

Proclamation of Triumph over the Spirits in Prison in 1 Peter 3:18-22

Sampson M. Nwaomah, PhD

Simdumise Poswa

Abstract

This paper is an exegetical study of 1 Peter 3:18-22. It investigates the nature of the spirits in prison, what kind of prison they are and what constitutes Christ preaching to them. The paper concludes that the text moves from Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and triumph over evil spirits. Therefore, the "spirits in prison" are best understood to be evil angels who have always been at work, but Peter emphasizes their work in the generation that lived before the flood. The prison represents a state of awaiting judgment and Jesus' proclamation is that of victory and exaltation over them which was accomplished at the cross and validated at this resurrection.

Keywords: Proclamation, Triumph, Spirits, Prison

Introduction

One of the most intriguing passages in the New Testament is 1 Peter 3:18-22. This passage is the third Christological passage in 1 Peter (see 1:18-21; 2:22-25). The three passages begin with the suffering and death of Jesus. However, while 1 Peter 1:18-21 and 2:22-25 seem to focus on the work of redemption of Jesus at the cross, 1 Peter 3:18-22 "highlights the conquering power of his resurrection and ascension."¹ Yet, this passage is

¹ Karen J. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 236

one of the most difficult and debated passages in the New Testament. This fact is attested by Forbes who considers it one of the most difficult exegetical, theological, and structural passages.² Like Forbes, Hillyer also suggests that this text is “one of the most obscure and difficult passages in the New Testament”³ and notes that even Martin Luther had difficulty understanding it.⁴ Therefore, scholars, through the centuries and in recent studies have come to different conclusions about the interpretation of this passage, especially the identity of the “spirits in prison,” and the manner and time of the ministry of Christ to them.

According to Campbell and van Rensburg, the majority of early church fathers from the time of Clement of Alexandria to Augustine understood Christ preaching to the “spirits in prison” to represent Christ going to the abode of souls in order to preach to Noah’s contemporaries and bring them to conversion.⁵ The patristic fathers who held to this view include Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, and St. John of Damascus.⁶ Others believed that Jesus went to preach to those who repented just before the flood with the purpose of leading them from purgatory to heaven. John Calvin seems to have taken up this view during the time of the reformation.⁷ This view is also called the optimistic Clementine position.

By the time of Augustine there seems to have arisen new interpretation. Augustine viewed this text to refer to Christ preaching to Noah’s contemporaries prior to the flood and this

² Greg W. Forbes, *1 Peter*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2014), 236.

³ Norman Hillyer, *1 & 2 Peter, Jude*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 112.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁵ Douglas N. Campbell and Fika Janse van Rensburg, “The History of the Interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22,” *Acta Patristica Byzantina* 19 (2008): 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

he did through the person of Noah.⁸ To the development of this view Campbell and van Rensberg note, “The Augustinian position, therefore, generally held sway among Protestant scholars until the adoption of the optimistic Clementine position by late 17th Century scholars. From then on the Augustinian position fell out of favour within Protestant scholarship.”⁹

In recent studies Grudem¹⁰ and Feinberg¹¹ brought a resurgence of the view that Jesus preached to Noah’s contemporaries through Noah prior to the flood. Further, Reicke¹² and more recently Dalton¹³ see the importance of the Book of Enoch in understanding this text. Both scholars thus conclude that Christ proclaimed his victory over wicked spirits who sinned in cohabitating with humans during the time prior to the flood. It will be noted that in modern commentaries this is the dominant view.

The difficulty of understanding this passage is also demonstrated by the diverse interpretations even amongst scholars of common denomination like Ekkerhardt Mueller and Clinton Wahlen. Both present two opposing views on the understanding of the “spirits in prison” found in 1 Peter 3:18-22. While Mueller favors the generally new view in Seventh-day Adventism, that is, that the spirits in prison represent fallen angels to whom Christ proclaimed victory over after his

⁸ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰ Wayne A. Grudem, “Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19-20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature,” *Trinity Journal* 7 (1986): 3-31.

¹¹ John S. Feinberg, “1 Peter 3:18-22, Ancient Mythology, and the Intermediate State,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 303-336.

¹² Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism: A Study of 1 Peter III:19 and its Context* (Kobenhaven: Ejnar Munkgaard, 1946), 68.

