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Hellish Indigestion: Consumption as Knowledge in Medieval *Descensus Christi* Accounts

Harley Joyce Campbell
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Present throughout medieval iconography and drama, the hellmouth relays a frightening glimpse of what awaits sinners after death. However, our perception of the hellmouth becomes complicated when we study these images in conjunction with Hell's portrayal as a speaking character. Ascribing anthropomorphic qualities to Hell makes its theological implications more approachable for a non-clerical audience, effectively forming connections between human sinners and a figure of unimaginable monstrosity. This essay examines the medieval Latin Gospel of Nicodemus and its first Middle English descendant, the verse Digby Harrowing of Hell, in terms of how these texts describe the physiology of Hell and Satan, as well as how they imagine the descent of Christ into Hell and evil's reaction to Him. Parallel to this close reading is a discussion of the significance of the sacramental Eucharist as a physical means through which Christ's divinity may be apprehended. By juxtaposing these concepts, this essay positions Satan as an exemplum of a bad consumer incapable of fully knowing Christ and Hell as the more knowledgeable figure by means of meditatio and ruminatio.

Introduction

In the preface to Nicholas Love's early fifteenth century *Mirrore of þe blessed lyffe of oure lorde Jesu cryste*, pseudo-Bonaventure begins with a commendation of St. Cecilia and her method of meditating upon the gospels:

And so with a likyng & swete taste gostly chewyng in þat manere þe gospell of crist she set & bare it euer in þe priuyte of her breste. In þe same manere I conseil þat þou do. ... For sobely þou shalt neuer finde, where man may so perfite be taght,... for to stable his herte aʒeynus vanitees & deceyuable likynges of þe worlde... as in þe blissede life of oure lorde Jesu...¹

This incitement to consider and internalize the Word of God in a literally, somatically-figured way comes on the heels of Love's recommendation that, in order for laypeople to learn the love of Christ, knowledge of Him must be communicated to them in a

¹ Love, *Mirror*, 11-12.

manner befitting their “comun vndirstondyng,” “as children hauen nede to be fedde with mylke of ly3te doctrine & not with sadde mete of... contemplacion.”² For Love, chewing and digesting food is equivalent to reading the Word of God, pondering it, and internalizing it as a model for righteous life. Even when one receives the right sort of nutrition, the line between proper use and sin is razor thin: the spiritually delicious “likyng” taste of the Word easily collapses into “deceyuable likynges,” worldly pleasures that carry none of the nourishment of Christ’s love. A major concern of devotional practice for Love and others was that the experience did not stop with the physical, or human, aspect. As Caroline Walker Bynum has argued, the emphasis on the spiritual component of the physical sign extends to the Eucharistic theology of the period. Whereas earlier Christians understood the Eucharist as “a communal meal that bound Christians together and fed them with the comfort of heaven,” later medieval interpretations shifted toward perceiving “an object of adoration” with “Christ at the moment of his descent into the elements.”³ The ideal interpretation, therefore, of any physical sign of Christ is one that preserves the proper signification, and knowledge of Christ in a form appropriate to humankind, conveyed through signs, should always lead to the knowledge of the signified, the godhead: “þat by þo þinges þat bene visible & þat men kyndly knoweþ he be stired & rauyshede to loue & desire gostly inuisible þinges.”⁴

One of the most ubiquitous images related to problematic consumption in the medieval period is the hellmouth. Present throughout iconography and drama, the hellmouth relays a frightening glimpse of what awaits sinners after death, with the damned clearly on display through the mouth’s fanged entrance and Satan often lurking nearby. As Robert Lima has argued, iconography of the hellmouth combines “two distinct images”: “that of a great beast swallowing a living human being,” and “that of the eternal punishment in the

² Love, *Mirror*, 10.

³ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 53.

⁴ Love, *Mirror*, 10.

fires of Hell.”⁵ Our perception of the hellmouth becomes even more complex, though, when we study these images in conjunction with Hell’s portrayal as a talking, and ostensibly thinking, character. We find that Hell is often portrayed with an emphasis on physical characteristics and actions. Ascribing anthropomorphic qualities to Hell, a figure of unimaginable monstrosity, makes its theological implications more approachable for a non-clerical audience. “Spedefull & edifyng” though these depictions of Hell may be, they nonetheless contain deeper meanings that are important for the audience to discern, just as the ubiquitous physically-focused portrayals of Christ the man must lead to knowledge of the godhead.⁶ In this essay, I examine the *Gospel of Nicodemus* B-text, an early medieval Latin apocryphal work that details the crucifixion, resurrection, and Harrowing of Hell, in comparison to its later Middle English descendants to see how they describe the physiology of Hell and Satan, as well as evil’s reaction to Christ.

