earth but are above in heaven (ἐπουράνιος)[106]

Lohfink argues that, in light of the soteriological frame of a descending redeemer, this text should be understood as pertaining to the incarnation.[107] If indeed reading Eph 4:7–11 is read as a pertaining to the incarnation, most justice is done to the assumed original meaning or context of the Psalm: "The descent to be inferred from the ascent of Yahweh to Mount Zion would be that of his first descent to deliver his people and triumph over his enemies before going up to his dwelling place."[108] To which he adds a similar argument as Lohfink above: "On this view, the passage can be seen as a typical instance of a descent-ascent Christology to be found elsewhere in the NT, especially in the Fourth Gospel (cf. John 3:13; 6:62), but also represented in Paul by the humiliation-exaltation motif of the hymn in Phil 2:6–11."[109] This interpretation, also in light of the Old Testament background of the Psalm is summarized by Hoehner as follows:

> Christ had victory over Satan, sin, and death and gives gifts of the Spirit to those who have been identified with him. The point that Paul is trying to make is the fact that Christ, who ascended as victor, has the right to give gifts. For if Christ had been defeated, he would yet be in his grave and spiritual gifts would be useless to those whom he could not redeem. On the other hand, Christ does not receive gifts from the defeated foes as in Ps 68, for such would be useless to God and his children. Satan, sin, and death have been defeated by Christ's redemption. Consequently, those who were held in bondage have been freed and have obtained the gifts of the Spirit from their victorious Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.[110]

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[105] Lincoln, *Ephesians,* 245.

[106] "[P]ert. to being associated with a locale for transcendent things and beings, heavenly, in heaven… Since there is more than one heaven (cp. 2 Cor 12:2), τὰ ἐ. can be the dwelling place of evil spirits 6:12" in Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, BDAG, 3rd ed (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. ἐπουράνιος. Cf. Eph 2:2, 3:10, 6:12.

[107] Lohfink, *Die Himmelfahrt Jesu*, 87.

[108] Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 245–46.

[109] Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 245. This descent-ascent motif, or the variations e.g. the humiliation-exaltation motif, is the theological framework in which all the ascensions need to be understood. The natural place for Christ, in light of his pre-existence, is not the earthly realm and therefore any glorious ascent requires a previous descent.

[110] Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 530.

1 Peter 3:18–4:6

I have saved the most heavily debated and intriguing passage until now, the unit of 1 Pet 3:18–22 and 4:1–6. The core is found in 3:18-20. Often, the verses 4:5–6 are read in parallel. Here "…νεκροῖς εὐηγγελίσθη" is read in parallel to "…τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν…", an issue to which I will shortly return.

1 Peter 3:18–4:6 is often called the "most difficult passage in the entire letter"[111] or "perhaps the most difficult in the NT."[112] Although no contribution will be added to this debate, a decision between the many different interpretations offered has to be made. William Dalton's magisterial work will prove to be most helpful in this regard.[113] The most important questions that needs to be answered for our study are: Where did Christ go, especially, did he descend or ascend? When did the described events take place: before, during or after the Passion narrative? What is the direct object of Christs activity, i.e. who or what are "τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν"? What is Christ really doing, what does "ἐκήρυξεν" mean? For the last two questions it is especially relevant whether 4:5–6 can be understood as a parallel. The first, and most traditional, interpretation would generally answer that affirmingly, 4:5–6 is a parallel and therefore the passage should be read as a one unit but no satisfactory proof has been offered for this supposed reading, so argues Dalton.[114]

This, and the other two main direction of interpretation are discussed at length in Dalton's first chapter discussing the history of interpretation. The interpretations can be listed as follows: (1) Christ's soul went down to the underworld during the *triduum mortis* to make proclamation to Noah's contemporaries. (2) Christ, before the incarnation, made proclamation to these people while they were still alive through Noah. (3) Christ made a proclamation to the fallen angels associated with the flood story.[115] It is the last interpretation offered—it is usually the last—that Dalton will end up arguing for. This interpretation has become the majority view amongst

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[111] Paul J. Achtemeier and Eldon Jay Epp, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 240.

[112] Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 236.

[113] William J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6*, 2nd ed., AnBib 23 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989).

[114] Therefore Dalton argues that the texts, to prevent circular reasoning, should be treated on their own merit, Dalton, 143–5. Cf. these earlier studies, Werner Bieder, *Die Vorstellung von der Höllenfahrt Jesu Christi: Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Vorstellung vom sog. Descensus ad inferos*, vol. 19, ATANT (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1949); Bo Reicke, "The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism: A Study of 1 Pet. III. 19 and its Context" (Copenhagen, E. Munksgaard, 1946).

[115] Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits,* 14.

scholars.[116] Before I turn to the details of this interpretation, it is worth noting the complete lack of citation and allusion to the text in question until Clement of Alexandria, which is striking given the popularity of the *Descensus* in the early Church Fathers, most of whom held the first interpretation.[117]

The argument for this last interpretation is built on (1) a short contextualization of 1 Peter 3:18–4:6 within the rest of the letter, (2) an analysis of the literary structure and hymnic elements in 3:18–22, (3) a detailed exegesis of verse 18 and (4) 19–20a followed by the (5) study of the text in light of 1 Enoch which wraps up the core of the argument. Afterwards he returns to the (6) baptismal context of the text, and its comfort for Christians suffering persecution sharing in Christ's victory over evil, established earlier (1). I will briefly summarize the most essential steps to follow the argument, found in (3), (4) and (5).

The distinction made in 18b: "θανατωθεὶς μὲν σαρκί, ζῳοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι·" is discussed in detail. This distinction, so argues Jobes, must be understood to be between his state before and after the resurrection.[118] Dalton shows that nowhere in the New Testament, where the antithesis between σάρξ and πνεῦμα is indeed quite common, it refers to the distinction between body and soul.[119] Citing Schweizer's articles in *TWNT* he adds: "Schweizer emphasizes that Pauline and New Testament usage generally is based on the thought world of the Old Testament, not on the concepts of Hellenistic philosophy."[120] He concludes that, without "an *a priori* [Italics his] concept of how the whole passage should be interpreted" it can be stated with certainty that 3:18b refers to the death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.[121]

This then immediately impacts how "ἐν ᾧ" in verse 19 needs to be understood. Besides the conjecture that reads Enoch as the subject of the next sentence, as first suggested by J. Bowyer and popularized by Rendel Harris who argued the original sentence would have been ΕΝΩΚΑΙΕΝΩΧΤΟΙΣΕΝΦΥΛΑΚΗ containing both the ΕΝΩΚ as the first four letters as well as ΕΝΩΧ, the latter having been omitted due to haplography.[122] Although it anticipates the important parallel between Enoch's proclamation to the fallen angels and Jesus's proclamation to this spirits in prison, to which I will shortly turn our attention, this conjecture does not

[116] Jobes, *1 Peter*, 237.
[117] Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits*, 16–32. For the development of the *Descensus* see chapter six.
[118] Jobes, *1 Peter*, 238.
[119] Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits,* 127.
[120] Dalton, 131.
[121] Dalton, 134.
[122] Dalton, 135; The similarity of these four letters in the original majuscule manuscript has been helpfully visualized in the excursus on thus conjecture in Achtemeier and Epp, *1 Peter*, 253–4.

sufficiently explain the abrupt narrative change of subjects and therefore, amongst other reasons, can be safely rejected. What then is the antecedent of this relative? The two most natural options are either πνεύματι or the whole phrase as is argued most strongly by Selwyn based on the notion that "an adverbial dative such as πνεύματι is never found as the antecedent of a relative."[123] However, considering the New Testament use of constructs such as ἐν πνεύματι, Dalton sides with the former option. Having established above that πνεύματι refers to the resurrected state of Christ, it leads to the conclusion that the subject of the preaching, is "the risen Lord". This also leads to an answer on our question of "When", if it is the resurrected Jesus, the preaching must take place after the *triduum mortis* and not during.[124]

This then leaves two questions two be answered: who are the objects to which Christ is making a proclamation and what does this proclamation achieve or mean? As will be seen, the nature of the proclamation is directly linked to the objects of the proclamation. The reading πνεύμασιν, assuming the ancient variant in P_{72} which reads πνευματι as in the previous verse is an error, it refers either to the souls of those who died in the flood or the fallen angels, the infamous בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים who precede the flood narrative in Gen 6:2 or the spirits who remained after their giant offspring died in this flood.[125] Neither in the New Testament or non-biblical usage does the absolute, i.e. unqualified, term "spirit" refer to human souls, and it must therefore be understood as referring to superhuman beings.[126] These superhuman beings are said to be in prison (ἐν φυλακῇ) which confirms that they are not souls in the abode of the dead, so concludes Dalton: "Nowhere in biblical literature is the world of the dead called φυλακή".[127] Only a later variant renders ἐν φυλακῇ as Sheol (ܫܐܘܠ), namely the Syriac Peshitta of this text but all this demonstrates is the interpretation history of this text.[128]

Two verbs remain, the participle πορευθεὶς and the indicative ἐκήρυξεν. Although nothing conclusive can be said regarding πορευθεὶς, it is worth noting that—while its basic meaning is simply "to go"—the same verb (πορεύομαι) is used in the in the ascension narrative of Acts 1:10. This is especially significant since the proper verb for descending is not πορεύομαι

[123] As summarized in Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits,* 137.
[124] Dalton, 140.
[125] Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits*, 145–9. Cf. 1 En. 6:1–7:6, 15:4–10.
[126] Dalton, 145–50; See also John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, AB 37B (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 656.
[127] Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits*; Cf. Achtemeier who adds "That such a prison exists for evil "spirits." however, is assumed both in the NT and in Jewish tradition, particularly the traditions concerning Enoch, although the location of the prison is unclear, that is, whether it is in the earth , in the heavens, or at the end of both heaven and earth." Achtemeier and Epp, *1 Peter*, 256.
[128] Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits*.

but καταβαίνω.[129] This leaves us with ἐκήρυξεν (κηρύσσω) which has as a neutral meaning simply the making of public proclamation.[130] Since Christ is usually the content of this proclamation it usually appears together with εὐαγγελίζω and is used interchangeably.[131] To be more precise, it is the proclamation of that which Jesus achieved (in death and resurrection). The kerygma of the New Testament gospel contains more than the forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life or being justified by the atonement of Christ, it also contains the victory over death and the coming judgement of Satan and his angels. In light of the context that the flood provides, it is likely that the proclamation might be one of judgement and not the extension of grace.[132]

At this point I have followed Dalton's argument for the interpretation of Christ making a proclamation of judgement to the evil spirits after rising from the grave in victory. The most important evidence has been saved until the end, and in light of the previously presented arguments amounts to a convincing case for this proposed interpretation. In the short fourth chapter Dalton fills the gaps in his argument by analysing the pseudepigraphic work of 1 Enoch and its bearing on 1 Pet 3:19. Because I will turn to the apocalyptic literature from the Second Temple period in the next chapter, in which the discussion of 1 Enoch will play a prominent part, it will suffice here to quickly summarize the conclusions of Dalton in regard to 1 Pet 3:19. In short: 1 Enoch develops, from the tradition of rebellious angels (or sons of god/ divine beings) found in Gen 6:1–4 who are the direct prelude to the flood. They descend from heaven, have intercourse with women and teach all mankind how to sin. In the narrative, in comparison to Genesis, the ultimate origin of sin and evil can no longer be contributed to humankind. "Salvation" therefore has nothing to do with atonement, and everything with purification by the violent destruction of all evil through the flood. Enoch, who according to Gen 5:21–4 has been taken up to heaven, is then sent to them to pronounce their coming judgement and is later shown the prison prepared for them.[133] From this summary alone it is immediately clear that this tradition is part of the literary context of 1 Pet 3:19. Considering how influential 1 Enoch has

[129] Dalton, 160.

