

Reformed Scriptural Analyses of *He Descended into Hell*

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The article from the *Apostles' Creed* [hereafter *Credo*], *He descended in to Hell* [hereafter *Descendit*], has been a controversial phrase throughout Christian history. This essay will précis the Scriptural references used to explain the *Descendit* with a modern Reformed perspective. It will summarise the historical iterations of the *Credo*, and then superficially examine the Biblical references used to defend or deny the *Descendit*. This is a companion document for *Jesus' Humiliation in He Descended into Hell*¹.

Origins of the Phrase *He Descended into Hell*

The Gospel of Nicodemus (c.155AD?)² is an apocryphal work that consists of a second part, *Acts of Pilate*, which details the account of two of the risen dead (Matt.27:52-52) and Jesus' leading the Old Testament [OT] believers from Hell. The entire document is a collation of fragmentary manuscripts [MSS] from earlier Koine, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian and predominantly Latin sources allegedly authored by *Nicodemus* (Jhn.3:1-21) and *Pontius Pilate* (Matt.27:2). It is academically alleged to be the possible documents *Justin Martyr* addresses as heretical or Gnostic in his *First Apology* (c.155AD), although this is speculative. Certainly the Passion and Resurrection (first part) were existent in the second century, however the *Descendit* (second part) doesn't appear in any Oriental copies and is very rare in the Koine versions. It is prolific in the Latin MSS. Although the document appears orthodox (generally referring to most OT persons and quoting their canonical Scripture references), it introduces substantial Gnostic features not detailed in Canon at all. *The Acts of Pilate* (or *Gospel of Nicodemus, Part II - The Descent into Hell*) outlines the narrative of Christ entering hell, the OT Fathers rejoicing as Jesus leads them to heaven, while Satan and the demons tremble at the presence of the Messiah.

Irenaeus (200AD), Tertullian (220AD), Cyprian (250AD), Novatian (260AD) and Marcellus (341AD) all **omitted** any reference to the *Descendit* in their works pertaining to the *Credo*.

Referring to the works of Schaff³, none of the orthodox creeds record the ***Descendit in Inferna*** until Rufinius in only one of his two presentations (namely *Aquileja*) in 390AD. It then remains in this form of the *Credo* in works by Augustine (400AD), Nicetas (450AD), Eusebius Gallus (c.550AD), until the *Sacramentarium Gallicanum* (650AD) where it is modified to ***Descendit ad Inferna***.

¹ Duffy, J.G. (2020). *Jesus' Humiliation in He Descended into Hell*.

<http://johnduffy.net.au/academic%20notes/Jesus%20Humiliation%20in%20He%20Descended%20into%20Hell.pdf>

² James, M. R. (1924). *The Gospel of Nicodemus and Acts of Pilate*. Oxford.

https://www.masterandmargarita.eu/estore/pdf/esen002_nicodemus.pdf

³ Philip Schaff: *Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical notes*. Volume I. The History of Creeds. - Christian Classics Ethereal Library. (n.d.). Ccel.Org. Retrieved September 26, 2020, from

https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds1/iv.ii.html#fnf_iv.ii-p58.1

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Calvin proposed that Christ did indeed descend into hell, to experience all the Divine punishment for His elect, including hell⁴. This is reflected in the *Heidelberg Confession*⁵ which asks and answers:

“Q44. Why is there added: *He descended into hell*?

A. In my greatest sorrows and temptations I may be assured and comforted that my Lord Jesus Christ, by His unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony, which He endured throughout all His sufferings but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.”

The Westminster Divines proposed a different perspective which they presented in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Larger Catechism*. They refer to *Descendit* as the state and “sovereignty of death” under which Christ was during the three days’ burial physically, while His soul was with the Father⁶.

A great deal of these OT verses are reflected in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, so that is why they are included in the discussion regarding the state (locations’ descriptions) of the dead.