¹³ William J. Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989), 165-176.

resurrection,¹⁴ Wahlen argues for the more commonly held view, that is, that preaching to spirits in prison was done by the Holy Spirit through Noah during the time before the flood.¹⁵ The question then has to be asked, which of these views is correct and best accords with careful exegesis of the text?

Further, regarding the different views held by scholars on this text Keener notes three key ones which are summarized as follows:

(1)... that between his death and resurrection, Jesus preached to the dead in Hades, the realm of the dead, although the identity of dead for some in this category of interpretation is debated between preaching salvation to the dead of Noah's day, to the righteous or repentant dead of Noah's day (or the OT era), or judgment to Noah's wicked contemporaries (the view of many church fathers); (2)... that the pre-incarnate Christ preached through Noah to people in Noah's day (the view of many Reformers); (3) that before or (more likely) after his resurrection, Jesus proclaimed triumph over the fallen angels that sinned in the time of Noah (the view of most scholars today).¹⁶

¹⁴ Ekkehardt Mueller "1 Peter 3:18-22," accessed 03 June 2021, <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/1-peter-318-22/>. Edcarlos Menezes and Kim Papaioannou, in their "Preaching to the 'Spirits in Prison': A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-22," *Ministry*, June 2019, 20-22, support Mueller's position.

¹⁵ Clinton Wahlen, "Who Are the 'Spirits in Prison' to Whom Christ Preached?" in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gehard Pfandl (Silver Springs, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 418-421. Mueller and Wahlen are both Seventh-day Adventist Bible scholars.

¹⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 694. See also Craig S. Keener, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021) e-book, "Christ's Example: 1 Peter 3:18-4:6."

The weakness of the latter view, in our understanding, is the assumption that the fallen angels are the sons of God who married the daughters of men in Genesis 6:4. However, in the light of these views, the purpose of this research is to engage in the study of this passage. In trying to understand this text this paper endeavors to address the question: What are the spirits? What kind of prison are they in? How and what constitutes Christ preaching to them?

Context and Structure of 1 Peter 3:18-22¹⁷

A survey of the themes addressed in 1 Peter suggest the audience consist of communities under duress (1:6; 2:12, 15, 18–20; 3:9, 13–17; 4:1, 4, 6b, 12–14, 16, 19; 5:8–10). They are all experiencing suffering that has resulted from their profession of faith in Jesus. It seems this common experience of suffering generated the letter of 1 Peter.¹⁸ The recipients were also Christians who had a pagan background (1 Pet 1:14, 18; 4:3-4) and they seem to be living and associating with people who are still adherents of pagan religions. Watson thus notes

¹⁷ For a discussion on the variant readings see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed. (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 623. He observes that “While acknowledging the difficulty of ascertaining the original text, a majority of the Committee preferred the reading *περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἔπαθεν* because (a) this verb, which is a favorite of the author (it occurs elsewhere in 1 Peter eleven times), carries on the thought of ver. 17, whereas *ἀποθνήσκειν* (which occurs nowhere else in the epistle) abruptly introduces a new idea; (b) in view of the presence of the expression *περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν* scribes would be more likely to substitute *ἀπέθανεν* for *ἔπαθεν* than vice versa; and (c) the readings with *ἡμῶν* or *ὕμῶν* (which in later Greek had the same pronunciation) are natural and, indeed, expected scribal expansions.” Forbes also further notes, “In evaluating the ms. data, the longer readings should be rejected as confessional expansions. Furthermore, it is more likely that a scribe would change *ἔπαθεν* to *ἀπέθανεν* than vice versa, thus conforming to the traditional creedal formula that Christ died for our sins.” It is the view of the authors of this paper that these reasons are sufficient to retain this reading rather than any of the other variants.

¹⁸ Brian H. Gregg, “1 Peter,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 584.

that the former sinful lifestyle of the recipients is characteristic of a Gentile background, that the exile motif is metaphorical for Christians in the world and the familiarity of these Christians with the Old Testament background is mainly because of their education as Christian converts.¹⁹

