

# Lift Up Your Heads, O Gates!

## *Who is This King of Glory?*

**Psalm 24:1**     *A Psalm of David.*

The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein,

<sup>2</sup> for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers.

<sup>3</sup> Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?

<sup>4</sup> He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.

<sup>5</sup> He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

<sup>6</sup> Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah

<sup>7</sup> Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

<sup>8</sup> Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle!

<sup>9</sup> Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

<sup>10</sup> Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory! Selah"

Psalm 24

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# He Descended into Hell

ONE OF THE MOST OFTEN ASKED questions I get asked pertains to a line in later versions of *The Apostle's Creed* that we have sometimes recited in our Worship Service. *The Apostle's Creed* has a very long history.<sup>1</sup> The oldest version we have of it comes from 337 AD. It was basically unchanged for three hundred years when suddenly, in the seventh century, there appeared a line: *descendit ad inferos* (“he descended into hell”). This is what gets me so many questions. A little history of the phrase is helpful.

This was not part of *The Apostle's Creed* until about 650 AD. But this does not mean it was unknown in the church. The line appears almost three hundred years earlier in baptismal confessions,<sup>2</sup> and other creedal statements.<sup>3</sup> That's not much later than our earliest version of the Apostle's Creed itself. Before this, we find it in the writings of **Irenaeus** (ca. 125-202), **Tertullian** (ca. 150-225), **Clement of**

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<sup>1</sup> With antecedents such as the *Old Roman Symbol* or Creed attested by **Tertullian** and **Irenaeus** in the Second Century, the first mention of it as “The Apostle's Creed” occurs in 390 and the synod that called it this expressed the widely-held view of the church at that time that each of the Twelve Apostles contributed an article of the creed.

<sup>2</sup> **Rufinus of Aquileia**'s baptismal creed about 390 AD.

<sup>3</sup> **Fourth Sirmium Formula** in 359 AD.

Alexandria 150 – c. 215, and Justin (100-167 AD), all in the second century.<sup>4</sup>

So, what does it mean “he descended into hell?” The views range from the obvious to the fascinating to the overtly heretical. Let’s start by what it does not mean. Word of Faith teacher Joyce Meyer has become infamous for saying that it means Jesus stopped being the Son of God on the cross and therefore went to hell to be tortured for three days for our sins, after which God raised from the dead where he became the first “born-again” man. Along with fellow cohort in crime Kenneth Copeland, it was this descent, and not the atoning work on the cross that redeemed sinners. Heresy.

This woman has fallen victim to one of the classic blunders. It is the meaning of the English word “hell.” When we hear the word, we think “the place of fire and torment.” I don’t know if Calvin had the same problem in French, but like us, he also could not (rightly) bring himself

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<sup>4</sup> “But in point of fact the idea of the *Descensus* can be clearly traced through Clement of Alexandria (cf. § 7), Tertullian (*de Anima*, 7 and 55, ed. Reifferscheid, Vienna, 1890, p. 308, 14 and 387 ff.), and Irenæus (*adv. Hær.* iii. 20. 4, Massuet [ed. Harvey, ii. 108]; iv. 22. 1 [ii. 228]; iv. 33. 1 [ii. 256]; iv. 33. 12 [ii. 267]; v. 31. 1 [ii. 411], and Ἀπόδειξις, *TU* xxx. 1. p. 42), to Justin (*Dial.* 72, ed. Otto, 1876–81, ii. 260) and one of the ‘presbyters’ of Irenæus (cf. *adv. Hær.* iv. 27. 2 [ii. 241]).” Friedrich Loofs, “Descent to Hades (Christ’s),” ed. James Hastings, John A. Selbie, and Louis H. Gray, *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh; New York: T. & T. Clark; Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908–1926), 659–660.

to say that Jesus suffered the fires of hell.<sup>5</sup> So instead, he took it to mean that **Jesus suffered abandonment from God spiritually** on the cross (*Institutes* II.16.9). This was his “hell,” and the punishment we all deserve. This is perfectly true. The problem is, this isn’t what “hell” means. Hell is a literal place, albeit in another realm—the place of spirits, and demons, and the dead.

All the Reformers retained the doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Some like the later **Zwingli** believed that what is meant is simply that **Jesus died** and went to the place where all dead people go. Many Reformed people today continue to teach this. But if that is all it means, this seems rather obvious, and as Calvin points out, redundant, since the Creed already said he died. So why add it?

The Roman Catholics from which Calvin came taught this, but added that Christ, while there, **proclaimed the Gospel to the OT saints** who were there. He did not come to deliver the damned, but to “open heaven’s gates” for the just who had gone before him (**CCC I.2.2.5.637**). This is no “addition” by Rome, but is what East and West and all the Fathers taught since the beginning. However, **Luther** captured something that seems to have been lost for a time,

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<sup>5</sup> Or any of the other views that we will mention.

<sup>6</sup> For a lengthy discussion on all of the views see Loofs, 654-58.

which is that Christ also went down to trounce on the head of Satan. He went there to proclaim his victory to the evil spirits of Hades and thus to conquer Death, or as Revelation puts it, to get the keys to Death and Hades (**Rev 1:18**).<sup>7</sup>

But how could anyone get an idea that there are saints, even in the OT, that went to *hell*? Let's return to the classic blunder. The Bible has **at least four words** that are translated with the English word "hell." These are **Sheol** and **Gehenna**, **Hades** and **Tartarus**.<sup>8</sup> Sheol is the main Hebrew OT term. It is the place in the OT where all people go, righteous or wicked, it doesn't matter. Everyone goes to Sheol. It is the place of the dead.

*Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* says, "Sheol is depicted as located in the depths of the earth (e.g., **Gen 37:35**; **Prov 15:24**; **Ezek 31:15–18**) .... It is a place of gloom (**Job 10:21–22**; cf. **Eccl 9:10**) and decay (**Isa 14:11**), from which there is no escape (**Job 7:9**; cf. **Isa 5:14**); only God can rescue his people from the clutches of Sheol (**Ps 49:16**)." It is often described as having **bars** (**Ps 107:16–18**; **Jonah 2:6–7**) and **gates** (**Isa 38:10**).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Luther believed he went down in body and soul, that the God-man's body went to this place. See **F. Bente**, "XIX. Controversy on Christ's Descent into Hell," in *Historical Introductions to the Lutheran Confessions*, at <http://bookofconcord.org/historical-19.php>

<sup>8</sup> The "abyss" and "Abaddon" are conceptually speaking, two more.

