

# Australian EJournal of Theology

PENTECOST 2006 SPECIAL EDITION

ISSUE 7 - ISSN 1448 - 6326



## 'ANASTASIS' ICON, TEXT, AND THEOLOGICAL VISION

Lawrence Cross  
Birute Arendarcikas  
Brendan Cooke  
Joseph Leach

**Fig. 1:** Anastasis, Church of the Holy Saviour in the Fields, Constantinople  
(Copyright. Prof. Greenhalgh. Reproduced with permission)

### Abstract

The fresco of the 'Anastasis' (1310-1320) in the monastery of the Holy Saviour in the Fields, Constantinople, is one of the supreme works of Christian theological art (fig. 1). This supreme work, executed on the cusp of the City's doom, illustrates the enduring vitality of the Greek patristic vision, with a power that it still exercises today. It is the expression of centuries of theological thought and tradition. This paper will explore the theological foundations of this tradition through the historical developments of the Anastasis imagery and present a compositional exegesis of the various image types.

### Introduction

The icon of the Anastasis – the Descent of Christ into Hell – is a sacred image that was created and developed by Christian artists of the Orthodox Byzantine Church. It is one of the favourite themes in Eastern Christian Art and the traditional Byzantine icon for the Resurrection.<sup>[1]</sup> According to art historian Anna Kartsonis, the Anastasis image was created in the late seventh century and continued to evolve until it reached its final form in the eleventh century<sup>[2]</sup>. This paper now focuses on the theology, genesis and development of the image.

### Theological Foundations

In western Christianity the Resurrection is sometimes depicted with a victorious Christ standing boldly with a staff pole bearing a red cross on a white background. Christ is shown rising from the tomb, with soldiers or angels at his sides. This western-styled image was introduced into the Eastern Church in post-Byzantine times and is sometimes used in eastern churches. Some Orthodox scholars consider this image unacceptable because it is naturalistic and strictly speaking not “according to the Scriptures”<sup>[3]</sup>. In the East two images are used to depict the Resurrection: the *Anastasis* or the *Myrrh-bearing Women*. Quite clearly, the source of inspiration for the Myrrh-bearing Women is scriptural (Matt 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10) but the source of inspiration for the more frequent representation of the Resurrection in the East, the *Anastasis*, is not as certain.

### Scriptural References

There is no reference to the *Anastasis* event in the four canonical Gospels. Dragas explains the origin in this way, “Customarily art scholars have tended to explain this icon on the basis of the Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus or Acts of Pilate of the fourth or fifth centuries in which Christ’s descent into, and harrowing of, Hell is described quite dramatically”<sup>[4]</sup>. However, there is clear evidence in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, of the *Anastasis* event.<sup>[5]</sup> The case of Jonah as precursor sign of Christ’s Resurrection was given to the Christian community by Christ himself<sup>[6]</sup> and Paul writes to the Ephesians, “When it says, ‘he went up,’ it must mean that he had gone down to the deepest levels of the earth”.<sup>[7]</sup> In 1 Peter, a paragraph (3:18-4:6) contains the elements of an ancient profession of faith: death of Christ, his descent into hell, his resurrection, his enthronement at the right hand of God the Father, and as the judge of the living and dead and later the same letter speaks of the gospel being brought to the dead so that they might have the life of God.<sup>[8]</sup>

### Patristic Evidence

Apart from the Scriptural references, the earliest evidence of a literary source for the *Anastasis* comes from the latter part of the first century, in what are known as the *Odes of Solomon*. As explained by Doherty, they were almost certainly composed in Syriac, probably in the latter part of the first century, and very likely in northern Syria, that is in Antioch, Edessa or some nearby centre. Their tone is predominately Jewish, although there are many Christian overtones. There are many parallels, in terms and ideas, with the Gospel of John, but scholars have discounted any dependence on that work<sup>[9]</sup>. Even greater though are the parallels with certain of the Dead Sea Scrolls, especially the Thanksgiving Hymns, and the *Odes of Solomon* as a whole are clearly modelled on the Davidic Psalms. Odes 22 and 42 are thought to contain references to the image of the *Anastasis*.

<sup>1</sup>He who caused me to descend from on high,  
and to ascend from the regions below ...

<sup>4</sup>He who gave me authority over bonds,  
so that I might unbind them;<sup>[10]</sup>

...

<sup>11</sup>Sheol saw me and was shattered, and Death ejected me and many with me.

<sup>12</sup>I have been vinegar and bitterness to it;  
and I went down with it as far as its depth.

<sup>13</sup>Then the feet and the head it released,  
because it was not able to endure my face.

<sup>14</sup>And I made a congregation of living among his dead;  
and I spoke with them by living lips  
in order that my word may not be unprofitable

<sup>15</sup>And those who had died ran towards me;  
and said “Son of God, have pity on us.

<sup>16</sup>And deal with us according to Your kindness  
and bring us out from the bonds of darkness...[\[11\]](#)

At the beginning of the second century, the Church Fathers introduced the subject of Christ’s journey to the underworld. There are a plethora of Patristic texts which shed light on the mystery of the Anastasis and all the Fathers of the Church touched on this most important subject in their writings. Canon 9 of the Fifth Ecumenical Council ( Constantinople 553) condemned anyone who denied the Descent of Christ into Hell and ascended from it as Victor into the Highest Heaven. The Seventh Ecumenical Council ( Nicaea 787) stated that Christ: “spoiled Hell and delivered the captives who were kept there from all ages”.[\[12\]](#)

Another very early Patristic reference to it occurs early in the second century in the Epistle of Ignatius (50-107) to the Trallians:

For says the Scripture, ‘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 of separation which had existed from the beginning of the world, and cast down its partition-wall. He also rose again in three days, the Father raising him up.[\[13\]](#)

From the middle of the second century, Melito of Sardis (died 180) refers to Christ as “a unique sun from heaven Who appeared to those dead in Hell and to those living in the world”[\[14\]](#). Furthermore, Melito of Sardis writes in *On Pascha*:

‘I am the one that destroyed death and *triumphed over* the enemy and trod down Hades and *bound the strong one* and carried off the man to the heights of heaven; I am the one’, says the Christ.[\[15\]](#)

**Hippolytus** (170-235) commenting on Deuteronomy 33:26 says:

He is the One Who pulled up from the lowest Hell the first man who was from the earth and had been lost, having been held captive by the bonds of death. He is the One Who descended from above and brought above him who was down below. He is the One Who preached the Gospel to the dead and redeemed the souls, Who became the resurrection of those that had been buried.[\[16\]](#)

**The Apostles' Creed**, a formula containing in brief statements, or “articles”, the fundamental tenets of Christian belief, was developed between the second and ninth centuries, although some scholars claim that it was settled by the fourth century.[\[17\]](#)

.....was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended into hell.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven ...

The first part of the *Aprocryphon of Nicodemus*, also known as the *Acts of Pilate*, which is not earlier than the fourth century contains the story of the Passion and Resurrection. Its object is to furnish testimony to the Resurrection. Part 2 is the story of the Descent into Hell. It is probably older than Part 1, and is thought by the scholars to have been added to Part 1, but not before the fifth century[\[18\]](#). We have the text in three forms: Latin A, Greek and Latin B. Greek copies are rare and it is in Latin that it has chiefly flourished, and has been the parent of versions in every other language. The central idea in Part 2, Christ's Descent into Hell, is exceedingly ancient. Second-century writers are full of it. The embellishments, the dialogues of Satan with Hades, which are so dramatic, come in later.

The following table shows the order of the story in the three recensions available to us. Latin A and Greek go together, while Latin B differs.[\[19\]](#)

|   |   |
|---|---|
| i. The two men (nameless in Greek) are found and induced to write their story.  | i. The two men are found, write their story, and return to their tombs.                 |
| ii. The story. A light shines in Hell. Adam, Esaias, Simeon speak (not in B). (In Greek, Abraham and Esaias.) John Baptist comes. | ii. The story. A light shines. A voice: Lift up the gates. Satan has the doors secured. |
| iii. Seth's story of the oil of mercy.  | iii. Dialogue of Hell and Satan (A. iv).  |
| iv. Satan's dialogue with Hell.   | iv. Seth's story.   |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| v. First cry: Lift up the gates. David and Isaiah speak. Second Cry. David speaks. Christ enters. (Greek, David speaks only once.) | v. Isaiah and John Baptist (A. ii).                                     |
| vi. Address of Hell to Christ (not in B). Satan bound.   | vi. David and Jeremiah. Satan not allowed to leave hell.                |
| vii. Hell derides Satan.   | vii. Cry: Lift up the gates. The good thief appears (A. x). Second cry. |
| viii. Christ greets Adam and takes all saints out of hell. David, Habacuc, Micheas speak (not in B). (Greek omits the prophecies.) | viii. Doors broken. Christ enters. Satan bound.                         |
| ix. They meet Enoch and Elias (not in B.).   | ix. Christ greets Adam and Eve (not in A).                              |
| x. They meet the thief.  | x. Sets up his cross in hell (not in A). Leaves hell. Conclusion.       |
| xi. Conclusion.  |   |
| xii. The two men vanish, &c.   |   |

The *Hodegos*, or Guide-Book, of Anastasius Sinaites, a late seventh century text intended to help the Orthodox defend themselves against heretics contains many references to Christ's descent into Hades.[\[20\]](#)

One of the most beautiful references to the Anastasis event is from the writings of Epiphanius of Salamis and it is worth quoting in full:

Something strange is happening – there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and hell trembles with fear.

He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrows the captives Adam and Eve, he who is both God and the son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the cross, the weapon that had won him the victory.

At the sight of him, Adam, the first man he had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone: “My Lord be with you all.” Christ answered him: “And with your spirit.” He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: “Awake O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.”

I am you God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.

For your sake, I, your God, became your son; I, the Lord, took the form of a slave; I, whose home is above the heavens, descended to the earth and beneath the earth. For your sake, for the sake of man, I became like a man without help, free among the dead. For the sake of you, who left a garden, I was betrayed to the leaders of the Jews in a garden, and I was crucified in a garden.

See on my face the spittle I received in order to restore you to the life I once breathed into you. See there the marks of the blows I received in order to refashion your warped nature in my image. On my back see the marks of the scourging I endured to remove the burden of sin that weighs on your back. See my hands, nailed firmly to a tree, for you who once wickedly stretched out your hand to a tree.

I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side for you who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side has healed the pain in yours. My sleep will rouse you from your sleep in hell. The sword that pierced me has sheathed the sword that was turned against you.

