

Universalism in the Orthodox Octoechos according to Hilarion Alfeyev - by Isaac Gregory Hollums

Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, in his book *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, makes this observation concerning Christ's descent into Hades:

The Octoechos' teaching can be systematized by the following questions:

- a. *Who benefited from Christ's saving accomplishments?*
- b. *To whom was his preaching in hell addressed?*
- c. *Whom did he resurrect from the dead?*
- d. *Whom did he free from the power of hell, and whom did he lead to paradise?*¹

The Church Fathers answered these questions differently. **St Gregory Nazianzen** did not answer the question: "Will Christ save all or just the faithful?" (Homily 45,24). **St. Amphilochius of Iconium** believed that ALL those who were in hell followed Christ after his descent and preaching. (Homily 6, Against Heretics). **Theologians of the Alexandrian Tradition** were inclined to believe that God "redeemed and led ALL OF US out of hell, or rather, the entire human race from death." (Paschal Epistle 10,10.) Clement even numbered the pagans among the saved (Stromateis 6,6). **St. Romanos the Melodist** and **St Ephrem the Syrian** maintained that after Christ's descent into Hades "ALL TOMBS were opened, and ALL the dead came out of them and rejoiced." (Kontakion 45,17).²

Hilarion mentions that there were also saints who contradicted this view and narrowed the preaching in Hades only to the "souls of the saints" (On Christ and the AntiChrist [St. Hippolytus of Rome]) and **St. Cyril of Jerusalem** believed only the righteous were redeemed. (Catachetical Homily 14,19)³

A careful study of the writings in the hymns of the Octoechos demonstrates that in about 'five out of one hundred cases'⁴ only the "pious, and righteous" are among the only people delivered from hades. Even more rarely in the Octoechos 'possibly in two or three out of one hundred cases'⁵ Christ grants salvation to all the "faithful". But this offers not specifics if the "faithful" are those who believed in God during their lives or if it is those who believed after Christ's preaching in hell.

¹ Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009).

² Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 163-4.

³ Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 164.

⁴ Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 164.

⁵ Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 165.

Interestingly in the Octoechos the Universal Character of Christ's death and resurrection is stressed much more frequently. So we find that Christ' descent into hades illuminated the "peoples."

*"We offer you our evening worship, O Light that knows no evening, who...
Descended as far as hell, abolished the darkness there and showed the nations
(ethne) the light of the Resurrection."*⁶

In a very general sense the Greek word *ethne* means a race, people, nation: the nations, heathen world or Gentiles. But according to Hilarion, in a Christian context it very often means "Pagans."⁷ According to Clement of Alexandria, Christ's preaching in hell was beneficial and health-giving to the pagans. *Ethne* should be understood in this context to refer to all peoples, the entire human race.

Hilarion observes that the Hymnographers quite often identify themselves, and with them the entire church or even all of mankind as those who benefit from Christ's work. I think in our arrogance we believe that these hymns only refer to us or to the church. That is simply not the case; the gospel itself calls us always to look outside ourselves and hope for the salvation of the entire human race which is the desire of our Savior. With Paul, we confess ourselves as chief of sinners, so any us versus them mentality is detrimental to the heart of the gospel we confess.

The Metropolitan continues,

When speaking of those whom Christ resurrected and of those whom he led out of hell, the liturgical texts of the *Octoechos* most frequently (*in approximately forty out of one hundred cases*) refers in a general way to the "dead," "those who passed away," those "born of earth," the "human race," "the race of Adam," the "world," or the "universe" (the Greek *oikoumene* can mean both "the inhabited world" and "the people of the world"):⁸

The following are samples lifted directly from the Octoechoan liturgy:

*"You were willingly nailed to the Cross, O Merciful one, and laid in a tomb as a mortal, O Giver of life. By your death, O Powerful one, you crushed its might; for hell's gatekeepers trembled before you; you raised with you **THE DEAD FROM EVERY AGE....**"*⁹

*"Death gave up the dead it had swallowed, while hell's reign, which brought corruption, was destroyed when you rose from the tomb, O Lord."*¹⁰

*"You opened the gates of hell for the souls from every age....."*¹¹

⁶ Sat.5.Gt.Vespers StichLC (EL).

⁷ *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 166.

⁸ *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 170.

⁹ Sun.1. Mat. Sessional Hymn (EL-BB).

¹⁰ Sun.3. Gt. Ves. StichLC (EL).

¹¹ Sun.4. Mat. Can. O.3 (EL-BB).

