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The Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9: Its Impact Upon
the Use of the Apostles' Creed

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Abstract

Confusion runs rampant when it comes to certain theological issues such as the descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9. Over the centuries, three main interpretations have arisen to explain this enigmatic text. The possible interpretations are that the descent was the *Descensus ad Infernos* during which Christ visited hell during the three days that He was dead, that the descent was the Incarnation of Christ, or that the descent was the coming of Christ as the Spirit at Pentecost to give spiritual gifts to the believers.

In this paper, these three interpretive options are evaluated on the basis of the grammatical factors of the text itself in conjunction with theological factors from inside the epistle to the Ephesians as well as from the rest of the biblical canon. Once the evidence has been properly examined, a theological stance will be adopted and subsequently applied to the use of the Apostles' Creed in public and private worship and instruction.

The Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9: Its Impact Upon
the Use of the Apostles' Creed

Throughout the centuries, seemingly endless theological questions and considerations have puzzled the hearts and minds of men and women. These issues drive scholars, exegetes, and the general student of the Scriptures to the very limits of human understanding. Most certainly one of these theological puzzles surrounds the *Descensus ad Infernos*—the “Descent to Hell.” This simple phrase draws one into an intense theological debate concerning the activities of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, during what is known as the “*triduum*” or the three-day time span between the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹ Some scholars and exegetes have held to the doctrine that Christ descended into hell during the three-day sojourn between His death and resurrection. However, many other scholars and exegetes have rejected this position in favor of other stances. Although a pursuit to find an informed and biblical stance on this issue may seem to be primarily a scholarly matter, it can have serious effects upon the lives of ordinary people of God because the chief task of theology is to apply God’s truth to everyday life. Therefore, what is the truth of the issue? Did Christ actually descend into the pits of hell? If He did, does the contents of Ephesians 4:9 support that teaching? Only a diligent study of the question can render learned answers and opinions. Such a study will include a survey of the various interpretations of the descent in Ephesians 4:9, an examination of the grammatical and theological considerations affecting the issue, and the application of the best interpretation. The resulting interpretation must then help

¹ W. Hall Harris III, *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4:7-11 and Traditional Hebrew Imagery* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1.

Christian leaders and laymen determine the appropriate liturgical use of the Apostles' Creed, which has come into much wider use in recent years.² The amount of use of the Apostles' Creed brings to the forefront its doctrinal contents. These contents in turn educate believers and influence their theology. Therefore, the educational and influential nature of the Apostles' Creed, which affirms the *Descensus ad Infernos*, necessitates its critical critique according to the truth of Scripture. That critique should prove useful to the question of whether the Apostles' Creed should be used, either in part or in whole, in the public worship of the church and the private worship of the believer.

Survey of Possible Interpretations

In the case of Ephesians 4:9, three main interpretations have been presented in order to explain this passage's assertion about the descent of Christ. These interpretations are the *Descensus ad Infernos*, the descent as the Incarnation, and the descent as the descent of Christ as the Spirit at Pentecost.³ The distinctiveness of each of these various views occurs according to how the particular view answers two basic questions—what is the location of the descent of Christ, and what is the timeline of the descent of Christ?⁴

The Descent as Descensus ad Infernos

The first major view, which states that Christ descended into the realm of hell before His ascension back to heaven, is the *Descensus ad Infernos*. Ernest Best says that this stance is the “almost unanimous view of the Fathers” concerning the issue of the descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9. He lists Church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Origen,

² Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2006), 518.

³ Harry Uprichard, *A Study Commentary on Ephesians* (Auburn: Evangelical Press, 2004), 212-214.

⁴ Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 383.

Tertullian, Chrysostom, and Jerome as advocates of the descent into Hell.⁵ Modern interpreters such as Kenneth Wuest⁶, J. Armitage Robinson⁷, and J. D. G. Dunn⁸ also purport this opinion of the passage along with E. G. Selwyn, F. W. Beare, C. E. Arnold, and A. T. Hanson.⁹

The line of argument for the descent into hell view begins by taking the Greek clause κατέβη εἰς τὰ κατώτερα [μέρη] τῆς γῆς (“he descended into the lower [parts] of the earth”) as containing a partitive genitive or a genitive of comparison. In these constructions, the genitive noun (“earth”) would indicate the whole of which “lower” is a part (partitive genitive)¹⁰ or the object to which “lower” would be compared (genitive of comparison).¹¹ The resultant meaning of such an understanding is that the location of Christ’s descent was to a place lower than the earth (genitive of comparison) or “under the earth” (partitive genitive).¹² Proponents of the descent as a trip by Christ to hell maintain that this interpretation shows the true parallelism between the depth of the descent with the height of Christ’s ascension “far above all the heavens” (Eph. 4:10).¹³

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Ephesians and Colossians in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 99-100.