Rise, Let us leave this place. The enemy led you out of the earthly paradise. I will not restore you to that paradise, but I will enthrone you in heaven. I forbade you the tree that was only a symbol of life, but see – I who am life itself am now one with you. I appointed cherubim to guard you as slaves are guarded, but now I make them worship you as God. The throne formed by my cherubim awaits you, its bearers swift and eager. The bridal chamber is adorned, the banquet is ready, the eternal dwelling places are prepared, the treasure houses of all good things lie open. The kingdom of heaven has been prepared for you from all eternity.[\[21\]](#)

**Liturgy of the Hours**



The Liturgy of the Hours (or the Prayer of the Church, or the Daily Office) has evolved over the whole lifetime of the Church. It is rather difficult to ascertain which came first, the Liturgy of the Hours prayers, or the awareness of the Anastasis event. What is certain however is that there are many references to the Anastasis event in the Liturgies of Great and Holy Saturday of both the Western Latin Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

In the Matins of Great and Holy Saturday,  
 O Messiah, Jesus,  
 Whom are you seeking in the depths of hell?  
 ;...  
 Hell's foundations quaked and trembled, seeing You  
 Opening the graves of mortal men.  
 When devouring Hades  
 Engulfed the Rock of Life,  
 In great pain he burst asunder,  
 And the dead, held captive from all ages  
 Were released.[\[22\]](#)

Any or all of these sources may be claimed as *the* source of inspiration for the icon of the *Anastasis*. Each is so theologically rich. This section of the paper is concluded with one final source; from the writing of Epiphanius of Salamis, comes this lovely, extraordinary piece written for Vespers for Holy Saturday:

Yesterday he was stricken,  
 Today, he strikes the abode of Hades,  
 With the lightning of his divinity;  
 Yesterday he was bound up,  
 Today, he ties down the tyrant in indissoluble bonds;  
 Yesterday he was condemned,  
 Today, he presents freedom to the condemned.[\[23\]](#)

Following the Byzantine tradition, these scriptural and patristic texts were also expressed in iconographic imagery. The compositional development of this imagery, which is based largely on Kartsonis' work *Anastasis: The Making of an Image*, will now be discussed.

## **Compositional Development of the Image of the Anastasis in Byzantine Art**

### **Genesis of the Icon**

In the Early Christian period the Fathers of the Church discussed, preached and affirmed Christ's Descent into Hell. Although the subject of Christ's Resurrection following his triumph over Death and the raising of Adam and Eve from the dead "had formed part of Byzantine theology and liturgy throughout the Early Christian period" it was not depicted by the artists of the period[24]. In any representation of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection in this period the actual moment of Christ's death and Resurrection is only alluded to but never portrayed. In the sixth century Syriac representation of the *Crucifixion and Resurrection* for example, Christ is shown alive on the Cross, the two Maries are seen at the empty tomb, and Christ appears to the Maries after the Resurrection.[25]

Kartsonis argues that the artists of the Early Christian period consistently avoided the direct representation of the subject of Christ's Descent into Hell, mainly on account of the Christological difficulties that exist in the depiction of the person of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, at any moment during his death. Since Christ was dead, and his soulless body lay buried in the tomb, at the moment he destroyed Hades and took Adam by the hand from among the dead, these events were not depicted by artists of the period. It was not until after the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680-681) and the Council in Trullo (692) that the attitude of the artists changed.

The Councils' resolution of some of the Christological questions concerning the relationship between Christ's two natures during the various aspects of his death, and the authorized use of the visual arts in the service of the Church and its theological concerns, gave artists the confidence to illustrate the theme of Christ's death. Hence, in the late seventh century artists began to portray the subject of Christ's death "in the shape of the representation of the Death of Christ on the cross, the Entombment of his soulless, sightless, and speechless corpse, and the Anastasis [or Resurrection] from Hades through the will and energy of his divinity"[26]. It is in this context, according to Kartsonis, that the Anastasis icon was born. Kartsonis uses the late 7<sup>th</sup> century handbook, the *Hodegos*, to argue that the image was also originally created as a way of defending the Orthodox faith against those (Monophysites) who asserted that there was only one nature in Christ (Monophysitism).[27]

### **Major Compositional Variants**

In her pivotal work on the Anastasis, Kartsonis[28] provides a detailed discussion of the art history of this iconography. The study of the icon of the Anastasis as art history began in the late nineteenth century with the study by Millet[29] who



recognised three compositional variants. Numerous studies followed through the early twentieth century and two schools of thought developed: one based on the imagery from imperial roman sources and one based on literary sources. Millet's three compositional types were further organised by Morey.[30] A fourth compositional type was discussed by Weitzmann and by Der Nersessian and was traced to its earliest known examples by H. Buchthal.[31] A synthesis of this classification scheme is given by Kartsonis.

Kartsonis refers to four major compositional types based on the attitude of Christ towards Adam. The first three types - namely: Christ's movement toward Adam so as to raise Adam out of his sarcophagus; Christ's movement away from Adam as he pulls Adam out of the tomb, and Christ fully frontal with his hands outstretched to Adam and Eve who are on either side of him - had been established by Millet in the late nineteenth century. The fourth compositional type appeared later and Kartsonis considered it to be a combination of the second and third types. Here Christ raises Eve as well as Adam by the hand so that the two flank him symmetrically.

### ***First Compositional Type***

#### **a) Eighth Century**



**Fig. 2**

**The Anastasis (after Wilpert), S. Maria Antiqua, Rome.**  
(Copyright, Princeton University Press. Reproduced with permission.)

The iconographic nucleus of the three earliest surviving representations of the Anastasis, two of which appear in fresco in S. Maria Antiqua,[\[32\]](#) and the third as part of a mosaic christological cycle in the Oratory of John VII,[\[33\]](#) shows that Christ has just defeated Hades and is focusing his attention on raising Adam out of his sarcophagus. The main characters in all three representations are Christ, Adam, and Hades. They determine the content of the action and the image. In the fresco on the doorway to the Palatine ramp in S. Maria Antiqua for example, Christ dominates the composition ([Fig. 2](#)). He is enclosed in a mandorla of light and his only two contacts with the surrounding material world are with Adam and Hades. He holds Adam's limp hand which is inside the mandorla and he tramples Hades with the tip of his foot which is outside the mandorla.

