

“The Outskirts of Paradise” Depictions of Hades in Early Syriac Literature

Jackson Reinhardt
Vanderbilt Divinity School

Abstract

This paper examines the depictions of Hades/Sheol in three of the earliest examples of Christian Syriac literature: *The Odes of Solomon*, *The Acts of Thomas*, and the authentic corpus of Ephrem the Syrian. This paper intends to fulfill two purposes. First, it serves as a beginning attempt in filling the lamentable gap of English-language scholarship concerning early Syriac eschatology. Second, it seeks to make explicit the noticeable unity and disunity these depictions share, contending that the latter diversity is a mark of the imaginative theologizing in which these Syriac works engaged. The paper concludes by suggesting further research in this area and theological attitude.

Introduction

In this paper, I examine the depictions of Hades/Sheol in the earliest Christian Syriac literature, with particular emphasis on three influential sources from the 3rd and 4th centuries CE: *The Odes of Solomon*, *The Acts of Thomas*, as well as both the poetical and prose writings of Ephrem the Syrian. There is a dearth of material on Hades, and eschatology more generally, in English-language Syriac academic discourse.¹ Frequently, discussions on the posthumous state are examined through the prism of Christ’s *descensus ad infernos*—his preaching of the Gospel to the Old Testament Saints and their deliverance into Heaven. Over the past several decades, there have been several monographs and dissertations that study Christ’s

1 The broadest discussion I have found is Ute Possekel, “Expectations of the End in Early Syriac Christianity,” in *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity*, ed. Robert J. Daly, Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 160–74. However, much of Possekel’s discussion is limited as she attempts to incorporate as many sources and authors as possible.

descent in Ephrem, *The Odes*, and other early and medieval Syriac literature.² Yet, there is little explicit surveying on the role of Sheol beyond this (now) obscure theological doctrine.

This paper attempts primarily to provide analysis and elaboration on Hades' location, inhabitants, function, and greater cosmological-eschatological significance in the early Syriac tradition. I contend these presentations do possess noticeable, but basic, commonalities about Hades, such as belief in its existence and some comparable conceptual ideations about the location's appearance or inhabitants. In this sense, there is consensus on aspects of Hades among these sources. Yet simultaneously, there exists a real theological diversity in these *Sheolic* portrayals, as these sources go beyond their shared commonalities and engage in an active, imaginative theologizing that results in each work featuring distinct and creative depictions of Hades.

The Odes of Solomon

*The Odes of Solomon*³ are a collection of forty-two psalms pseudepigraphically attributed to the eponymous Israelite monarch. Since their more extensive discovery in 1909 by J. Rendell Harris, the provenance of the *Odes* has been a source of much scholarly debate. Yet even though there are a lack of concrete answers to the multitude of questions regarding the text's origins, certain statements can be made about the *Odes* with some surety. It was most likely an original Syriac text, written in the late 2nd to early 3rd centuries CE, and even though Jesus Christ is not mentioned by name, the *Odes* are "undeniably a Christian work," influenced by Christianized readings of the Hebrew Bible and the Gospel of John. The hymnbook is filled with beautiful and theologically rich imagery, with one scholar noting that the "overwhelming sentiment of the *Odes* is one of exuberant joy, praise, and thanksgiving."⁴

Due to the *Odes*' joyful attitude, as well as the limited amount of material with explicit mention of the posthumous state, it is harder to construct a thorough depiction of Hades to the same extent as the works below. Additionally, the *Odes* engage in paradoxical, poetic descriptions of the nature and inhabitants of Hades.

2 See Adrienne L. Jervis, "O Death, Where Is Thy Victory? A Study of Christ's Descensus Ad Infernos in the Odes of Solomon," PhD diss. (University of Edinburgh, 1995); Richard Edward McCarron, "The Appropriation of the Theme of Christ's Descent to Hell in the Early Syriac Liturgical Tradition," PhD diss. (Catholic University of America, 2000); and Thomas Buchan, "*Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam From Sheol*": *Christ's Descent to the Dead in the Theology of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*" (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004).

