

The Ancient Concepts of The State of The Dead

Compiled by Glen W. Chapman-January 2002

Plato

And what of the body?

More like the other.

'Look at it then again in this way; that, when soul and body 'are combined in one, nature orders the body to serve and to obey, and the soul to rule and to govern. Now in these respects again which of the two seems to you to be like the divine, and which like the mortal? Do you not think that the divine is naturally fitted to rule and to lead, and the mortal to be ruled and to serve?'

'I think so.

'To which of the two then is the soul like?'

'Evidently, Socrates, the soul is like the divine, and the body like the mortal.

Consider then, Cebes, said he, whether from all that has been said we obtain these results: that soul is most like the divine, and immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and ever unchangeable and self-consistent; and the body on the other hand most like the human, and mortal, and unintelligible, and multiform, and dissoluble, and never consistent with itself.

'Have we anything else to say against this, my dear Cebes, to show that it is not so?'

'We have not.

'Well then? This being so, is it not a property of body to be quickly dissolved, but of soul on the other hand to be altogether indissoluble, or nearly so.

'Do you then observe, that after a man is dead, the body, the part of him which is visible and lies in the visible world, and is called a corpse, the property of which is to be dissolved, and decomposed, and scattered by the winds, does not at once suffer any change of this kind, but remains for a considerable time-if the man die with his body in a vigorous state and at a vigorous time of life, for a very considerable time indeed. For when the body has shrunk and been embalmed, like those who were embalmed in Egypt, it remains almost entire an incredible time. And even if the body be decayed, some parts of it, bones and sinews and all such parts, are nevertheless, so to say, immortal, are they not.'

Yes.

But then the soul, the unseen, that has passed to another place like herself, noble, and pure, and unseen, the true Hades, to the presence of the good and wise God, whither, if it be God's will, my own soul is presently to go-is then, I say, this soul of ours, such as she is and so endowed by nature, on being released from the body, immediately scattered to the winds and lost, as most men say?

'Far from it, my dear Cebes and Simmias; but the truth is much rather this. If the soul is pure when released, drawing nothing of the body after her, as she never during this life had any communication with it willingly, but shrank from it, and was gathered up into herself, as making this her constant study, and this is nothing else than practicing true philosophy, and preparing in reality to die cheerfully, -Or would not this be a preparation for death?'

'Certainly.

'In this condition then the soul departs to that world which is like herself, the unseen, the divine, and deathless, and wise:

and on arriving there she finds ready for her a happy existence, released from error, and folly, and fears, and wild desires, and all other human ills, and, as they say of the initiated, she truly passes the rest of her time with the gods. Is it thus, Cebes, that we ought to speak, or otherwise?'

'Thus assuredly, said Cebes.

'But, I suppose, if when she departs from the body she is polluted and impure, from being in constant communion with the body, and cherishing it, and loving it, and having been so bewitched by it, I mean by its desires and pleasures, as to think that nothing else is true except the corporeal, just what a man might

touch, and see, and eat, and drink, and use for his lusts-but accustomed to hate and fear and shun what to the eyes is dark and invisible, but intelligible to thought and attainable by philosophy-in this condition then do you suppose that a soul will depart pure in herself and unalloyed? 'By no means, said he. (Ps-Plato. Alcibiades, I, 133)

'THESE things, then said I, are nothing in number nor in greatness in comparison with those other rewards which await each of them after death. And you ought to hear them, in order that each may receive in full what is due to be told to them by our argument.

'You may speak, said he, as to one who will not find the story too long. but listen all the more gladly.

'But indeed, said I, it is not the story of Alcinous that I am going to tell you, but that of a brave man Er the son of Armenius, a Pamphylian by birth, who was killed in battle, and when the dead were gathered up after ten days in a state of putrefaction, his body was taken up undecayed and carried home to be buried, and on the twelfth day when laid on the funeral pile, he came back to life, and after his revival told what he had seen in the other world.

