

# Commentary from "1 Peter"

## by I. Howard Marshall

**Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits (3:19-20)** We now come to the most tricky part of this section. Its central affirmation is that Christ went and preached to the spirits in prison, who are identified as those who disobeyed long ago in the days of Noah.

I will begin by stating the three main interpretations of the passage and then compare them in detail. Although the view designated as 1b appears to me the most probable, I recognize that any conclusion must be tentative.

1. Christ went to the place where disobedient supernatural powers are

**3:19** It may be helpful to indicate which recent commentators adopt the various interpretations. For view 1a, see Selwyn (1947); Stibbs (1959); Best (1971); for view 1b, see Dalton (1965); Kelly (1969); France (1977); Michaels (1988). For view 2, see Goppelt (1978). View 3, which goes back to Augustine, has been given fresh life by Feinberg (1986) and Grudem (1988:203-39; compare Clowney 1988:162-64).

*Through whom* interprets the Greek "in which" as a reference to the Spirit. But this is a most odd way to express this thought. If the reference is to the realm of the Spirit, then we may interpret the phrase to mean "alive in the Spirit, through which" (as in NIV margin) or, preferably, "in which spiritual mode of existence." Another possibility is that the Greek phrase functions as a conjunction: "in the course of which [process of dying and rising]."

imprisoned. This is variously taken to refer to a journey (a) "down" to Hades before his resurrection or (b) "up" to a prison in the heavens after his resurrection. In either place he proclaimed to them his victory and God's judgment. On this view the incident is mentioned primarily to assure the readers that Christ is superior to all powers and that believers have no need to fear them.

2. Christ went to Hades (as in 1a) and preached to the spirits of the people who were disobedient in Noah's day. For some commentators (a) this was simply an announcement of victory and judgment (as in view 1); for others (b) it was a proclamation of the gospel, giving them a "second chance" in their postmortem state.

3. Christ entered into Noah and through him preached to those who were disobedient during the building of the ark. He preached the need for repentance, but the people refused to listen (only Noah's family being saved). They perished in the flood, and their spirits are now in prison. Thus Christ in Noah is an example and encouragement to Peter's readers to preach the gospel fearlessly.

We can now tackle the main questions raised by the passage:

□ **When did Christ go?** The most commonly accepted view is that the event described in this passage took place at the time of the death and resurrection of Christ. He performed the task in the Spirit before he finally went into heaven (3:22). There are, however, two possibilities. The older interpretation (views 1a and 2) posits that between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, Christ descended into the temporary abode of the dead (Hades not hell), where disobedient spirits are imprisoned, to make his proclamation. The more recent interpretation (view 1b) is that Peter is referring to a visit made by Jesus after his resurrection in connection with his ascension to the right hand of God in heaven. Christ

The majority of attempts to correct the text of the New Testament without textual evidence are best forgotten. Maybe we should simply forget the conjecture that after the conjunction (*en boi kai*) the word "Enoch" was dropped out of the text. On this view, it was not Christ but Enoch who visited the spirits in prison. The conjecture is unnecessary and wrong, but nevertheless interesting because it points us to the background of thought in the verse. By the first century there existed a number of legends about the patriarch Enoch, whose remarkable departure from the world (Gen 5:24) was the stimulus for suggesting that he travelled to places visited by no other man. In 1 Enoch much is made of the "sons of God" of Gen 6:1-4 as fallen angelic beings who sinned with humankind. These "Watchers" were therefore condemned to imprisonment:

visited the prison of disobedient spirits that is situated in the heavens.

Over against this view is the suggestion (view 3) that the passage refers to Christ's preaching in and through Noah to the latter's contemporaries. The spirit of Christ was active in Noah, as it was in the prophets (1:11), and empowered him to be a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet 2:5). A final decision between these views can be made only in the light of other details in the passage. View 3 has in its favor the parallel of Christ/Noah and Peter's readers as fearless preachers to hostile audiences. It also preserves continuity between the references to the flood and baptism. Second Corinthians 13:3 demonstrates that the idea of Christ speaking in somebody is not impossible.

View 3 faces insuperable difficulties. The passage most naturally refers to an incident that took place after Christ had been *made alive*. The spirit of Christ inspiring the prophets is not the same thing as Christ himself going and acting in Noah, and there are no other parallels to Christ temporarily inhabiting Old Testament characters. Above all, this view requires a double reinterpretation of verse 19. After having read it once in terms of the spirits and Christ, the readers must then reinterpret *the spirits in prison* as the people in Noah's day (see below) and *he* as "he in the person of Noah." The major weakness of this view is that Noah is not named as the one through whom Christ preached.

□ **Where did Christ go?** If we must decide between views 1a and 1b, several considerations are relevant.

On 1a: The belief that the abode of the dead is under the earth is found in the Old Testament, which speaks of going down to Sheol (Ps 30:3; Is 14:15; compare Lk 10:15), and in Revelation 20:1-3, where the prison of Satan is in the abyss. Jesus is said to have been in Hades (Mt 12:40; Acts 2:27, 31), but it is not said that he preached there (Mt 16:18;

Bind them for seventy generations underneath the rocks of the ground until the day of their judgment and of their consummation until the eternal judgment is concluded. In those days they will lead them into the bottom of the fire—and in torment—in the prison [where] they will be locked up for ever. (1 Enoch 10:12-13)

Enoch was sent to visit them and tell them that there was no hope for them:

And they said to me, "Enoch, scribe of righteousness, go and make known to the Watchers of heaven who have abandoned the high heaven, the holy eternal place, and have defiled themselves with women, as their deeds move the children of the world, and have taken unto themselves wives." (1 Enoch 12:4)

In 1 Enoch the place of imprisonment appears to be beneath the ground. However, in 2

Rom 10:7; Eph 4:8-10; and Rev 1:18 must be understood otherwise). On this view the spirit of Jesus was active while it was separated from his body.

On 1b: The Jews believed that there were several levels or divisions in heaven, a view shared by Paul, who relates how "a man in Christ" ascended to the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2). Some Jewish writings locate the place where the evil powers are kept in subjection until the final judgment in one of these divisions of heaven. We may observe how Satan himself is in heaven until he is thrown down to the earth (Rev 12:7). So it is possible that the reference here is to a visit paid by the resurrected Jesus to a prison in heaven. (There was a story that Enoch visited and toured the heavens. See note below.)

The ideas that the spirits were imprisoned down below or up above were both current. R. T. France points out that the text says nothing about Christ going down, and that the event took place after he had been resurrected. He also argues that the abode of the dead to which Christ *went* (as in the Nicene Creed) should not be confused with the prison of the spirits. If we have to choose between these two possibilities, the latter has the better case.

□ **To whom did Christ go?** Again we have to deal with the three different interpretations:

1. The *spirits* are evil supernatural beings. The word "spirits" can certainly be used in this sense, both of angels (Heb 1:14; 12:9; Acts 23:8-9) and evil beings (Mk 1:23; Lk 10:20; Acts 19:15-16). The story of the "fallen angels" who seduced mankind in the days before the flood (Gen 6:1-4) was a popular one in New Testament times. Furthermore, the story of their being kept in prison until the day of judgment was well known (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6).

Enoch 7 and in Testament of Levi 3:2 the place is in heaven and is visited by Enoch. Clearly various, literally incompatible views were current.

Gudem tries hard to show that the sons of God in Genesis 6 were not necessarily regarded as angelic powers and that the angels did not necessarily sin specifically at the time of the flood, but his case is unconvincing. The most that he can do is to show that other opinions existed in Judaism. He cannot deny the existence of the opinion that he attempts to play down.

*Prison* is the traditional understanding of Greek *phylakē* here. Michaels's suggestion (1988:206-9) that the word means "a refuge" is very dubious. He offers it largely because the spirits are still active rather than restrained. But this overlooks the possibility that only

2. Christ preached to the spirits of dead people, kept in the abode of the dead until the last judgment. More commonly we would speak of the "souls" of the dead, but the word "spirit" can be used in this sense (Num 16:22; 27:16; Heb 12:23). The thought that they are in prison is found in early Christian writings. Because the contemporaries of Noah, who spurned God, were proverbial for extreme wickedness, we can readily understand that they represent the wicked in general.

3. If Christ preached in the person of Noah, then *spirits in prison* describes the human beings who were disobedient during the building of the ark.

Let us now assess these different interpretations:

In favor of view 2, some scholars note that when New Testament authors use the word "spirits" to denote spirits of dead persons, it is always qualified in such a way as to make this clear. They then claim the description in verse 20 of the disobedience of the spirits to whom Christ preached fits human rather than supernatural beings.

There is, of course, no dispute that humankind sinned at the time of the flood. The period just before the flood had become proverbial in Judaism for disbelief and indifference to God (Lk 17:26-27). The wickedness of those opposed to God was seen as all the more culpable because this was the time when God patiently waited for sinners to repent and through Noah proclaimed righteousness to them (2 Pet 2:5).

Noah's construction of the ark should have made them turn to God. Here was a remarkable sign, a man aided by a few members of his family building a vast boat on dry land, far from the sea, because he had been warned about a coming flood, but they did not pay heed to the warning. "Disobey" is essentially the same as "disbelieve." In the end only eight

one group of spirits is under restraint while others are still active.

**3:20** A major argument advanced by Grudem for view 3 is that this verse should be translated not as he "preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently," but rather as he "preached to the spirits in prison when they disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently." The difference is that on the latter translation the preaching and the disobeying were simultaneous, whereas on the usual view the disobedience preceded the preaching.

Grudem argues that the participle used without an article after the noun demands this sense. But this is not correct. First, as Grudem admits, the force of the participle is ambiguous. It could be causal or temporal. If it is temporal, it could equally well be translated "when or after they had formerly disobeyed." Since the participle is aorist rather than

people went into the ark and were delivered from the flood. Scarcely could a more potent indicator be found as to how deliberately Noah's contemporaries had turned away from God.

However, it is not certain that verse 20 implies that God was patiently waiting for the spirits of these disobedient persons to repent. In the last part of the verse the focus shifts to the human beings who actually were saved. The spirits may be regarded rather as preventing other human beings from responding to God's patience. The spirits are not unambiguously identified as human beings.

Further, it is unprecedented to speak of the spirits of the dead being kept in *prison*. It may also be significant that when Peter speaks of the eight people being saved, he uses the word *psychē* rather than *pneuma* (see note).

There are also strong arguments against view 3. First, it is not clear why Peter would describe human spirits so unusually, in terms of their present imprisonment rather than their perishing in the flood.

A second point is that the reader is required to interpret *spirits* as "the beings who are now spirits but were then men and women." Proponents of this view urge that the same phenomenon occurs in 4:6, where the gospel was preached *also to the dead*—that is, "to people who are now dead but were then alive." A sufficient rebuttal of this parallel, however, is to point out that the odd use of *the dead* there is necessitated by the reference in 4:5. Peter is concerned with how people now dead will be ultimately judged, whether by human or divine standards. The two cases are not parallel.

It follows that view 1 is the least difficult. It corresponds to Peter's reference to evil powers in 3:22. *Angels, authorities and powers* hangs

present, this translation is the more probable, since the aorist participle usually (though not always) expresses an action preceding the time of the main verb. Most of Grudem's parallels have present participles. Second, the use of *pote* ("at one time, long ago") with the participle, rather than the main verb, is most peculiar; it more naturally suggests a contrast in time between the disobeying and the preaching.

Another possibility regarding the disobedience of the spirits is that Peter may have had in mind the "Nephilim," or giants, who were the offspring of the disobedient angelic beings and human women, or that under "spirits" he includes both the fallen angels and human-kind.

*Through water* could possibly mean that they were saved *by* means of the water which bore up the ark. Although this gives a smooth connection with the next verse, it is rather too sophisticated an interpretation.

on its own if not related to the spirits.

□ **What did Christ preach?** Advocates of views 2b and 3 note that the Greek verb is normally used of preaching the gospel. Some defenders of view 2b have argued that Christ preached the gospel to the souls of the flood generation, giving them, in effect, a second chance of repentance. Those who take this view then tend to argue that this group of the dead represents all the dead (on the principle that if even the worst sinners are given a second chance, so too are the rest of the dead). Although this verse says nothing about the result of the preaching, some suggest that all who get this second chance will respond to it and be saved. They corroborate this conclusion with 4:6, which they interpret to mean that the gospel was preached to the dead so that they might “live in the spirit”—that is, “be saved.”

There are various objections to this universalist view. It is certainly not a necessary interpretation of the passage. The verb “preach” can mean no more than “make proclamation” (Rev 5:2; compare Jn 1:2; 3:2, 4), in contrast with the verb “to preach the gospel” in 4:6. Furthermore, 4:6 is most plausibly interpreted otherwise (see below). Above all, it is not clear what the point of the statement would be, unless it is to say that just as Christ preached the gospel to the worst of sinners, so Christians must be prepared to witness to their persecutors (supporting 3:15).

Much more likely is the view that Christ made proclamation to the evil powers, announcing his victory on the cross and confirming their defeat. They are now subject to him (3:22) and those who are persecuted need not be afraid of the evil spiritual powers who inspire their persecutors. Christ is Lord! Hallelujah!

□ If we interpret the passage in this way (view 1b), we see that Peter aimed to present Christ as an example of suffering for doing good, to show how his death brings believers to God, to stress the fact that though Christ died he was brought to life (as believers will be), to emphasize how Christ proclaimed his triumph to the spirits who corrupted the people of Noah’s time, and to stress that Christ, now enthroned alongside God, is superior to all supernatural powers. Consequently, Christians can confidently stand up to hostility and bear a courageous witness (4:1-6), knowing that they will be vindicated just as Christ was.

□ **The Symbol and the Reality** Before proceeding further with ex-

position of the passage we must pause to ask about the significance of what we have discovered. What exactly is Peter doing here? He knows that Christ did something during the period of his death and resurrection, but how did Peter come to know and to express it in this way?

Some say that Peter has expressed his point in mythological language. He is writing about a sphere of which he had no direct knowledge; therefore, he had to use existing imagery to convey his meaning to his readers. We note that what Peter says about Christ in some ways parallels what Jewish tradition said about Enoch, so that Enoch is the type to which Christ is the antitype. Peter appears to have expressed the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection by using imagery and language drawn from the Enoch story to depict dramatically Christ’s victory over all of the powers of evil. This way of presenting things may have come to Peter either by direct revelation or by meditation on the available scriptural and extracanonical materials. Either way, of course, the Spirit of God was active in the process, whether granting direct knowledge or working concursively with Peter’s mental processes. The interpretation may have been expressed here using concepts drawn from mythology, but it is nonetheless the true interpretation of the effects of the work of Christ in the spiritual realm. How should we understand what Peter says? As we have seen, there are two different interpretations of where Christ visited, somewhere “down” beneath the earth or somewhere “up” in heaven. Both directions should surely be understood metaphorically. We are speaking about spirits in any case, and they cannot be localized in the center of the earth any more than God can be localized in a heaven above the sky. Maybe it doesn’t matter if we aren’t certain where Christ went. Either way, Peter means that God’s power restrained the powers of evil, that this power was expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus and that, because of God’s omnipotence, Christians need not be afraid of persecution or the evil powers that promote it.

**The Significance of Christian Baptism (3:21-22)** It now becomes clear why Peter introduced the disobedient spirits and the flood narrative. At the end of verse 20 he comments that, in contrast to the mass of the disobedient, only a few people were saved in the ark. He adds that they were *saved through water*, which probably means that they were brought safely through the flood because they were in the ark,

without which they would have drowned.

This idea enables Peter to draw a further lesson by making a parallel between Noah's family and his readers. He uses the word "antitype" (translated by the NIV with the verb *symbolizes*) to show the parallel between the events and people at the time of the flood and the events and people in his own time. The people in the ark correspond to Christians; the water of the flood corresponds to the water of baptism; the escape of Noah's family from drowning corresponds to the spiritual salvation of believers. This Old Testament example is an actual saving event by God, which is now repeated in a new way in the case of Christians.

Whatever the precise construction, Peter says that Christian baptism saves Christians (see note). He clearly does not mean this in any material sense, as if an outward rite could convey spiritual salvation; or in any magical sense, as if the water possessed some spiritual power; or in any automatic way, so that anybody who is baptized is saved. We should not make the mistake of limiting the significance of *baptism* to the precise moment and action of being immersed or sprinkled with water. Rather, for Peter, the word "baptism" symbolically represents the whole process by which the gospel comes to people and they accept it in faith.

It is this last point which Peter emphasizes. He reminds his readers that baptism is not to be equated with the removal of dirt from the body. This protest against mere outward washing was necessary in a society

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**3:21** NIV adopts the most obvious interpretation of the antecedent of the Greek relative pronoun and takes it to refer to the water (literally, "saved through water; which [water] also saves you"). This translation assumes that the word "antitype" refers to the way in which the water symbolizes baptism. This is difficult if we do not take *through water* as the means of saving Noah's family in verse 20. Alternatively we may interpret it: "and, as an antitype to the whole event, baptism now saves you" or "which [water], namely, baptism, now saves you who are the antitype of Noah's family." The meaning is not greatly affected.

The interpretation of this verse has been plagued by Protestant fear of finding in it a basis for the doctrine of "baptismal regeneration." This view ties the experience of receiving the Spirit and being regenerated to the moment of baptism with water and sees this experience as taking place regardless of the repentance and faith of the person baptized. In the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, for example, after an infant has been baptized we find the words, "Seeing now . . . that this child is regenerate."

There is no justification for this view in Scripture. What Peter is talking about is the occasion when a person comes to water-baptism seeking salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. "Baptism saves you" is simply a shorthand way of saying, "God saves you in and through the act of baptism, which is the outward expression of the twin facts that he

that was only gradually realizing that outward defilement was not spiritually significant—that is, outward removal of dirt or contamination due to contact with sinners is not the same thing as inward spiritual renewal. Still today, of course, people think that outward acts like coming to church and receiving communion somehow make them acceptable to God even if their hearts are guilty of evil. It is curious how people who rarely attend church still want baptism of their infants, church weddings and Christian funerals. Peter's attitude rejects all such ideas in principle.

On the contrary, baptism must represent or express *the pledge of a good conscience toward God*. The translation in the NIV text suggests either that we come to baptism with a good conscience (the marginal note, *the response of a good conscience*, offers much the same sense), or that we pledge ourselves to maintain a good conscience by not sinning. The former of these possibilities is unlikely. We come to baptism not because we have a good conscience—one that does not accuse us of having done wrong—but precisely because we feel guilty and in need of forgiveness and renewal. We should either adopt the latter possibility—namely, that the pledge is one to break with sin for the future—or side with those commentators who take the Greek word to mean an "appeal" or "petition" to God for a good conscience. It is thus a prayer for forgiveness and cleansing.

Baptism saves us not by any virtue in itself but by the effects of Jesus' resurrection. The significance of this fact is brought out in verse 22,

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regenerates you by his Spirit on the basis of the atonement wrought by Christ and that you come committing yourself in faith and repentance to Christ as your Savior." Needless to say, evangelical Anglicans hold that the language of their baptismal service should not be interpreted in terms of baptismal regeneration.

The word translated "pledge" (*eperôtēma*) can mean "question" or "request" or it can refer to the clause containing a formal question and answer in a contract. Hence it can refer to the actual reply or legal pledge in the contract.

**3:22** The picture here is ultimately derived from the messianic exaltation of Psalm 110:1. Few verses in the Old Testament are alluded to so frequently in the New Testament. Peter emphasizes that Jesus *has gone* into heaven, thus speaking of his ascension, which is implicit in talk of his exaltation. It is, therefore, incorrect to suggest that the tradition of the ascension is peculiar to Luke and not found elsewhere in the New Testament (see 1 Tim 3:16). The thought of the subordination of the hostile powers is also found in Psalm 110:1. Peter refers to the hostile powers as (fallen) *angels, authorities and powers*; similar terms are used by Paul (Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15:24; Col 1:16; 2:10, 15; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12). The variety of terms strongly suggests that it would be wrong to try to identify different classes of powers in terms of this vocabulary or to create a consistent picture.

which reminds us that the risen Jesus is in fact the exalted Jesus who occupies the seat of power beside God and is superior to all the hostile powers.

By what he says in verses 21-22 Peter has made three things clear. First, just as Noah and his family escaped despite the disobedience of the evil spirits in their day, so too Christians will be saved and not be overcome by the evil forces behind persecution. Salvation is not just from sin but also from the powers that threaten us and our salvation. In fact, nothing “in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God” (Rom 8:38).

Second, although baptism is the normal means of Christian initiation, salvation is not the result of merely submitting outwardly to baptism. It is for those who come to God with a longing to be set free from sin and to have a pure conscience.

Third, the one source of spiritual victory is the crucified and risen Jesus. Peter concludes the section with encouragement for the persecuted: “Do not be afraid. The Christ whom you accept as your Lord truly is Lord over all the opposition that you may face.”

**Maintaining a Christian Lifestyle (4:1-6)** Stores that sell things to wear no longer advertise them as “clothes” but as “fashions.” And though the very name indicates how short-lived any particular style of clothing is, it encourages us to purchase the latest, most up-to-date apparel so that we will not fall out of step with the perceived majority (or at least the trendsetters). We don’t want to look old-fashioned, odd or as if we are unable to afford to live in style.

What is true of clothes is true of habits. Smoking is advertised as the “adult” thing to teen-agers, so that they will start the habit young. Once they are “hooked,” they won’t ask whether or not it is fashionable. The consumption of alcohol is similarly pushed as the “in” thing for everybody. So much so that even Christians, whose traditions have warned them against use of a drug (some would call it a poison) with an appalling record for stimulating crime, danger on the roads and disease,

**Notes: 4:1** The phrase *arm yourselves* brings out the force of the Greek, which conveys the metaphor of going out to battle after putting on armor. If we put on or adopt the same frame of mind as Jesus had, we shall find that we have protected ourselves against the attacks of temptation.

The interpretation of the final clause is debated: (1) The person who is prepared to

are lured by the trend.

One might suppose that Christians living in a hostile environment would want to shun all that reeks of paganism, but in practice things are not so simple. In the first place, everyone of us is weak and attracted by what the writer to the Hebrews realistically calls “the pleasures of sin” (Heb 11:25). Even though we know that certain activities are wrong, we are still attracted by the element of pleasure that they contain. In a weak moment we are prepared to disobey.

Second, we can have genuine uncertainty as to whether a particular activity is right or wrong (and whether earlier generations made the right decisions in “gray areas”) or as to where we draw the line. For example, is the use of alcohol and other potentially addictive drugs for other than medicinal reasons (1 Tim 5:23) allowable for Christians? If it is, where do you stop?

Third, we know that Christ prayed for us to remain “in the world.” We must not cut ourselves off from the very people to whom we are trying to bear Christian witness. How do we keep in touch with a pleasure-loving, affluent society? And finally, we are all tempted to conform in order to avoid being thought of as killjoys by other people.

To these kinds of struggles Peter addresses himself in this section. He asserts that, despite the pressures of society, Christians should live as the people of God, following the example of Christ. He stresses in various ways that his readers must regard themselves as being done with sinful pleasures, which will lead in the end to divine judgment.

**Suffering or Sinning (4:1)** Peter begins by drawing a lesson from what he said just previously about Christ’s suffering. He now uses Christ as an example that Christians must follow. His point is essentially that a person who suffers shows that he has given up those things against which his suffering is a protest. In other words, by suffering Christ showed his opposition to sinful living. Therefore, persecuted Christians must follow his example and say a firm no to their temptations. The thought is rather condensed, and verse one can be paraphrased more

undergo unjust suffering shows that he holds firmly to a principle, in this case, opposition to and refusal to sin; (2) the person who has died—that is, with Christ in his baptism (as in Rom 6:1:7)—has died to sin and thus ceased from sinning; (3) the person who is persecuted is purified from sin by his sufferings; (4) since it is death that brings the sinful flesh to an end, the Christian must be prepared to suffer death just as Christ did (the person