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Passover, Liberation, and the Defeat of Death and the Devil in Hebrews: A Proposal for the *Descensus Christi* and the Harrowing of Hades in Hebrews 2:14–15

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Abstract

According to David M. Moffitt, Passover themes permeate Hebrews 1–2. While Passover is normally understood to be apotropaic, Jesus' death in 2.14–15 defeats the devil. How is this defeat achieved? This article proposes that this victory is a synthesis of several strands of Jewish and early Christian tradition, conflating traditions about Jesus' paschal death and war against demonic evil. This conflation likely reflects contemporary Jewish beliefs about angels. In Second Temple literature, Michael, Melchizedek and the heavenly hosts fight against demonic forces opposed to God. In Hebrews, the Passover typologically foreshadows the liberating work of Christ, with the devil taking the place of Pharaoh and the realm of the dead as Egypt, the place of bondage. Just as Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, so does Christ liberate the dead from death and slavery to the devil through his complete experience of human death and his triumphant resurrection. This article therefore suggests that Hebrews contains early evidence for Christian belief in the *descensus Christi* and the harrowing of Hades, conceived as a new exodus from the bondage of death to heavenly glory. Therefore, when Christ rises from the dead, he does not do so alone, but rises as the first of those liberated from death, providing new significance to the quotation of Isa 8.18 in Heb 2.13.

Keywords: Hebrews; Passover; *descensus Christi*; harrowing of Hades; Satan; Melchizedek; new Exodus; resurrection; Dead Sea Scrolls; Christology

1. Introduction: Jesus' Death and the Defeat of the Devil in Hebrews

The central argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews explains how Christ achieves the ultimate Day of Atonement sacrifice. However, Heb 2.14 states that Jesus 'through death might disable the one who has the power of death, this is the devil' (ἵνα διὰ τοῦ θανάτου καταργήσῃ τὸν τὸ κράτος ἔχοντα τοῦ θανάτου, τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὸν διάβολον).¹ No aspect of the Levitical Day of Atonement ritual involves *defeating* the devil.² Instead, the context of Heb 2.14–15 seems to place it primarily within a larger Passover–Exodus typology, in which Jesus' death is understood as a sacrifice of Passover rather than of Yom Kippur. However,

¹ Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.

² However, there were connections between Yom Kippur and warfare against demonic power. Ancient and modern commentators have noted the close association of the goat 'Asa'el and the demon 'Azaz'el. This connection will be discussed in §6 below. Cf. D. Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century* (WUNT I 163; Tübingen Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 87.

this also fails to explain the language of ‘defeating the devil’ – nowhere in Passover is the devil defeated.

In the Passover ritual, as recounted in Exodus and remembered by Jews and Christians, the blood of the Passover lamb plays an *apotropaic* role.³ It shields the Israelites from the power of the destroyer, but it does not disable or destroy the destroyer. More appears to be going on in Heb 2.14–15 than a simple one-to-one typological correspondence with either Passover or Yom Kippur. How is this defeat accomplished? Or more specifically, what constructive role does the defeat of the devil play within the larger theological argument of Hebrews? Why include it at all?

This article will seek to answer these questions through a defence and examination of the Passover/Exodus typology and the nature of death in Hebrews (§2–4), before examining how the author combines two streams of tradition: first, early Christian beliefs about the paschal death of Christ (§5) and second, contemporary Jewish and Christian beliefs about angels and supernatural warfare (§6). The article will then turn to the significance of these themes for Hebrews (§7), before concluding with evidence from early Christian tradition to support these arguments (§8).

This article therefore will examine, first, the presence of pre-existent tradition in Heb 2.14–15, and then, secondly, how the author deploys and adapts this tradition for his own theological purposes. These arguments will be supported with close readings of selected passages in Hebrews (2.14–18; 11.28), along with evidence from Second Temple Jewish and early Christian literature. In conclusion, this article seeks to demonstrate that Hebrews reflects early Christian belief in what eventually came to be known as the *descensus Christi ad inferos*⁴ and the harrowing of Hades.⁵

Scholars such as John A. MacCulloch, Richard Bauckham, Harold W. Attridge and James A. Charlesworth have investigated Christian descent traditions against the diverse backgrounds of Greek and Roman *katabatic* traditions, as well as the more distant descent traditions of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Babylonia and Persia.⁶ However, despite being enshrined in the Apostles’ Creed and witnessed by extensive apostolic and patristic

³ On Passover and Easter, see J. B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover: From the Earliest Times to A. D. 70* (London Oriental Series 12; London: Oxford University Press, 1963); P. F. Bradshaw and L. A. Hoffman, eds., *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999); C. Leonhard, *The Jewish Pesach and the Origins of the Christian Easter: Open Questions in Current Research* (SJ 35; De Gruyter, 2006). For recent surveys of Passover and Exodus traditions in early Christianity, see S. M. Ehorn, ed., *Exodus in the New Testament* (LNTS 663; London: T&T Clark, 2022).

⁴ On the linguistic and theological difference between *ad inferos* and *ad infernos*, see M. F. Connell, ‘*Descensus Christi Ad Inferos*: Christ’s Descent to the Dead’, *Theological Studies* 62 (2001) 262–82.

⁵ The terminology of *descensus Christi* reflects a later stage of theological development than that which appears in the New Testament. However, given the lack of other, more suitable labels, this terminology will be used with qualification to refer to the descent of Christ’s soul to the underworld from the period of his physical death on the cross to his bodily resurrection. On the *descensus* in early tradition, see Connell, ‘*Descensus Christi Ad Inferos*’. For studies based in systematics, Church history and related fields, see A. L. Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Baltasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); H. Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009); M. Y. Emerson, ‘*He Descended to the Dead*: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019). On the doctrine, see J. A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930).

⁶ MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*; R. Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (NovTSup 93; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998) 9–48; H. W. Attridge, ‘Liberating Death’s Captives: Reconsideration of an Early Christian Myth’, *Essays on John and Hebrews* (WUNT 264; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 247–59; J. H. Charlesworth, ‘Exploring the Origins of the *descensus ad inferos*’, *Earliest Christianity within the Boundaries of Judaism: Essays in Honor of Bruce Chilton* (eds. A. Avery-Peck et al.; The Brill Reference Library of Judaism 49; Leiden: Brill, 2016) 372–95.

evidence, investigation into the origins of the *descensus Christi* within New Testament studies has suffered from neglect.⁷

Though denied by some, evidence for Christ's descent has occasionally been found in Hebrews.⁸ In 1911, Friedrich Loofs wrote that in comparison with other New Testament texts, 'We are on surer ground in saying that the idea of the *Descensus* was known to the author of the Hebrews.'⁹ He was followed in 1930 by MacCulloch.¹⁰ More recently, Attridge has called for scholars

to recognize that an early, if not the earliest, attestation of the motif of Christ's descent appears in the Epistle to the Hebrews, in a text generally overlooked or slighted in treatments of the theme.¹¹

Building on this work, I suggest that Hebrews depicts Jesus' defeat of death and the devil precisely through Christ's death, descent to the underworld, bodily resurrection and the liberation of the dead. If this is correct, then Hebrews can be convincingly read as early evidence for the *descensus Christi* and the harrowing of Hades. This, I argue, the author does through the development of a new Exodus typology, which Christ initiates through his paschal death, liberating those enslaved to death in the underworld.

Before beginning the main argument, I would like to clarify the relationship between Hebrews' typological use of Passover and the Day of Atonement rituals. The typological use of these two rituals complements one another and, importantly, I suggest, serves different theological functions. These functions address two different theological problems: first, the subjugation of humanity to death and, second, the requirement for the purification of the heavenly sanctuary. William Loader identifies these two theological problems when he writes,

It is possible that the author of Hebrews saw at least two elements to Christ's saving achievement: disempowerment of the devil and so removal of death as a barrier and purification, and may not have seen them as occurring in the one event, but, unlikely as it may seem, that is to be tested.¹²

⁷ There are exceptions, such as J. Jeremias, 'Zwischen Karfreitag und Ostern: Descensus und Ascensus in der Karfreitagstheologie des Neuen Testaments', *ZNW* 42(1949) 194–201. More recently, Charlesworth has argued that one influence on the *descensus* tradition may be found in the *Thanksgiving Hymns* (1QH^a 25.13–15), which was later developed in the *Odes of Solomon* (42.10–20), Charlesworth, 'Exploring the Origins of the *descensus ad inferos*'. Bauckham also surveys multiple streams of influence, Bauckham, *Fate of the Dead*, 38–9. Cf. L. J. Kreitzer, 'The Plutonium of Heirapolis: A Geographical Solution for the Puzzle of Ephesians 4.9–10', *Hierapolis in the Heavens: Studies in the Letter to the Ephesians* (LNTS 368; London: T&T Clark, 2007). Also see the references in Hebrews below.

⁸ For an example of a denial of the possibility of a descent, see Joachim Jeremias, who argues that Hebrews cannot refer to a post-mortem descent because Jesus' high priestly work takes place in heaven. Jeremias, 'Zwischen Karfreitag und Ostern', 197–9, 201.

⁹ Loofs based this assessment on his interpretation of 11.39f and 12.22f, among other texts. F. Loofs, 'Descent to Hades (Christ's)', *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (ed. J. Hastings; vol. iv; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1911) 648–63, 662.

¹⁰ MacCulloch, following Loofs, similarly bases his assessment on 11.40; 12.22; 13.20, among others, MacCulloch, *Harrowing of Hell*, 48–9.

¹¹ Attridge, 'Liberating Death's Captives', 250.

¹² W. Loader, 'Revisiting High Priesthood Christology in Hebrews', *ZNW* 109 (2018) 235–83, 257.

