

The Descent into Hades

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When Christians recite the Apostles' Creed, they affirm their belief that Jesus descended into hell. It is probably no exaggeration to say that most of them have little more than a vague idea of what this phrase implies. At the beginning of the current era, however, and for centuries earlier, such a statement would have been meaningful to followers of many a religion which flourished in the classical world and beyond.

In one of her later articles, H.P. Blavatsky asserted that

To speak ... of anyone as having descended into Hades, was equivalent in antiquity to calling him a *full initiate*.¹

The initiate who descended into Hades thereupon became one of a distinguished company who had completed the same journey. As well as Jesus these included, in various traditions, Attis, Dionysos, Enoch, Herakles, Ishtar, Krishna, Orpheus and Persephone.

Madame Blavatsky was writing in the context of the Ancient Mysteries. Their beginnings are lost in prehistory, and not until about 500 A.D. were they finally snuffed out. But in their prime, they appealed to some of the greatest minds of all time — the Neo-Platonic philosophers, for example. Plato himself was an initiate, and in his writings referred to the Descent into Hades. This was one of the secret teachings of the mysteries, preserved in the form of rituals.

In the Mysteries, initiation meant not a beginning, as the English word implies, but quite the opposite: a finishing, a making-perfect, from the Greek *telete*. Those choosing to further their spiritual development through this channel were expected to be of high moral calibre, and required to prepare themselves for it in prescribed ways. Save in periods when the Mysteries were corrupted, initiation was earned, not bought.

Of all the rituals practised in this old religion, the Descent into Hades seems to have had the greatest significance for the participants. Evidently it was more important, i.e., of a higher degree, than the baptism, sacred marriage and eucharist — rituals that were common to most of the various forms of the Mysteries.

It is an interesting theme to consider from a theosophical viewpoint. As an important phase in the human journey, it helps throw light on the nature, meaning and purpose of existence. Discovered in several religions, it also provides a useful focus for comparative studies.



Hades, otherwise known as the Underworld, was the abode of the dead — or, more accurately, of departed souls. On this basis, it is reasonable to conclude that the process of initiation in the Mysteries included some sort of involvement with the “afterlife”. But this raises other questions, not for all of which can be found satisfactory answers.

Here it is necessary to distinguish between Hades as a locality, and Hades the God of the Underworld, the God of the Dead. Which came first? It is usually assumed that the place took its name from the god, but this is only speculation, and the reverse is just as likely to be true. The derivation of the name Hades does not remove the uncertainty. It comes from a Greek root meaning, *unseen*, or *invisible*. Relevant comparisons can be found in the Egyptian religion, where the equivalent to Hades was called Amenta, meaning, *hidden place*, or *place of the hidden god*; and in the roots of the word hell, which had a sense of *hiding*, or *concealing*.

In mythology, the place Hades was located under the earth; and the god Hades was the principal of the underworld deities. Hence, the journey to Hades involved a descent, a going down. In view of the fact that it was part of an ancient and revered tradition, it is not surprising that the Greeks had a word for it. A recurring phrase in scattered writings pertaining to the Mysteries is *katábasis ejs Aidou*, meaning, precisely, a descent into Hades. ²

Symbolically, the downward direction is no doubt significant. But in the rituals connected with at least some of the Mysteries, there may well have been an actual physical descent, say into a cave or underground chamber.

From the earliest times, and in many lands, Hades appeared to have been popularly accepted as a physical location. The early Hebrews designated *Sheol* as the abode of the dead, a subterranean place with several levels, each designed to dispense a certain degree of punishment or torture. Parallels to *Sheol* are found in several early traditions.

In one form or another, this concept persisted down through the ages. The Latin languages adopted words related to *infernus*, referring to the world below, where the wicked are punished. In northern regions, words similar to the English *hell* were derived from a family of words including *Hel*, the name of the goddess of the Underworld in Scandinavian mythology. Although hell is usually thought of as a hot place, and one to be feared, the northern *helheim*, the abode of the goddess was to the contrary a very cold one, and not necessarily one to frighten mortal hearts.

