

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

VISIONS OF CHRIST IN THE
SPIRIT WORLD AND THE DEAD
REDEEMED

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A scene from Dante's *Inferno* will set the stage for this chapter. The poet Virgil brings Dante to the ledge of the abyss of hell:

*Death-pale the Poet spoke: "Now let us go
into the blind world waiting here below us.
I will lead the way and you shall follow . . ."
No tortured wailing rose to greet us here
but sounds of sighing rose from every side,
sending a tremor through the timeless air,
a grief breathed out of untormented sadness,
the passive state of those who dwelled apart,
men, women, children—a dim and endless congress . . .
I thought how many worthy souls there were
suspended in that Limbo, and a weight
closed on my heart for what the noblest suffer.
"Instruct me, Master and most noble Sir,"
I prayed him then, ". . . has any, by his own or another's merit,
gone ever from this place to blessedness?"¹*

Virgil answers that a Mighty One did come and took with Him the

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ancient patriarchs and other righteous souls. But those who remained endured in hell without hope of deliverance.

Dante's theology of the plight of the unredeemed dead stands in sharp contrast to the belief of the early Christians and those who remembered the teachings of the Apostles. In the early Church, there was no more prominent and popular belief than the Descent to hell and the redemption of the dead. Ignatius (AD 35–107),² Polycarp (AD 69–155),³ Justin Martyr (AD 100–165),⁴ Irenaeus (AD 130–200),⁵ Tertullian (AD 160–220),⁶ and other early writers either explicitly mention or allude to the Descent, several linking the Descent to redemptive work for the dead.

It is important to note that *hell* is a translation of *sheol* in Hebrew and *hades* in Greek. Both terms refer to the place of departed spirits and not necessarily to that place where only the wicked go. Selwyn writes:

The concept of Sheol or Hades as the abode of the dead generally, without ethical or other distinctions, was later differentiated to admit of distinct regions for the righteous and wicked respectively, as in *Enoch xxii*. As late as the *Psalms of Solomon* (cf. xiv. 6, xv. 11, xvi. 2) Hades was used for the place of punishment of the wicked, which is normally termed in N.T. Gehenna. The abode of the righteous, on the other hand, when a special term other than Hades is used, is spoken of as "Abraham's bosom" (Luke xvi. 23) or "Paradise" (Luke xxiii. 43).⁷

The ancients believed that the spirit world lay under the earth. Paul speaks of the Savior's Descent into the lower parts of the earth (see Ephesians 4:9).⁸ Peter does not use a term for descent, rather, a form of the verb "to go." I will use the term *Descent* hereafter to mean the Savior's journey to the spirit world. (The common Latin term for the Descent is *descensus ad inferos*.)

In modern times the Descent is perhaps the most neglected piece of Christian theology. According to F. Loofs, a prominent biblical scholar:

The Descensus belongs in fact to a group of primitive Christian conceptions which are inseparable from views then current, but now abandoned, and which accordingly can now be appraised only in a historical sense, i.e. as expressions of Christian beliefs which, while adequate enough for their time, have at length become obsolete. . . . The modern mind cannot bring to it more than interest; we cannot now accept it as part of our faith. . . . It were fitting, therefore, that

the Churches distinguished as Evangelical should omit the Article “descendit ad inferos” from their programmes of instruction in Christian doctrine and worship.⁹

Indeed, what shall the world do with the doctrine of the Descent? Richard L. Anderson includes in a discussion of baptism for the dead a conversation with the New Testament scholar Edgar Goodspeed. Dr. Goodspeed was asked, “Do you think it [baptism for the dead] should be practiced today?” He answered, “This is the reason why we do not practice it today. We do not know enough about it. If we did, we would practice it.”¹⁰

My purpose will be to treat five major points on the Descent and the redemption of the dead as outlined in D&C 138—President Joseph F. Smith’s “Vision of the Redemption of the Dead”—presenting supporting material from early Christian and Jewish writers to illustrate that the remarkable teachings pertaining to the redemption of the dead in section 138 represent truths accepted by the early Christians. I will comment little on D&C 138 itself but rather will use its major points relating to the Descent as outline for my presentation. These five points are: (1) some history, translation, and interpretation of the much-disputed passages in 1 Peter which section 138 includes, 3:19 and 4:6, focusing on the baptismal context of these passages; (2) early Christian and Jewish evidence bearing on the Savior’s redemptive work in the Descent; (3) evidence of belief in a division of spirits in the spirit world and in the anticipation by the righteous of the Messiah’s appearance to them; (4) evidence of the organization of the righteous to take the gospel to the wicked; and (5) evidence of vicarious work for the dead in early Christianity.

