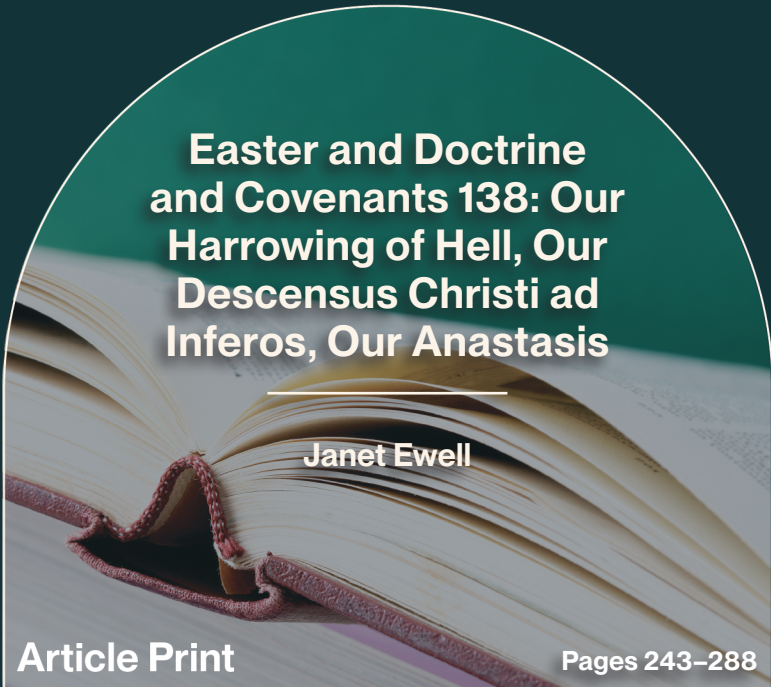


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**Easter and Doctrine  
and Covenants 138: Our  
Harrowing of Hell, Our  
Descensus Christi ad  
Inferos, Our Anastasis**

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# Easter and Doctrine and Covenants 138: Our Harrowing of Hell, Our *Descensus Christi ad Inferos*, Our Anastasis

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Janet Ewell

**Abstract:** *Easter should be a feast for all our senses. Early Christians recounted the events between Christ's death and Resurrection with joy, and much in their accounts is familiar to us. Doctrine and Covenants 138 describes and celebrates Christ's visit to the world of the spirits between his death and Resurrection. As this revelation becomes part of our Easter celebration, we, like the early Christians before us, will find our Easter to be the feast of feasts.*

**D**octrine and Covenants 138 can be our main course on Holy Saturday, the day between Christ's death and his Resurrection. It may become to our Easter what shepherds and wise men are to our Christmas. We should embrace this revelation with joy, just as early Christians celebrated with joy Christ's Holy Saturday descent to the spirit world and his redemption of the dead.

The vision Joseph F. Smith received in 1918, which became Doctrine and Covenants 138 in 1979, includes both restoration and revelation. It restores truths concerning Christ's visit to the spirit world; truths that were once widely known among early Christians. Although these beliefs were later diminished, dismissed, or misplaced in the Western Church, Christ's descent to the land of the dead is still remembered joyously in the Eastern Church.<sup>1</sup>

President Smith's vision was also a revelation that included at

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1. It is commemorated on Holy Saturday, Holy Thursday, and two other days each year as part of the "Vespereal Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great." Basil was bishop in Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia.

least one doctrinal truth not previously known in the restored Church. Through this vision, we are invited to view Christ's saving actions between his death and Resurrection, actions that reveal "the great and wonderful love made manifest by the Father and the Son in the coming of the Redeemer into the world" (Doctrine and Covenants 138:3). If we build our Easter feast upon this revelation, our view of Christ's love may expand. We may find in it more mercy, love, forgiveness, and hope than most have ever dreamed possible — perhaps more than most of us reading this dare think possible. It can ease our aching hearts.

What could give us more cause to celebrate? In that spirit, and in the spirit of the "occasional" essay that is this paper, I have attached an appendix containing suggestions for four scenes that can contribute to our Holy Saturday's celebration including suggested scripts and lists of characters, props, and costumes.

### **The Descent to the Dead in the Primitive Church**

Doctrine and Covenants 138 is a restoration of gracious and simple truths that were widely taught<sup>2</sup> in the Primitive Church:<sup>3</sup> that Christ descended into the land of the dead to rescue and teach at least some who were imprisoned there. Inklings of these teachings remain, though they are sometimes dismissed as medieval superstitions or simply metaphoric. Christ's mission between his death and his Resurrection is variously called the *Descensus Christi ad inferos* (Latin: Christ's descent to the lower world or descent to the dead<sup>4</sup>), the *Anastasis* (Greek: rising up, raising up, resurrection), or, by about 1000 CE, the *harrowing of hell* (Anglo-Saxon: the *siege of hell*).

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2. "The narrative of Christ's descent was nearly omnipresent in the early Church." "Until the middle of the fourth century the descent was simply part of the narrative of Christ's saving work for humanity and of God's generosity in rescuing the lost and those who had not heard the proclamation of the good news during their life in the world." Martin F. Connell, "*Descensus Christi ad Inferos: Christ's Descent to the Dead*," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 262, 264, [static.csbsju.edu/documents/Theology/10%20Descensus%20ad%20Inferos.pdf](http://static.csbsju.edu/documents/Theology/10%20Descensus%20ad%20Inferos.pdf).
  3. The "Primitive Church," is generally considered to extend up to the first Council of Nicaea in 325 CE.
  4. Rufinus of Aquileia changed the phrase from *Descensus Christi ad inferos* ("Christ descending to those below") to *Descensus ad inferna* ("descending to the burning place," "to hell") in his *Commentary on the Apostles Creed* in about 400 CE. "The earlier stratum [writers who used the word *inferos*] portrayed Christ preaching to those who, while on earth, did not hear the word of God, while the latter [those who used the word *infernos*] described the reconciliation of sinners." Connell, "*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*," 262, 264n3.



**Figure 1.** The great emblem of Easter for 300 million Orthodox Christians and others, the Anastasis, shows Christ's rescue of Adam and Eve shortly after his Crucifixion. This early fourteenth-century fresco is the centerpiece of a side chapel of the Chora Church (now Kariye Mosque) in Istanbul. (Image courtesy of Wikimedia, [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chora\\_Anastasis1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chora_Anastasis1.jpg).)

The *descensus* was familiar to early Christians. Works written by or attributed to Melito of Sardis, Clement of Alexandria, and Hippolytus of Rome speak of it as part of Christ's redemptive mission. Tertullian rails against the belief. The *Odes of Solomon* (written between 70 and 120 CE), the *Epistle of the Apostles* (second century), and *The Shepherd of Hermas* (written before 150 CE) refer to the *descensus* and use it to preach and to expound doctrine. Other works also refer to it.<sup>5</sup>

Early Christian works provide many examples of how commonly

5. In addition to scriptures thought to refer to the *descensus*, such as 1 Peter 3:18–21 and 4:18–21, "the descent to the dead is taken up in, among others, the works of Justin Martyr and Ignatius of Antioch; in Irenaeus of Lyons; Cyprian of Carthage; and, at greater length, in the writings of Tertullian. Testimony is found in the second-century eucharistic prayers of pseudo-Hippolytus and Melito of Sardis. The descent is mentioned in the writings of Epiphanius and Hilary of Poitiers; in the Alexandrians Origen, Clement, and Cyril." Connell, "*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*," 264n4.

Christ's descent was mentioned, taught, and celebrated in the Primitive Church. Much they taught would have seemed strange to nineteenth-century Christians in the Western World, but to today's Latter-day Saints it will usually seem familiar.

The following six sections provide early Christian mentions of specific beliefs that are also discussed in Doctrine and Covenants 138:

- Between his death and Resurrection, Christ visited the dead to redeem them (Melito; Hippolytus; Odes of Solomon; Epistle of the Apostles; Shepherd of Hermas; Tertullian, arguing for the contrary position).
- Christ taught and enlightened at least some of the dead who were not perfect nor sinless (Melito, Clement).
- Christ freed some of the dead from bodily death through the Resurrection (Melito, Hippolytus, Odes of Solomon, Epistle of the Apostles) and from sin through repentance (Odes of Solomon, Epistle of the Apostles).
- The dead would be judged by what they had done, whether good or evil (Epistles of the Apostles).
- The dead could teach others who were dead (Clement, Epistle of the Apostles).
- Baptism (the seal) might somehow be provided to the dead (Odes of Solomon, Epistle of the Apostles, Shepherd of Hermas).

### **Christ visited the dead to redeem them**

The Homily for Holy Saturday, attributed to Melito of Sardis,<sup>6</sup> teaches of Christ's ministry between his Crucifixion and Resurrection. Melito

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6. Some question whether Melito was the author of this homily and if it was really that early; very little in those first, turbulent days of Christianity has not been challenged. The homily has also been attributed to Epiphanius, Archbishop of Cyprus. Language from the text sometimes attributed to Melito is embedded in the text attributed to Epiphanius, but the second is a much longer and more elaborate homily. For the text of the homily attributed to Epiphanius, see "Our Father among the Saints Epiphanius, Bishop of Cyprus," *Saint George Melkite Greek-Catholic Church of Sacramento* (website), [stgeorgemelkite.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/St.-Epiphanius-Holy-Saturday-Homily-full.pdf](http://stgeorgemelkite.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/St.-Epiphanius-Holy-Saturday-Homily-full.pdf). (The *descensus* section begins on page 7.) Epiphanius lived most of his life after the Council of Nicaea and so would not be considered a primitive Christian. For the text attributed to Melito (and excerpted here) see "The Lord's Descent into Hell," *Vatican* (website), [vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit\\_20010414\\_omelia-sabato-santo\\_en.html](http://vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010414_omelia-sabato-santo_en.html).

was a bishop in Smyrna in modern Türkiye, one of the seven churches in Revelation. We read in the homily that Christ

has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, He has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, He who is both God and the Son of Eve. . . . The Lord approached them bearing the cross, the weapon that had won him the victory. . .

He took [Adam] by the hand and raised him up, saying, "Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light. I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and for your descendants I now by My own authority command *all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened*, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in Hell. . . . Rise, let us leave this place. The enemy led you out of the earthly Paradise. I will not restore you to that Paradise, *but I will enthrone you in Heaven*. I forbade you the tree that was only a symbol of life, but see, I who am Life itself am now one with you. I appointed cherubim to guard you as slaves are guarded, *but now I make them worship you as God*. The throne formed by cherubim awaits you, its bearers swift and eager. The Bridal Chamber is adorned, the banquet is ready, the eternal dwelling places are prepared, the treasure houses of all good things lie open. The Kingdom of Heaven has been prepared for you from all eternity."

The Homily for Holy Saturday reports Christ's victorious descent to free Adam and Eve and their descendants from death, to enlighten them, and to lead them back into God's presence "as God," using the imagery from Psalm 82:6 and the furnishings of the Holy of Holies.