⁷ J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1909), 96).

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 186-187.

⁹ Best, 383.

¹⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 84.

¹¹ Ibid., 110.

¹² Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 533.

¹³ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 245.

This view also logically requires that Christ's descent precede His ascension since after His ascension He is alive and no longer dead.¹⁴ Other Scriptures often connected to this doctrine of *Descensus ad Infernos* are Acts 2:27, Romans 10:6-7, 1 Peter 3:18-20, and 1 Peter 4:6.¹⁵ The Scripture of the greatest importance is 1 Peter 3:18-20,¹⁶ for this verse speaks of Christ's preaching to "the spirits now in prison" (1 Pet. 3:19). The connection made between these two verses seeks to show that this preaching is what Christ did between His death on the cross and His subsequent resurrection from the dead. The claim is that He preached to those spirits who are confined to the realm of hell.¹⁷

Four reasons have been presented to argue for this manner of explanation. The first reason is that if Christ descended into hell He could preach the gospel to the dead so that "no one who had died before the coming of Jesus would be deprived of the privilege of hearing the gospel."¹⁸ This boils down the "second chance" for salvation after death teaching that is commonly connected with Roman Catholic theology and the doctrine of *limbus partum*¹⁹ and is commonly referred to as the "harrowing of hell."²⁰ A second common reason associated with the purpose of the visit to hell is based in Lutheran theology and claims that Christ went to hell so that He might preach judgment to those

¹⁴ Harris, 31.

¹⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 588.

¹⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 793.

¹⁷ Hoehner, 534.

¹⁸ C. Leslie Mitton, *Ephesians* (Greenwood: Attic Press, 1976), 147.

¹⁹ Erickson, 793.

²⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 344.

who were imprisoned there.²¹ Yet another argument behind the descent into hell comes from Anglican beliefs and indicates that Christ visited the abode of the dead in order to preach the fullness of the gospel to those in paradise so that they might be taken to heaven.²² A final possible motivation for Christ to go into the depths of the underworld is so that He could completely and totally overcome the demonic forces, which “implied he pursued them to the farthest and deepest recesses of their activity,” even the vile region of hell.²³

A deviation from the traditional *Descensus ad Infernos* position falls into the present category of Christ descending to some place below the earth. This deviating view states that the genitive phrase still means below the earth, but that this description refers to Christ death. This death is connected to His entrance into Sheol, or the netherworld, but no attempt is made to elucidate what activities Christ performed there or His interactions with people there. While the descent to Sheol is vastly different in implication from the descent to hell, they both view the location of Christ’s descent as below the earth. Thus, the location and the timeline of the *Descensus* are still the same. Because of this fact, both positions are rightfully in the present category and may be evaluated in a similar manner in regards specifically to the teaching of Ephesians 4:9.²⁴

The Descent as the Incarnation

While the preceding viewpoint is considered the traditional one, the passing of years has ushered in two alternate positions on the issue of the *Descensus*. The first of

²¹ Erickson, 793.

²² Ibid.

²³ Harris, 10.

²⁴ Ibid., 12-13.

these views is the interpretation that the *Descensus* in Ephesians refers to the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity.²⁵ The Incarnation view had limited support among the Fathers; Theodore of Mopsuestia was its chief early supporter. The medieval period saw Pierre Abelard take up the Incarnation stance on the issue. As history progressed, John Calvin held a variation of this view.²⁶ In recent years, however, this view has become the majority view among scholars and exegetes.²⁷ J. MacPherson²⁸, F. Foulkes²⁹, R. Schnackenburg, M. Barth³⁰, C. L. Mitton³¹, F. F. Bruce³², E. Best³³, and J. Eadie³⁴ are among many who have supported the opinion that Paul's reference to the descent of Christ in Ephesians pertains to His Incarnation.

The Incarnation stance essentially begins by arguing that the genitive phrase (τῆς γῆς) is what Greek grammarians call an epexegetical genitive or a genitive of apposition.³⁵ These two terms refer to the grammatical construction in which the genitive noun ("earth" in this case) renames the noun to which it is related ("parts" in this case) in

²⁵ Ibid., 14.

²⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

²⁷ Ibid., 15.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Francis Foulkes, *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 116-117.

³⁰ Lincoln, 245.

³¹ Mitton, 147-148.

³² Bruce, 343.

³³ Best, 386.

³⁴ John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 289-285.