Loader goes on to reject this possibility, locating all of Christ's salvific work at his death on the cross. By contrast, I suggest that the author of Hebrews treats these as (conceptually) separate problems, which are solved at different points in Christ's salvific work.¹³ Humanity's subjugation to death is addressed through his Passover typology, while the author addresses the second problem through his exposition of the Day of Atonement. These two problems have different causes, which has a very significant effect not only on the temporal dimensions of Christ's work (*when* it happens) but also on its geographical dimensions (*where* it happens). In this article, I will focus on Passover, but will do so with a view to contributing towards the ongoing academic discussions on the nature of Jesus' high priesthood.

The complementary relationship between the Passover and Day of Atonement typologies can be seen most clearly through the lenses of a three-storey cosmology.¹⁴ Through his paschal death, Jesus liberates his people from the fear of death, and, I argue, the place of death, underworld. If his paschal death in some way recapitulates the Exodus story, then it liberates God's people from Egypt (death and the underworld) but does not, in itself, bring them into the promised land (rest and communion with God in heaven), a task which requires Jesus' high priestly work.¹⁵ However, we must now defend the presence of Passover typology in Hebrews.

2. Passover and Hebrews: The Death of the Firstborn

Does Hebrews use Passover imagery? Not according to Harold Attridge, who claims that 'Hebrews does not make explicit any symbolic or typological significance of this event...'¹⁶ He does not find Passover typology in 2.14–15, though he does allow for allusions to the Exodus in vs. 15.¹⁷ Instead, Attridge, along with William Lane, locates this language

¹³ I say conceptually because there is good reason to allow for some blending of Passover and Yom Kippur typologies in Hebrews. Even though the author of Hebrews is primarily interested in Yom Kippur, he could not have been ignorant of Jesus' death as occurring at Passover. This evident historical fact may have provided an impetus for him to include a place for Passover typology in his larger theological agenda. As Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra has shown of Yom Kippur, in some Jewish apocalyptic texts, 'The goat originally sent to 'Az'azel was seen as the personification of 'Az'azel, the demonic source of sin', Stökl, *The Impact of Yom Kippur*, 89. Thus, there may have been a natural meeting point of Passover and (an apocalyptic) Yom Kippur at the point of reckoning with demonic evil. It is therefore not impossible, and perhaps likely, that apocalyptic understandings of Yom Kippur may have influenced the Passover typology of Heb 2.14–15.

¹⁴ While I assume a three-story cosmology, the cosmology of Hebrews is, as Moffitt calls it, 'a longstanding scholarly divide', D. M. Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement: New Perspectives on Jesus's Death, Resurrection, and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022) 124.

¹⁵ On the structural correspondence of the Passover/Exodus and Hebrews, Moffitt writes, 'Once the people were freed from their enslavement to Pharaoh, Moses led them into the wilderness, where they met and worshipped God at Sinai. It is striking how well this aspect of the story aligns with the author's moves in Hebrews 3–4, in which he not only makes his first explicit comparisons between Jesus and Moses but also goes on to compare his audience with the exodus generation – the very generation that was liberated from Egypt and then journeyed into the wilderness. It is also striking that, later in the homily, the author links his audience with the "congregation of the firstborn," who, like Moses and the exodus generation at Sinai, are gathered around Jesus at Zion', Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 15–16.

¹⁶ H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) 343. For more, see D. M. Moffitt, 'Exodus in Hebrews', *Exodus in the New Testament* (ed. S. M. Ehorn; LNTS 663; London: T&T Clark, 2022) 146–63, 153, esp. fn. 32.

¹⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 93; cf. 79–82. He has elsewhere written, 'Nonetheless, alternative readings of the pericope – as an example, for instance, of an Exodus typology – fail to do justice to the importance of a coherent mythological scheme in the work', Attridge, 'Liberating Death's Captives', 250. Johnson also resists Exodus imagery in his comments on vs. 14–18, L. T. Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 100.

in Greco-Roman hero myths (Orpheus/Eurydice, Herakles, etc.).¹⁸ While this is possible, Attridge has too quickly dismissed the possibility of Passover typology in Hebrews.

By contrast, David M. Moffitt has recently argued that the Passover/Exodus narrative plays an important role in Hebrews, especially Hebrews 1–2.¹⁹ In Exodus, Moses tells Pharaoh to release Israel, God's firstborn, or else God will kill Pharaoh's firstborn (πρωτότοκος; Exod 4.22–3). In the final plague, all the unprotected firstborn children throughout Egypt are struck down.²⁰ For this reason, all Israelite firstborn, human or animal, belong to God and must be redeemed.²¹ Hebrews' language of the firstborn (πρωτότοκος) evokes the Passover as well as the liberating work of Christ.²² Hebrews uses the term πρωτότοκος three times, once of Jesus (Heb 1.6), once referring to the Israelites at Passover (11.28) and once of believers (Heb 12.23). In using this term, the author of Hebrews evokes a Christological understanding of Passover, a term applied to Christ elsewhere in the New Testament.²³

In Heb 1.6, it is God who 'leads the firstborn into' (εἰσαγάγῃ τὸν πρωτότοκον) the οἰκουμένη. The references to 'leading' (εἰσάγω) and the firstborn evoke the Exodus narrative.²⁴ Moffitt has argued that the οἰκουμένη is the heavenly assembly, making Heb 1.6 a reference to Jesus' ascension and glorification.²⁵ It is God who 'leads' Jesus into the heavenly assembly, just as God led Israel out of Egypt. The author then places the words of Deut 32.43 into God's mouth, calling his angelic servants to worship the Son.²⁶ 'Firstborns' are thus a key part of the Passover/Exodus narrative, a theme which the author of Hebrews is attentive to.

Speaking of Heb 2.14–18, Moffitt writes,

Within the larger context of Hebrews the logic of these verses appears to presuppose an implicit comparison between Jesus' death and Moses' act of applying the blood of the Passover lamb to the doors and lintels of the Israelite houses.²⁷

¹⁸ Attridge, 'Liberating Death's Captives', 252; see 252–9. He concludes, 'Hence the possibility should be left open that apocalyptic is not the mother of all Christian theologoumenon and that the inspiration for the account of Christ's liberation of those held by the power of death was the ancient heroic liberation story', Attridge, 'Liberating Death's Captives', 257. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 79–82. W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC 47A; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991) 61. Backhaus includes mythic parallels along with themes from apocalyptic Jewish literature, see K. Backhaus, *Der sprechende Gott: Gesammelte Studien zum Hebräerbrief* (WUNT 1/240; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 134. By contrast, see G. L. Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 147–8.

¹⁹ Moffitt, 'Exodus', for a survey of commentators' opinions on this, see fn. 32 on 153; D. M. Moffitt, 'Jubilees and Hebrews 2:10–18: Passover and the Defeat of the Devil', *Reading Hebrews in Context: The Sermon in Second Temple Judaism* (eds. B. C. Backwell et al; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023) 39–45; Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 9–27. Weiss does not identify a Passover/Exodus typology in these verses, H.-F. Weiß, *Der Brief an Die Hebräer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) 219–20. As already discussed, neither does Attridge.

²⁰ Exod 12.29; 13.15 cf. 11.5; 12.12.

²¹ Exod 13.2, 12–15; 22.29; 34.19–20.

²² Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 20–1.

²³ Lk 2.7; Rom 8.29; Col 1.15, 18; Rev 1.5.

²⁴ 'God performs this deliverance in order to "εἰσάγω" (εἰσαγεῖν, Exod. 3.8; 13.5, 11; 15.17; 23.20) Israel into the promised land of their inheritance, which Exod. 16.35 LXX describes as "an inhabitable land" (εἰς γῆν οἰκουμένην).' Moffitt, 'Exodus', 152.

²⁵ D. M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NovTSup 141; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 53–118.

²⁶ For a prosopological reading, see M. N. Pierce, *Divine Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Recontextualization of Spoken Quotations of Scripture* (SNTSMS 178; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 46–52.

²⁷ Moffitt, 'Exodus', 153–4.

Two specific clues suggest the presence of a Passover/Exodus in Heb 2.14–18: the references to ‘slavery’ (δουλεία; 2.15) and liberation (ἀπαλλάσσω; 2.15).²⁸ In Exodus, Israel was enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt, the ‘house of slavery’, (οἴκου δουλείας; Exod 13.3) a refrain echoed throughout the Scriptures.²⁹ Attridge interprets 2.15 in ‘existential terms’.³⁰ Yet, Hebrews is elsewhere able to speak of things in both an external and an internalised way.³¹ While the author can speak about bondage to the fear of death for the living, this does not exclude (and may presuppose) the actual bondage of the post-mortem soul in the underworld (i.e., the reality or object of fear for the living).³²

When speaking of human death, death can be understood as the *condition* of mortality (and therefore separation from God), as well as the *location* of the deceased (the underworld).³³ In Jewish and Christian anthropology, the defining characteristic of what it means to be human is to die (Heb 9.27).³⁴ Christ, therefore, necessarily shared ‘blood and flesh’ (2.14) with humanity, becoming like them ‘in every respect’ (2.17), including death as a necessary entailment. As Luke Timothy Johnson explains, Hebrews is clear that Jesus defeats death *through* death: ‘Jesus does not conquer death by avoiding it or commanding its disappearance, but by *experiencing* it in the manner of other human beings.’³⁵ In other words, to experience the human condition fully, Christ needed to fully experience human death.

Hebrews specifies that Jesus rose ἐκ νεκρῶν (13.20) and also uses this phrase of resurrection in general (11.19). According to Hebrews and the rest of the New Testament, resurrection happens ἐκ νεκρῶν.³⁶ Common English translations, such as ‘from the dead’, suggest to the reader the state of death and obscure the sense of the plural, which could be translated as ‘from among the dead (people)’. Though some later Jewish apocalyptic texts depict a heavenly post-mortem location for the dead, the overwhelming location of the dead in ancient Jewish literature is the underworld.³⁷ Richard Bauckham explains,

Since the commonest Jewish view in New Testament times was that all the dead descend to Sheol (Hades), Jesus’ descent to Hades was simply the corollary of his death, just as it was implied in his resurrection ‘from the dead.’³⁸

²⁸ The reference to the ‘seed of Abraham’ (σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ; 2.16) might also contribute to this typology. See Moffitt, ‘Exodus’, 153–6; Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 14–16.