HISTORY OF 1 PETER 3:18

The history of the interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18 (that Christ preached to the spirits in prison) and its context form a tangled jungle representing the confusion that came in the wake of the Apostasy. I will touch here only lightly on the creative means by which exegetists have through the centuries wrested this passage. For greater detail, the reader may consult several writers who have made thorough studies of the complicated network of factors, grammatical and exegetical, which the passages in 1 Peter embrace.¹¹ The difficulty does not actually lie in the passage but in the minds of the interpreters who find a conflict here with their own views of the afterlife and the impossibility of progress or redemption there. Nearly

all the interpretations of 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6 from ancient times to our own day are confined to these following alternatives: (1) The Lord preached the gospel to these spirits and offered them repentance. Under the influence of later theological ideas many commentators have been unwilling to admit this interpretation, maintaining (2) that Christ must have preached to them not hope but condemnation; or (3) that He preached only to those who were righteous; or (4) only to those who, though disobedient, repented in the hour of death; or (5) that He preached the gospel to those who had been just, and condemnation to those who had disobeyed.¹² The ancient Alexandrian school of theology accepted the plain interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 that Christ preached the gospel of hope to the unbelievers in the spirit world. Later many commentators of the Middle Ages (as well as of modern times) did not find in this verse any allusion to the Descent at all. Where some did find a Descent, they interpreted it to mean deliverance of the Old Testament Saints only and the defeat of Satan in that event which came to be known as the Harrowing of Hell, where the belief that Christ had liberated any others than those holy persons became heretical.¹³ Modern Catholic theology mostly tends to regard those who heard Jesus preaching in the spirit prison as sinners converted before they died.¹⁴

We should note here that mention of the Descent appears in many early Christian creeds, such as the famous Apostles' Creed (AD 390). But the earliest creed of which we have record is known as the Fourth Formula of Sirmium (a council of Western bishops) which came thirty-one years earlier in AD 359 and was a descendant of many former Christian creeds that did not contain anything about the Descent. I quote the section on the Descent from the Sirmium Creed: "And [Christ] descended to hell, and regulated things there, Whom the gatekeepers of hell saw and shuddered, and [he] rose again." After years of creed without mention of the Descent, why was the Descent inserted into this creed? J. N. D. Kelly points out that this Sirmium Creed was drafted by a Syrian, Mark of Arethusa, and that the Descent had a place very early in Eastern creed material.¹⁵ He gives the Syrian *Didascalia* (a collection of miscellaneous precepts of professedly apostolic origin, c. AD 250) as an example. There it says: "[Christ] was crucified under Pontius Pilate and departed into peace, in order to preach to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the Saints concerning the ending of the world and the resurrection of the dead." Why the Descent was so long neglected in the Western creeds is not clear, but Kelly speculates that Mark

of Arethusa, having credal materials before him that contained mention of the Descent, felt the interpolation in the Western creed was important to show the full scale of the Savior's work of redemption.¹⁶ At about the same time, synods at Nike (AD 359) and at Constantinople (AD 360) published creeds with a Descent clause. Rufinus records (c. 404) that the Aquileian creed contained the Descent clause which he connected with 1 Peter 3:19, and he says that the Descent passage is included in that creed to explain "what Christ accomplished in the underworld."¹⁷

Even though many references to the Descent appear in early Christian literature, curiously, interpretations, reflections, or quotations of 1 Peter 3:19 are missing in the oldest Christian literature. No writer before Hippolytus (c. 200), Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215), and Origen (AD 185–253) (who do indeed make clear connection between the Descent and 3:19) appears to allude to this verse.¹⁸ The reason may lie in the difficulties mentioned in the connection of the Descent with redemption in 1 Peter 3:10.¹⁹

TRANSLATION, INTERPRETATION, BAPTISMAL CONTEXT OF 1 PETER 3:18–21; 4:6

1 Peter 3:18–19. "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by [the Greek may be rendered 'made alive in'] the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison."