³⁵ Hoehner, 535.

a way that more clearly identifies it.³⁶ Wallace states that the genitive of apposition identifies “a specific example that is part of the larger category named by the head noun.”³⁷ The conveyed meaning with this understanding of the genitive phrase is “the lower parts, namely, the earth.”³⁸ The position naturally requires that the descent of Christ precede His ascension;³⁹ therefore, Eadie writes, “He could never be said to go up unless He had formerly come down. If He had to go up after the victory, we infer that he had already come down to win it.”⁴⁰

Many solid, corroborative facts greatly support the Incarnation view. First, the genitive of apposition construction can be found throughout the Ephesian epistle (Eph. 2:2, 14, 15, 20; 3:4, 7; 4:3, 6:14, 16, 17).⁴¹ In addition, the descent-ascent paradigm in the New Testament supports the idea that Christ descended to the earth and ascended back to heaven (John 3:13; 6:62; 16:28).⁴² Lastly, the plain absence in the Gospels of the mention of an excursion to hell by Christ bodes well for this view, and seems to oppose the *Descensus ad Infernos* position.⁴³

³⁶ Wallace, 95.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Hoehner, 535.

³⁹ T. K. Abbott, *A Critical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1968), 115.

⁴⁰ Eadie, 290.

⁴¹ Hoehner, 535.

⁴² Ibid. While one might argue that Christ could have descended into hell upon his death and then ascended back up to heaven in accordance with the basic idea of the descent-ascent paradigm (*Descensus ad Infernos* view), this is unlikely according to other evidences in the New Testament which will be presented later in this study. These other evidences support taking the genitive in Ephesians 4:9 as a genitive of apposition.

⁴³ Ibid.

The Descent as Christ as the Spirit at Pentecost

The last key interpretation of Ephesians 4:9 is that the descent of Christ is referring to the “descent of the exalted Christ in the Spirit to give gifts at the new Pentecost.”⁴⁴ The descent of Christ as the Spirit at Pentecost interpretation has recruited fewer supporters to its ranks—none have been before the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ The first of these proponents was H. von Soden in 1891.⁴⁶ He was followed by T. K. Abbott in 1897.⁴⁷ Others who have embraced this stance are G. B. Caird,⁴⁸ C. H. Porter,⁴⁹ R. P. Martin,⁵⁰ A. T. Lincoln⁵¹, and W. H. Harris III.⁵²

The line of reasoning in support of the descent of Christ as the Spirit begins much the same as the Incarnation view. The descent of Christ as the Spirit viewpoint also argues that the genitive phrase is a genitive of apposition meaning that “earth” is a clarification of “lower parts.”⁵³ The divergence of the Christ as Spirit view from the Incarnation view comes then, not with the *location* of the descent, but with the

⁴⁴ Uprichard, 214.

⁴⁵ Harris, 23.

⁴⁶ Lincoln, 246.

⁴⁷ Abbott, 114-116.

⁴⁸ G. B. Caird, “The Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:7-11,” in *Studia Evangelica II*, ed. Frank L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie, 1964), 535-545.

⁴⁹ C. H. Porter, “The Descent of Christ: An Exegetical Study of Ephesians 4:7-11,” in *One Faith: Its Biblical, Historical, and Ecumenical Dimensions*, ed. Robert L. Simpson (Enid, OK: Phillips University Press, 1966), 45-55.

⁵⁰ Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1992), 49-53.

⁵¹ Lincoln, 246-247.

⁵² Harris, 31.

⁵³ Abbott, 114-116.

chronology of the descent and ascent of Christ in the Ephesians 4.⁵⁴ The Christ as the Spirit view states that Christ, after He ascended into heaven, descended back down to the earth at Pentecost to distribute spiritual gifts to believers at the completion of which He ascended back up to heaven. The support for such a claim is drawn from the association of Psalm 68 (from which the quotation of Ephesians 4:8 comes) with the festival of Pentecost. The argumentation contends that, because the Psalm is the backdrop for the argument and because the Psalm is associated with Pentecost, the passage must be interpreted in accordance with Pentecost.⁵⁵ Supporters such as Lincoln also argue that in Ephesians there is “virtual interchange, between Christ and the Spirit” in the activities that they perform (Eph. 1:13 and 4:30; Eph. 3:16 and 3:17; Eph. 1:23 and 5:18).⁵⁶

This manner of elucidation of the passage is appealing in that it seems to make good sense about why Paul would include the seeming parenthesis of verses 9-10 in his argument on the bestowal of gifts to the church. If one accepts that the descent is subsequent to the ascent for the purpose of giving gifts, then the passage appears to flow more with the reasoning of Paul in the whole of the section from Ephesians 4:7-16.⁵⁷ The appeal to the contextual flow if the argument of the Ephesians 4 passage as fitting best with the descent as the Spirit view is the most attractive feature to the descent of Christ as the Spirit view.

⁵⁴ Best, 384.

⁵⁵ Best, 284-286.

⁵⁶ Lincoln, 247.

⁵⁷ Hoehner, 531-532.

