

# The Nature and Structure of Limbo in the Works of Albertus Magnus

Christopher Beiting

---

Albert the Great (ca.1200–1280) is one of the key figures in the development of limbo, and, indeed, in medieval theological thought. In an age of prodigious writers, his work stands out for its quantity and variety. H.M. Féret went as far as to claim that “among the great doctors of the Middle Ages, Albertus Magnus is, without doubt, the one who wrote the most, and on the most varied subjects”,<sup>1</sup> and Féret has not remained alone in that opinion.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the surviving corpus of this amazing output doubtless excludes at least several more works now lost.<sup>3</sup> In succeeding generations Albertus’ own prominence was eclipsed by that of his disciple, Thomas Aquinas, who has stood the test of time much better. Nevertheless, Albertus was an innovator in many fields, and for the purposes of this article is important for the scientific precision which he brought to a single subject, namely limbo, that realm of the afterlife into which scholastic theologians consigned unbaptized infants and the Fathers of the Old Testament before the advent of Christ. Albertus continues the disciplined format of exposition within a *Sentence* commentary and *Summa* which were increasingly popular in his day, but to this disciplined form of exposition, Albertus adds a rigorous investigation and distinction that were unique. He provides a detailed geographical description of the position of limbo and its internal divisions, as well as a careful examination of its nature and qualities in both philosophical and theological senses. Indeed, he is responsible for the formulation of the realm as a bipartite one, with a *limbus patrum* for the Fathers and a *limbus puerorum* for unbaptized infants. For all of these reasons, the work of Albertus Magnus is extremely important.

<sup>1</sup> H. Féret, “Albert le Grand”, *Catholicisme*, vol. 1, (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1948): 266.

<sup>2</sup> Cf, for instance, P. Mandonnet, “Albert le Grand”, *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. 1, (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1930): 668.

<sup>3</sup> H. Wilms, *Albert the Great: Saint and Doctor of the Church* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1933): 157.

## Albertus' Works- Source and Editions

In studying the actual works of Albertus, we are somewhat limited in terms of what is available. Albertus' works were collected and printed under the title *Opera omnia* by the Dominican Pierre Jammy in 1651, comprising 21 folio volumes (Lyon, 1651). This work was later reissued in 38 octavo volumes by August Borgnet (Paris, 1890–99),<sup>4</sup> and was for the longest time the standard edition. A new critical edition that will comprise 40 volumes was begun in Cologne in 1951 by B. Geyer, president of the Albertus Magnus Institute, but is at present incomplete.<sup>5</sup> None of these series includes the complete works of Albertus, many of which seem to have been omitted, and the Borgnet edition in particular includes several works attributed to Albertus that are actually by other authors such as Hugh Ripelin. Albertus' studies of limbo occur in his earlier works.<sup>6</sup> The first of these is his tract *De Resurrectione* which is actually an independent work, although it has been added to the other works *De Sacramentis*, *De Incarnatione*, [*De Resurrectione*], *De IV Coaequavis*, *De Homine*, and *De Bono*. Together, these works form the larger *Summa Parisiensis*,<sup>7</sup> which was comprised of Albertus' public disputations while he was a master at the University of Paris; the tracts *De IV coaequavis* and *De Homine* circulated for centuries as the *Summa de creaturis*. The other work which concerns us also dates from Albertus' early days in Paris – his commentary on the *Sentences*, upon which he was working contemporaneously with the *Summa Parisiensis*. This work as printed in the Borgnet edition is an *ordinatio*, that is, an edited version prepared for the stationers, the fourth book of which was definitely completed after March, 1249.<sup>8</sup> This commentary is not perfect in form: H. Wilms finds in it a sort of unresolved Aristotelianism, in that Albertus simply draws up a series of arguments for and against, presenting a solution that is lacking in clarity and precision.<sup>9</sup> Albertus' commentary also closely followed the order of the original *Sentences*, even to the point of repeating material in various spots – it is evident that such an inefficient style displeased

<sup>4</sup> *B. Alberti opera omnia*, ed. A Borgnet (Paris: L. Vives, 1890–1899), 38 vols., hereafter abbreviated Borgnet.

<sup>5</sup> *S. Alberti Magni operum omnium* (Cologne/Münster: Monasterium Westfolorum, 1951- ), hereafter abbreviated Cologne.

<sup>6</sup> For the chronology of these, see O. Lottin, "Commentaire des Sentences et Somme théologique d'Albert le Grand", *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 8 (1936): 117–153, 137.

<sup>7</sup> P. Glorieux, *Répertoire des Maîtres en Théologie de Paris au 13e siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1933–1934): 63.

<sup>8</sup> J. Weisheipl, *Albertus Magnus and the Sciences* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1980): 22.

<sup>9</sup> H. Wilms, *op.cit.*, 115.

him, since he tried to change it by the time of his later *Summa theologiae*.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the ideas he expresses about limbo in both of these works are at the same time in tune with early Christian thought, and also strikingly original.

### Christ During the *Triduum*, and Qualities of the Places in the Afterlife

Let us follow Albertus' treatment of limbo thematically rather than chronologically, and begin with the relevant portion of his commentary on the third book of the *Sentences*. Albert's study of limbo begins theoretically with the question of the location of Christ during the *triduum*, and in posing this question in Article III of the 22<sup>nd</sup> distinction, he follows closely in Peter Lombard's footsteps. His treatment of the question is standard, as is his solution – he accepts the Lombard's distinction between *totus* and *totum*, and notes that “the whole (*totus*) [Christ] is everywhere, but not wholly (*totum*).”<sup>11</sup> “Christ” is philosophically divided into three substances and two natures, which made it possible for him to be in the tomb, in hell, and everywhere during the *triduum*, since “he did not have personality from his human nature, or from man because he was man, but rather he had it from the eternal.”<sup>12</sup> This conclusion establishes the philosophical possibility of a descent into hell, which is what Albert considers in his fourth article, “Whether Christ Descended into Hell.” He begins with the overall objection that it seems incongruous that Christ should go to so ignoble a place as hell, but concludes with the authority of Scripture (Phil. 2:10, Ps. 23:7–9, Acts 2:24, etc.) and the Creed implying the descent of Christ to hell. Interestingly enough, among these responses Albert sees fit to include a response from the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, in the form of the claim by the imprisoned David to have prophesied the coming of the now-present Christ.<sup>13</sup> This tells us a great deal about how highly Albertus regarded the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, since he quotes it as an authority alongside Scripture and the Creed.

From this point Albertus makes a further set of distinctions, employing a vocabulary developed from the early Christian picture of the afterlife: did Christ descend to the *lower* hell? He concludes with a very elaborate explanation involving qualities, which as we shall see is a characteristic style that he uses frequently in these discussions. Hell, he states, can be realized in two ways. The first way

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>11</sup> Albertus Magnus, *In III Sent.* d.22, c, art.3, “totus est ubique, non autem totum”, (ed. Borgnet, vol. 28, 391).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., “non enim habet personalitatem a natura humana, vel ab homine secundum quod homo, sed potius habuit eam ab eterno”.

<sup>13</sup> Albertus Magnus, *In III Sent.* d.22, c, art.4 (ed. Borgnet, vol. 28, 392).

is interior, and Albertus notes that demons carry an interior hell with them at all times, even when they are outside the confines of hell proper. The second way is exterior, and Albertus again differentiates by qualities, this time of light and darkness. A place can be dark and inflicting punishment, and such a place is hell proper. If on the other hand the place is dark but does not inflict punishment, it is the limbo of children, (*limbus puerorum*, Albertus' term). However, such a darkness is not complete if there is some light coming from the people within. Thus, there can be a place in this scheme for a place which is dark but whose inhabitants have some light because they are being purged, and this is (presumably) purgatory. Finally, Albertus reasons that there can be a place which is "dark . . . having something of light because of the great faith of the inhabitants there",<sup>14</sup> which is the limbo of the holy Fathers (*limbus sanctorum patrum*). By this careful distinction Albert means us to understand that the only hell to which Christ descended was the *limbus patrum*, since it was the only place from which people were freed. Christ did this because he was made on behalf of man, not himself, so it was for our sake that he took this action.

Albertus then deals with the problematic image of the bosom of Abraham and punishment by noting that it is not applied to the "inhabitants of limbo [who were] in sure hope",<sup>15</sup> but rather is applied to those in hell proper who have not hope, and he personifies their lack of hope into the great chasm between them and the blessed. Interestingly, here he does not see this metaphor as the geography of hell and the *limbus patrum* as so many other writers did. He goes on to clarify the idea of the "deepest hell". This place is for demons alone; Albertus prefers to regard the place to which Job and the Fathers descended as "deepest limbo" (*profundissimus limbus*), and draws a distinction between Christ's descent considered *simpliciter* and *quodammodo*, Christ having descended to the deepest hell *quodammodo*. Furthermore, Albertus' treatment of the condition of Dives (the poor beggar from Lk. 16: 19–31) in hell gives us a little better view of the nature of the *limbus patrum*. Was Dives, who sought release from punishment, in hell or the *limbus patrum*? Divine mercy would not work to effect a reduction of punishment (of sense and damnation) in the *limbus patrum*, for there was none there, although it was capable of gaining "relaxation". So Dives was in hell, a different place from the *limbus patrum*. Albertus goes on to examine the psychology of Dives, concluding that what Dives was really seeking from Abraham was ultimately not salvation but the chance to return to life. He presumed that if someone were to be

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., "locus tenebrosus aliquid de luce habens propter magnam fidem et spem habitantium ibi".

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., "hoc non dictum est de habitantibus in limbo certa spe", (ed. Borgnet, vol. 28, 393).

resurrected on behalf of Dives' kin, it would not be Lazarus, since Abraham would not return Lazarus to his former wretched life, thus Dives would be able to return instead. Albertus thus concludes that "he was not at that time in limbo, but went there through Christ",<sup>16</sup> and only when his entreaty was refused did he seek the state which Lazarus enjoyed with Abraham, which Albertus characterizes as, "a slight relaxation from punishment which had not been given to him, but had been given to the inhabitants in limbo because of their merits."<sup>17</sup> Of course, in the end he was granted neither.

### The Nature of the Limbo of the Fathers

Now that Albertus has drawn a careful distinction between the non-heavenly realms of the afterlife, he goes on to consider the nature of the *limbus patrum* in greater detail in Article 5, "Whether Christ Illuminated Those who were held in Limbo?" It is interesting that he chooses to use the word "limbo" in this question, when the body of Western Christian thought phrased the question as "illuminated those who were in hell". The entire tone of this question changes when the distinction between realms is made, and Albertus simply denies any objections by a repetition of the ideas mentioned in the preceding article, as he notes that Christ did indeed "show his divinity" to the saints in hell:

and for them he turned the place of a horrible prison into a paradise to this extent that they saw his divinity face to face, having paid the price of redemption.<sup>18</sup>

The price was paid, no doubt, through faith. He goes on to clarify his solution by explaining that even though the word "hell" is used throughout his quotes and exposition, what is meant in any discussion of these matters is the concept "limbo", where the Fathers were. Furthermore, even if they had been in hell proper, they could still have been illuminated by Christ while the damned around them would not have been, since such an illumination could only have been perceived by eyes which were purified by grace and glory, which the saints would have had but the damned would have lacked. And since the Fathers were actually in limbo rather than hell, there would have been the possibility of illumination, since as Albertus defined it, limbo was, "not the commendation to perpetual darkness, but rather temporary darkness up until the redemption which was made

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., "et ille non erat tunc in limbo, sed per Christum advenit".

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., "petivit relaxantem aliquantulum de poena quae non dabatur ei, sed dabatur habitantibus in limbo propter meritum eorum".

<sup>18</sup> Albertus Magnus, *In III Sent.*, d.22, c, art.5, "et eis locum horrendi carceris in paradysum convertit, quoad hoc quod facie ad faciem deitatem ejus videbant, soluto pretio redemptionis". (ed. Borgnet, vol. 28, 394).

through Christ.”<sup>19</sup> It was possible for Christ to make the promise he did to Dismas about being with him in paradise that day if one understands paradise as Albertus does, which is according to a series of distinctions of interior and exterior. Paradise understood interiorly is the “open vision of the divinity”,<sup>20</sup> which Dismas enjoyed while in the presence of Christ, whereas paradise understood exteriorly for the body is Eden and exteriorly for the soul is heaven. Closely related to these questions are those raised in the last Article, 6, “How Long was Christ in Hell”? which is raised particularly with reference to the promise given to Dismas by Christ on the cross. Was it instantly, or at the moment of Christ’s resurrection? In view of the above interpretation of Christ’s promise to Dismas, it is clear that Albertus means for this passage not to be taken literally. Christ did not lead the Fathers out of hell until the third day, since he had to complete his tasks of defeating death and illuminating the underworld.

### *The Nature of the Limbo of Children*

Now we have seen that Albertus identifies five places in the after-life, and definitely distinguishes the differences between the *limbus puerorum* and the *limbus patrum*, separating the established notion of “limbo” into two places with distinct names. Furthermore, he examines each place in depth, in questions found in the treatise *De Resurrectione*. He begins with the *limbus puerorum*, in Question 7 of the third tract. The first article asks why children go to limbo, and as such are intimately connected with reasons of original sin. Why should unbaptized children have to go limbo? If the reason is because of original sin, then their punishment is unjust, since original sin is not their fault. Furthermore, what happens to those souls during the Final Resurrection? Since they are not counted among the blessed, it does not seem that they will receive a glorified body, yet neither should they suffer the torments of the damned, since they have no personal sin.

Albertus’ ideas follow the formulations of Anselm of Canterbury very closely.<sup>21</sup> The punishment of unbaptized children is due to original sin, which in Albertus’ estimation had tainted all of human nature that was in Adam at the time when he committed his sin. Adam would certainly have been rewarded with virtues had he obeyed God’s commands, but he did not, and thus we justly inherit original sin, since we draw our nature from Adam’s. Albertus does not spell out the reason explicitly, but it is clear that the means by

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., “limbus non erat damnatus perpetuis tenebris, sed potius temporalibus usque ad redemptionem quae facta est per Christum”.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., “visio aperta deitatis”.

<sup>21</sup> See Anselm, *De Conceptu virginali*, esp. i–iii (ed. F. Schmitt, *S. Anselmi opera omnia* [Rome/Edinburgh: T. Nelson, 1938–1968], 6 vols, vol. 2, 140ff).

which the sin is spread is through the concupiscence involved in the generative act, desire being punished in desire – he notes of man that “it was just that he should derive harm from that from which he would have gained advantage.”<sup>22</sup> Albertus concludes, as Anselm did, that original sin was of nature, rather than of person, and was passed on to each man as part of his nature. More interesting is Albertus’ subsequent statement about the post-resurrection status of unbaptized infants. He concludes that these infants will be resurrected “in a state which is appropriate for an age of thirty years”.<sup>23</sup> This presumably will not be a glorified body like that of the saints, since Albertus insists that it would be a physical body like Adam’s, although without the need for food and sleep. Logically, we can thus conclude that it would be more perfect than a mortal body like the one we possess currently, although Albertus admits that it would still carry the stain of *fomes*, which would at that time not be punitive in nature, but rather would exist only to impede the further glorification of these resurrected infants.

But all these events are in the future; what of the nature of the *limbus puerorum* now? The second Article of the Question asks where it is, and in so doing provides us with some further insights into Albertus’ views of geography in the afterlife. His objections begin with the etymology of the word “limbo”; he notes that the word comes from “fringe”, and wonders where this put the *limbus puerorum* – on hell’s fringe? Albertus preserves the etymological meaning of limbo by insisting that it is indeed next to hell, although distinct from it, which means that there can be fire in hell but not in the *limbus puerorum*. Albertus is also quite definite in allowing that the *limbus puerorum* is closer to hell than purgatory is – despite the fact that there are punitive fires in purgatory and not in the *limbus puerorum*, this does not make purgatory more like hell. Rather, the spatial distinction is one which is based on spiritual qualities rather than superficial likenesses. Souls in purgatory are undergoing a process of purgation which will bring them closer to God, whereas unbaptized infants are forever confirmed in their state. In Albertus’ own words: “Children in limbo are separated more from God than are the holy souls who are in purgatory.”<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Albertus asks about the punishment which children in limbo undergo. What of the worm of conscience, and the nature of the deprivation of the beatific vision? Are children not in a twofold darkness? Not necessarily. Albertus takes great care to clarify what

<sup>22</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Tract III de resurrectione ex parte malorum tantum*, q.7, art.1, “Unde a quo reportasset lucrum, iustum fuit, ut reportaret nocumentum”. (ed. Cologne, vol. 26, p. 318).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, “quod resurgent in statura, quae competit aetati triginta annorum”.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, art.2, “quod pueri in limbo magis elongati sunt a deo quam sanctae animae, quae sunt in purgatorio”.

the worm of conscience means. The worm of conscience is “from irredeemable sin voluntarily done from one’s own fault”,<sup>25</sup> and this does not apply to children, since their situation is predicated by the sins of another. They suffer no pain, either internally or externally.

Albertus thus follows the idea established by Abelard, that such infants merely suffer “the lack of the vision of God; which is the punishment of damnation and not the punishment of sense.”<sup>26</sup> With regard to the questions of the darkness that unbaptized infants suffer, Albertus conceded that they are indeed in an interior darkness, but notes that it is one thing to be *in* such a darkness and another thing to *suffer* from it. Unbaptized infants do indeed lack an internal light, but this is not their fault, but rather that of someone else. Albertus expands upon these ideas:

Nevertheless [unbaptized infants] have a natural knowledge of God and all creatures, not grace nor that which is in the word, because no one is deprived of natural thought after death, neither the damned nor the Devil.<sup>27</sup>

This idea borders on the conclusion that such infants are capable of philosophy, although Albertus says nothing about them being capable of intellectual progress, or lacking material distractions, and so forth. Furthermore, with regard to exterior darkness, Albertus speaks a little about the future state of unbaptized infants after the Resurrection. He has explained a little about their bodies; here he speaks more about their state. They will remain in the *limbus puerorum*, and it will be a dark place (for whatever reason, possibly because Albertus means us to believe that it remains inside the earth; he is not too clear on this point). However, although the place will be dark, and the infants in their thirty-year old bodies will have physical means of perception, they will nevertheless not suffer from that darkness, since Albertus believes that: “the vision and the actions of bodily senses after the resurrection will not be informed from the outside, but from inside.”<sup>28</sup>

### *The Fate of Aborted Fetuses*

Albertus does not limit his quests in these matters merely to unbaptized infants. He possessed a lively interest in all matters scientific,

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., art.3, “quia vermis est de peccato irremissibili voluntarie perpetrato propria culpa”, (ed. Cologne, vol. 27, 319).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., “carentia visionis dei, quae est poena damni et non poena sensus”.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., “Habent tamen dei et omnium creaturarum cognitionem naturalem, non gratuitam nec eam quae est in verbo, qui naturali cognitione nullus privatur post mortem, nec damnatus nec diabolus”.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., “quod visio et actus sensuum corporalium post resurrectionem non informabuntur ab exteriori, sed ab interiori”.



and among them was the study of embryology.<sup>29</sup> This interest was more than a merely passing one – Albertus devoted approximately 31% of his works on biology to the question of human generation.<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly, his views on this subject are largely Aristotelian – he saw the embryo as developing a series of souls: vegetative, sentient, and rational, and believed that the embryo did not become human until its rational soul had been infused, which happened when the embryo had a recognizable human shape. This process occurred at animation, which Albertus estimated at two months, and coincidentally identified as the point at which abortion should be considered murder.<sup>31</sup> Many of the ideas on embryology that Albertus held are neither new nor unusual for the medieval period. However, what is novel for us is the fact that Albertus was aware enough of the fate of aborted embryos to ask what befell them, which he does in Article 44 of his commentary on Book IV of the *Sentences*. Here he asks what will happen to aborted fetuses and freaks (*monstra* is the term used, implying deformed humans such as Siamese twins) on the Resurrection. Presumably he means fetuses aborted after animation, since he followed Augustine in not considering them to have a rational soul before animation.<sup>32</sup> The question is not a frivolous one, and deals with the absolute beginnings of the human person.

Albertus begins his examination with an objection: how can aborted fetuses enjoy the rebirth of resurrection if they have not previously had the first birth into life? This was a common scholastic question, usually asked to assert the inefficacy of prenatal baptism. Albertus' response is a formulation that is worth quoting in full:

It should be said that birth is twofold, namely in the uterus and from the uterus. In the uterus there is animation, which is here called the formation of the fetus. However, they do not have birth outside the uterus. But resurrection follows the first birth, and not merely the second.<sup>33</sup>

Thus it is clear that Albertus is interested in the fate of even the humblest souls, and we can say that for him they are functionally no different than other unbaptized infants. After the Resurrection they do not inherit the gifts of the blessed, but they will participate

<sup>29</sup> For more details of his embryological studies, see A. Delrome, "La morphogenèse d'Albert dans l'embryologie scolastique", *Revue Théologique* 36 (1931): 352–360 and L. Demaitre and A. Travill, "Human Embryology and Development in the Works of Albertus Magnus", in J. Weisheipl, *Albertus Magnus and the Sciences*, 404–440.

<sup>30</sup> L. Demaitre and A. Travill, *op.cit.*, 410.

<sup>31</sup> Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.*, d.31, art.18 (ed. Borgnet, vol. 30, 250–251).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.* d.44, l, art. 44, "Dicendum, quod duplex est nativitas, scilicet in utero, et ex utero. In utero est animatio, quae dicitur hic *formatio perpuerii*. Et ex utero autem nativitatem non habent. Sed resurrectio sequitur primam nativitatem, et non secundam tantum". (ed. Borgnet, vol. 30, 602).

in the Resurrection itself, and be given bodies of mature adults of thirty years. They will also have a sort of impassability, not like that of the saints, but rather like that Adam would have had, had he not sinned. Albertus does not specify where these fetuses would spend eternity, but since their reward is identical to that of unbaptized infants, presumably they, too, would be in the *limbus puerorum*.

### *The Status of the Fathers in the Limbus Patrum*

Albertus also examines the other limbo, the *limbus patrum*, in some detail in Question 8 of *De Resurrectione*. This investigation follows the same format as his previous one into the nature of the *limbus puerorum*. He begins with a question of the justice of the situation of the Fathers: why did they need to descend to limbo? Were not their laws prefigurations of the sacraments of the Christian era, and did they not lead lives of great rectitude? Albertus' ideas are influenced by Anselm of Canterbury; yes, the Fathers were able to do all that a human *could* do to make up for original sin, but more was needed to be done than a human could do, and this required the actions of Christ. This reply touches on the mystery of the Incarnation, which Albertus examines in detail elsewhere,<sup>34</sup> and which need not concern us. Original sin thus remained in the Fathers, and Albertus uses a kind of natural science metaphor to note that a certain weight (*pondus*) remained in them which dragged them down to the underworld (at this point he uses the word *inferos* rather than *infernus*).

Having established a quasi-geographic/spatial image for the *limbus patrum*, Albertus goes on to consider its location. Since the Fathers were there, it must have been a place of some excellence; would it not be at some distance from hell? However, there is the evidence of the descent into hell from the Creed and other authorities. Albertus' response is to detail the lower regions of the afterlife in a way which again merits quotation in full:

We say that the *limbus patrum* is next to hell, just as the Creed says, and it joins the rim of hell to the *limbus puerorum*. But that distance which is spoken about in the Gospel is understood as far as concerns the distance of merit and consolation, and also it is a higher place than hell as far as hell is the place of the damned.<sup>35</sup>

Again, the distinctions here are based primarily on qualities, the more excellent realm being more highly placed than the less excellent

<sup>34</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Tract I de incarnatione* (ed. Cologne, vol. 26, 171).

<sup>35</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Tract III de resurrectione ex parte malorum tantum* q.8 art.2, "Dicimus, quod limbus patrum est iuxta infernum, sicut dicit Symbolum, et est ora inferni coniuncta limbo puerorum. Distantia autem, de qua dicitur in Evangelio, intelligitur quantum ad distantiam meriti et consolationis, et etiam locus altior est quam infernus quoad locum damnatorum". (ed. Cologne, vol. 26, 320).

one. Thus the limbos and hell are placed in descending order of excellence in this fashion:

*Limbus puerorum*  
*Limbus patrum*  
 Hell

Albertus also asks whether the *limbus patrum* continues to exist, since the Fathers are now, of course, in heaven. He concludes that there is no more reason for it to be there, and yet it still exists “Wherefore it remained so far as substance is concerned, but not so far as reason”,<sup>36</sup> which presumably means that the realm is still there, though physically unoccupied. Possibly it serves as an extra buffer zone between hell and the *limbus puerorum*. Finally, as he did for the *limbus puerorum*, Albertus considers the punishment meted out by the *limbus patrum*. Even before the objections, he begins his examination of them, unusually, with the bold statement that “there was there neither worm nor fire.”<sup>37</sup> However, he has established that the limbos and hell are dark realms – possibly inside the earth – and goes on to query whether the Fathers had to suffer from any form of darkness. Since in Lk. 1:79 Zachary had said that Christ came to illuminate those “who sit in darkness and in the shadows of death”, it seems that the Fathers endured some form of external darkness (Albertus notes here that the shadow of death is meant to connote external rather than internal darkness). Furthermore, it is asked whether this darkness was a punishment. Albertus concludes that the Fathers suffered no positive punishments. There was no punishment of sense in the *limbus patrum*, nor was there any sort of internal darkness, since the Fathers were illuminated interiorly by the “light of faith.”<sup>38</sup> He interprets “shadow of death” to mean the postponement of the beatific vision which the Fathers had to undergo because of the presence of their original sin. The illumination of faith thus obviates the punishment of the exterior darkness which exists in limbo. Merely physical darkness is not really a punishment to “a soul having exited from the body.”<sup>39</sup> If the Fathers endured any discomfort at all, it was not from the punitive effects of external darkness; rather, it was from the fact that they were forced to endure a long wait in a state of such “meanness” (*ignobilitatem*).

### *The Number of Places in the Afterlife*

After having considered the two limbos separately, Albertus also goes on to examine them in conjunction with other areas of the afterlife, both in

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, “Unde remansit quantum ad substantiam, sed non quantum ad rationem, ut possit dici limbus patrum”.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, art.3, “Et constat per praedicta, quod non fuit ibi vermis nec ignis”.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, “lumen fidei”.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, “non sunt poena animae exutae a corpore”.

Question 5 of the tract *De Resurrectione* and in Book IV, art. 45 of his commentary on the *Sentences*. Let us begin with Article 45, which contains in embryo some ideas which are developed more completely in Question 5. Article 45 deals with the question of receptacles in the afterlife, following on an earlier question of whether all souls are held together in receptacles to await the Final Judgment and reward, which was an idea popular with some Greek theologians, and one which Albertus decisively rejects.<sup>40</sup> It asks whether there are five receptacles: heaven, hell, purgatory, and the limbos, adding the idea of limbo to the more established locations of heaven, hell, and by then purgatory, and considers the possible existence of a widely varying number of receptacles.

Albertus' answer is to view things in terms of categories. Places in the afterlife can be described in his estimation according to the categories of ends and the categories of merits, and how these groups fit together in various combinations. The realms of the afterlife are divided according to ends and ways, that is, those places which are eternal and those which lead eventually to one of the eternal places. Personal merit helps to determine where one goes. The permanent place for those of good merit is heaven, while the permanent place for those of evil merit is hell. However, hell is seen in two ways. If the evil merit which leads to hell is personal, it results in "the lower hell of the damned" (*inferior infernus damnatorum*). If, however, it is inherited merit – from original sin (Albertus calls it "alien merit contracted from nature"), the result is the *limbus puerorum*, "which is a higher hell."<sup>41</sup> The "ways", or temporary realms, are fixed on a defect of merit, since they do not send one anywhere permanently. If there is a defect of personal merit, the result is purgatory; if it is a defect of atonement, it is the *limbus patrum* before the advent of Christ. The following diagrams should make these ideas clearer:

---

REALMS OF THE AFTERLIFE ACCORDING TO END AND MERIT IN  
ALBERTUS MAGNUS

---

I.	End ( <i>terminus</i> ) – permanent realms	
	good merit	heaven
	evil merit	hell ( <i>infernus</i> ), i.e.
	personal evil merit	lower hell
		( <i>inferior infernus damnatorum</i> )
	contracted evil merit	limbo of children
		( <i>limbus puerorum</i> )
II.	Way ( <i>via</i> )–temporary realms	
	defect of personal merit	purgatory ( <i>purgatorium</i> )
	defect of personal atonement	limbo of the fathers
		( <i>limbus sanctorum patrum</i> )

---

<sup>40</sup> Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.*, d.21, d, art.10, (ed Borgnet, vol. 29, 875).

<sup>41</sup> Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.* d.45, i, art. 45, "qui est infernus superior" (ed. Borgnet, vol. 30, 603).

This explanation is involved, and yet orderly, and results not in three, six, or an infinite number of realms of the afterlife, but just five. Notice in the diagram that Albertus ranks the realms of the afterlife according to merit, rather than type of sin. This is because he tends to link venial and mortal sins, since venial sins tend to lead to mortal ones, even if only by omission. Darkness is not used in this schema, either (but see below), since he remarks:

the punishment of sense cannot be without darkness: because darkness leads to aversion, and the punishment of sense to conversion: and for that reason no place is only of sensible punishment, just as no sin is mortal having only conversion.<sup>42</sup>

Purgatory thus becomes a special case; since the people in it are illuminated by grace, and are being punished sensibly, there is no such thing as a “purging darkness”. Albertus admits that demons and the Devil are punished in the “shadowy air”, but does not consider it a realm. Of chief importance, then, is the fact that here Albertus establishes the quinpartite structure of the afterlife, with regard to the quality of merit.

### *Qualities of the Receptacles*

Having established that there are, indeed, five realms to the afterlife, Albertus elsewhere deals with the question of what those places are like. Some of his formulations in Question 9 of *De Resurrectione* are the same as those in the commentary on the *Sentences*. He begins his examination of the receptacles of souls with an examination of their ends, in much the same way as he did earlier. A receptacle of souls is either the “end of a way or it is a way.”<sup>43</sup> An end that has joy is heaven. The opposite of joy is punishment, which is either that of damnation or damnation and sense. Here Albertus presumes that the punishment of sense implies a prior punishment of damnation, because there is no punishment of sense alone. The punishment of damnation alone, here as elsewhere, he identifies as the lack of the vision of God. An end that has the punishment of damnation alone is the *limbus puerorum*, and one with the punishment of damnation plus sense is gehenna. A fate which is a way to an end also comes with a punishment, either damnation alone, that is, the *limbus patrum*, or

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, “dicendum, quod poena sensibilis non potest esse sine tenebris: quia tenebrae sequuntur ad aversionem, et sensibilis poena ad conversionem: et ideo nullus est locus sensibilis poenae tantum, sicut nullum est peccatum mortale habens conversionem tantum”. (ed. Borgnet, vol. 30, 604).

<sup>43</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Tract III de resurrectione ex parte malorum tantum* q.9, “vel est terminus viae vel est via”. (ed. Cologne, vol. 26, 320).

damnation plus sense, alias purgatory. Again, a diagram may help to clarify these distinctions:

---

REALMS OF THE AFTERLIFE ACCORDING TO END AND PUNISHMENT  
IN ALBERTUS MAGNUS

---

I.	End ( <i>terminus viae</i> )	
	joy ( <i>gaudio</i> )	heaven ( <i>regnum caelorum</i> )
	punishment	
	damnation only	limbo of children ( <i>limbus puerorum</i> )
	sense and damnation	hell ( <i>gehenna</i> )
II.	Way ( <i>via</i> )	
	punishment of damnation only	limbo of the fathers ( <i>limbus patrum</i> )
	punishment of damnation plus sense	purgatory ( <i>purgatorius</i> )

---

From this point, Albertus proceeds to consider the receptacles of the afterlife with regard to the categories of merit. This produces an argument which is very similar in nature to that in his commentary on the *Sentences*: good personal merit results in heaven, bad in hell, while bad inherited merit results in the *limbus puerorum*. However, here in *De Resurrectione*, he chooses to mix the categories of merit rather than consider deficiencies of merit, so his final category is of good joined to evil. In this construction, the admixture results in venial sin, and as such is considered a form of evil merit, “because the good of grace is not joined to it.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, if the admixture is joined to actual sin which is one’s own fault, it will result in purgatory; if it is joined to another’s fault, it will result in the *limbus patrum*. No mention of the impermanence of the latter two realms is made; possibly Albertus meant it to have been firmly established in the previous paragraph. In a diagram, the whole looks like this:

---

REALMS OF THE AFTERLIFE ACCORDING TO PERSONAL MERIT IN  
ALBERTUS MAGNUS

---

Merit		
	Good alone	Heaven
	Bad alone	
	Own fault	Hell
	Another’s fault	Limbo of children
	Good and bad mixed	
	Venial sin, own fault	Purgatory
	Venial sin, another’s fault	Limbo of the Fathers

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., “quia illi non coniungitur bonum gratiae”.

After having established this, Albertus then goes on to consider these realms with regard to punishment. In this scheme they are described not in terms of ends or merits, but rather in terms of qualities of the punishments. He distinguishes four qualities: injurious, dark, luminous, and delightful (*afflictivum, tenebrosum, luminosum, and laetificativum*). He then describes the realms in terms of the way he pairs these punishments together. Oddly enough, he tends not to regard these qualities as absolutes, and so in some matchings qualifies them. When paired, the realms look like this:

---

REALMS OF THE AFTERLIFE ACCORDING TO QUALITY IN ALBERTUS  
MAGNUS

---

Luminous + Delightful	Heaven
(Injurious) + Dark	Gehenna
Primarily Injurious + (A Little) Dark	Purgatory
Not Injurious + Primarily Dark	Limbo of children
Not Injurious + (A Little) Dark	Limbo of the Fathers

---

Albertus here qualifies the notion of a “little dark” as meaning “that it puts off the vision of God”,<sup>45</sup> a mitigation of the absolute *carentia visionis dei* that is the punishment for original sin. Actually, there is some confusion here, as Albertus’ schema is meant to call hell entirely dark: that it is injurious is a secondary matter, so it is proper to call it entirely dark as well. The rest of the categories are not meant to be taken as absolutes, though no one realm is entirely luminous, or entirely injurious, etc. Luminosity, in itself a primary category, is the cause of happiness, so any place which is luminous will also be delightful. Furthermore, injuriousness is another primary category, which can exist *simpliciter* (it involves fire as well, which makes it injurious), and since every injurious place harms, it also implies darkness. Darkness, however, can be of different kinds, as Albertus observes:

But darkness is of two causes, namely from the lack of the light of fully formed faith, and from the lack of the vision of God through sight. And for that reason something can be primarily dark that lacks both kinds of light, and something (can be) in some respects dark, namely because it has another light.<sup>46</sup>

Hence the different levels of darkness are used to describe every level of the afterlife which is not heaven. Heaven is luminous because it has a twofold light, since there one has the open vision of God

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, “scilicet quantum ad dilationem visionis.”

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, “Sed tenebrosum est a duplici causa, scilicet a carentia luminis fidei formatae et a carentia visionis dei per speciem. Et ideo potest aliquid esse simpliciter tenebrosum quod utroque lumine caret, et aliquid secundum quid tenebrosum, scilicet quod habet alterum lumen”. (ed. Cologne, vol. 26, 321).

exteriorly; this vision implies the possession of faith interiorly. The whole section ends with what might seem to the overstretched reader as a logical conclusion: since Albertus has so multiplied the realms of the afterlife, can one not continue to keep doing so? After all, the division of merit and sin is unequal for all, and if these are the deciding factors about where one ends up in the afterlife, should there not be an almost infinite number of places for each individual, with a unique load of merit and sin, to go to? Albertus must see some logic to this point, since he responds to it pithily:

it should be said, that the receptacles are accepted from general divisions of merit, for they [i.e., the inhabitants of the receptacles] will be distinguished according to special mansions in the receptacles.<sup>47</sup>

Thus the area of subdivisions might be large, but the actual number of receptacles remains five.

### *Suffrages and the Limbos*

We should not conclude this section without examining one more question about the limbos, and that is their permanence. Since the Fathers have been freed during Christ's descent during the *triduum*, it is generally concluded that the limbo of the Fathers is empty, whereas the limbo of children still exists and will continue to exist. But what about the individuals who are or were in each? Was (or is) it possible for the living to affect them? Specifically, were or are suffrages of any benefit for the Fathers and unbaptized infants in the limbos? Albertus considers this question for both limbos, beginning with the *limbus patrum*. Were suffrages of benefit to the Fathers? Generally, Albertus concludes they were not, since the Fathers lived worthy lives and thus had nothing to be purged. Or else perhaps suffrages were of no benefit to them, since they had attained "no punishment of judgment."<sup>48</sup> However, the main reason why is Anselmian: although the Fathers had "in all things which were able to be done by man . . . made satisfaction",<sup>49</sup> there was still need of a mediator of God and man to pay the price for Adam's debt. The Fathers were in a condition of "happy hope" awaiting that mediator. They fit into Augustine's *non valde mali* category,<sup>50</sup> but that was because they were *valde boni*, and as such had no need of suffrages. Quite the contrary: not only did they not need them, they were rather so excellent that "they were able to aid those others who were in purgatory more fully than they were able to be

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., "dicendum, quod receptacula accipiuntur a generalibus divisionibus meriti; secundum speciales enim distinguuntur mansiones in receptaculis".

<sup>48</sup> Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.*, d.45, A, art.5, "qui nullam propter se experitur poenam iudicis". (ed. Borgnet, vol. 30, 613).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., "quia in omnibus satisfecerunt, quae ab homine fieri poterant".

<sup>50</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, 110 (*P.L.* 40, 283).



aided by [suffrages].”<sup>51</sup> Some people die in a deficiency of merit and thus in need of suffrages; in Albertus’ view, the Fathers “entered the tomb rather in a state of abundance, and having been buried they slept in peace until the advent of Christ.”<sup>52</sup> The language here is more measured than the analytic logic we have seen earlier, and in so being succeeds in making the condition of the Fathers seem much more positive.

The position of unbaptized children is another matter. It might seem that suffrages should benefit them; since their sin is through another, it seems that the actions of another (particularly the Church!) should be of benefit to them. However, for Albertus the issue is not one of deserving, but rather of grace, as it had been for Augustine.<sup>53</sup> While sensible and merciful objections can be raised, the plain fact is that the only path to heaven is through grace. Unquestionably, infants died before receiving grace through the sacrament of grace, namely baptism, and Albertus maintains “someone dying without grace is not open to the reception of grace”,<sup>54</sup> again underlining the notion of the static character of the human soul after death. In Albertus’ own words, “they have been confirmed in another state, and on that account sin is made immovable, not from the magnitude of the sin, but from the state and the divine judgment.”<sup>55</sup> Thus grace provided by another can be of no use to someone who is frozen in a state without it. Furthermore, the question of venial sin does not enter into this formulation, since the position of unbaptized infants is due to divine judgment rather than their own sin. They have no personal sin, it is true: they are not *valde mali*, but neither are they *valde boni* or really anything at all. They have done no acts either of good or of evil, and do not benefit from suffrages. These do not aid them any more than they aided the Fathers, but unlike the Fathers, it is because their status in the afterlife is permanent.

### Conclusion

Albertus Magnus is one of the major figures in the development of the idea of limbo in the Middle Ages and in the increasing complexity of that era’s view of the afterlife. Much of what he wrote served to maintain continuity with the preceding body of thought. He preserves the *totus/totum* distinction of the natures of Christ, which

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., “unde potius alios qui erant in purgatorio juvare poterant, quam juvarentur ab ipsis”.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., “sed potius in abundantia ingressi sunt sepulcrum, et defossi securi dormierunt usque ad Christi adventum”.

<sup>53</sup> Augustine, *De Praedestinatione sanctorum*, 12..23, (P.L. 44, 978).

<sup>54</sup> Albertus Magnus, *In IV Sent.*, d.45, a, art.6, “sed decedens sine gratia, imperceptibilis est ad gratiae perceptionem”, (ed. Borgnet, vol. 30, 614).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., “et ideo peccatum efficitur immobile, non ex magnitudine peccati, sed ex statu et sententia divina”.

aided in the theoretical explications of the possibilities of Christ's descent to the dead, or, more properly, to limbo, as Albertus describes it. Furthermore, he maintains almost in their entirety the ideas of Anselm on the necessity of a God/man to make atonement for original sin, which is a crucial point in understanding the necessity of the limbos. Albertus is the first to bequeath to the West the practice of considering the limbos as two distinct places, both united and distinguished by a common name. After Albertus, the *limbus patrum* and the *limbus puerorum* would always be considered two separate places. Albertus also presents a number of very detailed and novel views on these limbos, which although they were not always adopted by later authors, nevertheless paved the way to the consideration of the limbos as specific places. While distinctions in these areas had been made in the past, Albertus is very important in that he helped to make them geographical by considering them with regard to space. He assigns a merciful fate to unbaptized children after the Resurrection – a thirty-year old body with a kind of Adamic impassability – but is novel both in considering the state of aborted fetuses, and in adding them to the category of unbaptized infants. Furthermore, he contributes to a continuing historical trend by considering the effects of suffrages on the Fathers and on unbaptized children. Despite their occasional complexity and strangeness, Albertus' distinctions about the nature of the receptacles of the afterlife result in some of the most detailed examinations about the theory behind the limbos that the Middle Ages produced. Albertus gives us five realms of the afterlife, three permanent and two temporary, in the following order:

Heaven  
 [Purgatory]  
*Limbus puerorum*  
 [*Limbus patrum*]  
 Hell

After him, most scholastics number the receptacles of the afterlife with these five; perhaps in different orders, true, but almost always these five.

*Dr Christopher Beiting*  
*Ave Maria College*  
*300 W. Forest Ave*  
*Ypsilanti*  
*Michigan 48197*  
*USA*