

THE CURIOUS VOYAGE OF CHRIST: *Katábasis, Anábasis, and the New Testament*

No text is an orphan. When we read and interpret a text, we tend to have whispering in our ears the voices of a whole family of writings and interpreters, some we may be familiar with personally, and many of which influence us consciously or unconsciously through the prior reading community. Nowhere is this more true than of the Bible. The theme of this volume is *katábasis*, or *descensus ad inferos*, the descent to the dead¹. Within that emphasis, this chapter is specifically about the *katábasis* of Christ. It seeks to understand the New Testament origins for what has been, almost from the beginning of Christian proclamation, a triptych of faith: Jesus died, he ‘descended to the dead’, and on the third day was raised². As a creedal formulation and a point of theology the place (if not the exact nature) of Jesus’ *katábasis* is well-established. In Christian belief there was a crucifixion, there was an interval of time when Jesus was dead, and there was, from the very beginning, the proclamation of a resurrection. Despite the solidity of these fixed points of doctrine, the scriptural background for any actual specifics about Christ’s *katábasis* is far less secure. In particular, using the example of 1 Peter 3:18-22, we will see how a text that may not originally have applied to the descent of Christ at all, could eventually be pressed into service to meet a growing desire to describe Jesus’ ‘curious voyage’³.

In literary and theological understandings, a *katábasis* is a trip down, usually to some version of hell or the Underworld. It is often, but not always, paralleled by an *anábasis*, or trip up. Sir Isaac Newton is attributed the remark ‘what goes up must come down’. In the case of *katábasis*, and of a three-storied cosmos, what goes down may sometimes come back up, as does Dante in the *Divine Comedy*.

1. For the creedal change from *descensus ad inferos* (descent to the dead) to *descensus ad inferna* (descent to hell), see M. F. CONNELL (2001), p. 266 & f.

2. See Philippians 2:5-11 as a New Testament proto-creed.

3. R. GOUNELLE (2004), p. 5: *l'interprétation traditionnelle qui y voit une allusion à la descente du Christ en enfer pose plus de problèmes qu'elle n'en résout.*

Orpheus also descended to the Underworld, an heroic *katábasis* to win back from death his beloved Eurydice. No one was better than the Greeks at turning philosophy into compelling narrative, and here the point of the *katábasis* is likely that art and human love can be stronger than death, even if only for the briefest of moments. Orpheus's love, expressed through his beautiful music, triumphs over death. So long as he never looks back he is allowed to process back to the land of the living with his beloved walking behind him. As the lovers walk, they embody an *anábasis*. Orpheus misunderstands the injunction and turns around when he is on *terra firma* but before his beloved has reached him. This time she slips forever back into the shadows.

The descent of Christ, like the Orphic narratives, is a *katábasis*. However, unlike Orpheus, Dante, and many other famous *katabáseis*, in the Christ narrative descent was never the primary narrative emphasis. Neither Paul's letters, which are the earliest surviving written evidence of the Jesus proclamation, nor the Christian gospels penned decades later, take any great interest in the actual features of Christ's *katábasis*. When the Greek heroes go to the Underworld, they do so with purpose. Orpheus seeks out Hades in order to deliver his beloved Eurydice. In Virgil's account Aeneas leaps into the darkness, and Odysseus traverses the realm of the dead as part of the narrative arc of seeking his way home. By contrast, the Gospels relate that Jesus dies and is buried. The passive sense of that action is matched by the remarkably consistently passive way by which the *anábasis* of Christ is also stated: Jesus IS raised on the third day; he does not raise himself. Thus both the *katábasis* and *anábasis* of Christ are framed in a passive voice, consistent with Jewish thought and tradition insofar as the prime actor is only, and can only be, the God of Israel.

Jesus' voyage to the dead is a journey that is curious for just this lack of early detail; I am arguing here that it originated not as a primary but as a tertiary theological detail, a sort of secondary feature of the story. In fact, Christ's *katábasis* took its shape and significance from a far more famous *anábasis* – Easter morning's resurrection. Resurrection was the irreducible core of the Christian *kerygma*, or early proclamation. The resurrection of the dead was a long-standing, if disputed, part of Jewish eschatological thought, that was applied to Jesus by the earliest believers. For them, the *anábasis* had priority. It seems quite possible that the *katábasis* of Christ represented – at first – simply the working out of the internal logic posed by an already-accepted resurrection, a needing to describe its matching term.