Grammatical Factors Affecting the Issue

While scholars have said that grammar cannot solve the issue of the *Descensus*,⁵⁸ grammatical analysis of the constructions involved with the issue can prove useful in helping the understanding of the student as he pursues the truth of the Word of God. Wallace notes that understanding the grammar “opens up the interpretive possibilities.”⁵⁹ Since grammar is important, two textual variants need to be discussed—the inclusion or omission of *πρῶτον* and *μέρη*. Additionally, issues surrounding the use of the comparative adjective *κατώτερα* and its uses should be evaluated along with the grammatical classification of the genitive phrase *τῆς γῆς*.

The Authenticity of πρῶτον

The importance of the inclusion or omission of the textual variant *πρῶτον* (“first”) is immediately evident. If this Greek word is truly part of the text, then the third interpretation of Ephesians 4:9 is completely discounted and only the first two are left, for the ensuing rendering of the verse would be, “he *first* descended to the lower parts of the earth.” Therefore, the manuscript evidence and transcriptional factors must be taken into account to determine the authenticity of *πρῶτον* in the text.⁶⁰

The reason for the possibility of *πρῶτον* being in the text comes from the considerable amount of manuscript evidence substantiating it. Harris states that the “Byzantine lectionaries are unanimous in their support of the longer reading” (*κατέβη*

⁵⁸ S. D. F. Salmond, “The Epistle to the Ephesians,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 3:326. See also Wallace, 100.

⁵⁹ Wallace, 100.

⁶⁰ Harris, 32.

πρῶτον εἰς τὰ κατώτερα μέρη τῆς γῆς).⁶¹ As well, church Fathers such as Eusebius of Caesarea, Didymus, Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret all demonstrate at least familiarity with the longer reading. However, many early manuscripts from both the Alexandrian and Western families completely exclude πρῶτον from the text. As a corroborative fact, many church Fathers actually quote the shorter form of the clause (Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Victorinus of Rome, Ambrosiaster, Hilary, Lucifer, Jerome, Pelagius, and Augustine).⁶² The consideration of this evidence begins to suggest that the omission of πρῶτον from the text is the correct decision.

Adding to this suggestion of omission is the categorical distribution of the manuscript evidence. Kurt and Barbara Aland give a breakdown of the categories of Greek manuscripts in their book *The Text of the New Testament*. In this book, they present five categories of manuscripts according to their importance in establishing the original text through the process of textual criticism. Category I manuscripts are “very special in quality which should always be considered in establishing original text.” Category II manuscripts are “of a special quality, but distinguished from category I manuscripts by the presence of alien influences yet of importance for establishing the original text.” Category III manuscripts are “of a distinctive character with an independent text, usually important for establishing the original text, but particularly

⁶¹ Ibid., 33.

⁶² Ibid., 33-35.

important for the history of the text.” Category IV and V manuscripts are less important and less accurate in their representation of the text.⁶³

Armed with knowledge of the manuscript categories, one may see then what the importance is in the following information. In support of the omission of *πρῶτον* from the text are four category I manuscripts, five category II manuscripts, and five category III manuscripts. On the other hand, the inclusion of *πρῶτον* in the text is only supported by one category I manuscript, three category II manuscripts, and twenty category III manuscripts. Such evidence causes Salmond to remark that “the preponderance [of the manuscript evidence], on the whole, is on the side of the omission, especially in view of transcriptional probabilities.”⁶⁴

The previous quote mentions some transcriptional factors that affect the omission or inclusion of *πρῶτον* in the text. In this case, the transcriptional factor is what textual critics call *lectio brevior lectio potior* (“the shorter reading is the more probable reading”).⁶⁵ The logic is that a scribe probably added *πρῶτον* in the margin as an interpretive gloss, which was later incorporated into the text by other scribes who would not know whether *πρῶτον* was a correction or a gloss both of which were routinely included in the margins.⁶⁶ For these reasons, Metzger concludes that “the addition of *πρῶτον* after *κατέβη* appears to be a natural expansion introduced by copyists to elucidate the meaning.” An interesting note is that Metzger calls the inclusion of *πρῶτον*

⁶³ Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 106.

⁶⁴ Salmond, 3:326.

⁶⁵ Aland and Aland, 281.

⁶⁶ Harris, 37-39.

a “natural expansion” of the text lending weight to either the *Descensus ad Infernos* interpretation or the Incarnation interpretation.⁶⁷

From the preceding information, one may confidently affirm the omission of *πρῶτον* since it was most likely not an original part of the text of the Greek New Testament. This fact leaves all three interpretations as possible explanations of the descent in Ephesians 4:9. However, the study has shown that there is significant reason to *understand* the descent-ascent timeline in Ephesians 4:9-10 to be descent first and ascent second since such an understanding seems to be the most natural.

