

Christ is risen!

SHEOL DELENDA EST!

or

The Fierce Man of War Strikes Again

By Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

"Oh no, here we go again," groaned the senators. They were complaining because old Cato had raised his hand, indicating he wanted to speak. The Roman senators had learned by now what to expect every time Cato took the floor. No matter what the subject was, no matter who or what the issue of discussion, Cato always began his speeches with exactly the same words. Some senators were convinced that he had a one-track mind and was obsessed. And, sure enough, he did not disappoint his colleagues. "Cartago delenda est!" shouted the old legislator, as always, and then he launched into what was the current subject of discussion before the Senate that day. Often, he ended his speeches with the very same expression!

"Carthage must be destroyed!" was Cato's slogan, preoccupation and obsession. He was convinced that if the Roman State was to grow and prosper, and exert its influence over the nations whose shores were washed by the great Inland Sea, Carthage, Rome's major rival, had to be destroyed. "Cartago delenda est!" "Carthage must be destroyed!"

In God's overall strategy, there was another region that had to be destroyed: Sheol [known in the Greek-speaking world as "Hades"], the land of the souls that had departed this life. This destruction of Satan's stronghold had an important facet to it — a facet that has been either sorely ignored or completely misunderstood in the West, and that is why one hardly hears anything about it in Roman Catholic or Protestant circles; whereas, in the Orthodox Christian Church, it is very prominent, both in iconography and hymnology.

A recent study by Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev provides some important insights into this question. The bishop points out that, in Protestant circles, the event of Christ's Descent into Hades is largely ignored and unknown (which we also noted in our earlier article, "The Neutralization of the Netherworld"). At best, it is explained away in metaphorical terms.

Following the thought of Augustine and Aquinas, Roman Catholic interpreters, on their part, insist that Christ's descent into Hades had relevance only for the righteous of the Old Testament. Following faithfully in the footsteps of Latin scholars, many contemporary Orthodox Christians say the same.

But what did the *early* Church believe? *This* is the question that Bishop Hilarion addresses in his study, and the answers he discovers in the Church Fathers are, quite literally, Sheol-shattering, if you pardon the expression. This is of interest to us, not so much because of what Bishop Hilarion is saying, but because this is what our Church Fathers, our hymnography, our iconography, our Church Tradition, are saying.

Citing ancient Christian writers — such as Sts. Polycarp of Smyrna (+163) and Ignatius of Antioch (+107), the *Shepherd of Hermas* (c. A. D. 100), Melito of Sardes (+170), Clement of Alexandria (+220), Jacob Aphrahat (+345), Sts. Justin the Philosopher (+107), Hippolytus of Rome (+236), Irenaeus of Lyons (+202), Athanasius the Great (+373), Basil the Great (+379), Gregory the Theologian (+391), Gregory of Nyssa (+395), John Chrysostom (+407), Cyril of Alexandria (+444), Ephraim the Syrian (+373), Maximus the Confessor (+662), and John of Damascus (+760) — Bishop Hilarion shows that these ancient authorities were virtually unanimous in teaching that Christ's descent into and destruction of the netherworld is *of universal and timeless significance*. In the writings of the ancient authors and Church Fathers, Adam is viewed as a symbol of the entire human race redeemed by Christ. Those who hear Christ's preaching and follow Him are, first, the righteous of the Old Testament and *then* all the others who respond to our Saviour's preaching. Whether or not all respond to Christ's preaching in Hades is an open question, but unlike later writers in the West, the consciousness of the Church in the East admitted the opportunity to be saved, not only to those who believed during their lifetime, but also to those who were not given the opportunity to believe, yet pleased God with their lofty morality, compassion for others, and good works, and thus, were *predisposed* to believe when they heard Christ.

Let us look at some examples of this Patristic thinking in the holy hymnography of our Church. One illustration comes from the Kontakia of St. Romanos the Melodist, who reposed around A. D. 556. In his *Third Kontakion on the Resurrection*, the Saint says the following:

Strophe 8: Adam Speaks

Now, Hades, you will recall my words, which I said to you a long time ago,
'My King is stronger than you.'
But you considered these words a dream.
Experience will teach you His force.
For it is not only I, but all my descendants,
And all men that you will lose; you will be deprived of all.
The Christ whom you saw hanging on the Cross,
He will himself enchain you, and joyfully I shall reply
'Where, O Death, is your victory, and where your power?
God has destroyed your strength,
Through the Resurrection'."

Strophe 9: Hades speaks

"Just so, on the third day, the sea-monster disgorged Jonas.
Now I disgorge Christ and all of those who are Christ's;
Because of the race of Adam I am being chastised."
Uttering these laments, Hades cried out with groans.
"I did not believe Adam when he told me these things in advance;
But I boasted and loudly proclaimed: 'No one rules over me.'
For formerly I was lord of all;
But now I have lost all men^{*}, and taunting me, they say:
'Where, O Death, is your victory, and where your power?
God has destroyed your strength,
Through the Resurrection!'"

Another example of this thought is expressed in a hymn by St. John of Damascus (+760):

Some say that [Christ delivered from Hades] only those
who believed,
Such as fathers and prophets,
Judges and, with them, kings and rulers,
and others of the Hebrew people,
not numerous or known to many.