<sup>9</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls have "When they stop into the abyss, they make their voices heard | They open the gates of Sheol for all acts of wickedness | They close the doors of the pit behind

Sometimes translated as “the grave,” Sheol was always translated by the Greek LXX as *hades*. **Hades** is one of the three terms in the NT for “hell.” *Hades is Sheol*. We might remember Jesus saying that “**the gates of hell**” will not prevail against his church (**Matt 16:18**). **Tartarus** is a particular place in Hades, the deepest darkest part, a prison with a screeching gate protected by bars of adamantine (nod to the Wolverine), the hardest substance in the ancient mind.<sup>10</sup> This is where God locked up the fallen angels when they rebelled in the days of Noah (**2Pe 2:4**). What this shows is that Hades and Sheol have parts within them, which is why they are sometimes described as a city. **Gehenna**, on the other hand, refers to the lake of fire. Originally the valley just to the SW of Jerusalem, it was the place where abominable deeds such as burning their sons and daughters in the fires to Molech took place. This later came to represent a place of eternal torment that we sometimes think of as hell.

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the conceiver of mischief | The bars of eternity behind all spirits of wickedness” (**1QH 3:17-18**; cf. **6:31**). **Alan Cooper**, “Ps 24:7–10: Mythology and Exegesis,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983): 43, n. 34 [37-60].

<sup>10</sup> For example, “**And even with that latest word his feet he tore away.**

**But suddenly Æneas turned, and lo, a city lay**

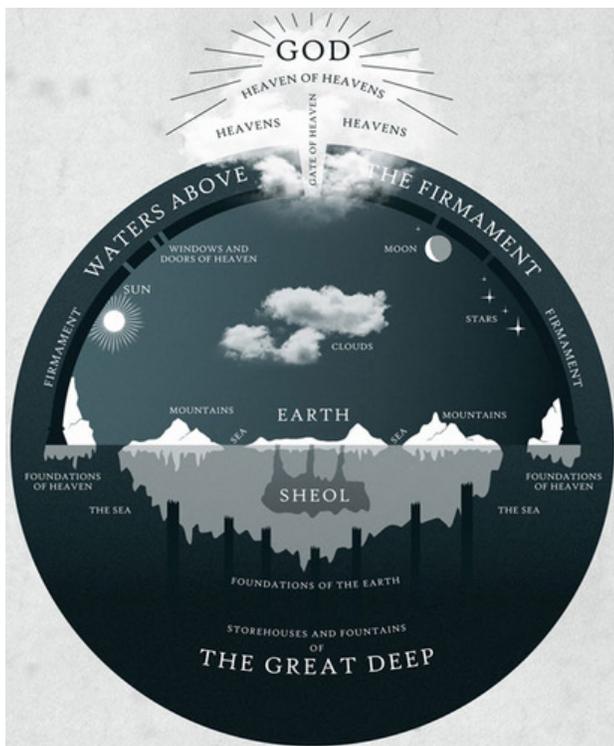
**Wide-spread ‘neath crags upon the left, girt with a wall threefold;**

**And round about in hurrying flood a flaming river rolled,**

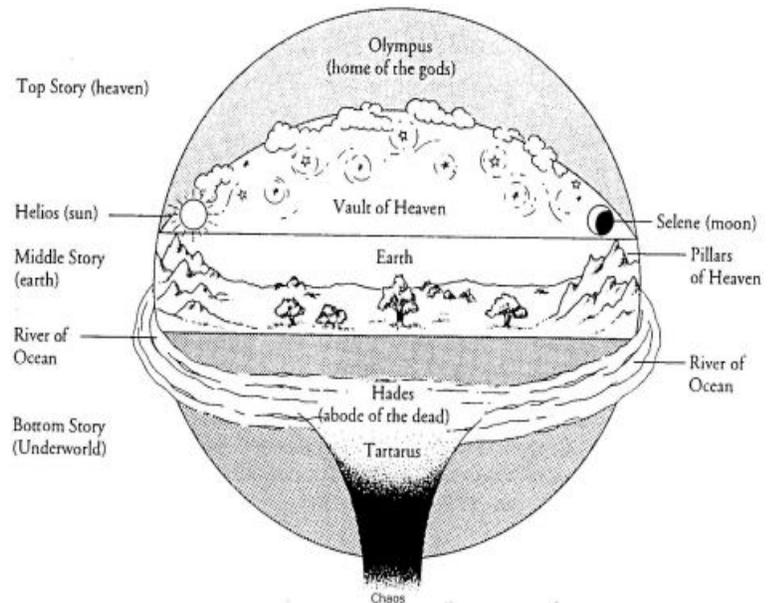
**E’en Phlegethon of Tartarus, with rattling, story roar:**