The Authenticity of μέρη

The second textual variant in the text is the Greek word for “parts,” *μέρη*. This variation does not carry as much weight as *πρῶτον* but it can have an impact upon the classification of the genitive phrase *τῆς γῆς* (“of the earth”).⁶⁸ The reason that this variant is less weighty is that its inclusion or omission is compatible with all three views but especially with the last two interpretations.⁶⁹

The exclusion of *μέρη* comes primarily from its omission in one early manuscript from the Alexandrian family. Also, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Victorinus of Rome, Ambrosiaster, Hilary, Lucifer, and Jerome quote the reading without *μέρη*. One category I manuscript, one category II manuscript and two category III manuscripts corroborate this position. On the other hand, most of the other manuscripts for Ephesians have the longer reading including *μέρη*. Such Fathers as

⁶⁷ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 605.

⁶⁸ Harris, 32.

⁶⁹ Salmond, 327.

Eustathias of Antioch, Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Pelagius, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, and Theodoret support the longer reading. Additionally, five category I manuscripts, seven category II manuscripts, six category III manuscripts, and every single category V manuscript substantiate the inclusion of *μέρη*. Even though *lectio brevior lectio potior* would usually apply, the vast amount of manuscript evidence provides solid grounds for excepting the rule and including the variant in the original text.⁷⁰

The Use of the τὰ κατώτερα

The Greek text of the later part of Ephesians 4:9 reads τὰ κατώτερα μέρη τῆς γῆς which is rendered “He descended to the lower parts of the earth.” The point in question here is “lower” (κατώτερα) and its use as an adjective. The Greek language, in similar fashion as English, has adjectives that show comparison by degrees of two or more things. Such is the case with τὰ κατώτερα which is a comparative adjective which shows the comparison between the “parts” and “earth.”⁷¹ The significance here is that if a descent to hell was trying to be communicated, why did Paul not use the superlative form of the adjective (τὰ κατώτερα) meaning “the lowest” to indicate that Christ descended below the earth. This fact has some serious ramifications for the *Descensus ad Infernos* interpretation of the Ephesians 4:9 passage.

The Classification of τῆς γῆς

The last major grammatical consideration is the classification of the genitive phrase τῆς γῆς. One may classify this genitive phrase in three basic ways: partitive

⁷⁰ Harris, 40-45.

⁷¹ Harris, 49.

genitive, comparative genitive, or genitive of apposition. All three classifications are possible from a grammatical viewpoint though not all are necessarily the best way to classify this particular genitive.⁷²

The first classification of the genitive as partitive would say that the genitive noun indicates the entirety of which the related noun is a part. So, the idea would be that the meaning of the passage is that Christ descended into the lower parts of the earth or the grave (Sheol). This is clearly in more alignment with the variant view of the traditional view of the *descensus*. The major problem with taking the genitive this way is that such a sense could have been much more easily communicated by saying Christ descended into the heart of the earth (τὰ κατώτερα εἰς τὴν καρδίαν τῆς γῆς) similar to Matthew 12:40.⁷³

A second possibility for classification of the genitive is for it to be a genitive of comparison which would mean that Paul is speaking of a descent to parts *lower than* the earth. This is how the *Descensus ad Infernos* view classifies the genitive.⁷⁴ While it is possible to classify the genitive this way, it is quite unlikely. Therefore, Wallace writes, “a partitive gen. is possible and a gen. of apposition is likely, a comparative gen. is syntactically improbable, if not impossible: the comparative adjective is in *attributive* position to μέρος.”⁷⁵ Another problem, which will be explained later in the study, is that this classification of the genitive creates the contrary viewpoint of a three-tiered

⁷² Ibid., 45.

⁷³ Hoehner, 535-536.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 533-535.

⁷⁵ Wallace, 112.

cosmology in contrast to the two-tiered model that Paul seems to present elsewhere in Ephesians.⁷⁶

The final manner to classify the genitive phrase is as a genitive of apposition. This classification would assert that the genitive noun shows more clearly the place of the descent which would be in this case to the earth. This is the stance of the Incarnation view and the Christ as the Spirit view. The strength of this classification comes from the fact that it is in keeping with cosmological breakdown of the universe presented in Ephesians, and it is in line with the stylistic practices of Paul, since he commonly uses the genitive of apposition in Ephesians.⁷⁷

From the previous considerations, one would best classify the genitive phrase τῆς γῆς in Ephesians 4:9 as a genitive of apposition since it is more in keeping with the theological and stylistic tendencies of Paul. If such a classification is accepted, then the *Descensus ad Infernos* is already discounted and only the other two interpretive opinions are possible. However, there is more to argue against the Descent to hell and even the descent of Christ as the Spirit when considering the theological factors, which affect the issue.

Theological Factors Affecting the Issue

The Destination of Departed Saints and the Location of Paradise

Part of the stance of *Descensus ad Infernos*, and possibly the variation of a descent to Sheol, is the idea that Christ went to preach the gospel to those Old Testament

⁷⁶ Harris, 49-50.