3 Translations of the *Odes of Solomon* are from either James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Odes of Solomon: The Syriac Texts*, trans. James H. Charlesworth, Texts and Translations 13 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977); or Jervis, "O Death." Each citation will indicate which translation is utilized.

4 Ute Possekkel, "The Emergence of Syriac Literature to AD 400," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (New York: Routledge, 2018), 311.

Nonetheless, the *Odes* frequently mention Christ's underworld descent, along with his actions therein, which allows for a sufficient depiction to be possible.⁵

Sheol in the *Odes* is a landscape of watery pits, or a "plurality of abysses,"⁶ filled with disparate bones and shadowy beings. There is no "life" in Sheol,⁷ but there is a kind of disembodied, pitiful existence. In fact, one of Christ's many seminal acts in his descent is performing an Ezekiel-esque action in which he "took dead bones and covered them with flesh."⁸ The realm is ruled over by the personified Death, who is frequently portrayed as equivalent to the "Evil One" and/or "Sheol" itself. Death is a chaos monster: a seven-headed dragon who vociferously devours all who descend into his realm.⁹ Death is also a jailer, as Sheol is surrounded by a gate of iron, with the dead held in chains.¹⁰ One may notice mixed descriptions about the state of the dead in Hades throughout the corpus. For example, in Ode 22, the dead are truly in "graves" within Sheol,¹¹ while Ode 17 features the dead enchained and existing as cognizant (spiritual, but non-corporeal) beings in the afterlife. There is no mention of explicit punishment, but the Odists do not portray this posthumous state as anything *but* miserable.

Regardless of pictorial ambiguity, the *Odes* appear quite clear on what happens to Hades when Christ descends into it: he empties it and destroys its power to consume any more deceased humans.¹² In Ode 22, Christ is said to have "defeated"

5 I primarily rely on Jervis's "O Death" due to the serious lack of scholarly material investigating this question (in English, of course). The closest article I found to addressing this topic is William Romaine Newbold, "The Descent of Christ in the Odes of Solomon," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 31 (1912): 168–210. Yet, since over a century has passed since publication, the article is extremely dated. His primary argument is that the *Odes of Solomon* were written by "Bardaisan of Edessa," and this is deduced via a comparison of the hymns to Zodiac and Greek astrology. Little is discussed concerning the form, function, and ultimate purpose of Hades.

6 Ode 24:5. Jervis remarks that Sheol is sometimes described as "subterranean, [and] at others it is subaquatic." "O Death," 340–41.

7 Ode 42:14 states that Christ, in his descent, made a "congregation of the living among . . . [the] dead." Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 145.

8 Ode 22:9. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 90.

9 Ode 22:5. Jervis makes the unpersuasive attempt to connect the depictions of Death *qua* dragon to the ancient Canaanite legends of Ba'al, Yam, and Mot. This is an incident in which a similar concept does not, at all, imply any sort of mythopoetic mimesis. "O Death," 340.

10 Ode 17:10. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 75.

11 Ode 22:8. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 90.

12 The earliest scholars of the *Odes* appear to agree to the hymnbook's universalism. In J. Rendell Harris' first translation of and commentary on the Syriac *Odes of Solomon*, he writes that the Odists are "exultant in his universalism." In Ode 6, "the stream of living water has gone out into all the earth: thirsty souls everywhere have been refreshed by it: dying souls have been revived." *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon: Published from the Syriac Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 13. Later authors are more ambivalent to the claim of universalism, however. Jeffrey A. Trumbower denies any potential for a universalist reading of the *Odes*, remarking that the various hymns (particularly 42) indicate that not only did not every inhabitant leave with Christ, but also the descending Lord seems to have "let go" of Sheol/Death after holding them down, implying a resumption of function. *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 98–99.