And he said that when his soul had departed from his body, it travelled with many others, until they came to a certain wonderful place, in which were two chasms in the earth close to each other, and others opposite to them in the heaven above.

'And between them there sat judges, who, after they had decided each case, commanded the just to proceed by the way on the right hand leading upward through the heaven, having hung around them on their breast the records of the judgments given, and the unjust by the way leading downwards on the left, these also having on their hacks the records of all their deeds.

'And when he himself came forward, they said that he must be the messenger to mankind of what was done there, and they commanded him to hear and see everything in that place.'

Plato, *Politicus*, 272

'Such being the nature of these regions, as soon as the dead have arrived at the place to which each is conveyed by his genius, first of all they undergo a trial, both those who have lived good and holy and just lives, and those who have not. And those who are found to have led tolerable lives proceed to Acheron, and embarking on such vessels as there are for them, they arrive on board these at the lake; and there they dwell, and by undergoing purification and suffering punishment for their evil deeds they are absolved from any wrongs they have committed, or receive rewards for their good deeds, each according to his deserts. But any who are found to be incurable by reason of the greatness of their sins, having either perpetrated many great acts of sacrilege, or many nefarious and lawless murders, or any other crimes of this kind-these are hurled by their appropriate doom into Tartarus, whence they never come forth.

But those who are found to have committed sins which are great though not incurable, as for instance if in anger they have done any violence to father or mother, and passed the rest of their life in penitence, or have committed homicide in any other similar way, these must also be thrown into Tartarus

'But any who are found to have been preeminent in holiness of life-these are they who are set free and delivered from these regions here on earth, as from prison-houses, and attain to the pure dwelling place above, and make their abode upon the upper earth. And of this same class those who have fully purified themselves by philosophy live entirely free from troubles for all time to come, and attain to habitations still fairer than these, which it is neither easy to describe, nor does the time suffice at present.

(Plato, *Phaedo*, 113)

' (There was a law) that he who had lived a just and holy life should depart after death to the Islands of the Blessed, and dwell in perfect happiness beyond the reach of all evils. But the

man who had lived an unjust and ungodly life must go away to the prison-house of vengeance and punishment, which they call Tartarus.'

And again a little farther On: 'Next they must be stripped of all these wrappings and so tried, for their judgment must be after death. The judge also must be naked, that is to say, dead, examining by his very soul the very soul of each immediately after death, when it is bereft of all its kindred, and has left all that apparel behind on earth, in order that the judgment may be just.'

And afterwards he adds:

'This, Callicles, is what I have heard and believe to be true, and from these stories I gather the following conclusion: death, as it seems to me, is nothing else than the separation from each other of two things, the soul and the body.

(Plato, *Gorgias*, 523)

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Justin Martyr held to the belief in the two-fold division of the world of spirits:

The souls of the pious remain in a better place, while those of the unjust and wicked are in a worse, waiting for the time of judgment. Thus some which have appeared worthy of God never die; but others are punished so long as God wills them to exist and to be punished.

Irenaeus was emphatic that even believers must be taken to the underworld:

For as the Lord "went away in the midst of the shadow of death," where the souls of the dead were, yet afterwards arose in the body, and after the resurrection was taken up [into heaven], it is manifest that the souls of His disciples also, upon whose account the Lord underwent these things, shall go away into the invisible place allotted to them by God, and there remain until the resurrection, awaiting that event.

Tertullian not only preached that everyone must serve a term in the underworld, but he also taught that the spirit world is under the earth, and the fact that the souls of the wicked are punished there proves that the soul is material. He taught that the punishments in spirit hell will have an end, as well:

By ourselves the lower regions (of Hades) are not supposed to be a bare cavity, nor some subterranean sewer of the world, but a vast deep space in the interior of the earth, and a concealed recess in its very bowels; inasmuch as we read that Christ in His death spent three days in the heart of the earth.... Now although Christ is God, yet, being also man, "He died according to the Scriptures," and "according to the same Scriptures was buried." With the same law of His being He fully complied, by remaining in Hades in the form and condition of a dead man; nor did He ascend into the heights of heaven before descending into the lower parts of the earth, that He might there make the patriarchs and prophets partakers of Himself. (This being the case), you must suppose Hades to be a subterranean region, and keep at arm's length those who are too proud to believe that the souls of the faithful deserve a place in the lower regions.