### **Christ taught and enlightened the dead**

Clement of Alexandria portrays Christ as a teacher as well as the Redeemer during his descent. Clement had expansive views of who could be saved. He writes that Christ descended to teach both the apparently unbaptized Hebrews and also to initiate the redemption of Gentiles and sinners. He writes, "the Lord preached the Gospel to those in Hades."

The apostles, following the Lord, preached the Gospel to those in Hades. For it was requisite, in my opinion, that as here, so also there, the best of the *disciples should be imitators of the Master; so that He should bring to repentance those belonging to the Hebrews, and they, the Gentiles*; that is, those who had lived in righteousness according to the Law and Philosophy, who had ended life not perfectly, but sinfully.

This is because, according to Clement, “God is not only Lord of the Jews, but of all men.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Christ brought freedom from death and sin**

Hippolytus, a bishop in Rome who became a saint and martyr, wrote that Christ descended to overcome death and hell, to weaken the devil’s power, and to give light to the righteous — the presumably *unbaptized* righteous, who died before his coming. The *Apostolic Traditions*, attributed to Hippolytus, seems to be a sort of handbook of instructions for bishops. This section may tell how to bless the Eucharist’s bread and wine:

We give thee thanks, O God, through thy beloved Servant Jesus Christ, . . . who, fulfilling thy will, and winning for himself a holy people, spread out his hands when he came to suffer, that by his death *he might set free them who believed on thee*. Who, when he was betrayed to his willing death, that he might bring to nought death, and break the bonds of the devil, and tread hell under foot, and give light to the righteous, and set up a boundary post, and manifest his resurrection, taking bread and giving thanks to thee said: Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Clement of Alexandria, “The Stromata, or Miscellanies,” book VI, chapter VI, *Early Christian Writings* (website), [earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book6.html](http://earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book6.html).

8. Burton Scott Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 35–36, [archive.org/details/apostolictraditi0000hipp/page/34/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/apostolictraditi0000hipp/page/34/mode/2up). Hippolytus was involved in many doctrinal controversies and was schismatic—he broke away with some followers from other presbyters (probably bishops) in Rome over, among other things, the relationship between the Father and the Son and the manner and extent to which Christ was both God and man. (These issues continued to strain the greater church’s internal relations for at least four centuries.) He wrote extensively against heresies, both non-Christian, including Jewish heresies,

The anonymous *Odes of Solomon* dates from between 70 and 120 CE. They may have been written by a Greek or Syriac-speaking Jewish Christian who was familiar with the sorts of documents found at Qumran. ("The seal" was used to refer to baptism and its associated ordinances during the first millennium.)<sup>9</sup> The last ode relates these words in the voice of Christ:

And I was not rejected though I was reckoned to be so. I did not perish, though they devised it against me.

Sheol<sup>10</sup> saw me and was made miserable: Death cast me up and many along with me. I had gall and bitterness, and I went down with him to the utmost of his depth: And the feet and the head he let go, for they were not able to endure my face: And *I made a congregation of living men amongst his dead men*, and I spake with them by living lips: Because my word shall not be void:

And those who had died ran towards me: and they cried and said, Son of God, have pity on us, and do with us according to thy kindness. And *bring us out from the bonds of darkness: and open to us the door by which we shall come out to thee*. For we see that our death has not touched thee. Let us also be redeemed with thee: for thou art our Redeemer.

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and against what he saw as Christian heresies. In 235 CE, under Emperor Maximinus, Roman persecution of Christians began anew; both Hippolytus and his chief doctrinal opponent (an anti-pope and a pope) were arrested and sent to the mines of Sardinia where they both died from the harsh conditions. They are honored as martyrs and saints. The work of Hippolytus is held in high regard in the Eastern Church.

9. See, for instance, Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 8:

"Seal" was the commonest baptismal designation in the second century. Some texts show the seal clearly as a mark of ownership and protection. For Christian usage in the relation to baptism there are two lines of thought—an eschatological and a juristic. There is a close relation of seal and name in the second and third centuries so that "seal" and "baptismal formula" are close together. Indeed "seal" is no separate baptismal rite but an interpretation of the baptismal bath.

Ferguson further states, "Hermas, like *2 Clement*, identifies the seal with baptism" (p. 218) and baptism "was an immersion administered in the name of the Son of God and so was designated as a seal of his ownership and protection" (p. 220).

10. *Sheol* is the abode of the dead. It does not imply either punishment or glory.

And I heard their voice; and *my name I sealed upon their heads*: For they are free men and they are mine. Hallelujah.<sup>11</sup>

We read that the victorious Christ descended to the dead, gave them life *and* redeemed at least some of them. Once again, temple imagery is invoked.

### **Christ will judge the dead according to their deeds**

*The Epistle of the Apostles*, an anonymous second-century book, was rediscovered in 1895 and is preserved in Coptic and Ethiopic. In the voice of Christ, it recounts his descent into “the place of Lazarus” (perhaps the Lazarus in the parable in Luke 16), where he teaches the children of light and redeems them. It suggests that those he taught during his descent would teach others so they could also “come out of the prison-house.”<sup>12</sup>

26 Verily I say unto you: the flesh shall arise, and the soul, alive, that their defence may come to pass on that day *in regard of that that they have done, whether it be good or evil*: that there may be a *choosing-out of the faithful* who have kept the commandments of my Father that sent me; *and so shall the judgement be accomplished with strictness*. . . .

27 For to that end went I down unto the place of Lazarus, and preached unto the righteous and the prophets, that they might come out of the rest which is below and come up into that which is above; and I poured out upon them with my right hand the water (?) [*baptism* in the Ethiopic text, unclear in the Coptic text] of life and forgiveness and salvation from all evil, as I have done unto you and unto them that believe on me. . . .

28 But so much the more have I redeemed you, the children of light, from all evil . . . *and every one that believeth on me by your means. For that which I have promised unto you will I give unto them also*, that they may come out of the prison-house and the fetters of the rulers.

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11. “The Odes of Solomon,” Ode 42:13–26, *Early Christian Writings* (website), [earlychristianwritings.com/text/odes2.html](http://earlychristianwritings.com/text/odes2.html).

12. “The Epistula Apostolorum,” 26–28, *Early Christian Writings* (website), [earlychristianwritings.com/text/apostolorum.html](http://earlychristianwritings.com/text/apostolorum.html).

## Christ commissions others to teach in the spirit world

The *Epistle of the Apostles* is also a rich source for other precepts including that the children of light were not only redeemed by Christ at his descent, but were sent as teachers to others so they also could be redeemed. In verse 28, as just cited, Christ promises those whom he has redeemed from all evil that "every one that believeth on me by your means" could also be redeemed.

This echoes the roughly contemporary teachings of Clement, also mentioned above, that Christ's apostles, in imitation of Christ, were to teach the gospel to the dead, including Gentiles and sinners.

## Christ provides some means for the dead to receive baptism

The Shepherd of Hermas suggests that the Apostles taught and baptized repentant sinners among the dead.<sup>13</sup> In a parable, redeemed souls are compared to stones fit for building a tower, presumably representing the kingdom of God or the Church. The narrator asks the Shepherd:

"Why, sir, . . . did the forty stones also ascend with [the Apostles] out of the pit, having already received the seal?" "Because," he said, "these apostles and teachers who preached the name of the Son of God, after falling asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, preached it not only to those who were asleep, *but themselves also gave them the seal of the preaching. Accordingly they descended with them into the water, and again ascended.*"<sup>14</sup>

## Challenges to the *Descensus ad Inferos*

Primitive Christianity was not united on all points of Christian practice or belief. Tertullian argued *against* the idea of Christ's victorious and redeeming descent to the underworld to free the captives, though he accepted that Christ did spend "three days in the heart of the earth" so that the Patriarchs and prophets could be "partakers of Himself." Ironically, his arguments given *against* the teaching that Christ

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13. Baptism seems to be referred to here as "the seal," as it often was in the early church (see note 9). *The Epistle of the Apostles*, verse 27, may also suggest, at least in the Ethiopic version, that baptism was available to "the righteous and the prophets."

14. "The Shepherd of Hermas," Parable 9:16, *New Advent* (website), [newadvent.org/fathers/02013.htm](http://newadvent.org/fathers/02013.htm).

redeemed at least some while his body lay in the tomb is a witness that others *did* believe it.<sup>15</sup>

Tertullian, a Carthaginian, was the first to write Christian theology in Latin,<sup>16</sup> and he frequently wrote against heresies, both worldly and within the Church. He took on Plato and the Stoics as well as the Jews, but kept his sharpest scorn for fellow Christians, including those who believed Christ rescued the righteous while his body lay in the tomb. Tertullian voices what he thought these heretical Christians would say: “that is just the reason why Christ went down into Hell — so that we should not have to go.”<sup>17</sup>

According to Tertullian, there was no escape from hell until the Second Coming. Tertullian suggests Christians who hoped that Christ had rescued the just “would place the servants above their Lord, disciples above their Master, and . . . would no doubt loftily disdain the solace of awaiting the resurrection in the bosom of Abraham.”<sup>18</sup> Not only were such Christians prideful in his eyes, they were slothful. Only a death not in “some gentle fever in a soft bed, but in the torture of martyrdom,” granted access to paradise.<sup>19</sup> Only martyrs escaped hell before the Second Coming. “The only key that unlocks the gates of Paradise is your own blood. Look at my treatise on Paradise where I showed that all [other] souls are kept in Hell until the Second Coming of the Lord.”<sup>20</sup>

Tertullian’s forceful writings suggest that Christ’s mission between his death and Resurrection, both its location and its purpose, was controversial in the early third century. But his writings acknowledge that others did believe that Christ both descended and rescued those who had died before his earthly ministry.

In Doctrine and Covenants 138 we see ancient and glorious teachings renewed, expanded, and set in the sacred context of Christ’s redeeming work. Early Christians suggested, and the Doctrine and Covenants makes clear, that Christ’s mission between his Crucifixion and Resurrection brought abundant mercy and hope: Christ visited

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15. Tertullian, *Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix Octavius*, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1950), chapter 55, [web.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Tertullian\\_On\\_the\\_Soul.pdf](http://web.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Tertullian_On_the_Soul.pdf).

16. Many early theological works were written in Greek.

17. Tertullian, *Apologetical Works*, 298.

18. Tertullian, *Apologetical Works*, 298.

19. Tertullian, *Apologetical Works*, 299.

20. Tertullian, *Apologetical Works*, 300.

the dead to redeem them; Christ taught and enlightened the dead; Christ brought freedom from death and sin; Christ will judge the dead according to their deeds, good or evil; Christ commissions others to teach in the spirit world; and Christ provides means for the dead to receive baptism.

Why would anyone reject such hope and such mercy if they had once been taught about them? How could the *Descensus ad inferos*, the Anastasis, the harrowing of hell be so easily dismissed? Why is Doctrine and Covenants 138 not a cherished highpoint in our Easter celebration?