**In face with adamantine posts was wrought the might door.”** (**Virgil**, *The Æneids* Book VI.547-52).

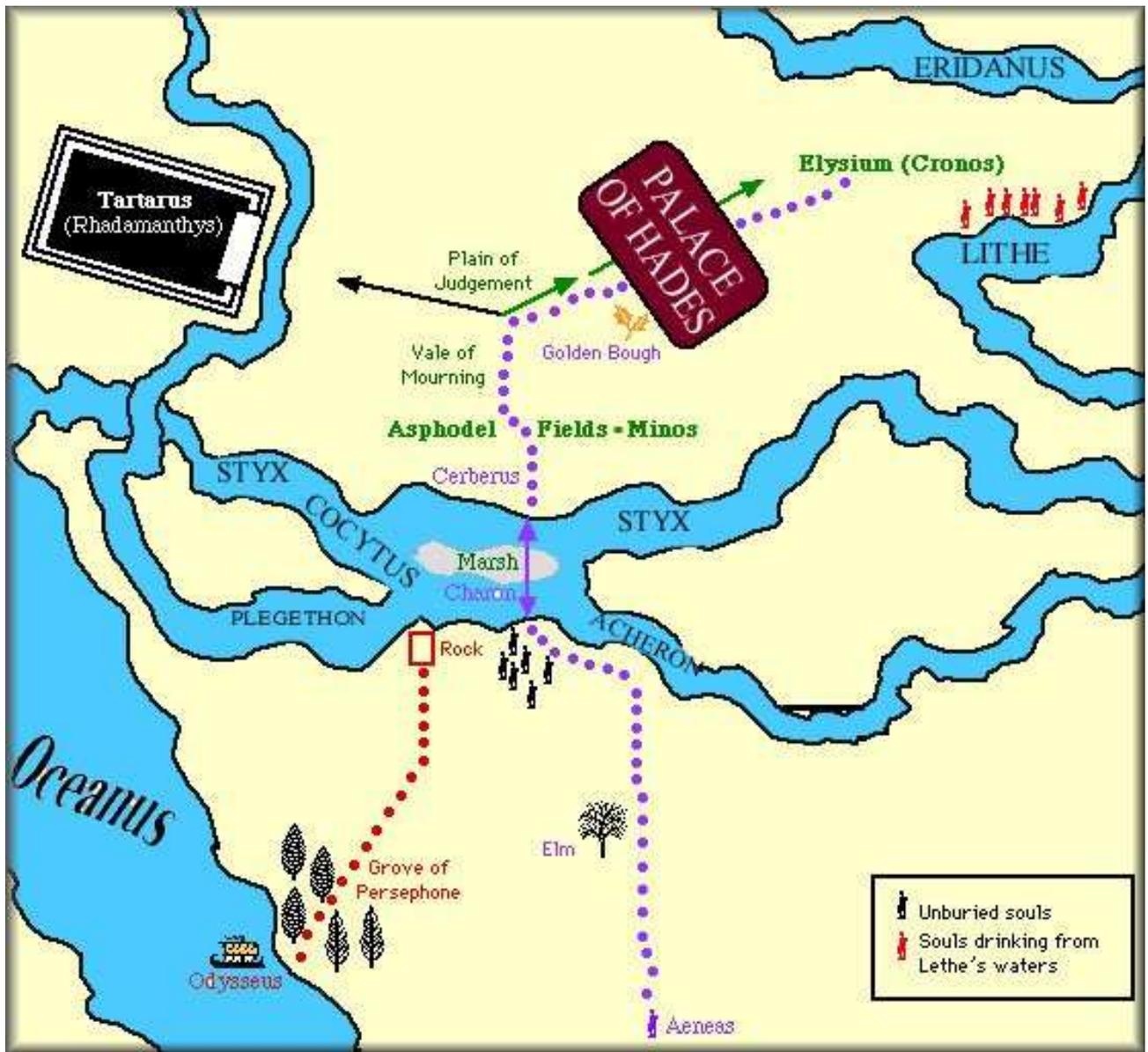
But Hades also had a “good” side (since everyone goes there, this makes sense, and it is how we can say that saints went to “hell”). “Abraham’s bosom” and “paradise” are two places the Bible may refer to as being parts within Hades. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, at the very least, uses the imagery where one man is burning in fires and the other is in sight, separated by a great chasm, but in no torment at all. He is said to be in Abraham’s Bosom (Lk 16:22). No one questions that Abraham’s bosom was in Sheol or Hades.



Sheol (Diagram by Michael Paukner)



Hades



Map of Hades

Some Jews and Fathers identified this as the same place the thief on the cross was promised to go: Paradise (Lk 23:43).<sup>11</sup> But strangely, it is not clear if Paradise is in Hades

<sup>11</sup> For example, the *Testament of Abraham* (2<sup>nd</sup> Cent. AD?) says, “The undefiled voice of the God and Father came speaking thus: ‘Take, then, my friend Abraham into Paradise, where there are the tents of my righteous ones and (where) the mansions of my holy ones, Isaac and Jacob, are in his bosom, where there is no toil, no grief, no moaning, but peace and exultation and endless life’” (T.Ab 20:13-14).

or Heaven, as Paul says he was taken up into paradise ([2Co 12:4](#)).<sup>12</sup> Some like [Augustine](#) said he had no idea where Paradise was. The point I want to make is that the ancient conception of Hades was that it was a large place where everyone went. It had various zones, the righteous went to one place, the damned to another, the fallen angels to still another. But all of it was Hades/Sheol. This is the reason, then, why it is perfectly orthodox to think that Jesus in his spirit went to the place of the dead, to Sheol or Hades, when he died.

But was it merely to die? Or was it something more. This morning we are looking at Psalm 24 and in a fascinating way I want to show you how I think this Psalm speaks directly to this event.

## Psalm 24

Psalm 24 is a memorable song that comes at a remarkable point in the Psalter. As we have seen, the Psalter has organized its songs so that their very placement often speaks to us in ways that are beyond even the song itself. In this

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<sup>12</sup> Did Jesus take the thief on the cross and take him to Paradise in heaven before anyone else got there, or did they both go where David and Abraham went before them? For a discussion of the difficulties and the various interpretations see [Edward Bouverie Pusey](#), *Tertullian: Apologetic and Practical Treatises* (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1842), 116-20.

case, Psalm 24 comes at the end of a 10-song unit that forms the following chiasm:

- A** Ps 15 (Entrance Liturgy)
- B** Ps 16 (Song of Trust)
- C** Ps 17 (Prayer for Help)
- D** Ps 18 (Royal Psalm)
- E** Ps 19 (Creation/Torah)
- D<sup>1</sup>** Ps 20-21 (Royal Psalms)
- C<sup>1</sup>** Ps 22 (Prayer for Help)
- B<sup>1</sup>** Ps 23 (Song of Trust)
- A<sup>1</sup>** Ps 24 (Entrance Liturgy)

I can imagine a worship service in ancient Israel being conducted around these ten Psalms. You begin worship with the question “O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?” (Ps 15:1). The answer is that it is the person who keeps torah. Next you move your way into Psalm 16, “Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord: I have no good apart from you’” (16:1-2), and you begin to realize that you are a sinner. But you want to keep Torah, even though you are a sinner. So, Psalm 17 is offered up as a prayer for help: “I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;

incline your ear to me; hear my words” (17:6). Next, the order of the service takes you to a prayer of trust in the King, “The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation” (18:2). But the king himself joins you in worship (a staggering thought itself, imagine Queen Elizabeth coming to worship in in the Metropolitan Tabernacle with her peasants!)<sup>13</sup> now and sings, “Great salvation he brings to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his seed forever” (18:50).