²⁹ Exod 13.3, 14; 20.2; Deut 5.6; 6.12; 7.8; 8.14; 13.5, 10; 24.17; Judg 6.8; Jer 34.13; Mic 6.4.

³⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 93.

³¹ For example, he understands Christ’s work to have been achieved in the heavenly temple, but this does not prevent him from using similar language in a personalised, interior way (Heb 10.22; cf. 9.9, 14). Also see L. T. Stuckenbruck, ‘The Interiorization of Dualism within the Human Being in Second Temple Judaism: the Treatise of the Two Spirits (1QS III: 13–IV:26) in its Tradition-Historical Context’, *Light Against Darkness: Dualism in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and the Contemporary World* (eds. A. Lange et al.; JAJSupp 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011) 145–68. Also see Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 132.

³² Contra Attridge, *Hebrews*, 93.

³³ The location of the dead is suggested by the phrase ἐκ νεκρῶν (11.19; 13.20), discussed below.

³⁴ For example, Gen 3.19; Ps 90.10; Is 40.6–8; with qualification, Wis 2.1, 5; Rom 5.12–21; 1 Cor 15.22. Also see, J. Maston, *Divine and Human Agency in Second Temple Judaism and Paul* (WUNT II/297; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 84–5.

³⁵ Emphasis original, Johnson, *Hebrews*, 100.

³⁶ Matt 17.9; Mk 6.14; 9.9, 10; 12.25; Lk 9.7; Lk 16.31; 20.35; 24.46; Jn 2.22; 12.1, 9, 17; 20.9; 21.14; Acts 3.15; 4.2, 10; 10.41; 13.30, 34; 17.3, 31; Rom 4.24; 6.4, 9, 13; 7.4; 8.11 x2; 10.7, 9; 11.15; 1 Cor. 15.12, 20; Gal. 1.1; Eph. 1.20; Phil. 3.11; Col. 2.12; 1 Thes. 1.10; 2 Tim. 2.8; 1 Pet. 1.3, 21. Cf. Eph. 5.14; Col. 1.18

³⁷ Whenever a directional marker is given in the Scriptures, Sheol is always below: Gen 37.35; 42.38; 44.29; Num 16.33; 1 Sam 2.6; 1 Kgs 2.6; Job 7.9; 17.16; 21.13; Ps 55.15; Prov 15.24; Is 5.14; 14.11, 15; 57.9; Ezek 31.15, 16, 17; 32.21, 27. See also, *Ant.* 18.14.

³⁸ Bauckham, *Fate of the Dead*, 38.

The use of the phrase ἐκ νεκρῶν in Hebrews suggests Jesus' resurrection from the underworld (11.19; 13.20; for ἀπὸ νεκρῶν, see 6.2).³⁹ Colossians 1.18 and Rev 1.5 similarly call Christ 'the firstborn of the dead' (Col. 1.18 πρῶτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν; Rev. 1.5 ὁ πρῶτότοκος τῶν νεκρῶν). While Hebrews does not use this exact phrase, Hebrews does depict Christ as the 'founder of our salvation', (τὸν ἀρχηγόν τῆς σωτηρίας; 2:10) who opens the way for his brothers and sisters to God. But what does it mean for Jesus to experience death and descend to the realm of the dead? The following section will seek to answer these questions by looking at how death and the underworld could be personified and described.

3. The Personification of Death and the Underworld

Death is the inescapable condition of humanity.⁴⁰ Sheol and Death were sometimes personified in the Hebrew Scriptures.⁴¹ Like the god Mot, Sheol can be personified with a hungry mouth devouring the dead.⁴² The 'earth' (אֶרֶץ) is also sometimes connected to the realm of the dead and personified as one who swallows.⁴³ In Isa 28.15, 18, the Israelites must be freed from their covenant with Death/Sheol.⁴⁴ As Tromp has documented, the underworld can be described as a prison⁴⁵ with gates,⁴⁶ bars,⁴⁷ cords⁴⁸ or chains.⁴⁹ No one who enters is permitted to leave.⁵⁰

Richard Bauckham has documented in detail how carceral imagery is picked up by early Christians to describe Christ's liberation of the captives of the underworld.⁵¹ In his study of the origins of Christ's descent, Charlesworth identifies Ps 68.19–24, Amos 9.2–3, Zech 9.11 and Isa 24.21–2 as possible sources of inspiration for the *descensus*.⁵² Zech 9.11 and Isa 24.22 describe the release of prisoners held in a pit. Psalms 68 combines themes of captivity, deliverance, escape from death and the destruction of enemies.⁵³ Significantly, Eph 4.8–10 quotes and interprets Ps 68.18 in what appears to be a discussion of Christ's subterranean descent.⁵⁴

³⁹ Contra Backhaus, *Der sprechende Gott*, 135.

⁴⁰ Hebrews states this explicitly (Heb 9.27). See also sources listed in fn. 34 above.

⁴¹ As a word of caution, it must be noted that the poetic language of death and the underworld both in the Hebrew Bible and other cognate bodies of literature is expansive in its breadth and diversity. This study focuses on a particular set of terms and motifs, aiming for brevity rather than comprehensiveness. For example, Hos 13.14; Hab 2.5. N. J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (BibOr 21; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) 99–107; J. F. Healey, 'Mot', *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (eds. K. van der Toorn et al.; Leiden: Brill, 1999, 2nd ed.) 598–603, 598, 601; J. Ludlow, *Abraham meets Death: Narrative Humor in the Testament of Abraham* (JSPSup 41; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 96–9.

⁴² Prov 1.12; Isa 5.14; Num 16.30. Tromp, *Death and the Nether World*; for Mot, see 6–16. Healey, 'Mot', 599, see additional texts listed on 601; H. M. Barstad, 'Sheol', *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (eds. K. van der Toorn et al.; Leiden: Brill, 1999, 2nd ed.) 768–70.

⁴³ Tromp, *Death and the Nether World*, 23–46. For example, Gen 4.11, Exod 15.12, Num 16.32, 1 Sam 28.11–13, and Jon 2.6; see Tromp for more.

⁴⁴ Healey, 'Mot', 601. See also Wis 1.12–2.24.

⁴⁵ Job 17.16; Lam 3.6; Ps 88.9, 142.8; Jer 32.2. See Tromp, *Death and the Nether World*, 154–6. Also, T. Zeph. 6.15.

⁴⁶ Isa 38.10; Ps. 107.16. Tromp, *Death and the Nether World*, 155. Also, Sib. Or. 2.228–9, 8.226; 2 En. 42.1 (J).

⁴⁷ Ps. 107.16; Jon 2.6. Tromp, *Death and the Nether World*, 155. Also, Apoc. Pet. 4.4.

⁴⁸ Ps 18.5.

⁴⁹ Lam 3.6; Ps. 107.10. Tromp, *Death and the Nether World*, 155.

⁵⁰ 2 Sam 12.23; Job 7.9, 10.22, 12.14, 16.22, 19.8; Lam 3.6. Tromp, *Death and the Nether World*, 156; esp. 189–90. See also, Wis 2.1, 5.

⁵¹ Bauckham, *Fate of the Dead*, 42.

⁵² Charlesworth, 'Exploring the Origins of the *descensus ad inferos*', 385–7.

⁵³ This is especially clear in Charlesworth's translation, see Charlesworth, 'Exploring the Origins of the *descensus ad inferos*', 385–6.

⁵⁴ So Charlesworth, 'Exploring the Origins of the *descensus ad inferos*', 378–9.

As in many bodies of ancient literature (Mesopotamian, Greek, Latin, etc.), Death in Jewish and early Christian literature could be personified.⁵⁵ When Death is personified in the New Testament, Death is depicted like a king in opposition to God.⁵⁶ As van der Horst explains, he can rule (ἐβασίλευσεν, Rom 5.14, 17); he is the last enemy to be destroyed (1 Cor 15.26); he has no victory (1 Cor 15.54); and after his resurrection, Death no longer ‘lords over (κυριεύει)’ Christ (Rom 6.9).⁵⁷ The New Testament thus depicts Death as a king conquered by Christ.

There are clear parallels between the Jewish and Christian personifications of Death, Sheol, and related terms with Hades (both place and god) in Greek literature.⁵⁸ Hades the place is a shadowy, gloomy place, whose gates⁵⁹ are famously guarded by Cerberus.⁶⁰ The god Hades was rarely worshipped and sometimes hated.⁶¹ As Bremmer notes, his most famous narrative was his abduction of Persephone.⁶² As Mackin concludes, Hades ruled over the dead as a king ruled over his citizens.⁶³

The Christian personification of Death also links it/him conceptually with Satan.⁶⁴ As Johnson writes, ‘Because the devil, in turn, can be associated intimately with death (see above all Wis 2.24), victory over him can be expressed in terms of victory over death (see Hos 13.14; 1 Cor 15.26, 55; 2 Tim 1.10; Rev 20.14; 26.4).’⁶⁵ For the author of Hebrews, the identification of Death with the devil was important enough for him to include an explanatory gloss specifically to ensure that recipients make this connection.