[130] "[T]o make an official announcement" or "to make public declarations, proclaim aloud" in Danker and Bauer, BDAG, s.v. κηρύσσω.

[131] Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits*, 152.

[132] Cf. 2 Pet 2:5 where Noah is called a herald of righteousness (δικαιοσύνης κήρυκα). "He is a herald in so far as, by building the ark, he proclaims the coming punishment of God." See Dalton 153–4.

[133] See the Book of the Watchers, esp. chs. 6–11, 13:1-3, and 21:7-10 in George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, eds., *1 Enoch: A New Translation, Based on the Hermeneia Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004).

been for—at least some part, including 1 Peter, of—the New Testament, I conclude that the author of 1 Peter saw in the patriarch Enoch an anticipation of the work of Christ and therefore used the story of 1 Enoch to portray Jesus as a new (and better) Enoch.[134]

Two brief questions remain: Where did this proclamation take place and what is the meaning of the rest of the passage? Given the cosmology of the New Testament, which situates the realm of evil spirits in the skies above, i.e. in a lower heaven, it is likely that this proclamation was made during Christ's ascension through the heavens which can be understood as a march of victory. This leads to the conclusion that 1 Pet 3:18–22 does not refer to a descent. Having established that 1 Pet 3:19 does not refer to the souls of the dead, it can be concluded that it should not be read in parallel with 4:6. Then what is the meaning of this verse and the literary unit of 1 Pet 3:18–4:6 as a whole? Dalton concludes:

> It remains true that the whole passage, 3:18-4:6, is closely knit together by a great 'inclusion'; this is based upon the link between Christ and the Christian, 'Christ, put to death in the flesh, brought to life in the spirit' and the Christian 'judged in the flesh in the eyes of men but 'living in the spirit in the eyes of God' And if one looks for the ground of this fundamental relationship, one finds it in the Christian's experience of baptism: in this he is not merely saved by water, like Noah, from the world of evil, not merely is he preserved in the great eschatological judgment, not merely does he pledge himself to a life in keeping with the new covenant, but he enters into the very mystery of Christ's death; he shares Christ's death in the flesh in order to share His life in the spirit.[135]

3.4.2 Descending

Having established which texts are not primarily about a descent, three texts that might refer to a descent to the underworld will be surveyed below. Starting with the gospels, an important possible reference to the *Descensus* can be found in Matt 12:40: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." In this text an explicit allusion is made to Jonah as an answer to Jesus's critics demand for a sign. Where elsewhere the tradition of Jonah's descent inro ᾅδης might be implicit, here it is certainly present.[136] Nevertheless the text does not say much about what happened in the heart of the earth, the *Descensus* is not in sight. The text is primarily concerned

[134] Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits,* 175–6.
[135] Dalton, 276-7.
[136] Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, WBC 33A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 354.

with anticipating the resurrection as the final sign of Jesus ministry, just as the emergence from the fish was the main sign for Jonah.[137]

Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2:27 and 31 also describe Jesus being in Hades: "he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption."[138] Peter cites Ps 15:10 LXX which, pointing to the tomb of David in their midst, cannot apply to him and must point to someone else who God set on the throne.[139] The claim is that he did not even go down there to begin with, assuming a distinction between the physical grave and the realm of Hades, his body laid in the grave without his soul descending any lower.[140]

In Rom 10:6-7 the idea of Christ being in heaven and amongst the dead, at least at some point in time, is also found. Pauls works with a reinterpretation of Deut 30:11-14 to which he refers. Especially significant is the idea of descending into the abyss instead of traveling to the other side of the sea which is found in the LXX.[141] Dunn observes that this idea is also found in *Targum Neofiti* of Deuteronomy 30 which contains the tradition of Moses who ascended to heaven and Jonah who descended to the depths of the sea and who brings the law down or up from where they are.[142] Again, just as generally is the case in the Old Testament above, the point is that no human should attempt to cross the boundaries between heaven, earth and the abyss. It is likely however, that a descent of Christ to the underworld is behind this text.

One final text worth mentioning here is Rev 1:18 which is about the keys of Hades. In the his recent monograph, Justin Bass convincingly argues that this text should be understood as a reference to the *Descensus*.[143] The argument is the following: Based on the study of the personified Death and Hades in the Greco-Roman world—and the Old Testament, Second Temple literature and New Testament—combined with a study on keys and keyholders, if

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[137] G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 45.

[138] Acts 2:31.

[139] Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 82.

[140] It is also possible that Christ was only temporarily in Hades and God did not allow him to see corruption, i.e. he was unaffected by Hades and could not be imprisoned by it.

[141] First thought to be Pauls own modification, but now found in Targum versions, Hanson cites the *Targum of Palestine,* see Antony Tyrrell Hanson, *The New Testament Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SPCK, 1980), 135.

[142] James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, WBC 38B (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 604–6.

[143] Justin W. Bass, *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ's Descent into the Underworld*, PBM (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2014).

Christ has gained the keys of Death and Hades, he must have taken them by force.[144] Most notable here is the reliance on the Greco-Roman conception of the underworld and its keyholders to arrive at this conclusion. If this text does indeed refer to the *Descensus*, it is significant that for the interpretation of Revelation—which is the most apocalyptic book of the New Testament—the Greco-Roman cosmology is required to arrive at the clearest possible reference to the *Descensus* in which Jesus descends to and also interacts with Hades.

There are other descents in the New Testament as well, descending from heaven to earth. Since these are hardly controversial, I will only mention these for the sake of completeness. There are two primary divine descents, the incarnation of the pre-existent Logos as most explicitly found in the Gospel of John with its distinct high Christology. Especially in John 6:22–59 the descent of the bread from heaven is given a lot of attention. The other descent, following Jesus's ascent, is the descent of the Holy Spirit the Pentecost narrative in Acts 2:1–13.[145] Angels are also said to descend from heaven to earth, e.g. in John 1:51 or Matt 28:2.

3.5 Conclusion

It is no surprise that the New Testament is not nearly as concerned with human movement as it is with Christ's ascending and descending. The importance of his descent to earth and ascent to heaven cannot be understated for the New Testament theology, the same is true for his death, burial and resurrection. Given the tripartite cosmology—at least behind some of the texts—the descending and ascending takes place on two different levels. Combining incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus passes through all realms of existence in the pattern of (A) descent, (B) descent, (B') ascent, (A') ascent. The theological core of this chiastic structure is (B + B'), there is no (X), i.e. any real activity between these two that is described in the New Testament. The descent into Hades is found in the New Testament, however, argues Dalton: "In the New Testament, the descent of Christ to the world of the dead is a way of insisting on the fact that he really died. There is no text, besides that of 1 Pet 3:19, which can be proposed as justifying an *activity* [his] of Christ in Sheol."[146] This proposal ultimately fails, I agree with Dalton's conclusion that indeed 1 Pet 3:19 cannot help fill this gap. Nevertheless, in the last text of Rev 1:18 discussed above, the descent and defeat of Hades can be found which

[144] Bass, 146–8.
[145] Cf. the baptism narratives Matt 3:16 and parallels.
[146] Dalton, 184.

constitutes at least the activity of victory. This element of victory is also found in relation to Christ's ascent and is arguably more common there, the New Testament cosmology usually situates the evil powers in a lower heavenly realm. The other activities, ministry and liberation can however not be found as related to the descent to the underworld and are—just as is the case for the Old Testament—related to the descent from heaven to earth.

All elements that are required for the development of the *Descensus* have been found in the Old and New Testament: Descending, Death, Victory, Ministry, Liberation and Ascending. However, they are not brought together in a single pattern, the descent into the underworld has no relation to the element of ministry and liberation yet. In the following two chapters apocalypses and katabaseis—each with their own distinct cosmology—will be surveyed to better understand the relation between the descent to the underworld and possible activity therein.

4: Second Temple Jewish Literature

4.1 Introduction

The Old and New Testament contain all elements of the *Descensus* but the references to a descent to the underworld are rare still and the only activity there, a victory over Hades is implied and not described. The aim of this chapter is to see if any other activity can be found in extra-biblical Jewish literature from the Second Temple period. Especially the element of ministry and liberation, i.e. any activity that benefits humans in the underworld, will be looked for. The apocalyptic literature, with its tours of heaven and hell, is most likely to contain other references to any activity in the realm of the dead. Studying these apocalypses provides a better understanding of the Jewish literary context in which both biblical and extra-biblical sources participate. Because of the complicated and heavily discussed nature of this body of literature, genre and worldview, "apocalypticism" itself is first discussed. Second, a survey of the cosmology, worldview and language for the afterlife will be given by discussing cosmic tours of heaven and hell and analysing The Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1–36) as a proto-typical example in detail. Third, this will be followed by a conclusion in which the balance regarding the elements of activity is made up.