Therefore, whatever amount of punishment or refreshment the soul tastes in Hades, in its prison or lodging, in the fire or in Abraham's bosom, it gives proof thereby of its own corporeality. For an incorporeal thing suffers nothing, not having that which makes it capable of suffering; else, if it has such capacity, it must be a bodily substance. For in as far as every corporeal thing is capable of suffering, in so far is that which is capable of suffering also corporeal.

All souls, therefore; are shut up within Hades: do you admit this? (It is true, whether) you say yes or no.... Why, then, cannot you suppose that the soul undergoes punishment and consolation in Hades in the interval, while it awaits its alternative of judgment, in a certain anticipation either of gloom or of glory?... What, then, is to take place in that interval? Shall

we sleep? But souls do not sleep.... Or will you have it, that nothing is there done whither the whole human race is attracted, and whither all man's expectation is postponed for safe keeping?... Now really, would it not be the highest possible injustice, even in Hades, if all were to be still well with the guilty even there, and not well with the righteous even yet?... In short, inasmuch as we understand "the prison" pointed out in the Gospel to be Hades, and as we also interpret "the uttermost farthing" to mean the very smallest offence which has to be recompensed there before the resurrection, no one will hesitate to believe that the soul undergoes in Hades some compensatory discipline, without prejudice to the full process of the resurrection, when the recompense will be administered through the flesh besides.

Tertullian is more specific: "*Christ ...did not ascend to the higher heavens until he had descended to the lower regions [lit. lower parts of the worlds], there to make the patriarchs and prophets his compotes.*"

Tertullian, On the Soul In PL 2:788

"Celsus, making fun of the strange doctrine, asks Origen: "Don't you people actually tell about him, that when he had failed to convert the people on this earth he went down to the underworld to try to convert the people down there?"

"We assert that Jesus not only converted no small number of persons while he was in the body . . . but also, that when he became a spirit, without the covering of the body, he dwelt among those spirits which were without bodily covering, converting such of them as were willing to Himself."

"Now if some of them are 'baptized for the dead,' can we not assume that they have a reason for it? Certainly he[Paul] is maintaining that they practiced this in the belief that the ordinance would be a vicarious baptism and as such be advantageous to the flesh of others, which they assumed would be resurrected, for unless this referred to a physical resurrection there would be no point in carrying out a physical baptism."

Tertullian, De Resurrectione (On the Resurrection) 48, in PL 2: 864.

Origen not only taught about the division in the spirit world, but called it both a place of learning and of punishment, and indicated that it was located on the earth. The inhabitants of Paradise will receive instruction, while the inmates of hell will be punished to purify them from their sins. And if their souls can be purified, this punishment must have an end, just as Joseph Smith said.

... those who, departing this world in virtue of that death which is common to all, are arranged, in conformity with their actions and deserts - according as they shall be deemed worthy - some in the place which is called "hell," others in the bosom of Abraham, and in different localities or mansions.

I think, therefore, that all the saints who depart from this life will remain in some place situated on the earth, which holy Scripture calls paradise, as in some place of instruction, and, so to speak, class-room or school of souls, in which they are to be instructed regarding all the things which they had seen on earth, and are to receive also some information respecting things that are to follow in the future....

... we find a certain confirmation of what is said regarding the place of punishment, intended for the purification of such souls as are to be purified by torments, agreeably to the saying: "The Lord cometh like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: and He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and of gold."