4. The Devil and the Destroyer in Exodus Traditions and the New Testament

The use of the Passover/Exodus tradition is developed in 2.14–15 with the reference to the devil. Moffitt links Heb 2.14–15 with 11.28, where the author refers directly to the Passover and ‘the sprinkling of blood in order that the destroyer of the firstborn (ὁ ὀλοθρεύων τὰ

⁵⁵ On the personification of death in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Persian and Greek literature, see S. G. F. Brandon, ‘The Personification of Death in Some Ancient Religions’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 43 (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1966) 317–35. In Greek, NT and Jewish sources, especially *T. Abr.*, see Ludlow, *Abraham Meets Death*, 95–118. Also, P. W. van der Horst, ‘Thanatos’, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (eds. K. van der Toorn *et al.*; Leiden/Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1999, 2nd ed.) 854–65.

⁵⁶ van der Horst, ‘Thanatos’, 855–6.

⁵⁷ van der Horst, ‘Thanatos’, 855–6.

⁵⁸ Bauckham writes, ‘The personification of the place of the dead is also rooted in Old Testament usage (e.g. Job 24.19; 28.22; Isa 5.14)’, Bauckham, *Fate of the Dead*, 279. On Hades as god and place, see especially E. Mackin Roberts, *Underworld Gods in Ancient Greek Religion: Death and Reciprocity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020) 40–6. As Mackin notes, depictions of the dead in Hades changed over time (pg. 45).

⁵⁹ As Mackin writes, ‘the “gates of Hades” could refer to either gates belonging to the god, or gates that lead into the Underworld’, Mackin Roberts, *Underworld Gods*, 40.

⁶⁰ J. N. Bremmer, ‘Hades’, *Brill’s New Pauly Online* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

⁶¹ Hades had a cult at Elis, and he sometimes appears in conjunction with the cultic service of other deities, see Mackin Roberts, *Underworld Gods*, 41, 46–9. For hatred, see Bremmer, ‘Hades’. On Hades in Anatolian Hierapolis, see K. Marcar, ‘Descents to the Underworld: *Katabaseis* in the Cult of Magna Mater, Judaism, and early Christianity in Anatolian Hierapolis’, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity 12A: Texts on Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis* (eds. J. R. Harrison, A. H. Cadwallader, R. Canavan and M. Trainor; Atlanta: SBL Press, forthcoming).

⁶² Bremmer, ‘Hades’.

⁶³ Mackin Roberts, *Underworld Gods*, 49.

⁶⁴ Backhaus, *Der sprechende Gott*, 133. However, Bauckham sounds a note of caution about the extent of the conflation of various figures when he writes of Christ’s victory, ‘It is important to notice that in the early period the defeated powers are the angelic rulers of the dead (cf. Ascensio 9:16; ActsThom 10; 143; 156), often Death or Hades personified (OdesSol 42:11), but not Satan and the forces of evil’, Bauckham, *Fate of the Dead*, 42. While such caution is surely called for, in Heb 2.14 the author explicitly interprets ‘the one who has the power of death’ with an explanatory gloss, ‘the devil’. On this connection in rabbinic literature, see fn. 69 below.

⁶⁵ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 100.

πρωτότοκα) would not touch their firstborn'.⁶⁶ In Exodus, God speaks of himself carrying out the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn.⁶⁷ However, Exodus 12.23 LXX speaks of 'the destroyer (τὸν ὀλεθρεύοντα)', whom God allowed to smite those not protected by the lamb's blood.⁶⁸ When read together, 'the one who has the power of death, this is the devil' in 2.14 is understood to be the 'the destroyer of their firstborn (ὁ ὀλοθρεύων τὰ πρωτότοκα...αὐτῶν)' in 11.28. The now-common epithet 'angel of death' for this figure does not occur in Exodus, or indeed any of the canonical Scriptures, though it does occur in Second Temple and rabbinic literature, often as a psychopomp.⁶⁹

Some biblical passages suggest that the figure in Exod 12.23 is an angel.⁷⁰ Second Samuel 24.16 refers to 'the destroying angel' (LXX: τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῷ διαφθεύοντι) and the parallel passage in 1 Chr 21.15 uses the designation 'the angel of destruction' (LXX: ἄγγελον...τοῦ ἐξολεθεύσαι).⁷¹ After surveying this and other evidence, Meier concludes, 'There can be little question, therefore, that the Destroyer in Exod 12:23 belongs to the class of plague deities broadly attested in the ancient Near East.'⁷²

By the Second Temple period, the destroyer is explicitly identified as an angel.⁷³ In its poetic retelling, Wisdom 18 depicts the destroying (ὀλέθρῳ; 18.13) of the firstborn by a militant divine Logos (Wis 18.15–16).⁷⁴ Wisdom 18 then goes on to describe Korah's rebellion as a plague (18.20; cf. Num 16–17). The plague is stopped by 'a blameless man' (i.e., Aaron; 18.21) clad in a robe and ephod (18.24). He intervenes to hold back 'the anger' (18.23). Wisdom concludes, 'From these the destroyer (ὁ ὀλεθρεύων) yielded' (18.25a). Wisdom thus depicts Aaron, the high priest, intervening to stop the destroyer.

⁶⁶ Moffitt, 'Exodus', 154. Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 16–22.

⁶⁷ Exod. 12.12, 13, with the destroyer, 23, 27, 29. See also, Brandon, 'Personification of Death', 325; Ludlow, *Abraham Meets Death*, 97–8.

⁶⁸ This destroying figure only explicitly appears three times in the Hebrew Scriptures (Exod 12.23; 2 Sam 24.16; 1 Chr 21.15); though he seems to be present elsewhere (so Meier: Num 17.11–15 [16.46–50]; 2 Kgs 19.35; Isa 37.36; Ezek 9; Rev 9.11). See S. A. Meier, 'Destroyer', *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (eds. K. van der Toorn et al.; Leiden/Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1999, 2nd ed.) 240–4, 241. The notion of God sending an agent of death may be reflected in Ps. Sol. 7.4–5. For more on this passage, see Ludlow, *Abraham Meets Death*, 100–1.

⁶⁹ 2 Bar 21.23; *Mart. Asc. Is.* 9.16. While neither text makes explicit use of the Exodus tradition, 2 Bar refers to the angel of death as a figure who appears to be in charge of 'the realm of death' where the souls of the departed are held. This confluence of the angel of the death as ruler of the underworld fits very neatly the traditions represented in Heb 2.14–15. In the Christian *Mart. Asc. Is.* 9.16; the 'angel of death' is 'plundered' (on the plundering of Hades, see sources listed in Bauckham, *Fate of the Dead*, 42). My thanks to Deane Galbraith for drawing my attention to this. The theme of plundering likely comes from the parable of the strong man which early Christians interpreted as the harrowing of Hades (Mk 3.27; Matt 12.29; Lk 11.21–2). Bauckham lists as evidence of this tradition *Peri Pasc.* 103; fr. 13; Origen *Comm. in Rom.* 5.10 (*Fate of the Dead*, 42). In rabbinic literature, B. *Batra* 16a equates the Angel of Death with Satan, and Pirke Eliezer depicts the Angel of Death as a psychopomp, see J. Morris, 'Life and Death (Jewish)', *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (ed. J. Hastings; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916) 8.39–42, 41; [Unattributed], 'Angel of Death', *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* (ed. G. Wigoder; New York: New York University Press, 2002) 61; E. Diamond, 'Wrestling the Angel of Death: Form and Meaning in Rabbinic Tales of Death and Dying', *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 26 (1995) 76–92.

⁷⁰ 2 Kgs 19.35; Isa 37.36; Rev 9.11; cf. Ezek 9; see Meier, 'Destroyer', 241–3. For the involvement of angels in the tenth plague, see Ps 78.49.

⁷¹ Meier, 'Destroyer', 242.

⁷² Meier, 'Destroyer', 242.

⁷³ As Hannah has shown, Ezekiel the Tragedian identifies this figure as an angel (*Exagoge* 159). *Jubilees* identifies this figure with Mastema, D. D. Hannah, *Michael and Christ: Michael Traditions and Angel Christology in Early Christianity*, (WUNT 2/109; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) 91.

⁷⁴ D. Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon* (AYBC 43; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 318–19; Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 91–2.

Jubilees identifies the destroyer as Prince Mastema.⁷⁵ Moffitt explains,

Given that Mastema is identified throughout *Jubilees* with the Satan figure/destroyer who accuses God's people (see *Jub.* 10.17; 17.16–17; 23.29; cf. *Job* 1.6–12; 2.1–6), it follows that some Jews understood Exod. 12.23 in terms of Moses' liberation of the Israelites not just from Pharaoh, but also from the satanic power controlling him and keeping the people in slavery.⁷⁶

Thus, Hebrews and other texts, notably *Jubilees*, understood the mysterious 'destroyer' from Exod. 12.23 as an angelic figure, however variously named (the destroyer, Satan, the devil, Mastema).⁷⁷ The author of Hebrews was likely familiar with traditions that understood the destroyer from Exod. 12.23 as a malevolent angelic leader of demonic forces (i.e., Satan, the devil or Mastema). This figure could be described using royal titles (Prince, King, ruler, etc.) and is sometimes associated with the underworld (*Rev* 9; cf. 11.7; 17.8; 20.3).⁷⁸

The association of the destroyer, malevolent angels, plague and death are found elsewhere in the New Testament. In 1 Cor 10.9, Paul refers to those who tested God and were destroyed (ἀπόλλυμι) by serpents, alluding to Num 21. He continues, 'And do not complain, as some of them complained, and were destroyed (ἀπώλοντο) by the destroyer' (ὑπὸ τοῦ ὀλοθρευτοῦ; 1 Cor. 10.10).