Ephesians 4:9, arguably ⁴, does exactly this: “when it says ‘he ascended’, what does that mean,” asks the author, “except that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?” There is a syllogistic logic at work: what comes up must first have gone down.

***Katábasis* and the harrowing of hell**

However simple the possible reasons for its origin as a doctrine, the *katábasis* of Christ quickly filled in with meaning. For most post-NT writings that mention it, and for the Fathers, after the crucifixion Jesus did not simply lie dead; during the time of waiting he accomplished much. Jesus here becomes much more than the almost passive recipient of the God of Israel’s actions in the earliest proclamations ⁵. He becomes the fulcrum and the centre-point of the drama of the three days. Jesus “cast down the partition wall” of Hades (Ignatius) ⁶, he “descended to Hades for no other end than to preach the Gospel” (Clement of Alexandria) ⁷. *Elle a été vaincue, la mort qui refusait d’être vaincue; transformée, la corruption; anéanti, le mal invincible* ⁸. It became widely thought that in the interim between cross and resurrection Christ ‘harrowed hell’, by which is meant not only the preaching of the messianic gospel to the repentant or unrepentant dead (depending on the interpreter) but also the emptying of the Underworld by force. A triumphant Jesus, much like Orpheus, but on a cosmological scale, leads the righteous dead out of captivity. Usually Adam and Eve, the Patriarchs and David, among others, are pictured as first in line behind the rising Christ ⁹.

Later artistic representations ¹⁰ of the event show Jesus, sometimes with the survivors of the Biblical Flood (a visual reference to the 1 Peter passage) but more often reaching out to rescue Adam and Eve, who represent all of pre-messianic age humanity. Particularly in the Eastern churches, the harrowing of hell became known as the *anástasis*, and visual representations of this event a more common resurrection portrayal than the empty grave scenes typical of western art.

4. A number of interpreters, from the time of the Fathers, have seen in this verse a reference not to the *katábasis* of Christ but rather, or equally (in the case of Jerome and Aquinas) to the Incarnation.

5. I would include here the creedal statement of Philipians 2.

6. Ignatius, *To the Trallians*, 9, 4.

7. Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, VI, 6, in A. CLEVELAND COXE (1994), p. 490-491.

8. Cyril of Alexandria, *Fifth Festal Letter*, in R. GOUNELLE (2004), p. 11.

9. J. A. MACCULLOUGH (1930).

10. Just one of hundreds of examples is the painting by Bartolomeo Bertejo, ca. 1480, where Christ leads not only Adam and Eve but the Patriarchs and the Queen of Sheba out of hell.

The *katábasis* / *anástasis* of Christ solved the knotty theological problem of how a temporal incarnation of the Messiah in Jesus left out those already deceased, who might have embraced the good news of salvation if only they had heard it. In the concept of the harrowing of hell, the righteous dead could and did hear the gospel, from the Messiah himself. At the same time, the action of Christ's preaching to the dead in Hades aligns Christ's *katábasis* more closely with pre- or extra-Christian narratives of *katabáseis* where the protagonist's voyage to hell is both heroic and has some redemptory purpose.

Soon, as scholar of liturgy Andrew Connell puts it, "the narrative of Christ's descent was nearly omnipresent in the early Church"¹¹. Such conceptions of Jesus' activities in Hades found their power in the contemporary preaching of the first apostles, and their vocabulary in interpretations of various Psalms and other scriptural texts, via the Greek language translation of the Septuagint (LXX). Eventually these understandings returned to influence the readings of various New Testament passages. The narrative of Christ's *katábasis* came to be expressed clearly but in an embryonic way in the Apostles' Creed, and to be developed more fully in later non-canonical texts such as the Gospel of Nicodemus¹². The Church Fathers, beginning with Ignatius, the Shepherd of Hermas, Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, and continuing with Irenaeus and Tertullian, almost immediately teach that in the period between the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus variously destroyed death, conquered evil, and liberated the dead – the righteous dead, or perhaps all of the dead, by preaching the gospel even to the previously unrighteous – in Hades.

Among other texts, behind this image of the dead and of their deliverance is probably a very early interpretation of Psalm 107:10-16, which describes prisoners in darkness and behind gates, and Isaiah 9:2 "those who dwelt in darkness have seen a great light". The image of a prison may arise from the gates of bronze being smashed in Psalm 107. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:8 about the "powers" crucifying the "Lord of glory" (an unusual phrase in the NT, but reminiscent of traditional nomenclature for God) also lead to Psalm 24, where the "King of Glory" enters through triumphal gates.

Jesus believers were hardly the first Jews to understand Psalm 24 apocalyptically, as denoting the end of this present age and the beginning of God's reign. But in the so-called lost time of Jesus they had a ready venue

11. M. F. CONNELL (2001), p. 262.

12. For overviews of the development of this doctrine, see Catherine Ella LAUFER (2013) and R. Gounelle's careful and encyclopedic treatment of the primary sources in R. GOUNELLE (2000). See also W. J. DALTON (1989), p. 29-31.

for applying the apocalyptic interpretation of this psalm to a thorny theological and temporal problem. What did Jesus do during the missing time between cross and empty grave? The answer they arrived at was that as apocalyptic sovereign he entered the gates of hell, took the powers of death prisoner, and as Colossians 2:15 puts it, made the prison-keepers themselves prisoners, displaying them much as would an imperial Roman victory parade. To supply the language for this developing narrative about Jesus' time in hell, they looked into (the usually Greek-language translation of) their scriptures.

However, despite this preoccupation of the post-canonical sources with the voyage of Christ, and the widespread use of existing scriptural passages to flesh out the understanding of such a descent, there is almost no discussion in the New Testament itself of what is proposed to have happened during Christ's *katábasis*. What exist there are only fragments and hints.

1 Peter 3:18-22 and Christ's *katábasis*

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, **19** in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, **20** who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. **21** And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, **22** who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. (1 Peter 3:18-22, NRSV.)

So much has been written on the subject of 1 Peter 3:18-22 and Christ's *katábasis* that here I will simply point to the broadest outlines of the debate¹³. Whether 1 Peter 3:18-22 attests to and describes Christ's *katábasis* has from the beginning been deeply contested, and remains so¹⁴. Laufer states that the first record of the passage being understood in this way is Clement of Alexandria, near the end of the second century¹⁵. That it apparently took so long for this crucial *katábasis* text to be applied to Christ's descent is itself one of the arguments against seeing its original context in this way.

The basic, opposing positions taken in the debate are that: (a) 1 Peter 3:18-22 describes Christ's *katábasis*, and the term 'spirits in prison' refers to

13. C. T. PIERCE (2011) contains an excellent review of Patristic and later scholarship on the passage.

14. W. J. DALTON (1989), p. 28.

15. Catherine Ella LAUFER (2013). See also W. J. DALTON (1989), p. 29, and 32.

the righteous dead, such as the patriarchs, Adam and Eve, Noah and so on; or (b) that the ‘spirits in prison’ are fallen angels or other spiritual creatures, and the proclamation that is written about, takes place in some celestial realm, part of Christ’s ascension rather than his *katábasis* ¹⁶.

One of the sticking points in understanding the 1 Peter text is the meaning of the phrase in verse 18: “made alive in the spirit”. When applied to the dead Jesus, what might this mean? The Greek *hoi* in verse 19 may presume a strict temporal timeline (i.e., this thing happened before that) but more likely implies function – *so that*. This understanding leads the reader to an odd, almost double resurrection: Christ is first made alive in the spirit in order to proclaim, in his divinity if not his body ¹⁷, the Gospel to those other spirits, and then comes the bodily resurrection of Christian proclamation with which the tradition is more familiar.

W. J. Dalton notes that in Book IV of his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus wrote that in the *triduum mortis* (the “three days of death”) Jesus preached to the souls of the dead while he was in the grave. Yet Irenaeus nowhere alludes to 1 Peter to support these statements, an omission Dalton finds at the very least indicative that the Church Father could not with confidence understand the passage as applying to Jesus’ time in Hades ¹⁸. For many interpreters, ancient and modern, the term ‘spirits’ in 1 Peter 3:19 should be read as describing fallen angels, and specifically, given the Noah context of the passage, those angels who are reported to have sinned just before the Flood ¹⁹. This interpretation, as Laufer notes, has the double advantage of cohering to the Noah material in 1 Peter, and of remaining consistent with the usual NT use of the term ‘spirit’, which usually (with the exception of Hebrews 12:23) refers to angelic beings ²⁰. If the term refers to some sort of heavenly beings, then the preaching of the resurrected Christ to such spirits should rightly be placed spatially in the celestial realms and temporally as part of the Ascension.

