

The Resurrected Christ in the Realm of the Dead

STUDENTS of mystic Christianity know that Christ Jesus designates the Archangelic Christ Being Who lived for three years as Ego in the human vehicles of the man Jesus. While the Roman Catholic Church has tended to emphasize the humanity of Christ Jesus, the man of sorrows acquainted with grief, the crucified God, the Orthodox Catholic Church emphasizes the divinity of Christ, particularly as seen in the Resurrection. This same contrast is evident in the Western Church's presentation of Mary as the Mater Dolorosa (Mother of Sorrows) versus the Eastern Church's hieratic Mary as *Theotokis* (Mother of God).

In fact, the Victorious Christ is the ritual, liturgical icon for Eastern Orthodox Church's celebration of Easter. In itself, this is hardly surprising. But the pictorial content of the icon is. For it shows not an empty tomb, or even Christ appearing to the disciples, but a Christ in the Underworld, appearing to the dead. What is the basis for such a portrayal?

For the apostle Paul, "If Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is in vain." Saul, before his time, saw the Risen Christ and thereby knew that the man Jesus, whose followers he had sought with such fury to silence, was the Messiah, the Son of God. He also knew that as Messiah (he who saves), humanity had a deliverer from "this body of death" (Rom. 7:24). Paul knew that "Christ, being raised from the dead ['by the glory of the Father'] dieth no more, death hath no more dominion over him" (Rom 6:9), and, as such, was the "first born among many brethren" (Rom 8:29). Who then was to be raised? Those yet living and those yet to be born? Indeed. But also and especially them who had lived and were now death's thralls, who had been "waiting for the adoption, to



Tempera on panel, Jaume Serra (1358 - 95), from the altarpiece of the convent of Santo Sepulchro, Zaragoza, Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes, Zaragoza, Spain

Descent into Limbo

Christ liberates "the spirits in prison" (1Pet. 3:19) disgorged from a yawning dragon's mouth gargoyled with demons.

wit, the redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:23).

Where were these dead? In the Netherworld. How held? By Satan and Hades. In what form held? Surely not as mineral bodies? No, but as the essential physical Form that had been tainted by Original Sin, by the loss of an original power and purity that caused them to sleep, Christ being the "firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Cor. 15:20). How were they liberated? Paul tells us in Ephesians (4:9) that before He ascended, Christ "descended first into the lower parts of the earth" where, releasing them from death's dominion, "he led captivity captive" (4:8).

The ancient Eastern text (*Peshitta*) is more sug-



Egg tempera on wood panel, gold-leaf gilding. Traditional greek-orthodox byzantine icon.

Anastasis

Keys and doors to the Netherworld a shambles, Hades prone and bound, Christ draws up Adam and Eve. The Baptist, David and another king are among Deaths' former hostages.

gestive of the spiritual nature of Christ's deed. It says "Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the inner parts of the earth." Max Heindel also refers to this initiatory event with respect to Jesus, who, as "the son of Seth, entered the Subterranean strata where he remained for some time in communion with the spirits who dwell there" (*Freemasonry and Catholicism*, pp. 82-83).

Christ came to seek and save that which was lost. To do so, the living blood of Jesus had to flow into the earth. When the blood flowed from the six wounds (etheric centers), "the great Sun-Spirit Christ was liberated from the physical vehicles of Jesus and found Himself in the Earth with individual vehicles" (*Cosmo* p. 406) with which He permeated the already existing planetary vehicles, flooding the Netherworld with light and radiant energy, thereby rendering impotent "him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). How could this be? The human dense physical body



Preliminary design of an icon. Russian, 17th century

Anastasis

Descensus shown with Resurrection. Christ redeems the dead, beginning with Adam and Eve (foreground). Accompanied by angels (left), the elect ascend to the portals of Paradise (right), guarded by a cherub. Lower right, a remnant of the judged yet remain in chains.

still dies. True, but not the essential physical Form, the handiwork of three and one-half incarnations of Earth.

What was the Scriptural justification for this dramatic action? The promise to David is fulfilled: "Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave" (Psalm 107); "For he hath broken the gates of brass and cut the bars of iron in sunder." Peter exclaims, after the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, that now his flesh rested in hope "because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell" (Acts 2:27).

Also, in 1 Peter 4:6, the apostle tells his brethren that the gospel was preached to the dead. Elsewhere (1 Pet. 3:19) he writes that Christ "preached unto the spirits in prison." So also was the word of Ezekiel (37) fulfilled: "Behold I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves and bring you into the land of Israel." Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 15:13, "But if there be no



Tempera on wood, 1308-11, Duccio di Buoninsegna, Museo dell'Opera della Metropolitana, Siena, Italy.