4.2 Second Temple Jewish Literature and Apocalypticism

The period between the Old and New Testament is often called the intertestamental period, however, this proves difficult to define since neither testaments are fully canonised at this point and the dating of some books further problematizes this.[147] The so-called Second Temple period allows for a clearer definition since its categorization is chronological and independent of certain understandings of canon.[148] It differs from the previous period in that the monarchy is replaced by the high priesthood, which made the temple cult even more central than it had

[147] This is also complicated by the different canons, certain works, e.g. 1 Enoch, are part of the biblical canon in the Orthodox Tewahedo church. Others, not containing apocalypses but still demonstrating an apocalyptic worldview, are considered deuterocanonical or apocryphal by some churches, e.g. the narrative books 1 and 2 Maccabees which develop the belief in individual resurrection. Most notable is 2 Macc 7 in expressing the hope of post-mortem reward and punishment.

[148] The focus on apocalypticism within Second Temple literature means that there is a certain overlap with both the OT and NT. Many apocalypses predate the earliest books of the NT and continue to be written well past the destruction of the Second Temple.

already been.[149] It is mainly in the Hellenistic period, that the apocalypticism, which slowly emerged from the eschatological hopes of postexilic prophecy and other wisdom traditions during the Persian period, shows up far more developed and "full-blown".[150] A distinction can be made between the apocalypses as a genre and apocalypticism as a worldview. The former is briefly discussed, followed by a discussion of the latter which is most important for this thesis.[151]

4.2.1 Apocalypses as a Literary Genre

The dominant definition, still frequently cited as a starting point for scholarly discussion, is the one put forward by John Collins in *Semeia 14*:

> [An apocalypse is] a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world.[152]

This definition was amended, in light of the important criticism which held that this definition said nothing about the function of said apocalypses, in *Semeia 36* by Adela Yarbro Collins:

> [and is] intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.[153]

Especially the emphasis on the supernatural world in this genre is significant for the present study which attempts to better understand the cosmological framework out of which the *Descensus* emerged. Within the genre, other common elements are pseudonymity, i.e. being

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[149] Frederick J. Murphy, "Second Temple Judaism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck, Reprint (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 58. For the rise to power of the (Zadokite) priesthood and its influence on later Judaism see Gabriele Boccaccini, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism: An Intellectual History, from Ezekiel to Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2002). See also, James D. G. Dunn, The Parting of the Ways.

[150] John J. Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End," in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard J. McGinn and John J. Collins (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 64–8. This hints at the complex relation between apocalypticism and Hellenism, an issue to which I will return below.

[151] Frederick J. Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), xv. This recent introduction to apocalypticism is the main one used in this chapter. Another great introduction, first published 1984 is John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016).

[152] This definition is the result of the Apocalypse Group of the SBL Genres Project, John J. Collins, ed., "Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia*, no. 14 (1979), 9. Cf. John J. Collins, "What Is Apocalyptic Literature?," in The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature, ed. John J. Collins (Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–5. And John Frow, Genre, 2nd ed., NCI (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 59–60.

[153] Collins, "What Is Apocalyptic Literature?", 6; Adela Yarbro Collins, ed., "Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting," *Semeia*, no. 36 (1986), 7.

attributed to ancient people like Moses, Elijah or Enoch. And the use of *vaticinia ex eventu*, i.e. prophesying about events in the past or after the event.[154] The literary genre can also be divided further: "[O]ne containing a heavenly journey and the other a review of history." The former is most relevant for the present study, since, so continues Murphy, "[t]hose with a heavenly journey demonstrate greater interest in cosmological knowledge..."[155] In the paragraph below these heavenly journeys will be analysed further. Before this, the worldview of apocalypticism will be described as a general framework in which these journeys should be understood.

4.2.2 Apocalypticism as a Worldview

The most straightforward understanding of apocalypticism is simply the worldview that is contained in the apocalypses themselves. Therefore, making explicit the worldview implicit in these apocalypses will be the starting point of this survey. Important is the necessity of a revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) from which the whole genre and worldview derives its name. Although the category "supernatural" is not appropriate in the ancient world, the need for a special revelation implies a "unseen world" as suggested by Murphy.[156] Whether this is really a distinct realm is not entirely clear. The content of these revelations are the heavens, hell and other places at the edges of the world where the seer, i.e. the one receiving the revelation, is taken to interact with divine beings and is revealed the inner workings of the cosmos and the plans for the future.[157] It is important to note that the seers begin their cosmic journeys as human unrelated to their death.[158]

This knowledge of the future emphasises the sovereignty of God throughout history, culminating in the eventual defeat of all opposing powers, both human empires and demonic powers. In the eschaton the world will be renewed, often depicted as a purification by fire, and

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[154] Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World*, 6–7.

[155] Murphy, 6. These are not mutually exclusive, some apocalypses contain both, e.g. the book of Daniel.

[156] Murphy, 8–9. For the critique on the category 'supernatural' in the ancient mind, see the section "Problems with "Supernatural"" in Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 13–6.

[157] The emphasis on the future differs between the apocalypses, however the emphasis on the eschatological end of the world and coming judgement is often an important element of the received knowledge. Most texts do not show a strong interest in individual judgement but all texts contain the idea of post-mortem punishment or reward, see Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World*, 9.

[158] To be explicit here: If there is a journey to the realm of the death below, they descend there alive. For a discussion on the death of these seers, see Samuel I. Thomas, "Eternal Writing and Immortal Writers: On the Non-Death of the Scribe in Early Judaism," in *A Teacher for All Generations*, ed. Eric F. Mason, vol. 153, JSJSup (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 573–88.

return to the originally good state of creation.[159] The visible tension between the eschaton and the present day, i.e. the day of the intended audience, is the source of the ever-present eschatological or temporal dualism that is common in apocalypticism. The dualism is found not only temporally, between the present and future world, but also cosmically, spatially and soteriologically.[160]

The language used in apocalypticism is heavily indebted to both internal Jewish and external sources. "This language is simultaneously metaphorical and literal…", says Murphy.[161] This raises the question—which he raises as well—whether the ancient readers really believed in beasts made up of different animal parts, melting mountains and heavenly beings? The simple answer he gives is "They do." and "Yes."[162] At the same time the language is multivalent, language can mean or refer to multiple things. There is also the use of recapitulation, multiple metaphors are used to describe the same thing—they cannot always be harmonised—demonstrating that there is a fluidity in the degree in which the language corresponds with reality. Murphy illustrates this by referring to the beasts that rise out of the sea (Rev 13). What the seer really sees are beast, while they represent something else at the same time. That the visions are not always self-evident is demonstrated by the need of an external interpreter who explains the vision both to the seer and the reader.[163]

Apocalypticism developed mainly in the Hellenistic period during which there was an increased sharing of ideas, concepts and ideas through widespread texts and culture.[164] Given the exchange of cultures and ideas, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate between the many different sources which were integrated in the worldview of apocalypticism, the sources are: (1) the ancient Near Eastern, of which the combat myth, the use of *vaticinia ex eventu*, and

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[159] The curses and effects of sin and primeval rebellion are removed so that that "*Endzeit* becomes the *Urzeit*", in Murphy, 11.

[160] Murphy, 8–11. See also Jörg Frey, "Apocalyptic Dualism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 271–94.

[161] Murphy, 12.

[162] Murphy, 13.

[163] Murphy, 12–3.

[164] In this period of globalisation there remains a great local diversity while at the same time similarities between different texts can be observed. These similarities do not necessarily need to be explained in terms of (Greek) influence and borrowing, it can also point a larger *Zeitgeist* of the period in which these texts all position themselves. See John J. Collins, "What Is Hellenistic Judaism?," *JSJ* 53, no. 4–5 (2022): 567–76. and Pieter B. Hartog and Jutta Jokiranta, "The Dead Sea Scrolls in Their Hellenistic Context," *DSD* 24, no. 3 (2017): 339–55.

the occurrence of dream visions are most influential.[165] (2) Persian Zoroastrianism, most notable are its cosmic dualism and eschatological framework.[166] (3) Prophetic—and to a lesser extent sapiential—traditions in the Old Testament, apocalypses exceeding the prophetic traditions on every level in grandeur and mystery.[167] (4) The Hellenistic literature, i.e. the literature of the dominant culture of the period. Given the dominance of this culture, which also provided more direct access to ANE literature, it is not always possible to separate between what is "Jewish" or "Babylonian" and what is "Greek".[168]

4.3 Tours of Heaven and Hell

The most important apocalypses for the purpose of this study are: 1 and 2 Enoch, 3 Baruch, the Latin fragment of The Apocalypse of Elijah, the Testament of Levi in The Testament of the Twelve Patriarch, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, and the Apocalypse of Ezra.[169] However, in these early apocalypses, it is difficult to determine whether these are of Jewish or Christian origin because most of these texts have only been preserved by Christian scribes. For example, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah and the Apocalypse of Ezra—which contain tours of hell and intercessory prayer by the saints in heaven who observe the wicked souls being punished—possibly contain older Jewish traditions but it is difficult to categorize them as either Jewish or

[165] The influence of ANE myths is visible in the OT as well, often latent in the background, emerging again in the Second Temple period. The means of transmission not entirely clear, its influence is undeniable, see for a detailed analysis Richard J. Clifford, "The Roots of Apocalypticism in Near Eastern Myth," in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard J. McGinn and John J. Collins (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 3–29.

[166] The degree and extent of Persian influence is still a contested subject, however some shared conceptual framework seems acceptable, see Anders Hultgård, "Persian Apocalypticism," in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard J. McGinn and John J. Collins (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 30–63.

[167] Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World*, 19–23; Collins, "From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End", 64–86. Cf. Hansons influential study of Trito-Isaiah and Deutero-Zechariah and its relation to the origins of apocalypticism, Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975).

[168] For the Greek transmitting of ANE stories cf. for example the flood story in Berossos Babyloniaca with the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the *Eridu Genesi*s, see Geert E.E. de Breucker, "De Babyloniaca van Berossos van Babylon: Inleiding, editie en commentaar" (PhD diss., University of Groningen, 2012), F3a on 232–35. On separating between Jewish and Greek influence, Himmelfarb says the following: "No attempt to determine either/or—either a Jewish provenance, or a Greek—will be made, however. The direction of recent scholarship has been toward rendering that particular distinction increasingly hazy." in Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 67. This hesitancy still holds today. Her work will be discussed below.

[169] Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 33–38, 49–96; Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World*, 125–196; Ehrman, *Journeys to Heaven and Hell*, 51–98; Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell,* 8–40. Texts otherwise important to understand these cosmic tours are the Apocalypse of Paul and the Apocalypse of Peter, the Ascension of Isaiah, the Acts of Thomas 51–60, the Vision of Ezra and *Gedulat Moshe* (the Ascension of Moses). These sources are clearly of Christian origin or otherwise dated well after the first sources describing the actual *Descensus* have already appeared and are therefore less useful here.