Biblical Arguments Used for *He Descended into Hell*

Genesis 37:35⁷

אָבִיו: אֵת וַיִּבֶן שְׂאֵלָה אָבִי אֶל-בְּנֵי כִי-אָרַד וַיֹּאמֶר לְהִתְנַחֵם וַיֵּמָאן לִנְחָמוֹ וְכָל-בְּנָתָיו כָּל-בְּנָיו וַיִּקְמוּ
and his all his and all to but he to be and he for I shall to my in into thus for his
arose sons daughters comfort refused comforted said go down son mourning sheol wept him father
him

ESV: *All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father wept for him.*

This passage is often represented by early theologians as the not simply the grave (site), but the afterlife (reinforced in the LXX as εἰς ᾗδου *into hades*), since Joseph was allegedly mauled⁸. It is obvious that it doesn’t mean to *descend into hell*, even allegorically or metaphorically would be very hyperbolic.

⁴ Calvin, J., & White, R. (2014). *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The Banner Of Truth Trust. 251.

⁵ *Westminster Theological Seminary - Heidelberg Catechism*. (n.d.). students.wts.edu. Retrieved October 10, 2020, from <https://students.wts.edu/resources/creeds/heidelberg.html#41>

⁶ Ward, R. S. (2000). *The Westminster Confession and Catechisms in Modern English: a modernised text commemorating the 350th anniversary of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-49*. New Melbourne Press. 24-26, 76.

⁷ Format of exegesis will include Passage, Hebrew from *Westminster Leningrad Codex*, author’s transliteration, and *English Standard Version* (ESV).

⁸ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1989). *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental and Practical on the Old and New Testaments: Vols. 1. Gen.-Deut.-Josh.-Est*. William B. Eerdmans, Reprinted. 233

Job 10:21⁹

בְּטָרָם	אֵלַי	וְלֹא	אָשׁוּב	אֶל-אֲרֶץ	חֹשֶׁךְ	וְצִלְמוֹת:
before	I go	and	I shall	the to	of	and the
		not	return	land/	darkness	shadow
				place		of death

ESV: *before I go, and I shall not return, to the land of darkness and deep shadow*

The <אֲרֶץ *land or place of darkness*> is a reference to death, where his body (but not his spirit) remains. It is not a description of the immediate OT afterlife. This concept is continued in the following example:

Job 17:13

אִם-אֶקְוֶה	שְׁאוֹל	בֵּיתִי	בְּחֹשֶׁךְ	רַפְדֹּתִי	יְצוּעֵי:
I wait	if	sheol	my	in the	If I
			house	dark	my bed
				make	

ESV: *If I hope for Sheol as my house, if I make my bed in darkness*

Here, Job is despairing that life has nothing currently (or expected) benevolent, and the imagery is poetic.

Psalms 107:16

כִּי-שָׁבַר	דִּלְתוֹת	נְחֹשֶׁת	וּבְרִיחַי	בְּרִזָּל	גָּדַע:
for he has	the	of	and the	of	cut in
broken	gates	bronze	bars	iron	two

ESV: *For he shatters the doors of bronze and cuts in two the bars of iron.*

As a direct quote in the *Nicodemus* and referred by *Bernard of Clairvaux*, this verse attributes the Messiah allegorically shattering the doors of bronze and cutting the iron bars (into pieces). This is an extraneous interpretation.

The context of the entire Ps.107 is entirely about all God's redemptive power temporally and spiritually. God's people are viewed as collected from all worldly powers into their current position as His elect. The fact that all points of the compass (3) are present endorses this idea (since Babylon is in the East). This song begins with the typical call to praise (1-3), then lists various calamities the Lord rescues His people (4-32), including the wilderness journey (4-9), prisons (10-16), fatalistic psychological misery (17-22), and inclement climate and weather (23-32). Although this is a temporal reminder of God's faithfulness, it may be spiritually extrapolated to eschatological matters. Unfortunately, to eisegetically use this passage for the evidence of nature of hell is inadequate.