How Christians in the early Church, as well as more modern ones, received Christ's Holy Saturday descent to the dead is intertwined with at least three other questions:

- How many people would Christ save?
- Is our eternal fate sealed by our spiritual condition at the moment of death?
- If change after death is possible, could anyone else — living or dead — improve the lot of the deceased?

### **How many people would Christ save?**

Would Christ save only a select group from among baptized Christians, or would he save almost everyone? Writers with expansive views of Christ's mercy and redemption tended to cherish the *descensus*.<sup>21</sup> These writers dared hope that Christ's redemption would extend to the presumably unbaptized prophets and patriarchs or beyond them to people who had not heard of Christ in mortality. Or, possibly, even to people who died as sinners.

In Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Dare We Hope?*, the author compares the highly expansive views of Origen with the narrower views argued for by Augustine. "Some passages in [Origen's] works allow at least a glimmer of hope for all men to shine through, almost always supported

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21. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014). Von Balthasar was a Catholic theologian who had been nominated to become a cardinal shortly before his 1988 death. While the book addresses the question of who will be saved, p. 31n6 surveys the literature concerning Christ's "descent to hell." Von Balthasar contributed greatly to the modern interest in the *Descensus Christi ad inferos*. He writes about the most expansive and the most limiting views in the early church concerning who could be saved in chapter 3, "Origen and Augustine."

by words from Holy Scripture.”<sup>22</sup> Origen entertains, at least academically, the possibility that even devils “will in a future world be converted to righteousness because of their possessing the faculty of freedom of will.”<sup>23</sup>

During the Decian persecutions in 250 CE, Origen was tortured for his faith. His health broken, he died in 253. Almost 300 years later the Emperor Justinian the First had him declared a heretic and ordered his books burned. (Origen also had written about the preexistence of souls.)

In contrast, Augustine, who was born roughly a hundred years after Origen died, puts forth one of the most limiting early views of who might be saved. The entire Book 21 in the *City of God* is devoted to the punishments of hell and the damned who are beyond the reach of mercy, either human or divine, according to von Balthasar.<sup>24</sup> Augustine advanced the idea of original sin through Adam’s fall, making humankind a *massa damnata* (a condemned crowd). Accordingly, our corrupted nature leads us to sin, which leads to more damnation. For Augustine, “the whole of earthly life is depicted in terms of punishment and burden.”<sup>25</sup> Infants were damned at birth and he condemns the *descensus* story as groundless. Augustine is considered a Doctor of the Church and was made a saint shortly after his death in 430 CE.

### **Is our eternal fate sealed by our condition at the moment of death?**

Does our condition at death, despite death’s apparently capricious timing, determine our fate? Or does Christ’s victory over death also vanquish even this uncertainty? After death could we still turn toward God, learn, repent, and grow?<sup>26</sup> Many, though not all, of the early mentions of the *descensus* seemed to support the latter hope.

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22. Von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 43.

23. Von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 42–43.

24. Von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 47–49.

25. Von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 48.

26. Augustine’s position rejected “all forms of posthumous salvation.” Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 126. Latter-day Saint historian Stephen Harper writes “the first Christians didn’t believe that death was a deadline that determined a person’s salvation. Peter taught that Jesus Christ preached His gospel to the dead so they could be judged as justly as the living (1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6). Paul taught that Christians could be baptized for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29) . . . It turns out that it was Augustine, not Jesus or his apostles, who decided that death should be a

### **If change after death is possible, could anyone else—living or dead—improve the lot of the deceased?**

Did apostles and disciples preach to dead sinners as Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas taught? Could they perform baptisms in the afterlife as the Shepherd of Hermas seems to suggest? Could the living, through prayers and ritual acts, including baptism for the dead, change either the dead or the judgments against them?

It is widely believed today that the church in ancient times held to some notion of postmortem evangelization. This theme is scattered throughout various early Christian sources and seems to suggest that the early church was in agreement that Christ 'descended into hell,' per the Apostles' Creed.<sup>27</sup>

According to Trumbower:

Numerous conceptions of posthumous rescue found their way into the earliest Christian speculations: an implicit universal salvation (Rom. 11:32), vicarious baptism "on behalf of the dead" (1 Cor. 15:29), talk of proclaiming the gospel among the dead (1 Pet. 4:6), the dead apostles' baptizing the righteous dead (*Shepherd of Hermas*, *Sim.* 9.16.2–7), and even God's granting the righteous the privilege of saving some of the damned at the final judgment. (*Apocalypse of Peter* 14:1–4; *Sibylline Oracles* 2:330–38).<sup>28</sup>

A Christian's intellectual position on these theological questions might influence their reception of the *descensus*. Conversely, homilies, odes, Eucharist prayers, extra-canonical epistles (certainly sometimes read aloud), apocrypha, hymns, and *descensus* parables had power to engage audiences in visceral and imaginative ways. All these modes of presentation engage the senses of the body in ways that reach the soul.<sup>29</sup> These forms left deep and lasting impressions on communities of believers who embraced the *descensus* traditions.

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deadline that determined a person's salvation." Steven C. Harper, "Section 137 & 138 Context," *Steven Craig Harper* (blog), [stevencraigharper.com/post/come-follow-me-doctrine-covenants-137-138](http://stevencraigharper.com/post/come-follow-me-doctrine-covenants-137-138).

27. David L. Paulsen "Are Christians Mormon? Reassessing Joseph Smith's Theology in His Bicentennial," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 1 (2006): 122, [byustudies.byu.edu/article/are-christians-mormon-reassessing-joseph-smiths-theology-in-his-bicentennial](http://byustudies.byu.edu/article/are-christians-mormon-reassessing-joseph-smiths-theology-in-his-bicentennial).

28. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 33.

29. Anna D. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton: Princeton

Doctrine and Covenants 138 can have a lasting impression on Latter-day Saints, if we feast upon it and are prepared to budge some of our unexamined and perhaps cerebral positions about Christ's "great atoning sacrifice . . . and the great and wonderful love made manifest by the Father and the Son" (Doctrine and Covenants 138:2–3).

### **The Descent to the Dead in the First Centuries after the Council of Nicaea**

When the Emperor Constantine reversed Diocletian's policy of persecution and granted Christians legal status, he saved many Christian lives, but he also imposed on the struggling Church the Roman Empire's structures and priorities, including uniformity and loyalty, loyalty often secured through grants of privileges. The Emperor enjoyed a power no bishop had possessed. He not only could summon bishops from major Christian centers to ecumenical councils, but he could enforce their decisions.<sup>30</sup> The councils, held under the Emperor's eye and written down in learned Greek, were convened to reach a consensus on doctrine that was meant to unify all those who agreed to it. Those who did not agree were identified as heretics; they and their flocks risked excommunication.<sup>31</sup> Though the Emperor himself did not excommunicate the heretics, he enjoyed the power to enforce the

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University Press, 1986), 228, [archive.org/details/anastasismakingo000kart/page/228/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/anastasismakingo000kart/page/228/mode/2up).

30. The first seven ecumenical councils were held in modern-day Türkiye at Nicaea (325 CE), Constantinople (381 CE), Ephesus (431 CE), Chalcedon (451 CE), Constantinople (553 CE), Constantinople (680–681 CE), and Nicaea (787 CE). For a concise and accessible summary of each, see "Crash Course on the Seven Ecumenical Councils," *Dallas International University* (website), [diu.edu/diu-today/program-spotlights/crash-course-on-the-seven-ecumenical-councils/](http://diu.edu/diu-today/program-spotlights/crash-course-on-the-seven-ecumenical-councils/).
31. Each of the seven major councils, in addition to developing doctrine, created language that addressed controversies within the Church, often with political repercussions. For example, the first Council of Nicaea, in 325 CE, differentiated between orthodox Christianity and Arianism, declaring many of the Arian positions to be anathema. This not only denounced a doctrine but excommunicated its advocates. At the first Council of Constantinople, in 381 CE, thirty-six heretical Pneumatomachian bishops were refused seating because they denied the Holy Spirit's divinity and wrote against Apollinarianism, which taught that Christ had a human body but a divine mind. At the Council of Ephesus, in 431 CE, Mary was declared *theotokos* (God-bearer). The council dismissed Nestorianism, ultimately removing Nestorius from his bishopric position and anathematizing his teachings.

councils' decisions. To be heretical was to risk your civic protection, privileges, property, and possibly freedom.

The first councils addressed pressing issues including the suppression of incorrect views such as Arianism, Apollinarism, Sabellianism, Nestorianism, Pelagianism, Monophysitism, Origenism, Monothelism, and Iconoclasm. In an attempt to differentiate between correct positions and all others, they forged language specifying the nature of the Trinity and the manner in which Christ was both man and God.<sup>32</sup>

Council agendas were full of these weighty matters; Christ's mission between his death and Resurrection was not directly addressed, nor was the number and potential of those in hell. But the councils' positions did influence the fate of the *descensus*. The Nicene Creed was both a statement of belief and a loyalty test. It sidestepped *descensus*-related issues by employing language that both Melito and Tertullian could have endorsed by using the most inclusive—and most bland—possible language: Christ "suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again."

The Apostles' Creed, which also found its lasting form in the fourth century, goes further than the Nicene Creed but still skirts most *descensus*-related controversies, saying only that Christ "descended into Hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead."<sup>33</sup>

Believers in the redeeming mission of the *Descensus Christi ad inferos* and their various opponents continued their teachings after the first four ecumenical councils, but the councils' carefully worded positions on Christ's dual nature as man and God denied to the *descensus*' narrative its earlier vigorous arc. What mortal or divine part of Christ descended to the dead? Was his body truly dead, or, since it did not see corruption, did it sleep or keep a vigil?<sup>34</sup> A linguistic misstep concerning these subtle and sometimes unresolved issues could brand one a heretic.<sup>35</sup> According to Catholic theologian Martin F.

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32. The study—and debate—of Christ's nature is called *Christology* and includes question such as "What parts of him were divine, what parts mortal?" "Did he have two natures in one body?" "Were they mixed or separate?" "Did Jesus cease to be God when he became a man?"

33. The full Apostles' Creed can be found in many places. See, for example, "Apostle's Creed," *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops* (website), [usccb.org/prayers/apostles-creed](http://usccb.org/prayers/apostles-creed).

34. Connell, "*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*," 268.

35. Connell writes that "in this period . . . the christological contentions about the person and natures of Christ resulted in some awkward configurations of the person of Christ in the span between death and Resurrection. There was a

Connell, these Christological controversies eventually resulted in the redeeming nature of the *descensus*'s "virtual disappearance from the tradition,"<sup>36</sup> or at least from learned discourse in the West.<sup>37</sup>

The voices against the *descensus* were less hobbled by the councils' statements. By 380, Philastrius of Brescia had branded the *descensus* a heresy and, according to Connell, had "eliminate[d] salvation for those who died before the coming of Christ."<sup>38</sup> Augustine, often referred to as the preeminent Doctor of the Church,<sup>39</sup> dismisses the redemptive *descensus*. He writes concerning 1 Peter 3:19–20, "Consider . . . whether all that the Apostle Peter says concerning spirits shut up in prison . . . may not after all have been written *without any reference to hell*. . . . Let us . . . refuse to entertain the thought that the gospel was once preached, or is even to this hour being preached in hell in order to make men believe and be delivered from its pains, as if a Church had been established there as well as on earth."<sup>40</sup>

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problem about how the salvation borne by the descent could have happened if the body or 'flesh' was in the silence of the tomb." Connell, "*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*," 268. See also Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 36–38 for her discussion of the Christological problems involved in portraying Christ's death.

