

Gospel of Nicodemus, Christ's Descent into Hell

Elliott, J. K. "The Gospel of Nicodemus or Acts of Pilate." In *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, 185-190. Oxford, New York: Clarendon, Oxford, 1993.

(Lower section numbers reflect numbering as a separate text, higher numbers in parentheses continue numbering from the first part of the Gospel of Nicodemus. Footnote numbers reflect those in Elliott.)

1(17). 1. Joseph [of Arimathaea] said, 'Why then do you marvel that Jesus has been raised? This in itself is not marvellous, but what is marvellous is that he was not raised alone, but raised up many other dead who appeared to many in Jerusalem. And if you do not know the others, Simeon, who received Jesus, and his two sons, whom he raised up, you do at least know. For we buried them a little while ago. And now their sepulchres are to be seen opened and empty, but they themselves are alive and dwelling in Arimathaea.' They therefore sent men, and they found their tombs opened and empty. Joseph said, 'Let us go to Arimathaea and find them.'

2. Then arose the chief priests Annas and Caiaphas, and Joseph and Nicodemus and Gamaliel and others with them, and went to Arimathaea and found the men of whom Joseph spoke. So they offered prayer, and greeted one another. Then they went with them to Jerusalem, and they brought them into the synagogue, and secured the doors, and the chief priests placed the Old Testament of the Jews in the midst and said to them, 'We wish you to swear by the God of Israel and by Adonai and so speak the truth, how you arose and who raised you from the dead.'

3. When the men who had risen heard that, they signed their faces with the sign of the cross, and said to the chief priests, 'Give us paper and ink and pen.' So they brought these things. And they sat down and wrote as follows:

2(18). 1. O Lord Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life of the world, give us grace that we may tell of your resurrection and of your miracles which you performed in Hades. We, then, were in Hades with all who have died since the beginning of the world. And at the hour of midnight there rose upon the darkness there something like the light of the sun, and it shone and lit us all, and we saw one another. And immediately our father Abraham, together with the patriarchs and the prophets, was filled with joy, and they said to one another, 'This light comes from a great illumination.' The prophet Isaiah, who was present there, said, 'This light comes

from the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This I prophesied when I was still living, “The land of Zabulon and the land of Nephthalim, the people that sit in darkness saw a great light.”⁴⁴

2. Then there came into the midst another, an anchorite from the wilderness and the patriarchs asked him, ‘Who are you?’ He replied, ‘I am John, the last of the prophets, who made straight the ways of the Son of God, and preached repentance to the people for the forgiveness of sins. And the Son of God came to me, and when I saw him afar off, I said to the people, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”⁴⁵ And with my hand I baptized him in the river Jordan, and I saw the Holy Spirit like a dove coming upon him, and heard also the voice of God the Father speaking thus, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”⁴⁶ And for this reason he sent me to you, to preach that the only begotten Son of God comes here, in order that whoever believes in him should be saved, and whoever does not believe in him should be condemned. Therefore I say to you all that when you see him, all of you worship him. For now only have you opportunity for repentance because you worshipped idols in the vain world above and sinned. At any other time this is impossible.’

3(19). 1. Now when John was thus teaching those who were in Hades, the first-created, the first father Adam, heard and said to his son Seth, ‘My son, I wish you to tell to the forefathers of the race of men and to the prophets where I sent you when I was about to die.’ And Seth said, ‘Prophets and patriarchs, listen. My father Adam, the first-created, when he fell into mortal sickness, sent me close to the gate of paradise to pray to God that he might lead me by an angel to the tree of mercy, that I might take oil and anoint my father, so that he might arise from his sickness. This I did. And after my prayer an angel of the Lord came and asked me, “What do you desire, Seth? Because of the sickness of your father do you desire the oil that raises up the sick, or the tree from which flows such oil? This cannot be found now. Therefore go and tell your father that after the completion of 5,500 years from the creation of the world, the only-begotten Son of God shall then become man and shall descend upon the earth. And he shall anoint him with that oil. And he shall arise and wash him and his descendants with water and the Holy Spirit. And then he shall be healed of every disease. But this is impossible now.”’ When the patriarchs and prophets heard this, they rejoiced greatly.