Much debate has taken place over what condition "alive in the Spirit" implies. The King James Version gives "quickened by the Spirit" and capitalizes *Spirit*, implying the interpretation that He went in the power of the Holy Spirit or that this journey refers not to His descent but to His Resurrection and to a proclamation of His triumph over the powers of evil.²⁰ But it is more likely that the two datives, flesh and spirit, should be understood as antithetical, meaning that when Christ's flesh was dead, His spirit continued alive into the spirit world. Joseph Smith taught: "Now all those [who] die in the faith go to the prison of spirits to preach to the dead in body, but they are *alive in the spirit*, and those spirits preach to the spirits that they may live according to God in the spirit. And men do minister for them in the flesh, and angels bear the glad tidings to the spirits, and they are made happy by these means."²¹ Origen understood this sense of the verse that Jesus went in His spirit: "We assert that Jesus not only converted no small number of persons while he was in the body . . . but also,

that when he became a spirit, without the covering of the body, he dwelt among those spirits which were without bodily covering, converting such of them as were willing to Himself."²² Hippolytus (c. 155–236) wrote, "The Only-begotten entered [the world of spirits] as Soul among souls."²³

For Augustine (AD 354–430), Bede (AD 673–735), Aquinas (AD 1225–74), and others, the difficulties in accepting the plain sense of 1 Peter 3:19 were insuperable. Although at first Augustine accepted the literal view of 1 Peter 3:19,²⁴ he later proposed a new interpretation which was that Christ was *in* Noah when Noah preached repentance to the people of his time, and the spirits in prison were taken to mean "those who were then in the prison of sin," or "those who are now in the prison of Hades, but were then alive."²⁵

Peter spoke of the Lord's visit to the spirits *in prison*. He did not mention paradise, where the righteous dwell who also benefit from the Savior's redemptive work. Doctrine and Covenants 138:50 reveals that "the dead had looked upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage." Even the righteous spirits viewed their existence in the spirit world as living in prison because of their separation from their bodies. Therefore, the term *prison* refers here to the entire spirit world.

1 Peter 3:20. "Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water."

Why did Peter single out Noah's generation? One reason may be suggested in "Sanhedrin" (10.3) in the Mishnah: "The generation of the Flood have no share in the world to come, nor shall they stand in the judgment." This group was considered by the rabbis to epitomize the most wicked generation in the history of mankind. Therefore, Peter may have been using them as typical of the most wicked and says in effect that the Savior's mission to the spirit world embraced all spirits, even the most wicked. The Joseph Smith Translation adds three clarifying words to verse 20: "*Some of whom* were disobedient in the days of Noah," confirming the sense that Noah's generation was only part—perhaps the most wicked part—of the spirits who benefited from the Savior's mission. A few verses later, 1 Peter 4:6 implies that the gospel was preached to all the dead. Doctrine and Covenants 138:30–33 says the gospel was preached "even to all the spirits of men; . . . even unto all who would repent of their sins and receive the gospel. . . . To those who had died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth, or in transgression, having rejected the prophets.

These were taught faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands.”

What kind of redemption could those spirits hope for? The foundation of redemption is Resurrection, which, by virtue of the Savior’s work, all who had had earthly bodies could anticipate. In addition, each could expect to be redeemed “through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God” and “receive a reward according to [his] works (D&C 138:58–59). In the book of Moses, the Lord spoke to Enoch about Noah’s generation: “But behold, these which thine eyes are upon shall perish in the floods; and behold, I will shut them up; a prison have I prepared for them. And That [Christ] which I have chosen hath pled before my face. Wherefore, he suffereth for their sins; inasmuch as they will repent in the day that my Chosen shall return unto me, and until that day they shall be in torment” (Moses 7:38–39; see also Moses 7:57).

Doctrine and Covenants 138:59 teaches the fate of these spirits: “And after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, [they] shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation.” That is, Noah’s generation, as well as all those who enter the spirit world unrepentant, experience a cleansing process in the spirit world in preparation for the Resurrection. Many of these spirits will receive a degree of redemption in the terrestrial or telestial kingdoms (see D&C 76:72–78; 88:99).

1 Peter 3:21. “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

I include here 1 Peter 3:21, which refers to the Flood being like baptism because it indicates that Peter’s attention turned from the subject of those who received the preaching to the subject of baptism: “Which (water) saves you now as a type, namely baptism, which is not the removal of uncleanness of [from] the flesh, but a covenant before God of a right mind, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (my translation).²⁶ In some areas of the early Church,²⁷ candidates for baptism put off their clothes, entering the baptismal water naked; then, upon emerging from the water, they were clothed with a white garment. For this reason, Reicke perceived a possible allusion to a baptismal service in the language of this verse about putting off the uncleanness of the flesh.²⁸ Several scholars have observed that 1 Peter, which identifies itself as an epistle, has elements reminiscent

of an actual baptismal service. First Peter 3:18–22 contains what looks like a basic creed embracing in a few words a summary of the Lord's ministry: He suffered for sin, died, went in the spirit and preached to spirits in prison (Peter inserted the figure of baptism here), and went to heaven at the right hand of God, having angels subject to Him. One significance of this creedal section is that Peter has put baptism in close proximity to the Savior's Descent, linking the two. A parallel text in 1 Timothy 3:16 says, "God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, *seen of angels* [can refer to spirits], preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory" (emphasis added). Reicke comments, "The whole hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16 has . . . great similarity to 1 Peter 3:18–22. From this it is fairly clear that the appearance to the Angel world is a *motif* organically embodied in the Salvation drama."²⁹