36. Connell, "*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*," 265. He was most probably speaking of the Western, Catholic tradition. The Orthodox tradition took a different course, as discussed below, relying less on Augustine and more on earlier liturgies. In Western visual art during the Middle Ages, there are examples of the *Descensus Christi ad infero* theme, but they are not common and in them the message of redemption is muted. Kartsonis lists three images in Rome from the eighth century and four from the ninth century. Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 82. In at least one image, the underworld, *sheol*, is portrayed as hell, the post-judgment place of fire, punishment, and torment. Western Medieval images containing creative and multiple torments followed in this tradition. Western art conflated what had earlier been the underworld, *sheol* (*spirit prison* in LDS parlance) with the hell awaiting sinners after the Final Judgment. The *Descensus ad inferos* (to those below) had becoming *Descensus ad infernos*, (to the place of burning) as portrayed by Dante in the fourteenth century. By the ninth century in the West, "Adam is not saved from death, but rather from punishment for his sins." Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 85.
37. Thomas Aquinas took up *descensus* issues in the thirteenth century but "his contribution on the descent seems to have brought little change to Christology in this regard." Connell, "*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*," 272.
38. Connell, "*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*," 266.
39. The title *Doctor of the Church* is an honorific bestowed by the Catholic church for certain saints whose teachings are considered especially important for understanding Christian doctrine. As of this writing, the title has been bestowed thirty-seven times.
40. Augustine, "Augustine Letter 164 (A.D. 414)," *New Advent* (website), chapter 5:15, [newadvent.org/fathers/1102164.htm](http://newadvent.org/fathers/1102164.htm).

## The Descent to the Dead in the Orthodox Tradition

Though Latin-speaking leaders of the church refuted or lost interest in the *descensus* tradition, the leaders of the Greek-speaking Eastern church took a different course in both writings and art, perhaps influenced by their choice of liturgies.<sup>41</sup> The Eastern church continues to use fourth-century liturgies attributed to Basil the Great and John Chrysostom. The Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great is normally celebrated ten times each year, while John Chrysostom's liturgy is celebrated on most of the remaining Sundays and feast days.<sup>42</sup> Both probably drew on earlier liturgies and so preserve very early texts.<sup>43</sup>

The Vespereal Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great is added to his Divine Liturgy on Holy Thursday<sup>44</sup> and on Holy Saturday. It is particularly important for preserving and teaching about Christ's acts between his death and Resurrection. Early in the Divine Vespers there is a comment addressed to Christ:<sup>45</sup>

Going down to death, O Life Immortal, Thou hast slain hell<sup>46</sup> with the dazzling light of Thy divinity. And when Thou hast raised up the dead from their dwelling place beneath the earth, all the powers of heaven cried aloud: 'Giver of life, O Christ our God, glory to Thee.'

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41. The liturgy is the celebration of the Eucharist, the center of Orthodox worship.
  42. The Liturgy of Saint James, probably from the late fourth century, and The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, probably from the late sixth century, also are celebrated.
  43. Basil shortened existing liturgy to accommodate the "slothfulness and degeneracy of men, how they were wearied by the length of the liturgy," according to Proclus, Archbishop of Constantinople. "Liturgy of St. Basil," *Orthodox Wiki* (website), [orthodoxwiki.org/Liturgy\\_of\\_St.\\_Basil](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Liturgy_of_St._Basil). In its current form, Saint Basil's Liturgy spans about an hour and a half. On Holy Saturday, Holy Thursday, and on other feast days when Vespers are combined with the Divine Liturgy, the service may be two-and-a-half or three hours long.
  44. Holy Thursday is the day before Good Friday.
  45. The excerpts from the Divine Vespers are taken from "Great and Holy Saturday: The Third, Sixth, and Ninth Hours with the Typika and the Vespereal Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great," *Church of the Resurrection of Christ* (website), [orthodox.net.nz/files/Holy-Saturday-Liturgy.pdf](http://orthodox.net.nz/files/Holy-Saturday-Liturgy.pdf).
  46. The word *hell* in English suggests the fiery place of punishment for the damned. In the Greek of the liturgy it is ὁ Ἅδης, *Hades*, more closely associated with the god of the underworld and often seems to be a personification of death. Thus, Hades was in the earlier *inferos* tradition and in the earliest icons where Hades is the bound and trussed creature beneath Christ's feet. In the Gospel of Nicodemus, Satan and Hades both appear as characters.

Later, hell is given a voice three different times,<sup>47</sup> separated by other elements of the liturgy:

Today hell groans and cries aloud:  
'It had been better for me, had I not accepted Mary's Son,  
for He has come to me and destroyed my power;  
He has shattered the gates of brass,  
and as God He has raised up the souls that once I held.'

Today hell groans and cries aloud:  
'My power has been destroyed.  
I accepted a mortal man as one of the dead;  
yet I cannot keep Him prisoner,  
and with Him I shall lose all those over whom I ruled.  
I held in my power the dead from all the ages;  
but see, He is raising them all.'  
Glory to Thy Cross, O Lord, and to Thy Resurrection

Today hell groans and cries aloud:  
"My dominion has been swallowed up;  
the Shepherd has been crucified  
and He has raised Adam.  
I am deprived of those whom once I ruled;  
in my strength I devoured them,  
but now I have cast them forth.  
He Who was crucified has emptied the tombs;  
the power of death has no more strength.'  
Glory to Thy Cross, O Lord and to Thy Resurrection.

John Chrysostom's beautiful Paschal homily is read each Easter morning.<sup>48</sup> It includes these references to Christ's descent:

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47. This takes place shortly before the entrance of the priest and the deacon through the Holy Doors. This entrance is a dramatic highlight of the liturgy. Some identify the deacon as representing John the Baptist while the priest represents Christ. By coming through the Holy Doors, as if coming through the veil, they may also represent angels, or angels and Christ, coming to earth. The deacon and priest accompany a gospel book around the nave in the presence of the congregation and back to the Holy Table, the altar, where they leave it. The later Great Entrance brings the elements of the Eucharist, the bread and wine, into the nave in a similar manner.

48. *Pascha*, from the word in Hebrew for *Passover*, is the name commonly given to what English-speaking people call *Easter*. Christ's betrayal and death happened during the Jewish Passover, and Christ is frequently referred to as the Lamb of God, referencing the lambs slain at Passover.

Let no one mourn that he has fallen again and again;  
 for forgiveness has risen from the grave.  
 Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set  
 us free.

He has destroyed it by enduring it.

*He destroyed Hades when He descended into it.*

*He embittered it even as it tasted of His flesh.*

Isaiah foretold this when he said,

You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering Him  
 below.

O death, where is thy sting?

O Hades, where is thy victory?<sup>49</sup>

Leaders of the Greek-speaking church continued to refer to, write about, and preach of Christ's activities between his death and Resurrection.<sup>50</sup> These events were also taught visually, most notably through the Anastasis images, which became the Pascha (Easter) icon. The principal elements of the Anastasis icon appeared before the eighth century and became quite standard by the ninth century when the phrase *the Anastasis*<sup>51</sup> appears as a sort of title, usually above Christ's head. The icon's early development is unfortunately obscured by the destruction brought by iconoclasm, discussed below.

Eastern Anastasis icons and their earlier Eastern predecessors

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49. "The Easter Sermon of John Chrysostom," *The Liturgy Archive* (website), [liturgies.net/Easter/Sermons/Chrysostom.htm](http://liturgies.net/Easter/Sermons/Chrysostom.htm).

50. Kartsonis mentions authors Anastasius Sinaita (early eighth century, from Saint Catherine's Monastery) who "allegedly wrote a sermon on the Descent of Christ to the Underworld," which remains unpublished and untranslated. Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 64. Psuedo-Epiphanius, who may have been a bishop in Cyprus, wrote a homily about it for Holy Saturday. It was such a dramatic homily that scholars have wondered if it were meant to be live theater and have called it "baroque." Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 64. An eighth-century Homily on Holy Saturday on Christ's Crucifixion, burial, descent, and the lamentation of Mary attributed to Patriarch Germanus I. Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 66. John of Damascus's late seventh- or early eighth-century Easter Canon includes, in Ode VI: "You descended, O Christ, to the depths of the earth. You broke the everlasting bars which had held death's captives, and like Jonah from the fish on the third day, You arose from the grave." "Reader's Service for the Matins of Pascha," *Diocese of the Midwest* (website), [domoca.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Readers-Service-for-Pascha-Matins.pdf](http://domoca.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Readers-Service-for-Pascha-Matins.pdf).

51. While in the Latin-speaking west it was called the *descensus* (the *descent*), in the Greek-speaking east it is called *anastasis* (the *raising* or *rising*). In New Testament Greek, *anastasis* is usually translated as *resurrection*.

traditionally show the haloed Christ striding victoriously, dressed in gold or white, his entire body surrounded by an almond-shaped mandorla, having descended into the underworld with his robes still floating slightly upward from the descent, as in a wind (see figure 1). He grasps Adam (or Adam and Eve) by the wrist, nail marks visible on Christ's hands and feet, as he lifts them from their sepulchers. (Often, especially in early images, Eve stands behind Adam supplicating Christ, her hands covered in her robe.) Below Christ's feet are the broken doors of Hades, often but not always positioned diagonally, crossing each other to form an X. A dark figure, Hades, symbolizing death, is bound helpless beneath Christ's feet and is surrounded by broken locks, chains, and keys, though apparently not by instruments of torture. Around Christ are Old Testament figures, sometime identifiable. John the Baptist, the forerunner, may be shown coming toward Christ. Above Christ's head are the words (in Greek, most often) *The Anastasis*. It is a dramatic scene, as evident in figure 1.

If the word *Anastasis* was used for these scenes earlier than the ninth century, the evidence has been lost. The Byzantine Empire underwent a great purge of its religious art under its iconoclastic leaders in Constantinople from 726 to 787 CE and again between 814 and 843 CE. For most of those years it was forbidden to create or display certain religious images, including the *Anastasis*.<sup>52</sup> Its development was thwarted for at least 120 years, while earlier images were destroyed or covered over. Artists fled beyond the borders of the Byzantine Empire, including into Italy.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, art historians studying eastern art dating before the ninth century must work from very limited data. Nonetheless, examination of smaller, privately owned objects suggests that the *Anastasis* was used no later than the middle of the seventh century on rings, manuscripts, and reliquaries.<sup>54</sup>

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52. Iconoclasts objected to images unworthy of adoration. The thieves' presence on crosses neighboring Christ's ruled out many pictures of the Crucifixion, and the image of Hades defeated under Christ's feet ruled out the *Anastasis*. They also forbade images of the resurrected Christ because his body had become incorruptible and immortal, and so should not be represented. His mortal body could be shown, however, at least according to some iconoclasts. Perhaps showing him between his death and Resurrection also became a delicate issue.