⁴⁴ Isa. 9:1-2

⁴⁵ John 1:29

⁴⁶ Matt. 3:16-17

4(20). 1. And while they were all so joyful, Satan the heir of darkness came and said to Hades, ‘All devouring and insatiable one, listen to my words. There is one of the race of the Jews, Jesus by name, who calls himself the Son of God. But he is a man, and at our instigation the Jews crucified him. And now that he is dead, be prepared that we may secure him here. For I know that he is a man, and I heard him saying, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.”⁴⁷ He caused me much trouble in the world above while he lived among mortals. For wherever he found my servants, he cast them out, and all those whom I had made to be crippled or blind or lame, leprous and the like, he healed with only a word, and many whom I had made ready for burial he also made alive again with only a word.’ 2. Hades said, ‘Is he so powerful that he does such things with only a word? And if he is of such power, are you able to withstand him? It seems to me that no one will be able to withstand such as he is. But if you say that you heard how he feared death, he said this to mock and laugh at you, wishing to seize you with a strong hand. And woe, woe to you for all eternity.’ Satan answered, ‘O all-devouring and insatiable Hades, did you fear so greatly when you heard about our common foe? I did not fear him, but worked upon the Jews, and they crucified him and gave him gall and vinegar to drink. Therefore prepare yourself to get him firmly into your power when he comes.’

3. Hades answered, ‘O heir of darkness, son of perdition, devil, you have just told me that many whom you made ready for burial he made alive again with only a word. If then he freed others from the grave, how and with what power will he be held by us? A short time ago I devoured a certain dead man called Lazarus, and soon afterwards one of the living drew him up forcibly from my entrails with only a word. And I think it is the one of whom you speak. If, therefore, we receive him here, I fear lest we run the risk of losing the others also. For, behold, I see that all those whom I have devoured from the beginning of the world are disquieted. My belly is in pain. Lazarus who was snatched from me before seems to me no good sign. For not like a dead man, but like an eagle he flew away from me, so quickly did the earth cast him out. Therefore I adjure you by your gifts and mine, do not bring him here. For I believe that he comes here to raise all the dead. And I tell you this: By the darkness which surrounds us, if you bring him here, none of the dead will be left for me.’

⁴⁷ Matt. 26:38 and parallel

5(21). 1. While Satan and Hades were speaking thus to one another, a loud voice like thunder sounded, ‘Lift up your gates, O rulers, and be lifted up, O everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.’⁴⁸ When Hades heard this, he said to Satan, ‘Go out, if you can, and withstand him.’ So Satan went out. Then Hades said to his demons, ‘Secure strongly and firmly the gates of brass and the bars of iron, and hold my bolts, and stand upright and keep watch on everything. For if he comes in, woe will seize us. 2. When the forefathers heard that, they all began to mock him, saying, ‘O all-devouring and insatiable one, open, that the King of Glory may come in.’ The prophet David said, ‘Do you not know, blind one, that when I lived in the world, I prophesied that word: “Lift up your gates, O rulers”?’⁴⁹ Isaiah said, ‘I foresaw this by the Holy Spirit and wrote, “The dead shall arise, and those who are in the tombs shall be raised up, and those who are under the earth shall rejoice.”⁵⁰ O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’⁵¹ 3. Again the voice sounded, ‘Lift up the gates.’ When Hades heard the voice the second time, he answered as if he did not know it and said, ‘Who is this King of Glory?’ The angels of the Lord said, ‘The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.’⁵² And immediately at this answer the gates of brass were broken in pieces and the bars of iron were crushed and all the dead who were bound were loosed from their chains, and we with them. And the King of Glory entered as a man, and all the dark places of Hades were illuminated.

6(22). 1. Hades at once cried out, ‘We are defeated, woe to us. But who are you, who have such authority and power? And who are you, who without sin have come here, you who appear small and can do great things, who are humble and exalted, slave and master, soldier and king, and have authority over both the dead and the living? You were nailed to the cross, and laid in the sepulchre, and now you have become free and have destroyed all our power. Are you Jesus, of whom the chief ruler Satan said to us that through the cross and death you would inherit the whole world?’ 2. Then the King of Glory seized the chief ruler Satan by the head and handed him over to the angels, saying, ‘Bind with irons his hands and his feet and his neck and his mouth.’ Then he gave him to Hades and said, ‘Take him and hold him fast until my second coming.’