⁹ Format of exegesis will include Passage, Hebrew from *Westminster Leningrad Codex*, author's transliteration, and *English Standard Version* (ESV).

Isaiah 42:7

חֲשֵׁךְ:	יֹשְׁבֵי	כֶּלֶא	מִבֵּית	אֹסִיר	מִמִּסְגֵּר	לְהוֹצִיא	עֵינַיִם	לִפְתָּח
In	those	prison	from the	prisoners	from the	to bring	eyes	to open
darkness	who sit		house		Prison	out		

ESV: *to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

<חֲשֵׁךְ to open> <עֵינַיִם eyes> <עֵרְוֹת blind> is reference to the confirming miracles that Christ perform (cf. 35:5-6). They addressed healing the blind, deaf, lame and dumb, demonstrating the power/authority of God to reverse the consequences of sin (Luk.7:22). The greatest healing is giving of the spiritual nature and enabling of the sinner's heart (6:10, 42:17-20; 44:17-18; Acts 26:18).

<חֲשֵׁךְ in darkness> ... <כֶּלֶא prison> <מִבֵּית from the house> reflects the greatest freedom comes from Jesus the Christ who releases the sinner from *spiritual* blindness (Acts 26:18; 2 Cor.4:4-6) and then leads them to glory (v.16). It is erroneous to fit this passage into an apocryphal document distorting the the Descendit for Christ to release the "prisoners from limbo or purgatory".

Isaiah 45:2

אֶגְדָּע:	בְּרִזְלִי	וּבְרִיתִי	אֲשַׁבֵּר	נְחוֹשֶׁה	וּדְלֹתוֹת	(ק אִישָׁר)	¹⁰ [כ אוֹשָׁר]	וְהִדְוִירִים	אֵלַי	לִפְנֵיךָ	אֲנִי
cut	of iron	and the	I will	of	the	-	make	And the	will go	before	I
		bars	break in	bronze	gates	straight	straight	crooked		you	
			pieces					places			

ESV: *"I will go before you and level the exalted places, [level the mountains]⁸, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron*

This is another passage quoted in *Nicodemus* to demonstrate the victory of breaking the restraints of hell to deliver the ancient just. Refer to the earlier notes for Ps.107:16. Contextually, the Lord explains He sovereignly enables Cyrus to conquer, in a unique and demonstrative reference of a pagan king as the *Anointed* <לְמָשִׁיחַ>. God uses (sovereignly) Cyrus to save Israel from its Babylonian exile as a *type of Christ*, the genuine Saviour. There is no other interpretation can be applied in relation to the *Descendit*, derived from Scripture alone.

Hosea 13:14

מֵעֵינַי:	יִסְתֵּר	גִּחְם	שְׂאוֹל	קִטְבֶּךָ	אֶהְיֶה	מוֹת	דְּבָרֶיךָ	אֶהְיֶה	אֶגְאֹלֶם	מִמוֹת	אֶפְדֶּם	שְׂאוֹל	מִיָּד
from	Is	pity	sheol	your	I will	death	your	I will	I will	from	I will	of	from
my eyes	Hidden			destruction	be	plagues		redeem	be	death	ransom	the	power
								them		them			

¹⁰ in Masoretic Text, Dead Sea Scroll and Septuagint

ESV: *I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol; I shall redeem them from Death*¹¹. *O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.*

This is a passage where God delivers Israel from it's idolatry. <מִיָּדְיָ לְאֹשֶׁת הַמָּוֶת I will ransom from the power of the grave> outlines how God's purpose is to deliver man from a physical and spiritual death. Paul quotes this text (albeit from the LXX, slightly different as a rhetorical question) in 1 Cor.15:55, regarding the resurrection of the body. There continues an idea that God will not *change His mind* pertaining to His promised redemption and destruction of death <חַיָּה לְאֹשֶׁת הַמָּוֶת compassion or repentance shall be hid from eyes>, so the promise of the Gospel is assured and His eternal decree can not be thwarted.