In particular, I examine the earliest Middle English version⁷ of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, a poem called *Harrowing of Hell* that is extant in MS Digby 86. Prior scholarship⁸ on *Harrowing of Hell* has been relatively scant and has not focused extensively on the

5 Lima, “The Mouth of Hell,” 35.

6 Love, *Mirror*, 10.

7 Fein, “Middle English Poetry,” 167. Susanna Fein locates the first known appearance of the *Harrowing of Hell* in MS Digby 86; later copies of the poem appear in MS Harley 2253 and the Auchinleck MS. In his introduction to the EETS edition of *Harrowing of Hell*, Hulme observes that all the earliest Middle English versions of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* are in verse. Hulme, *The Middle-English Harrowing*, vii. For a brief discussion of the Digby, Harley, and Auchinleck versions of the poem, see Hulme vii-xi. While an explanation for this phenomenon is outside the scope of this article, I would suggest that the presence of multiple dialoguing voices, in addition to the dramatic potential of the hellmouth’s striking appearance, makes verse a sensible medium. For the dramatic possibilities of *Harrowing of Hell*, see Turville-Petre pp. 59, Lundeen pp. 391-396, Nelson pp. 49-55, and Tamburr pp. 113-119.

8 Turville-Petre, Fein, and Lundeen have studied *Harrowing of Hell* based on its presence within a multilingual collection and its dramatic properties, respectively. Nelson, in contrast to most of the readings of MS Digby 86, examines the non-liturgical elements of this poem and considers it reflective of “gentry perceptions of power” during the late thirteenth century. Nelson, “Performance of Power,” 49.

theology of the text.⁹ Yet the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and *Harrowing of Hell* are apt testing grounds for Caroline Walker Bynum's seminal theories of eating in the medieval world, namely the consumption of the Eucharist to engender intimate knowledge of Christ¹⁰ and Christ's relentlessly indigestible body as a symbol of triumph over death.¹¹ I relate textual images of Hell and Christ to common medieval views of the Eucharist as a representation of Christ's sacrifice and the transition from human to Spirit which makes the Harrowing possible. Moreover, I discuss the significance of the sacramental Eucharist as a physical means through which Christ, or God the Son, may be understood. By juxtaposing these concepts, I aim to demonstrate that the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and *Harrowing of Hell* can be read as relevant to Eucharistic theology in that they demonstrate both the success and failure of that sacrament. In essence, Hell and Satan are exempla of bad consumers, both in terms of eating badly and taking in the knowledge of Christ in an inappropriate or ineffective way, but Hell is somewhat recuperated through the use of mouth- and consumption-based imagery.

The Eucharist as a Sign

Before delving into a specific examination of the *Descensus Christi* texts, it is useful to establish how the Eucharist functions as a sign for writers of the medieval era. On the one hand, the Eucharist is excessively ordinary; though it acts as the focal point of the Mass, it consists of humble elements. Caroline Walker Bynum reminds us that, within the original materials of the Eucharist, which were "the basic foodstuff of the Mediterranean diet – bread and wine," there is

9 One notable exception is Katariina Närä's 2009 chapter on medieval representations of the devil, where she reads the popularity of Harrowing of Hell-related images and writing as attempts to downplay Satan's power over humanity and diminish the effects of his antagonism against God. Närä, "I Make." Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England*, also devotes significant attention to *Harrowing of Hell*, though his aim tends more towards comparison of the various medieval versions of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

10 See especially Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 54.

11 See especially Bynum, *Resurrection*, 56.

nothing particularly godly, nor even reminiscent of Christ the man.¹² This ordinariness follows from early Christian interpretations of the Eucharist, which were predicated upon the *communal* aspect of communion.¹³ Whereas later medieval Christian thought was highly concerned with “awe-inspiring and cultic reverence of the actual body and blood of Christ,” the older tradition hinged on “His eschatological presence in... the ritual” of Eucharist for the purpose of remembering the Last Supper as one of Christ’s “salvific acts.”¹⁴

Regardless of the particular contemporary view of how the Eucharist was meant to function, an emphasis on the presence of Christ in the sacrament was paramount. The ability to see the Eucharist for what it was meant to be (i.e. Christ’s body and blood), rather than for what it merely looked like (i.e. bread and wine) was, for one thing, integral to how Christians characterized themselves. Christians could consider themselves superior to practitioners of animal sacrifice, for example, because “they ate real human flesh,” yet “their sacrifice was invisible,” or mentally perceived, rather than “literal and bloody.”¹⁵ As Eucharistic ritual evolved during the twelfth century to include the elevation of the Host, the visual elements of communion were increasingly made to symbolize not just the Passion in general but the body of Christ crucified.¹⁶ As a reincarnation of Christ’s crucified body, the Eucharist has the power to re-present Christ’s sacrifice for His consumers. Importantly, the idea of reliving Christ’s works through the Eucharist is not confined to liturgy but also appears in medieval vernacular theology, such as *Meditations on the Life and Passion of Christ*:

¹² Bynum, “Sacrality,” 11.