53. Byzantine-style large-scale art in the west that provides clues to the heritage that was lost in the east includes Santa Maria Antiqua and in San Clemente.

54. Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 81.



**Figure 2.** An Anastasis scene in miniature, about one inch by two inches. It occupies the lower right-hand corner on the inside lid of a ninth-century reliquary, a small, enameled box meant to hold remnants of the True Cross. The Fieschi-Morgan Staurotheke is in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and is thought to have been made for private use in Byzantium during the time of iconoclasm. (Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, [images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/md/original/DT233513.jpg](https://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/md/original/DT233513.jpg).)

The earliest remaining art with the words *The Anastasis* associated with Christ's Holy Saturday descent is a ninth-century Byzantine psalter, or a book of psalms.<sup>55</sup> Such small, privately held objects escaped the iconoclasts' wrath even in Byzantium and apparently continued to

55. Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 135–36, 138–39, fig. 45.

be produced in a Byzantine style beyond the empire's reach where its artists had fled.<sup>56</sup>

The Anastasis image reemerged after 843 CE when the Council of Constantinople ended iconoclasm. In the following centuries, the image appeared more frequently and grew to be more powerful, becoming

the sacred image associated with the celebration of Easter. . . . It eventually became the image accompanying the text of Saint John's Gospel in the illustrated lectionaries that [were] read for the Paschal vigil liturgy and the emblem of the triumphal Paschal labarum or banner carried in the liturgical processions of Easter. In sum, the Anastasis becomes the festal image of Pascha.<sup>57</sup>

In Orthodox churches, the Anastasis icon and the liturgies of Holy Week provide what moderns might term an "immersive reality experience" with all the senses engaged including the contemplative senses of empathy and imagination. The liturgies involve physical movement: processions, response, music, and chanting. Beautiful language is addressed both to the worshiper and to Christ. Rich and intricate visuals, including the lighting and altar cloths, reflect the appropriate solemnity or joy of the liturgy, as do the ritual spaces and the ritual garb of those celebrating the Divine Liturgy. The Anastasis image depicts a descending, striding, reaching, rescuing Christ. The liturgy is both reverent and dramatic. On Holy Saturday it provides the setting, characters, and action for engaging drama, including Christ's victorious appearance and Hades's anguished and futile complaints. The senses of smell and taste are also enlisted through incense smelling of frankincense, myrrh, and other resins and the Orthodox Eucharist's leavened bread and sweet, red wine.

"For the untutored Christian, [the Anastasis] was a potent illustration of Christ's willingness and ability to perform the miracle of the Resurrection, the act which promised redemption for everyone, the

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56. The eighth-century descensus images, twice at Santa Maria Antiqua and once in the Oratory of John VII, are "thought to be an eastern iconographic import of Constantinopolitan origin, and not a local artistic invention." Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 70.

57. Bishop Joachim of Amissos, "The Image of the *Anastasis* in the Shrine of Saint Nicholas," *Saint Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine at the World Trade Center* (website), [friends.stnicholaswtc.org/iconography-the-image-of-the-anastasis-in-the-shrine-of-saint-nicholas/](https://www.friends.stnicholaswtc.org/iconography-the-image-of-the-anastasis-in-the-shrine-of-saint-nicholas/).

spectator included."<sup>58</sup> This is, in part, because "the sense of vision — along with the other senses of the body — easily reaches the soul."<sup>59</sup>

### The Descent to the Dead among the Less Learned

Learned discourse does not always reflect the religious lives of non-elites<sup>60</sup> whose beliefs and experiences may be dismissed as superstition or folklore. Even many of the clergy were not masters of learned Latin. Simpler people, such as these clergy and their congregants, do not often leave monuments and only occasionally leave written records even when they are literate. The impressive spread of *descensus* literature suggests a variety of believers, including less-prominent ones, were attached to the *descensus* for well over a millennium.

The *descensus* certainly had legs. In the British Isles, for example, Caedmon wrote about it in Anglo-Saxon during the seventh century. By 1000 CE, Ælfric of Eynsham, in a homily, had dubbed it *the harrowing of hell*. In the fourteenth century, William Langford wrote of it in his poem, *Piers Plowman*. It forms the climactic scene in multiple Medieval and Renaissance mystery play cycles,<sup>61</sup> which were often noisy, bawdy, and entertaining.<sup>62</sup>

The *descensus* also had a robust life elsewhere in the Christian

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58. Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 236. She continues, "For the learned theologian, the representation of the Anastasis was also a microcosmic and macrocosmic review of the christological and soteriological doctrines as well as the services of the Church which encapsulated them."

59. Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 228.

60. "The great names . . . and those not so great but still known to us through their writings or the mentions of them as heroes of one sort or another—all these together count as no more than a hundredth of one per cent of the Christian population at any given moment." Ramsey MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), xi. MacMullen wrote specifically of the years 200 to 400 CE, but his position may be true for any Christian population before literacy became widespread for both genders.

61. Mystery plays were often performed during the feast of Corpus Christi two months after Maundy Thursday (the day before Good Friday) on the streets rather than in churches. They were presented in vernacular languages and did not always cleave closely to the scriptures. They sometimes involved local guilds that might develop their scenes over years with elaborate props and costumes, much like a Mardi Gras krewe. Their aim was to enjoy and to entertain as well as to instruct. Clergy were forbidden to participate.

62. For a Middle High German example performed by Oxford's Medieval Germanists (a translation into Modern English is provided) and a video of a production that would do Monty Python proud, see "Harrowing of Hell," *St. Edmund*

world. Copies of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which recounts details from Christ's trial and Crucifixion not found in scripture and tells of the *descensus*, have been found in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Georgian, Slavonic, and Old English. As with virtually all documents at this time, each was copied by hand using homemade ink on individually prepared parchment or papyri, so there must have been a considerable appetite for the work. Since the *Gospel of Nicodemus* was not canonized scripture, not approved to be read in church, not part of liturgy, and not in the creeds, its continued popularity across space and across centuries shows the story's power.

The *Gospel of Nicodemus* took its current form before 600 CE, perhaps as early as the fourth or fifth centuries.<sup>63</sup> In places, the text simply embellishes scriptures. It recounts Simeon greeting the infant Christ and his parents at the temple in Luke 2, staying as close to the scriptural account as do many Sunday school retellings. But *Nicodemus* also creates characters and actions absent from scripture. Simeon is identified as the high priest, and *Nicodemus* tells of two previously unrecorded sons, Charinus and Lenthius. All three are dead and publicly buried by the time of Christ's Crucifixion. In *Nicodemus* 12, the sons have risen from the grave, having witnessed his descent to the dead, and are recruited to testify of Christ to the Jews in their synagogue, probably the Sanhedrin, in what may be a very early courtroom drama.

In the courtroom scene, the brothers recount their experience in "the depth of hell, in the blackness of darkness" before Christ's appearance (*Nicodemus* 13:2). Gold and purple lights appear. Adam rejoices, Isaiah quotes from his prophecies, their father Simeon retells his encounter with the infant Christ. John the Baptist, described as being "like a little hermit" (*Nicodemus* 13:10), recounts Christ's baptism and announces Christ's coming to hell.

In chapter 15, Satan and "the prince of hell" (Hades?) have a tremendous and possibly comedic row. In chapter 16, a voice of thunder quotes from Psalm 24 ("Lift up your gates," *Nicodemus* 16:1, 13) while the prince of hell scrambles to lock down his brass gates with iron bars, as in Psalm 107. He asks, using the language of Psalm 24, "Who is that King of Glory?" (*Nicodemus* 16:14). King David responds

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Hall, *University of Oxford* (website), [seh.ox.ac.uk/mystery-cycle/harrowing-of-hell](http://seh.ox.ac.uk/mystery-cycle/harrowing-of-hell).

63. *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, [archive.org/details/TheGospelOfNicodemus/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/TheGospelOfNicodemus/mode/2up).

with language from Psalm 107, then adds, "now, thou filthy and stinking prince of hell, open thy gates, that the King of Glory may enter in" (*Nicodemus* 16:17). The mighty Lord appears "in the form of man" and enlightens the dark places (*Nicodemus* 16:18). The narrator, quoting from Mark 5:4, says Christ "broke asunder the fetters which before could not be broken; and with his invincible power visited those who [sat] in the deep darkness by iniquity, and the shadow of death by sin" (*Nicodemus* 16:19).

In chapter 17, death's minions and legions of devils are bound. They bewep their fallen state and bemoan Christ's power. It is very dramatic. (As Milton found, the devils get all the best lines.) Christ "trampling upon death, seized the prince of hell, deprived him of all his power, and took our earthly father Adam with him to his glory" (*Nicodemus* 17:13). In chapter 18, Beelzebub, prince of hell, indignantly blames Satan for the fine mess they have gotten themselves into. In the last verse of the chapter, the King of Glory gets his first speaking lines of the account as he imprisons Satan in Beelzebub's "dominions for ever, in the room of Adam [in the place of Adam] and his righteous sons, who are mine" (*Nicodemus* 18:14). Christ takes Adam by the hand and "ascended from hell, and all the saints of God followed him" to Paradise (*Nicodemus* 19:12).

The Jews of the Sanhedrin said, "blessed be the Lord Jesus for ever and ever," and "went all out with great concern, and fear, and trembling, and smote upon their breasts and went away every one to his home" (*Nicodemus* 21:10–11). In the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, the Christian side is victorious both in court and in the afterlife.

Many popular retellings and stagings of the *descensus* appeared later than *Nicodemus*, as did visual images. This is not to say that *Nicodemus* was the source for them all, as some have suggested.<sup>64</sup> In the British Isles, the earliest record of the descent is in the *Book of Cerne*, a personal prayerbook probably compiled between 820 and 840 CE.<sup>65</sup> Only fifty-five lines long, it contains a scene set in hell. The

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64. Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 14–16 refutes the argument that the *Gospel of Nicodemus* was the source for the emerging *Anastasis* images. The *Descensus* is frequently mentioned by early Christian teachers and is present in early liturgy before *Nicodemus* was published. Later works treating the subject, even in vernacular languages, may vary from *Nicodemus* more than they resemble it. Taken together, this evidence suggests that there were most likely multiple possible avenues for its continued transmission, one of which was *Nicodemus*.

65. Brandon W. Hawk, "The Book of Cerne Harrowing of Hell: A Translation," *Brandon W. Hawk* (website), [brandonwhawk.net/2021/04/03/the-book-of](http://brandonwhawk.net/2021/04/03/the-book-of)



**Figure 3.** Christ resurrects Adam and Eve, with more of the human family following in a chain in this marginal illustration from an eleventh-century psalter, a book of Psalms called the Barberini Psalter, in the Vatican. (Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, fig. 45.)

“innumerable crowd of saints who were held in the captivity of hell,” and then, Adam and Eve speak to Christ as Christ descends. Adam and Eve speak in poetry, but the lines that could be stage directions or lines for a narrator or chorus (“Adam was loosed out of the bonds, grasping the knees of Jesus Christ” and “Yet Eve persists in weeping”) are written in rhythmic prose. The prose and poetry are marked in red or black ink. It may be the earliest example of an oratorio, if it

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-cerne-harrowing-of-hell-a-translation/. The surviving Anglo-Saxon version of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* appears to be an eleventh-century document.

was meant to be sung, or the earliest surviving Christian drama. Its dialogue relies heavily on Psalms, but not the same psalms used in *Nicodemus*. Very little about the two works overlap.<sup>66</sup>

### Whence the Popularity of the *Descensus*?

What accounts for the continued popularity of the *descensus*, Anastasis, and harrowing of hell accounts? Philip Jenkins suggests that they grew to fill lacunae in the scriptures. Where did Christ go and what did he do while his body lay in the tomb? The topic had been "neglected in our canonical gospels," and so, imagination was enlisted to fill in the gaps.<sup>67</sup> This is a helpful suggestion, but it does not adequately account for the *descensus*'s frequent mention in the Primitive Church in very sober discourse. According to Connell, "Christ's descent is omnipresent in the Fathers of the next few centuries" after 1 Peter was written.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps oral teachings or documents were known at that time beyond those that were eventually canonized. Our ignorance of them does not mean they did not exist. There may be more than curiosity and imagination at play.

Jenkins further suggests that there were lacunae in the doctrine and teachings of the church. "Over the centuries, believers mulled over theological problems that the church did not confront or adequately explain."<sup>69</sup> To this I would add that the descent tradition is inherently hopeful; it shows a victorious Christ. It may have eased the cognitive dissonance created by the idea of a loving Savior on one hand and on the other, the harsh, post-Augustine doctrines concerning those who died unrepentant or without baptism. Plays, stories, poems, homilies, and art about the *descensus* could carry weight on the side of a loving Savior against the assault of Augustine's learned Latin.

The ubiquity of death may be a singularly potent explanation for the tradition's longevity. Death was a familiar companion. We moderns — those of us lucky enough not to live in war zones — may imagine death,

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66. The *Gospel of Nicodemus* chapters that concern the descent use Psalms 24 and 107, a quotation from Isaiah, and Mark 5:4. According to Hawk, the *Book of Cerne* text "is based on the Latin Pseudo-Augustine *Sermo* 160, with parts of the Roman Psalter added." He identifies material excerpted from the following psalms: 35, 84, 73, 78, 115, 106, 102, and 118, with language from Genesis 24, 26, and 48.

67. Philip Jenkins, *The Many Faces of Christ: The Thousand-Year Story of the Survival and Influence of the Lost Gospels* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 77.

68. Connell, "*Descensus Christi ad Inferos*," 264.

69. Jenkins, *The Many Faces of Christ*, 77.

if we imagine it all, as a distant inevitability, something we expect will come in a gently lit bedroom, preferably our own gently lit bedroom, and only when we have aged-out of most of our sins and repented of the others. What we call *early deaths* not only grieve us — as they surely did our ancestors — they shock us.

Our ancestors often witnessed more death in a year than we do in a lifetime. Many, through no fault of their own, died unbaptized, especially babies and young children. If our human hearts could love them and grieve for them, why could not Jesus? How could he consign them to eternal darkness? The stories of the *descensus* gave hope for the unbaptized, even in the presence of official doctrine that denied that hope.

And what of the untaught dead, those who never were taught Christ's good news? Hope glimmers in the *descensus*.

What of the unrepentant among the dead? My family history shows that until well into the twentieth century children died, mothers died (giving birth could be a death-defying act), and young men were killed in wars as though they were harvest wheat. They died at sea, at work, and in raids by hostile groups. Typhoid, striking in London, left three survivors from a family of ten. So many died unexpectedly and often young, many times without opportunity to repent. Again, the *descensus* gave hope.

I do not wish to speculate publicly on my chances for heaven, but I hope they will be greater in my ninth decade than they were when I was twenty. What was to happen to those we loved who were cut down at the height of their pride or their frivolity? Are they to be sorted eternally by their righteousness at the moment of their death, as Augustine insists? The *descensus* traditions suggest that repentance and growth may go on beyond the grave.

The *Descensus Christi ad inferos* and the Anastasis, in almost all of their variations, could give hope and comfort in a harsh and death-haunted world. It offered glimpses of a generous Christian afterlife, however out of step with official doctrine it might be. Christ's redemptive descent to hell was celebrated, sometimes reverently, as on Holy Saturday, sometimes with boisterous good will, as in mystery plays. But the *descensus* was never forgotten.

## **Doctrine and Covenants 138 as Our *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* and Our Anastasis**

Doctrine and Covenants 138 is a restoration of beliefs held during the earliest three centuries of Christianity, beliefs that appeared in many early writings mentioned thus far. In addition to teaching mutually held doctrine, Joseph F. Smith and these pre-Nicene writers seem to have accessed a visionary experience. No mortal witness could have recorded the events of Holy Saturday, though the Primitive Church could possibly have possessed accounts from those resurrected along with Christ on Easter morning. Whatever the source of their knowledge, writers in the Primitive Church discussed Christ's mission between death and Resurrection with as much confidence as they spoke of his Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Section 138 is also a revelation, though most—but not all—of the Latter-day Saint doctrines expressed in it were already familiar to Church members in 1918. Saints already knew that “the faithful elders of this dispensation, when they depart from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel . . . in the great world of the spirits of the dead” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:57). James E. Talmage had taught that doctrine in the 1915 edition of *Jesus the Christ*, as had others.<sup>70</sup>

We will return below to the new “doctrinal insight,” as Robert L.

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70. Chapter 36 of Talmage's *Jesus the Christ* (1915), “In the Realm of Disembodied Spirits,” was not updated in later editions to reflect the canonization of Doctrine and Covenants 138.

Missionary labor among the dead was inaugurated by the Christ; who of us can doubt that it has been continued by His authorized servants, the disembodied, who while in the flesh had been commissioned to preach the gospel administer in the ordinances thereof through ordination in the Holy Priesthood? That the faithful apostles who were left to build up the Church on earth following the departure of its divine founder, that other ministers of the word Of God ordained to the Priesthood by authority in the Primitive as well as in the Latter-day Church, have passed from ministerial service among mortals to a continuation of such labor among the disembodied, is so abundantly implied in scripture as to be made a certainty. They are called to follow in the footsteps of the Master, ministering here among the living, and beyond among the dead.

James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1915), 675–76, [archive.org/details/jesusthechrist1915/page/n689/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/jesusthechrist1915/page/n689/mode/2up).

Millet calls it, that was introduced in Section 138.<sup>71</sup> The Lord provided President Smith with an extensive vision, which included new doctrine. Both the vision and the doctrine are important in different ways.

To Joseph F. Smith, the vision must have been a blessing on several levels. World War One still raged, with 15,000 members of the Church involved in military service.<sup>72</sup> The 1918 influenza pandemic had reached the West Coast that September. His first-born son and fellow Apostle Hyrum Mack Smith died just ten months before the revelation. Increased understanding of the afterlife and a witness Christ's Redemption would have been a comfort.

It was also an affirmation of his life's work and the doctrines he had taught. It was a new witness to the Savior's redemptive power and his love. Perhaps it witnessed anew that all of his deceased family continued beyond the grave,<sup>73</sup> or it may also have reminded him that when he laid aside his frail body, he could stride forward in the saving work he had loved throughout his life. (President Smith died only seven weeks after the vision.)

The vision was not meant only for him. On 31 October 1918, a council made up of the counselors in the First Presidency,<sup>74</sup> the Patriarch, and the Quorum of the Twelve "accepted and endorsed the revelation as the Word of the Lord" and directed it to be published in the next (December) issue of the *Improvement Era*.<sup>75</sup> It was meant for all the Saints.

An account of a vision can do much more than expand doctrine, as important as that is. It records a three-dimensional and immersive experience for the one who received it. In the vision, a person may ask questions and receive answers in words and through the senses—vision, hearing, feeling (both tactile feeling and subjective feelings), taste, and smell.<sup>76</sup> The account of a vision may record information that

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71. Robert L. Millet, "The Vision of the Redemption of the Dead (D&C 138)," in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Craig K. Manscill (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 324, [rsc.byu.edu/sites/default/files/pub\\_content/pdf/The\\_Vision\\_of\\_the\\_Redemption\\_of\\_the\\_Dead.pdf](https://rsc.byu.edu/sites/default/files/pub_content/pdf/The_Vision_of_the_Redemption_of_the_Dead.pdf).

72. Millet, "Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," 315.

73. President Smith lost thirteen children and an adopted son. His father and uncle, Hyrum and Joseph, were killed when he was five. His mother, Mary Fielding Smith, died when he was thirteen.

74. President Smith was too ill to attend the meeting.

75. Millet, "Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," 321.

76. Lehi and Nephi's visions in 1 Nephi include information from every sense

is not recognized as important at the moment but becomes important later.<sup>77</sup> Accounts of visions yield fresh understanding to those who study them and provide answers to questions that may not have been on the mind of the person receiving the revelation.<sup>78</sup>

Visions merit our attention and reward our study. Doctrine and Covenants 138 deserves more attention than it receives, especially at Easter.

The new doctrinal insight that Millet highlights is this: "The Lord went not in person among the wicked and disobedient" but rather "from among the righteous, he organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority . . . to [go to] all the spirits of men" (Doctrine and Covenants 138:29–30). "But unto the wicked

except the sense of smell. Isaiah 6 reports smoke, which may well imply incense.

77. 1 Nephi 15:27 may be an example of this. Nephi explains "the water which my father saw was filthiness; and so much was his mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water." Another significant example may be Nephi's vision of the tree of life, as explained in Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and his Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol9/iss2/4/](http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol9/iss2/4/).

78. To cite a personal example, discourse around missionaries to spirit prison has tended to be male-centric. The vision does say, "the faithful *elders* of this dispensation . . . continue their labors," though President Smith had taught several years before the vision that "women minister to women in the spirit world, even as they do in holy places on earth." Millet, "Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," 324. Its relevance to women may have been less apparent in 1976 when it was canonized than it is now. Hosts of young women are opting to serve missions, and missions are presided over by mission leaders, not the "mission president and his wife" of earlier years.

In Doctrine and Covenants 138:30, Christ "appointed *messengers*, clothed with power and authority and commissioned them to go forth." The verse contains temple language and could apply to either endowed sisters or elders and to both the brother and sister mission leaders. Christ prepares "faithful prophets who had testified of him in the flesh" (v. 36). The gift of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus, and testifying of Christ is not a privilege reserved for one gender.