At the fifth trumpet, Revelation 9 depicts 'a star that had fallen to the earth' (9.1). This angelic figure is now in the bottomless pit and is associated with fire. A demonic plague of locusts begins and afflicts those without the apotropaic seal of God (*Rev* 9.4). The demonic locusts 'have as king over them the angel of the abyss; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he has the name Apollyon' (*Rev* 9.11 cf. vs. 12). The Hebrew and Greek names create a bilingual wordplay. Abaddon means 'destruction'.⁷⁹ Apollyon's name is similarly connected with the verb ἀπόλλυμι, 'to destroy' as well as the god Apollo, the god of pestilence and destruction.⁸⁰ Revelation identifies Abaddon/Apollyon as both 'king' of the locusts and an angel. These texts from 1 Corinthians and Revelation provide snapshots of early Christian demonology. They also witness to early Christian conflation of Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions.

5. First Stream of Influence: Early Christian Traditions

Scholars recognise that the author of Hebrews was well versed in early Christian teaching and tradition.⁸¹ This tradition is especially strong in Heb 2.14–15, though in the author's own voice. This is supported by Backhaus' observation that 2.14–15 contain an impressive

⁷⁵ For more on Mastema in *Jubilees*, see A. Laato, 'The Devil in the Old Testament', *Evil and the Devil* (eds. I. Fröhlich and E. Koskeniemi; LNTS 481; London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 1–22, 17–19; I. Fröhlich, 'Evil in Second Temple Texts', *Evil and the Devil* (eds. I. Fröhlich and E. Koskeniemi; LNTS 481; London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 23–50, 33–5.

⁷⁶ Moffitt, 'Exodus', 154.

⁷⁷ Moffitt, 'Jubilees and Hebrews', 40–3.

⁷⁸ For the Devil as ruler, see *Matt* 9.34; 12.24; *Mk* 3.22; *Lk* 11.15; *Jn* 12.31; 14.30. Cf. 1 Cor 15.24.

⁷⁹ M. Hutter, 'Abaddon', *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (eds. K. van der Toorn et al.; Leiden/Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1999, 2nd ed.) 1.

⁸⁰ Hutter, 'Abaddon'; R. van den Broek, 'Apollo', *Dictionary of Demons and Deities in the Bible* (eds. K. van der Toorn et al.; Leiden/Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1999, 2nd ed.) 74–7.

⁸¹ For example, Cockerill writes, 'The most significant aspect of the pastor's worldview is his fundamental dependence on common Christian tradition', Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 24. Also, Johnson, *Hebrews*, 28–30, 100. On Hebrews' relationship to Paul, see Backhaus, *Der sprechende Gott*, 'Der Hebräerbrief und die Paulus-Schule', 21–48; Loader, 'Revisiting High Priesthood', esp. 248–53.

total of nine *hapax legomena*.⁸² Furthermore, death figures very prominently in Heb 2 (2.9 x2; 14 x2; 15), in contrast with the rest of the letter.⁸³ Hebrews 2.14–15, therefore, seem to reflect pre-existent early Christian tradition known to the author of Hebrews.⁸⁴

It seems likely that the traditions now represented in the Gospels, among others, were known in some form to the author of Hebrews. It will be sufficient here to note very briefly how early Christian literature both links Jesus' death with Passover and also depicts Jesus' conflict with the devil/Satan. Many other examples could be listed, but it is hoped that the evidence provided here from the Gospels should be sufficient to establish the prominence and importance of these themes in early Christianity.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul calls Christ 'our paschal lamb' (τό πάσχα ἡμῶν; 5.7) which has been sacrificed.⁸⁵ The Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus celebrating the Passover meal (Mk 14.12–17; Matt 26.17–20; Lk 22.7–14), while John aligns the death of Jesus with the slaughter of the Passover lamb (Jn 13.1). John strengthens this connection by noting that none of Jesus' legs were broken, following the scriptural instructions for Passover (Jn 19.23, 36; Exod 12.46; Num 9.12; Ps 34.20).⁸⁶

Likewise, all four Gospels depict conflict between Jesus and the devil/Satan.⁸⁷ The fluidity of terminology for this figure is illustrated in Matthew's temptation narrative, which uses both the devil (4.1, 5, 8, 11) and Satan (4.10) to describe Jesus' adversary. The parable of the strong man in the triple tradition anticipates Jesus' victory over or binding of this demonic adversary (Mk 3.20–30; Matt 12.22–30; Lk 11.14–23).⁸⁸ According to Lane, the parable may draw upon Isa 49.24–6, in which God rescues his people from a tyrant.⁸⁹ In these Gospel narratives, the titles of Beelzebul (Mk 3.22; Matt 12.24; cf. Matt 10.24, 27; Lk 11.15, 18–19), ruler of demons (Mk 3.22; Matt 12.24; Lk 11.15) and Satan are apparently used interchangeably (Mk 3.23, 26; Matt 12.26; Lk 11.18). Luke and John specifically connect Judas' betrayal with the work of Satan (Lk 22.3; Jn 13.2, 27; cf. 6.70 where διάβολος is used of Judas Iscariot).

This very brief rehearsal of evidence demonstrates the context in which the author was writing, a context in which the themes of Passover and the defeat of the devil were already prominent.⁹⁰ While the author of Hebrews inherited early Christian traditions, he may be one of, or perhaps the first to combine Jesus' paschal death and *Christus victor* motifs: it is somehow through his sacrificial death as a Passover offering that Christ defeats the devil. Jesus' victory over the devil or destroyer in Hebrews evokes Jewish speculation of war in heaven, the second stream of influence on Heb 2.14–15, to which we now turn.

⁸² He writes, 'Von den vier Vollverben kommen drei – κοινωνέω, καταργέω, ἀπαλλάσσω – in Hebr nicht mehr vor, ferner das Adverb παραπλησίως, das Adjective ἔνοχος sowie die Nomina κράτος, διάβολος, δουλεία und φόβος.' Backhaus, *Der sprechende Gott*, 132–3.

⁸³ Elsewhere in Hebrews, θάνατος appears only in four other verses (5.7; 7.23; 9.15; 11.5).

⁸⁴ So Backhaus, 'Plausibilität scheint die Aussage nur unter Voraussetzungen zu gewinnen, die Hebr selbst nicht ausführt, die daher von außen entliehen werden.' Backhaus, *Der sprechende Gott*, 133.

⁸⁵ P. F. Bradshaw, 'The Origins of Easter', *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times* (eds. P. F. Bradshaw and L. A. Hoffman; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999) 81–97, 82–3.

⁸⁶ Cf. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover: From the Earliest Times to A. D. 70*, 233.

⁸⁷ For example, the devil tempts Jesus (Matt 4.1–11; Lk. 4.1–13); cf. Matt 13.39; Lk 8.12; Jn 6.70; 8.44. At Jesus' temptation, Mark refers only to Satan (see Mk 1.12). Satan is referred to throughout Mark, Matthew, and Luke (Mk 3.23, 26; 4.15; 8.33; Matt 12.26; 16.23; Lk 10.18; 11.18; 13.16; 22.31). For more, see the essays in I. Fröhlich and E. Koskenniemi eds., *Evil and the Devil* (LNTS 481; London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁸⁸ On the connection of these texts with Hebrews, see Lane, *Hebrews*, 62–3. Lane also highlights connections with Isa 49.24–6.

⁸⁹ Lane, *Hebrews*, 63.

⁹⁰ For the author's use of early Christian tradition of a conflict between God and Satan, see Johnson, *Hebrews*, 100.

6. Second Influence: Angels and Supernatural Warfare in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christian Literature

At first glance, the reference to demonic power in Heb 2.14–15 appears to be unconnected with the epistle's larger exposition of Yom Kippur. By contrast, Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra has demonstrated that Jewish apocalyptic texts could infuse Yom Kippur with eschatological significance.⁹¹ He writes,

In some cosmological myths of *Urzeit* and *Endzeit* about the genesis and termination of sin, the 'Az'azel goat serves as imagery for the leaders of the evil powers (*Apocalypse of Abraham*; 1 *Enoch* 10). Sometimes the 'Az'azel goat ritual is used to describe the eschatological end of sin (1 *Enoch* 10). Often the protagonist of the good forces is portrayed as a (high) priest (1 *Enoch*, Zechariah 3, 11QMelchizedek, *Apocalypse of Abraham*).⁹²

As Stökl Ben Ezra demonstrates, 1 *Enoch* 10 describes the binding and imprisonment of 'Az'azel in terms reminiscent of the 'Asa'el goat ritual. The angels Raphael and Gabriel both play important roles in these events, and in so doing connect Yom Kippur with motifs of supernatural warfare and eschatology. He concludes, '1 *Enoch* and 11QMelchizedek perceive Yom Kippur as an eschatological day of liberation of the good prisoners from the vanquished powers of evil.'⁹³ Thus, the supernatural warfare language of Heb 2.14 may have more in common with Yom Kippur than has often been thought.⁹⁴

In Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, there was diverse, widespread belief in the cosmic, supernatural war of God's heavenly forces against the forces of malevolent demonic beings and their leader.⁹⁵ As discussed above, the leader of the demonic forces was variously identified as the devil, Satan, the destroyer, Prince Mastema, or Beelzebul. To these could also be added Belial (and its likely variant Beliar; 2 Cor 6.15).⁹⁶ There was a tendency in both Jewish and early Christian texts to conflate these discrete titles and names into a single figure.⁹⁷

The roots of these beliefs are complex, but they may stem in part from speculation on Deut 32.8–9; in which God appointed angels over the nations of the world.⁹⁸ Israel originally had no angelic guardian because she was God's own portion (Deut 32.9). However, in some Jewish texts, Michael begins to assume the role of Israel's protector on God's behalf.⁹⁹ There is no indication in Deut 32.8–9 that the angelic guardians of the nations are demonic. The

⁹¹ Stökl, *The Impact of Yom Kippur*, 78–101.

⁹² Stökl, *The Impact of Yom Kippur*, 79.

⁹³ Stökl, *The Impact of Yom Kippur*, 95.

⁹⁴ Cf. fn. 13.