Suddenly, the songs have taken you to the heart of obedience by faith, not duty. You reach Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God” (19:1). “Torah is perfect, reviving the soul” (7). You now see with different eyes how you should approach the word of God. Not like Adam and Eve, but by faith and obedience.

But it still isn’t enough. You need more. So, you start to sing about the Great King: The Name of the LORD. “May the Name of the God of Jacob protect you [and] send you help from the sanctuary” (20:1-2). You sing of representation of a King in your place taking effect, “For the king trusts in the LORD” (21:7). You start to realize that

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<sup>13</sup> I know, she’s Anglican. She should be Reformed Baptist. But that’s not my point. The point is, the Queen would *never* do that. But if she did, imagine what people would think!

God himself is your King who fights on your behalf, “You will put them to flight ... be exalted, O LORD, in your strength!” (12-13).

Suddenly, the battle hymn becomes a discordant lament. It jars you to attention as lyrics of victory are replaced by rhymes of the weakness of your king. You wonder what kind of representation this really is? “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (22:1). They mock the king, “He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him” (8). They put him to death in a most brutal way, “You lay me in the dust of death ... they have pierced my hands and feet” (15, 19). Yet, after death, he is alive, “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (22). And you realize in the next song that this same suffering king is also your Shepherd, “The LORD is my Shepherd” (23:1).

As you steady yourself for the final song, you are taken back to the beginning of the service, “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD” (24:3). You stand in amazement at what you have just been through. You wonder at it all. The themes repeat, and yet there seems to be a mystery here. One king, or two? Victory or suffering? Death or life? And how does all of this play into your obedience and faith and desire

to obey Torah? What kind of a thing have you really just partaken in? Mere worship, or perhaps the very act of a prophet who speaks of a future to come?

You and I know what the answer is, as we see with the vision of hindsight. This worship service has indeed posed the great question, has shown us what is required of us, has knocked us down with our sin, has had us plead for help in the midst. But it has also shown us the Way God has chosen to hear our prayers—through the Anointed Messiah, King Jesus, who fulfilled so much of the second half of this chiasm, showing us his humiliation of becoming a man, his sufferings, his death, and his victory over life. Oh! Can it be that even the organization of the songs themselves have been inspired by God? But one thing remains. **How now might this all relate to you and I personally?** How can we see what he has done and then apply it to who we are? This is where Psalm 24 completes the worship service.

The song is organized into three main parts. **The first section (Ps 24:1-2)** recalls themes from the center psalm (**Ps 19**) about creation. It will tell us about God's transcendent sovereignty over that creation.

**The second section (3-6)** bridges the gap between heaven and earth. For the LORD dwells upon a holy hill, Mt. Zion

in Jerusalem. But how can transcendent Yahweh who created all things dwell among men on earth? Thus, someone writes, “This declaration [God dwelling on the holy hill] reminds one not only of God’s transcendent claims to own, and therefore to rule, the world that God has securely established; but it also leads to the reminder in the second section that this same God has graciously condescended to establish a covenantal relationship.”<sup>14</sup> This section will then return to Psalm 15 and tell us that the way we gain access to the LORD is through submission and cleanliness and obedience to the LORD.

The third section (7-10) is the climax not only of the song, but of the entire 10-song liturgy. And what a climax it is! Along with the second section, it forms a kind of liturgical catechism. Catechisms are teaching tools that are formed through questions and answers. The worshipers of the LORD shout out the question and sing forth the answer in a kind of antiphonal melody and harmony that would bring a great climax to a truly overwhelming worship experience.

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<sup>14</sup> Rodney K. Duke, “Form and Meaning: Multi-Layered Balanced Thought Structures in Psalm 24:4,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 62.2 (2011): 217 [215-32].

Q. Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? (3)

A. He who has clean hands and a pure heart. (4)

Q. Who shall stand in his holy place? (3)

A. He who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. (4)

Q. Who is the King of glory? (8)

A. The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in Battle. (8)

Q. Who is this King of glory? (10)

A. The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory. (10)

With these words ringing in your ears, together you sing “**Selah.**” You pause. The worship director leads a benediction. And you are dismissed to think about all the things you have just sung. *But what have you just sung? What are these words of Psalm 24?* They are the heart of worship, prophecies fulfilled in Christ, a tremendous apologetic of Christianity, the first reason for hope, trust, obedience, happiness, and life.

## *Psalm 24:1-2: The God of all Creation*

The first two verses establish the vital fact for the song. **God is Lord of all creation.** This includes heaven. This includes the earth. This includes that which is under the earth. Why? My threefold division of creation is given a reason in Philippians 2, “**So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Php 2:10).<sup>15</sup>**

“The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established upon the rivers” (Ps 24:1-2). The first verse establishes that **the LORD holds claim to everything.** The earth’s fullness would include everything about it. The word for “world” here is specified by “**those who dwell therein.**” When we worship God, this is the God we worship. He has the whole world in his hands. Nothing is outside of his sovereign control. It all belongs to him.

The second verse is actually saying the same thing, but in a way that you might not be able to consider, given how far removed we are from its ancient worldview. When he

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<sup>15</sup> Athanasius relates Psalm 24 directly to Philippians 2:6-11. See *Discourses Against the Arians* 1.41 in **Craig A. Blasing** and Carmen S. Hardin, *Psalms 1–50*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 189.

says that Yahweh has founded the earth upon the seas, he is doing more than making a claim to be Creator (as if we needed more information than that!). This is **a jab at the nations around Israel**, even while it confirms in the mind of an Israelite tempted to worship the gods that this is a fool's errand. What do I mean?

