



## Christ's descent into *Sheol* in the Odes of Solomon

*Sheol* (ܫܘܠ - *sh'youl*, 'the underworld') is mentioned three times in the Odes of Solomon:<sup>1</sup>

- 15.9: 'In front of my eyes Death was destroyed, and Sheol was eliminated upon my word.'  
 29.4: 'He made me ascend from the depths of Sheol, and from the mouth of Death He pulled me.'  
 42.11: 'Sheol saw me and shrunk back,<sup>2</sup> Death spit me out and many with me.'

Christ's descent into and ascent from *Sheol* is alluded to several times, and is the main topic in Ode 42, the final Ode of the book.

As there is no earlier witness of the well known doctrine of Christ's descent to the underworld, we should do our best to interpret the relevant passages correctly. This brief article will only collect a few pertinent observations and formulate two hypotheses that seem to force themselves on us as we read the final Ode against the background of its parallels in earlier sections of the book.

### Observations

- All three times *sh'youl* occurs in the Odes, it is in synonymous parallelism with 'Death' (ܡܘܬܐ - *mauto*)<sup>3</sup>  
 Cf. also 'immortal life' (ܡܘܬܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܘܬܐ) in 10.2, 15.10, 28.7, 31.7, 38.3, 40.6.  
 Cf. 'become immortal' (ܡܘܬܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܘܬܐ) in 3.8
- Sheol* is represented as a place. Esp. 15.10 and 38.3 are remarkable: a place of life over against a place of Death:  
 15.10: Eternal life has arisen in the Lord's land (ܡܘܬܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܘܬܐ).  
 38.3: [The Truth] set me on the place of immortal life (ܡܘܬܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܘܬܐ).  
 Both death and life are represented by places:
  - Death by *Sheol*;
  - Life by Paradise.
- Sheol* and Christ's triumphant victory over it is discussed extensively in the final Ode. That Ode has a jubilant tone. It doesn't contain significant new elements, but sums up what was prepared in the book of Odes so far. The opening verses of Ode 42 (v. 1-2) repeat almost verbatim most of Ode 27, which is a homage to the cross.
- The main theme of Ode 42 is salvation: deliverance from death of those who love the Messiah and transfer to Life. Cf. v. 18:

ܡܘܬܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܘܬܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܘܬܐ  
 ܡܘܬܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܘܬܐ ܘܠܐ ܡܘܬܐ

'May we also be saved with You, because You are our Savior.'

<sup>1</sup> Only for these three verses I have used my own translation from the Syriac. All other verses are taken from James Charlesworth at <http://users.misericordia.edu/davies/thomas/odes.htm> (accessed 27/8/2008).

<sup>2</sup> The Syriac term which is translated 'shrunk back' is ܫܘܠܘܢܐ, the *etpaal* form of ܫܘܠܐ = 'shrink back in fear.' It is the equivalent of the Greek verb πτήσσω, which is found in the Septuagint rendering of Jb 38:17. I will contend further that Jb 38:17 is behind this verse in Odes.

<sup>3</sup> The same is the case in 1 Sm 2:6; Jb 38:17; Ps 6:6; 18:6; 89:49; 116:3; Prv 5:5; 7:27; Is 28:15,18; 38:18; Hos 13:14 (1 Cor 15:55); Hb 2:5. Cf. RV 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14.

### Hypotheses

1. The Odist took Job 38:17 as a starting point:  
 ἀνοίγονται δὲ σοι φόβῳ πύλαι θανάτου,  
 πυλωροὶ δὲ ἄδου ἰδόντες σε ἐπτήξαν;  
 ['Do the gates of Death open for you in fear?  
 Did the gate keepers of Sheol *shrink back* when they saw you?']  
 The Odes are a confession that Christ did what man was unable to do: break the power of Death. Christological reading of Job 38:17 may have been common in the early church. At the Council of Sirmium (AD 359) a creed was accepted in which Christ's descent to Hades was confessed in terms taken from the Septuagint rendering of Job 38:17:<sup>4</sup>

