

ON THE PROPER INTERPRETATION OF 1 PETER 3:18-20

One of the most difficult and debate texts of the New Testament is found in 1 Peter 3:18-20, which reads: “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.” The interpretational difficulties drove Martin Luther to write in his commentary on the text, “A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.”¹ In this paper, I will survey the more common interpretations of the text and provide some critique of each position. Like Luther, I will refrain from any dogmatism as to the proper interpretation of this challenging passage, but I intend to demonstrate that the better view is that Christ preached by the Spirit through Noah in the days preceding the flood, and it is those that rejected the message that are in Peter’s day spirits in prison, under judgment for their rejection of the word of God.

In his commentary on 1 Peter, Wayne Grudem summarizes the five most popular views of the text:

View 1: When Noah was building the ark, Christ ‘in spirit’ was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to *unbelievers who were on*

¹ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter & Jude* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 166.

the earth then but are now 'spirits in prison' (people in hell).

View 2: After Christ died, he went and preached to *people in hell*, offering them a second chance of salvation.

View 3: After Christ died, he went and preached to *people in hell*, proclaiming to them that he had triumphed over them and their condemnation was final.

View 4: After Christ died, he proclaimed release to *people who had repented just before they died in the flood*, and led them out of their imprisonment (in Purgatory) into heaven.

View 5: After Christ died (or: after he rose but before he ascended unto heaven), he travelled to hell and proclaimed triumph over the *fallen angels* who had sinned by marrying human women before the flood.²

In addition, Thomas Schreiner offers and advocates a sixth view that is a variation on Wayne Grudem's View 5:

...the majority view among scholars today is that the text describes Christ's proclamation of victory and judgment over the evil angels. These evil angels, according to Gen. 6:1-4, had sexual relations with women and were imprisoned because of their sin. The point of the passage, then, is not that Christ descended into hell but, as in 3:22, his victory over evil angelic powers.³

I would essentially advocate View 1, but will first address reasons to reject Views 2 through 6, and to properly assess those views I will begin with a careful look to the context of the subject passage.

² Wayne A. Grudem, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Peter* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press 2009), 212-13.

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers 2003), 185.

This epistle has a primary theme of the proper Christian response to suffering that is especially prevalent in the third chapter. Peter writes in chapter 3:

12 For the eyes of the Lord *are* over the righteous, and his ears *are open* unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord *is* against them that do evil. 13 And who *is* he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? 14 But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy *are ye*: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; 15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and *be* ready always to *give* an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: 16 Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. 17 For *it is* better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing.

There is in these verses a contrast between the lot of the Christian living righteously and the nonbeliever living fleshly. In verse 12, the righteous enjoy the favor of the Lord, but the unrighteous His indignation. Verse 13 asks a rhetorical question. Obviously, Peter's audience was suffering and so it is the type and source of harm at issue in the question. I think his point is that it is better to suffer at the hands of evildoing men for doing good than at the hands of God for doing evil, which seems to be confirmed in verse 14. In the midst of the suffering, the Christian is to be ready to explain the hope he has, enjoying a clear conscience even when "evildoers" speak evil words about the Christian who has, in fact, had a "good conversation in Christ." Verse 17 is key, for it is better to suffer for righteous conduct at the hands of evil men than to suffer for unrighteous conduct at the hands of God.

Peter begins verse 18 with "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins...." The critical interpretive grid to be applied to this difficult passage is the context and flow of Peter's argument. Any proposed solution must not only make sense

syntactically, but must further and bolster Peter's argument in the foregoing verses—to wit, that it is better to suffer for righteous living and have the favor of God than to live unrighteously and face the judgment of God. Moreover, the solution must make sense of Peter's connecting the death and resurrection of Christ with "spirits" (whoever that was) that were disobedient in the days of Noah. And finally, the solution must be something Peter's audience could have grasped. With this in mind, I will turn to Wayne Grudem's View 2.