⁷⁷ Hoehner, 535.

saints who had up until this time been incapable of entering into heaven.⁷⁸ These saints, it is said, were the “host of captives” of Ephesians 4:8, which Christ freed from their bonds in Hades, or the place of the dead, when He ascended from the grave back up to heaven.⁷⁹ Up until the time that Christ rescued them they were bound in a part of Sheol known as Paradise or Abraham’s Bosom (Luke 16:19-31; 23:43). The problem with the application of the *Descensus ad Infernos* in this case comes from the biblical perspective of the teaching of the place of Paradise and the destination of Old Testament saints after their physical death.

The place of Paradise can be conclusively argued to be in heaven itself or rather that Paradise is heaven. There are only two other mentions of the word “paradise” in the New Testament outside of Luke 23:43, and both place the location of Paradise to be in heaven. The first reference is 2 Corinthians 12:4 which is in the context of Paul’s experience of being caught up to the “third heaven” which is probably the abode of God or heaven. Even if one argues that the “third heaven” is not heaven as the abode of God in an attempt to discount Paradise as the place of God’s dwelling, then contents of the book of revelation are hard to dismiss. For instance, Revelation 2:7 connects the tree of life to “Paradise.” Revelation 22:2, 14 clearly place the location of the tree of life in heaven which would mean that Paradise itself is heaven.⁸⁰

In addition to the place of Paradise being heaven, one may convincingly argue that the destination of the departed Old Testament saints was heaven in the presence of God. Grudem writes that, “Scripture gives us no clear evidence to make us think that full

⁷⁸ Grudem, 591.

⁷⁹ Bruce, 343-344.

⁸⁰ Grudem, 593.

access to the blessings of being in God's presence in heaven were withheld from Old Testament believers when they died." Rather, because these Old Testament men and women trusted in God and what the Messiah would do, they received the same benefits as present day believers as present day believers place their trust in what Jesus did do (Gen. 5:24; 2 Sam. 12:23; Ps. 16:11,17; Ps. 17:15; Ps. 23:6; Eccl. 12:7; Matt. 22:31-32; Luke 16:22; Rom. 4:1-8; Heb. 11:5). Therefore, based on these biblical evidences, the descent in Ephesians could not have been to the abode of the dead as under the earth which means that the *Descensus ad Infernos* view of the descent of Christ cannot be correct.

The Words of Christ

Yet, not only does the place of Paradise and the destination of Old Testament saints argue in this direction, so do the words of Christ while he hung on the cross. The first saying to be examined comes from Luke 23:43. Here Jesus says, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." Drawing from the previous argument as to the location of Paradise, one may conclusively say that Jesus believed that, upon His death, His body would be left on the earth but His spirit would proceed straight to heaven into the presence of His father. One should note also the use of "today." The implications here are that there was no time delay where Christ would have gone to hell whether to give people a second chance for salvation or to take Old Testament saints from Paradise to heaven. Instead, there was the immediate expectation that, "today," both Jesus and the thief beside Him would go into the presence of God the Father in heaven.⁸¹

A second statement from Jesus while He is on the cross comes from Luke 23:46. In this instance, Jesus cries out, "Father, into your hands I commit My spirit." These words are an idiomatic expression that indicates Jesus' trust in the power and will of God.

⁸¹ Grudem, 593.

However, it does not preclude the idea that Christ's trust included the assumption that He would indeed go into the presence of the Father upon the willful giving up of His spirit. Therefore, Grudem writes that the wording of this sentence "suggests that Christ expected (correctly) the immediate end of his suffering and estrangement and the welcoming of his spirit into heaven by God the Father."⁸² An interesting note is that Stephen's words in Acts 7:59 are quite similar to those of Jesus ("Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!").⁸³

Finally, the powerful words of Jesus "It is finished!" found in John 19:30 argue that Christ did not go down to hell. The fact that Jesus had completed His salvific work meant that He did not need to go down to hell to rescue anyone or to even defeat evil angelic powers as Ogeberg suggests.⁸⁴ Since Jesus' work of paying for the sins of mankind was finished, He did not need to face any more judgment but had completed His work and His spirit could go to heaven having defeated the devil, death, and sin.⁸⁵ Once again, the *Descensus ad Infernos* seems to be contrary to the biblical evidence while the other two interpretations are more in keeping with it.

The Location of the Evil Powers

The teaching in Ephesians concerning the location of Christ's battle with the evil powers will shed some light on the correct understanding of the descent of Christ. Throughout Ephesians, Paul presents the perspective that the place where the evil spirits are bound and defeated is in the heavenly realm. Ephesians 1:10 speaks of the "summing

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Harris, 10.