¹³ See above; Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 53.

¹⁴ Snoek, *Medieval Piety*, 32.

¹⁵ Bynum, “Sacrality,” 12.

¹⁶ Snoek, *Medieval Piety*, 55.

Þin ovne body þon ʒef hem alle,
Þat eton þanne wiþ þe in halle. ...
“Desired I haue with gret longynge
To ete wiþ ʒow at my wendynge.” ...

“Children, ʒe shal neuere more
Sen me drynkon ʒow be-fore,
Til þat we drynke to-gyderes alle
In heuene in my faderes halle.”¹⁷

Though Christians will not be able to see Christ sharing a meal with them until after the Second Coming, the futurity of Christ’s statements in *Meditations* can also be taken to encompass the present moment – Christ is both eaten by and eating with Christians during communion, present spiritually through the medium of the Host in what Miri Rubin calls constant “generative and generous” motion.¹⁸ By reenacting Christ’s “wendynge” via the sacramental ritual, the priest reclaims the Last Supper from the past and makes salvation accessible to his parishioners in real time. Similarly, the image of Christ eating at the Last Supper hearkens to the popular medieval trope of Christ *as* a mouth, able to eat like other humans do while speaking and embodying the Holy Spirit in the fullness of His incarnation.¹⁹

What is particularly meaningful about the presence of Christ in the Host is that the Eucharist does not signify His presence alone but the partakers’ *transformation* into Him. Of particular interest here is Augustine’s concept of Eucharist, which informed much of vernacular theology’s take on the matter.²⁰ For Augustine, “Eucharistic piety is expressed in the many exhortations in his sermons urging the congregation to *be* the Body that they eat in the sacrament,... the invisible church, which is the thing signified by this visible sign.”²¹ Affirming Augustine’s insistence on the

¹⁷ *Meditations*, lines 259-60, 267-68, 273-76.

¹⁸ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 106.

¹⁹ Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 111.

²⁰ For example, of the elements of Augustine’s *Confessions* that Jacobus de Voragine chooses to replicate in *The Golden Legend*, Christ self-identifying as food is a prominent one. See Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 112 n.131.

²¹ Cary, *Powerlessness*, 246.

invisible signified, Maggie Kilgour claims that “Augustine’s primary difficulty with the Christian doctrine [lies] in his inability to conceive of a Word that could be made flesh, a God who was in any way substantial.”²² In avoiding the fleshiness of an overly literal Eucharistic interpretation, Augustine builds a model of reciprocal consumption. Just as Christ’s presence during the Eucharist means he is consumer and consumed, Augustine imagines God incorporating the faithful into Himself: “grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me.”²³ Augustine’s approach follows the older tradition, mentioned above, of focusing on the Eucharist as a salvific act but also meshes well with worship of Christ’s body when emphasis remains on the symbolism thereof.²⁴ The transformation Augustine posits notably avoids the somatic, digestible quality of normal food. The food of the body of Christ, instead, supersedes normal bodily processes and changes the consumer. Indeed, even if “cultic reverence of the actual body and blood of Christ” was a side effect of Eucharistic practice, such may not have been the liturgical intention.²⁵ Exploring the refinement of Eucharistic teaching in the fourteenth century, Miri Rubin cites the anonymous Latin tract-sermon “De eukaristia” as an example of how the Host was meant to be viewed symbolically: “the sermon... reminded the hearer that the eucharist had been established under the form of wine and bread so as to test faith, to avoid abhorrence of raw flesh, and to save the body of Christ from the ridicule of heretics.”²⁶ From an Augustinian point of view, bread and wine test faith because the consumer is challenged to think of them as Christ’s body and blood, not as physical nourishment nor as “raw flesh.”²⁷ Rather, there is a double

22 Kilgour, *From Communion*, 50.

23 Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.10.