First Peter is a hortatory letter as it is meant to be a word of encouragement and also a circular letter because it addresses a number of people in a large geographical area.²⁰ Chapter three begins with duties of Wives to Husbands (3:1-7) followed by exhortations on unity and love (3:8-12). This is then followed by Suffering for the Cause of Righteousness (3:13-22) where Peter addresses the suffering and unjust treatment of Christians (3:13-17). This is followed by the Suffering and Vindication of Christ (3:18-22), the passage of our study. Chapter 3:18-22 begins and ends with a focus on Christ, and it appears that the main purpose of the section is to depict the transition from his suffering to exaltation.²¹ Verse 18 begins with ὅτι καὶ Χριστὸς and this shows both a connection with verse 17 and also a transition. Verses 13-22 speaks about doing good rather than evil in the midst of suffering and Christ's suffering and exaltation. The phrase ὅτι καὶ Χριστὸς shows a connection with verse 17 and καὶ especially shows, "a thematic connection between the recipients' sufferings for doing good and Christ's suffering for doing good."²² In 1 Peter 4:1 a resumptive use of οὖν is made. And Dubis notes that, "As is often the case with resumptive uses of οὖν, it also introduces an inference from the material in the digression, suggesting that vindication vis-à-vis

¹⁹ Duane F. Watson and Terrance Callan, *First and Second Peter*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 7.

²⁰ Greg, *1 Peter*, 588.

²¹ Forbes, *1 Peter*, 236.

²² Mark Dubis, *1 Peter*, A Handbook on the Greek Text (Waco TX, Baylor University Press, 2010), 115.

one's enemies follows faithful suffering."²³ . Therefore, the division of the verses that focus on Christ suffering is from verses. 18-22.

Observing the structure of 1 Peter 3:13-4:6, the wider context of 1 Peter 3:18-22, which all speaks of doing right in the midst of suffering, Keener notes that ancient writers sometimes communicated points through inverted parallel structures and thus observes the following chiasmic structure in the text:

- A Your slanderers will be ashamed (3:16)
- B Suffer though innocent, in God's will (3:17)
- C For Christ Suffered for the unjust (3:18)
- D He triumphed over hostile spirits (3:19)
- E Noah was saved through water (3:20)
- E You are saved through water (3:21)
- D Christ triumphed over hostile spirits (3:22)
- C For Christ suffered (4:1a)
- B Suffer in God's will (4:1b-2)
- A Your slanderers will be ashamed (4:3-5)²⁴

This chiasmic structure sheds light on the interpretation of the "spirits in prison" and therefore is an important consideration in our study.

Another structural element that seems to play a major role in understanding this text is the use of *inclusio*. Achtemeier observes this use and suggests its importance when he says, "The repetition of πορευθεῖς in vv. 19 and 22, in each instance used in association with deposed spiritual entities (imprisoned spirits in v. 19, subordinating spiritual powers in v. 22), forms and *inclusio* in which the latter member sheds light on the

²³ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁴ Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 694.

former.”²⁵ This use of πορευθεῖς in both verses seems to solidify the inclusio and makes it the *inclusio* a very important structural element to aid in interpreting the text at hand.

Proclamation to the Spirits in Prison

In investigating the “spirits in prison” and the nature of the proclamation of Jesus to them in 1 Peter 3:18-22, it is helpful to consider certain clauses such as θανατωθεῖς μὲν σαρκί and ζωοποιηθεῖς δὲ πνεύματι. Both θανατωθεῖς and ζωοποιηθεῖς are nominative, masculine, singulars of aorist passive participles. In this context θανατωθεῖς in this context is best translated “put to death”²⁶ and ζωοποιηθεῖς “make alive.”²⁷ In relation to this antithetical phrasing Achtemeier suggests, “The phrase itself is an antithetical *parallelismus membrorum* that... shares with early Christian tradition the contrast between Christ dead and alive, as well as between Christ relating to the flesh and to the spirit.”²⁸ Very importantly Achtemeier notes that the μὲν ... δὲ construction puts the emphasis on ζωοποιηθεῖς.²⁹ According to Dubis, these are participles of means modifying προσαγάγη because it is through his death and resurrection that Christ brings sinners to God.³⁰ Although Wallace sees σαρκί as a dative of sphere,³¹ he suggests that πνεύματι is a dative of means.³² Contrary to this, Forbes suggests, “the μὲν ... δὲ construction clearly provides a symmetry to the clause and consequently the datives σαρκί and πνεύματι should likely be constructed in the

²⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 240.

²⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Greek New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), trans. and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. by Fredrick W. Danker (2001), s.v. “θανατώω”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, s.v. “ζωοποιέω”

²⁸ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 248-9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

³⁰ Dubis, *1 Peter*, 117.

³¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 166.

³² *Ibid.*, 343.

same way...”³³ Köstenberger, Merkle, and Plummer³⁴ and Methewson and Emig³⁵ in their Greek grammars also see both $\sigma\alpha\rho\kappa\acute{\iota}$ and $\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha\tau\iota$ as constructed the same way. This paper agrees with the latter view. Contrary to Achtemeier who views these datives as datives of means,³⁶ the authors of this paper believe, together with Dubis³⁷ and others, that they should rather be seen as datives of sphere, contrasting Jesus’ death in the sphere of the flesh with being made alive in the sphere of the spirit (after the resurrection)³⁸ rather than by the agency of his death. It is also very unlikely that the reference is to an intermediary period between his death and resurrection during which time he performed the task of preaching to the spirits. Such an understanding violates Christ own teaching about the state of dead (bible ref John 5:20, 25; Luke 14:12-14). His death was complete. His newness of life after the resurrection could be in view.

The antecedent of $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \tilde{\phi}$ is not easy to determine and also the nature of the relative pronoun is also debated.³⁹ Dubis suggests that the antecedent of the $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \tilde{\phi}$ is $\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha\tau\iota$ and he views it as a relative pronoun of means⁴⁰ suggesting with Forbes that it refers to the realm on the spirit in which Christ made proclamation to the “spirits in prison.”⁴¹ This paper prefers this understanding of the relative pronoun. In this case, this might

³³ Forbes, *1 Peter*, 240.

³⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, Benjamin L. Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer, *Going Deeper With New Testament Greek: An Intermediate Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 129.

³⁵ David L. Matthewson and Eloide Ballantine Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar: Syntax for Students of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 26.

³⁶ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 250.

³⁷ Dubis, *1 Peter*, 118.

³⁸ Forbes, *1 Peter*, 240.

³⁹ Karen J. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 242-3.

⁴⁰ Dubis, *1 Peter*, 119.

⁴¹ Forbes, *1 Peter*, 242.

refer to the new status of the post-resurrection Jesus, rather than the Holy Spirit as an agency of his preaching. It was the certainty of his resurrection that Christ triumphed over the malevolent spirits mentioned in verse 19. This position is further strengthened by the contrast that the realm of the spirit makes with his death. So, while he seems incapacitated by the suffering of his death, the newness of life in resurrecting from death affirms his triumph over the spirits (Col 1:10, 15).

The next part of the clause that is a great challenge is τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεῖς ἐκήρυξεν. This is the crux of the bone of contention. Our lexical and syntactical analysis will seek to answer the following questions: Who are these spirits? What is their prison? What is the nature of the proclamation that Jesus made? Beare suggests that Jesus preached to the wicked who perished in the flood at some point after his resurrection.⁴² Others like Grudem see these spirits as the wicked who lived before the flood and the Holy Spirit preached to them through Noah.⁴³ Most modern commentators take the view that the spirits in prison represent fallen angels to who Christ proclaimed his victory the resurrection.⁴⁴ A few considerations will be made to determine which one of these options best suits the context.

Wahlen suggests that the word πνεῦμα is sometimes used in the Bible to refer to human beings.⁴⁵ Yet it will be noted, as Forbes observes, the plural form of πνεῦμα has a qualification when it refers to humans.⁴⁶ He further observes that when πνεύματα is used without a qualifier it often refers to spiritual beings (Heb 1:14; Rev 3:1; 5:6) and often evil ones (Mt 8:16, 12:45; Lk 10:20;

⁴² F.W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 3rd ed (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1971), 172.

⁴³ Wayne A Grudem, *1 Peter* (Leicester: Intervarsity, 1988), 157-161.

⁴⁴ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 252-262.

⁴⁵ Wahlen, *Interpreting Scripture*, 420.

⁴⁶ Forbes, *1 Peter*, 244.

1 Tim 4:1; Rev 16:14).⁴⁷ Contrary to Wahlen, Forbes also observes that the word ψυχαι (souls) is used in relation to human beings in the context (1 Pet 3:20) instead of πνεύματα.⁴⁸ And the word φυλακῆ nowhere in the Bible is used to refer to the grave.⁴⁹ Thus, application of this to the imprisonment of sin⁵⁰ has also been challenged.⁵¹ Forbes suggests that in the New Testament the term φυλακῆ is instead usually used in relation to the place where Satan and demons are (see Rev 18:2; 20:7; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6).⁵² From the aforementioned evidence it seems consistent that the use of spirits and prison point to evil spirits or disobedient angelic beings more than they do humans.