Adam is an old man who rises limply out of his sarcophagus. He is not taking an active part in Christ's forceful effort to lift him from his sarcophagus. Adam is totally reliant "on the will and energy" displayed by Christ[\[34\]](#). On the other hand, the dark muscular figure of Hades is still trying to stop Adam from rising out of the sarcophagus even though Hades is restrained by Christ's trampling foot.

The primary theme in these eighth century images of the Anastasis is the action of Christ in the underworld. Christ raises Adam after trampling Hades, "whose hold on Adam is in the process of being broken".[\[35\]](#) The iconography provides "a forceful illustration of the will and energy of Christ's divinity in action".[\[36\]](#) The mandorla of light which envelopes Christ underlines this illustration since it stands for the light of Christ's divinity.

## **b) Ninth Century**

In the ninth century western examples of the Anastasis, which descended from the same iconographic group as those in eighth century Rome, the focus of the image is on the rescue of Adam from the dark and sunless place (*tenebrae*) of the underworld. Christ's direction has changed, his effort in raising Adam is not as forceful and he appears to be moving into a dark cave drawing Adam out of it. Hades is absent and if he is represented he "lies flat on the ground incapable of any meaningful resistance to Christ's power".[\[37\]](#) The late ninth century S.Clemente Anastasis 11 in Rome, highlights the development of particular aspects of the story. The darkness of Hades is stressed and the addition of fires and floating human body parts in Hades portrays the underworld as Hell. The replacement of the scroll in Christ's hands with the long staffed cross emphasizes the role of Christ's Passion

in bringing about salvation. Finally, the inclusion of the portrait of a cleric “reasserts the broader message of the raising of the dead”.[\[38\]](#)

The Anastasis in the Chapel of S.Zeno in S. Maria Prassede, Rome, includes two important points of departure in relation to the ninth century iconography. Firstly, the addition of an angel behind Christ’s mandorla reflects the popularity, in the West, of the participation of the angelic host in the siege of Hades. Although this theme was familiar to the East, angels are generally absent in the eastern Anastasis. Secondly, the addition of the combined motif of David and Solomon iconographically balanced the eighth century examples which primarily demonstrated the will and energy of Christ’s divinity. The motif draws attention to Christ’s humanity “since the presence of the two kings asserted the historical reality of Christ’s human ancestry”.[\[39\]](#). The earliest example of the motif of David and Solomon on objects made in the East appears in the Anastasis image on the Frieschi Morgan Reliquary.

### **c) Tenth Century**

The first compositional type of Anastasis, with the modifications of the ninth century and the amendments of the tenth century, became predominant and was established in the tenth century. Christ’s movement towards Adam is either to the right or to the left. Christ holds the scroll in his hand and is usually enclosed in a mandorla of light. Christ lifts an elderly Adam from a shallow sarcophagus, which is mostly included. Eve continues to raise her hands in supplication as she stands ignored behind Adam. The action usually occurs in the topmost part of the underworld. Hades, who is now bound or chained, holds onto Adam. King David and King Solomon are often included and John the Baptist is added.

### ***Second Compositional Type***

#### **a) Ninth Century**



**Fig. 3**

### **Chludov Psalter**

(Copyright, Princeton University Press. Reproduced with permission.)

The illustration which accompanies Psalm 67:2 in the Chludov Psalter is considered to be the earliest surviving eastern example of the second type of Anastasis ([fig. 3](#))[\[40\]](#). Whilst the core of image appears similar to that of the Anastasis in S. Maria Antiqua there are two noticeable variations. Firstly, the “scene is taking place on the stomach of Hades, who lies on his back irrevocably defeated”[\[41\]](#). Secondly, although Christ is facing Adam, Christ’s feet give the impression that Christ is moving away from Adam. This miniature second type of Anastasis foreshadows the theme of Christ dragging Adam out of Hades.

### **b) Eleventh Century**

The second type of Anastasis emerged fully developed in the Phocas Lectionary in the eleventh century. Christ drags Adam out of Hades with one hand and holds a patriarchal cross in the other. Whilst the cross is a reminder of the way in which Christ defeated Hades, and of the suffering of Christ, it functions as “‘the royal sceptre’ of Christ, whose authority, like that of the rod of Moses, made possible the passage of mankind into a state of grace once more”.[\[42\]](#) The topography of the two hills that are divided by the underworld stand “as evidence of the rending of the earth, and the uncovering of the foundation of the world which took place while Christ lay buried in the tomb”.[\[43\]](#) The rising Christ personally leads Adam out of

the prison of Hades which is shown with its broken doors, keys, bolts and chains. Abel the Shepherd is added to the iconography and stands behind his mother Eve. Although Eve keeps up her pleading attitude Christ still does not acknowledge her existence. The focus of the image is on the triumphant Christ who holds his sceptre-cross and “strides energetically out of Hades against a sea of light”.[\[44\]](#)

### ***Third Compositional Type***

#### **a) Ninth Century**



**Fig. 4**

#### **Chludov Psalter**

(Copyright, Princeton University Press. Reproduced with permission.)

In the first example of the third type of Anastasis which accompanies Psalm 81:8 in the Chludov Psalter, Christ stands fully frontal in a mandorla of light on the head of Hades ([fig. 4](#))[\[45\]](#). Adam and Eve are to the left and right of Christ and are floating in mid-air. Christ raises Adam with his left hand and address Eve with his right hand. The symmetry of the composition is compromised by Christ’s lifting of Adam.