Descent of Christ into Limbo

Death's minions are scattered by the advent of Christ, accompanied by the Baptist, at the gates of Limbo, whose grateful captives await their deliverance. Renaissance depictions of Christ's Descent became increasingly common. Though not identical with Limbo, the concept of Purgatory did not become official doctrine in the Latin Church until the thirteenth century.

resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen," had already been established by Matthew (27:52-53): "The graves were opened: and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city and appeared unto many."

The pictorial ingredients for the generic human resurrection were provided by the Gospel of Nicodemus (formerly called The Acts of Pontius Pilate), a third century document. Here, the King of Glory "broke asunder the fetters which could not be broken" and released "the captives that were held in chains by original sin and bringest them into their former liberty," raising the human body of Adam, the father of mankind, with all the patriarchs and prophets. Seth is specifically mentioned, as are David and John the Baptist, who again is the "forerunner," in this instance announcing the descent of Christ to Hades. Satan (Lucifer) is addressed by Hades, "O prince Satan, all thy advantages which thou didst acquire by the forbid-

den tree and the loss of Paradise, thou hast now lost by the wood of the cross."

These representations of the *descensus ad inferno* have three aspects: one, a proclamation of the Gospel to the ancestors (Christ is often shown carrying a scroll); two, the victory over Hades-Lucifer/Satan (not synonymous), in which Christ is usually shown bearing the emblem of power, the cross; three, the redemption of the Just. Collective humanity is symbolized in Adam, therefore Christ is shown reaching out to mankind's figurative first father. Usually Eve is also pictured in a grateful and imploring gesture. David and Solomon, the latter not mentioned in Nicodemus, are normally depicted wearing crowns. Christ is often shown with a foot on the overpowered Hades, or, alternately, angels subdue and bind the one who formerly bound.

Paul promises the Romans (16:20), "the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet."

These portrayals are called *anastases* (*ana*—up + *stasis*—stand) because they show Christ empowering the dead to stand up, to arise, indeed, to resurrect. As Christ is "the firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18), those whom He first rescued are known as *protoplasts*, the "first-formed," being Adam and Eve and their descendents. This is, in truth, a kind of second Creation of Man.

How could a semi-apocryphal doctrine become elevated to an official festival representation? Because it satisfied the intuition of a deep need and a fundamental truth: With Adam a God-given capability had become compromised, and through Christ Jesus that endowment was redeemed and restored.

At death certain physical forces and all mineral substances are dispersed. But these do not constitute the essential human body. They but complete or flesh out its configuration. The Form of the body as a spiritual texture works up the substances

and forces so they fill out the human physical body. What is passed over from one incarnation to the next is the essence of the physical body, its Form as contained in the forces of the seed atom—truly a micro-microcosm.

As originally created, the Form of the human body was a transparent body of force. It was invisible, bequeathed to the Earth Period as the culmination of the work of the Thrones during the Saturn Period, the Spirits of Wisdom during the Sun Period, and the Spirits of Movement during the Moon Period (angelic hierarchies correlated with the constellations of Leo, Virgo, and Libra, respectively). Only during the Earth Period did the Spirits of Form (Scorpio) instill in man this real Form, also called the Phantom.

But by the illicit entry of the Lucifer Spirits, this original network of invisible forces was compelled to take in dense matter. When the Lucifers were thrown down, they, in a sense, took humanity with them. As colored pigments stain clear glass, making it visible, so did the Lucifer influence stain the clear fleshless human Form, opaque. Or, as Paul expresses it, the human body became corruptible.

Christ Jesus, “who has the keys of hell and of death” (Rev. 1:18), reinstates the body’s spiritual genealogy that should have been bequeathed by Adam. The



Fresco, 1365-68. Andrea da Firenze, Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence
The Descent of Christ into Limbo

anastases depict the effect of this repossession. In them Christ Jesus steps on the head of Lucifer-Hades, fulfilling the curse of Jehovah to the Serpent that mankind shall bruise its head (Gen. 3:15). Whereupon Paul may say, appropriately, “Oh death, where is thy [serpent-dealt] sting, oh grave, where is thy victory?” From the forces that rose from the grave of Christ Jesus mankind can regain what he has lost. What had become increasingly feeble and faint, he can regenerate through Christ and be clothed upon as was the first Adam clothed before being clad with his coats of skins.

It is truly a Risen Body, not flesh and blood, not the corruptible, earthly body, but yet physical—the quintessence of Earth evolution, the alchemical quiddity, an incorruptible body, the gift of spiritual Hierarchies focused in the Christ, the Second Adam, imparted to anyone who enters into a true and whole relationship with Him.