The View 2, again, is as follows: "After Christ died, he went and preached to *people in hell*, offering them a second chance of salvation." Thomas Schreiner rightly criticizes this view as not fitting the context:

The view that Christ offered salvation to those who died in the flood suffers from some of the same weaknesses as the first [view]. Such a view also reads the term "spirits" to refer to human beings, but we have seen that this is unlikely. If Christ descended into hell before his resurrection, the word "went" seems superfluous when used of Christ's "spirit." If the journey below is placed after the resurrection, at least Christ has a body with which to make the trip. This interpretation has another fatal problem. It makes no sense contextually for Peter to be teaching that the wicked have a second chance in a letter in which he exhorted the righteous to persevere and to endure suffering. Indeed, we have seen in many places throughout the commentary that eternal life is conditioned upon such perseverance. All motivation to endure would vanish if Peter now offered a second opportunity for death. The benefit of braving suffering is difficult to grasp if another opportunity to respond will be offered at death.⁴

While I disagree that, in the epistle, Peter conditions eternal life on perseverance—rather, the salvation of one's soul/life is in view, that is, rewards—but Schreiner is

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, 187-88.

fundamentally correct that motivation for enduring suffering righteously is diminished or devalued, or in any case not bolstered, by the argument that the evildoers get a second chance. It must also be noted that the text does not say that Jesus preached the gospel, and indeed, Peter does not explicitly state the content of the preaching. But as J. Ramsey Michaels points out in his commentary on 1 Peter, the Greek term translated “preached” is used only here in 1 Peter, and where Peter speaks of preaching the gospel he uses a different word (1 Peter 1:12, 25; 4:6).⁵ Those who advocate this view usually teach that everyone gets a second chance at salvation, but that neither fits the flow of Peter’s argument here nor finds any support elsewhere in the Holy Scriptures.

The fourth view is thematically similar to the second, and shares some of the same failings: “After Christ died, he proclaimed release to *people who had repented just before they died in the flood*, and led them out of their imprisonment (in Purgatory) into heaven.” This view is purely speculative in that there is no indication in the text of any repentance. Rather, the text only describes these “spirits” as having been disobedient, and nothing in the Noahic account in Genesis suggests that anyone repented and yet died in the flood. The great mark of repentance would surely have been to have heeded Noah’s preaching and entered the ark. Moreover, this view assumes a notion of Purgatory that finds now explicit support in the Scripture and runs contrary to the notion that, on the cross, Jesus paid it all. Jesus could not very well have exclaimed, as we find recorded in John’s

⁵ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 Peter* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson 1988), 209.

Gospel, “It is finished,” if in fact, it was not finished and something remained to be done in purgatory to deal with sin.

The third view is more appealing than those already considered: “After Christ died, he went and preached to *people in hell*, proclaiming to them that he had triumphed over them and their condemnation was final.” This view at least fits the flow of Peter’s argument insofar as it builds of the contrast of the spiritual blessings to the righteous versus judgment or condemnation for the unsaved. The difficulty with this view is that it does not adequately relate to what Peter follows with in verse 20: “Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.” As J. Vernon McGee explains in arguing his view, the term “when” is critical here:

This has been a most misunderstood passage of Scripture. The key word to this entire passage is in verse 20; it is the little word *when*—

When did Christ preach to the spirits in prison? “When once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah.” In Christ’s day, the spirits of those men to whom Noah had preached were in prison, for they had rejected the message of Noah. They had gone into *sheol*. They were waiting for judgment; they were lost. But Christ did not go down and preach to them after He died on the cross. He preached through Noah “when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah.” For 120 years Noah had preached the Word of God. He saved his family but no one else. It was the Spirit of Christ who spoke through Noah in Noah’s day. In Christ’s day, those who rejected Noah’s message were in prison. The thought is that Christ’s death meant nothing to them just as it means nothing to a great many

people today who, as a result, will also come into judgment.⁶

Putting aside for the moment whether McGee's interpretation is the right one, he is correct that any proffered interpretation must make good sense of the phrase, "when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah." As it is presently stated, View 3 is unsatisfactory.

The fifth and sixth views are substantially similar and may be treated together. View 5 states: "After Christ died (or: after he rose but before he ascended unto heaven), he travelled to hell and proclaimed triumph over the *fallen angels* who had sinned by marrying human women before the flood." View 6 affirms the message and the audience, but locates the place of the preaching as somewhere related to Jesus' ascent, but not hell. Unlike the third view, these views give more credence to the phrase, "when once the longsuffering of God waited in days of Noah," but rather than placing the preaching in the days of Noah (as I will advocate below), it only connects the audience (fallen angels) with the days of Noah. Those advocating this view rely primarily on two arguments: (1) the use of the term "spirits" is rarely used of people as opposed to angels and (2) Peter places the preaching within the context of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, giving no indication that the preaching occurred in Noah's day. Supporting the latter point, they would point out that if Jesus merely preached through Noah, then Peter would not have used the term "went." But as N.M. Williams explained, that Jesus "went" need not necessarily imply a physical journey:

⁶J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible: 1 Corinthians Through Revelation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1983), 701-2.