⁹⁵ J. R. Davila, 'Melchizedek, Michael, and War in Heaven', *Society of Biblical Literature 1996 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996) 259–72. Hannah, *Michael and Christ*; A. R. Michalak, *Angels as Warriors in Late Second Temple Jewish Literature* (WUNT 2/330; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), esp. 'Appendix A: Contest between the Good Angel and the Devil', 246–51; J. Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity Vol 1: The Development of Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea* (ed. and trans. J. A. Baker; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964) 190–1.

⁹⁶ S. D. Sperling, 'Belial', *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (eds. K. van der Toorn et al.; Leiden/Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1999, 2nd ed.) 169–71.

⁹⁷ For a helpful overview of 4QAmram where this is especially clear, see Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 70–4; Evidence for this conflation in early Christianity is provided above.

⁹⁸ Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 18–19; Daniélou, *Jewish Christianity*, 184–5. On Deut 32, see Laato, 'The Devil', 6–8.

⁹⁹ Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 31–8; Davila, 'War in Heaven', 270. Though dated in some aspects, Daniélou's work is still valuable; Daniélou, *Jewish Christianity*, 117–27, 184–5.

author of Hebrews seems to reflect the common belief that angels in general have been given dominion over the world (Heb 2.8; cf. Deut 32.8–9).¹⁰⁰

However, it seems that as speculation about angels increased, strong morally loaded judgements were projected onto these heavenly guardians, aligning most with God's demonic adversary.¹⁰¹ As Antti Laato writes, 'In the course of time, Satan became associated with the angels of foreign nations, assuming position as their leader.'¹⁰² Hebrews does not explicitly describe the world as ruled by Satan or under his authority, but this may be implied. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Satan is described as ruling over the current world.¹⁰³

Michael, Israel's guardian, is often described in military language, leading the heavenly hosts.¹⁰⁴ Michael takes on a warrior role in the New Testament as well (Jud 9; Rev 12.7–9; 20.1–3).¹⁰⁵ Michael's role could also be depicted in judicial terms.¹⁰⁶ Darrell D. Hannah summarises,

Thus, the evidence for Michael as the military protector of Israel, as well as her legal champion, is widespread and multifaceted. It appears that his role as Israel's military guardian led to the office of heavenly ἀρχιστράτηγος being attributed to him, while his judicial advocacy for Israel developed into the traditional role of Satan's opponent.¹⁰⁷

Hannah also notes that Michael could also function as Israel's intercessor and heavenly high priest.¹⁰⁸ If the author of Hebrews understood Melchizedek as a heavenly priest (Heb 5.10; 6.20), then this similarity may have affiliated Michael and Melchizedek in the author's mind.¹⁰⁹ As various scholars have argued, it seems clear that some Second Temple interpreters identified Michael with Melchizedek.¹¹⁰ Both figures could be depicted as heavenly high priests and warriors.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁰ Daniélou, *Jewish Christianity*, 184–5. Isaacs emphasises that there is nothing demonic in Hebrews' discussion of angels, see M. E. Isaacs, *Sacred Space: An Approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (JSNTSup 73; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) 176–7; Moffitt, *Logic of Resurrection*, 119–20. See also discussion of angels above.

¹⁰¹ For more on this in early Christianity, see Daniélou, *Jewish Christianity*, 187–9.

¹⁰² For more, see sources cited in Laato, 'The Devil', 17.

¹⁰³ In Luke's temptation narrative, the Devil says to Jesus, 'To you will I give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will' (4.6), an assertion that Jesus seems to accept at face value (cf. Matt. 4.8). See also, Jn. 12.31; 14.30; 16.11; Eph. 2.2. Cf. 1 Cor. 15.24.

¹⁰⁴ Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 38–40; P. J. Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melchireša'* (CBQMS 10; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1981) 72.

¹⁰⁵ Jude 9 refers to a tradition in which Michael engages in a dispute with the devil over the body of Moses. On this tradition, see R. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC 50; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 65–76.

¹⁰⁶ Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 40–2.

¹⁰⁷ Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 42. For more on the *archistrategos*, esp. in T. Abr, see Ludlow, *Abraham Meets Death*, 75–80.

¹⁰⁸ Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 42–5.

¹⁰⁹ Significantly, Hebrews never describes Melchizedek as a high priest. For Melchizedek as an angel, see Moffitt, *Logic of Resurrection*, 202–7.

¹¹⁰ Davila, 'War in Heaven', 259; Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 70–4; Kobelski, *Melchizedek* 71–4; A. Aschim, 'Melchizedek the Liberator: An Early Interpretation of Genesis 14?', *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (vol. 35; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996) 243–58, 251; A. Aschim, 'Melchizedek and Jesus: 11QMelchizedek and the Epistle to the Hebrews', *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (eds. C. C. Newman et al. Leiden: Brill, 1999) 129–47, 133; Michalak, *Angels as Warriors*, 181–91.

¹¹¹ For Aschim, their identity as warriors is 'a more important connection' between them than that of heavenly high priest. Aschim, 'Melchizedek the Liberator', 251.

Additional evidence for the identification of Michael and Melchizedek may be found in 4QAmram, which states:¹¹²

Fragment 2 In. 3a [ואנון תלתה שמהתה בליעל ושר חשוכא] ומלכי רשע	Fragment 2 In. 3a [“And these are his three names: Belial, Prince of Darkness], and Melchireša.”]
Fragment 3 In. 2 [ל וענה וא]מר לי דתלתה שמה[תי] אנון מיכאל ושר [נהורא ומלכי צדק]	[/ and he answered and sa]id to me: [“My] three names [are Michael, Prince of Light, and Melchizedek.”]

Due to the highly fragmentary nature of the text, the key lines have to be reconstructed based on the parallelism of the three names of the demonic figure with the three names of the heavenly figure. The name Melchizedek is reconstructed as the counterpart to Melchireša⁶. If this reconstruction is accepted, then 4QAmram directly identifies Michael and Melchizedek. While limited weight can be placed on this text, the case is strengthened by the similarity of priestly and warrior roles shared by Michael and Melchizedek elsewhere. Just as multiple names and titles clustered around the principal demonic figure, so it seems that previously separate angelic identities converged in the figure of Michael. This assimilating force may have encouraged the identification of Melchizedek with Michael.

According to Anders Aschim, an important stream of Jewish tradition identified Melchizedek as an angelic warrior, battling the forces of evil.¹¹³ Aschim proposes that the roots of this tradition lie in interpretation of Genesis 14.¹¹⁴ As Paul Kobelski notes, while there is no indication in the text of Genesis that Melchizedek is an angel, there are elements that may have suggested this to later interpreters (namely, the author of 11QMelch).¹¹⁵ It is plausible that some Jewish interpreters attributed Abram’s victory to Melchizedek’s angelic intervention (cf. Josh. 5.13–15).¹¹⁶ What happened on earth reflected a supernatural reality. Aschim writes,

On a parallel invisible, heavenly plane an angel comes to the help of Abraham. He leads the angelic forces to victory over the hostile forces of evil powers, the supporters of Abraham’s enemies. This, I propose, is the role of Melchizedek, whom Abraham honors following battle and who blesses him.¹¹⁷

The author of Hebrews extrapolates that Melchizedek was the superior party by the fact that Abram gives a tithe to him (Heb 7.1–2).¹¹⁸ Further, the only two biblical passages which mention Melchizedek may have also contributed to this conception: both passages (Gen 14 and Ps 110) can be linked by the dominant theme of military victory.¹¹⁹

Genesis 14 narrates a war between two groups of allied kings (Gen 14.1–10), in which Lot and his family are captured (Gen 14.11–12, 14). One person escapes and reports that Lot

¹¹² Text and translation from Kobelski, *Melchizedek*, 26–8.

¹¹³ Aschim, ‘Melchizedek the Liberator’, 243–58.

¹¹⁴ Aschim, ‘Melchizedek the Liberator’.

¹¹⁵ Kobelski, *Melchizedek*, 52.

¹¹⁶ As Aschim points out, 4Q180 identifies the three men in Gen 18 as angels. He identifies Judg 5.20 and Dan 10–12 as containing ‘the scenario of simultaneous war on two levels’, Aschim, ‘Melchizedek the Liberator’, 249.

¹¹⁷ Aschim, ‘Melchizedek the Liberator’, 249.

¹¹⁸ Aschim, ‘Melchizedek the Liberator’, 249.

¹¹⁹ Aschim, ‘Melchizedek the Liberator’, 249. The dating and redaction of both passages is complex and highly debated, but need not detain us here. For Gen 14, see recently R. R. Cargill, *Melchizedek, King of Sodom: How Scribes Invented the Biblical Priest-King* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

‘had been taken captive’ (14, נִשְׁבָּה; ἡχμαλωτεύθη). Abram marshals his forces, rescues his relatives, and then encounters Melchizedek, King of Salem. Melchizedek blesses Abram and God Most High ‘who has delivered your enemies into your hand’ (Gen 14.20). Release from captivity is a theme that links Gen 14, Isa 61 and 11QMelch.¹²⁰

Similarly, Psalm 110 is replete with images of victory: enemies in subjection (110.1), rule over foes (110.2), the shattering of kings (110.5) and the execution of judgement (110.6). It would seem improbable for Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 *not* to have influenced the Qumran sectarians’ understanding of Melchizedek.¹²¹ Reflecting on 11QMelch, Hay asks, ‘Could any Jew acquainted with those scriptural passages fail to think of them when mentioning Melchizedek?’¹²²

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, Melchizedek is unambiguously mentioned twice (11QMelch, 1QapGen).¹²³ 11QMelch is a thematic pesher, based roughly on Leviticus 25.¹²⁴ Kobelski explains,

The interpretation of the biblical passages focuses on the eschatological figure Melchizedek, who is presented as a heavenly redeemer who secures liberty for those held in captivity by the power of Belial and the evil spirits allied with him. Standing at the head of the good angels, the heavenly leader Melchizedek leads the forces of good against the forces of evil at the end of days.¹²⁵

11QMelch alludes to Isa 61.1, in which the prophet is sent ‘to proclaim to the captives liberty and to those who have been bound release’. In 11QMelch, Melchizedek takes this role.¹²⁶ In the following annotated translation taken from Kobelski, allusions to the biblical text are underlined:¹²⁷

4. [The interpretation of it for the e]nd of days concerns <u>the captives</u> who [were in mourning all the days of the dominion of Belial] who	Isa 61.1
5. cut them off from the sons of heav[e]n, and from the inheritance of Melchizedek k[] but they are the chil[dren of the lot of Melchiz]edek who	
6. will restore them, and <u>proclaim liberty to them</u> , relieving them [of the burden] of all their iniquities. And [thus will] this event [happe]n	Lev 25.10 Isa 61.1

The theme of the release of captives links Gen 14, Isa 61.1 and 11QMelch, as well as Heb 2.14–15. ‘In Gen 14.14, the verb שָׁבַח niph., “be taken captive”, is used in reference

¹²⁰ Aschim, ‘Melchizedek the Liberator’, 244. By contrast, Cockerill is not convinced by these parallels, G. L. Cockerill, ‘Melchizedek without Speculation: Hebrews 7.1–25 and Genesis 14.17–24’, *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in its Ancient Context* (eds. R. Bauckham et al.; LNTS 387; London: T&T Clark, 2008) 128–44, 136–41.