As I said a moment ago, this entire Psalm is in some ways **an apologetic**, or a defense of Yahweh. This means that it has value in the broader arena outside of Israel's worship, as a polemic against the nations. When you defend your faith, you do it towards atheists or Muslims or Mormons. Israel did it with its neighbors, Egyptians, Canaanites, Babylonians.

To us, we think no differently about the sea or a river than we do a glass of water. It's just a thing, quite ordinary in this world. Perfectly *natural*. To those people however, the sea and the rivers were **viewed in relationship to their gods**. And Israel was tempted to say that too, as we learn from things like the First Commandment.

The reason this matters will become increasingly clear as we go along. The words used here are *yam* ("sea") and *nahar* ("river"). These are the same two words used in the **Baal Cycle**. Here is a summary of the story. **"The divine king**

whose realm is the sea, appropriately called Yammu/Naharu, attempts to subordinate the weather God Ba'lu (Baal). Ba'lu defends himself and successfully conquers Yammu (with the help of other deities). Having now become a king himself, he inevitably desires to build for himself a palace/temple upon [a] mountain,"<sup>16</sup> Zaphon. In the Psalm, the holy hill comes in the very next verse, and in this way there are the same themes in Psalm 24:2-3 that make up the main theme of the Baal Cycle.

This would have been an effective apologetic tool back then, not to mention wonderful words to help them enter into worship. Yahweh parallels the role of Baal (i.e. Son to son). But in the Psalm, Yahweh has no need to fight Yam. Rather, he is God of gods, and has established his world upon the seas (thinking of Genesis 1 where the dry land comes up out of the sea). Yam is literally under Yahweh's feet. And in the Psalm, the sea gives no struggle. It is utterly quiet. Not raging. Not angry. Not usurping. Yahweh is in absolute control.

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<sup>16</sup> Philip E. Sumpter, "The Substance of Psalm 24: An Attempt to Read Scripture after Brevard S. Childs," (A Dissertation to the University of Gloucestershire, Oct 2011), 165.

<http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/2497/1/Philip%20E%20Sumpter%20PhD%20Thesis%20Redacted%20for%20signature%20only.pdf>

## *Psalm 24:3-6: Ascending the Holy Hill*

How does this matter to the rest of the Psalm? It matters in **the directional flow of worship** which parallels the directions in the psalm: Ascending and Descending. Up and Down. Heaven and earth and under the earth. First, **ascending**. “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?” (Ps 24:3). “Ascension.” You should know that in the early Church, this Psalm was used as **an ascension of Christ Psalm**. They generally did this because of the third stanza (**see below**). I think it makes better sense from this verse. Either way, it is prophetic.

The holy hill is the place where Yahweh resides. How do you get to him? That is the question. If we are talking Yahweh **God the Father**, then this would be in heaven, and thus the ascension to heaven thought. If we are talking Yahweh **God the Son**, then we must understand that he has **descended** on behalf of his Father, along with **God the Holy Spirit** to be with man here. This is the idea behind the holy hill or mountain. These places (such as Mt. Eden, Ararat, Sinai, Zion, etc.) were physical representations of a spiritual reality, a nexus between heaven and earth.

We haven't seen the hill for a while now, but we have seen it before. As we saw earlier, it is right there in Psalm 15, which asks the same basic question as we have here. It begins, “Who shall dwell on your holy hill?” (Ps 15:1). Here is it “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?” (24:3). These questions are directed towards you and I. Yet, this time we are meant to read the question in light of these 10 songs that come between. This time, the question comes at the end of a series of prophecies of Messiah.

This hill was explained to us already in the Psalter. We have seen in Psalm 2 that the Father said to the Son, “I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you’” (Ps 2:6-7). Who, therefore, is on the holy hill? The Son of God. For it is His hill, and he is the King. And in vs. 6, he is the face (*panim*) that we seek. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2Co 4:6).<sup>17</sup>

Our song now answers the “who shall ascend” with, “He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.

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<sup>17</sup> The whole idea of the *panim* (face/presence) of God in the OT is intimately related to the Angel of the LORD (cf. Gen 32:30; Ex 23:21; 33:11; Jdg 6:22; Isa 63:9).

He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation” (24:4-5). In light of (especially) Psalm 22-23, we can see that this is true of none other than the Lord Jesus. And this is why this Son has been given the Holy Hill by his Father. He is the Righteous One.

How is righteousness expressed here? In three ways, all found in vs. 4. First, “He who has clean hands and a pure heart.” Two specifics are then given. You do not lift up your soul to what is false. You do not swear deceitfully. It isn’t lifting up your soul in worship that is wrong; it is doing it to that which is false. It isn’t swearing that is wrong; it is doing it deceitfully. Sin and disobedience. These two things are related, and they are related in ways we have already talked about.

That which is false is not simply a lie. Rather, it is much more sinister. The word is “vanity” and it is often translated as something like “worthless gods.” “For My people have forgotten Me, They burn incense to worthless gods (*shav*)” (Jer 18:15 NAS). Yam. The River. Don’t do what the Canaanites were doing. Similarly, given the parallelism of the verse, you don’t swear deceitfully. Now, this might mean to swear and then lie about it. But behind this is swearing by that which is not God, especially swearing by

the gods, for the word (*mirmah*) also means “treachery” (treachery against Yahweh). In this light, the commandments as we normally think about them about taking God’s name in vain, lying, etc. all still apply, but their context is that **they must be done in loyalty to Yahweh**. He and he alone is to be your God. You must have no others before him.

**Only someone like this can ascend the hill of Yahweh.** How can they be like this? You can have this status either **intrinsically** or **extrinsically**. Consider the many laws of God, his commandments which are life if kept, but death if disobeyed. And it only takes one. To think that anyone has kept even just the tenth commandment not to covet perfectly, let alone the other 10 and the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of commands that comes from them, it is truly incredible. And yet there is One. Jesus. He never sinned. He never dirtied his hands spiritually. His heart was always pure as the freshly fallen snow. **He has this status intrinsically**, for he is God.