the seven-headed dragon: he “obliterated [the beast’s] evil venom” and “destroy[ed] [its] seed.”¹³ Adrienne Jervis contends this passage demonstrates “the complete reversal of fortunes of Death and his cohorts.”¹⁴ Death has tasted “true life” (i.e., Christ), and it is unclear whether he will ever possess the same appetite for the dead again. Ode 42, following this metaphor, states that Christ was like a toxic ipecac: “I have been vinegar and bitterness to [Sheol],” which not only led Death to “[eject] me and many with me”¹⁵ but also shattered the power of this subterranean realm. Ode 17 details the utter destructiveness of Christ’s descent to the whole physical geography of Sheol: “I shattered the bars of iron, for my own shackles had grown hot and melted before me.”¹⁶ All that was closed becomes open, those who were bound are untied, and the dead are given the living knowledge of the “resurrection through [his] love.”¹⁷

Thus, the *Odes of Solomon* cast Christ’s descent as an extremely disruptive moment in eschatological history. Jervis writes that it signals “the totality of [Death/Sheol’s] defeat,” as Christ’s salvific descent is “comprehensive, final, and definitive.”¹⁸ The Odist “emphasizes . . . universality . . . [and] the finality of [Christ’s] victory” in which “not a trace of Death or his loathsome abode is allowed to endure.”¹⁹ Jervis argues that this is not “an improvement of the existing scheme, but a complete overturning of everything that had gone before.”²⁰ The power of Death to hold the dead in his realm was totally devastated by Christ.²¹

Yet, we must be careful drawing any too fine of conclusions. The *Odes* feature varying depictions of Hades, seemingly in conceptual conflict with each other as noted. Attempting to construct any systematic theological conclusion from this hymnbook may be unwise. Nonetheless, the *Odes* frequently portray this ghastly, watery location as having been weakened, destroyed, and/or reduced to emptiness after the descent—it thus seems reasonable to conclude that Hades plays little to no role in the posthumous existence of not only believers, but also *all* people post-descent. Whether this implies any sort of soteriological universalism seems impossible to firmly determine based on merely what is in the *Odes* themselves.

13 Ode 22:5, 7. Jervis, “O Death,” 106.

14 Jervis, “O Death,” 342.

15 Ode 42:12, 11. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 145.

16 Ode 17:10. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 75.

17 Ode 17:13. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 75.

18 Jervis, “O Death,” 341.

19 Jervis, “O Death,” 341.

20 Jervis, “O Death,” 342.

21 It is rather enigmatic, but Ode 24:10 also mentions that “the Lord destroyed the devices of those who had not the truth with them,” possibly a reference to the obliteration of Death and his carceral mechanisms. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 98.

The Acts of Thomas

The *Acts of Thomas* is a New Testament apocrypha detailing the missionary exploits of Judas Thomas Didymus—the twin brother of Jesus Christ—who was the apostle to the East (i.e., contemporary India). The provenance of the material is Syriac (although there is some debate),²² with one scholar contending that it “was composed in the Edessene area in the first half of the third century [CE].”²³ The work was popular in late antiquity, finding support among both the “orthodox” and Manichean Christians, the latter of which primarily valued the narrative’s ascetic teachings.²⁴ Indeed, the theme of asceticism is heavily apparent within the *Acts*, as Thomas calls upon recent converts to live a life of bodily rejection and celibacy. Throughout the narrative, the apostle breaks up weddings, commands chastity, and encourages extreme frugality, thrift, and charitable giving. Sebastian Brock frames the asceticism within the *Acts* as dualistic and oriented towards the salvation of the participant. He writes,

The basis of [the *Acts*’] teaching consists in the contrast between the corruptible body (not, however, in itself evil) and the soul, alone capable of incorruptibility. All that pertains to the body is to be rejected on the grounds that such things, being corruptible, are liable to hinder the soul in attaining its goal of incorruptibility. The ascetic life thus becomes an essential step on the road to salvation.²⁵

The asceticism that dominates the theology of this apocryphal history provides an essential context for understanding the portrayal and function of Hades within the text. It is those that have unrepentantly corrupted their souls through carnal sins who are doomed to vile torment and annihilation.