σταυρωθέντα καὶ ἀποθανόντα καὶ εἰς τὰ καταχθόνια κατελθόντα καὶ τὰ ἐκεῖσε οἰκονομήσαντα, ὃν πυλωροὶ ἄδου ἰδόντες ἐφρίξαν καὶ ἀναστάντα ἐκ νεκρῶν τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ . . . [He was crucified and died; He descended into the underworld and managed the things over there, and when the gatekeepers saw him, they shuddered; He rose from the dead on the third day . . . ]<sup>5</sup>

2. Christ's descent into Hades to lead his people out is a metaphor for salvation, and should not be read as one particular episode in salvation (between death and resurrection). Ode 42 is a hymn that reflects a baptismal ceremony in the believing community that is behind this hymn book. It represents the application of the Savior's victory over Death to those who call on his name.

This second hypothesis is built upon the way Ode 42 relates to other sections in the Odes. The theme of deliverance from captivity runs through the entire hymn book and serves as a picture of Christian salvation, which is celebrated particularly during the baptismal ceremony. A few elements, among others, that jump out in other delivery sections in the Odes are as follows:

- Life is through union with Christ (e.g., 5.14-15 and 17.13-16)
- Salvation is understood as a transfer from destruction to Paradise (e.g., 10.2-4 and 11 - passim). It is often described as delivery from captivity (e.g., 17.1-4, 10-12; 29.4-5; 22 - passim)
- Traditional baptismal elements are integral parts of receiving salvation:
  - Renouncing the adversary (e.g., 29.4-5; 33.6-12)
  - Confession ('expressing the Word'-cf. Eph 5:26 e.g., 24:9)
  - Reception of the Spirit (e.g., 28.8)
  - The kiss of kinship (e.g., 28.6, 7)

Of course these hypotheses need to be checked further against systematic exegesis of the Odes, and especially of Ode 42. As a basis for further discussion, I printed the text of Ode 42 (Charlesworth's version) with some of its most striking parallels in the Odes. Only with verse 19 I printed a NT parallel, Rm 10:9 (English Standard Version). I added headings to make the baptismal setting more explicit.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. the text of this creed in Jonkers, E. J., ed. *Acta et symbola conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, Testus minores in usum academicum, vol. 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 104.

<sup>5</sup> Πτήσσω (from Jb 38:17: 'shrink back') and φρίσσω (from the Sirmium creed: 'shudder', 'shiver') are quite similar in meaning. Both are metaphors for 'to be terribly frightened.'

**Norelli, Enrico, and Bernard Pouderon, eds. *Histoire de la littérature grecque chrétienne: Introduction, Initiation aux pères de l'église*. Paris: Cerf, 2008. 332 p. ISBN: 978-2-204-08228-0.**

A few years ago a working group met in Paris to consider publishing a replacement for Quasten's *Patrology* (French version published 1957-63). The first result of that collaboration under the *Textes pour l'histoire de l'Antiquité tardive (THAT)* has now appeared. It introduces the project and its main editors and presents various questions of methodology and sources. The aim is to present all available Christian Greek literature from the first to the fifth centuries, beginning with Paul and ending with the Council of Chalcedon (451). Five other volumes are planned: II. *La Littérature grecque chrétienne, de Paul à Irénée*, III. *La Littérature grecque chrétienne, de Clément d'Alexandrie à Eusèbe de Césarée*, IV. *L'Âge d'or des Pères de l'Église: Alexandrie-Égypte*, V. *L'Âge d'or des Pères de l'Église: Asie Mineure, Constantinople*, and VI. *L'Âge d'or des Pères de l'Église: Syrie, Antioche et divers*. The main editors are Bernard Pouderon, Professeur de grec ancien at Tours and Enrico Norelli, Professeur ordinaire en histoire du christianisme at Geneva, appreciated for his collaboration with Claudio Moreschini over the two volume *Storia della letteratura cristiana antica greca e latina* (1995-96), now widely translated.

The book begins with a short introduction by Pouderon (7-8), outlining the project, noting Norelli's role, and stating its distinctive approach and contribution. Then follow eight essays on relevant prolegomena. P gives no criteria either for the order or topics of the essays, although the reader notes that three contributors are editors of other volumes (Gain, Gounelle, and Norelli). The reader is also left to guess from the projected titles and some hints in the essays which documents are included in the series. This review first presents an English summary of the articles in the order they appear in the book, followed by some critical observations and questions.

