

The Harrowing of Hell.

The story of Christ's descent into Hades and his delivering the Just who were in the bondage of death is told in the Acts of Pilate and the Gospel of Nicodemus, two of the ancient apocryphal texts which throughout the ages have formed part of the spiritual reading of Orthodox Christians. They have never been regarded as scripture, but have been respected for the insight, the wisdom and the beauty of the story they contain. The texts of Great Sabbath make considerable use of these apocrypha.

And Joseph rose and said to Annas and Caiaphas: You are indeed right to marvel since you have heard that Jesus has been seen alive after death, and that he has ascended into heaven. It is, however, more marvelous that he did not rise from the dead alone, but many other dead he raised from their graves to life, and many people have seen them in Jerusalem.

And now hear me; for we all know the blessed Simeon, the high priest who received the child Jesus in his hands in the temple. And this Simeon had two sons, brothers in blood and we all present at their death and burial. Go therefore and look at their graves: for they are open, because they have risen, and behold they are in the city of Arimathaea living together in prayer. And indeed men hear them crying out, yet they speak with no-one, but are silent as dead men. But come, let us go to them and with all honour and gentleness bring them to us, and if we adjure them, perhaps they will inform us about the mystery of their rising again.

When they heard these things, they all rejoiced. And Annas and Caiaphas, Nicodemus and Joseph and Gamaliel went and did not find them in their grave, but they went to the city of Arimathaea, and found them there, kneeling on their knees and giving themselves unto prayer. And they kissed them, and with all reverence and in the fear of God they brought them to Jerusalem into the synagogue. And they shut the doors and took the Law of the Lord and put it into their hands, and adjured them by the God Adonai, the God of Israel who spoke to our fathers through the prophets, saying: "Do you believe that it is Jesus who raised you from the dead? Tell us how you have arisen from the dead."

And when Karinus and Leucius heard this adjuration, their trembled physically and groaned, being troubled at heart. And looking up together to heaven they made the seal of the cross with their fingers upon their tongues, and forthwith they spoke, both of them, saying: "Give us each a volume of paper, and let us write that which we have seen and heard." And they gave them to them, and each sat down and wrote, saying:

O Lord Jesu Christ, Resurrection of the dead and Life of the living, permit us to speak of the secrets of your majesty which you accomplished after your death on the Cross, for we have been adjured by your Name. For you commanded your servants to tell no-one the secrets of your divine majesty which you wrought in Hades.

Now when we were placed with all our fathers in the deep, in shadowy darkness, suddenly the sun's golden heat was there and purple royal light shining on us. And immediately the father of the whole human race together with all the patriarchs and prophets rejoiced, saying: ***"This light is the author of everlasting light who promised to send unto us his co-eternal light."*** And Isaias cried out and said: ***"This is the light of the Father, the Son of God, just as I prophesied when I was alive on the earth: The land of Zabulon and the land of Nephthalim beyond Jordan, of Galilee of the Gentiles, the people that walked in darkness have seen a great***

light, and those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death, on them the light has shone. And now it has come and shone upon us that sit in death."

And as we were all rejoicing in the light which shone on us, our father Simeon came joyfully to us saying: "***Glorify the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God; for I received him in my hands in the temple when he was born a child, and being moved of the Holy Spirit I confessed him saying to him; 'Now my eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.'***" And when they heard these things, the whole multitude of the saints rejoiced yet more.

And after that there came someone looking like a desert dweller, and everyone asked him: "***Who are you?***" And he answered: "***I am John, the voice and the prophet of the Most High, who preceded his coming to prepare his pathway, to give knowledge of salvation to his people, so that their sins might be forgiven. And when I saw him coming unto me, I was moved by the Holy Spirit and said: 'Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the world's sins. And I baptized him in the river Jordan, and I saw the Holy Spirit coming down on him with the appearance of a dove, and I heard a voice from the sky saying: 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'***" And now I have come before his face, and have come down to proclaim to you that he is at hand to visit us, he, the Dawn, the Son of God, coming from on high to us that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