The depiction of Hades within the *Acts of Thomas* is far closer to notions of hell that populate the Western consciousness, theological or not.²⁶ The description

22 Due to the existence of *Acts* manuscripts in both Greek and Syriac, some have argued that the former was the text’s original language of composition. Yet the scholarly consensus is still firmly in support of the latter. For an overview of these questions, see Harold W. Attridge, “The Original Language of the Acts of Thomas,” in *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism, and Christian Origins*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, John J. Collins, and Thomas H. Tobin, College Theology Society Resources in Religion 5 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 241–50.

23 McCarron, “The Appropriation,” 79.

24 Susan E. Myers, *Spirit Epicicles in the Acts of Thomas* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 2.

25 Sebastian P. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” *Numen* 20 (1973): 8–9.

26 The Greek translation includes a longer tour of Hades, with more explicit and gruesome torments along with the punishment of non-sexual sins. These additions were added possibly under the influence of the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Peter*, one of the earliest non-canonical Christian depictions of hell, to expose the torment that occurs to other evil actions like murder, etc. Martha Himmelfarb, “Tours of Hell: The Development and Transmission of an Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature,” PhD diss. (University of Pennsylvania, 1981), 25–31.

begins in the work's sixth act, entitled "The Young Man who Killed the Girl."²⁷ The apostle Thomas is asked to investigate the case of a man whose hands mysteriously dried up, prohibiting him from taking the Eucharist. The youngster reveals that his girlfriend was trying to copulate with him, even though he desired to live chaste and pure. After falling to the temptation of the woman, he kills her, admitting that it was "because I could not bear to see her while she was having intercourse with other men."²⁸ Thomas goes to the corpse and, after performing a long supplication to Jesus, is able to resurrect the girl.

Afterward, the apostle asks the maiden what she experienced in her posthumous state, to which she responds with a long, elaborate digression on the inner workings of Hades. She first meets a man who was "hideous . . . [with a] black body . . . [and] his clothes filthy."²⁹ This strange character takes the girl to see "a place full of pits, and a stinking smell . . . in its midst." The first pit is full of blazing fires, which smolders a multitude of bodies. The black figure³⁰ remarks to the girl, "into this torment are destined to come those souls which transgress the law, which change the union of intercourse that has been appointed by God."³¹ Elsewhere in the hellish landscape, there are those "be[ing] given over to evil spirits, and shall be for mockery and a derision, and retribution shall be (extracted) from them."³² Some transgressors³³ have sinned so mightily that they "shall go into another torment, which is worse" than burning or demonic irritation.³⁴

After touring these tortures, the black man takes the girl to a dark, foul-smelling cavern. In the cave is "the prison of . . . souls. . . . When the chastisement of each of them is finished, another cometh in its place."³⁵ Some of the prisoners are "utterly consumed," while others are "handed over to other tortures."³⁶ Some of the demonic torturers ask for the black man to hand over the girl to them for torment, but the guide remarks, "I will not give her to you, because I am afraid of Him who

27 William Wright, trans., "The Acts of Judas Thomas (or the Twin) the Apostle," in *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (London: Williams and Northgate, 1871), 190.

28 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 191.

29 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 195.

30 This black demonic figure has intrigued many scholars. According to David Brakke, demonic beings were frequently cast as possessing black skin in Patristic-era writings, particularly by those in the Coptic tradition. David Brakke, "Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 501–35.

31 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 195.

32 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 195.

33 The girl remarks on several examples: "those men who leave their own wives, and have intercourse with the wives of their fellows; and women, who go beyond intercourse with their own husbands; and youths, who do not keep their laws but wantonly indulge themselves with harlots in their lust . . . and maids, who have not kept their state of virginity." Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 195–96.

34 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 195.

35 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 196.

36 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 196.

delivered her to me, and I was not ordered to leave her.”³⁷ The girl is then taken back to the entrance of Hades, where the black man says, “she is one of the sheep that have gone astray.”³⁸ After hearing the narrative, Thomas speaks to the amazed crowd: “Ye have heard, my children, what this woman hath said. . . . There are not these tortures only, but also others, which are much worse. . . . Unless ye are converted to this truth which I preach, and restrain yourselves from evil deeds . . . your end will come to these torments.”³⁹ With that impromptu sermon, the masses repent and begin to believe.