But we shall reply to those who think this
that there is nothing marvelous or strange
in Christ saving those who had believed;
for He alone is the just Judge,
and everyone who believes in Him shall not perish.

Wherefore, they all ought to have been saved
and delivered from the bonds of Hades
by the descent of our God and Master;
for this very thing came to pass by His foresight.

Whereas those who were saved only by His *philanthropía* [love
for mankind] were, I think, all those
who had the purest life,

^{*}By "all", we assume that St. Romanos means all in Hades who assent to Christ's teaching when He proclaims the glad tidings of His Resurrection. One might ask: which soul could possibly refuse to accept Christ's teaching? It seems quite possible that the soul of someone like Lenin, or Hitler, or Stalin, or of a number of some such individuals would react to Christ's teaching by saying, "Resurrection? Bah! Humbug! What utter nonsense! The opium of the masses!" In his *Homily on Christ's Descent into Hades*, St. Epiphanius of Cyprus (+403) says, "What then? Did God save absolutely all when He appeared in Hades? In no wise. But there also He saved them that believed." For the entire Homily, see *The Lamentations of Matins of Holy and Great Saturday*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, 1981.

and performed all manner of good works,
living in modesty, temperance and virtue;
yet, they had not grasped [or, apprehended — *Gr. katélavon*]
the pure and divine Faith,
because they had not been instructed in it,
and remained altogether untutored.

They were those whom the Steward and Master of all
drew and captured in His divine nets,
and persuaded to believe in Him,
illuminating them with His divine rays
and showing them the True Light.

(*Concerning Those Who Died in Faith*,
St. John of Damascus, *PG. 95, 257 AC*)

Why did Augustine (and, following him, the entire West) veer away from this virtually unanimous teaching of the ancient Church? Augustine does not really explain himself in this matter. Some surmise that, since he had already consigned most of mankind to eternal damnation by his teachings of predestination and original sin, perhaps he felt that our Saviour's act of *philanthropía* toward the souls held captive in Hades was somehow — how can we say this delicately? — misplaced? In any case, Aquinas followed him faithfully, and added a few scholastic elements and novelties [like Purgatory], and — *voilà!* — the Papacy's teaching drifted away from the doctrine of the early Church in this matter. The Protestants, on their part, inherited this variation, and made their own interpretations of it, and so we have what we have today in the West.

But, once again, let us examine the Holy Scriptures carefully:

When Jesus was entered into Capernaum there came unto Him a centurion, beseeching him and saying, "Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented".

And Jesus saith unto him, "I will come and heal him."

The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, 'Go', and he goeth; and to another, 'Come,' and he cometh; and to my servant, 'Do this'; and he doeth *it*."

When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to them that followed, "*Amen, I say unto you. I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west and, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the Kingdom of Heaven...* And Jesus said

unto the centurion, *"Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee."* And his servant was healed in the selfsame hour.

(Matt. 8:5-13)

A certain woman, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of [Christ], and came and fell at His feet:

The woman was a Greek, [i.e., a pagan], a Syrophenician by nation; and she besought Him that He would cast forth the demon out of her daughter. "But Jesus said unto her, "Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs:"*

And she answered and said unto Him; "Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs!"

And He said unto her, *"For this saying go thy way; the demon is gone out of thy daughter."* And when she was come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter laying upon the bed.

(Mark 7:25-29)

When the heathen who have not the Law do by nature what the Law requires, they are a Law to themselves, even though they do not have the Law. *They show that what the Law requires is written on their hearts*, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

(Rom. 2:24-16)

But how are men to call upon [the Lord] in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel; for Esaias says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" *So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.*

(Rom. 10-14-17)

* Actually, in the Greek text, our Saviour did not say "dogs" [*kýnos*], but *kynária*, i.e., little dogs, puppies. "Dogs" is a term of disdain; but "puppies" are something else altogether. Puppies are helpless, little creatures. So, the pagans are like puppies in spiritual understanding; they are not deserving of disdain, but of solicitude.

For Christ also hath once suffered for our sins. He, the just, suffered for the unjust, that He might bring us to God. In the body, He was put to death; in the spirit, He was brought to life. And in the spirit He went and preached to the spirits that were imprisoned [in Hades], *who formerly had not obeyed....*

(I Peter 3:18-20)

In the Holy Scriptures, in the mind of the Church Fathers, in the Orthodox Church's iconography and hymnology, the Descent into Hades is a vitally important event, foretold in the Old Testament, articulated in the New, and celebrated by the Saints.

The end was swift and dramatic. Light flashed everywhere. Yelps, shrieks, squeals, and, yes, pandemonium.... The gates crashed with a din. The gate-keepers scrambled and high-tailed it. Shouts of, "Look, He's here! Last week, He snatched Lazarus, and now He's back! The fierce Man of War is back! Yahoo! Tell everyone the Good News! The Vanquisher of death is here! Hosanna and Hooray!!" And echoing everywhere, through the dank halls and vaults, and down the endless ages, again and again, the battle-cry reverberated: "Sheol delenda est! Hades must be destroyed!!"