And when father Adam the first-created heard this, that Jesus had been baptized in the Jordan, he cried out to his son Seth, saying: "***Tell your sons the patriarchs and the prophets all you heard from Michael the Archangel, when I sent you to the gates of paradise to beg God to send his angel to give you oil from the tree of mercy to anoint my body when I was sick.***" Then Seth approached the holy patriarchs and prophets, and said: "***When I, Seth, was praying at the gates of Paradise, behold Michael the angel of the Lord appeared to me, saying: 'I am sent to you from the Lord: it is I that am set over the body of man. And I say to you, Seth, do not upset yourself with weeping, praying and begging for the oil of the tree of mercy to anoint your father Adam because he is in physical pain; for you will not be able to receive it until the last days and times, until five thousand five hundred years are accomplished: then the most beloved Son of God will come upon the earth to raise up the body of Adam and the bodies of the dead, and he shall come to be baptized in the Jordan. And when he emerges from Jordan's water, he will anoint all who believe in him with the oil of mercy, and for all generations that are born of water and of the Holy Spirit that oil of mercy will be for eternal life. Then the most beloved Son of God, Jesus the Anointed, will descend to earth and bring our father Adam into paradise to the tree of mercy.'***" And when they heard all these things of Seth, all the patriarchs and prophets rejoiced with a great rejoicing.

And while all the saints were rejoicing, behold Satan the prince and chief of death said to Hades: "***Prepare yourself to receive Jesus who boasts he is God's Son, though he is a human being, afraid of death, and says: 'My soul is sorrowful even to death.'***" And he has been my great enemy, harming me greatly, and with a word he has healed many that I had made blind, lame, dumb, leprous, and possessed: and some that I have brought to you dead, he has taken from you."

Hades answered and said to Prince Satan: "***Who is this Mighty One, if he is a human being who fears death? for all the mighty ones of the earth are subject to my power, even those that you have brought me subdued by your power. If, then, you are mighty, what manner of man***

is this Jesus who can withstand your power, even though he is afraid of death? If he be so mighty in his humanity, I tell you truly he is almighty in his Godhead, and no man can withstand his power. And when he says that he fears death, he wishes to trap you, and woe shall be to you for everlasting ages."

But Satan the Prince of Tartarus said: *"Why do you doubt and fear to receive this Jesus who is your adversary and mine? For I tempted him, and have stirred up my ancient people of the Jews with envy and wrath against him. I have sharpened a spear to thrust him through, gall and vinegar have I mixed to give him to drink, and I have prepared a cross to crucify him and nails to pierce him: and his death is near at hand, so I can bring him to you to be subject to you and me."*

Hades answered and said: *"You told me it is he who has taken dead men from me. For there are many who when they were alive on earth have taken dead men from me, but not by their own power but by praying to God, and their Almighty God has taken them from me. Who is this Jesus has drawn dead men away from me by his own word and without prayer? Perhaps it is he who by simply speaking a command restored to life Lazarus, four days dead, stinking and decomposing, whom I held here dead."*

Satan the Prince of Death answered and said: *"It is that same Jesus."*

When Hades heard this, he said to him: *"I adjure you by your strength and my own not to bring him to me! For at that time when I heard him speak a command I did shake and I was overwhelmed with fear, and all my ministers were troubled with me. And we could not keep Lazarus; like an eagle shaking himself he sprang forth with all agility and swiftness, and departed from us, and the earth too which held Lazarus's corpse at once yielded him up alive. And so it is I know now that that man who was able to do these things is a God strong in command and mighty in manhood, and that he is the saviour of mankind. And if you bring him to me he will set free all that are shut up here in the hard prison and bound in the unbreakable chains of their sins, and he will bring them to the life of his Godhead for ever."*

And as Prince Satan and Hades said these things to each other, suddenly there came a voice like thunder and a spiritual shout:

***"Lift up, your gates, O princes,
and be lifted up, you everlasting doors,
and the King of Glory shall come in."***

When Hades heard this, he said to Prince Satan: *"Leave me, leave my dwelling. If you are a mighty warrior, fight against the King of Glory. But what is he to you?"* And Hades cast Satan out of his dwelling. Then Hades said to his wicked ministers: *"Shut fast the strong gates of brass and put on them the iron bars and resist bravely, make sure we who hold the captives do not become captives ourselves."*

But when the multitude of saints all heard it, they rebuked Hades: ***"Open your gates, that the King of Glory may come in!"*** And David cried out: ***"When I was alive on earth, did I not foretell you: Let them give thanks to the Lord, for his mercies and his wonders to the children of men; who has broken the gates of brass and smitten the iron bars asunder? he has taken them from their wicked ways."*** And then Isaias likewise said: ***"When I was alive on earth, did not I foretell to you: The dead shall arise, and they that are in the tombs shall rise again, and***

they that are in the earth shall rejoice, for the dew which comes from the Lord is their healing? And again I said: O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?"