In the *Acts of Thomas*, Hades is thus a place of punishment for earthly, temporal, almost entirely sexual wickedness. It is divided into sections that perform various types of torment for, it is implied, differing degrees of sin. Contrary to later Occidental, Medieval conceptualizations, the torment in this hell is not eternal. While it can last some time, one assumes, eventually the sufferer is “wholly consumed.” However, this does not seem to imply a “purgatorial universalism,” in which the tormented soul is then brought to Heaven after a cleansing of their soul by fire and torture. Instead, they are completely destroyed and consequently miss out on the possibility of the resurrection and/or Heavenly communion with the Godhead.⁴⁰ It is unknown what role God has within the torment inflicted. When the black man speaks of “Him,” who gave the girl, he might be designating merely God’s role in allowing this tour rather than *His* involvement in the types of torment administered. Regardless, the fact that the location is primarily filled with men and women who have sexually “transgressed the laws” demonstrates the great importance of ascetic practice. As Brock noted, the more corruptible (and frequent) the bodily acts on earth, the more corrupted the soul becomes. The individual then, in turn, loses their salvation. This tour of hell has a moralistic, didactic purpose—the girl’s narrative is so grisly and discomfiting that it should drive any right-thinking person to avoid all forms of sexual impurity lest they are sent to the same locale!

37 Wright, “The Acts of Judas Thomas,” 196.

38 Wright, “The Acts of Judas Thomas,” 196.

39 Wright, “The Acts of Judas Thomas,” 197.

40 While never a dominant position, purgatorial universalism was an eschatological option within ancient Eastern and Syriac Christianity. As E. H. Plumptre wrote, “Diodorus of Tarsus taught that the penalty of sin is not perpetual, but issues in the blessedness of immortality, and was followed by Stephanus, bishop of Edessa, and Solomon of Bassora, and Isaac of Nineveh.” *The Spirits in Prison and Other Studies on the Life After Death* (London: Wm. Isibister Limited, 1884), 141. Richard Bauckham denies any real prevalence of the universalist position—in whatever form—but does admit that there “were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated (in its commonest form, this is the doctrine of ‘conditional immortality’).” “Universalism: A Historical Survey,” *Themelios* 4 (1978): 47. It is impossible, based on the brevity of the text and seeming disinterest in more abstract matters of eschatology, to lump the *Acts* within either stream. But, surely, it does not teach eternal conscious torment.

Ephrem the Syrian

Ephrem the Syrian (306–372 CE) is a monumentally influential figure within the Syriac Christian tradition and beyond.⁴¹ He was born in Nisibis, where he served as a Deacon, before moving to Edessa due to the Persian exile of Christians. Through his poems (in the form of *madrashē* and *memre*) and prose writings (mostly letters and biblical commentaries), Ephrem theologized in a manner that employed “symbol, type, and paradox, qualities that convey the nuanced texture of meaning and an emotive immediacy.”⁴² This is noticeably distinct from the type of theological engagements seen in the Greek and Latin traditions. Robert Murray declared him to be “the greatest poet of the patristic age, and perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante.”⁴³ He is the foremost figure within early Syriac theology and spirituality, whose manifold writings (and false attributions) have been sources of inspiration throughout Eastern Christianity.⁴⁴ The following analysis will focus on Ephrem’s Nisibene Hymns and Letters to Publius.

To Ephrem, Sheol exists outside the temporal and physical spatial realm—it is a liminal space located beneath the pillars that uphold the terrestrial earth.⁴⁵ Sheol is the abode of the dead: all humans, prior to the resurrection, will be sent there. Only have Enoch and Elijah passed over habitation in Sheol and ascended straight to the Heavenly realms.⁴⁶ It is due to Adam’s first sin that all humans are forced to descend to this place. As Thomas Buchan puts it, “Adam alienated himself and all his descendants from the divine source” through his transgression, thus initiating a process whereby there would be “subsequent human physical decomposition”

41 Ephrem the Syrian is “by far the most important figure in early Syriac literature. . . . [His] writings are extensive even when the large number of works falsely attributed to him is excluded.” Sebastian P. Brock, “Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition,” in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 363.