⁴⁸ Psalm 24:7

⁴⁹ Psalm 24:7

⁵⁰ Isa. 26:19

⁵¹ 1 Cor. 15:55

⁵² Psalm 24:8

7(23). 1. And Hades took Satan and said to him, ‘O Beelzebub, heir of fire and torment, enemy of the saints, through what necessity did you contrive that the King of Glory should be crucified, so that he should come here and strip us naked? Turn and see that not one dead man is left in me, but all that you gained through the tree of knowledge you have lost through the tree of the cross. All your joy is changed into sorrow. You wished to kill the King of Glory, but have killed yourself. For since I have received you to hold you fast, you shall learn by experience what evils I shall do to you. O arch-devil, the beginning of death, the root of sin, the end of all evil, what evil did you find in Jesus to procure his destruction? How did you dare to commit such great wickedness? How did you study to bring down such a man into this darkness, through whom you have been deprived of all who have died since the beginning?’

8(24). 1. While Hades was thus speaking with Satan, the King of Glory stretched out his right hand, and took hold of our forefather Adam and raised him up. Then he turned to the rest and said, ‘Come with me, all you who have died through the tree which this man touched. For behold, I raise you all up again through the tree of the cross.’ With that he sent them all out. And our forefather Adam was seen to be full of joy, and said, ‘I give thanks to your majesty, O Lord, because you have brought me up from the lowest Hades.’ Likewise all the prophets and the saints said, ‘We give you thanks, O Christ, Saviour of the world, because you have brought up our life from destruction’. 2. When they had said this, the Saviour blessed Adam with the sign of the cross on his forehead. And he did this also to the patriarchs and prophets and martyrs and forefathers, and he took them and sprang up out of Hades. And as he went the holy fathers sang praises, following him and saying, ‘Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord.’⁵³ Alleluia. To him be the glory of all the saints.’

9(25). 1. Thus he went into paradise holding our forefather Adam by the hand, and he handed him and all the righteous to Michael the archangel. And as they were entering *the* gate of paradise, two old men met them. The holy fathers asked them, ‘Who are you, who have not seen death nor gone down into Hades, but dwell in paradise with your bodies and souls?’ One of them answered, ‘I am Enoch, who pleased God and was removed here by him. And this is Elijah the Tishbite. We are to live until the end of the world. But *then* we are to be sent by God to

⁵³ Psalm 118:26

withstand Antichrist and to be killed by him. And after three days we shall rise again and be caught up in clouds to meet the Lord.’

10(26). 1. While they were saying this there came another, a humble man, carrying a cross on his shoulder. The holy fathers asked him, ‘Who are you, who have the appearance of a robber, and what is the cross you carry on your shoulder?’ He answered, ‘I was, as you say, a robber and a thief in the world, and therefore the Jews took me and delivered me to the death *of* the cross together with our Lord Jesus Christ. When he hung on the cross, I saw the wonders which happened and believed in him. And I appealed to him and said, “Lord, when you reign as king, do not forget me.” And immediately he said to me, “Truly, truly, today, I say to you, you shall be with me in Paradise.”⁵⁴ So I came into paradise carrying my cross, and found Michael the archangel, and said to him, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was crucified, has sent me here. Lead me, therefore, to the gate of Eden.” And when the flaming sword saw the sign of the cross, it opened to me and I went in. Then the archangel said to me, “Wait a short while. For Adam also, the forefather of the race of men, comes with the righteous, that they also may enter in.” And now that I have seen you, I have come to meet you.’ When the saints heard this, they all cried with a loud voice, ‘Great is our Lord, and great is his power.’

11(27). 1. All this we saw and heard, we two brothers who also were sent by Michael the archangel and were appointed to preach the resurrection of the Lord, but first to go to the Jordan and be baptized. We went there and were baptized with other dead who had risen. Then we went to Jerusalem and celebrated the passover of the resurrection. But now we depart, since we cannot remain here. And the love of God the Father and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.⁵⁵

When they had written this and had sealed the books, they gave half to the chief priests and half to Joseph and Nicodemus. And they immediately vanished. To the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁵⁴ Luke 23:43

⁵⁵ 2 Cor. 13:14