None of these terms convey exactly the same meaning as Hades, which in ancient tradition was not solely a place where sinful souls were tortured. If the Greeks expected to suffer in Hades, in their *post-mortem* state, they also saw it as a gateway to a heaven-like existence. One of the roads in Hades led to Tartaros, a region where imaginative punishments were administered, for example, Tantalus, constantly thirsty even though standing up to his neck in water; and Sisyphus, compelled to roll a large stone uphill only to see it constantly roll down again. In the other direction — the right hand road, according to the Mysteries — lay the Elysian Fields, a desirable place to be.

This is perhaps closer to the theosophical concept of the immediate after-death state. In this view, Hades is no place, but rather a transitional phase, *kama-loka*, which follows the death of the physical body. It is, in effect, a junction, where the non-physical aspects of the human entity become separated. The lower principles form the *kama-rupa*, that is, the deceased personality's psychic shell, or shade, which sooner or later dissipates into the elements that compose it; the higher principles, the spiritual aspect, enter the state of Devachan, the "fields of bliss". This separation is sometimes referred to as "the second death".

Possibly the more enlightened initiates of the Mysteries understood Hades in a similar way. For the majority of the populace, however, the after-death state would have been associated with the literal meaning of the analogies invented to explain it. Catering to the human weakness which tries to avoid thinking in abstract terms, an increasingly simplified teaching probably rendered Hades as a physical location, and eventually a place of punishment; and also anthropomorphized Hades into a god, with human-like characteristics.



A brief survey of some of the better known journeys to Hades is sufficient to establish its antiquity and universal nature.

One of the earliest examples is to be found in the Indian tradition, the story of the journey to hell by the divine Krishna.

An esoteric version is presented in the *Kathopanishad*. The visit of Nachiketas to Yama, the Lord of Death, suggests the necessity for making the journey in full consciousness. The reward is immortality. This is a profound story, and no theosophical version of the descent theme is complete unless its implications are taken into account.

Everything known about the religion of Ancient Egypt points to the immediate after-death state as being pivotal in the spiritual quest. This is evident in the wording of the litanies and the nature of the rituals that are described in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The Egyptian myth hints at the change in consciousness every individual experiences at the end of each incarnation; and also by the initiate while still bound to the physical body. This feature of the old religion became an important influence on the Greek Mysteries.

From the ancient Middle and Near East comes a rich collection of myths embodying the descent themes. One is that of Gilgamesh, the hero of the Babylonian epic. Another is the colourful story of the goddess Ishtar, who descended into Aralu, the Akkadian equivalent of Hades. A Sumerian version of this story is very similar. In recognizable variations it can be traced from there to the north and west. In Phoenicia, the goddess Astarte and her consort Adonai appear in the principal roles; elsewhere these are identified as Aphrodite, or Venus and Adonis. In Asia Minor it is the Magna Mater, the Great Mother Cybele, associated with her consort Attis; and so on.

This type of myth, with some important modifications, was also the inspiration for the famous Eleusinian Mysteries. These Mysteries, which were celebrated not far from Athens, were the origin of most of the classical references to the Descent into Hades, including Plato's. Their establishment is described in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, which dates to the 7th century B.C., very early for a literary source. In it, the story is unfolded how the god of the Underworld, Hades, abducted Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, triggering events which panicked gods and humans alike. Simple and crude, perhaps, but be it remembered that this myth sustained an important religion for two thousand years or more.

Also from classical sources are two examples from Greek mythology that have stood the test of time, and are perennially fascinating. The most famous is the story of Orpheus in the Underworld. He went there to plead to Hades to release the soul of his dead wife, Eurydice. His beautiful music captivated the god of the dead, who granted his request on condition that if, when leaving the Underworld Orpheus looked back, his loved one must return to Hades. Orpheus failed to honour this rule of the spiritual path, and his journey was in vain.

In the Orphic Mysteries, to which Orpheus lent his name, the descent theme was prominent. In a later, corrupt phase of this religion, superstitious devotees were buried with gold tablets on which were etched descriptions of the entrance to Hades and beyond — which they would expect to see at the beginning of their own after-death journey. This seems a degrading travesty of an occult teaching, a distorted fiction of what should be a conscious and meaningful experience; yet at least it indicates the nature of the original Mystery teaching.³

Another link between Hades and the Mysteries may be discerned in one of the fabulous stories of Herakles. His twelfth labour was to overcome the guardian of the gates of the Underworld, the ferocious three-headed dog Cerberus. This he successfully accomplished.