The connection of the ‘spirits in prison’ to the fallen angels of Genesis 6:4, was made very early in Christian tradition. It is linked, as Pierce, Dalton and others rightly point out, to the noteworthy influence of 1 Enoch on the writing of 1 Peter. That Enoch lies behind 1 Peter has been demonstrated without a doubt, but it is Christ, rather than Enoch, who here ministers to the dead ²¹. Other interpreters see ‘the spirits in prison’, in light of the

16. N. H. TAYLOR (2012).

17. See R. GOUNELLE (2004), p. 11.

18. W. J. DALTON (1989), p. 28.

19. S. E. JOHNSON (1960), p. 48.

20. Catherine Ella LAUFER (2013).

21. S. E. JOHNSON (1960), p. 48.

Noah context, as a reference to those who, in their experience of the Flood, repented (this understanding was expanded to include all those who, prior to the arrival of Jesus, saw the results of their actions and came to repentance). Another view, still connected to the Noah reference, was that the ‘spirits in prison’ referred to those who experienced the Flood but did not repent. This conception also extended to include all those dead from throughout history who, in Hades, continued to be unrepentant. In this case, Christ’s proclamation to them was considered to be a sort of ratification of their damnation. Rather than connecting 1 Peter 3:18-22 with the *katábasis* of Christ, Augustine saw the passage as relating to the pre-existing Christ’s proclamation, through Noah, to the unredeemed at the time of the Flood. Aquinas, later, agreed with the broad outlines of Augustine’s interpretation of the passage ²².

Although there is considerable disagreement over the matter, the majority current scholarly opinion now seems to be that 1 Peter 3:18-22 does not refer to a *katábasis* of Jesus at all, but to something else. This is the view put forward by Bandstra ²³, Pierce and Dalton ²⁴, among others. While there is much to commend this position, such interpretations inevitably have difficulty reconciling 1 Peter 3:18-22 with 1 Peter 4: 6 and the proclamation of the gospel “even to the dead” there. If the verses in 18-22 were not originally connected to the time of Christ in Hades, it is not hard to see how the link came to be made. Moreover, connecting the ‘spirits in prison’ and therefore the passage, to the Ascension rather than the *katábasis* links the redemptive work of the risen Christ to a new spatial and temporal dynamic. The ascension of Christ to heaven, in this schema, is not a continuation of the *katábasis* - *anábasis* dyad, but rather the first part of a second dyad, that was expected to be completed in the return of Christ, the eschatological focus so central to the early Christian texts. The expected eschatological return of Christ and its placement in a second narrative dyad is a factor omitted from most discussions of the meaning of 1 Peter 3:18-22 and of, perhaps more importantly, Ephesians 4:9 “When it says ‘he ascended’, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?”

As Laufer points out, the position of Biblical interpreters on the applicability of the 1 Peter passage to Christ’s descent seems to have little or no effect on whether such interpreters, particularly the Reformation, medieval and ancient writers, actually believed that there was such a *katábasis*. Most did, no matter their opinion of the meaning of 1 Peter 3:18-22 ²⁵.

22. C. T. PIERCE (2011), p. 11-12.

23. A. J. BANDSTRA (2003).

24. W. J. DALTON (1989).

25. Catherine Ella LAUFER (2013).

The curious voyage of Christian baptism

Why then, in the absence of very much direct evidence in the pages of the NT, did the *katábasis* of Christ become such an important part of the early Christian narrative, and so soon? The discussion of the 1 Peter 3 text shows that the driving impetus behind this conception of what happened in Jesus' 'missing days' was ultimately not textual, nor was it contextual Hellenism, despite the fact that both can be seen to have contributed to the development of the doctrine. Community and pastoral reasons for Christ's *katábasis* would likely have developed naturally, especially solving the problem of what happens to those, including recently deceased loved ones, who died before Messiah arrived. In addition, a developing Christology that shifted emphasis from the actions of the God of Israel to those of the risen and ascended Christ may be part of the development of the notion, although Christology can as easily be seen as a parallel development as a formative influence. Most likely, in terms of developing Christology, both its parallel development and its influence on all 'missing' elements of the Christ story would be the case. In this constellation of factors, however, a final possible contribution to the growing conception of Christ's *katábasis* may well have been crucial, and that is the effect of early Christian liturgical practice.