#### **b) Eleventh Century**

In the Anastasis of Iviron I, the first fully developed example of the third type of Anastasis, “Christ now towers above the trampled figure of Hades, who lies on top of a hill”.[\[46\]](#) Adam and Eve, who are to the left and right of Christ at the base of the hill, extend their hands toward Christ but do not come into contact with him. The symmetry of the composition is reinforced by Christ’s hands which



extend outwards to show the marks of the nails. The two angels above Christ and the two groups of people above Adam and Eve lifting their hands toward Christ further enhance the symmetry of the composition.

#### *Fourth Compositional Type*



**Fig. 5**

#### **Church of Christos, Veroia**

The earliest known examples of the fourth type of Anastasis, a combination of the second and third types, date from the second quarter of the thirteenth century. The fourth type Anastasis fresco in the Church of Christos, Veroia, which was painted during the early fourteenth century, shows Christ pulling Adam out of his sarcophagus while marching away from him (fig. 5). In addition Christ also pulls Eve by the hand out of her sarcophagus. In so doing Christ raises “for the first time both Adam and Eve, who flank him symmetrically”.[\[47\]](#)

While art history has recognised these four compositional types, a full understanding of this iconography is not possible without considering the theological meaning of each compositional type. Each variant expresses aspects of patristic thought as given



in an earlier section. This expression of theological meaning will now be explored through an exegesis of the four compositional variants.

## **A Compositional Exegesis**

Icons can be considered as scripture written in imagery[\[48\]](#) and just as we have four canonical gospels to record the events of Jesus' life, since no one account could fully explore the mystery of the incarnation, life death and resurrection of Jesus, so there are sometimes different versions of the icon of an event. There are, for example, two recognised versions of the icon for the descent of the Holy Spirit. Each icon version explores more fully a theological aspect of the incident being represented and it is only by considering all of the icons that we come to a full appreciation of the mystery being made present. In the case of the Anastasis there are four recognised compositional types of the icon. Each of these relate not to the resurrection itself but to the Harrowing of Hell. A fifth icon, that of The Myrrh Bearing Women, relates the scriptural account of the resurrection but it is so different from the four harrowing of hell icons that it needs to be considered separately. In this part of the paper we will consider the theology represented by each of the Anastasis icon compositional types.

The first two compositional types of the Anastasis icon are closely related. These show Christ standing on the broken doors of hell with the darkness below filled with the symbols of bondage and enslavement; keys, locks, pieces of chain etc. In each of them the triumphant Christ holds Adam by the hand and is drawing him out of his sarcophagus. The cross (or a scroll indicating the gospel in early versions) is also prominent. The trampled symbols of death and enslavement: the broken doors of hell, and the drawing out of the sarcophagus all indicate that these are icons of salvation – salvation won through the cross. The two compositional types are different in important respects. One is the relationship of Christ to Adam and the other is the position of the cross.

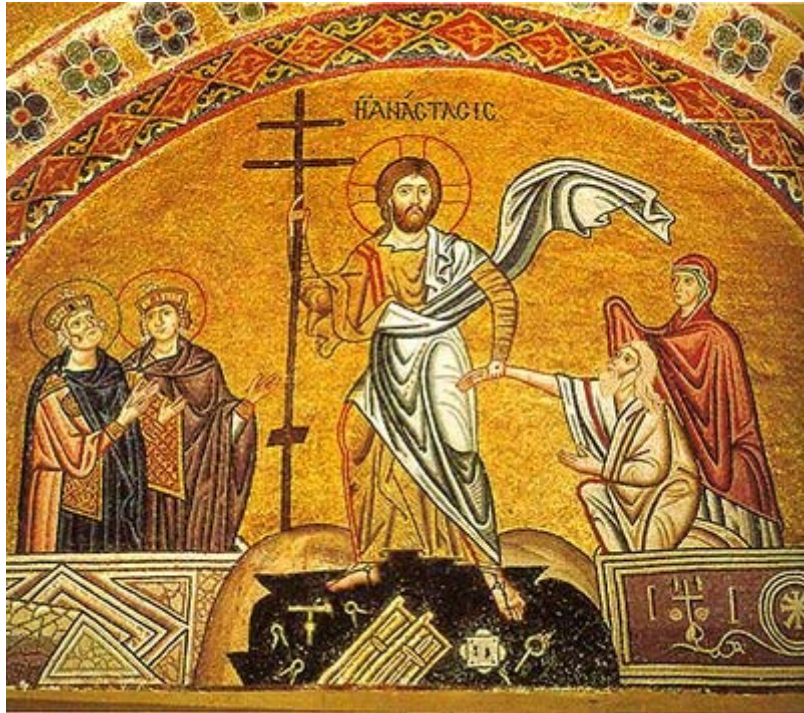


**Fig. 6**

**The first compositional type of the icon of the Anastasis from the Chios, Nea Moni.**

(Source: <http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/dbcourses/item?skip=1220> )

In the first compositional type (fig. 6), Christ faces Adam and draws him towards himself. The cross is between Adam and Christ so that Adam must come to Christ by passing in front of the cross. This clearly recalls the original *sacramentum*[49] – the oath of allegiance which new legionnaires of Rome gave by passing in front of the eagle standard. Christ is the centre of the icon and the sense of movement in the icon is between Adam and Christ, with Christ drawing Adam towards himself. This is an icon where salvation has been won and is now offered to Adam. The offer must be accepted by accepting the cross. Here Adam stands for all men. The message is that we all need to accept Christ's offer of salvation by accepting the cross. It is, however, Christ who draws us out of our death and the enslavement of sin. The action is His as he draws Adam to himself.