Before undertaking this dangerous mission, however, it was necessary he be initiated. For only initiates could visit Hades and return. Because Herakles had blood on his hands, he could not qualify as a candidate in the Great Eleusinian Mysteries, admittance to which was strictly limited to those free of moral stain. To accommodate him, initiation ceremonies known as the Lesser Mysteries were established, and were celebrated outside Eleusis.

It is surely significant that Herakles' Descent into Hades was the last of his twelve labours. It was, as it were, his final initiation. Afterwards, and following other adventures, he achieved apotheosis from the human to the divine, and was thereafter welcome in the company of the gods.

A late example of the post mortem journey is that presented in the Christian teachings, best known in the assertion in the Apostles' Creed that "He descended into hell and on the third day he rose again from the dead." There is no mention of this incident in the gospels, and the few references elsewhere in the New Testament are vague, and not necessarily relevant.

How, then, did the "Descent into Hell" find its way into the Christian creed? Among early influences was *The Book of Enoch*, which describes a visit to hell,

though not by Jesus. The most imaginatively detailed description of Jesus' descent is to be found in the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*. This is probably the main source for many later versions, such as for example the popular medieval English mystery play which went by the title, "The Harrowing of Hell".

Early church fathers, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen among others, accepted the descent literally, and attempted to weave it into their theology. Probably from the second or third century onwards, it was an accepted belief. Perhaps it was even recited as one of the articles of faith, but it does not appear to have been written into the Apostles' Creed until about the seventh century.

This late inclusion was noted by H.P. Blavatsky⁴ who suggested that the myth had been borrowed from the Mysteries.⁵ Several years later, this view was (no doubt unknowingly) corroborated by the respected historian of Christianity, F.C. Conybeare. In connection with the "descended into hell" statement in the Apostles' Creed, he wrote;

... we may safely attribute to the influence of the old Orphic hymns and mysteries this class of Christian myth.⁶

Jesus' descent into hell receives little more than passing mention in later theology. An exception was a 16th century Lutheran controversy around the question whether the descent of Jesus took place before or after his death on the cross.⁷

The list could be expanded, with the addition of such examples as the journey to the Land of the Dead by Quetzacoatl, the great Toltec god, also revered by the Aztecs in ancient Mexico. In passing, it is also of interest to note that the native religion of North America includes concepts of the after-death state that are startlingly similar to Orphic and related teachings.

Hell as a place seems always to have appealed to human imagination. Folklore of all nations abounds with references to it. The frequency with which it is uttered in clichés make it as familiar a word as any in the English language. Familiar, perhaps, as a hackneyed term, but probably little understood.

Not only in ancient religions was the Descent into Hades a universally popular theme. It is to be found in the works of authors who rightfully occupy some of the most honoured places in classical literature; for example, Homer, Hesiod, Aristophanes, Virgil and Lucian. Long after the Mysteries were no longer a living religious force, this theme continued to attract writers of the calibre of Dante, Milton, even George Bernard Shaw.



Having indicated the widely diffused and long-existing tradition of the Descent into Hades, there remains the age-old puzzle: what is it all about?

As in similar cases, it is worth recalling H.P. Blavatsky's recommendation that symbols and mythological themes should not be limited to a single interpretation. Rather does she advise her readers in several places of the necessity to seek the multiple meanings they contain. She noted that

... the so-called "myths," in order to be at least approximately dealt with in any degree of justice, have to be closely examined from all their aspects. In truth, every one of the *seven Keys* has to be used in its right place, and never mixed with the others, if we would unveil the entire cycle of mysteries.⁸

Elsewhere, she enumerates these keys of interpretation, mentioning the spiritual, astronomical, psychical, physiological and anthropological. Then she adds two more, which she calls the highest of them all: theogony, the birth of the gods; and anthropogony, the origins of man. She suggested these latter are related, and admits the near impossibility of grasping them fully.⁹

No single explanation of the Descent into Hades, therefore, is likely to reveal its mystery—and mystery it was, in more than one sense, in ancient times. There are a number of possible interpretations, each of which may be valid in its own context, and the sum of which may help toward a better understanding of the puzzle. Lacking the genius, knowledge and occult experience of H.P. Blavatsky, it is impossible to do justice to the whole range, let alone to put each in its right place.