42 Possekel, “The Emergence,” 319. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Ephrem’s material are from Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Part II Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, vol. 13, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature, 1894). Henceforth S&W.

43 Quoted in Joseph P. Amar, “Christianity at the Crossroads: The Legacy of Ephrem the Syrian,” *Religion & Literature* 43 (2011): 2.

44 For an overview on Ephrem’s (typically translated) legacy, see Ephrem Lash, “The Greek Writings Attributed to Saint Ephrem the Syrian,” in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West [Festschrift for Bishop Ware]*, ed. John Behr, Dimitrie Conomos, and Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 81–98.

45 According to Thomas Buchan, Ephrem’s conception of Sheol arose from “three interrelated sources: Scripture, his Mesopotamian cultural milieu, and many of the physical aspects of death and the human experiences of practices related to it.” Buchan argues that all three sources share a common feature: “practices of burial and the decomposition of the body,” which “contributed to the [general] habit of thought which located Sheol under or within the earth.” Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 54.

46 “Yet were there two men (that I lie not) whose names have escaped me in Hell. For Enoch and Elijah came not to me.” Nisibene Hymns 36:7. S&W, 196.

at death.⁴⁷ Through putrefaction, “the return of humanity’s dust to its earthly source . . . [imitated the] prospects of death and descent to Sheol.”⁴⁸ Once Cain killed Abel, Sheol became a place for the death to reside: “Cain with his sword overthrew the gate of Sheol, for it was closed . . . before the time he first opened it.”⁴⁹

The physical dimensions of Sheol in Ephrem’s thought are cavernous and blackened. The place is “cold and dark,”⁵⁰ full of disparate bones piled up across the hypogeal hellscape.⁵¹ It is surrounded, like in the *Odes of Solomon*, by a large, impenetrable, and black gate, that only Christ has been able to break open during his exit with the dead after his descent.⁵² The law of Sheol is “to keep silent,”⁵³ indicating that its inhabitants are speechless, seemingly because this is the very characteristic of Death itself (both as personification and process): “be like me who am so silent, in the midst of Sheol.”⁵⁴ The dead may also be silent because they are sleeping. As F. Gavin notes, Ephrem frequently “compares death to sleep. . . . The resurrection is being waked out of sleep.”⁵⁵ Ephrem writes, “behold, sleep shows us how temporary is Sheol, for the morn awakes the sleeper.”⁵⁶ In many instances, Ephrem depicts Sheol as a giant cemetery, full of not only decaying skeletal remains but also “graves”⁵⁷ and “gloomy sepulchers.”⁵⁸ It is thus presumed that the dead “sleep” in these graves, awaiting their resurrection peacefully.

Throughout his prose and poetic writings, Ephrem mentions numerous inhabitants of Hades, particularly those from biblical history,⁵⁹ yet he also gives great attention to its overlord(s). The ruler of the location is the personified Death. Ephrem describes both that Death has a throne in Sheol and that Sheol functions

47 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 55.

48 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 55.

49 Nisibene Hymns 69:11. Quoted in Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 55.

50 Nisibene Hymns 36:11. S&W, 196.

51 Nisibene Hymns 37:4. S&W, 198.

52 Nisibene Hymns 37:9. S&W, 199.

53 Nisibene Hymns 65:15. S&W, 217.

54 Nisibene Hymns 66:1. S&W, 217.

55 F. Gavin, “The Sleep of the Soul in the Early Syriac Church,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 40 (1920): 105. Gavin notes that in “Syriac Christianity, from the fourth century on, there appears with more or less consistency and in much the same outline a curious teaching as to the state of the dead,” that being a posthumous slumber until the resurrection. Yet Gavin arbitrarily begins in the fourth century, when earlier Syriac material, as shown, had depictions of posthumous existence that was not a kind of sleep. Additionally, he gives little discussion on Sheol and the role of these sleeping corpses in that realm. Regardless, Ephrem does regularly view the human inhabitants of Hades as being asleep.