⁸⁵ Grudem, 593.

of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth” which shows the realm of the work of Christ. Ephesians 1:20 indicates that Christ completed his work by sitting at the right hand of God in the “heavenly *places*.” The devil is spoken of as the “prince of the power of the air” in Ephesians 2:2, and Ephesians 6:12 indicates that spiritual warfare occurs with wicked forces in “heavenly *places*.”⁸⁶ The words of Jesus mentioned before also indicate that the work of Christ in defeating sin, death, and Satan was finished on the cross when he cried “It is finished” (John 19:30; also cf. Col. 2:14-15).⁸⁷ From these evidences, one may deduce that Paul does not teach in Ephesians a visit by Christ to hell, but that he was trying to communicate that the descent of Christ in Ephesians was the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity or possibly the giving of spiritual gifts by Christ as the descended Spirit.

The Cosmology of Ephesians

The various views of the descent require a specific explanation of the structure of the universe. For the *Descensus ad Infernos* and its variant view to be true, Paul must expound a “three-layer picture of the cosmos” which would include heaven, earth, and Hades. On the other hand, the descent of Christ as His Incarnation or as His descent as the Spirit to impart gifts both require a two-tiered view of the universe to include just heaven and earth.⁸⁸ The question, then, is “Which perspective does Paul give?” Some of the material for the teaching of Ephesians on this matter was mentioned in the previous section. However, the clearest teaching comes from Ephesians 1:10. In this verse, Paul writes that all things are summed up in Christ whether those things are in the heavens or

⁸⁶ Best, 384.

⁸⁷ Hoehner, 534.

⁸⁸ Best, 384.

on the earth. Clearly, the perspective on the structure of the universe presented in Ephesians is that of two levels which argues for the Incarnation and descent as Spirit views but heavily against the descent to hell position.⁸⁹

The Descent-Ascent Motif in Scripture

If, as all the previous arguments have shown, the *Descensus* in Ephesians cannot be the activity of Christ going down into hell, then it must be that Christ either descended at the Incarnation or that He came as the Spirit at Pentecost. Further proof of this concept comes from the descent-ascent motif in the Scriptures. For instance, Scripture consistently views the descent of Christ to be from heaven to earth as is the case in John 3:13. In this verse, Christ says, “No one has ascended into heaven, but he who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.” Very clearly the Scripture indicates that the descent was from heaven to earth (cf. John 6:62 and John 16:28).⁹⁰ In the same manner, the ascension is viewed from the earth to heaven not from the underworld to the earth or the underworld to heaven. Take for instance John 8:21-23 where Christ tells his disciples that where he is going or ascending to they cannot come because they are from below or the earth and He is from above or heaven.⁹¹ Therefore, the descent and ascent of Christ according to clear Scripture is always from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven. The dividing point then between these two interpretations is the question—when did the descent occur in relation to the ascent?

⁸⁹ Harris, 50. This two level view of the cosmos in Ephesians might be contrasted with the three level view which Paul presents in Phil. 2:10.

⁹⁰ Hoehner, 535.

⁹¹ Ibid., 534.

The Context of Psalm 68

The crux of the argument for the descent referring to Christ descending as the Spirit at Pentecost is the background associated with Psalm 68. However, upon further study of the Psalm and its apparent connection to the descent in Ephesians, several problems emerge. The supporters of this view assert that the rabbinic tradition of the Psalm surrounds the teaching that Moses (like God in the Psalm) ascended up Mount Sinai so that he might “capture” the Law (or Torah) and then returned back down the mountain to distribute the “gifts” of the Law to the nation of Israel in association with the Festival of Pentecost.⁹²

The problem with this argument is that in “the Psalm it was Jehovah that ascended, but only after He had first descended to earth in behalf of His people from His proper habitation in heaven.”⁹³ Indeed, verse 7 of the Psalm speaks of how God “went forth before your people.” The resulting issue then is that the rabbinic interpretation of the Psalm does not follow the Psalm’s context, which reveals that applying the rabbinic tradition to the descent in Ephesians is incongruous. Christ could not have descended after He had already ascended because that is contrary to the chronology of descent-ascend in the original Psalm. Furthermore, if Ephesians 4:9 does indicate that that Christ descended again subsequently to His heavenly ascent in accordance with the rabbinic tradition, then the whole of verse 10 is essentially “useless.”⁹⁴ The idea here is that if the audience of the letter already knows that the rabbinic teaching on the Psalm in association with Pentecost includes a succeeding descent then there is no need to assert that the very

⁹² Ibid., 532.

⁹³ Salmond, 3:326.

⁹⁴ Hoehner, 532.

one who descended was also the one who ascended, for that fact would be assumed and self-evident.