24 Referencing *Confessions* 13.23, Kilgour notes that “Man is elevated over nature by virtue of his ‘superior’ powers... to use the symbolism of the sacraments, which for Augustine are epitomized by the Eucharist.” Kilgour, *From Communion*, 57.

25 Snoek, *Medieval Piety*, 32.

26 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 91.

27 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 91.

signification at play here, where the Eucharist signifies Christ's human substance, which signifies the salvific *effect* of his humanity.

The conclusion drawn from this layering of meanings is paramount for the medieval Christian to understand, because, in Maggie Kilgour's words, "the unhealthy eater is in fact also an unhealthy *reader* who mistakes matter for spirit, the sign for the signified"²⁸. This connection between eating and understanding originates from a long tradition of food representing religious texts and complex theology,²⁹ as evidenced by the section from Love's *Mirrore* above and a wide variety of other medieval works. The physical act of eating, when done in a temperate, measured way, breaks up a large piece of food into manageable bites; in the same way, "chewyng"³⁰ on an idea leads to *sapientia*, or the material, affective knowledge that supplements *scientia* (learned knowledge).³¹ Though *sapientia* occurs through the body, a fallible tool, its experiential nature allows for a deeper understanding of God than intellectual knowledge alone can.³² Bad consumption, on the other hand, implies a lack of moderation, whether in the amount of "chewyng" or in the size of one's appetite. In most cases, gluttony and swallowing food whole are associated with misunderstanding, though, as I will discuss further with regard to Hell, medieval Eucharistic theology may provide an exception to the latter.

Thinking with Your Stomach – The *Gospel of Nicodemus*

With the signification of consuming the Eucharist in mind, let us now turn to a group of texts that elaborate upon the aftermath of the crucifixion, the *Decensus Christi ad Inferos*. We will begin by examining the "oldest surviving record"³³ of Harrowing tales, the

28 Kilgour, *From Communion*, 48; my emphasis.

29 For a helpful overview of the concepts in this section, see Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 78-80 and 83-91.

30 Love, *Mirror*, 11.

31 See Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 79, 81, 92-95.

32 Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 93.

33 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 255.

Gospel of Nicodemus B-text, which “was by far the most influential source about the Harrowing of Hell for late-medieval Europe.”³⁴

Even before we learn the particulars of the Descent, the text draws our attention to corporeal markers of Christ’s works. The outer narrative of the story tells us that the account we read was physically recorded by the spirits of “Simeon and his two sons,” who were resurrected by Christ: “When those who had arisen heard [the invocation to make an oath] they made the sign of the cross on their faces and said to the chief priests, ‘Give us paper, ink, and pen.’ They brought these things. When they sat down, they wrote as follows...”³⁵ This detail of Simeon and his sons writing down an account of the miracles may seem trivial, but by categorizing the B-text as a physical remnant of the Harrowing, rather than an oral retelling, the writer compares the tale to other tangible signs of Christ’s victory over death, including the resurrected souls of Simeon and his sons, the “sign of the cross,” and perhaps Christ’s body itself.

Following this framing physicality and some prophetic lessons on the coming of Christ, we learn how Satan and Hades, the personification of Hell, react to Christ’s impending arrival. The text’s first description of Hades immediately links him with gluttonous consumption; Satan addresses Hades as “O all-devouring and insatiable one,” an epithet which the forefathers later repeat.³⁶ Even though Hades seems somewhat anthropomorphized by his dialogue with Satan, the relation between this depiction and later iconography of Hell, which features the gaping animalistic maw crammed full of souls,³⁷ is clear. Hades continues to build his own image as a consumptive being when he recounts the earlier resurrection of Lazarus, which happened before the Passion and, in Hades’s opinion, may be cause for concern:

34 Tamburr, *Harrowing of Hell*, 104.

35 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 260.

36 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 262.

37 See Bynum, *Resurrection*, 192-96 for a selection of twelfth-century iconographic examples of the hellmouth.

If [Jesus] set others free from the grave, in what way and by what power will he be seized by us? Not long ago I devoured a certain dead man named Lazarus, and soon afterwards someone from the living forcefully dragged him from my intestines through a word alone. I suppose that this was the one about whom you are speaking. If then we receive that one here, I am afraid that we might somehow be in danger with all the others. For see, I can sense that all those whom I devoured from the beginning are stirred up, and I am pained in my belly. It does not seem to me a good sign that Lazarus was previously snatched from me. For he flew out from me not like a corpse but like an eagle, so quickly did the earth cast him forth.³⁸

At this point in the narrative, Hades's understanding of Christ is completely couched in terms related to his own body – more specifically, to his stomach.³⁹ The belly ache Hades feels in the current action of the *Gospel* reminds him of the one he felt when Lazarus “flew out” previously, and he essentially fears that Christ will attack his digestive system and cause him to vomit forth the souls he has devoured once more. Though grotesque, the image is not unusual; Antony Eastmond and Liz James count “at least fifteen references” to vomit throughout the Bible. The *Nicodemus* writer portrays Hades's indigestion as, in Eastmond and James's words, “the good contents...purged from the bad body.”⁴⁰ A soul marked by Christ, whether His own or that of His followers, cannot be corrupted by the demeaning, earthy process of digestion, and Hades appears to have some awareness of this dynamic.⁴¹

38 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 262.