¹²¹ Kobelski, *Melchizedek* 51; Aschim, ‘Melchizedek the Liberator’, 248. However, this is not without debate. See, for example, Cockerill, ‘Melchizedek without Speculation’, 136–41.

¹²² D. M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 27. Similarly, ‘It is difficult to imagine that the author of 11QMelch would consider his description of Melchizedek at odds with the biblical sources for the presentation and description of Melchizedek and his role’, Kobelski, *Melchizedek*, 51.

¹²³ F. L. Horton Jr., *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A. D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SNTSMS 30; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 60–82; J. Reiling, ‘Melchizedek’, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (eds. K. van der Toorn et al.; Leiden/ Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1999, 2nd ed.) 560–3, 561–2.

¹²⁴ Kobelski, *Melchizedek* 3–4; M. De Jonge and A. S. Van Der Woude, ‘11QMelchizedek and the New Testament’, *NTS* 12 (1966) 301–26; J. A. Fitzmyer, ‘Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11’, *JBL* 86 (1967) 25–41.

¹²⁵ Kobelski, *Melchizedek*, 4.

¹²⁶ Aschim, ‘Melchizedek the Liberator’, 250–1.

¹²⁷ Kobelski, *Melchizedek*, 8.

to Lot; שבויים, “captives” (11QMelch 2.4; Isa 61.1) is derived from the same root.¹²⁸ In 11QMelch, Melchizedek is the angelic warrior who frees the captives. Aschim concludes, “There seems to be more than a superficial resemblance.”¹²⁹ In addition to his priestly roles, there also seems to be an established tradition which understood Melchizedek as a heavenly, angelic warrior. Aschim concludes that both 11QMelch and Hebrews 2.10–18 ‘invoke a traditional picture of the heavenly warrior-priest Melchizedek’.¹³⁰ While most attention has been rightly paid to Melchizedek as a priestly figure, this article therefore suggests that Melchizedek’s status as a warrior (and possibly a heavenly one at that) may be an additional point of correspondence between himself and Jesus in Hebrews.

In conclusion, Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra has argued that Heb 2.14–15 stands in alignment with traditions of an eschatological Yom Kippur found in apocalyptic Jewish texts (1 Enoch, 11QMelch).¹³¹ Thus, there is good reason to see the defeat of the devil in Hebrews as a creative conflation of Passover and Yom Kippur informed by contemporary Jewish apocalyptic eschatology. What makes this observation particularly striking for this study is the fact that the themes of liberation from captivity, prison and death appear to be central elements of early Christian belief in Christ’s descent to the underworld.

7. Passover and the Defeat of the Devil in Hebrews

Drawing these threads together, this article has argued that Heb 2.14–15 reflects the author’s synthesis of various Jewish and early Christian traditions. From both Jewish and Christian traditions, it seems likely that the author was familiar with depictions of Michael as a heavenly warrior. It is also possible that he knew traditions about Melchizedek as a heavenly warrior. He may have identified Michael with Melchizedek.

What the author does clearly explain is the superiority of Christ’s priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek compared to the priesthood of Levi. If the author’s Melchizedek had a heavenly, angelic identity, alongside his priestly identity, then this neatly contributes to the author’s reasons for beginning the letter as he did: emphasising Christ’s superiority to angels.¹³² Though the main focus on Melchizedek as priest comes later, Christ’s superiority to angels in general (and Michael and Melchizedek in particular) may have influenced Heb 1–2, especially 2.14–15.¹³³ The underlying rationale would be thus: Christ is superior to all angels in general, but he is superior to Michael and Melchizedek in particular because he not only battles with the devil as do they, but defeats him.

This case is strengthened by Heb 2.16, which returns to the theme of angels, saying that Jesus came not to help the angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Many commentators, if they comment on the angels in this verse at all, do not have much to say about them.¹³⁴ In contrast, there are clear reasons for why the author returns to them here. As in Hebrews 1, they indicate a key distinction between themselves on one hand and the Son and humanity

¹²⁸ Aschim, ‘Melchizedek the Liberator’, 251.

¹²⁹ The theme of atonement may also link the passages (Heb 2.17, 11QMelch II8), and the reference to Abraham in Heb 2.16 may be a link with this extended Melchizedek tradition, Aschim, ‘Melchizedek and Jesus’, 141–2.

¹³⁰ Aschim, ‘Melchizedek and Jesus’, 142. Also, De Jonge and Van Der Woude, ‘11QMelchizedek’, 316.

¹³¹ Stökl, *The Impact of Yom Kippur*, 185–6.

¹³² Aschim, ‘Melchizedek and Jesus’, 143. For Hebrew’s Melchizedek as an angel, see Moffitt, *Logic of Resurrection*, 202–7. On Hebrew’s Melchizedek as fully human, see Cockerill, ‘Melchizedek without Speculation’, 128–44.

¹³³ On Melchizedek as more than human, see Aschim, ‘Melchizedek and Jesus’, 138–9, 143.

¹³⁴ The following commentators have very little (or nothing) to say on angels here: Backhaus, Cockerill, Ellingworth. All Attridge says is that it ‘concludes the theme that superficially unites the first two chapters’, Attridge, *Hebrews*, 94, fn. 172.

on the other.¹³⁵ Specifically, Jesus conquered death by *dying as a human being*.¹³⁶ Angels, by their very nature as supernatural beings, are not subject to death or the fear of death.¹³⁷ Hebrews 2.16 thus explains what may seem counterintuitive – that Jesus, through dying, is superior to angels who do not die.¹³⁸ Michael E. Gudorf explains

At this juncture (v. 16), our author interjects the obvious reality that the fear of death does not affect angels at all, but it certainly does human beings (i.e., the ‘seed of Abraham’). This statement brings into sharp focus the difference between the two natures and strengthens the author’s argument as to why it was necessary for Jesus to have a mortal, human nature. The author concludes in v. 17 that Jesus’ human nature further facilitated his becoming a merciful and faithful high priest, able to make atonement for the sins of the people. It also enabled him to be able to identify with and help those who suffer and are tempted because he, possessing a human nature, likewise suffered and was tempted (v. 18).¹³⁹

Here and in the rest of his exegesis, Gudorf explains how Heb 2.5–18 is ‘all in all a very tightly knit construction’.¹⁴⁰ The reference to angels is thus not ancillary, but central to the author’s Christological argument: Christ is superior to the angels precisely through his (counterintuitive) death. It is through his death that he has become like his brothers and sisters in every respect and is able to liberate them from the power of death and the devil.

Within this context, the Passover typology is simultaneously infused with angelic dimensions from Second Temple Judaism and Christological significance from early Christianity. The author of Hebrews understood there to be a typological correspondence between Passover and the death of Jesus. Just as the blood of the lamb liberated the Israelites from Pharaoh, so did the blood of Jesus liberate the seed of Abraham from the devil, death and the fear of death. This typology is reflected in the references to bondage, death and liberation. Drawing from early Christian tradition, the author conflated early Christian Christological understandings of Passover and the defeat of the devil. Michael, Melchizedek and the heavenly hosts may do battle with their demonic adversary, but it is Christ who defeats him by dying as the Passover lamb and rising again with indestructible life. In this way, Jesus achieves a superior deliverance for those in bondage to death and the fear of death, ‘leading many sons (and daughters) to glory’ in a new salvific exodus.

In Heb 11.28, the author alludes to the sprinkling of the blood of the lamb so that ‘the destroyer of the firstborn ones (τὰ πρωτότοκα) would not touch their [firstborn].’ Typologically, the blood of the lamb foreshadows the blood of Christ, which correlates believers with the Israelites who were brought up out of slavery in Egypt. As Moffitt explains, if the destroyer in 11.28 is connected with the Exodus tradition, then

the further identification in Hebrews 12.23 of the homily’s intended audience as part of ‘the congregation of the firstborn’ (ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων) can be seen to suggest that the author wants them to understand themselves as caught up in the cosmic battle between ‘the one who destroys the firstborn’ and the primary object of his

¹³⁵ Thus, ‘Hebrews 2.10–18 is also instructive because the passage discloses the major *difference* between Melchizedek in 11QMelch and Jesus in Hebrews: There are no signs extant in the former of anything parallel to the significance of the incarnation, humiliation, and death of Jesus’, Aschim, ‘Melchizedek and Jesus’, 143.