When they heard what Isaias said, all the saints said to Hades: *"Open your gates: now you will be overcome and weak and devoid of strength."* And there came a great voice like thunder, saying: *"Lift up your gates, O Princes, and be lifted up you portals of Hades, and the King of Glory shall come in!"*

And when Hades saw that they cried out twice like this, he said, as if he did not know the answer: *"Who is the King of Glory?"* And David answered Hades and said: *"I know the words being shouted, since by His Spirit I prophesied the same; and now I say to you what I said before: **The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle, he is the King of glory.** And: The Lord looked down from heaven that he might hear the groanings of those in fetters and deliver the children of the slain. And now, most foul and stinking Hades, open your gates, that the King of glory may come in."* **And as David spoke like this to Hades, the Lord of Majesty appeared in the form of a man and lightened the eternal darkness and broke the unbreakable bonds: and his everlasting might brought relief to us that sat in the deep darkness of our transgressions and in the shadow of death of our sins.**

When Hades and death and their wicked ministers saw this, they were stricken with fear, they and their cruel officers, at the sight of the radiance of such a great light in their own realm, seeing Christ suddenly in their dwelling, and they cried out, saying: *"We are overcome by you. Who are you, sent by the Lord for our confusion? Who are you, undamaged by corruption, and with your majesty's signs unblemished, in your wrath condemning our power? Who are you so great and so small, both humble and exalted, both soldier and commander, a marvelous warrior in the form of a bondsman, and King of Glory, both dead and living, whom the Cross carried killed on it? You that lay dead in the grave have come down to us living, and at your death all creation shuddered and all the stars were shaken and you have become become **free among the dead** and you rout our legions. Who are you that free prisoners held bound by the original sin and restore them into their former liberty? Who are you that shed your divine and blazing light on those who were blinded with the darkness of their sins?"* Likewise all the legions of devils were stricken with the same fear and cried out all together, terrified and in confusion, saying: *"Where are you from, Jesus, a man so mighty and radiant in majesty, so excellent, spotless, clean of sin? For that world, the earth, which hitherto was always subject to us, paying tribute from which we profitted, has never sent us a dead man like you, nor ever dispatched such a gift to Hades! Who then are you that enter our borders so fearlessly, not fearing our torments, but even trying to carry everyone off out of our bondage? Perhaps you are that Jesus of whom Satan our prince said that by your death on the cross you should receive the dominion of the whole world.* **Then the King of Glory in his majesty trampled on death, and laid hold of Prince Satan and delivered him to the power of Hades, and drew Adam to him, to his own brightness.**

Then Hades, receiving Prince Satan, reproached him bitterly, saying: *"O prince of perdition and chief of destruction, Beelzebub, the scorn of the angels and spitting of the righteous why did you do this? You crucify the King of Glory and at his death you promise us*

great spoils of his death: like a fool you did not know what you were doing! See! by the brightness of his majesty this Jesus puts to flight all the darkness of death, he has broken the strong depths of the prisons, and let out the prisoners and loosed the bound. And all those who were groaning in our torments rejoice against us, and at their prayers our dominions are vanquished and our realms conquered, and now no nation of men fears us any more. And beside this, the dead who never used to be proud triumph over us, and the captives who never could be joyful threaten us. O Prince Satan, father of all the wicked and ungodly and renegades, why did you do this? Of all those who from the beginning until now have despaired of life and salvation, now none of their usual howls can be heard, not a groan from them sounds in our ears, nor is there any sign of tears on the face of any of them! O Prince Satan, holder of the keys of Hades, those riches you had won by the Tree of Transgression and the loss of Paradise, you have lost by the Tree of the Cross, and all your gloating is over! When you hung up Christ Jesus the King of Glory you worked against yourself and against me. Henceforth you shall know what eternal torments and infinite pains you are to suffer in my keeping for ever. O Prince Satan, author of death and head of all pride, you ought first to have sought out some wrongdoing to accuse this Jesus of: why did you dare to crucify him unjustly, without any cause, when you found no blame against him, and to bring into our realm the Innocent Just One, and to lose the guilty, the ungodly and the unjust of the entire world?"