What is interesting is the whole of chapter 13 is prophetic judgement, with an apparent promise of salvation at the end. This is why it may better translated as questions. Irrespective, it has no relationship with *Descendit* as in the traditional sense.

Acts 2:27¹²

ὅτι οὐκ ἐγκαταλείψεις τὴν ψυχὴν μου εἰς ᾗδην, οὐδὲ δώσεις τὸν ὅσιόν σου ἰδεῖν διαφθοράν.

For not you will abandon the soul of me into hades, nor will you the Holy of you to see decay.
permit One

ESV: *For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.*

The Koine <ᾗδην *hades*> may refer to the punishment of the wicked after death (Luk.10:15, 16:23), but like the Hebrew <לְאֹשֶׁת *she'ol*>, it can also simply refer to death and the grave (1 Cor.15:55). God promised not to permit <δώσεις *allow, suffer*> His Holy One (Jesus the Christ) to experience the decay <διαφθοράν *corruption*> from remaining in the grave (13:35-36).

The context pertains to a speech (14-51) where Peter explains the Pentecostal tongues (1-13) incident to the crowd. He illumines the comprehension of Jesus' Resurrection, based on Ps.16:8-11. Peter states that David's Ps.16:(especially v.10) is a prophecy relating to the immediate resurrection of the Messiah, of whom David is a type. He reminds the crowd, David remains (bodily) dead, buried and in the tomb (v.29); whereas Christ isn't.

¹¹ Interrogative alternative: *Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death?*

¹² Format of exegesis will include Passage, Koine from Tyndale House Greek New Testament (THGNT), author's transliteration, and English Standard Version (ESV).

Romans 10:6-7

Ἡ δὲ ἐκ πίστεως δικαιοσύνη οὕτως λέγει· μὴ εἴπῃς ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου· τίς ἀναθήσεται εἰς τὸν

The however of faith righteousness thus speaks: not you in heart [your], who will ascend into the
should say

οὐρανόν; τουτέστιν χριστὸν καταγαγεῖν· ἢ τίς καταβήσεται εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον; τουτέστιν χριστὸν

Heaven? that is Christ to bring down, or who will descend into the abyss? that is Christ

ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναγαγεῖν.

out [the] dead to bring up.

from

ESV: *But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).*

The Apostle paraphrases Dt.30:12-14 to show that we don't have to do the work of Christ as the Redeemer. All that is required is faith in the gospel as revealed to humanity. This make no specific emphasis that Christ descended into Hell <ἄβυσσος abyss>, but a simple acknowledgement that Christ fulfilled the requirements of salvation, so that man may be saved by faith, not works/Mosaic Law.

Ephesians 4:8-9

διὸ λέγει· ἀναβὰς εἰς ὕψος ῥήματώτευσεν αἰχμαλωσίαν, [και] ἔδωκεν δόματα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις. τὸ δὲ ἀνέβη,

Therefore it having on high he lead captive captivity, [and] gave gifts to men/ and he
says: ascended mankind. ascended

τί ἐστιν εἰ μὴ ὅτι καὶ [πρωτον] κατέβη εἰς τὰ κατώτερα μέρη τῆς γῆς;

What is if not that also [first] he into the lower regions of the earth?

descended

ESV: *Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? [Or the lower parts of the earth?])*

Paul quotes Ps.68, which declares God's victory for Israel, and applies it to Christ, who is God. <ἔδωκεν δόματα> relates to Ps.68:18 <נתת מתנות לך לך> you have received gifts> and continues with God "gives strength and power to His people (v.35), as Paul summarised here. Paralleling the NT, <ἀνέβη He ascended> refers to Christ going to heaven (1:20), but prior to that He descended to earth as a man (His humiliation) to save sinners (His atonement) (John 3:13-16). <κατώτερα μέρη τῆς γῆς lower regions of the earth / lower parts of the earth> doesn't necessarily mean hell, but more likely death and the tomb / grave (Ps.63:9-10).