One equation that finds frequent expression is that hell is the physical body, and the descent to it is the incarnation of the human soul. Plato and Blavatsky both employed this allegory, which indeed is very old. The ancients spoke of the soul as being imprisoned, or dying in the flesh. This suggests a psycho-physiological meaning, as well as pertaining to the nature of man.

A popular interpretation is that hell is considered to be a place of eternal punishment of "sinners". This is found not only in Christianity but in several religions. Its passive acceptance by the masses is presumably due to some sort of masochistic appeal, a human weakness not confined to the present subject, and one which tends to be exploited by opportunists and institutions including the religious.

The general acceptance of this idea, however, seems to be on the decline. Results of a recent survey show that among Canadians, 70% believe in heaven, and 40% in hell.¹⁰ Unfortunately, no explanation is offered for this interesting differential! Nevertheless, the concept of hell as a *port-mortem* torture chamber still has its defenders, especially among the fundamentalist sects.

In modern Christianity, the actual *descent* is seldom mentioned beyond its association with the Apostles' Creed, and in at least one recent translation, even this statement is camouflaged. The question is, if hell is strictly a place of torment, why did Jesus go there for three days? This problem must have been a thorny one in the minds of the early church fathers. They came up with the explanation that the purpose was to preach to all therein who had lived and died before that time, and so had

missed the opportunity for Christian salvation.¹¹ This theory probably derived from other traditions known to some of these writers: that the Descent into Hades involved an obligation to do good works while there. But it is a pity that they overlooked the possibility of embodying into their theology the idea that the descent marks the culmination of a long and arduous spiritual quest, the end of which is divinity.

At an intellectual level, both the Descent into Hades, and hell as a punishment-centre have characteristics pointing to archetypal origins, so it is not surprising that attempts to explain both have been made by proponents of modern psychological theories. A Freudian view, for example, is that the descent experience is one of token castration.¹² Now what would Herakles have thought of that! More pertinent, perhaps, are the ideas put forward by Carl Jung. He spoke of the

... conscious mind, advancing into the unknown regions of the psyche ... overpowered by the archaic forces of the unconscious.¹³

This has possibilities as an interpretative key, because it can be applied to various forms of the descent myth.

Less promising is the field of anthropology where, if treated at all, the Descent into Hades is considered merely as a phase of a fertility cult, an embellishment to the ancient worship of underworld deities in order to ensure plentiful crops. Admittedly, one of the roles of Hades; though not mentioned in the Descent Stories, is that of Pluto the God of Wealth, who bestows benefits on mankind. But in the Mysteries this aspect of Hades was surely taught at a higher level than that of mere superstition. As well as the religious, there was an educational function to the Mysteries, which among other things preserved and disseminated the secrets of agricultural science and possible other technologies.

Ironically, the doyen of 19th and 20th century anthropologists, Sir James G. Frazer, named his most famous work after the symbolic wand which guaranteed visitors to the land of the dead a safe return; but one may search the fat volumes of *The Golden Bough* or any of his other works for anything more than a simplistic explanation of the journey to the infernal regions.

No interpretation of ancient myths is complete unless it takes into account the factor of astronomy, around which many of them were developed. In connection with the Descent into Hades, Madame Blavatsky left this hint:

Astronomically, *this descent into hell* symbolized the Sun during the autumnal equinox when abandoning the higher sidereal regions ... Then the Sun was imagined to undergo a *temporary* death and to descend into the infernal regions.¹⁴

This is a promising clue which may have wider relevance and so should be used to test other aspects of the theme.