After study of pre-Nicene paschal and baptismal texts, F. L. Cross concluded that 1 Peter 1:3–4:11 has a baptismal setting and that the rite is understood to have taken place after Peter's words in 1:21, which are: "Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God." At this point, the person was baptized. Here is the verse that follows the alleged baptism: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently: Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible."³⁰ However, whatever the original setting of the elements in 1 Peter, the significant point is, again, that baptism is seen by many scholars to be the main theme of Peter's letter, and thus the context for the Descent and the preaching to the spirits.

Early Christians associated the Lord's Passion and the Descent with baptism, Easter Eve being a popular time to receive baptism. Tertullian (AD 160–220) observed, "The Pascha offers the most solemn occasion for Baptism."³¹ Of course, baptism by immersion is itself a figure of death, being a descent into a watery tomb preceding the deliverance from the water of spiritual rebirth. But again Peter's association of baptism with the Descent and the preaching to the spirits should be noted because the linking of these two ideas may constitute a cryptic reference to the offering of baptism to the dead and even to vicarious work for the dead.

1 Peter 4:6. "For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit."

Again scholars debate what “them that are dead” means, some wishing to interpret the phrase as pertaining to the spiritually dead. Augustine, Cyril, Bede, Erasmus, Luther, and others took “the dead” to mean “those who were dead in trespasses and sins”—the spiritually dead or more especially the Gentiles³²—since these fathers could not assent to the wicked in hell receiving the gospel. But Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215) wrote, “If then He preached [the gospel to those in the flesh that they might not be condemned] unjustly, how is it conceivable that He did not for the same cause preach the gospel to those who had departed this life before His advent?”³³

EVIDENCES IN JUDAISM AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY OF THE SAVIOR’S REDEMPTIVE WORK IN THE DESCENT

Foreshadowings of the redemptive nature of the Descent appear in the Old Testament (see Zechariah 9:11: “By the blood of the covenant I have brought forth the prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water”; see also Hosea 13:14). In Jewish literature, we read not only of the Descent but also of the Messiah’s redemptive work in the spirit world. Several apparently Jewish texts, some based on Old Testament passages, contain descriptions of the Lord’s work among the spirits of the dead. Justin³⁴ and Irenaeus³⁵ quote a passage which they claim was formerly found in the text of Jeremiah (once Irenaeus attributes it to Isaiah) but which they say had been excised by Jewish controversialists. This passage is called the Jeremiah Logion: “The Lord remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in their graves, and went down to preach to them His own salvation.” One scholar observes:

It is strange that no trace of this text is found in the LXX of Jeremias, if what Justin alleges is true, but it must now be admitted (in the light of the Qumran scrolls) that some tampering with controversial texts was practised by the Jews, for the Isaias scroll at 53:11 has a reading which favours the Christian argument (and which is found in the LXX), but this reading has disappeared from all later Hebrew mss. Moreover, the Greek Fragments of the OT found at Qumran present a type of text which is often in agreement with Justin.³⁶

From rabbinic literature, which contained ideas likely contemporary with early Christianity, comes an account of the Lord’s visit to the spirit

world. The first of two passages from the *Bereshith Rabba* says of the Messiah's appearance at the gates of Gehinnom:

But when they that are bound, that are in Gehinnom, saw the light of the Messiah, they rejoiced to receive him, saying, He will lead us forth from this darkness, as it is said, "I will redeem them from Hell, from death I will set them free" (Hosea 13:14); and so says Isaiah (35:10), "the ransomed of the Lord will return and come to Zion." By "Zion" is to be understood Paradise.³⁷

And in another passage, "This is that which stands written, We shall rejoice and exult in Thee. When? When the captives climb up out of hell, with the Shechinah at their head."³⁸

An early Christian hymn, dated about AD 100, contains additional insight into the early understanding of the Descent and the redemption of the dead:

Sheol saw me and was shattered, and Death ejected me and many with me. . . . And I made a congregation of living among his dead . . . and those who had died ran towards Me and cried: "Son of God, have pity on us . . . and bring us out from the bonds of darkness, and open to us the door by which we shall come out to Thee. . . . Thou art our Savior." Then I heard their voice. . . . And I placed my name upon their head, because they are free and they are mine.³⁹

A second passage from this hymn represents Christ as speaking:

And I opened the doors which were closed . . . and nothing appeared closed to me, because I was the opening of everything. And I went towards all my bondsmen in order to loose them; that I might not leave anyone bound or binding. And I gave my knowledge generously, and my resurrection through my love . . . and transformed them through myself. Then they received my blessing and lived, and they were gathered to me and were saved; because they became my members and I was their head.⁴⁰

The combination of Christ's placing His name on the heads of the dead, references to the Savior's liberating work, and the spirits' reception of Christ's blessing strongly suggest the giving of baptism to the spirits.

THE DIVISION OF SPIRITS IN THE SPIRIT WORLD; ANTICIPATION BY THE RIGHTEOUS OF THE MESSIAH'S APPEARANCE

In Doctrine and Covenants 138, President Joseph F. Smith recorded that the righteous were assembled in one place waiting for the appearance of the Lord (see vv. 11–19, 38–49). This division of spirits is supported by the apochryphal book of Enoch (dated by Charlesworth as second century before Christ to first century after Christ), which, though not Christian, contains a view of the spirit world current among the Jews of Jesus' time which apparently influenced such New Testament books as Jude and 2 Peter (chapter 2). Enoch, on a tour of the spirit world, asks the attending angel what the hollow places in the rock are. The angel answers:

These beautiful [or "hollow"—the Greek words are similar] corners [are here] in order that the spirits of the souls of the dead should assemble into them. . . . They prepared these places in order to put them there until the day of their judgment. "For what reason is one separated from the other?" And he replied and said to me, "These three have been made in order that the spirits of the dead might be separated. And in the manner in which the souls of the righteous are separated by this spring of water with light upon it, in like manner, the sinners are set apart when they die." (22:8–10)

President Smith wrote, "I beheld that they were filled with joy and gladness, and were rejoicing together because the day of their deliverance was at hand" (D&C 138:15). The joy of the spirits is also supported by Enoch (69:27), "Then there came to them a great joy. And they blessed, glorified, and extolled [the Lord] on account of the fact that the name of that [Son of] Man was revealed to them."

A Jewish text dating about AD 100 describes the state of the spirits after death: "Did not the souls of the righteous in their chambers ask about these matters, saying, 'How long are we to remain here?' [The archangel said] in Hades the chambers of the souls are like the womb. For just as a woman who is in travail makes haste to escape the pangs of birth, so also do these places hasten to give back those things that were committed to them from the beginning" (4 Ezra 4:35, 42; see also Odes of Solomon 24:5).

The Gospel of Nicodemus, a Christian document dating from the time of Justin Martyr who shows familiarity with it, describes the Savior's advent in Hades:

We, then, were in Hades with all who have died since the beginning of the world. And at the hour of midnight there rose upon the darkness there something like the light of the sun and shone, and light fell upon us all, and we saw one another. And immediately our father Abraham, along with the patriarchs and the prophets, was filled with joy, and they said to one another: This shining comes from a great light. The prophet Isaiah, who was present there, said: This shining comes from the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This I prophesied when I was still living: . . . the people that sit in darkness saw a great light.⁴¹

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE RIGHTEOUS TO TAKE THE GOSPEL TO THE WICKED

Section 138 maintains that the Savior did not descend personally to the wicked but organized the righteous and gave them authority to engage in the preaching of the gospel to all the dead (see vv. 29–30). Later Muhammadan theology also contains a trace of this doctrine, which says, “The righteous ones, who have safely passed the bridge which crosses Hell to Paradise, intercede for their brethren detained upon it. They are sent to Hell to see if any there have faith, and to bring them. These are washed in the Water of Life and admitted to Paradise.”⁴² In *Yalkut Shim'oni* (Jewish), the godless are rescued from hell by the righteous dead and pass to eternal life, while in the *Zohar*, the righteous or the patriarchs are said to descend to hell to rescue sinners from the place of torment.⁴³

The early Christian author Ignatius (AD 35–107) writes about the Savior’s visit to the prophets: “If these things be so, how then shall we be able to live without him of whom even the prophets were disciples in the Spirit and to whom they looked forward as their teacher? And for this reason he whom they waited for in righteousness, when he came, raised them from the dead.”⁴⁴