*“When the Saviour went down as a mortal to the prisoners, **THE DEAD FROM EVERY AGE** arose with Him....”¹²*

*“You rose from the tomb on the third day and made life dawn for **THE WORLD**, as giver of life and God; establish my mind to do your will....”¹³*

*“When you rose from the dead by your power, O Saviour, you raised up with you **THE HUMAN RACE**, granting us life and incorruption.”¹⁴*

Roughly *‘thirty five out of one hundred cases’*¹⁵ the Octoechos speaks of how Christ led ALL people out of hell.

*“Christ has despoiled hell, as alone might and powerful, and has raised up with himself **ALL** those in corruption....”¹⁶*

*“Let us praise as almighty God the One who rose on the third day, smashed the gates of hell, and roused the age-long dead from the grave...Therefore...hell groans, death laments, **THE WORLD** exults and all rejoice together: For you, O Christ, have granted Resurrection to **ALL**.”¹⁷*

*“When you, O Supremely Exalted, had willingly for our sakes become as one with no help and a slain corpse among the dead, you freed us **ALL** and raised us up with you with your mighty hand.”¹⁸*

*“You are the light of those in darkness, you are the resurrection of **ALL** and the life of mortals, and you have raised up **ALL** with yourself, despoiling the might of death, O Saviour, and smashing the gates of hell, O Word. And when the dead saw the miracle they were amazed, and **ALL** creation rejoices in your Resurrection..”¹⁹*

“Having been nailed to the Cross...You have poured forth salvation, O Christ, to all people.”²⁰

*“Your soul made divine, O Saviour, plundered the treasuries of hell and raised with it the **SOULS FROM EVERY AGE**; while your life-bearing body became a source of incorruption for **ALL**.”²¹*

¹² Sun.5.5. Mat.Can.O.4(EL)

¹³ Sun.7. Mat.Can.O.3(EL).

¹⁴ Sun.7. Mat.Can.O.6(EL-BB).

¹⁵ *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 175.

¹⁶ Sun.1. Mat. Sessional Hymn (EL-BB).

¹⁷ Sun.1. Mat.Oikos (EL-BB)

¹⁸ Sun.1. Mat. Can. O.7 (EL-BB).

¹⁹ Sun.2. Mat.Oikos (EL-BB).

²⁰ Wed.2. Mat.Can.O.5(BB).

²¹ Sun.4. Mat.Can.O.4. (EL).

*“The gate-keepers of hell trembled when you were placed as mortal in the sepulcher; for you destroyed the strength of death and gave incorruption to ALL the dead.”*²²

*“Destroyed by death, the miserable one [death] lies without breath; for it, the strong one, could not endure the encounter with the divine life and is slain, and resurrection is granted to ALL.”*²³

*“By rising from the grave, you raised with you ALL the dead in hell.”*²⁴

According to Hilarion nowhere in the *Octoechos* is it stated that Christ preached only to the righteous or pious and then left all the rest of humanity.²⁵ God’s providence is said to have extended to all of humanity this is why the Angels are in such awe of this eternal event that transcends all ages for all times. As St. John Damascene states “for to save a righteous man is no great thing.”²⁶

The liturgical texts return over and over to this theme of Christ’s descent into Hell, with great astonishment hymnographers express their wonder at this eternal reality. This idea simply doesn’t fit with our ideas of retributive justice, or rewarding those for their good deeds in this age, or the just punishment of those who are guilty of great and many sins. But as Hilarion states something ‘extraordinary’ occurred that made the angels shudder and be “seized with wonder.”²⁷

Hilarion goes on to say that we cannot say for sure or with clarity as to whether or not Christ’ delivered every human being from hades and the reason for this he states is due to Free Will.²⁸ He does however grant that Christ has made salvation possible for all and uses the example of the Flood to demonstrate that people are given post mortem the opportunity to respond to the preaching of the Gospel as demonstrated in the tradition of Christ’ descent into *Hades*. These assessments present an entire series of questions concerning the will that might bring us to a differing conclusion than Hilarion.

What does a truly FREE WILL look like?

What have I personally taken away from Hilarion’s study? He shows me that our liturgical texts hope for the salvation of all; and I cannot believe that this hope is in vain. How is it every knee will bow and every tongue confess, yet those that bow and confess still remain lost? If this is true, must it fit with my logic or reasoning? Absolutely not, how is it I can die without dying, yet die so that I might live. Such truths seem to contradict reason but remain true. All that is left is silence and wonder.

²² Sun. Mat.Lau.(EL-BB).

²³ Sun.6. Mat.Can.O.3 (BB).

²⁴ Sun.8. Mat.Can.O.4(EL).

²⁵ *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 178.

²⁶ Cf. Kanonnik (Moscow,1986), in Slavonic, p.283.

²⁷ *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 179.

²⁸ *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, 180.