**Fig. 7**

**The second compositional type of the icon of the Anastasis in a mosaic from the Phokis Hosios Lukas Monastery**

(Source: <http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/dbcourses/item?skip=1220> )

In the second compositional type of this icon there are two significant differences (fig. 7). The first is that Christ, while still pulling Adam from his sarcophagus, is walking away over the ruins of hell. The second is that the cross is now held up in front of Christ like a standard. In this version, Christ does not pull Adam towards himself but onwards to some other goal towards which he is leading. Once again there are Roman military references. This looks very much like a triumphal procession with Christ as the victorious general. The emphasis here is on the salvation of Adam (man) as an achieved fact and on the call to join in the triumphal procession of Christ into heavenly glory with the cross as our standard. In both of these types the structure and sense of movement is lateral rather than vertical.

In discussing these icons, some consideration must be given to the position of Eve. She is essentially identical in both compositional types, standing behind Adam with her veiled arm lifted in entreaty. Her relatively passive presence might be seen as an expression of patriarchal bias. There is, however, another interpretation. The strong interaction between Adam and Christ can be seen as emphasising Christ as the new Adam. Here is the wonder of the incarnation where Adam, standing in for all



mankind, regards his descendent who not only saves him but is also God. In this context, the fact that Eve is depicted at all shows the determination of the iconographers to demonstrate that all of humanity is included in the salvation of Christ.

The third compositional type of this icon is radically different from the earlier two. It shows Christ in his mandorla, facing to the front with his arms extended. On either side of him are Adam and Eve looking towards Christ. The whole icon is static with no obvious sense of movement. Here, Christ is in his glory and Adam and Eve, already free from hell, worship him. This icon depicts the fact of the resurrection and the consequent salvation of humanity rather than its process

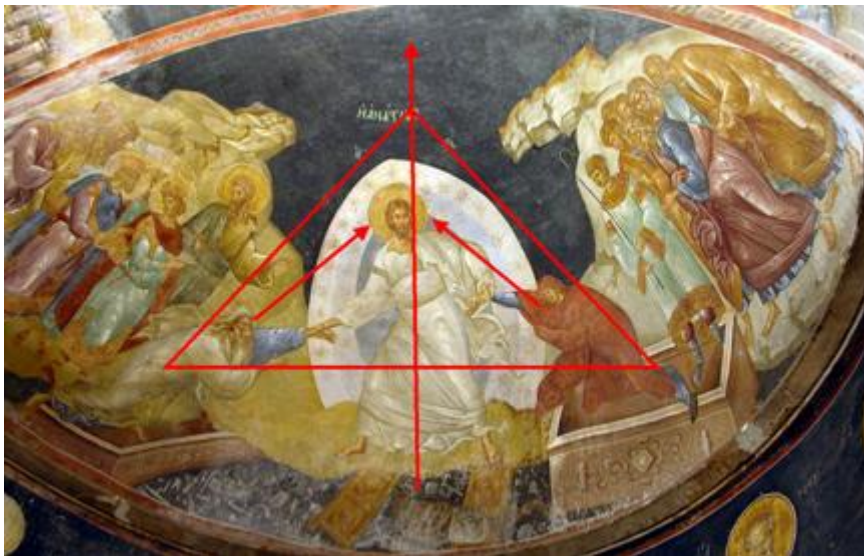


**Fig. 8**

**Digital sketch of Fra Angelico's fresco of the resurrection from the Convento di San Marco in Florence.**

At this point it would be good to briefly discuss western imagery of the resurrection, taking Fra Angelico's famous fresco of the resurrection in the Convento di San Marco, Florence, as a starting point (fig. 8). In this beautiful fresco Fra Angelico has combined the third icon compositional type (discussed above) with the icon of the myrrh bearing women. The traditional icon of the myrrh bearing women is very much a representation of the gospel account of the finding of the empty tomb. The tomb is shown as black to indicate that Christ has not only overcome death but also the darkness of sin. The women are shown approaching the tomb with their jars of

ointment, the soldiers guarding the tomb are shown either prostrate in fear or fleeing and an angel is shown on guard. Significantly, Christ is not shown in the icon. Following the gospel accounts, the icon does not show the moment of Christ's resurrection but rather its immediate aftermath[50]. In combining the two icons, Fra Angelico has produced a painting which speaks powerfully of the fact of the resurrection. Christ carries the standard of his cross in the mandorla of his risen glory while the women stare at the empty tomb as the angel tells them of the resurrection. This painting is not about salvation. It is about asserting the truth of the resurrection both in the person of the risen Christ and in the "evidence" of the empty tomb. However, Fra Angelico clearly maintains a separation between the two combined elements. Not only are the women and Christ in different portions of the image but there are clouds at the bottom of the mandorla separating Christ from the women. Also, the only interaction between the two elements is the angel who points both at the risen Christ and the empty tomb. The women are unaware of Christ and look either at the angel or at the tomb. This is a finely composed painting which clearly shows a knowledge and appreciation of eastern iconography[51].



**Fig.9**

**The fourth compositional type of the icon of the Anastasis, from a fresco in  
The Monastery of The Holy Saviour in the Fields, Constantinople**  
(Copyright Prof. Greenhalgh. Reproduced with permission.)