Another early Christian document refers to the Lord’s visit to the righteous:

I have descended and have spoken with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, to your fathers the prophets, and have brought to them news that they may come from the rest which is below into heaven, and have given them the right hand of the baptism of life and forgiveness and pardon for all wickedness, as to you, so from now on also

to those who believe in me. But whoever believes in me and does not do my commandment receives, although he believes in my name, no benefit from it. He has run a course in vain. . . . O Lord, in every respect you have made us rejoice and have given us rest; for in faithfulness and truthfulness you have preached to our fathers and to the prophets, and even so to us and to every man. And he said to us, "Truly I say to you, you and all who believe and also they who yet will believe in him who sent me I will cause to rise up into heaven, to the place which the Father has prepared for the elect and most elect, (the Father) who will give the rest that he has promised, and eternal life."⁴⁵

Rising "up into heaven" reminds us of a striking parallel in Doctrine and Covenants 138:51: "These the Lord taught, and gave them power to come forth, after his resurrection from the dead, to enter into his Father's kingdom, there to be crowned with immortality and eternal life."

Other early literature adds some interesting details to the idea of the righteous taking the gospel to the dead. Hippolytus writes, "John the Baptist died first, being dispatched by Herod, that he might prepare those in Hades for the gospel; he became the forerunner there, announcing even as he did on this earth, that the Savior was about to come to ransom the spirits of the saints from the hand of death."⁴⁶

Again, in a sixth-century manuscript, Hippolytus distinguishes between those who saw the Savior and those who only heard His voice, the voice being figurative perhaps for hearing the gospel from His authorized servants:

Oh, Thou only-begotten Son among only-begotten sons, and All in all! Seeing that the multitude of Holy Souls was deep down and had been deprived of a Divine visit long enough, the Holy Spirit had previously said that they should be the object of a meeting with the Divine Soul, saying: "His form we have not seen, but His voice we have heard." For it behoved Him to go and preach also to those who were in Hell, namely those who had once been disobedient.⁴⁷

One more example will illustrate the righteous spirits' taking the gospel to the wicked spirits and will also provide a transition to the topic of vicarious work for the dead. The Shepherd of Hermas (first century) was, according to the fourth-century Church historian Eusebius, considered by some valuable for instruction in the Church and was quoted by some of

the most ancient writers.⁴⁸ Hermas saw in a vision that the Apostles took the gospel into the spirit world so that the dead might receive the seal of baptism:

These apostles and teachers, who preached the name of the Son of God, having fallen asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, preached also to those who had fallen asleep before them, and themselves gave to them the seal of the preaching [baptism]. They went down therefore with them into the water and came up again, but the latter went down alive and came up alive, while the former who had fallen asleep before, went down dead but came up alive. (Sim. 9.16.5)

Clement of Alexandria also cited this passage, commenting “that it was necessary for the apostles to be imitators of their Master on the other side as well as here, that they might convert the gentile dead as he did the Hebrew.”⁴⁹ In another place, citing Hermas again, he wrote, “Christ visited, preached to, and baptized the just men of old, both gentiles and Jews, not only those who lived before the coming of the Lord, but also those who were before the coming of the Law, . . . such as Abel, Noah, or any such righteous man.”⁵⁰ Clement’s observation recalls D&C 138:40–41 and the description of all the righteous prophets, including Abel and Noah, who waited in that assembly for the Savior’s advent.

VICARIOUS WORK FOR THE DEAD

The writer of Hermas obviously treated two kinds of death, spiritual and physical, but his poetic writing is not clear, and one might easily find in this passage only a description of Apostles giving baptism in the spirit world. But note the sentence, “The latter [the baptizers] *went down alive and came up alive*, while the former [those baptized] . . . went down dead but came up alive.” The wording suggests that the former group—the baptizers—is physically alive and the latter—those baptized—physically dead, and therefore cryptically alludes to vicarious baptism for the dead.