And when Hades had spoken like this to Prince Satan, the King of Glory said to Hades: "Satan the prince shall be in your power to all ages in the stead of Adam and his children, my just ones." And the Lord stretching out his hand, said: **"Come to me, all my saints who bear my image and my likeness. You that by the tree and the devil and death were condemned, behold now the devil and death condemned by the Tree!"** And forthwith all the saints were gathered together under the hand of the Lord. And the Lord holding the right hand of Adam, said to him: **"Peace be to you with all your children, my just ones."**

But Adam, casting himself at the knees of the Lord entreated him with tears and beseechings, and said with a loud voice: "I will magnify you, O Lord, for you have set me upright and not let my enemies triumph over me: O Lord my God I cried to you and you have healed me; Lord, you have brought my soul out of Hades, you have delivered me from those who go down into the pit. Sing praises to the Lord all you his ye saints, and give thanks to him, remembering his holiness. For there is wrath in his indignation and life is in his good pleasure." In a like manner all the saints of God kneeled and cast themselves at the feet of the Lord, saying with one accord: "You are come, O Redeemer of the world: what you foretold by the Law and your prophets, you have accomplished in deed.

You have redeemed the living by your Cross, and by the death of the Cross you have come down to us, to save us out of Hades and death through your majesty. O Lord, as you have set the name of your glory in the heavens and set up your Cross as a token of redemption upon the earth, so, Lord, set up the sign of your Cross's victory in Hades, that death may have no more dominion."

And the Lord stretched out his hand and made the sign of the Cross over Adam and over all his saints, and he took the right hand of Adam and went up out of Hades, and all the saints followed him. Then Holy David cried aloud: **"Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand has wrought salvation for him and his holy arm. The Lord has made known his saving healing, before the face of all nations he has revealed**

his justice." And the whole multitude of the saints answered, saying: "Such honour have all his saints. Amen, Alleluia."

And then Avvakoum the prophet cried out: *"You went forth for the salvation of your people to set your chosen free."* And all the saints answered: ***"Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord. The Lord is God and has appeared to us. Amen, Alleluia."*** Likewise after that the prophet Micheas too shouted: *"What God is like you, O Lord, taking away iniquity and removing sins? and now you withhold your wrath as evidence that you are freely merciful, and you turn and have mercy on us, you forgive all our iniquities and have sunk all our sins in the depths of the sea, as you swore to our fathers in the days of old."* And all the saints answered, saying: ***"This is our God for ever and ever, he shall be our guide, to ages of ages. Amen, Alleluia."*** And so spoke all the prophets, quoting sacred words from their praises, and all the saints followed the Lord, crying ***"Amen, Alleluia!"***

But the Lord holding the hand of Adam delivered him unto Michael the archangel, and all the saints followed Michael the archangel, and he brought them all into the glory and grace of Paradise. And there two old men met them, and when they were asked by the saints: *"Who are you that have never been dead in Hades with us and are placed in Paradise in the body?"* Then one of them answered: *"I am Enoch who was brought here by the word of the Lord, and this that is with me is Elias the Thesbite, who was taken up in a chariot of fire: and up to this day we have not tasted death, but we are kept until the coming of Antichrist to fight against him with signs and wonders of God, and to be slain by him in Jerusalem, and after three days and a half to be taken up again alive on the clouds."*

And as Enoch and Elias were speaking like this with the saints, there came another man miserably dressed, carrying on his shoulders the sign of the cross. When they saw him, all the saints said to him: *"Who are you? You look like a brigand! - and how is it you bear a sign on your shoulders?"* And he answered them and said: *"You are right: I was a brigand, doing all manner of evil upon the earth. And the Jews crucified me with Jesus, and I beheld the wonders in creation which occurred through the Cross of Jesus when he was crucified, and I believed that he was the maker of all creatures and the Almighty King, and I begged him: **Remember me, Lord, when you come in your Kingdom!** And forthwith he received my prayer, and said to me: 'Truly I tell you, this day you will be with me in Paradise: and he gave me the sign of the Cross, saying: Bear this and go to Paradise, and if the angel that guards Paradise will not let you enter, show him the sign of the Cross; and say to him: Jesus Christ the Son of God, now the Crucified, has sent me.' And when I had so done, I said all these things to the angel that guards Paradise; and when he heard this of me, he immediately opened the door and brought me in and set me at the right hand of Paradise, saying: 'Just wait a little while and Adam the father of all mankind will enter in with all his children that are holy and just, after the triumph and glory of the ascension of Christ the Lord, the Crucified.'" When they heard all these words of the brigand, all the holy patriarchs and prophets said with one voice:*

***"Blessed be the Lord Almighty,
the Father of eternal good things,
the Father of mercies!
You that have given such grace to your sinners***

*and brought them again into the beauty of Paradise and into your good pastures:
for this is the most holy life of the spirit.
Amen, Amen."*