In the fourth compositional type of the icon of the Anastasis (fig.9), Christ in his glorious mandorla, surrounded by stars, standing on the broken gates of hell and the scattered symbols of sin's enslavement, takes both Adam and Eve by the hand and hauls them out of their tombs. It is a very dynamic image. Christ's knees are bent

but he is not walking in either direction. Rather, the sense of movement is up. The action is all Christ's. Adam and Eve are being pulled from their tombs towards Christ and into his mandorla. Significantly, the figure of Christ shows none of the wounds of his passion but he is shown as the incarnate second person of the Trinity in his full divine glory. The strong sense of upward motion there indicated that Adam and Eve are not just being saved from the enslavement of sin but are being called, indeed pulled, to something higher. Also, there is a triangular space formed by the figures of Christ, Adam and Eve which is suggestive of the Triune God. Adam and Eve are being pulled into this space. All of this suggests that that this icon is not about salvation but about theosis. Adam and Eve are being pulled into the divine life of the Trinity, divinized by the action of Christ. It is significant that the earlier emphasis on Adam is dispensed with here. Both Adam and Eve are pulled equally into Christ's mandorla emphasising that this divinization is the destiny of all of humanity, indeed of all of creation.

All four of these icons show different aspects of the resurrection, which is why all four have survived and are still in use. In the first salvation is offered through the cross, in the second salvation is achieved and we are led to heaven, in the third the achieved salvation leads to adoration and in the fourth to divinization.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main reason it is important to revisit the theological and art historical material assembled in this paper is explicitly pastoral. There has been a growing and continuing undercurrent of monism in the modern spiritual and philosophical climate for almost one hundred and fifty years. This is evidenced by increasing Western fascination with Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, Pantheism, Theosophy and Anthroposophy and similar systems of thought, including the Occult, which explore the mystical and spiritual elements of a monistic philosophy. Such a philosophy in its pantheistic form identifies God with the universe and all that is in it. In short, "All is One, One is All, All is God".

The implications for Christian eschatology are clear. For the last things, and particularly the mystery of the Anastasis (Resurrection) to have any meaning at all, there needs to be a certain tension between God and creation, between the uncreated and created, between God and God's human creature. Monism dissolves all these tensions and makes an eschatological view impossible. There can be no eschaton in a closed cosmic system. This icon, in all its developments, and particularly that in the monastery of the Holy Saviour in the Fields, is a vivid and nuanced re-



presentation of the Christian eschatological vision. Certainly it expresses the well-known Eastern Christian emphasis on theosis, the divinization, of the human being in Christ. But it also confutes the claustrophobic monistic perception of the universe and humankind's place within it by illuminating artistically the mystery of the relationship of the eternal creator God, with God's creature, humankind.

Typical of the Eastern approach to theology, but this time in visual art, this relationship is expressed through a paradox in which one can almost hear the divine laughter of the Holy Spirit. Adam and Eve, the aboriginal ancestors of mankind, fled from God because of sin-induced fear. God now comes to find them in the depths of death into which they fled. The shock is that the God who comes to lift them into the life of the Holy Trinity, and the saints along with them, is their descendent in the flesh. This icon refutes the ghastly spectacle of Chronos eternally devouring his children in a closed universe. It shows, better than a thousand words, how the gate of heaven and eternity stands open for humankind.

---

[1] L. Cross, *Eastern Christianity: The Byzantine Tradition* (Virginia 1999) 107.

[2] A. D. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton, New Jersey 1986) 3-4

[3] G. D. Dragas, "Understanding the Resurrection through Christ's Descent into Hades", *Orthodox New*, (accessed 23 June, 2005); available from <http://www.orthodoxnews.net/firms.com/170/Understanding%20the%20Resurrection.htm>.

[4] Dragas, "Understanding the Resurrection" 3

[5] E.g. Psalm 16: 9-10.

[6] Matt 12:40

[7] Eph 4:9

[8] 1 Peter 4:6

[9] E. Doherty, "The Odes of Solomon" Supplementary Article no. 4 (accessed 17 Dec. 2005); available from <http://pages.ca.inter.net/~oblio/home.htm>

[10] M. Lattke, *Die Oden Salomos in ihrer Bedeutung für Neues Testament und Gnosis. Band I: Ausführliche Handschriftenbeschreibung*. Edition mit deutscher Parallel-Übersetzung. Hermeneutischer Anhang zur gnostischen Interpretation der oden Salomos in der Pistis Sophia (orbis biblicus et orientalis 25/1), Göttingen, 1979, Ode 22.

[11] Lattke, Ode 42.

[12] As quoted in Dragas, "Understanding the Resurrection", 6.

[13] Ignatius of Antioch, "The Epistle of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Trallians" in A. Roberts, J. Donaldson (eds), *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations Of The Writings Of The Holy Fathers. The Apostolic Fathers* vol. 1, trans. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, F. Crombie (Edinburgh 1868) 200.

[14] Dragas, "Understanding the Resurrection", 5

[15] S. Hall (ed), Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha and Fragments* (Oxford 1979) 59.

[16] As quoted in Dragas, "Understanding the Resurrection", 6.

[17] H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum Et Declarationum De Rebus Fidei Et Morum* editio 31 (Rome 1960) 3.

[18] J.M. Rhodes, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (London 1955) 117.

[19] J.M. Rhodes, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (London 1924, 1955) 118.

[20] Kartsonis cites primary sources Anastasius Sinaites, *Hodegos*, PG, 89. 35-310 and K. J. Uthemann, *Anastasii Sinaitae Opera. Viae Dux. CChr. Series Graeca* 8 (Turnhout, 1981). One example of a reference to Christ's descent into Hades can be seen in PG, 89.224f. and Uthemann, 13.6.17-102. See Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 40, 60-61.