Why is baptism for the dead only hinted at in early writings? It was likely a restricted part of the Savior’s teaching. The New Testament contains many references to mysteries of the kingdom that were shared only in the Savior’s most intimate circle.⁵¹ Some of the early Fathers exhibit this same sense of secrecy about the special doctrines that the Savior taught, probably during the mysterious forty-day ministry (see Acts 1:3). With

regard to secrecy, Clement of Alexandria says of himself, that he writes "in a studied disorder"⁵² and has "here and there interspersed the dogmas which are the germs of true knowledge, so that the discovery of the sacred traditions may not be easy to any one of the uninitiated."⁵³ As a result of the secrecy, after the first century and the demise of the authority to administer baptism, the doctrine of vicarious baptism is hardly referred to, and then only with confusion, since those who knew the truth were probably not writing it down in any detail. Finally, no one could remember just what it was all about. However, traces linger in the literature. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (AD 347–403), wrote:

From Asia and Gaul has reached us the account [tradition] of a certain practice, namely, that when any die without baptism among them, they baptize others in their place and in their name so that, rising in the resurrection, they will not have to pay the penalty of having failed to receive baptism, but rather will become subject to the authority of the Creator of the World. For this reason this tradition which has reached us is said to be the very thing to which the Apostle himself refers when he says, "If the dead rise not at all, what shall they do who are baptized for the dead?" Others interpret the saying finely, claiming that those who are on the point of death, if they are catechumens, are to be considered worthy, in view of the expectation of baptism which they had before their death. They point out that he who has died shall also rise again, and hence will stand in need of that forgiveness of sins that comes through baptism.⁵⁴

Later writers thought that only the heretics had practiced baptism for the dead. Many heretics had. For example, the Marcionites would lay a catechumen (candidate for baptism) who had just died upon a bed and lay a living person under his bed. Then they would ask the corpse if he wished to receive baptism, and the living person would reply that he did wish to. Then the living person would be baptized for the dead one.⁵⁵

It was a short step from baptism *for* the dead to baptism *of* the dead. Greek Canon 20 from the Council of Carthage in 419 (reporting a council in 379) reads, "It also seemed good that the Eucharist should not be given to the bodies of the dead. For it is written, 'Take, Eat,' but the bodies of the dead can neither 'take' nor 'eat.' Nor let ignorance of the presbyters baptize those who are dead."⁵⁶ Some of our Mormon literature has claimed that a

Council of Carthage banned baptism for the dead, but in fact it was the baptism of corpses that was banned.⁵⁷

The idea that the living might do something efficacious for the dead was not new in Israel. In 2 Maccabees 12:42, we read:

The noble Judas called on the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened to the fallen because of their sin. He levied a contribution from each man, and sent the total of two thousand silver drachmas to Jerusalem for a sin-offering—a fit and proper act in which he took due account of the resurrection. For if he had not been expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been foolish and superfluous to pray for the dead. But since he had in view the wonderful reward reserved for those who die a godly death, his purpose was a holy and pious one. And this was why he offered an atoning sacrifice to free the dead from their sin.

Montefiore quotes from fifth-century rabbinic literature on the redemption of man from hell:

Hence we learn that the living can redeem the dead. Hence we have established the rite of holding a memorial service for the dead on the Day of Atonement . . . for God brings them out of Sheol and they are shot forth as an arrow from a bow. Straightway a man becomes tender and innocent as a kid. God purifies him as at the hour of his birth, sprinkling pure water on him from a bucket. Then man grows up and increases in happiness like a fish which draws happiness from the water. So is a man baptized every hour in rivers of balsam, milk, oil, honey: he eats of the tree of life continuously, which is planted in the division [*Mehizah*, term refers to the divisions in Paradise] of the righteous and his body reclines at the (banquet) table of every single saint and he lives for eternity.⁵⁸

Vicarious work in fact underlies the whole of the gospel, since Jesus Christ performed proxy work by suffering for the sins of the world. Similarly, acting in his priesthood office, the priesthood holder acts by proxy, in the name of Jesus Christ, in doing the will of God on the earth. The doctrine of baptism for the dead marvelously illuminates the plan of exaltation: man develops into God by doing what God does; that is, by extending himself in behalf of souls living and dead. Christ did for us what

we could not do for ourselves; in turn, we do for others what they cannot do, becoming, as Clement of Alexandria said (of the Apostles in the spirit world), “imitators of our Master.”⁵⁹ Likewise, section 138 recorded that baptism for the dead made it possible for the righteous, “clothed with power and authority, . . . to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men” (D&C 138:30), continuing, in the process, their own godly development.

It is clear then that abundant writings from the early Christian period, especially from the earliest Church writers, support the thesis that the early Church accepted the doctrine that the Son of God journeyed to the spirit world and there performed a work of enormous magnitude which, with His mortal ministry, offered redemption to the entire family of God. Section 138 is not new doctrine but a restoration of the knowledge that God had given the ancients.