Christian, the Apocalypse of Ezra is only extant in Christian manuscripts.[170] Since the aim of this chapter is to better understand different views on cosmology existing around the first centuries, the earliest texts are the most important witnesses. However, since texts written after the New Testament and even after the first development of the *Descensus* still participate in the same larger debates, they must also be considered.

Within later cosmic tours there are two important developments: (1) From punishment after the last judgment—in a place already prepared in the present time—to punishment immediately after death even before the last judgement. (2) Instead of the cosmic tours going to the extremities of earth, now they visit the many heavens above. These developments must have happened somewhere in the second century CE.[171] Therefore, the discussion of the development of these later tours of hell by Martha Himmelfarb, in *Tours of Hell* is already important to understand the cosmology behind these apocalypses.[172] The previous consensus on the Apocalypse of Peter—from which most others later apocalypses develop in one way or another—as suggested by Albrecht Dieterich's *Nekyia* is that it is completely dependent, "on archaic and classical descents into Hades, far removed from Jewish literature."[173] Trough analysing two key elements in these tours of hell, the "demonstrative explanation" and detailed descriptions of punishment by hanging sinners by the parts with which they have sinned, she locates the Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1–36) as one of the earliest (end third-century BCE) attestations of these features.[174] By demonstrating the shared literary feature of "demonstrative explanation", interpretations given to the seer by a guiding angel, Himmelfarb convincingly argues that these apocalypses belong to a single genre.[175] By showing the early appearance of these unique features—also present in the later parts of the apocalyptic texts in the Old Testament—the Jewishness of these tours of hell can be given more credibility. Given the enormous influence of the Book of the Watchers on these apocalypses, it can function as the

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[170] See text and introduction in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), Apocalypse of Zephaniah, 498–516 (trans. O. S. Wintermute), Greek Apocalypse of Ezra, 561–79 (trans. M. E. Stone). For a discussion of the Apocalypse of Zephaniah ,see Ehrman, *Journeys to Heaven and Hell: Tours of the Afterlife in the Early Christian Tradition*, 63–70.

[171] Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead,* 70–72.

[172] Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*.

[173] So summarized by Himmelfarb, see Himmelfarb, 3; Albrecht Dieterich, *Nekyia: Beiträge zur Erklärung der neuentdeckten Petrusapokalypse*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913).

[174] Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*, 169.

[175] Himmelfarb, 41–67. Bauckham reached a similar conclusion but did not anticipate the strong argument based on the demonstrative explanations, see Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead,* 49–52. In the case of the Apocalypse of Peter it is Jesus himself is the one giving explanations.

most important and influential Jewish prototype of these later tours of heaven and hell and will be discussed below.

4.3.1 The Book of the Watchers

The complete texts of 1 Enoch, which contains the Book of the Watchers, is only preserved in Ge'ez. This Ethiopic version is likely based on a Greek translation of the original Aramaic. The Aramaic texts is fragmentary, however, over fifty percent of the Book of the Watchers is found in Qumran MSS which establish a *terminus ad quem* of around 200 BCE.[176] The Book of the Watchers 1 Enoch 1–36, besides the Book of the Luminaries (1 Enoch 72–82) which might predate it, is the oldest part of the composite work now called 1 Enoch. The Book of the Watchers itself has been subject to redaction as well; The oldest part is the Rebel Story which containing the Shemihazah and later Asael myth. The Enoch traditions (1 Enoch 12–36) were added later in multiple phases. The introduction, 1 Enoch 1-5 are the last redaction.[177] The primary concern here is with the two accounts of Enochs cosmic journey, 1 Enoch 17–19 and 20–36. The structure of the cosmos is an essential literary element of these journeys.[178]

There are three categories of beings—each punished in a different place: (1) The watchers or fallen angels, (2) the stars, and (3) the spirits or souls of dead humans. Before the two journeys the binding and imprisonment of the watchers and their offspring is described in 10:4–16. Raphael is told to "bind Asael hand and foot, and cast him into the darkness; And make an opening in the wilderness that is in Doudael. Throw him there, and lay beneath him sharp and jagged stones. And cover him with darkness, and let him dwell there for an exceedingly long time. Cover up his face, and let him not see the light. And on the day of the great judgment, he will be led away to the burning conflagration."[179] And Shemihazah, the others and those who are "destroyed henceforth"[180] are bound "in the valleys of the earth until the day of their

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[176] Michael A Knibb and Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch: A New Edition in the Light of the Aramaic Dead Sea Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch: Chapters 1-36; 81-108*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), for the Aramaic texts see 9–11, for other versions, e.g. Greek and Ge'ez see, 12–17. The current best critical translation, which is the one that will be cited below, is Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch*. For the fragments, 4Q201-206 or 4QEn^{a-e} and palaeographic evidence, see J. T. Milik and Matthew Black, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumrân Cave 4* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 5–6; J .T. Milik, "Hénoch au Pays des Aromates (Ch. XXVII à XXXII): Fragments Araméens de la Grotte 4 de Qumrân.," *1958*, RB, 65.

[177] Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch,* 7, 25, 169–71.

[178] Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1*, 38–39.

[179] 1 En. 10:4–6.

[180] 1 En. 10:14.

judgment and consummation, until the everlasting judgment is consummated. Then they will be led away to the fiery abyss, and to the torture, and to the prison where they will be confined forever."[181] A distinction is made between the place in which they are collected, a dark place under the ground, and the fiery prison where they will be punishment after the day of judgement. It is to this place of collection that Enoch is sent to pronounce their sentence and describe the visions of their coming punished. The result of this pronouncement is that "fear seized them."[182] Uriel, the one responsible for Tartarus (1 En. 20:1) shows Enoch the immeasurable deep chasm filled with pillars of heavenly fire where the angels are kept.[183] In the second journey it is said that the angels will be confined forever, implying the place of collection and punishment is the same for them.[184]

The stars, responsible for pointing out the correct time—central to the functioning of the cultic calendar—but disobedient, are bound in a non-place at the end of heaven and earth: "there was neither firmament of heaven above, nor firmly founded earth beneath it. Neither was there water on it, nor bird; but the place was desolate and fearful."[185] In the case of the stars no future judgment is mentioned.

The human souls or spirits—used interchangeably in the text—are only mentioned in the second journey for which Raphael is responsible.[186] Their place of collection as well as their final punishment or reward are described in greater detail than the two above. The place of collection for the souls for all the dead functions like שְׁאוֹל but is placed on top of a high mountain.[187] It has four hollow places that are separated, three for sinners that are dark and one for the righteous.[188] Despite the contrast between the place for sinners and righteous, neither is already a place for punishment.[189] After judgment the righteous are allowed to enter a high mountain garden where they can eat from the tree of life and to which God will descend "to

[181] 1 En. 10:12–14.
[182] 1 En. 13:3. Cf. Bauckham for the interpretation that understands this foretelling or anticipating of coming punishment as a step between punishment after the judgment and immediately after death, see also his comparison between 1 and 2 Enoch in this regards, Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 52–56, 87–90.
[183] 1 En. 18:6–19:2.
[184] 1 En. 21:10.
[185] 1 En. 18:12. Cf. 21:1 It is also possible that the stars should be identified with the watchers, reflection a different version of the same myth, see Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1*, 288.
[186] Cf. 1 En. 20:3, his name might be related to the רְפָאִים see, Nickelsburg, 295.
[187] Cf. next paragraph where "hell" is located in the heavens above and not below the earth, in light of this development the description of an abyss on top of a mountain is significant.
[188] For the discussion of difficulties in harmonizing the different descriptions see Nickelsburg, 302–3.
[189] Cf. the contrast between the smooth rocks in 1 En. 22:1 and the jagged rocks in 10:5.

visit the earth in goodness."[190] Next to this mountain containing the sanctuary, i.e. Mt Zion, is a cursed valley for those who blasphemed the Lord. The Hinnom valley seems the most natural identification for this valley given its association with child sacrifices and fiery punishment.[191] Noteworthy here is that the fiery abyss is only the destination for the divine beings, humans are kept in sight of the righteous on top of the mountain. The texts of 1 En. 27:2 is uncertain but the most likely reading is that the blasphemers will be forced to bless the Lord forever as their punishment.[192]

This early cosmic tour situates the many different places within the earthly realm, either on high mountains or on deep chasms at the edges of the known world. Significant here is that humans are never located under the ground, only very deep within the earth in open valleys or pits. Only the fallen angels are imprisoned under the rocks. In the first century tours, e.g. 2 Enoch these places of punishment and prison are relocated to one of the seven heavens above. In even later tours, e.g. 3 Baruch or *Syriac Transitus Mariae* first a tour of the seven heavens is given followed by a tour of and hell and paradise, "in none of these cases is it clear where hell and paradise are located."[193] Descents to the realm deep within the earth where souls of humans are collected and fallen angels are imprisoned are at the root of the apocalypses as seen in the Book of the Watchers, however, around the turn of the first century CE these traditions develop a cosmology that places more emphasis on the heavens than on the earth and what is below.[194]

This is not the case for the cosmology found in Enoch—which still contains a detailed description of an underworld. Nickelsburg states that: "1 Enoch's cosmology reflects contemporary Greek sources. Moreover, the accounts of Enoch's journeys appear to be modelled not on the Gilgamesh epic but on Greek *Nekyias*, accounts of visits to the underworld found in Homer, Plato and Plutarch."[195] Himmelfarb has argued for the distinct Jewish origin

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[190] 1 En. 25:2. Cf. 1 En. 24:2–25:7.

[191] Cf. the tradition of Isa 66:24 and the history of the valley, 2 Kings 23:10, see also Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead,* 87; Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1*, 319. It is this site from which the later Gehenna develops.

[192] It is also possible that the righteous bless the Lord, for what God has done or that the cursed are begging for mercy to the Lord, see Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1*, 319.

[193] Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead,* 84–86.

[194] For the shift in focus towards the seven heavens in apocalypses see Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*; Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982).