Great weight has been attached to this word in support of the view that Christ *went in person* to the prison of the lost. But the word does not necessarily imply personal locomotion. See Gen. 11:5-7, and especially Eph. 2:17. Such language would have been entirely admissible (for it would have been in harmony with the genius of the Greek tongue), had Peter desired to say that Christ brought himself into connection with the persons in question, either by his Spirit, or by means of some pious inhabitant of the earth.⁷

Moreover, the term “spirits” can be used of people (see Hebrews 12:23) and so the context should drive our interpretation rather than any artificial assumptions. The thrust of Peter’s argument is the contrast between Christians suffering for righteousness sake and evildoers, with warnings that there will be consequences for evildoers. It seems far more likely, then, that the term spirits refers to the spirits of human evildoers, not angels. Advocates of the fifth and sixth views are quick to point out and relate the reference to “spirits” in verse 19 to “angels” in verse 22, but the reference in verse 22 to angels cuts against their position. If Peter had in mind the fallen angels of Genesis 6 and wanted to make the connection to the “angels” in verse 22, then it seems more likely that he would have used “angel” or “spirits” both times. Indeed, when Peter refers to these angels explicitly in his second epistle, he calls them the “angels that sinned.” (2 Peter 2:4) Moreover, we find no indication in Genesis 6 or elsewhere in the Bible that the fallen angels of Genesis 6 persecuted the faithful for living righteously. We know from the Flood account and here in 1 Peter 3 that only 8 lives were saved from the Flood.

⁷ H. H. Harvey et al., *An American Commentary On The New Testament Volume VI* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press 1890), Ch. 3, 51.

Had these fallen angels persecuted those 8 for their righteous living, it would seem to be a glaring omission from the Flood narrative.

Measuring these proposals against the context and flow and Peter's argument and against the backdrop in Genesis, the fifth and sixth views, while plausible, do not provide the most satisfactory solution. This leaves View 1 for consideration: "When Noah was building the ark, Christ 'in spirit' was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to *unbelievers who were on the earth then* but are now 'spirits in prison' (people in hell)." Verse 19 begins with "by which also...." As Grudem explains, this refers back to the Spirit in verse 18:

In which refers back to 'in the spirit' in verse 18. It means 'in which realm, namely, the spiritual realm.' It does not necessarily mean 'in the resurrection body' (which Peter could easily have said, had he wanted to), but rather 'in the realm of the Spirit's activity' (the realm in which Christ was raised from the dead, v. 18).⁸

As I press forward, that the actions of Christ occur in the spirit is critical, and it is the primary point of attack for those that reject this view.

As J. Vernon McGee points out, the "when" is critical. As with McGee, commentator N.M. Williams advocates that the preaching in view occurred at the time of the disobedience, not later at the time of the resurrection:

The preaching occurred at the time of the disobedience, not thousands of years afterward. That it occurred long after the disobedient were swept away has been taught by the majority of expositors, including some recent distinguished interpreters of Germany. The common view is held in most remarkable disregard of the construction of the Greek ... The spirits who were in

⁸ Wayne A. Grudem, 164-65.

prison when Peter was writing those words were persons who lived their earthly life in the days of Noah.⁹

Advocates of views 5 and 6 insist that the “when” refers back to when the “spirits” were disobedient but not when the preaching occurred. The problem with this view is that it does not provide the best fit for the situation of Peter’s audience. Peter continually implores his readers to live righteously even it entails underserved suffering brought about by other people, to wit, to rejoice despite their trials (1:6-7), to gird up the loins of their minds as obedient children (1:13-14), be holy in all of their conduct knowing everyone’s works will be judged by God (1:15-17), set aside sin in favor of the “sincere milk of the word: that endures forever (1:25-2:2), offer spiritual sacrifices to God (2:5), abstain from fleshly lusts (2:11), to have a good reputation among Gentiles (2:12), and to submit and suffer for doing good (2:20-25). Peter’s readers must have felt overwhelmed by their circumstances, and he recalls for them another group of believers who faced a like situation, namely Noah and his family.

Of Noah, the “preach of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5), we read in Hebrews 11:7: “By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.” From the description in Genesis 6, Noah lived in a morally decayed world in rebellion to God, and it must have been a tremendous trial as he and his family lived in that time by faith in God’s Word. But in the end, they were blessed and the evildoers faced the judgment of God. Likewise, in Peter’s time, his readers would face undeserved

⁹ H. H. Harvey et al., 51-52.

suffering for living out the word of God, but they ultimately have deliverance and blessings in Jesus Christ. They were hearing the word of Jesus Christ in their day through Peter and others just like those in Noah's day heard it through Noah. This finds support especially in 1 Peter 1 where Peter explained that it was the "spirit of Christ" that preached the word of God through the Old Testament prophets. Those persons Jesus preached to through Noah that rejected his message are now suffering as spirits in prison, awaiting their future judgment. (Revelation 20:11-15) Likewise, in Peter's day, the believers who were suffering for their faith would find future blessings, but the evildoers would face a certain judgment. The same Spirit who preached to people in both eras raised Christ and, thereby, proclaimed victory over all those opposed to him, and by implication, a future victory for those like Peter's audience who presently suffer as a result of identifying with the Christ.

Thomas Schreiner dismisses the view that Christ spoke through Noah, pointing out the primary objection typically raised against the view, namely that the term "went" does not make sense if Christ only spoke through Noah rather than journeying somewhere:

First, the idea that Christ spoke by means of the Spirit through Noah suffers from a number of problems. First, it does not explain adequately the participle (*poreutheis*) translated "went" in v. 18 and "has gone" in v. 22. In v. 22 it is clear that it refers to Jesus' ascension to God's right hand, showing that it is a post-resurrection event. The word "went" seems out of place and strange for those who defend the Augustinian view, for Christ does not really go anywhere if he preaches "through" Noah. There are instances in the New Testament where the word "went" (*poreuomai*) refers to the ascension of Christ (Acts 1:10-11; John 14:2, 3, 28; 16:7, 28), while it nowhere refers to his descent into the underworld. We also noticed in v. 18 a clear

reference to the resurrection of Christ. The “going” in v. 19, therefore, also most naturally refers to what is true of Christ’s resurrection body. It is obviously the case that Christ did not need his resurrection body to preach through Noah by means of the Spirit. Indeed, the reference to Christ’s going in v. 19 demonstrates the implausibility of the first view since it is only through the Holy Spirit. This piece of evidence alone shows the first view is implausible.¹⁰

But as pointed out before, “went” (*poreutheis*) need not indicate physical locomotion. Peter himself uses the term figuratively in 1 Peter 4:3 (*walked* in lasciviousness, lusts,...), 2 Peter 2:10 (*walk* after the flesh), 2 Peter 3:3 (*walking* after their own lusts), and also by Jude in Jude 11 (*gone* in the way of Cain), Jude 16 (*walking* after their own lusts), and Jude 18 (*walk* after their own ungodly lusts). In this sense, the term does not carry the sense of a journey at all, but stresses the characteristic of the person by describing the sphere of their activities. In 1 Peter 3:19, the point is not that Jesus journeyed anywhere, but that in the realm of the Spirit or by the Spirit he preached. Although not employing the same language, the teaching Ephesians 2:17-18 also uses the notion of Jesus come to people to preach to them through others: “And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.”

The passage under consideration presents substantial challenges, but as with any passage, context is king. Peter’s epistle deals considerably with the issue of Christians’ undeserved suffering. Such suffering is to be met with righteousness, knowing that there will be future blessings as the soul/life is delivered into eternity

¹⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, 186.

(1 Peter 1) and there will be judgment for the evildoers. Of the six passages considered, the only view that both fits within Peter's argument and makes sense of the language is the view that Jesus preached through Noah the word of God and those that rejected it are now spirits in prison. Likewise, in Peter's day, Christ preached the word of God through Peter and others. As in the days of Noah, Peter's audience could expect that living by the word would entail suffering, but the end of it would be blessings, whereas those rejecting the word would in the end face judgment at the hand of God. Admittedly, this view is not without difficulties, but as I have demonstrated, the most substantial difficulty of the meaning of the term "went" is readily answerable. Accordingly, the first view is to be preferred over the other five views of 1 Peter 3:18-20.