56 Quoted in Gavin, “The Sleep of the Soul,” 105.

57 Christ, in his descent, “burst the graves one by one.” Nisibene Hymns 36:11. S&W, 197.

58 Quoted in Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 56.

59 For a partial list containing many biblical characters referenced as inhabiting Sheol, see Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 58–59.

as Death's stomach. The role of Satan, and his relationship to Death, is more ambiguous. Ephrem is not clear on whether Sheol is Satan's continual abode and what his role and function there are exactly. It appears that the "Evil One" resides primarily in Gehenna but is able to transverse across the visible and invisible cosmos, with the possible exception of Heaven.⁶⁰

The ambiguity concerning Satan appears to leak into Ephrem's characterization of Death. In some locations, Death is Satan's ally: together they "rejoice," while the former provides "counsel" to the latter in moments of nefarious plotting.⁶¹ As Buchan remarks, Ephrem sees "Satan, Sin, Sheol, and Death as equally complicit in the exploitation and oppression of humanity."⁶² Elsewhere, however, Death seems opposed, even hostile, to the machinations of Satan. In the dialogue between Death and Satan, the former states: "I am he that rescues from thee [The Evil One] the sons of men."⁶³ Later in the Nisibene Hymns, Death questions why humans even "weep" over their dead, when he has provided the deceased "rest from sorrows and sins."⁶⁴ Death is frequently portrayed as a just, impartial, "guileless" consumer, who only takes what is rightfully given to him.⁶⁵ Thus, Ephrem's depiction of Death vacillates from co-conspirator against the Lord's reign to one who "hast gotten thy might . . . from God."⁶⁶

Related to the occasionally redemptive attitude toward Death, the most distinct element of Ephrem's concept of Hades is how positive he casts the posthumous realm. While his physical descriptions appear quite gloomy, putrid, and miserable, the place is nonetheless one of restful slumber, tranquility, and general egalitarianism. There is no hierarchy or societal distinctions: from the loftiest king to the poorest pauper, most deviant scoundrel to holiest of saint—all are sent to Sheol upon death where they sleep peacefully until the final resurrection. No one individual receives greater or lesser comfort. A refrain in the Nisibene Hymns is "Happy are ye silent dead, how tranquil are ye" as they are "freed from the misery" and "there is no iniquity."⁶⁷ Most shockingly is Ephrem's comparisons of Sheol to *Heaven!* He writes, "it is Sheol and Heaven alone, that are removed from all sins; this earth that lies between, in her iniquity dwells."⁶⁸ He contends that regardless of which spiritual path one will go on in this life, they should not fear the next: "he therefore that is prudent will either go up into Heaven, or, if that be too hard,

60 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 323. An example of this trans-cosmic movement is Satan's Sheolic and Earthly appearances, evidently the temptation of Jesus Christ in the wilderness.

61 Nisibene Hymns 41:15. S&W, 205.

62 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 175.

63 Nisibene Hymns 55:7. S&W, 209.

64 Nisibene Hymns 64:1. S&W, 217.

65 Nisibene Hymns 52:17. S&W, 207.

66 Nisibene Hymns 52:7. S&W, 206.

67 Nisibene Hymns 38:4. S&W, 199.

68 Nisibene Hymns 38:4. S&W, 199.

will go down to Sheol which is easy.”⁶⁹ While Ephrem’s Sheol is not a picturesque locality, it is free of torment, suffering, and the challenges that make earthly living arduous.

Yet, Sheol is only populated during temporal history. In the final resurrection, the dead will physically depart from their entombed slumber in Sheol, leaving the entire realm empty.⁷⁰ After this general resurrection and judgment, the unrepentant sinners are sent to *Gehenna*. Torture of the damned is reserved for Gehenna in Ephrem’s eschatology rather than Sheol,⁷¹ which Buchan remarks as “the difference between [Hades] and Hell.”⁷² In his Letter to Publius, Ephrem, with constant biblical allusion and reference, describes the torment that befalls the unregenerate: weeping and wailing, gnashing of teeth, chained sinner, and continually burning fire.⁷³ The fiery tortures are reiterated in the Nisibene Hymns, in which “floods of fire be stirred against thee, in the resurrection . . . fire mayest thou justly burn.”⁷⁴ Stones are also heaped on sinners as the smoke from the smoldering fire burns eyes and throats.⁷⁵ All this imagery reads as reminiscent of the visceral depictions in *Acts of Thomas*.