[195] Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1*, 62. The similarity between the waters and abyss in Enoch and the rivers Oceanus and Pyriphlegethon and their connection to Tartarus is discussed on 282–84. Cf. also the Asael myth in 1 En. 8 and the Prometheus myth in Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Work and* Days, discussed e.g. in Estelle Strazdins, "Transforming Fire: The Effect of Technology on Humanity in Hesiod's Prometheus Myth and the Watcher Myth of I Enoch," *Comparative Critical Studies* 2, no. 2 (June 1, 2005): 285–96.

of the tours of hell in Jewish and Christian apocalypses by locating a prototype of the tradition not in Greek *Nekyias* but in the Book of the Watchers. However, though examining this Book of the Watchers, the prototypical Jewish source, one arrives at the influence of the *Nekyias* once again. The Tours of hell are still influenced by a Greco-Roman cosmology, only mediated by the Book of the Watchers.

4.4 Conclusion

By analysing one of the earliest and most influential tours of heaven and hell found in the Book of the Watchers, it has become clear that apocalypses do not really know of a descent to Hades that are distinctly different from the Greek descents to the underworld before the end of the Second Temple period. The more "apocalyptic" these tours become around the turn of the second century CE, the more they leave behind this Greek cosmology and shift their attention towards the heavens. Therefore, it is necessary to give a quick survey of the Greek cosmology of the afterlife and myths of descents therein in the next chapter.

In the descents that do appear in these apocalypses, the main activity has been just to ascent, observe, and report the vision back to humans on earth. The purpose of these visions is the description of post-mortem punishment. The aim of this chapter was to see if the elements of ministry and liberation in relation to a descent could be found in the Jewish Second Temple literature. The only activity—besides this observing—is Enoch's proclaims of judgment to the fallen angels. In later texts, e.g. The Apocalypse of Zephaniah, there is intercessory prayer for the wicked in hell but it is unrelated to a descent. Tours of hell that do not connect the activity of ministry and/or liberation to a descent to the underworld cannot be the definitive source for the *Descensus*. To conclude, there is much language and imagery and theological ideas available in the extra-canonical Second Temple Jewish literature—just as in the Old and New Testament—but these three together do not contain sufficient literary material that can be understood as the source for the *Descensus*. Therefore, the katabaseis found in Greco-Roman literature will be discussed next in an attempt to find a connection between a descent, ministry and liberation.

5: Greco-Roman Literature

5.1 Introduction

In light of the previous three chapters, which surveyed a wide range of Jewish texts,[196] it was deemed necessary to give brief attention to non-Jewish literature. In this chapter the katabaseis found in Greco-Roman literature will be discussed because it seems the most likely place to find the combination of a descent and the elements ministry and liberation.[197] The Old and New Testament already contain a great deal of material which is an important sources for the development of the belief in the *Descensus*, e.g. the idea of a defeat of the power of death, a confrontation with fallen angels, Gods ability to bring resurrection of the dead and an underworld in which the shades of the dead are awaiting judgment. The idea of a cosmic tour in which a human can descend to the underworld alive is found in the apocalypses discussed in the previous chapter. There are two reasons that make it necessary to survey the Greco-Roman literature: (1) Despite the discussion on either Jewish or Greek origins of the Tours of Hell, by examining the Book of the Watchers, the influence of Greek literature is established either way in the previous chapter. (2) The seer descends to the underworld for the benefit of those who are alive either now or will be in the future—the descent does not really impact the underworld or help its captives.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the possible sources of the idea that a descent to the underworld could benefit those held captive there in Greco-Roman literature.[198] No attempt will be made to give an exhaustive overview of the varied and complex Greco-Roman literature on the underworld, the afterlife, Hades, Tartarus and descents and ascents from the underworld.[199] This would be beyond the scope of this thesis, since giving a modest survey of the most important Jewish texts already required the previous three chapters above. There is no space to repeat this for the non-Jewish texts. Instead, the aim is to demonstrate that it is more likely that some of these elements could have been found in the Greco-Roman literature than in the previously discussed Jewish texts. If a more plausible source for these elements above

[196] I choose here to refer to the New Testament as Jewish, despite it also being Christian literature– in order to emphasize that all these texts are all deeply rooted in the ancient Jewish literary framework.

[197] See '7.3 Discussion' for other alternatives.

[198] In the chapter above I described this as the connection between the element of a descent and ministry and/or liberation. In this chapter I refer to this missing combination of these elements simply as "elements".

[199] See the bibliographies in the encyclopaedia articles cited below for more information.

can be found here, a convincing case can be made that at least part of the *Descensus* emerged from Greco-Roman sources.

5.2 Katabasis

In the previous chapter I have used the concept of *Nekyia* to refer to the descents to the underworld, following the title of Dieterich's important study on tours of hell in the apocalypse of Peter. However, *Nekyia*, derived from Odysseus's consultation of the dead at the border of the land between the living and the dead, is a misnomer for what I am actually looking for. The description of the travel to the place of the dead in Homers eleventh book of the Odyssey has more in common with necromancy than an actual descent into the underworld. Odysseus never enters into the underworld and instead the dead come up to meet him in this liminal space between the realm of the living and the dead.[200] It is better to refer—as is done in most scholarly literature—to these descents as katabaseis.[201] These are "true journeys into the other world, with the intention of bringing an inhabitant of the underworld into the upper world, [and] are recounted concerning Heracles, Theseus and Orpheus…"[202] These journeys are behind later katabases, e.g. in Virgil, *Aeneid* 6, Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, certain eschatological myths of Plato and works of Plutarch and Lucian.[203]

The underworld to which these descents take place is usually referred to as Hades or the house of Hades, here the ruler of the underworld gives the name to his realm. Sometimes it is used interchangeably with Tartarus and Erebos while at other moments these refer to distinct realms. Tartarus, similar to the place for the fallen angels in 1 Enoch, can also refer to a prison for the Titans after they have been defeated by Zeus. Tartarus is located as deep below Hades, as the earth is below the heavens.[204] Hades had few rites and myths connected to him, but was

[200] Fritz Graf and Rudolf Brändle, "Katabasis," in *Brill's New Pauly Online* (Brill, 2006), https://referenceworks-brill-com.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/display/entries/NPOE/e610380.xml#e610390; Ehrman, *Journeys to Heaven and Hell*, 11–12.

[201] From the Greek κατάβασις (εἰς Ἅδου), from the verb which we also frequently encountered in the New Testament: καταβαίνω.

[202] Graf and Brändle, "Katabasis."

[203] Ehrman, *Journeys to Heaven and Hell: Tours of the Afterlife in the Early Christian Tradition*, 1–8; Graf and Brändle, "Katabasis."

[204] It can also be understood as the part of Hades in which there is punishment for evil-doers, as a counterpart to Elysium, see Karin Schlapback, "Tartaros," in *Brill's New Pauly Online* (Brill, 2006), https://referenceworks-brill-com.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/display/entries/NPOE/e1201170.xml.

"already personified in the Bronze Age".[205] This personified Hades was able to be hurt, as is seen in Homers *Iliad*.[206] He rules the underworld with his wife, Persephone, who was captured by Hades and is annually allowed to return to the land of the living.[207] Hades is situated under the world while at the same time accessible at the western edges of the earth. Other openings in the earth such as caves, lakes and volcanoes were often locally understood as points of entry as well.[208] This realm of the dead is separated—despite its initially apparent easy access—by multiple barriers that make it impossible to enter for the living or improperly buried dead. Most significant are the rivers, of which the Styx is most commonly mentioned, the ferryman Charon and the "hell-hound" or guard dog Cerberus. Because Hades is in general not accessible for the living, when the hero of an ancient myth needs to enter to complete a task or receive guidance from the dead, usually there is a need for divine assistance. Hermes and Athene helped Heracles find his way in his quest to capture Cerberus, Hermes is called a soul guide in the second *Nekyia* in Odyssey and later the Cumaean Sibyl not only guides Aeneas in his descent but also interprets the things seen in Hades.[209]

These heroes do not only descend but also find a way to ascend again to the realm of the living. Most significant are the myths of heroes bringing others with them in their ascent, because they are a likely source for the missing elements thus far. Most famous is Orpheus's attempt to bring Eurydice back which he, in most versions, ultimately fails. Other well-known rescue attempts are that of Theseus and Pirithous who try to bring back Persephone, fail and must later be rescued by Heracles while he is capturing Cerberus.[210] In these myths a more convincing source for these elements of divine descent and ascent, as well as a more developed activity in the underworld is found. This activity constitutes both the wounding Hades and most importantly, bringing back people from the realm of the dead.

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[205] Jan N. Bremmer, "Hades," in *Brill's New Pauly Online* (Brill, 2006), https://referenceworks-brill-com.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/display/entries/NPOE/e501140.xml.

[206] Cf. Hom. Il. 5,395 where Hercules wounds Hades, see also Bremmer.

[207] For the story of Persephone's myth see the Homeric hymn to Demeter. Jan N. Bremmer, "Hades,"; Alexandra von Lieven et al., "Underworld," in *Brill's New Pauly Online* (Brill, 2006), https://referenceworks-brill-com.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/display/entries/NPOE/e1225130.xml; Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 19–20.

[208] Bremmer, "Hades"; Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 23.

[209] Cf. Hom. *Od*. 11,626 and 24,1–13 and Verg. *Aen*. 6,126–29, see also Graf and Brändle, "Katabasis"; von Lieven et al., "Underworld"; Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 29. Note a similar function of the Sibyl to the interpreting angels in the Jewish apocalypses.

[210] Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 21.

5.3 Conclusion

This survey is brief, but makes sufficiently clear that the *Descensus* was not only developed out of Jewish sources but relied on non-Jewish, i.e. Greco-Roman myth as well for at least certain important elements. While these myths around Hades were popular, already in the fifth century BCE does it lose some of its significance because of a new emerging concept of the afterlife: "the appearance of the idea of souls that make their way to the upper layer of the air while bodies are absorbed by the Earth."[211] Therefore, these myths described above—important as they are—should also not be over-emphasized as the only dominant conceptual worldview that necessarily forms the background out of which this *Descensus* emerged. The lines of influence are more blurred and complex, nevertheless these myths cannot be ignored as part of the development history of the *Descensus*. In the next, and final, chapter this development will be described.

[211] Bremmer, "Hades."