Origen, Against Celsus II" 43, in PG 11:864-65

"What then, does not the same economy prevail in Hades, so that there, too, all the spirits might hear the gospel, repent and admit that their punishment, in the light of what they have learned, is just"

Origen says *John "died before him, so that he might descend to the lower regions and announce [preach] his coming."* And again: *"For everywhere the witness and forerunner of Jesus is John being born before and dying shortly before the Son of God so that not only to those of his generation but likewise to those who lived before Christ should liberation from death be preached, and that he might everywhere prepare a people trained to receive the Lord."*

. Origen, In Lucam Homily (Homily on Luke) 4, in PG 12 :1811.

Ignatius taught that when Christ descended to the spirit world, he tore down the wall separating its two regions and arose from the dead accompanied by a multitude:

"Many bodies of the saints that slept arose," their graves being opened. He descended, indeed, into Hades alone, but He arose accompanied by a multitude and rent asunder that means [lit. "fence" or "hedge"] of separation which had existed from the beginning of the world, and cast down its partition wall.

This type of imagery is common in early Christian descriptions of Christ's descent into the spirit world. The descent is always represented as an utter sacking of the place where Christ rips apart the gates, throws down the partition walls, and leaves with the righteous dead. Thus Athanasius:

He burst open the gates of brass, He broke through the bolts of iron, and He took the souls which were in Amente [the Egyptian name for the underworld] and carried them to His Father....Now the souls He brought out of Amente, but the bodies He raised up on the earth....And the Lord died on behalf of every one, in order that every one should rise from the dead with Him.

A Coptic apocryphal document attributed to Bartholomew, as well as the apocryphal *Gospel of Bartholomew*, the *Letter of Jesus to King Abgar*, and the *Gospel of Nicodemus* describe the descent in nearly identical terms:

He broke in pieces the doors, and smashed their bolts, and dragged away and destroyed the door-posts and frames. He overthrew the blazing furnaces of brass and extinguished their fires, and, removing everything from Amente, left it like a desert....So Jesus went down [into Amente, and] scattered [the fiends], and cast chains on the Devil, and redeemed Adam and all his sons; He delivered man, and He shewed compassion upon His own image; He set free all creation, and all the world, and He treated with healing medicine the wound which the Enemy had inflicted on His Son. He brought back into His fold the sheep which had gone astray - He the holy and faithful Shepherd.

Then did I enter in and scourged [Hades] and bound him with chains that cannot be loosed, and brought forth thence all the patriarchs....

... he humbled himself, and died and debased his divinity and was crucified, and descended into Hades, and burst the bars which from eternity had not been broken, and raised the dead; for he descended alone, but rose with many, and thus ascended to his Father.

There came, then, again a voice saying: Lift up the gates. Hades, hearing the voice the second time, answered as if forsooth he did not know, and says: Who is this King of glory? The angels of the Lord say: The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. And immediately with these words the brazen gates were shattered, and the iron bars broken, and all the dead who had been bound came out of the prisons, and we with them. And the King of glory came in in the form of a man, and all the dark places of Hades were lighted up.

We will find that the early Christian writers held no such narrow view, insisting that the Gospel had to be preached to the spirits in prison. And they did not stop at the pitifully small amount of information Peter gave. They preached a doctrine remarkably similar to the Latter-day Saint

belief that the gospel was not only preached by Christ in the spirit world, but by His disciples, as well, after they died.

Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria insisted that it wouldn't be right for God to condemn those who hadn't heard the gospel:

Since those who did that which is universally, naturally, and eternally good are pleasing to God, they shall be saved through this Christ in the resurrection equally with those righteous men who were before them, namely Noah, and Enoch, and Jacob, and whoever else there be, along with those who have known this Christ, Son of God....

For it is not right that these should be condemned without trial, and that those alone who lived after the advent should have the advantage of the divine righteousness. But to all rational souls it was said from above, "Whatever one of you has done in ignorance, without clearly knowing God, if, on becoming conscious, he repent, all his sins will be forgiven him."

. Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Hermas all testified of the fact that Jesus did, indeed, preach to the spirits in prison, some even claiming that the departed disciples of Jesus now continue the preaching work:

It was for this reason, too, that the Lord descended into the regions beneath the earth, preaching His advent there also, and [declaring] the remission of sins received by those who believe in Him. Now all those believed in Him who had hope towards Him, that is, those who proclaimed His advent, and submitted to His dispensations, the righteous men, the prophets, and the patriarchs, to whom He remitted sins in the same way as He did to us, which sins we should not lay to their charge, if we would not despise the grace of God. For as these men did not impute unto us (the Gentiles) our transgressions, which we wrought before Christ was manifested among us, so also it is not right that we should lay blame upon those who sinned before Christ's coming.

And it has been shown also, in the second book of the Stromata, that the apostles, following the Lord, preached the Gospel to those in Hades.... For it was suitable to the divine administration, that those possessed of greater worth in righteousness, and whose life had been pre-eminent, on repenting of their transgressions, though found in another place, yet being confessedly of the number of the people of God Almighty, should be saved, each one according to his individual knowledge.... If, then, the Lord descended to Hades for no other end but to preach the Gospel, as He did descend; it was either to preach the Gospel to all or to the Hebrews only. If, accordingly, to all, then all who believe shall be saved, although they may be of the Gentiles, on making their profession there....

... when He became a soul, without the covering of the body, He dwelt among those souls which were without bodily covering, converting such of them as were willing to Himself, or those whom He saw, for reasons known to Him alone, to be better adapted to such a course. ... These apostles and teachers who preached the name of the Son of God, after falling asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, preached it not only to those who were asleep, but themselves also gave them the seal of the preaching. Accordingly they descended with them into the water, and again ascended.

"What then, does not the same economy prevail in Hades, so that there, too, all the spirits might hear the gospel, repent and admit that their punishment, in the light of what they have learned, is just"

Clement of Alexandria Stromata. :VI,6, in PG 9:272.

"Now if some of them are 'baptized for the dead,' can we not assume that they have a reason for it? Certainly he [Paul] is maintaining that they practiced this in the belief that the ordinance would be a vicarious baptism and as such be advantageous to the flesh of others, which they

assumed would be resurrected, for unless this referred to a physical resurrection there would be no point in carrying out a physical baptism." Clement of Alexandria, Stromata III, 6., in PG 9: 268

This belief in Christ's preaching mission to the dead was not some incidental folk belief, but a central part of the Christian message. It was so central, in fact, that Justin Martyr accused the Jews of having removed a passage from Jeremiah about the descent and preaching to weaken the scriptural support for Christianity.

Here Trypho remarked, "We ask you first of all to tell us some of the Scriptures which you allege have been completely cancelled." [Justin quotes some passages which the Jews evidently removed from Esdras and Jeremiah.] And again, from the sayings of the same Jeremiah these have been cut out: 'The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the graves; and He descended to preach to them His own salvation.'

The *Odes of Solomon* preserve a beautiful account of the preaching work of Christ to the dead. In one of the *Odes* the Saviour says:

Sheol saw me and was made miserable: Death cast me up and many along with me. I had gall and bitterness, and I went down with him to the utmost of his depth.... And I made a congregation of living men amongst his dead men, and I spake with them by living lips: Because my word shall not be void: And those who had died ran towards me: and they cried and said, Son of God, have pity on us, and do with us according to thy kindness, and bring us out from the bonds of darkness: and open to us the door by which we shall come out to thee. For we see that our death has not touched thee. Let us also be redeemed with thee: for thou art our Redeemer. And I heard their voice; and my name I sealed upon their heads: For they are free men and they are mine.