When the vision lists the mighty and great ones, two of the first three mentioned are women: Father Adam and "our glorious Mother Eve" and "many of her faithful daughters" (v. 38). President Smith reports the presence of "choice spirits . . . to take part in laying the foundation of the great latter-day work, including the building of the temples and the performance of ordinances therein for the redemption of the dead, were also in the spirit world" (vv. 53–54). When I read this, I can see not only brothers, but sisters who donate tithes and offerings, temple matrons, sister ordinance workers, laundry workers, cleaners, and sister patrons "also in the spirit world."

he did not go, and among the ungodly and the unrepentant who had defiled themselves while in the flesh, his voice was not raised.” (v. 20)<sup>79</sup>

That doctrinal insight builds on many restored and revealed teachings, including baptism for the dead and the potential for the unbaptized to receive celestial glory, as taught in Doctrine and Covenants 137. It raises many questions but also allows us to imagine some of the new doctrine’s implications, always remembering what is revealed truth and what is speculation. President Dallin H. Oaks reminds us that “we know very little about the spirit world that follows mortality or even about the spirit world that preceded it.”<sup>80</sup>

We do know Christ’s Atonement reaches to the very sinful, including Noah’s terminally wicked contemporaries who perished in the flood. In Doctrine and Covenants 138 we learn Christ could not go to them, and so their redemption must be facilitated by Christ’s messengers. We do not know who all these messengers may be. It is likely those who perished in the Flood left no descendants, save perhaps through Noah’s family, but we may imagine that the parents and grandparents of those who perished continue to love and grieve for them. If our ancestors may seek after their descendants who are in spirit prison, might Adam and Eve have sought out Cain? Might Lehi and Sariah have gone in search of Laman and Lemuel? Could this be one of the meanings for “the hearts of the fathers being turned to the children?” Perhaps our Father Adam and our glorious Mother Eve will be our ultimate mission leaders.

We learn from President Smith’s revelation that Christ could not go to the ungodly and unrepentant, but we are not told why he could not. Perhaps the glory of his presence would overwhelm and destroy them? Perhaps his presence would be such a strong witness that it would override their moral agency, much as Satan’s plan would have taken away the agency of man? (Moses 4:3). We know our agency is so important that Christ died for it. As interesting as it is to wonder and speculate, we only know that “unto the wicked he did not go, and among the ungodly and the unrepentant who had defiled themselves

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79. See Millet, “Vision of the Redemption of the Dead,” 323–24. This was a reversal of what President Joseph F. Smith and others had taught; they had preached that Christ had taught the wicked and unbelieving.

80. Dallin H. Oaks, “Coming Closer to Jesus Christ” (devotional, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 10 February 2026), [speeches.byu.edu/talks/dallin-h-oaks/coming-closer-to-jesus-christ/](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/dallin-h-oaks/coming-closer-to-jesus-christ/).

while in the flesh, his voice was not raised" (Doctrine and Covenants 138:20).

We know from this revelation that Christ's messengers to those in spirit prison were clothed with power and authority. We may suppose that some in spirit prison, especially those who had not heard the gospel in life, may repent swiftly once they are taught. Perhaps others, including those who had heard the gospel but would not receive or abide by it, might need more time to repent, might take more patient teaching, or might need more encouragement. It is not hard to imagine the sort of missionary, teacher, family member, or ministering brother or sister who would continue to love and teach these as I have watched them in this life.

Those who were truly wicked and defiled themselves while in the flesh—perhaps including those destroyed by the flood—may resist all love, all teaching, all encouragement, and all repentance for a very long time. C. S. Lewis wrote, "the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*."<sup>81</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 138 suggests that Christ still has hope for them. I can imagine—but only imagine—the sort of messengers who will be able to turn such hearts. I sometimes catch glimpses of such potential messengers, but not in the places where I usually seek my heroes nor where I aim my aspirations. They are not necessarily among the successful, but rather among the humble and patient. I may be aspiring to the wrong attributes.

### **What Should We Do with Doctrine and Covenants 138?**

Section 138 is an Easter text. The vision shows the events that took place on Holy Saturday, between Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection. The Easter homilies of the Primitive Church resonate with its hope. As we study the scriptures to learn of Christ's Crucifixion and the events of Easter morning, we would do well to include Doctrine and Covenants 138. Indeed, we should do more than study it—we should ponder it, imagine it, teach it to our children, and celebrate it, much as we celebrate the events of Christ's birth.

The events of the Savior's earthly advent are made real to us through countless nativity scenes and posadas, some more reverent than others. Re-enactments allow us to live the events of Christ's humble birth, to participate with our bodies and our imaginations, and to write those

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81. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 127, [archive.org/details/problemofpain0000unse\\_g2g2/page/126/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/problemofpain0000unse_g2g2/page/126/mode/2up).

events on the fleshy tablets of our hearts (figure 4). Some retellings may stray a bit from scriptural truth, but never mind — we do not know how many Wise Men there were, how they dressed, their ethnicity or age, or if they used camels or donkeys. We do know the Wise Men arrived a considerable time after the shepherds saw the star, but our nativity scenes show shepherds and kings surrounding the manger together. That manger may well have been made of stone, not wood.<sup>82</sup> The towels we use for headdresses may not closely resemble the woolen clothing of the shepherds. The inns in which the family sought shelter may not match the ones we visit during Las Posadas. But the central events are real to us because we participate in them.

Re-enactments often give form to our ward, branch, and stake Christmas concerts and Sunday services. Carols and nativity elements twine around each other like the red and white in a candy cane. In a similar spirit I offer suggestions for a little Easter play about our Anastasis (Doctrine and Covenants 138) in the appendix.

## Conclusion

Doctrine and Covenants 138 is our revelation for Holy Saturday, our harrowing of hell, our *Descensus Christi ad inferos*, our Anastasis. It is full of hope and can be a balm to our aching hearts. As we feast on it, read it, celebrate it, and live it, it can unite us with other faithful Christians who have preserved this hope for two millennia.

At Easter, throughout the Eastern World, Christians greet each other using some variation of the word *Anastasis*. One might say, “Christos Anesti” (“Christ is risen”); the other replies “Alithos Anesti!” (“he has risen indeed!”).

I, too, testify: He is risen indeed!

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## Appendix

### ***The Descensus: An Easter Play in Four Acts***

These four acts are offered as a prompt, a suggestion as to how we may connect the long tradition of Christians celebrating Christ’s *descensus* and our own revealed texts. It is my hope that as we re-enact the events of Christ’s visit to the spirit world, these events will

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82. See Jeffery R. Chadwick, “Stone Manger: The Untold Story of the First Christmas,” *Meridian Magazine*, 21 December 2011, [latterdaysaintmag.com/article-1-9109/](http://latterdaysaintmag.com/article-1-9109/).



**Figure 4.** Halos slightly askew, bathrobes dutifully donned, and a real baby, this senior Primary nativity reenactment may not have been uniformly reverent or completely scripturally accurate, but it helped write the story of Christ's birth into our memories in ways a simple reading cannot. (Photo by author.)

become as dear and familiar to us as those of the Nativity. While the Nativity inspires tenderness and introduces a vulnerable God into the human world, the *descensus* can show us the redeeming and heroic Christ who breaks the bands of death and proclaims liberty to the captive. With plays such as this, we can see the end from the beginning and glimpse his great majesty and his compassion for us all.

This template provides ideas for cast, props, costumes, and such; it is just a template. Please adjust any of it to fit your cast and audience or your understanding of the revelation and its implication. You could add lines from the homilies cited earlier in this paper or from any scripture or conference talk. Feel free to add or subtract characters. (I added Satan in scene one and gave him a few choice lines. It is a great role, though not in Doctrine and Covenants 138.)

I have suggested music in a few places, but please choose your own music and put it wherever you wish. (Do not forget the resources composed for children.)

Be mindful that if such plays are to be performed in a Church setting, the *General Handbook of Instructions* gives specific requirements

when portraying Christ.<sup>83</sup> God the Father and the Holy Ghost may not be portrayed, but the Savior may be portrayed under these conditions:

- It must be done with reverence and dignity.
- Only a man of wholesome personal character should be considered for the role.
- The person portraying the Savior should not sing or dance.
- When speaking, he should use only direct quotations from scriptures *spoken by the Savior*.
- At the end of the performance, he should immediately change into regular clothes.
- Children should not portray the Savior except in a Nativity scene.

This is also excellent advice for performances with family and friends.

### **Scene One**

**Settings:** World of spirits among the just, as Christ dies on Calvary and just after. Closet or other enclosure for spirit prison.

#### ***Dramatis personae with speaking lines***

- Narrator and Christ (perhaps the bishop?)
- Adam
- Eve
- The just, A through D. Black chains on their wrists.
- Satan, collar up, glowering.

#### ***Dramatis personae without speaking lines, but with costumes or props***

- A host (army) of the dead, small and great, including Adam and Eve, Lehi and Sariah, Ruth, etc. Black chains on their wrists. Shawls as available. Perhaps name badges, depending on the needs of your production or class.
- Spirits of those yet unborn, including noble and great ones reserved to come forth in the latter days.

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83. "Portrayal of Deity," *General Handbook of Instructions* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2026), 20.5.6, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/20-activities?lang=eng#title\\_number35](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/20-activities?lang=eng#title_number35).

### *Props and costumes*

- Large black construction paper chains, large rubber bands stapled on the ends, as needed.
- Signs reading SPIRIT PRISON to be attached to whatever closet or bin you use as the entrance to spirit prison. Also, a sign reading SPIRITS OF THOSE YET TO BE BORN, placed near those cast members.
- White shawls, scarves, and ties. A white cape for the bishop?
- Something for the spirits of those yet to be born?

### *Begin scene one*

**Song:** "Gethsemane," "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?," "Behold the Great Redeemer Die"

**Narrator** (off stage or otherwise out of sight): When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said:

**Bishop as Christ** (in a loud voice): It is finished!

**Narrator:** And he bowed his head and gave up the ghost (John 19:30).

[Adam and Eve with four of the just are excited, rejoicing, talking almost on top of one another.]

**Adam:** He is coming!

**Eve:** He has redeemed us.

**The Just A:** He will deliver us from death!

**The Just B:** He has delivered us from our sins.

**The Just C:** Will he really come here? To us? Won't he go to Father first?

**Adam:** He said he would come to us as soon as he gave up his life.

**Eve:** And He always keeps his promises!

**The Just D:** Yes, we know him. We knew him. He always keeps his promises.

**The Just A:** No matter how hard.

**The Just B:** No matter how hard.

**The Just C:** He is coming!

**Bishop as Christ**, steps forward, perhaps from behind a screen.

**Satan** (Collar turned up, glowering. Stands (perhaps from near spirit

prison) and shouts at Christ): Argh! I hate you! You've ruined everything! Everything! I hate you. I hate you. I will get you for this. No! I will get **them** for this [points to the spirits yet unborn] and **you** and **YOU!** [Turns back to the Savior] You will be sorry then! **I WILL get you!** [Exits, slams door.]