6: The Development of the *Descensus*

6.1 Introduction

In the chapters above it has become apparent that neither the Old nor New Testament contain any explicit references to the *Descensus Christi ad inferos.* However, in early Christian literature from this the early second century a quickly developing belief in the *Descensus* can already be found. When attempting to survey the development of the *Descensus* in the earliest period of Christianity, two methodological obstacles are encountered: (1) The writings are often fragmentary—especially the so-called apocrypha which also lack good critical editions—and the dating of many texts is speculative to the extent that no reliable historical order between them can be established.[212] (2) The relation between the development of an idea or concept and its expression in literature is more complex than simply equating these two. The first time an idea is put into words does not necessarily indicate the conception of this idea, rather it reflects the necessity of explicitly stating it. Throughout his recent article on the development of the *Descensus* Jonathan Knight raises this issue: "[I]t raises the question of how far the *descensus* is a *submerged* motif in this literature which was glossed over by the earliest writers who had more pressing concerns: the real problem that we face when researching the usage of the *descensus* [Italics his] motif in this period."[213] It remains very well possible that a certain aspect of the *Descensus* were believed much earlier than the texts would suggest, it might even be submerged underneath some the New Testament texts discussed in chapter three. It is also difficult to determine to what extent these texts which will be surveyed below reflect a generally shared understanding or whether the *Descensus* is a theological concept recognized only by the literary elite.

Nevertheless, there is a discernible development of references to the *Descensus*, first possibly submerged, followed by a simple allusion to it in passing. Over time its understanding is expressed in progressively greater detail in narratives and references, its meaning discussed more thoroughly by Church fathers in letters and homilies. As new questions arose, not seldom in response to what came to be understood as heresy, the early Church needed to make explicit

[212] Rémi Gounelle, "Christ, Jesus, 03: Descent into Hell," in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online* (Brill, 2018), https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-encyclopedia-of-early-christianity-online/christ-jesus-03-descent-into-hell-COM_038477#.

[213] See, Knight, "The Descent into Hell: Its Origin and First Development", 182.

what might have been implicit for much longer. In this way the *Descensus* grew in meaning. Two, not mutually exclusive, approaches seem to guide the early Church in this process: (1) Theological reflections on abstract questions, i.e. "what did Jesus do while He was in the grave?" or "how do the Old Testament saint gain the benefit of the gospel?"[214] (2) Discussion and interpretation of important biblical texts, e.g. 1 Pet 3:18-4:6 discussed above.

In both of these approaches biblical interpretation is fundamental, however the order is different between these two. In the former the Bible is used to support theological arguments, in the latter certain biblical passages are the starting point of the discussion. This latter approach seems secondary to the initial more abstract theological reflection. For example, 1 Pet 3:18–4:6—which becomes one of the most important biblical proofs for the *Descensus*—is cited as a support only after the interpretation of the *Descensus* already developed. The interpretation history of 1 Pet 3:18–4:6 demonstrates a belief which developed separately from the texts but later found support within the texts. The exegesis of the passage in chapter three above shows that the later interpretation, i.e. that of a *Descensus* including Christ preaching to the dead, can only be inferred in light of an already existing belief in this interpretation.[215] Since the approach starting with textual interpretation is secondary, the survey in this chapter focusses on the abstract theological development of the *Descensus*.

The development of the *Descensus* is, complex and diverse. [216] However, the development contains six core elements which cumulatively lead to the final interpretation of the *Descensus*: (1) Descent: Christ went to the underworld, related to (2) Death: the descent is primarily used to express that Christ really died a human death by describing that he really went to the same place where all the other dead go. (3) Victory: Christ powerfully broke free from the underworld, defeating Death and Hades, breaking the chains, gates, walls etc. (4) Ministry:

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[214] This question seems to be the primary concern of the early Church. If the belief in Jesus is a condition for salvation, people who did not hear the gospel preached could not be saved. The OT saints are righteous, yes, but needed to accept Jesus as Lord and are therefore caught in the middle. Jesus preaching his own gospel to them offers a solution to this problem.

[215] See chapter three for a discussion of 1 Pet 3:18–4:6, for the interpretation history see the first three chapters in William J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits*, 15–57. The interpretation of this text as relating to the *Descensus* lost its popularity in the West following Augustines *Epistula* 164 (414-15 CE), see Paul J. J. van Geest, "Augustin's Certainty in Speaking About Hell and His Reserve in Explaining Christ's Descent into Hell," in *The Apostles' Creed: "He Descended into Hell,"* ed. Marcel Sarot and Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, vol. 24, STAR (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 33–53.

[216] Ehrman writes the following on this non-linear development: "In early times, a variety of views emerged to explain Christ's activities immediately after his death. These views did not develop in a linear fashion: newer views never supplanted older ones, and different views could be held by different people at the same time or even simultaneously by the same person." Ehrman, *Journeys to Heaven and Hell*, 214.

Christ comforted or preached to the souls in Hades. There is a great variation of who the audience is and what the effect of this preaching might be. (5) Liberation: In his exodus from Hades, he brought other captives (usually the OT saints) up with him. (6) Ascent: Jesus did not stay in the underworld went up again, i.e. the resurrection. These elements did not necessarily historical develop in this order. However, this is the logical order, in the sense that, e.g. (3) and (4) presupposes at the very least (1), and (5) requires a variant of all of the former to a certain extent. (6) is dependent on (1). In this chapter (2)–(5) will be discussed, (1) and (6) will be included in (2) and (5) respectively.

6.2 Death

The most basic understanding of the *Descensus* is simply a way of emphasizing that Christ died.[217] In his commentary on the Old Roman Creed, it is precisely this point that Rufinus of Aquileia makes: "In the creed of the Roman church, we should notice, the words DESCENDED TO HELL are not added…Its meaning, however, appears to be precisely the same as contained in the affirmation BURIED."[218] It is in the Aquileian Creed (ca. 404 CE), the one Rufinus is himself familiar with, that the phrase *descendit ad inferna* is found in a version of the apostles' creed between death and resurrection. It is this emphasis on the significance of Jesus's death and a lack of interest in the events or any activity in Hades that is also found in the New Testament literature. It is also found early within church history, e.g. in Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5.31.2, Tertullians, *De Anima* 55.2 and in the Sibylline Oracles 8:312. The focus here is soteriological, to redeem human souls, Christ's soul needed to share the full human experience, including the descent to the underworld.[219] The interpretation of the *Descensus* as "just" an elaboration on Christ's death is the prerequisite of all other interpretation, however, towards the end of the New Testament literature it is already slowly expanded upon. In the early Christian literature, it is not long before much more meaning is attributed to it.

[217] Bringing the elements Descent and Death naturally together. There is no concept of a descent while still alive.
[218] [Capitals original] Rufinus Aquileiensis and J. N. D. Kelly, *Rufinus: A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, ACW 20 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1955), 52; Martin F. Connell, "Descensus Christi Ad Inferos: Christ's Descent to the Dead", 266–7.
[219] Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 40.

6.3 Victory

The third element in the development of the *Descensus* is the important requirement that, while in Hades, Christ could freely act, i.e. have control or power over both himself and possibly others. If bound by chains, a prisoner of Death, the only real activity of Christ could do, is to suffer.[220] This is not what happens in Hades, an important element of the *Descensus* is Christ's victory over Death and Hades. A minority view describes Jesus's descent as that of a prisoner, initially bound by chains, but breaking free once he arrived there, e.g. in Odes of Sol. 17:9-11: "And from there he gave me the way of his paths, and I opened the doors which were closed. And I shattered the bars of iron, for my own iron(s) had grown hot and melted before me. And nothing appeared closed to me, because I was the opening of everything."[221] This view has some similarities to the idea of God deceiving Satan by cloaking Jesus's divinity in the incarnation, Satan taking the bait and Jesus breaking out in full power.[222] This breaking the stronghold of Hades, its chains and bars in the majority of texts is not described as a breaking out, but a storming in. Rufinus describes it as follows:

> The intention was, not that He might be held fast by death according to the law governing mortals, but that, assured of rising again by His own power, He might open the gates of death. It was as if a king were to go to a dungeon and, entering it, were to fling open its doors, loosen the fetters, break the chains, bolts and bars in pieces, conduct the captives forth to freedom…In a case like this the king is, of course, said to have been in the dungeon, but not under the same circumstances as the prisoners…[223]

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[220] The interpretation of the Descensus as part of Christ's passion, necessary for satisfaction, is not common in the early Church, later this idea is explicitly rejected by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* III,52,8,2: "Descensus autem Christi ad inferos non fuit satisfactorius." The most well know variation of this interpretation is probably found in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), II,xvi,10. For Aquinas see also Harm J. H. M. Goris, "Thomas Aquinas on Christ's Descent into Hell," in *The Apostles' Creed: "He Descended into Hell,"* ed. Marcel Sarot and Archibald L.H.M. van Wieringen, vol. 24, STAR (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 33–53.

[221] James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 750–51. Also, in Teach. Silv. 110:14–16 and Irenaeus *Adv. Haer* 5.21.3, see Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 42.

[222] This idea is often described in the language of a fishhook, Christ being the bait and the Satan the fish echoing the ancient image of the Leviathan or great dragon. Most dramatic is this tradition found in the early Gos. Nic. (the beginning is also known as Acts of Pilate) esp. in chs. XV–XVIII. It is also found in many other early church fathers, e.g. Eusebius of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem and Irenaeus. For a discussion of this aspect see the overview in J.A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine*, Reprint (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1983), 199–216. See the discussion of the Gos. Nic. in Ehrman, *Journeys to Heaven and Hell*, 223–32. Odes Sol. 42:10–12 is significant here as well describing how Christ became "vinegar and bitterness" to Death and Sheol, i.e. Death not being to contain the presence of Christ. For discussion see Knight, "The Descent into Hell: Its Origin and First Development", 178–81. For the translation cited, see Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* 771.

[223] Rufinus Aquileiensis and Kelly, *Rufinus,* 51–52.