As far as the Mysteries are concerned, there is little doubt that the ritual of the Descent into Hades involved a temporary death for the participants. The initiate Apuleius reported that

... the delivery of the mysteries (of Isis) is celebrated as a thing resembling a voluntary death.¹⁵

And describing his own experience he also wrote that he

... approached to the confines of death, and having trod on the threshold of Persephone, I returned from it.¹⁶

The initiate Plutarch put it another way. He wrote:

At the time of death, the soul undergoes an experience similar to initiation in the great mysteries.¹⁷

Plutarch went on to discuss the close connection between the Greek terms *teleutan* and *teleisthai*, meaning respectively to die, and to be initiated.

If only Plutarch had been more explicit at this point! He did but reflect one of the admirable characteristics of the old Mystery religions: over the long span of their existence, the secrets of the initiations remained inviolate. What little evidence there is to study, mainly guarded statements by initiates such as those just cited, indicate that they were allowed to *consciously* experience the immediate after-death state. Other than these, a good deal of speculation is necessary. Yet if one thing can be deduced with some certainty, it is that the Descent into Hades was far from being an excursion for the inquisitive, with Hermes giving a guided tour of the Underworld.

To the contrary, the experience appears to have been an ordeal, and only approached in degrees. Its preparation alone was enough to discourage any but the most serious and dedicated candidates. Psychologically, the candidate would be sensitized: first through various purification rites; then subject to a strict diet for several weeks or months, ending with a fast. To this would be added several trials of moral purity and courage; and frightening, but necessary warnings by the hierophant of the dangers involved.

When, finally, at the appointed time the Mysteries were celebrated, this mental, emotional and physical preparation would have brought the individual to a highly receptive state. Various ceremonies would help intensify this condition and an atmosphere created wherein

... candidates for initiation enacted the whole drama of death, and the resurrection as a glorified spirit, by which name we mean *Consciousness*.¹⁸

At the lowest level, the experience no doubt included seeing the shades of departed friends. Plato spoke of those who

... descend into Hades, allured by the hope of seeing and conversing with departed loved ones.¹⁹

To which may be added evidence suggested in early literature. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus on descending into Hades met with his late mother, as well as comrades who had fallen in the Trojan War. In the famous scene in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the hero Aeneas goes down into the Underworld to seek the spirit of his father. In *The Frogs* of Aristophanes, the mysteries are parodied, and a scene in Hades depicts recently deceased playwrights participating in a debate. This last example, if nothing else, indicates that the after-death state was far from being a morbid fascination to 5th century Athenians.

Even at this level the experience provides a valuable lesson. Seeing the deteriorating astral forms of some whom they had known in the flesh would impress upon the initiates that this is a condition of impermanence. Perhaps they would be instructed that this aspect of the human personality sooner or later decomposes, just as does the physical body after death. They would come to realize that this region of Hades is one of comparative misery and frustration, where passions and emotions blindly seek channels through which to manifest.

Those permitted to go beyond this stage would also learn the *post-mortem* disposition of the immortal aspects of the individual. Allegorically, this was indicated by a road to the right of the entrance to Hades, which led to lush meadows wherein was experienced a state of perfect happiness and peace. In other words, Devachan.

That the separation of the two aspects was known to Homer can be gathered from the description of Odysseus' visit to the Underworld, wherein dwelt the *ghost* of Herakles, while his unseen *spirit* was said to be residing in heaven.²⁰

In *Isis Unveiled* it is suggested that this knowledge was reserved for the higher initiates:

... it was given only to the "*perfect*" [that is, the *teletai*, the full initiates] to enjoy and learn the mysteries of the divine *Elysium*, the celestial abode of the blessed; this Elysium being unquestionably the same as the "Kingdom of Heaven."²¹

From remarks by Plato and others, the privileged initiates were also enabled to witness souls returning from Devachan after their allotted time, and preparing to go back to earth in a new physical body.²² For reincarnation was taught in the Mys-

teries. It was described in Orphic terms as “the cycle of necessity” — phrase familiar to modern students of Theosophy.²³