39 In their article “Eat, drink... and pay the price,” Antony Eastmond and Liz James explore the Byzantine iconography of Hades, which has a similar basis to that of the Western tradition (for example, in Isaiah 5:14 “Therefore hell hath enlarged her soul, and opened her mouth without any bounds”) and seems to only diverge in a tendency to portray Hades along more godlike or anthropomorphic lines. In ninth-century Byzantine “marginal psalters,” Hades “was regularly depicted as fat and old, bald and dark, often a giant and often in a loincloth.” Otherwise, descriptions of the Harrowing's impact on Hades are remarkably consistent with those in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. Eastmond and James cite the *Gospel of Bartholomew* writer, Ephrem the Syrian, and Romanos the Melode as all using images of Christ attacking Hades's stomach, i.e. portraying the Harrowing as digestive distress. Eastmond and James, “Eat, drink,” 179-180.

40 Eastmond and James, “Eat, drink,” 180-81.

41 Cf. Bynum, also studying Romanos, notes that Hades vomits up Christ because “Jesus is the ‘celestial bread’ that hell ‘cannot digest’.” Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 40.

Satan, however, has a markedly different reaction to Christ's arrival than Hades does. Whereas Hades "[thinks Jesus] is coming... to raise all the dead," Satan thinks their visitor is a mere man who will be entrapped like all the rest:

There is a certain one named Jesus... who calls himself the Son of God. But this one is a human.... Now that he has died, be prepared so that we can keep him securely here. For I know that he is human, as I heard him saying "My soul is deeply grieved unto death."⁴²

Satan perceives Jesus's fear of death as precluding Him from being a deity and therefore lumps Him together with the rest of humanity. This assumption is Satan's fatal misreading of Christ. Ironically, Satan recalls that many of the souls he has already claimed were "through a word alone... brought... back to life" by the man he regards so dismissively.⁴³ Satan and Hades have both been privy to the action of resurrection through Christ's Word, so why do these two hellish figures interpret Christ so differently?

I suggest that the reason behind these contrasting viewpoints is the method by which each character has received knowledge of Christ. Satan knows of Christ through visual and auditory signs only; he has seen the man crucified, observed His miraculous works, and heard His lament on the cross. Satan's experiences are entirely different from Hades's. Whereas Satan has received Christ in external, visible ways, Hades has undergone something much closer to communion. Hades has consumed the souls of the righteous patriarchs,⁴⁴ who

42 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 262.

43 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 262.

44 Cf. *Confessions* 3.7, where Augustine responds to nonbelievers asking whether the patriarchs would be acceptable to God when they committed polygamy, murder, and animal sacrifice: "I also did not know that true inward justice which judges not by custom but by the most righteous law of almighty God. By this law the moral customs of different regions and periods were adapted to their places and times, while that law itself remains unaltered everywhere and always. It is not one thing at one place or time, another thing at another. Accordingly Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and David, and all those praised by the mouth of God were righteous. When untrained minds judge them wicked, they judge 'by man's day' (1 Cor. 4:3) and assess the customs of the entire race by the criterion of their own moral code." Considering the slippage of time inherent in the Eucharist and the Harrowing (see p. see p 84 above and p 94 n.67 below), the righteous patriarchs were members of the body of Christ even when Hell originally consumed them.

are members of the body of Christ. In the words of twelfth-century theologian Peter Comestor, “Christ’s body is indeed the universal church, that is, the head and members are Christ and the believers.”⁴⁵ Likewise, common thought held that, even when the Eucharist was taken from the original Host and separated into innumerable pieces, the body of Christ maintained its original signification.⁴⁶ Therefore one can argue that Hades has been steadily ingesting bits of the body of Christ as he receives the souls of those who will be saved. Hades’s long-term diet is reminiscent of the constant and active motion required for *meditatio*, or repeated “chewing,” which monastic texts considered necessary for “knowing inwardly and experientially.”⁴⁷ The *meditatio*, and also *ruminatio*, or the regurgitation of food to re-chew it, that Hades undergoes suggests he may have some level of *sapientia* regarding Christ’s true identity. In accordance with the medieval understanding of the learning process, Hades’s knowledge of Christ exceeds the mental and has an explicitly physical component. Satan, however, has by his own admission only seen and heard⁴⁸ Christ and is missing the component of taste, which means he is subject to “an indirect mode of knowing.”⁴⁹ Therefore Satan lacks the opportunity to internalize (literally and figuratively) the body of Christ to the extent that Hades has.