The other option is **extrinsic**. It comes to you from the outside. That is, such a status it is credited to you by God through faith. Have you been credited with it? This is why reading these songs together is so helpful, because we have

seen that David has nothing good that lives in his flesh. Yet, his trust and hope in the LORD has given him forgiveness and has justified him in God's sight. In this way, the Psalm really is also about us. For the next verse says, "Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob" (6). *Selah*. Pause.

Not only God the Son, but other sons adopted and sealed by the Holy Spirit may ascend. It is for *this generation*; not one person, but many. Throughout the centuries, many commentators have suggested that this Psalm might have been inspired by the events of 2 Samuel 6 where David takes the Ark of the Covenant up to Mt. Zion. For this song, as we will see in a moment, is a triumphal entry song (vv. 7-10), and this was the coronation of ark, the very throne of Jesus pre-incarnate making its way to Mt. Zion even prior to the building of the temple.

If so, it puts even more richness to the history, to the worship, to the excitement, and even to the sobriety of what it teaches. Ours is *A Psalm of David* (1). And this passage in Samuel is where David danced with all his might before the LORD. Trumpets were blasting. People were excited. This is what they had been waiting for. And yet, before David made it to Jerusalem, there was a terrible incident involving

a man named Uzzah who was helping the procession, when suddenly, and because the Levites had not been obeying Torah properly, the ark began to tip over. He reached out his hand to steady it, thereby touching it. And when he touched it, the LORD struck him dead and the ark waited several more months before finally coming to its resting home in Jerusalem. Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Eventually, even sinners like Uzzah could. But not yet. At least, not fully. That day was only a type of a day to come.

### *Psalm 24:7-10: The Descent of the King of Glory*

If one direction is **up**, the other direction is **down**. We go up to God, because he has come down to us. The Apostle says, “In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things” (**Eph 4:9-10**). I bring up this verse for a good reason. At the very least, it is a good segue to the third section of Psalm 24.

This passage in Ephesians probably refers simply to Christ coming to earth as a man. It is like Jesus said to Nicodemus, “**No one has ascended into heaven except he**

who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (John 3:13). God has come to us in the Face of Jesus Christ. It is in this light that many now read the third section climactic moment of the past ten songs of the Psalter.

“Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle!” (Ps 24:7-8). It is here that many have interpreted the words to be referring to those pearly gates of heaven. Thus, they take this as a prophecy of the ascension of Jesus forty days after his resurrection. It is probably true that there is some of this in mind. We certainly can’t rule it out.<sup>18</sup>

The two key questions to ask here are questions not often asked by us. First, what are the gates mentioned in vv. 7 and 9? Second, what is the function of the dialogue of question and response in 8 and 10?<sup>19</sup> Again, to the first question, some suggest that they are the gates of heaven. Others think they may be the gates of Jerusalem when David conquered it from the Jebusites. These gates are famously called “everlasting doors” in the KJV, “ancient doors” in the ESV. Some think this refers to the durability and antiquity

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<sup>18</sup> See Gregory of Nyssa in the Appendix for example.

<sup>19</sup> These two questions as well as my exegesis follow closely that of Cooper (see note 9).

of those giant Jebusite gates. If they are, it is only typologically. But there is a problem here, which is that the song tells the gates to “lift up” (literally “raise up”). But ancient gates didn’t go up, like you might find in a medieval castle. They were hinged and opened sideways.

Here’s where we have to [enter back into our ancient worldview](#) and see Psalm 24 at least partially as a polemic against the nations. A curious fact is met when we understand that it isn’t just Heaven that has gates, but Hades (as Jesus himself said). This was true throughout the ancient world: Egypt, Canaan, Babylon. They called the gates of the Underworld *everlasting gates*.<sup>20</sup> They sang about these gates often, curiously, it was usually in the context of a god descending to the netherworld to confront the demonic forces of the infernal realm.

For example, the Egyptians<sup>21</sup> describe the journey of a messenger of **Horus** into the netherworld where he meets **Osiris**, “the Eternal King.” He must pass through a series of gates which are guarded by demons. He is granted safe passage and the demons are prevented from harming him for, “**The gods of the netherworld fear you, the gates beware of you.**” “**Horus has commanded: ‘Lift up your faces and**

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<sup>20</sup> Cooper, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Egyptian Coffin Text Spell #312.

look at him ... Get out of the way, you wardens of your gates, for him in front of me; clear the way for him. Let him pass by, O you who dwell in your caverns, wardens of the House of Osiris.”

These gates are defenses against its enemies, as Jesus himself told us. In Babylon, *Ishtar's Descent* to the netherworld takes place through seven well-guarded gates. “Be adjured by the seven doors of the netherworld; be adjured by Nedu, chief doorkeeper of the netherworld.”<sup>22</sup> But these gates usually resist invasion. The main way is through a series of questions designed to challenge the one who wishes to enter. In another Egyptian text,<sup>23</sup> a deceased person tries to enter. Curiously, he cries out, “Rescue me, protect me indeed ... for I am clean of mouth and clean of hands” (cf. **Ps 24:4-6**). He begs Osiris to rescue him. Then the doorkeepers arise, “We will not let you enter past us unless you tellest our name.” Who is this? Here is who I am. Four times they say this. Four times he gives four different names.

The point here is not that the Bible is somehow copying the pagans. God forbid. Our song is quite different in other ways. Rather, it is that it is using the pagans own religion

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<sup>22</sup> *Babylonian Incantation CT XVI.13.ii.44ff.*, cited in *CAD* E.311a. see **Cooper**, 48.

<sup>23</sup> *Book of the Dead* 125.

against them in its own unique, mysterious, and truly astonishing way. Immediately after it is promised to the righteous generation that they will receive blessing and salvation, the lyrics shift to **the gates**. Remember the gates of Jerusalem or of a temple? Holy hills and temples connected not only earth to heaven, but earth to the underworld. The gates can go both ways.

So, **the gatekeepers of the netherworld are summoned to open the gates**. “Gates” is a metonymy for the divine doormen. But the keepers do not grant entry freely. Twice, they challenge the Commander’s credentials in our Psalm. They only bow and obey once they know they have no choice. When they understand who it is! “**Lift up your heads**” means not “Hurray, the King is here,” but rather, “**Rear your heads, O Gatemens! Stand at attention, Gates of the Netherworld! The King of Glory would enter!**” Imagine their shock and horror. God has descended to Hell itself.