Ego consciousness could not have advanced had Golgotha not taken place. Rather would it have become dimmer and dimmer, eventually being blotted out altogether. But now is Lucifer cast out of the Garden. Christ gave His Body truly. He broke the Bread of His Body that ours might be made whole. With Christ there rose out of the grave a seed-kernel for the reconstruction of the human physical Form, the Resurrection Body. It is this fact that Holy Communion celebrates, the living proof that matter is not merely matter, but that the Being of Christ as Spirit can unite with it.

The earth took in the body of Jesus transformed by the Christ as planetary communion. Henceforth, Christ is present to them who seek Him, the Spirit in matter by which they may rise in Ego consciousness to a living comprehension of the Presence of Christ in the

earth (as Paul realized). The earthly, flawed human form has been trans-formed by the flawless Form of Christ in Jesus.

The Eastern Church's Easter picture is not an empty sepulcher. This scene of hope mingled with bewilderment may suggest Resurrection. But where is the Resurrected, the Overcomer? He is resurrecting fallen, indeed, prostrate and sleeping, humanity. He has burst asunder the "brass gates of cruelty"; He has rendered useless the keys to an infernal kingdom; He has made the captor Death captive to His Light; He has taken "our earthy father Adam with him to his glory."

The prospect of losing his soul in limbo was a very real concern to pre-Christian man. He knew that the spirit is eternal and returned to God Who gave it. But the soul, the psyche, the specifically personal self-ness of egoic consciousness, which evolves only by being in the physical body, could be lost, so that the possibility of a spirit incarnating in bodies as automata, soulless, not even knowing or experiencing the loss of their humanity, was a real danger.

But the Christian Easter Mystery evokes a completely different vision and feeling through the Resurrected Christ, Him over whom Death has no dominion. Humans have become able to unite spiritually so that their soul loses its power to corrupt the body. For as Paul recognized and explained to King Agrippa, Moses prophesied that Christ Jesus was the first to rise from the dead (Acts 26:23). Of course Moses knew that every spirit must rise. But their bodies, until Christ, the Deliverer, were captive to Death. So may Timothy refer to "Our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death" (2 Tim. 1:10)—not death itself, but its power to keep back or deny something not of death (Heb. 2:14). Thus may St. John call the body of Jesus "the first begotten of the dead" (Rev. 1:5) by the power of Christ.

Four of the twelve articles of faith articulated by the Christian Community, an ecclesiastical movement founded within the Anthroposophical Society, are instructive. They shed light on Christ's inner-Earth work even as they correlate with both the original Apostle's Creed and the twelve signs of the zodiac:

5. The Christ Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate the death of the cross and was lowered into the grave of the earth.



Oil on vellum, Giovanni Bellini, circa 1474, City of Bristol Museum Art Gallery

Descent of Christ into Limbo

A more accomplished representation of the decensus, Bellini retains the standard thematic items while humanizing and dramatizing the action with masterly control of space and form.

6. In death He became the Helper of the souls of the dead who had lost their divine nature.
7. He overcame death, after three days.
8. Since that time He is the Lord of the heavenly forces upon earth and lives the Fulfiller of the deeds of the Father, the Ground of the World.

All that humanity has lost since the Fall can be gradually recovered. That is why the Mystery of Golgotha must be regarded as the central point in human evolution. And because of this Event mankind shall, by the conclusion of Earth evolution, be in possession of immortal physical bodies. In this light we are to understand Christ's words from the Cross: "It is finished." The corrupting power of the soul is now a thing of the past. The Christ Impulse was necessary in order that the end of Earth evolution should be worthy of the beginning.

Before Christ became Earth's indwelling Spirit, the grave was a tomb. Now it is a womb from which the Christ "body" is put on. Through the Resurrection the Form of the physical body, the work of the Gods, through our Lord Christ, is restored to humanity as the now incorruptible fruit of Earth evolution.

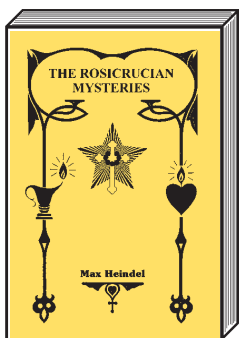
"Hades seized a body, and lo! it discovered God; it seized earth, and, behold! it encountered heaven; it seized the visible, and was overcome by the invisible. O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? Christ is risen and you are abolished....Christ is risen and life is freed" (St. John Chrysostom). □

—C.W.

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SAID TO THE PSALMIST

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream—
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act—act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God overhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow