As late as the fifteenth century a prominent theme in medieval English prose and poetry was the one usually called the “harrowing of hell”. ¹ The antecedents of it in Insular, as well as in Continental, literature are too numerous and familiar to cite at length. The motif is derived, mediately or immediately, from an apocryphal work known as the Gospel of Nicodemus or the Acts of Pilate. The latter part of the ancient document is an account of the descent of Christ into Hades, a narrative apparently older than the rest of the tale; actually of unknown date, it may have originated in the third or even second century. ² The central idea, the rescue of the pre-Christian faithful believers from the hold of Hades, is still older and probably Scriptural (I Pet. 3:19; 4:6). But there is a detail in many versions of the descensus that cannot be traced in any writing earlier than the Gospel of Nicodemus: when the Lord dies on the cross and goes to the place of departed spirits, He challenges the entrance to the nether region with the words


² M. R. James, The Apocryphal New Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), pp. 94 f., 117—146; J. A. MacCulloch, The Harrowing of Hell (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), passim, but especially pp. 152—173. Since MacCulloch’s excellent treatise is extensively documented, I believe that no end will be served by burdening my brief paper with numerous bibliographical references. Furthermore, dogmatic considerations are not my purpose in this essay. My concern is to present a twofold hypothesis: first, to account for the liturgical association of Psalm 24 with the descensus-doctrine; and, second, to interpret Pliny’s letter tentatively as literary evidence of that association.
(numerous variations) of Psalm 24, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in!" (The remaining verses are also usually incorporated into the story.)

The question may arise, How did this particular Psalm become associated with the "harrowing of hell"? Its appropriateness has been recognized not only in the literary sphere but also in liturgical and musical circles. It was appointed in the Divine Office, almost from the beginning, as a Proper Psalm for Holy Saturday Matins; and George Frederick Handel's immortal music has wedded it irrevocably to the interval between the tenor recitative of Good Friday, "He was cut off from the land of the living", and the bass air of Easter, "Thou art gone up on high". It is not impossible to reconstruct the process by which its propriety was noted.

In a remarkably short time after the days of Christ, his followers came to look upon His death not as defeat, but as a victory. Indeed, according to tradition, Saint Peter, in a public statement about seven weeks after the crucifixion, applied to the Lord a passage from the sixteenth Psalm to the effect that Christ had conquered the fell grip of death (Acts 2:25–28). A similar sentiment was later attributed to Saint Paul (Acts 13:35–37). Soon, moreover, the church developed the corollary belief that Christ's death was not His victory only, but also the victory of all believers, the Lord being simply "the firstborn from the dead" or "the firstfruits of them that slept". Once more they confirmed their conviction with suitable texts from the Old Testament, such as, "0 death, I will be thy plagues", and, "Death is swallowed up for ever".

At this point, however, some early disciple asked a sobering but filial question, "What happens to our fathers who died before Christ and the institution of His sacraments?" Such a query seems to lie behind the Pauline reference to baptism for the dead (I Cor. 15:29). For a brief moment the infant church hesitated. But only for a moment, for among the accounts afloat about the dreadful day of crucifixion was one relating how the Lord had assured the penitent thief (Dymsas) a place that very day with Him in the

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3 Col. 1:18; I Cor. 15:20.