The argument to describe this as the *Descendit* where Jesus went to hell in the “lower parts” and captured Satan and the demons, is incongruous and has no other adequate Biblical support. This interpretation is only supported by the non-canonical *Acts of Pilates*, further diminishing the value of this interpretation.

1 Peter 3:18-20

ὅτι καὶ χριστὸς ἅπαξ περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἔπαθεν, δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων, ἵνα ὑμᾶς προσαγάγῃ τῷ θεῷ,

because also Christ once for sins suffered, the for the so that you He might bring to God
righteous unrighteous,

θανατωθεὶς μὲν σαρκί, ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι, ἐν ᾧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν

having been indeed in having been however in in which to in prison spirits having He preached,
put to death the flesh, enlivened Spirit, also gone

ἀπειθήσασιν ποτε, ὅτε ἀπεξεδέχετο ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ μακροθυμία ἐν ἡμέραις Νῶε κατασκευαζομένης κιβωτοῦ,

having at when was waiting the of God patience in [the] days of Noah being prepared of the ark,
disobeyed one time,

εἰς ἣν ὀλίγοι, τούτέστιν ὀκτὼ ψυχαί, διεσώθησαν δι' ὕδατος·

in which a few, that is eight souls, were saved because of water:

ESV: *For Christ also suffered [or died] once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which [or whom] he went and proclaimed [or preached] to the spirits in prison, because [or when] they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.*

These verses are also often attributed to the *Descendit*, but the Peter's words would be better interpreted as Christ's soul after death entered into heaven (derived from Paradise promised to the penitent on the cross [Luk.23:43] see note below). Many proponents of *Descendit* attribute *Paradise* and *bosom of Abraham* to *Limbus Patrum* (or limbo), and claim this verse as evidence that Christ preached to the OT spirits in hell. This is not the case as it reflects Christ, by His Holy Spirit (v.18:1:10-11) spoke through Noah (a *type* of Christ) at the time before the Flood, preaching to the heathen of the antediluvian period (2 Pet. 2:5). Ignoring the proclamation, they died and their spirits remain imprisoned in hell. Water destroyed the wicked, but saved Noah's family (ὀκτὼ ψυχαί eight souls). Consequently, Noah's family were saved by the water from the wickedness of the world, as the elect are saved by the cross that condemns the reprobate.

1 Peter 4:6

εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ νεκροῖς εὐηγγελίσθη, ἵνα κριθῶσι μὲν κατὰ ἀνθρώπους σαρκί, ζῶσι δὲ

to this for even to the gospel was so they might truly according men in the they might however
purpose dead proclaimed, that be judged to flesh, live

κατὰ θεὸν πνεύματι.

According in [the] spirit.

to God

ESV: *For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.*

Those who use this verse as an argument for Christ preaching in hell after He descended have completely missed the context. Peter is explaining that those who are now dead have been condemned according to men by physical death, but because the gospel was preached to them during thier lives, and they responded to it, they are now alive according to God in regard to spirit. *According to men ... according to God* may refer to judgement in the flesh as the end of all men, and life in the spirit as the distinctive Divine character. The preposition <κατὰ according to> may mean <in the sight of> and has no major bearing on the translation, particularly in regards to defending *Descendit*.

Biblical Arguments Used against He Descended into Hell

Luke 23:43

καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ἀμήν σοι λέγω· σήμερον μετ' ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ.