Also somewhat like the *Acts*, Ephrem describes the punishment in Gehenna as only *potentially* eternal. While the inhabitants in Sheol are dead/asleep and thus lack a conscious will (hence Ephrem does not believe those in Sheol can repent⁷⁶), those in Gehenna are awake—resurrected—thus possessing a degree of freedom. In Ephrem’s theology of Gehenna, then, there is “the possibility of repentance and restoration.”⁷⁷ This possibility is seen throughout Ephrem’s writings. In the Nisibene Hymns, he writes, “hell in mercy, shall be emptied.”⁷⁸ Elsewhere, in his commentary on the Diatessaron, he notes that “when one will have made retribution in Gehenna, [God] will reward him for this in the Kingdom.”⁷⁹ It appears then that inhabitation in either Sheol or Gehenna, to Ephrem, is only a temporary “waiting-room” until entrance into paradises, yet the latter appears to be a state in which one has the choice to leave.

Conclusion

As shown, *The Odes of Solomon*, *Acts of Thomas*, and the work of Ephrem all

69 Nisibene Hymns 38:5. S&W, 199.

70 McCarron, “The Appropriation,” 129.

71 Although on a few occasions Ephrem does categorize Sheol as a type of punishment, it appears that it is not as direct, active, or miserable as Gehenna.

72 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 67, *supra* 104. Emphasis original.

73 See Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 343–44.

74 Nisibene Hymns 57:11, 20. S&W, 210–11.

75 Nisibene Hymns 57:22. S&W, 211.

76 Cf. Nisibene Hymns 36:16. S&W, 197.

77 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 350.

78 Nisibene Hymns 59:9. S&W, 212.

79 Quoted in Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 349.

feature various common aspects in their depictions of Hades. Each source presents Sheol as real and existing, home to the dead and located beneath the earth. All mention Christ's descent into Hades and bringing out of dead with him.⁸⁰ Also, each source mentions a figure or figures who control the regular happenings of the abode, such as accepting the newly deceased. Most eschatologically notable is that Sheol does not seem to be an eternal "resting" place, for the dead at least. In the *Odes*, Christ's descent destroys the power of Sheol; the tormented are eventually obliterated in *Acts of Thomas*; and Hades is emptied at the resurrection in Ephrem. Yet, beyond these elements, there is little by way of consensus among the sources. Active torture plays no role in the Sheol of Ephrem or the *Odes* like in the *Acts of Thomas*. Further, only the *Acts* clearly indicates that the inhabitants of Hades are conscious of their new residence. While Ephrem sends all pre-final judgment humans to Sheol, the *Odes* send none (post-descent), while only the wicked go in *Acts of Thomas*. The *Odes* and Ephrem portray a desolate graveyard Hades, while the former and *Acts* envision Sheol as full of pits, with water and fire respectively. No source agrees on who *exactly* controls Sheol, with each work giving very different answers: (potentially) God himself, the Evil One, or Death personified.

It appears that every work agrees on the foundational elements of Hades—its location, entrance by Christ, and temporality—which may itself constitute a basic consensus on the doctrine. Yet, there rarely is any commonality concerning Sheol's broader function and greater eschatological significance. The sources feature elaborate and distinct theological and pictorial imaginative creations regarding Sheol's inhabitants, inner workings, visuality, and rulers. These diverse engagements with Hades indicate that early Syriac theology—even when sharing ideational commonalities and potentially being conditioned by general doctrinal consensus and/or cultural contexts—was nevertheless able to conceptualize the manifold potentialities and possibilities, freely and poetically, of a given theological notion. Future research may examine if this diversity, and theological attitude towards consensus doctrines, continues in later depictions of Hades by other influential Syriac theologians.

80 I did not discuss this explicitly in my section on the *Acts of Thomas*, but the text makes frequent reference to the descent: "Thou didst descent into Sheol with mighty power." Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 288.