Who is this King of Glory? They didn’t know, because they didn’t recognize him. He was *a man*! Not Osiris. Not Ishtar. Not Gilgamesh. Not Baal or Yam. God in flesh. And how is Yahweh described? “**Strong and mighty ... mighty in battle**” (8). Or Yahweh, Mighty and Heroic, Yahweh, a

Hero of War. Uh oh! Why has he come? This is the imagery of the Angel of Yahweh, but it is a prophecy of Christ as a man. Open your gates you doormen of the underworld. Lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of Glory may come in (9)! Who is this King of glory? Yahweh of Hosts (10). He who rules with legions of angels at his command. He is the King of Glory. Now open your gates! Selah. Truly, if there was ever a need for Selah, it is here!

**What is this describing?** Curiously, while we have seen that many have suggested that this refers to the ascension of Christ, I rather think that it refers to his **descending into hell to proclaim his defeat of the demons and Satan to the legions and hounds of the underworld**. For in the understanding of this line of the creed, this descent is viewed as a battle where Jesus is victorious. And in the context of needing to be righteous, in the context of the righteous needing help, in the context of all we have seen in the past 10 songs, it refers to the Lord Jesus taking the train of captives held long in Sheol's grip and leading them upward into Paradise above. We will see in greater detail in Psalm 68 and the setting free of the saints as they ride the train of their king to Glory above.

Curiously, **Handel**—whose *Messiah* is the stuff of classical music legend, has these verses not after the resurrection, but before it. It is in the Second Movement, not the Third. I think he was reading rightly. This follows the ancient interpretation found in Eusebius, Ambrose, Athanasius, Hippolytus, Gregory of Nyssa, Irenaeus, Jerome, Justin and more.<sup>24</sup>

Listen to them tell us an old, old story as we conclude. “He was crucified and he died, and he descended to Hell, and there he ruled all things. The gatekeepers of Hell, seeing him, were terrified. After three days he was resurrected from Hades” (*Council of Sirmium*, 359 AD).<sup>25</sup>

**Epiphanius** writes about how Jesus breaches the gates of the netherworld as his angelic entourage cries out **Psalm 24:7-10** repeatedly. The demons are in disarray; the angels pursue and capture them. In the meantime, Adam is

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<sup>24</sup> **Gregory of Nyssa** (On the Ascension of Christ); **Ambrose of Milan** (*The Faith* 4.1.3ff. and *The Mysteries* 36 *Apocalypse of Peter* 17; **Athanasius**, *The Incarnation* 25.5–6 (SC 199, 358–59); *Against Arius* §41B; **Gregory Nazianzenus**, *Oratio XLV* 24–25; **Hippolytus** (PG 83, col. 176 = GCS Hippolytus 1/2, 147); **Irenaeus**, “Erweis der apostolischen Verkündigung” §§78, 83–85 (TU 30/1 [1907]); **Jerome**, *Epistola XVIII* (see above, n. 85); **Justin**, *First Apology* §51; Origen, *Commentary on John* 6.287–88; **Tertullian**, *De Fuga in Persecutione* 12.4 (CSEL 76, 36). This note summarizes, “All of these authors cite Ps 24:7–10 in connection with the ascension, and most either describe or allude to the preceding descent-battle. On the fascinating notion that ascension to heaven after death represents a transformation of the imagery of descent.” Cooper, 57 n. 89.

<sup>25</sup> I knew nothing of this council prior to this study. It turns out it was not accepted by the churches because of its semi-Arian overtones. This excerpt, however, is no more unorthodox than saying than anything in the Apostle’s Creed.

awakened by the noise, and he understands that his deliverance is at hand. He prostrates himself at the feet of Jesus, who leads him, together with Abel, Abraham, and all the rest into heaven.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (also called the *Acts of Pilate*), elaborates that after the Psalm is recited over and over again, when the gatekeepers resist, Jesus smashes the gates and enters and defeats the powers of hell. This is beautifully and almost poetically concluded this way:

For three days the band of the righteous was mustered and assembled, so that the wickedness of Death could no longer exercise its might against them ... Jesus smashed the eternal bolts, and the iron gates collapsed on Christ's command ... The saving divine spirit rejoices, and his triumphal chariot accompanies the band of the righteous and holy ... The saving divine spirit hastens forth and commands the gates of heaven to open: "Open, open, and rend the immortal bolt. God Christ has stamped out death and called the men he has adopted back to heaven." ... It is the Holy Spirit which, in order to show us the might of the Commander Christ, says: "Raise up the gates for your prince, and raise yourselves, O eternal gates, and the King

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<sup>26</sup> Cooper, 57, n. 88.

of Glory will enter.” This the angels [demonic doorkeepers?]  
—who had no information since they could not have known that the Word of God had descended to earth—are commanded. They respond, therefore, with an urgent question: “Who is this King of Glory?” To their question Christ responds with the radiant majesty of his divinity: “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.” Then the watchers of the heavens recognize the son of God, and they realize everything that has occurred before. They see the captured weaponry of the defeated enemy and, recalling the first command, they too cry aloud together with those who are ascending: “Raise up the gates, you who preside over the gates, and raise yourselves, O eternal gates, and the King of Glory will enter.”<sup>27</sup>

Truly, beloved, the King of Glory has entered in. He has descended to earth so that we might ascend to heaven. But he has not just made this possible. He has firmly established it in his death for our sins, his descent not merely to earth, but below the earth, to free the saints from Abraham’s bosom (perhaps Paradise) as he violently overthrew the gates of hell at the cost of his own body and blood, and in his

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<sup>27</sup> This is from **Julius Firmicus Maternus**’s *The Error of Pagan Religions* (fourth century).

resurrection and ascension, he now sits with the saints in heaven (perhaps also Paradise), at the right hand of the Father. And the church of Jesus Christ enters into it when the gospel is proclaimed, people repent, and captives are set free from the grips of Satan and sin and death. Has Jesus powerful set you free?