45 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 38.

46 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 107. The idea of Christ’s presence “in every particle of the Eucharist” would become especially important in later medieval attempts to confirm the doctrine of concomitance; see Bynum, *Resurrection*, 316.

47 Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 95.

48 While sound also plays an important role in the medieval sensory experience, taste seems to be privileged in texts related to the Harrowing, in part due to the omnipresent imagery of the hellmouth, but perhaps also due to the more passive nature of hearing. Chewing, eating, tasting, and digesting all act upon the consumed material and thereby become part of the process of discernment, whereas the pervasive quality of sound subjects the auditor to good and evil indiscriminately, requiring selective listening on the part of a “good listener.” For a general discussion of both senses, see e.g. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, 63-83 and 105-116.

49 Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 94.

Hades's capacity for digestion is further demonstrated when the "bronze gates" and "iron bars," imagistic replicas of his teeth, are destroyed and "the King of glory [comes] in" to the hellmouth, "as a human; and all the dark places of Hades [are] enlightened."⁵⁰ Christ entering Hades in his human form mirrors the sacramental bread and wine entering the mouths of Christians, and it is upon this intrusion of the original Host that Hades is "enlightened" to a better understanding of Christ. By destroying the mechanism for chewing, the text invites further connection to Eucharistic consumption, in that "swallowing [the sacrament] whole... equate[s to] believing without questioning."⁵¹ Swallowing the Eucharist whole does not erase the possibility of *ruminatio* and, according to Katie L. Walter, may even necessitate it so that Christ's identity is not just believed but reflected upon. "Immediately" after Hades takes in Christ's body, he recognizes Him as "the one who is humble yet exalted, the slave and the master, the soldier and the king, the one who has authority over the dead and the living."⁵² In the ensuing action, we see that "none of the dead is left in" Hades because all the souls of the righteous were released from bondage at the destruction of the gates; therefore, Christ's body has acted as both a revelation and an emetic substance.⁵³ Following the purging⁵⁴ (and, possibly, rumination) of his misgotten meal, Hades seems fully aware, for the first time, of Christ's power and the meaning hidden behind the signs of His human body: "everything you [Satan] gained through the tree

50 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 263; my emphasis.

51 Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 99. This belief also reflects anxiety within medieval pastoral instruction surrounding the breaking of Christ's body-as-Eucharist by the chewing of consumers. Walter discusses the complications of this model especially on pp. 98-102.

52 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 263.

53 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 264.

54 See Bynum's arguments on digestion, especially *Holy Feast* pp. 40 and *Resurrection* pp. 27, 56. Bynum reads Christ's body as "undigested and indigestible flesh" (*Resurrection*, 56) that breaks the digestive cycle to which normal human flesh, which decays and can be broken down, is subject.

of knowledge⁵⁵ you have lost through the tree of the cross. All your joy has turned to grief. Wanting to kill the King of glory, you have killed yourself.”⁵⁶ Here, Hades participates in what Rachel Danford calls “the etymological loop formed by *mors-morsus-remordere*,” or death-bite-gnawing remorse: “The bite of the conscience [can] save believers from the bite of death, provided it [inspires] them to move their own mouths in prayer and confession.”⁵⁷ Though Hades plans to do all manner of “evil things” to Satan, Hades takes this action because he has “received” Satan from Christ “to hold [him] fast.”⁵⁸ Thus after chewing, swallowing whole, and ruminating on the body of Christ, Hades becomes co-actant with Christ, albeit in a hellish way, as they both “swallow up death forever.”⁵⁹

Medieval Satan, the Bad Interpreter

I now will turn to the Digby version of *Harrowing of Hell* to further examine the connection between hellish consumption and understanding Christ. In this section I aim to expand one of the concepts I have already begun to discuss: in John Hallwas’s words, the “widely known medieval theory... [which] held that Satan failed to recognize the divinity of Christ when he brought about His death.”⁶⁰ The scope of this failure was subject to debate, with the Augustinian opinion holding that Satan can only know as much as God allows, Gregory the Great and Bede’s assertion that Satan did not understand

55 Hades’s reference to the tree of knowledge, of course, returns our thought to the very first biblical episode of problematic eating. In iconographic and literary traditions throughout early Christianity and the medieval era, both Eden and Hell are bound by gates, and humans are expelled through those gates. This line encapsulates Christ’s act of redemption along with its original motivation in a manner that emphasizes their respective bodily experiences. For an overview of the concept of an enclosed Eden, or *hortus conclusus*, see Delumeau, *History of Paradise*, 121-134 and McAvoy, “The Medieval *hortus conclusus*,” 5-8.