NOTES

1. Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1954), lines 15–60.
2. J. A. MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), observes that the earliest patristic references to the Descent occur in the Epistles of Ignatius and are made in such a way as to show that he is treating a well-known belief (83): *Magnes* c. 9; *Phila* c. 5. c. 9; *Trall* c. 9.
3. Polycarp, in his *Epistle to the Philippians* (1.2), implies the Descent by his citation of Peter’s sermon in Acts 2:24 (MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 84).
4. *Dialogue with Trypho*, c. 72.
5. *adv. Haer.* 4.27.2; Irenaeus says he heard this doctrine that Jesus “descended into the regions beneath the earth . . . preaching the remission of sin received by those who believe in Him” from “a certain presbyter, who had heard it from those who had seen the apostles, and from those who had been their disciples” (4.27.1–2).
6. *de Resur. Carnis*, 43, 44; *de Anima* 7, 55, 58; *adv. Marcionem*, 4.34.
7. Edward G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1958), 322n.
8. Although Brigham Young taught that the spirit world is organized upon the earth, perhaps when we see the spirit world, we will understand the use of the word *descent* (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954], 376).
9. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. H. Hastings, 13 vols. (New York: Scribners, 1951), 4:654–63.

10. Richard L. Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 413.
11. Charles Bigg, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902); William J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of Peter 3:18–4:6* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965); J. A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930); Hugh Nibley, *Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987); Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism* (New York: AMS Press, 1946); Edward G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1958).
12. Bigg, *Commentary*, 162.
13. Augustine, *de Haer.* 79; St. Gregory, *Ep.* 15; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: David McKay Company, 1972), 381.
14. Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 14.
15. Kelly, *Creeds*, 379.
16. Kelly, *Creeds*, 383.
17. Kelly, *Creeds*, 378.
18. Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 14.
19. Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 16.
20. Samuel Fuller, *Defense of the Version of King James I, "The Spirits in Prison"* (New York: T. Whittaker, 1885).
21. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 370; emphasis added.
22. *c. Cels.* 2.43.
23. *de Antichr.* c26.
24. *De Haeresibus*, 79.
25. *AdEvocUum*, *Ep.* 164.
26. Compare Mosiah 3:19, "natural" and "spiritual."
27. Probably the earliest reference to nudity in baptism is found in Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 21.3 (early third century) and possibly in the *Syria Didascalia* (c. 250), where nudity in baptism is strongly implied. The practice of nudity in baptism probably stems from the period when baptism became confused with other sacred ordinances. Several phrases from Paul were later interpreted to allude to the practice of nudity: Galatians 3:27, Colossians 3:9–10, Ephesians 4:22–24, and so on.
28. Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 189–90.
29. Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 234.
30. F. L. Cross, *1 Peter: A Paschal Liturgy* (London: n.p., 1954).
31. *De Baptismo*, 19.
32. Bigg, *Commentary*, 171.

33. *Stromata* 6.6.48.
34. *Dial.* 72.
35. In five places: *adv. Haer.* 3.22.1; 4.3.61; 4.50.1; 4.55.3; 5.31.1H.
36. J. H. Crehan, *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology* (Nelson, 1967), 163.
37. Most easily accessible in MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 31; also *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 4:653.
38. MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 31.
39. Odes of Solomon 42:11–20, in J. H. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon, The Syriac Texts* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).
40. Odes of Solomon 17:9–16.
41. Hennecke, Schneemelcher, and Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 1:471.
42. This reference is most easily available in MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 32, and *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 4:653.
43. MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 31; *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 4:653.
44. *Magn.* 9.2.
45. *Epistula Apostolorum* (c. AD 100–150), 27–28. Hennecke, Schneemelcher, Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 209–10.
46. *De Antichr.* c. 45; so Origen in two places, *In Luc. Hamil.* C.4. and *In Evang. John* 2.30.
47. Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 24.
48. *HE* 3.3.6.
49. *Stromata*, 6.6.
50. *Stromata*, 2.9.
51. Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; 2 Corinthians 12:2–4; 1 Corinthians 2:6; see also Eus. *HE* 2.1.4 and Nibley, Part 1, *Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times*, 1–5.
52. *Stromata*, 6.2.1.
53. *Stromata*, 7.110.4.
54. *Adv. Haeres.* 1.28.6.
55. John Chrysostome, *Homil. 40 in 1 Cor.*
56. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, “The Seven Ecumenical Councils” (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 14.451.
57. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:163.
58. Tanhuma, “Ha’asinu,” I f. 339b. om C. G. Montefiore, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 675.
59. *Stromata*, 6.6.