Norelli first presents a general history of Greek literature and Christian institutions focusing on methodological decisions made for the project (9-66). He justifies the project in terms of the special 'mixed' character of ancient Greek Christian literature, which demands treating both *Urliteratur* and what later evolved into new Christian *Literatur* (55). He identifies two reference points that need to be taken into account: the 'turning point' under Constantine which made Christianity a legitimate, even state religion and the formal closure of the New

Testament canon which, if substantially occurring at the end of the second century, was not finalized until the fourth (65-66).

Paolo Sinascalco then traces the development of literary histories in Christianity, from that of Eusebius to the present work (67-111). He mentions various examples from Jerome (*De viris illustribus*) to the patrologies of recent centuries, passing through the fathers of the sixteenth century and arriving at more recent works. According to him this survey shows the value of studying the language of the literature itself—words, images, genres, rhetorical forms and styles—as well as ideas, spirituality, liturgical forms, because the former show how Christian works can be evaluated as literary contributions in their own right (111).

Rémi Gounelle considers the question of the (non) transmission of Christian literary writings during the first four centuries and beyond (113-38). He wants to explain both reasons for loss and also by what channels a certain number of works survived (113). Noting both ideological and material reasons for disappearance, he identifies three ways in which texts have survived: direct tradition, translation and mediation (through other texts). Particularly noteworthy in all three modes is the fact that in most cases the original works have not survived, a fact attributed to the absence of commercial structures for their preservation (126-27). He suggests two reasons for exceptional preservation of Christian works, over against other ancient writings: the multiplication of formal copying centres in the monasteries and that earlier works (from the fourth and fifth centuries) were valued as references for Christians in their time and later (132).

Gilles Dorival then surveys the various literary forms and models of ancient Christian literature (139-88) to answer the question to what extent these writers used available forms and how much they innovated (139). He traces movement from more dependence on existing forms to the creation of a distinctively Christian literature in various areas and disciplines. Thus one finds an insistence on the originality of the Christian message, a recovery of ancient cultural forms to the benefit of Christian faith, and growing innovation which nevertheless valued and preserved these older forms (180-81).

Marie-Anne Vannier examines how theological reflection evolved and its relation to literary 'resources' available to the early church Fathers (189-214). Ignatius, Origen, and controversies in the fourth century and later mark points along the way for Christology. From Clement of Rome to the Cappadocians to John of Damascus Trinitarian language and theology changed. These two main themes (Christology and Trinity) thus offered the occasion for a new

vocabulary establishing a conceptual framework for historic, particularly Western Christianity.

Marie-Ange Calvet-Sebasti approaches these ancient texts from another angle, asking about the aesthetic value of early Christian literature (215-39). The Fathers valued simplicity and beauty of expression but expressed their art and ideals in various ways. She regrets the fact that, despite many internal indications to the contrary, up to now the 'new aesthetic' created by the Fathers has not been appreciated for its just worth.

Martin Wallraff offers a rambling narrative highlighting the history of published editions of patristic texts (241-66). His story alternates between praising the standards of various editions and projects (especially the phenomenal enterprise of Jacques Paul Migne in the nineteenth century) and noting their shortcomings, whether technical, content, or editorial. He closes his essay with a plea for more complete integration of new (electronic or digitalized) media, though some efforts in this direction are noted (256).

The bibliographical article of Benoit Gain is the last essay in the book, covering not only tools for studying Greek Christian literature but the wider historical field (267-327). French literature is favoured but other major works are not omitted. The book closes with a section introducing each of the contributors (329-32), but neither Pouderon nor the translator of one article (Sinascalco wrote originally in Italian). There are no indexes.

Limited space permits limited observations. The scope of bibliography presented in each article (not only in formal lists but throughout) alone justifies the price of the book. Focus on historical and literary questions is sufficient and thought-provoking. Yet other questions remain. First, the reason to limit to Greek literature is more assumed than argued. Then, given the way in which the works have been transmitted (often in non-Greek versions from a lost Greek original), how have the editors decided what to include and omit? Third, one senses a naïve acceptance of certain 'received views' regarding the legitimacy of pseudepigraphy that don't take into account recent historical studies. Publication of other volumes in the series will tell whether and how well these questions will be answered.

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