

**THE BELIEF OF THE FIRST THREE
CENTURIES CONCERNING
CHRIST'S MISSION TO THE
UNDERWORLD**

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The Belief of the First Three Centuries Concerning Christ's Mission to the Underworld by
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P R E F A C E .

THE following treatise was commenced nearly three years ago, under the supposition that it could be finished in three or four days, and with no further intention than that of translating some passages on the subject of which it treats, as one evidence among many that the Gospels did not originate in the opinions of the Early Christians. It grew on the writer's hands, led to investigations which he had not anticipated, and was delayed by other duties.

The size to which it has grown is not, probably, disproportionate to the place held by its subject among early Christian views; and if we are ever to have a satisfactory picture of their theology, it must be by giving to each feature its due proportions. The man who should treat of Millerism by ransacking its productions for every casual allusion to the Atonement, Original Sin, or Predestination, and should spread the result of his labors over volumes, while he barely hinted at a belief by the Millerites of the Second Coming, would give a very disproportioned picture of his subject. Yet such a picture would not be more faulty than many a portraiture of the early centuries. The writings of the Fathers have been

searched for their opinions on points concerning which they scarcely thought at all, whilst subjects of great interest to them have been neglected. Such of their expressions as could be made to bear on modern controversies have been extracted from their own systems of thought, and reconstructed into modern systems. The process has resembled that of a man who should reconstruct the fragments of Grecian statuary and temples into crucifixes and Gothic churches, and should expect by a treatise on each fragment to convey a good idea of the original design. A reproduction of the original work would be simpler, and answer the purpose better.

That a subject so prominent among the Early Christians as the Underworld Mission should have been passed by without a word, or with scarcely a word, by leading Ecclesiastical Historians, is singular. The elaborately terse work of Gieseler does not allude to it. Neander, who is regarded as having penetrated deeply into the spirit of the ancient Church, has written what makes, in Torrey's Translation, a large and closely printed volume, on the first three centuries. Of this, three hundred and twenty pages are devoted to Catholic and Heretical doctrines, without, I believe, any but an insufficient allusion to the Underworld Mission (Vol. I. p. 654), and a mention of Marcion's peculiarity (Ibid. p. 471), although the statement (Ibid. p. 641) that Christ gave himself to the Evil One as a ransom for mankind seems to require some explanation, in order to render it intelligible, concerning Satan's Lordship over the Underworld, and Christ's descent thither. Mosheim, Milner, and Priestley, so far as I have been able to ascertain by a cursory examination, do not mention Christ's mission below in their respective Church Histories, though

the first of these, in his copious Commentaries on the Affairs of Christians before Constantine, a work, in the original, of nearly one thousand quarto pages, casually introduces (Vol. I. p. 495, edition of Dr. Murdock) a mention of Marcion's peculiar bias on the subject.

The treatise apparently of most reputation as a history of Christ's descent to the Underworld is by J. A. Dietelmaier, "*Historia Dogmatis de Descensu Christi ad Inferos.*" My efforts to procure it were unsuccessful. The few works or articles that I have seen on the subject of this treatise did not prove satisfactory. J. L. Koenig, in his "*Lehre von Christi Hoellenfahrt,*" pp. 260-268, has filled nine pages with the titles alone of Works, Articles, and Sermons on this subject. His work did not reach me until my own was nearly finished. An examination of the titles of some of the works which he has mentioned, and a perusal of occasional extracts from, or references to, others, convinced me that the mass of them would aid my investigations but little. Most of them I suspect to be written from a doctrinal point of view. If this suspicion be correct, Christ's descent to the Underworld must in its most uninteresting shape, namely, as a point of doctrine, have occasioned an unusual amount of controversy, whilst its interesting and historical bearings have been overlooked.

The belief by the Early Christians of their special exemption from the Underworld, effected by Christ's descent thither, was to my own mind novel, and, as a point of history, interesting. Whether it will prove equally so to others, I do not know.

My chief object in writing has been the argument for the Gospels, in § XXV. The tone in which Christianity has fre-

quently been defended must be my excuse for not thinking it superfluous to add, that, though I would deem no toil misplaced which should give men a deeper confidence in the supernatural character of Christianity, yet I hope that I should recognize mental superiority, appreciate moral worth, and feel attracted towards whatever was lovely in one that did not accept Christianity as a revelation, equally as in one that did.

May I caution the reader who recoils from Church authority, not to go to the opposite extreme of judging the Fathers to be weaklings because they had not outgrown the errors of their times? He who should judge Julius Cæsar by his account of catching wild beasts * in Germany, or Tacitus by his story of the Phœnix, † might readily under-estimate them.

* " There are some beasts also which are called Alces. These are like goats in figure and in the diversity of their skins, but are somewhat larger. They lack horns, and have legs devoid of joints; nor do they lie down when they rest; nor if they by any accident fall, can they get up again. Trees serve them for couches. They place themselves against them, and leaning but a little, take their rest. When the hunters perceive, from the marks, whither they are accustomed to be, take themselves, they either root up or cut all the trees in that place, so that their upper part is left with the appearance as if they were standing. When the animals recline here as usual, they overturn the infirm trees by their weight, and fall with them." Cæsar De Bello Gallico Lib. VI. c. 27.

† " In the consulships of Paulus Fabius and Lucius Vitellius the Phœnix bird, after a long circuit of years, came [again] into Egypt, and afforded to the most learned both from among the natives and the Greeks, material for much discussion concerning the wonder. I will narrate the things in which they agree, and others, which, though doubtful, are not absurd subjects for investigation. That bird (*animal*) is sacred to

Our missionaries have not found that a communication of Christianity at once dispels the former education of their converts. Why should it have been different in the second century. In Howard Malcom's "Travels in Southeastern Asia," (Vol. I. note on p. 262, edit. of 1839,) the reader will find that "it was some time before the Christian converts [in Burmah] could be reconciled to Mr. Judson's performing the marriage ceremony, or being present in any way. It seemed to them absolutely obscene." Accustomed to

"the sun, and those who have described its form agree that it differs from other birds in its appearance and in the separation (or singularity, *distincta*) of its feathers. Concerning the number of years [between its visits] there are various reports. The most current assigns a space of five hundred years. Some assert an interval of one thousand four hundred and sixty-one, and say that the former birds first in the reign of Sesosidis, afterwards in that of Amasis, then in that of Ptolemy, the third king of the Macedonian line, flew to the city called Heliopolis (city of the sun), with a great accompaniment of other birds, astonished at the unusual appearance. The ancient part of it is however obscure. Between Ptolemy and Tiberius were less than two hundred and fifty years, whence some have supposed this last Phoenix to be a spurious one, not from the land of Arabia, and to have had nothing belonging to it of those things which were established by ancient tradition. When the number of [its] years is finished, and death approaches, it constructs a nest in its own country, and infuses into it a producing power out of which the fetus springs. The first care of this when grown is to bury its parent, nor that rashly, but having taken up a load of Myrrha (an Eastern stone) and tried it during a long journey, when it proves equal to the burden and to the flight, it takes its parent's body and bears it within the altar of the sun and burns it. These things are uncertain and increased by fables; but there can be no doubt that that bird is sometimes seen in Egypt." Tacitus, *Annals*, Lib. VI. c. 28.