56 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 264.

57 Danford, “‘Cast Not’,” 7.

58 Ehrman and Pleše, *Other Gospels*, 264.

59 Isaiah 25:8 (NRSV).

60 Hallwas, “Identity,” 417.

the redemptive impact of Christ's divinity, and the Thomistic notion of demons lacking an innate understanding of God, among others⁶¹. Most of these interpretations rely upon Satan's interaction with Christ during the Temptation, but, as I note below, neither the *Gospel of Nicodemus* nor the *Digby Harrowing* seem to reference that event and assume that Christ is just another human come to hell.

The writer of the *Digby Harrowing* makes the interesting choice of starting the poem *in medias res*; instead of building up to Christ's arrival in hell with a tense conversation between Satan and Hades, we see Christ announcing his presence by monologuing on the trials he has suffered in human form:

“Harde gates haui gon,
Serewes soffred moni hon,...⁶²
Almest so muchel hit is ago
Suppe þat i bicom furst mon;
Suppen haui þoled and west
Boþe chele, hounger and þurst...⁶³

The similarities between the *Gospel of Nicodemus* B-text and this later adaptation keep the audience's focus on Christ's body. Whether Christ has a human or deified form at this particular moment is not clear, but He insistently draws us into the narrative of His suffering while on earth. The first “serewes” He mentions are not the general event of crucifixion but the particular “chele, hounger and þurst” he experienced while on the cross, which emphasizes the senses and the digestive system.⁶⁴ This highly evocative image falls in line with later medieval devotional emphasis on Christ's wounds and crucifical suffering. Indeed, the *point* of the Eucharist in this period is to experience hunger as suffering and allay that suffering with the “bleeding and broken flesh” represented by the

61 For an exploration of Satan's misunderstanding within theological contexts, see Saunders, “The Devil and the Divinity of Christ,” 536-553.

62 Hulme, *Middle English Harrowing of Hell*, lines 27-28.

63 Hulme, *Middle English Harrowing of Hell*, lines 31-34.

64 Hulme, *Middle English Harrowing of Hell*, line 34.

elements: “To eat God... was finally to become suffering flesh with his suffering flesh; it was to imitate the cross.”⁶⁵ Even earlier in the scene, Christ mentions the “Harde gates,” which refers to the hardships of human life.⁶⁶ By virtue of the Harrowing, in Peter Stuart Macaulay’s words, “[fusing] all human time,”⁶⁷ Christ’s reference to gates also serves as a visual reminder of the gates of Hell *and* the teeth of Eucharist consumers through which His body passes.

Another divergence from the *Gospel of Nicodemus* to the Digby *Harrowing* is in Satan’s interaction with Christ. The *Harrowing*, in line with other contemporary adaptations of the same subject matter, features a great deal of debate between Christ and Satan. Much of this conversation consists of Christ telling Satan in no uncertain terms who and what He is. Referring to the Latin *Gospel of Nicodemus*, Karl Tamburr posits that “Satan is more obtuse and literal-minded, like other evil characters in medieval literature who cannot distinguish the letter from the spirit;” the same holds true in the Digby *Harrowing* poem.⁶⁸ We notice especially that Satan fixates on physical signs of consumption but does not understand their meaning:

[Satan:] “Adam þe houngrie com me to,
 Mani redes he gan me do;
 ffor on appel þat ich 3af him
 He is min and al is cun.”
 [Christ:] “Satanas, hit was min,
 Þe appel þat þou 3eue him,
 Þe appel and þe appeltre,
 Boþen veren maked þoru me”⁶⁹

65 Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 54.

66 “gate” n.(2), *MED*: “a harsh action or experience.” The *MED* specifically attributes this definition to the Digby *Harrowing* quote used here.