This is no myth. This is prophecy fulfilled in history. It is the teaching of Holy Scripture. This is your King of Glory. And if he has released David and Abraham, and raised many from the dead at his own death (**Matt 27:53?**) and brought them safely home, how will he not also do it for you who believe upon him as the King? He is how you get to the Holy Hill. He is the one who makes you holy. So, go forth from here ready to serve and obey him better. March out with the banner of Christ with the shouts of triumph. For he is risen and is glorious and mighty in victory.

## Appendix

Psalm 24 has a rich history of interpretation, including the one in the sermon. Phil Sumpter, who did a Ph.D. on this Psalm has a good summary of the views on the internet. I thought I would reproduce it here.

### Psalm 24 in early Christian exegesis<sup>28</sup>

The oldest undeniable reference to Psalm 24 (Kähler wonders whether it lies behind [1 Corinthians 2:8](#)) is in the Apocalypse of Peter, in which Peter, during the Transfiguration and the appearance Moses and Elijah (Matt 17), asks Jesus where the other righteous are. As answer, he receives a vision of Paradise filled with believers. In this vision, the righteous—who are identified with the righteous of [Ps 24:6](#)—are kept in a kind of “pre-Heaven” as prisoners. A dramatic scene then unfolds, in which Jesus and the two prophets ascend first into this “First Heaven” and then take the righteous further upwards into the true Heaven, the Second Heaven, in order to consummate their salvation. This ascension creates “great fear and horror,” implying that some kind of celestial resistance needs to be overcome. This occurs with the calling out of [Ps 24:7](#): “Open wide the Gates, you princes.”

Here is the relevant text, with allusion to Ps 24 underlined:

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<sup>28</sup> Phil Sumpter, “Psalm 24 in Early Christian Exegesis (in Commemoration of Ascension Day,” *Narrative and Ontology* (FRIDAY, 22 MAY 2009), <http://narrativeandontology.blogspot.com/2009/05/psalm-24-in-early-christian-exegesis-in.html>

And behold, suddenly a voice came from Heaven and said: “This is my dear son, with whom I am pleased, and my commandments ...” And an extremely large and sparkling white cloud came over our head and took up our Lord and Moses and Elijah. And I quaked and was horrified. And we looked upwards and Heaven opened up and we saw people in the flesh, and they came and greeted our Lord and Moses and Elijah and ascended into the Second Heaven. Then the word of scripture was fulfilled: “This generation seeks him and seeks the face of the God of Jacob.” And great fear and horror occurred in Heaven. The angels grouped together so that the word of Scripture would be fulfilled: “Open wide the Gates, you princes.” Following this, the Heaven which had been opened was closed again.”[\*]

This understanding of the Psalm remained incredibly fruitful throughout the history of the early church, within all the major theological centres (Palestine, Alexandria, Carthage, South Gaul, Rome, Asia Minor). For the sake of space, I will simply list the main variations and emphases as found amongst the major theologians of these schools in this period:

- For Justin, in his dialogue with the Jew Trypho, our Psalm functioned as a prophecy of Jesus' ascension. He read it in connection with the other major Christian proof texts: Isaiah 53 and [Daniel 7:13](#). The Isaiah passage seems to have furnished him with the answer to the question as to why Jesus experienced resistance before the gates of heaven. He arose in the form of the suffering servant, as so was not recognised by the keepers of the gate.

- For Irenaeus, Jesus is not recognised because he was “in the flesh.” He also interprets the dialogue between gate keeper and those requesting access as being between angels of the lower realms and angels of the upper realms.
- Tertullian is the first to categorise the Lord demanding entrance as *homo* (“man”).
- Hippolytus is the first to categorise the Lord as *soter* (saviour), a term with ecclesiological and political overtones.
- Interestingly, the Gnostics also had a similar interpretation, which in itself is not un-Christian. They identified the identity of the Lord with [Psalm 22:6](#): “But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people”
- Origin applies the standard Christian eschatological interpretation to his allegorical interpretation of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, understood as his entrance into the “true” Jerusalem. The city is astounded at his entrance and asks, “Who is this?” Again, the confusion is due to Jesus' incarnation.
- In the time of Athanasius, this standard interpretation had become so established that he could simply assume it when interpreting other texts, e.g. the motif of incarnation and exultation in [Phil. 2:5-11](#). For Athanasius and those like him, the Psalm had become “a means of making events which would have otherwise been impossible to know about both conceivable and tellable.”

- Later Church Fathers added their own interpretations. Augustine interpreted the mythological language ethically, while Ambrosius talked of the Lord's entrance into the human soul. Nevertheless, the basic schema remained the same.
- As far as I can see, one Church Father who took an innovative but later popular route is Gregory of Nyssa, for whom the Psalm was a supplement to the written gospels themselves, reporting events not contained therein. In a sermon on the Psalm, Gregory understands the two-fold questioning (vv. 7 and 10) as representing two different events, and two different locations. The first concerns Christ's descent to earth, where he went on to conquer the gates of Hell (hence his identification as “mighty warrior”). The second refers to the gates of heaven, where he returns, having completed his mission. In order to access to the first, he became incarnate. On his return journey, however, he remained incarnate, thus the inability of the angels to recognise him on his return.
- This “Harrowing of Hell” motif finds its most significant development in the Gospel of Nicodemus (as I posted on [here](#), thanks to [Vox Stefani](#)). According to this account, two righteous Jews who had been resurrected from the dead shortly after Jesus' own resurrection give eyewitness reports on how their resurrection actually took place. In short, Jesus entered Hell and there was a call to open the gates. Satan responded by locking them in fear. The enslaved saints inside cried out again for the doors to be opened. Satan's partner, inferus, asks “Who is the king of glory?” King David, in his function as prophet, answers

with [Ps. 24:8](#) and repeats the demand to open the door. Inferus binds Satan and, so it seems, lets Jesus in. Jesus enters, establishes his “war trophy” (*Siegeszeichen*), which is the cross, and then takes all the saints to Heaven.

[★] My translation, based on the German translation by E. Hennecke, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen* (1924). Cited in Kähler, *Te Deum*, 54.