And He said to him, truly to you I say, today with Me you in Paradise.
will be

ESV: *And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

Here Christ responds to the penitent malefactor on the cross. Though just converted from a life of sin and blasphemy, this man was assured by the Lord that he did not have to wait until the *ages of purgatory* or any soul-sleep (both unsupported by Scripture). Jesus informs him immediately at his death they would be joined in glory. Paradise <παραδείσῳ> is a word for beautiful garden , used in this instance of the heavenly realm where the redeemed souls are gathered after death like a return to the Garden of Eden (2 Cor. 12:4, Rev.2:7; compared with Rev.22:1-3). This is not to be confused with any *Roman Catholic* Limbo or purgatory doctrine.

John 19:30

ὅτε οὖν ἔλαβεν τὸ ὄξος ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν· **ΤΕΤΕΛΕΣΤΑΙ**¹³. καὶ κλείνας τὴν κεφαλὴν παρέδωκεν τὸ πνεῦμα.

When took the sour Jesus He **IT HAS BEEN** and having the head He delivered up the spirit.
Therefore wine said, **FINISHED**⁸. bowed

ESV: *When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished", and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

One of the main arguments against the *Descendit*, is that the entire atoning work of Christ was achieved by this verse, whereby Christ declares "It is Finished!" He experienced the entire wrath of God's Divine justice, fully bearing the entire imputed sins of His elect. There was no necessity to *descend into hell* to experience the throes of suffering.

¹³ Author's emphasis

Summary of the Modern Reformed Stance on *He Descended into Hell*

To summarise the modern Australian Reformed churches perspective of the *Descendit* in the *Credo*, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* [WCF] and *Larger and Shorter Catechism* [LC & SC respectively] will be outlined¹⁴.

The WCF 8:4 regarding *Christ as Mediator* states He “was crucified and died; was buried, and remained under the power of death, yet saw no corruption.” (Acts 2:23,24,27; 13:37; Rom.6:9). Prior to this it mentions He “endured most grievous torments immediately in His soul, and most painful sufferings in His body” (Matt.27-27), but never in Canon does it ever mention descending into hell (as in purgatory or limbo). LC50 pertaining to Christ’s humiliation *after* death as “consisted in His being buried, and continuing in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day; **which hath been otherwise expressed in these words, He descended into hell.** [author’s emphasis].” This is derived from Ps.16:10, when examined in regards to Acts 2:24-27, 31; Rom.6:9 and Matt.12:40.

From the view of the souls of the dead (OT and NT), the WCF 32:1 *The State of the Dead and the Resurrection* summarised explains the bodies of all men return to dust and decay (Gen. 3:9, Acts 13:36), but their immortal souls return to God. The souls of the righteous are perfectly sanctified and received into the glory with God (Luk.23:43, **Eccl.12:7**) awaiting the full redemption of their bodies and glorified (Heb.12:23, 2 Cor. 5:1,6,8; Phil. 1:23, with Acts 3:21 and Eph. 4:10). In contrast, the wicked are cast into the hell of torment and utter darkness, reserved for judgement day (Luk.16:23-24; Acts 1:25, Jude 6,7; 1 Pet. 3:19). The LC86 and SC37 similarly address the benefits and communion with Christ the elect have immediately after death.

The final line of the article in WCF 32:1 declares **Scripture recognises no places** (ie. Purgatory or Limbo, etc) **for souls separated from their bodies other than these two** (namely heaven and hell).

Conclusion

The phrase from the *Apostle’s Creed* has an article, *He descended into hell*, with a chequered history predominantly derived from a non-canonical, apocryphal document (the *Gospel of Nicodemus*) and buttressed from genuinely superior theologians. Throughout time it has evolved from theological curiosity to heresy and (in the modern Reformed faith) apologetic re-interpretation in line with *Sola Scriptura*. This essay has glanced at the complex sources of the main non-canonical document and the related Scripture references encountered in the *Descendit*.

Soli Deo Gloria

¹⁴ Ward, R. S. (2000). *The Westminster Confession and Catechisms in Modern English: a modernised text commemorating the 350th anniversary of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-49*. New Melbourne Press.

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