This motif of breaking the bars of prison, and storming Hades is an essential element found within a wide range of texts, e.g. in Hippolytus, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Tertullian and Eusebius. The idea is even expressed in the first credal appearance of the *Descensus* in the Creed or Fourth Formula of Sirmium (359 CE) which says that the Lord "died, and descended to the underworld, and regulated things there, Whom the gatekeepers of hell saw and shuddered."[224] Jesus's own parable of binding the strong man in order to plunder his goods (Mark 3:27) was influential here as well, picked up by Melito of Sardis in *Peri Pascha 103* and Origen's *Comm in Rom* 5:10. The plundering motif is found in, amongst others, the Ascension of Isaiah, and Testament of Levi 4, Gospel of Nicodemus and the even earlier Questions of Bartholomew.[225] To this frequently occurring victory motif Bauckham adds the following important nuance:

> It is important to notice that in the early period the defeated powers are the angelic rulers of the dead (cf. Ascenlsa 9:16; ActsThom 10; 143; 156), often Death or Hades personified (OdesSol 42:11), but not Satan and the forces of evil. In Jewish and early Christian thought Satan was not located in the underworld, but in the lower heavens. (A very exceptional case in which Beliar is the power Christ defeats, plundering the dead from him, is TDan 5:10-11.) However, the more Hades was thought of as an enemy whom Christ defeated, the more natural it would be to see him as an ally of Satan (cf. Origen, *Comm. in Rom*. 5.10), as he is in the Gospel of Nicodemus and Ephrem Syrus. In these and some other later Fathers, the result of the descent is that Satan is chained in the abyss. Here the descent has become a mythical portrayal of Christ's triumph over all evil.[226]

Gods power over the realm of death, and the expression of the hope that God would not abandon his people in the underworld, is most powerfully expressed in the Old Testament Psalms. It is therefore no surprise that especially these texts—reread in light of the New Testament belief in the resurrection—were "interpreted early on as advance announcements of his descent into the underworld and of his victorious ascent therefrom."[227] Gounelle continues mentioning the language of breaking hell's bars and doors: "In addition, the traditional image of hell's bars of iron and doors of bronze comes from Ps 107(106):16… Later on, Ps 24(23):7–10 – which had originally been associated with the ascension – was understood to be announcing the surprise of the infernal powers when Christ appeared in their kingdom"[228]

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[224] Job 38:17 LXX is provided as support, see J .N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, 1960), 378.

[225] See for an overview of these and other texts Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 42 and MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell*, 145–46, 227–32.

[226] Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 42–43.

[227] Pss 16(15):10, 30(29):2–6 and 88(87):4–7 are mentioned by Gounelle as examples, see Gounelle, "Christ, Jesus, 03."

[228] Gounelle.

6.4 Ministry

Having both descended and established dominance in the realm of the dead—in itself of great theological significance—Christ's actual activity in the underworld can be described. Although it follows logically after victory, the element of ministry, usually preaching, almost immediately makes an appearance before the victory element has been developed extensively. According to Bauckham this idea is already found at the very beginning of the second century.[229] Knight surveys the development of the preaching tradition in the early Church. In his survey he dates the Ascension of Isaiah as the earliest reference to the *Descensus* but finds no reference to—and possibly even arguments against—the preaching tradition.[230] Neither does he find one in the writings of Polycarp of Smyrna (ca. 120–40 CE). He also rejects the suggestion that Ignatius of Antioch's (ca. 107 CE) *Magnesians* 9:2, which describes the spirits of the prophets waiting for their teacher, can be understood as a clear reference to this preaching.[231]

The first real reference is found in The Shepherd of Hermas (ca. 140 CE) in which there is not only preaching but even baptism, the caveat however is that here it is not Christ ministering but the apostles who continue their earthly advancement of the Church within the realm of the dead.[232] In *Epistula Apostolorum* 27 (ca. 160 CE) it is Christ who preaches to the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, giving them the baptism of life and forgiveness.[233] The early so-called Jeremiah Apocryphon,[234] a passage in the Old Testament supposedly removed by Jews, speaks of God remembering his dead, and preaching to the Israelites in the grave.[235] The Gospel of Peter, contains a reference to three men and the cross leaving the grave, followed

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[229] Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 40.

[230] Knight, "The Descent into Hell: Its Origin and First Development.", 173, 184–85. Here and regarding the following primary sources below, see the technical discussion of dating and textual basis of these texts see the respective pages in this article as well.

[231] Knight, 173–75.

[232] Knight, 175–76.

[233] Knight, 176–77. Although not directly relevant here, the baptism of circumcised Old Testament saints is noteworthy, given the often-discussed relationship between circumcision, baptism and covenant in later theology. Cf. Col 2:11–12.

[234] Sometimes, esp. in earlier research, it is referred to as the Jeremiah Logion.

[235] Usually, the section from Justin Martyrs Dialogue with Trypho 72 (ca. 150 CE) is cited, but variations also occur in, e.g. Irenaeus (*Haer*. 3.20.4, 4.22.1, 33.1, 33.12, 5.31.1, *Epid*. 78). Knight, 177–78; Gounelle, "Christ, Jesus, 03."

by the cross saying that proclamation has been made to those who have fallen asleep.[236] In the Ode 42 mentioned above (early second century CE) describes the preaching in more detail:

> And I made a congregation of living among his dead; and I spoke with them by living lips; in order that my word may not fail. And those who had died ran toward me; and they cried out and said, "Son of God, have pity on us." And deal with us according to your kindness, and bring us out from the chains of darkness. And open for us the door by which we may go forth to you, for we perceive that our death does not approach you. May we also be saved with you, because you are our Savior." Then I heard their voice, and placed their faith in my heart. And I placed my name upon their head, because they are free and they are mine.[237]

Over time the recipients of Jesus's preaching grew in scope, in its earliest stages the only audience of Christ's preaching are the Old Testament saints, e.g. in Ignatius or *Epistula Apostolorum* above. The general question behind this preaching is the question of how the righteous before Christ, i.e. the Old Testament saints like the patriarchs and prophets, were to be saved since this was believed to be only possible by the means of Jesus's death and resurrection. Initially it is about ensuring the salvation for those that were already declared righteous before.[238] The scope increased especially in the East, where Clement considered righteous pagans as part of this audience and his pupil Origen even held to a conversion of sinners and the restoration of all things. The West retained a stronger emphasis on the salvation of those who, in some way, could already been considered "saved". The question of who benefited from Christ descent was one of the most controversial aspects of the *Descensus* in the early Church—and remains heavily debated to this day.[239]

6.5 Liberation

Almost always in combination with the preaching tradition is the idea that Christ liberated the audience of his preaching from the realm of the dead as a result of them accepting gospel. The general purpose of the preaching is not that of conversion, rather it is the revealing of the full mysteries of the gospel hoped for through faith but not seen in the lives of those who had fallen asleep before Christ's coming. The result therefore is that those imprisoned are released and

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[236] According to Knight it is from the later second century CE, see Knight, "The Descent into Hell: Its Origin and First Development", 181. However, Ehrman dates it much earlier seeing it as one of the first references, see Ehrman, *Journeys to Heaven and Hell: Tours of the Afterlife in the Early Christian Tradition*, 214.

[237] Knight, "The Descent into Hell: Its Origin and First Development", 178–81; Ode 42:14–20 in Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* 771.

[238] Cf. the line of thought in Hebrews 11.

[239] Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 41; Gounelle, "Christ, Jesus, 03."

receive the benefits that Christ achieved for all of his people. There seem to be three options, depending on one's understanding of the realm of the dead and the destination of those saved: (1) In what is probably the earliest view, the dead are resurrected in the body and ascend with Christ from the grave.[240] (2) The dead receive the gospel, giving hope and comfort in Hades while waiting to be resurrected in on the day of final judgment.[241] (3) The most prevalent view is that of liberation, the souls ascend out of Hades and continue to go up with Christ to heaven immediately.[242] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to elaborate on the development of the belief of the heavenly afterlife as a place for the righteous, but the movement from the ones saved from the depths of Hades to the heights of heaven is a significantly different from the soteriology and cosmology found with in the Old and New Testament.[243]

6.6 Conclusion

Through this survey of the development of the *Descensus* in the first centuries of early Christianity it has become apparent that as time passed, the details and explicit references to the *Descensus* increase. Nevertheless, the belief in the *Descensus* emerges almost immediately, even before the last books of the New Testament are written.[244] The analysis of the texts does not allow us to pinpoint the emergence of the belief in the *Descensus* because it might have been held much earlier before it was needed to make it explicit what was implicit. The key question answered in the *Descensus* is the abstract question of how all Christs benefits achieved in death (and resurrection) will have their effects on creation. The primary focus is on salvation of Old Testament saints, but the conquest of Hades, the victory of death and possibly restoration of all creation are all discussed. In the later Christological controversies, the manner of descent—body, soul or spirit and human or divine—is heavily discussed as well.[245] In

[240] E.g. in Ignatius's *Magn.* 9:2 or the Jeremiah apocryphon and possibly the enigmatic events described in Matt. 27:52–53.

[241] E.g. in Tertullian 's *De Anima* 58.

[242] This is found in many of the early texts, e.g. Ode 42:11, The Ascension of Isaiah 9:17 and The Apocalypse of Peter 17, see also Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*.

[243] For a brief introduction to this aspect in relation to practises of biblical interpretation in the early church see, Jeffrey A. Trumbower, "Heaven and Hell," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). For one of the most recent historical surveys of this subject, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell*.

[244] The driving force behind this development is the need to answer theological questions arising in light of increasingly complex theological debates within the early Church but has not been discussed here at length, see Gounelle, *La descente du christ aux enfers*.

[245] Gounelle, "Christ, Jesus, 03."

answering these questions by the early Church a wide range of texts, ideas, language and worldviews are used of both Jewish and Greco-Roman origin in formulating the belief in the *Descensus*.

7: Conclusion

7.1 Summary

This thesis set out to answer the challenge of the *Descensus*'s biblical status by surveying a wide range of biblical and extra-biblical literature. In light of this problematic distinction between "biblical" and "extra-biblical"—the Bible itself often incorporates ideas first found outside biblical literature—sources not found in the biblical canon were approached as conversation partner in order to better understand the intellectual framework of early Christianity. The analysis of the cosmology and the ascending and descending motif in the Old and New Testament reveal that many elements of the *Descensus* can in fact traced back to biblical texts. Both the Old and New Testament contain an underworld as the place where the dead descend. Notable also is the concept of Gods power over the underworld and victory over death, in the Old Testament found primarily in the poetic language of the psalms and in the New Testament directly linked to the resurrection. What is missing here is the concept of an actual descent to the underworld, in both the Old and New Testament this is reserved for those who die. To this extent—as an emphasis that Christ really died like all other humans before and after him—even this element can be found within the Bible. Nevertheless, a descent which leads to any activity, ministry or liberation in this realm below is completely lacking. Enigmatic passages frequently used to support the idea of Christ's activity in the realm below have been shown to not support this idea, at least not as their primary reading. In later tradition these texts were used as important sources.