Hippolytus, Demonstratio de Christo et Antichristo (On Christ and The Antichrist)

"these Apostles, and the teachers who had proclaimed the name of the Son of God, after they had fallen asleep in [the] power and faith of the Son of God preached likewise to the dead and they gave them the seal of the preaching. They accordingly went down with them into the water and came out again. But although they went down while they were alive and came up alive, those who had fallen asleep before them (prokekoimemenoi) went down dead, but came out again living, for it was through these that they were made alive, and learned the name of the Son of God. It is necessary, he said, for them to come up through the water in order to be made alive; for otherwise none can enter the Kingdom of God . . . therefore even the dead receive the seal.... The seal is of course, the water-"

The Latin version reads: *"These Apostles and teachers who had preached the name of the Son of God, when they died in possession of his faith and power, preached to those who had died before, and themselves gave them this seal. Hence [igitur] they went down into the water with them but they who had died before went down dead, of course but ascended living, since it was through them that they received life and knew the Son of God "*

Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes III, 9, 16; We are following the various texts given in Max Dressel, *Patrum Apostolicorum Opera*, (Leipzig, 1863), 548-49, 631.

Codex Vaticanus 3848.

"that it was necessary for the best of the Apostles to be imitators of their Master on the other side as well as here, that they might convert the gentile dead as he did the Hebrew." Elsewhere he says: "Christ visited, preached to, and baptized the just men of old, both gentiles and Jews, not

only those who lived before the coming of the Lord, but also those who were before the coming of the Law . . . such as Abel, Noah, or any such righteous man." (unknown missing scripture)

"They died in righteous and great purity, and this seal was the only thing they lacked.

For this reason they the Apostles] went down living with them into the water . . . and gave them life . . . and came up out again with them, and were gathered up together with them, that all might share eternal life."

Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes IX, 16,6-7

Epiphanius, Against Heresies 1, 28, 6, in PG; 4:384. *"From Asia and Gaul has reached us the account [tradition] of a certain practice, namely that when any die without baptism among them, they baptize others in their place and in their name, so that, rising in the resurrection, they will not have to pay the penalty of having failed to receive baptism, but rather will become subject to the authority of the Creator of the World. For this reason this tradition which has reached us is said to be the very thing to which the Apostle himself refers when he says, "If the dead rise not at all, what shall they do who are baptized for the dead"*

In the fourth century, St. Ambrose recalled; but did not approve, the practice:

"Fearing that a dead person who had never been baptized would be resurrected badly [male] or not at all, a living person would be baptized in the name of the dead one. Hence he [Paul] adds: "Else why are they baptized for them" According to this he does not approve of what is done but shows the firm faith in the resurrection" [that it implies].

Ambrose, Comme taria in Epistolam I ad Corinthios (Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians), in PL 117: 280.

From the Sayings of Jesus

"The testament which our Lord Jesus Christ made with his Apostles after his resurrection from the dead and the instructions which he gave them." .

"I have received all authority from my Father, so that I might lead out into light those who sit in darkness,

"[As resurrected beings] even as my Father raised me from the dead, so you, too, will rise again and be received into the highest heaven.

. "Christ preached 'to them that are dead.' For this reason, says the Lord in the Discourse to the Apostles, 'have I gone below and spoken to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to your fathers, the prophets, and preached to them, that they might enjoy their rest in heaven.' ...

and with my right hand I gave them the baptism of life and release and forgiveness of all evil, even as I do to you here and to all who believe on me from this time on.

"Christ not only appears as a preacher in the lower world, but also as one administering baptism; and here, too, his activity runs parallel to his earthly mission

"Servants [diakonoi] because they [the dead] will receive the baptism of life and the forgiveness of your sins from my hand through you, . . . and so have part in the heavenly kingdom.

"Another doctrine will arise and with it confusion; for they will seek their own advancement and bring forth a useless doctrine. And it will cause vexation even unto death; and they will teach and turn away those who believed on me and lead them away from eternal life."

Schmidt, Gesprache Jesu