¹³⁶ On the importance of Jesus as an ἄνθρωπος in Hebrews, see Moffitt, *Logic of Resurrection*, esp. 45–214.

¹³⁷ M. E. Gudorf, ‘Through a Classical Lens: Hebrews 2:16’, *JBL* 119 (2000) 105–8.

¹³⁸ Gudorf, ‘Hebrews 2:16’, 107.

¹³⁹ Gudorf, ‘Hebrews 2:16’, 107.

¹⁴⁰ Gudorf, ‘Hebrews 2:16’, 108.

hostility – God’s people, ‘the congregation of the firstborn’. In other words, they are those whom, like the firstborn of Israel, God has protected and liberated.¹⁴¹

Believers are part of the church of the firstborn through their union with Christ, the first-born par excellence. This designation aligns the redeemed with the triumphant life of Christ.

Just as Moses does not leave Egypt alone in Exodus, but in the company of the liberated children of Israel, so I suspect, Christ does not rise alone from Hades in Hebrews, but rises as the first of a triumphal procession to God’s heavenly throne. In Heb 2.10, Christ leads (ἀγογόντα) many sons and daughters to glory as the pioneer of their salvation (τὸν ἀρχηγὸν τῆς σωτηρίας αὐτῶν). The ἄγω-word group also appears in Hebrews 13.20, which says, ‘Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead (ὁ ἀναγαγὼν ἐκ νεκρῶν) our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant...’¹⁴² Furthermore, the catena of quotations in Heb 2 emphasises Christ’s relationship with humanity as his brothers and sisters (2.11–13, 14, 17).

8. Conclusion: The Case for the *Descensus Christi* in Hebrews

With the theme of ‘leading many sons (and daughters) to glory’, we can at last return to the question of the *descensus Christi* and harrowing of Hades in Hebrews. The question is, given the Passover–Exodus typology in Hebrews, is it *likely* that that author imagined Christ to rise from Hades alone? I would suggest that the answer is no. *The Exodus typology would seem to require, at a conceptual level, the liberation of the saints from Hades.* A corporate reading of Christ leading a procession of the liberated up from Hades coheres very well with the Exodus themes in the rest of Hebrews.

Support for a corporate resurrection and ascension may be found in Hebrews itself in the declaration of Isa 8.18 in Heb 2.13, ‘Here I am and the children whom God has given to me.’ If it is understood to take place in heaven, Jesus is presenting himself, along with the liberated saints, to God in heaven.¹⁴³ Notably, commentators have very little to say about the function of this quotation in 2.13. By contrast, when it is read in the context of the harrowing of Hades, it fits very well indeed as the triumphant declaration of Christ, the liberator of the dead. Thus, more could be said to support this position with evidence from Hebrews itself, but a full testing of this proposal must await further study.

Beyond Hebrews, the arguments proposed here find support in apostolic and patristic interpretation.¹⁴⁴ *Barnabas* (5.6) discusses Christ’s suffering in language very similar to Heb 2.14 but without quoting Hebrews directly.¹⁴⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea explicitly interprets Heb

¹⁴¹ Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 20.

¹⁴² In this context, Ps 49.15 is intriguing. Cf. Healey, ‘Mot’, 601.

¹⁴³ On the timing and location of this presentation, see Pierce, *Divine Discourse*, 112–113.

¹⁴⁴ For other early interpretations, see E. M. Heen and P. D. W. Krey, eds., *Hebrews* (ACCS X; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005) 44–8. I would like to thank Deane Galbraith for the references to *Barn*, Justin, and Melito. Bibleindex.org is also a valuable tool for studying reception history. For a similar approach, see Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 181–203.

¹⁴⁵ ‘But he submitted in order that he might destroy death and demonstrate the reality of the resurrection of the dead (ἵνα καταργήσῃ τὸν θάνατον καὶ τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀνάστασιν δείξῃ), because it was necessary that he be manifested in the flesh. Also, he submitted in order that he might redeem the promise to the fathers and – while preparing the new people for himself – prove, while still on earth, that after he has brought about the resurrection he will execute judgment.’ Greek text and trans. M. W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 392–3. *Barn* 5.1 also speaks of believers being sprinkled by Christ’s blood. My thanks to Deane Galbraith for this reference.

2.14–15 in terms of the *descensus Christi* and harrowing of Hades.¹⁴⁶ Melito of Sardis interprets the paschal lamb as foreshadowing the death of Christ (*Peri Pascha* 67–8).¹⁴⁷ Those who were enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt are understood as Melito's 'we', contemporary believers, who were ransomed and 'set free from the slavery of the devil'. Both Melito and Justin Martyr connect Pharaoh to the devil. For Cyprian, the deceit of Pharaoh foreshadows the deceit of the devil, which believers are liberated and protected from through baptism.¹⁴⁸ In his *Dialogue with Trypho* (111.3; 40.1), Justin explicitly identifies Christ as the Passover lamb, interpreted in light of Isa 53.7.¹⁴⁹ For Justin, just as the blood of the paschal lamb liberates those enslaved in Egypt, so does Jesus' blood liberate believers from death. We will conclude with a brief reference to these themes in Gregory of Nazianzus, for whom the *descensus Christi* and the harrowing of Hades are two sides of the same coin.¹⁵⁰ Christ descends to the realm of the dead, defeats death, liberates the captives held there and triumphantly enters heaven. While this apostolic and patristic evidence does not prove the argument advanced here, it demonstrates the plausibility of this interpretation among early interpreters.

¹⁴⁶ 'Now the law of love summoned him even as far as death and the dead themselves, so that he might summon the souls of those who were long dead...he pursued death from behind and drove him on, trodden under his feet and fleeing, until he burst the eternal gates of his dark realms, making a road of return back again to life for the dead there bound with bonds of death. Even his own body was raised up, and many bodies of the sleeping saints arose and came together with him into the holy and real city of heaven...' Trans. by W. J. Ferrar and quoted from Heen and Krey, *Hebrews*, 45.

¹⁴⁷ 'He is the one led like a lamb
and is slaughtered like a sheep;
he ransomed us from the worship of the world
as from the land of Egypt,
and he set us free from the slavery of the devil
as from the hand of Pharaoh,
and sealed our souls with his own spirit,
and the members of our body with his blood.
This is the one who clad death in shame
and, as Moses did Pharaoh,
made the devil grieve.

...

This is the one who delivered us from slavery to freedom,
from darkness into light,
from death into life,
from tyranny into an eternal Kingdom,
and made us a new priesthood,

and a people everlasting for Himself.' Trans. and ed. A. Stewart-Sykes, *On Pascha: With Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans; Melito of Sardis* (PPS 20; Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 55. My thanks to Deane Galbraith for this reference.

¹⁴⁸ Speaking of baptism, 'This example we see in the King Pharaoh, who, having resisted for a while and having delayed in his perfidy for so long a time, could resist and prevail until he came to the water; when he had come thither, he was both conquered and destroyed...Yet when it comes to the water of salvation and to the sanctification of baptism, we ought to know and to trust that the devil is oppressed there and that the man dedicated to God is freed by divine mercy.' Trans. Sr. Rose Bernard Donna, *St. Cyprian Letters 1-81* (Fathers of the Church; vol. 51; Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1981) 255–6.

¹⁴⁹ 'It is also written that on the day of the Passover, you seized him, and that, during the Passover, you crucified him. Now, just as the blood of the Passover saved those who were in Egypt, so also the blood of Christ shall rescue from death all those who believed in him.' Emphasis original, M. Slusser, ed., *St. Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho* (trans. T. B. Falls; Rev. with new introduction by T. P. Halton; Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003) 166.

¹⁵⁰ 'He dies, but he makes alive, and he destroys death with death. He is buried, yet he is raised. Into Hades he went down (εἰς ᾗδου κάτεισιν), and yet he leads souls (ἀνάγει ψυχάς), and yet went up into heaven (εἰς οὐρανούς ἀνεισιν)...' My translation. Greek text, J. Mason, ed., *Five Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus* (CPT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899) 106.

The arguments advanced here have sought to argue that a reading of Hebrews which segments Christ's salvific work into distinct movements has much to commend it at the chronological, geographical, narrative and theological levels. Rather than see every problem solved at one point in the drama of salvation, such as Christ's death, the reading advanced here argues that different problems are solved at different points in Christ's work.

The author of Hebrews understood there to be a typological relationship between the Passover and Jesus' salvific death and resurrection. Just as Israel was enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt, so was humanity, living and departed, enslaved to death, the devil and the fear of death. Just as the Israelites did not automatically enter the promised land after their Exodus, neither did the saints automatically enter heaven. The chronology and the geography must go together. Jesus thus led the deceased saints out of their mortal bondage in the underworld, but this liberation does not, in itself, enable them to enter heaven, God's rest, the correlate of the promised land in Exodus.

This article has therefore argued that Heb 2.14–15 reflects the author's synthesis of several streams of Jewish and early Christian tradition. Through the influence of interpretive traditions in Second Temple Judaism, the elements of the Passover are infused with supernatural dimensions. The mysterious 'destroyer' in Exodus becomes the demonic Prince Mastema, Satan or the devil, to give a few of his many names. This demonic figure's traditional opponents are Michael and possibly Melchizedek. In Hebrews, it is the human Christ who defeats death and the devil through his at first counterintuitive death and subsequent resurrection from the dead, thereby liberating the saints from the darkness of the underworld and ultimately leading many brothers and sisters to heavenly glory.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Acknowledgement. I would like to thank James Harding, Carl Mosser, Madison Pierce, Philip Church and David Moffitt for their valuable feedback on drafts of this article.

Cite this article: Marcar K (2025). Passover, Liberation, and the Defeat of Death and the Devil in Hebrews: A Proposal for the *Descensus Christi* and the Harrowing of Hades in Hebrews 2:14–15. *New Testament Studies* 71, 264–283. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688524000407>