67 As discussed earlier, the multiplistic imaging of Hell’s gates is in part possible due to the nature of the Harrowing, which “provides a link between past, present and future” in its “fusion of all human time” “by the physical gathering together of the righteous of the Old Testament era... and by references and echoes recalling past events in God’s scheme of salvation, and anticipating such future episodes as the Last Judgment.” Peter Stuart Macaulay, quoted in Tamburr, *Harrowing of Hell*, 130.

68 Tamburr, *Harrowing of Hell*, 106.

69 Hulme, *Middle English Harrowing of Hell*, lines 77-84.

Among the signs common to Biblical narratives, the apple holds special relevance to heretical knowledge. Augustine, for example, “[glosses] the forbidden fruit as a figure for heresy.”⁷⁰ Avitus of Vienne later develops a more specific, sense-based meaning for the fruit in his verse adaptation of Genesis: “The truth is embodied not in God’s word, [Eve] now learns, but in the apple, described as a tasty vessel of divine secrets.... In order to know...Eve must experience the taste (*sapor*) of the fruit, an implied contrast with the wisdom (*sapientia*) embodied in God’s Word.”⁷¹ By laying claim to the apple, then, Satan also positions himself as the originator of heretical, sense-driven knowledge in opposition to the truth of God’s Word.

What Satan does not realize is that he has merely relayed the apple; God, not Satan, created the fruit in the Garden of Eden. Satan’s misunderstanding of the apple’s provenance shows that he cannot differentiate between physical remnants of his actions and physical remnants of Christ. Tamburr sees this misinterpretation as one of the common tropes of texts related to the Harrowing and clarifies that the fault lies entirely with Satan: “Satan was not tricked because he was given a clear sign that Christ was greater than any man; the devil simply failed to understand this sign.”⁷² The contrasting language used by Satan and Christ to describe the apple emphasizes Satan’s problem. Christ acknowledges the divine origins of the apple and tree, while Satan, like the unhealthy consumer who only perceives bread and wine when he eats the Eucharist, sees only the vessel, the “giving” but not the “making.” Extending Augustine’s theories of consumption, the apple itself is innocuous. Augustine states in *Confessions* 10.31 “It is not the impurity of food I fear but that of uncontrolled desire,”⁷³ or gluttony. We can see the apple in the Digby *Harrowing* as playing a similar role to that of the

70 Jager, *Tempter’s Voice*, 41.

71 Jager, *Tempter’s Voice*, 44-45.

72 Tamburr, *Harrowing of Hell*, 115.

73 Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.31.

righteous fathers' and Christ's bodies in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* B-text. Satan attempts to interpret these signs but fails because, in Augustine's words, his "god is [his] belly."⁷⁴ Simply put, Satan's obsession with proving dominance, exemplified through his boasts of inciting the crucifixion in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and of causing the Fall in the Digby *Harrowing*, stems from his inability to see the signified behind the signs of body and apple.

The fourth century bishop Gregory of Nyssa wrote that these signs are no mere 'accidents' – their fleshy beauty is "congenial and kindred to [Satan] himself," who fixates on the sensuous.⁷⁵ To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with the sensuous, so long as it is not used as an isolated point of worship. This is especially true of the Eucharist, which relies upon the sense of taste to be taken in and understood by its consumers. Here, the bodily experience of eating presents the opportunity to approach the divinity of Christ, and meantime emulate his humanity, because of the redemptive power of the body of Christ. According to Eric Jager, humans have the ability to grasp all senses of the Eucharist and its associated physical remnants of Christ because they learned language to compensate for "the fallen body...[inhibiting] the free exchange of mind or spirit."⁷⁶ Satan, however, is not so fortunate. Intrinsic to human understanding of Christ is faith in His presence within the signs He creates. Consuming His body, a sign with momentous meaning, cyclically "signifies this inner, spiritual eating of faith."⁷⁷ By thinking only in terms of visible signs, Satan prevents himself from consuming, let alone digesting, the truth of Christ's identity and salvific grace; Hades in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* only just escapes this fate by virtue of having consumed so many members of Christ's body and engaging in the practices of *meditatio* and *ruminatio*.

74 Augustine, *Confessions*, 13.26.

75 Constan, "Last Temptation," 156.

76 Jager, *Tempter's Voice*, 59.

77 Cary, *Powerlessness*, 250.

The struggle to understand Christ's physical signs is in direct contrast with the knowledge of God granted through unity with him in the consumption of the Eucharist. As this essay has demonstrated, medieval narratives of the Harrowing of Hell couch this lesson in dramatic terms, using the ubiquitous image of the hellmouth to show the salvific effect of Christ passing triumphantly through His consumers' mouths.

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Harrowing of Hell: Fresco by Fra Angelico, c. 1430