In addition to the contextual problem comes the problem of assumption. The descent of Christ as the Spirit view assumes that the audience of this letter would know of the rabbinic tradition associated with the Psalm (if this tradition even existed as early as the first century). However, the audience of Ephesians is chiefly Gentile and would likely be ignorant of the Jewish teachings associated with the Psalm.⁹⁵ Adding to the strength of this argument is the fact that the sermon of Peter in Acts 2 is completely devoid of any mention of the Psalm with its rabbinic teachings in association with the descent of Moses to give gifts, a role now applied to Christ by the descent of Christ as the Spirit opinion. Why would Peter who was preaching to a Jewish audience that should know of such a rabbinic teaching not include such a key Christological fact since the day of Pentecost was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the inauguration of the church?⁹⁶

Conclusion

Formulation of Interpretation

Based upon the evidences which have been presented, the best and most comprehensive interpretation of the meaning of Ephesians 4:9 seems to be that the descent refers to the coming of Christ to the earth at the Incarnation where the Second Person of the Trinity took on flesh. This conclusion is based upon the grammatical factors of the classification of τῆς γῆς as a genitive of apposition giving clarity to what the “lower parts” refers and the use of the comparative adjective κατώτερα, which theologically agrees with cosmological breakdown of the universe that Paul teaches in

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Ephesians. Not only is the conclusion based upon these grammatical considerations, it also is based upon a contextual basis of the two-layer cosmos in Ephesians, which naturally precludes the possibility of a descent to hell or the underworld based upon Ephesians 4:9. Along with the cosmological factor come the words of Christ Himself as He hanged on the cross and indicated that He would immediately go to the presence of His Father upon His death and not to some place of torment. The descent-ascent paradigm in Scripture also indicates the Incarnation as the true interpretation in that it shows that the descent is consistently from heaven to earth and the ascent is consistently from earth to heaven leaving no room for a sojourn to hell. Finally, the context of Psalm 68 actually argues against the idea that Christ descended back to earth after He had already descended up to heaven especially since there is great probability that the recipients of the Ephesian epistle had no idea of a rabbinic tradition associated with Psalm 68 from which Paul quotes Ephesians 4:8.

Application to the Apostles' Creed

For the sake of practicality, the interpretation must be applied to some area of life or ministry. Moo writes in his commentary on Romans, “All true theology should lead to doxology.”⁹⁷ In other words, theology must not be theology in and of itself. Instead, theology must inspire greater worship and a more intimate relationship for believers with their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The theology of this issue then can readily be applied to the Apostles' Creed.

Robert Culver writes in his systematic theology, “Renewed use of the *Apostles' Creed* in worship has sprung up even among churches that traditionally eschewed

⁹⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 82.

anything like a traditional liturgy.”⁹⁸ With such an increase in use, the contents of the Apostles’ Creed are seen, examined, and sometimes questioned. One question that particularly arises concerns the statement of the creed that says about Jesus, “he descended into hell.”⁹⁹ People want to know if Christ truly did descend into the pit of hell. If he did not, then they want to know whether it is proper for them to say or use the creed as part of their private or corporate worship.

The issue here can be dealt with based upon the understanding of the descent of Christ in Ephesians 4, though only in a limited way. The descent in Ephesians is quite convincingly the descent of Christ at His Incarnation. One must admit, however, that Ephesians 4:9 does not give the biblical warrant for the complete denial of the *Descensus ad Infernos* due to the fact that other Scripture may be used to support it.¹⁰⁰ More research would need to be performed to determine the validity of support of such Scripture for the *Descensus*. Nevertheless, one may note that many scholars question interpretations of other Scripture that supports a descent of Christ to hell.¹⁰¹ Therefore, while one may not dogmatically say that the *Descensus* is biblically unfounded, he may convincingly call into question the doctrine of a descent to hell since one of its key supporting passages is Ephesians 4:9. In addition, the reality is that the clause neither teaches nor affirms a foundational Christian doctrine, as do the other parts of the

⁹⁸ Culver, 518.

⁹⁹ Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, “Apostle’s Creed,” <http://www.carm.org/creeds/apostles.htm> (accessed September 13, 2007).

¹⁰⁰ See page 7 of this document.

¹⁰¹ Grudem, 591-592 and Erickson, 793-794.

Apostles' Creed.¹⁰² With these considerations in mind, the Apostles' Creed might better be avoided or amended not to include the clause, "he descended into hell," so as to guard against possible confusion, division, or falsehood. This action of discernment may be thought of as an attempt to stay further away from a questionable line rather than closer to it.

Throughout the study, the effort has been made to show that though there may be an array of interpretations on an issue, one must choose the best one so that he might apply true theology to his life. In the present instance, the teaching of Ephesians 4:9 is that Christ descended to earth humiliating Himself and taking on flesh so that He might redeem fallen mankind. Since this truth shines through in Ephesians, it may be applied to a contemporary ministry issue so that people may properly and practically use the Apostles' Creed as an edifying and expressive means of worship and instruction.

¹⁰² Grudem, 594.

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