At the highest degree, the ultimate in “the Mysteries of Initiation” would depend not only on arduous preparation by the candidate, but also the presence of a hierophant—the high priest of the Mysteries—who was a true Master. Only then, with his protection, could the consciousness of the initiate be safely transformed to a deathlike state, leaving behind the physical body in a trance condition. In *The Secret Doctrine* this procedure is described in terms which are applicable to such examples as those of Herakles and Jesus:

... The initiated adept, who had successfully passed through all the trials, was *attached*, not *nailed*, but simply tied on a couch in the form of a Tau.[T] plunged into a deep sleep ... He was allowed to remain in this state for three days and three nights, during which time his Spiritual Ego was said to confabulate with the “gods,” descend into Hades ... and do works of charity to the invisible beings, whether souls of men or Elemental Spirits; his body remaining all the time in a temple crypt or subterranean cave.²⁴



Those who participated in the Mysteries, in Greece and elsewhere, lived in an age when it was assumed that life—in animals, humanity, even the very cosmos—existed not only on the physical, but also on the psychic, mental and spiritual planes. It would take little to persuade them that, on the death of the physical body, human existence continues for a longer or shorter period on those other planes. To intelligent initiates, therefore, Hades, as the abode of the Dead, represented but a phase in the human cycle.

Although initiates were invariably careful in what they wrote about the Mysteries, because of their oaths of secrecy, their writings cannot hide the fact that these were on the whole, intelligent, happy and well-adjusted persons. Thanks perhaps, to the knowledge assimilated in their Descent into Hades, which would include assurance of human immortality, they had no fear of death. No better example of this could be cited than Plutarch’s “Consolation to his Wife” on the death of their little daughter.

Initiates not only were unafraid of dying, but they were confident their afterlife would be a pleasant experience. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, it asserted:

... happy that earth-born man who has beheld [the august mysteries]! He who is not initiated and has no part [in the mysteries] does not enjoy the same happy lot when dead.²⁵

This is by no means an isolated statement. The playwright Sophocles and the poet Pindar both expressed an almost identical thought. Pindar added another line. The initiate, he said, knows the end of life; he also knows its god-given beginning.²⁶ Another hint, perhaps, of reincarnation.

In passing, it is interesting to note the similarities between descriptions of the Descent into Hades found in classical writings, and modern case histories of persons who have had "Near Death Experiences". That is, those who after a short period during which they were presumed to be dead, re-entered ordinary consciousness and reported on what they remembered.

In the growing literature on this subject are cited phenomena which receive frequent mention by those who have had such an experience.²⁷ These include an initial entry into darkness: this was characteristic of the descent. Going through a tunnel: this is reminiscent of Aeneas' journey, and several pertinent references to caves in classical literature. Seeing a bright light: a reminder of Apuleius' revelation that in the Egyptian Mysteries, "at midnight he saw the sun shining with a splendid light."²⁸ Meeting deceased relatives: a common experience, recorded of Odysseus among others. Losing the fear of death—this has been mentioned. Lastly, a change in personality, in which the individuals have more sense of purpose in life, and are more caring of others: with known initiates as examples, it can be said that such qualities were also characteristic of those who had partaken of the Mysteries.

The true significance of the Descent into Hades, however, is not to be measured by such mundane results. These are but stepping stones on the way to greater goals. The ritual of initiation itself is nothing beyond what it represents; the preparation for it everything. The important thing is that, in the words of Sri Krishna Prem:

... it is here and now, while still living on this earth,
that the bonds of death are to be destroyed, the
sorrowless garment of immortality to be put on ...
He who has not gained his immortality while still
"alive" will not achieve it by the mere act of dying
... He who seeks to become immortal must himself
here and now become his Higher Self. There in no
other way.²⁹

Only when the necessary moral strength and purity have been developed can the required transformation of consciousness safely take place. The final initiation will mark the awakening into divinity which is the potential for all humanity. In the religion of ancient Egypt, the initiate who successfully passed all the trials became one with the god Osiris. In the Orphic Mysteries there was a corresponding saying: "From mortal thou hast become God." In the words of H.P. Blavatsky, the most important degree of initiation is the

... descent into the Kingdom of Darkness and Matter, *for the last time*, to emerge therefrom as "Suns of Righteousness."⁰⁰

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