Expecting to find these missing elements, i.e. those that describe activity in the underworld, in the apocalypses of the Second Temple period—given their great interest in cosmic dualism, eschatology and most importantly; otherworldly tours of heaven and hell—the genre, worldview, and prototypical 1 Enoch were discussed. These tours of heaven and hell contain much language and concepts that helped fill the gap, however three important distinctions between the *Descensus* and these tours can be observed: (1) Apocalypticism generally focusses on the heavenly realms instead of the underworld. (2) The main activity of the seers is—as the name implies—to observe the cosmic structures guaranteeing eschatological judgment, when the prototypical seer Enoch interacts with the realm below it is only with the fallen angels. (3) The journeys of these seers are not the natural corollary of their

death. This is the case for the *Descensus* which traditionally situates it during the *triduum mortis.* In an attempt to find a more developed understanding of a descent into the underworld, the most important Greco-Roman katabaseis were surveyed. The cosmology found within these texts does not focus on the heavens—as was the case in the apocalypses—but on a complex and detailed underworld. Narratives of descend, activity and ascend by heroes are widespread and parallels with the *Descensus* are readily drawn. Similar to the apocalypses, these katabases show no association with the death of the hero.

Having surveyed a wide range of sources, the attention turned to the development of the actual belief in the *Descensus* in the first centuries of Christianity. Here the six core elements (Descending, Death, Victory, Ministry, Liberation and Ascending) of the *Descensus* are developed in more detail. No clear historical development was established, however, a certain logical order of these elements was distinguished. Some of these elements do appear earlier than others, but the accuracy of dating these texts is too limited to draw decisive conclusion of which elements came first. The sources show a very early belief in the *Descensus*, which became more articulated over time in order to answer theological questions. In answering these questions and many texts in the Bible were used to support this belief.

7.2 Final Conclusion

The concept of continuity and discontinuity helps in answering the question of how the *Descensus* fits within the larger intellectual framework of early Christianity. The most significant discontinuity between the sources studied is the constantly changing and developing cosmology. Old Testament cosmology is primarily concerned with living in the present, it is in this life on this earth that God is to be encountered—he is the one descending from heaven to be with his people. In the later Jewish writings of the Second Temple period and the New Testament the focus shifts somewhat to the heavens above as the prime eschatological destination.[246] In the early Church the realm of the dead is significantly developed, in light of Greco-Roman literature but also of reinterpretation of especially Old Testament passages about שְׁאוֹל.

[246] Despite this focus on the heavenly realm, many texts still situate the final messianic kingdom back on earth. The final hope is not only that God descents, e.g. the incarnation or outpouring of the Spirit, but that the heavens itself merge with the earth eliminating the dividing barrier between creation and creator, cf. Revelation 21.

This change in cosmology demands theological concepts to be adapted to new contexts, it is these concepts that demonstrate the greatest continuity. The belief that God would not abandon his people, even after death, is already present in the Psalms and is an important motif behind the continuously changing concepts of the afterlife. The same is true for Gods omnipotence, whatever realms exist in the mind of the author, God will in some way or at one point in time (re-)establish his power over this realm. If there are multiple heavens, he will be the ruler. If there is a contender in the realm below, he will conquer it and defeat the power of Death and evil. Although this core theological motif is present throughout the Bible, this near universal restoration of all things is most powerfully expressed in the early Christian belief in the *Descensus Christi ad inferos*. It is in expressing this belief that the early Church used many different images, concepts and language found within a wide range of biblical and extra-biblical texts.

This leads to the following twofold conclusion: (1) The *Descensus* **is not biblical** in the sense that is not directly and explicitly found within the Old and New Testament scripture. Even a very minimal concept of "biblical", i.e. being part of the Jewish literary framework of both canonical *and* extra-canonical writings does not solve this problem. Old Testament, New Testament and the concepts found in apocalypticism do not fully explain the development of the *Descensus*. (2) The *Descensus* **is biblical** in the sense that, despite it only being explainable in light of extra-biblical non-Jewish writings—in this thesis only the Greco-Roman katabasis literature was briefly surveyed—the *Descensus* shows the most continuity with the biblical literature. Although extra-biblical sources help fill the gaps, the biblical theological motifs are dominant. What happens in the early Church is the same thing that happens in the biblical literature itself, namely continuous theological truths are constantly re-expressed and reformulated in conversation with both biblical and extra-biblical texts. This intertextuality should hardly be surprising or frowned upon, the bible itself frequently shows engagement with its own literary context.

This narrow understanding of what it means for something to be biblical in the first option is problematic, because it renders the scripture silent in any new context in which it is read, only a dead literary artifact allowing access to a worldview no longer ours, to be studied but

with now meaning for our present worldview.[247] Instead, by recognizing the rich and complex historical process in which theology develops and Scripture is interpreted and written, space is created to express continuous theological concepts in a discontinuous worldview.

7.3 Discussion

While a wide range of texts was surveyed, many texts where either discussed briefly, only though secondary literature or not even included in this thesis at all. This can be defended given the scope of this thesis, however, a more in-depth study of primary sources would increase the strength of the argumentation and conclusion presented above. Especially the survey of Greco-Roman literature is brief and limited. The discussed literature was mythological in nature and philosophical discourses—arguably more influential in general on both the New Testament and the early Church—were not considered at all given their less immediately obvious relevance. Given the limited scope, only the Greco-Roman literature was discussed as a suggestion of where else to look for core elements of the *Descensus*, another equally important would be the huge collection of ancient Near East texts with its combat myths and descents into the underworld (e.g. The Epic of Gilgamesh or The Descent of Ishtar).

This thesis, initially proposed as a contribution to the systematic theological understanding of the *Descensus*, turned into quite a historical study given the enormous range of primary sources to engage with. It is my opinion that all systematic theology should first seriously engage with primary source, both biblical and extra biblical, however, it has left little room to develop the argument more systematically. Much more can and should be said about hermeneutics, the theological meaning of the *Descensus* and its interpretation history.

7.4 Recommendation

The discussion above provides multiple starting points for future research, I will briefly mention three: (1) To meaningfully contribute to the methodological gap between systematic theology

[247] The understanding of "biblical" in this view is often called biblicism. The idea is that all theological truths need to be explicitly found within the canon. This understanding would lead to the rejection of even commonly held beliefs, e.g. the doctrine of the Trinity or Calvins objection, against the biblicism of the Baptists in his time, that women were never explicitly allowed to take communion in Scripture. Both the Trinity and inclusivity towards women in the sacraments are considered 'biblical' even by more fundamental Christians today. I argue not for an opening of the canon, instead I argue that the Bible is best understood in light of its own intellectual literary framework. In allowing the Bible to engage open, yet, critically with its own context, a relaxed and vital, yet, "orthodox" hermeneutical method can be developed.

and biblical studies, the hermeneutic based around the concepts of continuity and discontinuity needs to be developed in greater detail, both in theory and demonstrated in a more complex case study. (2) The scope of this thesis could be increased further, including later developments of the *Descensus*, Augustine, Calvin and Hans Urs von Balthasar are promising conversation partners. (3) The theological significance of the *Descensus* today needs to be expressed in continuity with its theological core motif adapted to our present worldview. Where the modern worldview might not contain a complex cosmology of heaven and hell—at least not for atheists, many theists struggle with these abstract concepts as well—it does include other realms not present in the biblical worldview. The realm of the mind, where many people fight their demons, are held captive by intrusive thoughts and need liberation by and outside power, might prove a powerful example of how Christ can still descend into our hell today.

It is here that I close with the words of Abraham Kuypers inaugural address at the Vrije Universiteit, encapsulating what I have come to understand as the timeless truth of the *Descensus Christi ad inferos:* "In de totale spanne van een mensenleven is er geen vierkante centimeter waarvan Christus, die majestueus boven alles staat, niet zegt: 'Dat is van mij!'"

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Appendix A: Declaration Sheet

PThU

Declaration Sheet Master's Thesis

Name student: Christian G.S. Visser

Title master's thesis: How Low Did He Go?:
A Historical Survey of the Descensus's Cosmological Framework in the Bible and its Early Christian Context

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby declare that the aforementioned master's thesis consists of original work. The thesis is the result of my own research and is written only by myself, unless stated otherwise. Where information and ideas have been taken from other sources, this is stated explicitly, completely and appropriately in the text or in the notes. A bibliography has been included.

Place, date: Amsterdam, NL 20-06-2024

Signature: 

DECLARATION OF CONSENT

I hereby agree that the aforementioned master's thesis will be made available for inclusion in the library collection after its approval and that the metadata will be made available to external organizations and/or published by the PThU.
Furthermore, I
☑ do
☐ do not
authorize (the library of) the PThU to include the full text in a database that is publicly accessible via the world wide web or otherwise. (This permission concerns only the publication of the master's thesis as described, without further transfer or limitation of the student's copyright.)

Place, date: Amsterdam, NL 20-06-2024

Signature: 

Appendix B: Data Management Plan

Data management plan

1. General information

Name of student: Christian G.S. Visser

Names of thesis supervisor(s): Professor dr. A. Huijgen and Associate Professor dr. P.B. Hartog

Date: 20-06-2024

Version: 1

2. General information about research and subject of the thesis

(Provisional) title of the research / thesis:
How Low Did He Go?: A Historical Survey of the Descensus's Cosmological Framework in the Bible and its Early Christian Context
description of the research project and method(s):

Abstract: The Descensus Christi ad inferos as found in the apostle's creed remains both one of the most frequently cited, yet controversial doctrines. Its biblical status remains questioned and can only be answered through a detailed analysis of its background and the worldview out of which it emerged. This study surveys a wide range of biblical and extra-biblical source to understand the cosmological framework out of which the Descensus emerged. By reappreciating the Jewish apocalyptic and Greco-Roman background of this belief, this thesis contributes to the discipline of Systematic Theology by demonstrating the value of the interdisciplinary (historical) methods used in this case study of the Descensus.

Type of research data to be collected: Word document only.

Period in which the data will be collected: N/A

3. Technical aspects of the data storage Hardware and software:
Microsoft Word text processor

Other software used: Zotero library software and Logos 10.

File formats:

Submitted as PDF, DOCX provided as well.

Size of the data (estimate in MB/GB/TB): 1 MB

Storage of data while conducting research: Personal device

Storage of data after completion of research: Personal device

Responsibilities

Management of data while conducting research: Student

Management of data after completion of research: Student

Legal and ethical aspects Owner of data: Student

Are data privacy sensitive? ~~YES~~ / NO

If YES: How will you arrange safe storage and consent of the persons and organisations involved in your research?

4. Other aspects

==========

(*The following has to be filled in by the thesis supervisor:*)

X Approved
□ Not approved, because:

Name: Arnold Huijgen

Signature: 

Date: 17 June 2024

Protestant Theological University (form version: 20190703)