Baptism and resurrection are linked in Christian proclamation as early as Paul's letters. If one holds that Paul, writing much earlier than 1 Peter, was not unique in his conception of baptism, but as with so much other material inherited an early community tradition, in this case linking baptism to resurrection, this commonly inherited tradition of baptism possibly lies behind the *katábasis* understandings as well. For this not to be the case, would be to assume that either Paul's teachings, or the *katábasis* narrative, grew up in conceptual isolation from each other and from the rest of preaching and teaching about Jesus. This is manifestly not the situation, for Paul at least, who refers (from the point of view of Christian practice) to the *katábasis* of Christ in Romans 6 and elsewhere²⁶. In the Romans text, as evidence for the importance of baptism in the new Jesus communities, Paul writes at length about baptism as the singular entry for the believer into a participation in the *katábasis-anábasis* redemptive act of God in Christ. In fact, in slightly different, but related ways, for both 1 Peter and Paul's writings, baptism appears to act as both sign and enactment of eschatological participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and of the new age of Israel's God, brought in by the Messiah.

26. J. D. G. DUNN (1989, p. 187) points out what he believes to be other Pauline and pseudo-Pauline references to the *descensus* in Ephesians 4:8-10 and Romans 10: 6-10.

Whether or not 1 Peter 3:18-22 is concerned with *katábasis* in its original context, it is certainly concerned with baptism. 1 Peter's connection to Christian baptism has been observed from the beginning of Christian reflection on the letter. Whatever its original meaning, perhaps after the fact, precisely those verses that many interpreters leave out of this particular *pericope*, namely verses 21 and 22, link 1 Peter 3:18-22 back to the *katábasis* of Christ.

In any case, in both Paul and 1 Peter we are left with two characteristics of the combined Christ-disciple *katábasis* that appear to hark back to the earliest days of the movement: a mystical union with Christ, and an eschatological imperative for that union. The latter connects baptismal death to the first stirrings of a general *anábasis* or resurrection that will soon sunder all empires, gather in the non-Jews and bring the reign of Israel's God to fruition. The voyage of Christ in 1 Peter (curious also because we don't know if it is 'up' or 'down'), and even more, Paul's words in Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 15, are prescriptive: there is only one way to be part of this last-days movement, and that is the baptismal action of *katábasis/anábasis*. The liturgical act is typological²⁷, participatory and cosmic: all humanity, even creation itself (Romans 8:19), will be changed through the going down and the coming up of the few early followers. Death itself is defeated. The God of Israel, for the first Jesus believers as for all Jews, is, and cannot be other than, the God of both the living and the dead.

Finally, making such a strong connection between baptism and the development of the descent of Christ concepts helps to explain a rather awkward verse found in the earliest sources: Paul's reference to baptizing on behalf of the dead. In 1 Corinthians 15:29 Paul presents an extensive argument for the resurrection of believers, based on the subjugation of death by Christ; it is worth noting that here, as in the Orpheus myth, there is a taming of the Underworld theme. Paul then concludes a set of syllogistic statements with a rhetorical question, an argument from the opposite: if this were not so, he asks, and death is not ultimately vanquished by the resurrection of Christ, then, in his words, "what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?" One can hear behind this passage the same concerns over the faithful dead that may lie behind the development of the doctrine of Christ's *katábasis* in later tradition, and that also prompted Paul's likely first surviving letter, 1 Thessalonians.

27. R. GOUNELLE (2000, p. 241 & f.) traces the extensive influence of later, primarily Eucharistic and Paschal liturgies on the development of the doctrine of *katábasis*.

In the end, either by baptising on behalf of them, or making sure that Christ has preached to them, a pastoral concern is worked out theologically by means of actions that are rooted in liturgy. Here, as perhaps the case in 1 Peter, it is finally not by belief only, but through the eschatological and mystical act of baptism that followers of Jesus participate in the curious voyage of Christ.

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