[21] From an ancient homily on Holy Saturday, Ephiphanius PG 43, 440-464. St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, Dallas Texas, "An ancient Homily on Pascha - The Lord's Descent into the Underworld", available from <http://www.orthodox.net/pascha/holysaturday-homily.html>. Another translation of the ancient homily is cited in The Divine Office, *The Liturgy Of The Hours According To The Roman Rite* vol. 2. Lent and Eastertide (London 1974) 320-322.

[22] *Great and Holy Saturday Matins* (accessed 16 June 2005); available from [http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/prayers/tridion/hwk\\_sat](http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/prayers/tridion/hwk_sat).

[23] *Holy Saturday Vespers, The Triodion*, PG, 43.44OD-44IA. See translation by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware. Mother Mary and K Ware, *The Lenten Triodion* (London 1977).

[24] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 227.

[25] K. Corrigan, "Book Review", in *The Art Bulletin*, vol 71, no 2 (1989) 312.

[26] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 228.

[27] Corrigan, "Book Review", 312.

[28] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 7 -18

[29] Kartsonis gives G. Millet, "Mosaiques de Daphni", *Mon Piot* 2 (1895) 204-214 as the earliest reference to have influenced later studies. See Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 7.

[30] References listed in Kartsonis include C.R. Morey, *East Christian Paintings in the Freer Collection* (New York 1914) 45-53; and C.R. Morey, "Notes on East Christian Miniatures", *AB* 11 (1929) 57f. See Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 7.

[31] K. Weitzmann, "Zur byzantinischen Quelle des Wolfenbüttler Musterbuches", *Festschrift Hans R. Hahnloser zum 60. Geburtstag 1959* (Basel 1961) 223ff.; S. Der Nersessian, "Program and Iconography of the Frescos of the Paraccesion", *The Kariye Djami* (Princeton 1975) IV, 320ff. See Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 9.

[32] Kartsonis cites the works of P.J. Nordhagen, "The Frescoes of John VII (A.D. 705-707) in S. Maria Antiqua in Rome", *Acta IR Nov* 3 (1968), 81f. 93; and id., "Kristis i Dódsriket", *Kunst og Kulter* 57 (1974) 165-174. According to Nordhagen, the first three earliest Anastasis examples found in Rome, dating from the pontificate of Pope John VII (705- 707), reflect contemporary eastern iconographic and stylistic trends. See Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 70, 80, 230.

[33] The Oratory of John VII was demolished in 1606 in the time of Pope Paul V. The mosaic christological cycle which includes the Anastasis is known only through drawings by Giacomo Grimaldi. Kartsonis cites R. Niggel (ed.), Grimaldi's *Descrizione della basilica antica di S. Pietro in Vaticano: Codice Barberini latino 2733* (Vatican City 1972). She also cites other references, one of which is another of Nordhagen's works "The Mosaics of John VII (A.D. 705-707)", *Acta IR Norv* 2 (1965) 121-166. See Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 70.

[34] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 71

[35] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 71

[36] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 71

[37] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 231

[38] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 84 - 85

[39] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 231 .

[40] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 134 - 136

[41] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 134

[42] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 206

[43] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 208

[44] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 213

[45] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 136-137 and 152-164. Kartsonis cites A. Cutler, *Transfigurations. Studies in the Dynamics of Byzantine Iconography* (University Park, PA 1975) 100ff as a source for the third type of the Anastasis. See Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 153.

[46] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 153

[47] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 9, cites the following references: K. Weitzmann, "Zur byzantinischen Quelle des Wolfenbüttler Musterbuches", *Festschrift Hans R. Hahnloser zum 60. Geburtstag 1959* (Basel 1961) 223ff;

S. Der Nersessian, "Program and Iconography of the Frescos of the Paracclesion", *The Kariye Djami* (Princeton 1975) IV, 320ff.

[48] St Theodore the Studite, quoted in Leonide Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, NY 1978) 156.

[49] C. Vagaggini, "Theology and Liturgy in the Fathers- Mysterium and Sacramentum among the Latins", in *Theological Dimensions of Liturgy*, trans. L.T. Doyle and W.H. Jurgens (Collegeville 1976) 605.

[50] None of the canonical gospels discuss the moment of resurrection. The only account of it is given in the apocryphal Gospel of Peter.

[51] The composition is so similar to that of the traditional icon of the Dormition of Mary that it is probable Fra Angelico not only knew of the icon but was making a deliberate reference to it.



## Acknowledgments

The images of the 'Anastasis' in the monastery of the Holy Saviour in the Fields, Constantinople come from the personal photograph library of Prof. Greenhalgh, Australian National University. Reproduced with his kind permission. The images from S. Maria Antiqua, the Chloudov Psalter, the Church of Christos (Veroia), the Chios Nea Moni, and the Hosios Lukas Monastery are all copyright of Princeton University Press. Reproduced with their kind permission.

## Authors

Rev Dr **LAWRENCE CROSS**, a priest of the Russian Catholic Church under the jurisdiction of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Eparchy of Australia and New Zealand, is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Theology (Victoria) of Australian Catholic University and a member of the Centre for Early Christian Studies.

SR **BIRUTE ARENDARCIKAS**, a Sister of Mercy of the Goulburn Congregation, is undertaking Doctoral studies at Australian Catholic University, St Patrick's Campus, and is a sessional staff member in the School of Theology (Victoria).

**BRENDAN COOKE** is completing his Bachelor of Theology (Honours) at Australian Catholic University, St Patrick's Campus Victoria.

DR **JOSEPH LEACH** is a lecturer in the Department of Geomatics at the University of Melbourne. He lectures in the fields of image analysis and interpretation and is studying theology at Australian Catholic University as a post graduate student.

© *Copyright is retained by the authors*

*This article has been peer reviewed, and is deemed to meet the criteria for original research as set out by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.*