[The spirits yet unborn shrink in fear.]

**Adam:** We are loosed **from the bands of death, yea, and also the chains of hell.** (Alma 5:10)

[The just break off their chains and throw them down, and possibly jump up, joyously.]

**Eve** (turning to individuals among the just): Our sleeping bodies will be restored to their perfect frames, bone to our bone, and the sinews and the flesh upon them, our spirit and our perfected body to be united, never again to be divided, that we may receive a fulness of joy. (Doctrine and Covenants 138:17)

**Song of Rejoicing:** "I Stand All Amazed"

## Scene Two

**Settings:** World of spirits among the just, immediately after Christ has freed them from their chains of death and promised them resurrection. Some of the just may bow or kneel to him or sit near his feet.

### *Dramatis personae with speaking lines*

- Narrator and Christ
- Ruth
- Spirits yet unborn, A through H. G is a young female, not yet old enough to go to the temple. H is her older brother, perhaps nearing 16.

### *Dramatis personae without speaking lines, but with costumes or props*

- A host (army) of the dead, small and great, including Adam and Eve, Lehi and Sariah.
- Spirits of those yet unborn, including noble and great ones reserved to come forth in the latter days.

### *Props and costumes*

- Signs reading SPIRIT PRISON to be attached to whatever

closet or bin you use as the entrance to spirit prison. Another sign reading SPIRITS OF THOSE YET TO BE BORN. Those spirits yet unborn should be separate from the postmortal just.

- White shawls, capes, scarves, ties, etc. A white cape for the bishop?
- Something for the spirits of those yet to be born?

Note: Bishop's lines as Christ are taken from 3 Nephi 27:13–20, where Christ defines his gospel. Edit this for brevity as appropriate to your cast and audience, but leave in the references to baptism and that no unclean thing can enter into the kingdom.

### *Begin scene two*

**Song:** "Rejoice, the Lord is King," verses 1 and 3.

**Bishop as Christ:** This is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father . . . that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and . . . that I might draw all men unto me, . . . so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil . . .

That whoso repenteth and is baptized in my name shall be filled; and if he endureth to the end, behold, him will I hold guiltless before my Father at that day when I shall stand to judge the world. . . . And no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom; therefore nothing entereth into his rest save it be those who have washed their garments in my blood, because of their faith, and the repentance of all their sins, and their faithfulness unto the end.

**Ruth:** Dear Lord, hear my plea. I was faithful to my testimony of the God of Israel, and I suffered tribulations in thy holy name as I left the land of my birth and my family. I offered sacrifices looking forward to thy sacrifice, and I kept the Law of Moses in my home, as my mother-in-law Naomi taught me. But I have not been baptized. Is it too late for me? I am but a spirit and have no body to be immersed and brought forth clean!

**Adam and Eve:** Have faith, my daughter. The hearts of these, the children yet unborn [points to Spirits yet unborn] will turn toward you. These are even now receiving their first lessons in the world of spirits. They will build temples. They will perform work for you and for all the dead. They will administer ordinances in temples and labor for the

salvation of all who will repent (Malachi 4:6; Doctrine and Covenants 138:56).

**Spirits Yet Unborn A:** I promise that I will help build temples in the latter days that will connect the world of spirits to the world of mortal men. There you may receive baptism as if you still lived, afterwards to live according to the word of God in the spirit.

**Spirits Yet Unborn B:** I will help build temples.

**Spirits Yet Unborn C:** I will also.

**Spirits Yet Unborn D:** I, too, will help build temples.

**Spirits Yet Unborn E:** And I will work in the temple so that you may receive your ordinances.

**Spirits Yet Unborn F:** I will work in the temple laundry, because without clean laundry, the work would not go forth!

**Spirits Yet Unborn G** (female): Ruth, as soon as I am old enough, I will go to the temple and be baptized for you!

**Spirits Yet Unborn H** (older brother to G): I will stay worthy so that I as a priest can stand in a temple font on earth with my little sister. Then, having authority, I will administer baptism to you in the spirit world, Ruth, as I baptize my sister for you and in your behalf.

**Ruth:** I will wait with gratitude for your day and the time when your hearts are turned toward the fathers and mothers.

**Song:** “How Beautiful Thy Temples Lord,” “I Love to See the Temple”

### **Scene Three**

**Settings:** World of spirits among the just, being taught by Adam and Eve and Christ. (Think of Adam and Eve as mission leaders, counseling with Ruth.) Some of the just may bow or kneel to Christ or sit near his feet.

#### ***Dramatis personae with speaking lines***

- Narrator and Christ
- Ruth
- Adam and Eve
- Lehi and Sariah

*Dramatis personae without speaking lines, but with costumes or props*

- A host (army) of the dead, small and great.

*Props and costumes*

- Signs reading SPIRIT PRISON to be attached to whatever closet or bin you use as the entrance to spirit prison.
- White shawls, scarves, and ties. A white cape for the bishop?

*Begin scene three*

**Song:** "I hope They Call Me on a Mission"

**Ruth:** Dear Lord, what of my family in Moab? I did not go back to them when I became a widow. I chose to trust in Naomi and in thee, the God of Israel. To be honest, dear Savior, my family was not always kind, especially to their daughters. But they did not know thy ways, so perhaps it could not be helped. I believe they may be there. [Motions sadly toward spirit prison.] And they are still my family.

[Adam and Eve look toward the Savior, as for instruction. The Savior smiles on them.]

**Adam or Eve:** Do you have hope that they might repent?

**Ruth:** Perhaps if they heard the news of Christ's redemption and learned his law.

**Adam or Eve:** Would you like to teach them?

**Ruth:** I'm a little afraid, but yes, I love them. And if the Lord will help me now as he helped me during my life, I would like to try.

**Adam or Eve:** Some may welcome your good news and swiftly embrace the gospel. For others it may not be easy. It may take a long time. They must pay the penalty for their transgressions and be washed clean through obedience to the ordinances of the House of God. Then shall they receive a reward according to their works and they can become heirs of salvation (Doctrine and Covenants 138:59).

**Eve or Adam:** But if you are willing, Christ will lead you and appoint you to be his messenger. He will clothe you with power and authority and commission you to carry the light of the gospel to those who are in darkness (Doctrine and Covenants 138:30, 31).

**Ruth** (clapping her hands): That is my desire! If I labor all my days and

bring but one soul to thee, how great shall be my joy in the Kingdom of God (Doctrine and Covenants 18:15).

**Adam or Eve:** Then you are called to the work. Faith, hope, charity, and love, with an eye single to the glory of God, qualify you for the work. Remember faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, diligence. Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you (Doctrine and Covenants 4:5).

## Scene Four

**Settings:** World of the spirits among the just. Christ passes among the just. Adam and Eve (as mission leaders), after being greeted by Christ, move with Sariah and Lehi to the front of the scene, speaking together. Christ, meanwhile, sits with the just in silence in a teaching pose as they listen. Sign for spirit prison should be clearly visible

### *Dramatis personae with speaking lines*

- Christ
- Adam and Eve
- Lehi and Sariah

### *Dramatis personae without speaking lines, but with costumes or props*

- A host (army) of the dead, small and great.

### *Props and costumes*

- Sign reading SPIRIT PRISON to be attached to whatever closet or bin you use as the entrance to spirit prison.
- White shawls, capes, scarves, ties, etc.

### *Begin scene four*

**Sariah or Lehi** (to Adam and Eve): Some of our children and grandchildren are there in spirit prison. We grieve for them. Perhaps you also understand how we feel?

**Lehi or Sariah:** We have lost Laman and Lemuel and all our grandchildren from them. I do not know if we could ever be happy without them, but we think they must be in spirit prison.

**Sariah or Lehi** (pleadingly, turning to Christ): If they could just look on thy face, surely they would remember what they were taught! Surely,

they would believe and repent and be saved in thy kingdom. Will you not go to them?

**Eve or Adam:** That he cannot do. He cannot go among the ungodly and the unrepentant who have defiled themselves while they were in the flesh (Doctrine and Covenants 138:20).

**Adam or Eve:** But do you still have hope for them, your children, and grandchildren? Do you still love them?

**Lehi and Sariah** (looking at each other, then solemnly nodding): Yes, Father Adam, Mother Eve. We do still love them and have hope for them.

**Adam or Eve:** And so does Jesus.

**Eve or Adam:** They are not beyond the reach of his great and healing sacrifice, if they choose to repent. But they are in a worldly state, in the bonds of iniquity, without God. They have gone contrary to the nature of God, therefore, they are in a state contrary to the nature of happiness. They must pay the penalty of their transgressions and be washed clean through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God. Then shall they receive a reward according to their works (Alma 41:11).

**Adam or Eve:** It may not be easy for them to obtain forgiveness. Whoever tries to teach them will need both love and patience. Your children will retain their agency, their right to choose. Force is of no use. It would only harm them. Do you still want to go into that dark place [indicates spirit prison] where you may not be successful? Do you wish to try to teach them of our Father's love? (Alma 39:6)

[Lehi and Sariah nod, make sounds of assent]

**Adam and Eve:** Then you are called to the work and will bear Christ's name into the dark places and represent him to your lost children. You will have his image on your faces.

**Eve or Adam:** We will, with Christ's help, teach you and appoint you to be his messenger. He will clothe you with power and authority and commission you to carry the light of the gospel to those who are in darkness.

How beautiful in that dark place will be the feet of them who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

**Sariah and Lehi:** Our hearts are turned toward our children, and we rejoice in the work thou hast given us. For surely the worth of each of their souls is great!

**Adam or Eve:** The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

[Christ and the spirits move to rejoin Adam, Eve, Lehi, and Sariah.]

**Bishop as Christ** (facing the audience): I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life (John 8:12).

Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life . . . For verily I say unto you that I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the light and the life of the world — a light that shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not.

I came unto mine own, and mine own received me not; but unto as many as received me gave I power to do many miracles, and to become the sons of God; and even unto them that believed on my name gave I power to obtain eternal life. And even so I have sent mine everlasting covenant into the world, to be a light to the world, and to be a standard for my people, and for the Gentiles to seek to it, and to be a messenger before my face to prepare the way before me.

Wherefore, come ye unto it . . . And I will show it plainly as I showed it unto my disciples as I stood before them in the flesh, and spake unto them . . .

For as ye have looked upon the long absence of your spirits from your bodies to be a bondage, I will show unto you how the day of redemption shall come, and also the restoration of the scattered Israel. . . .

And when the times of the Gentiles is come in, a light shall break forth among them that sit in darkness, and it shall be the fulness of my gospel; . . . And it shall come to pass that the righteous shall be gathered out from among all nations, and shall come to Zion, singing with songs of everlasting joy (Doctrine and Covenants 45:5, 7–10, 16–17, 28, 71).

**Song:** “I’ll Go Where You Want Me to Go, Dear Lord”



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