When we consider the *inclusio* in this pericope as was suggested above it could be noticed that the word πορευθεις “went” is used in v. 19 in relation to the spirits in prison and in v. 22 it is used in relation to the principalities and powers which most probably relates to evil spirit (see Eph 1:21; 6:12; cf. Col 2:10, 15). It is also significant to note that in Eph 1:21 these evil spirits are connected with Christ death and resurrection.⁵³ It should be observed also that the word πορευθεις is normally used in the New Testament in relation to Christ’s ascension to heaven (John 14:2-3, 12, 28; 16:7, 28; Acts 1:10-11).⁵⁴ This all suggests that Jesus did not go down to the dead or the abode of evil spirits to make his proclamation but ascended to heaven after his resurrection. This could then locate the time of his proclamation after the resurrection. Even an argument contrary

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ John N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1969), 153.

⁵¹ Dubis, *1 Peter*, 121.

⁵² Forbes, *1 Peter*, 244.

⁵³ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 258.

⁵⁴ Watson, *First and Second Peter*, 91.

to this direction contravenes on the reality of Christ's death and is contrary to the Scriptural teachings on the state of the dead (see Eccl 9:5-6, 10, 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

The other significant word to consider in this passage is ἐκήρυξεν. Wahlen rightly observes that the word κηρύσσω is used in the New Testament almost exclusively to refer to preaching and also that in this context it is connected to Noah, whom the author elsewhere refers to as a preacher of righteousness.⁵⁵ Although this is true, it is also important that the semantic range of the word in question be considered in its entirety and also it should be observed how the word is used in this context. Forbes importantly points out that κηρύσσω is sometimes used in a general sense regarding the proclamation of any news (see Luke 12:3; Rom 2:21; Rev 5:2) and also notes that in 1 Peter the author normally uses εὐαγγελίζω to signify the preaching of the gospel (Ch 1:12, 25; 4:6).⁵⁶ Similarly, Watson notes that when κηρύσσω is used in connection with the gospel it usually has an object like the gospel or Christ (Mt 24:14; Col 1:23; 1 Thess 2:9)⁵⁷ and Dubis observes that here there is no direct object for κηρύσσω,⁵⁸ although the context points to the spirits. Therefore, we argue that κηρύσσω in this context may carry the meaning of "proclamation of an event" rather than "preaching of the gospel." It is unlikely that κηρύσσω refers to the preaching of the gospel to the spirits which in any case have their disobedient status sealed and awaiting the eschatological judgment.

Although our investigation indicates that the "spirits in prison" refer to evil angels, it does not seem evident, like some have argued, that these evil angels were those who copulated with humans and exacerbated the evils of the antediluvians, which

⁵⁵ Wahlen, *Interpreting Scripture*, 420.

⁵⁶ Forbes, *1 Peter*, 236

⁵⁷ Watson, *First and Second Peter*, 90.

⁵⁸ Dubis, *1 Peter*, 121.

brought about the flood.⁵⁹ This position of associating the evil angels with the beings who copulated with “daughters of men” in Genesis 6:4, leans on extra-biblical Jewish thought (2 Enoch)⁶⁰ which is considered by some as the key to unlock the meaning of this text.⁶¹ Contrary to this position, Menezes and Papaioannou are correct in observing that the myth of the sons of God being watcher angels marrying humans is based on a misunderstanding of Genesis 6:1-4. They suggest considering the fact that the sons of God are the descendants of Seth who had been obedient to God and the sons of men represent the rebellious descendants of Cain and also that Jesus himself said that angels do not marry.⁶² Therefore the option of this understanding of watcher angels is not a biblical notion and we need to seek a more biblical understanding.

According to the book of Revelation there was a war that broke out in heaven in which Satan, with the angels who sympathized with his rebellion, was cast out (Rev 12:7-9). In another place where the Devil and his angels are mentioned Jesus stated that hell was prepared for them (Matt 25:41). This reserved punishment is similar to that expressed by both Peter and Jude (2 Pet 2:4 and Jude 6). In other scriptures Jesus is said to have been resurrected and placed above these powers (Eph 1:19-21), he triumphed over them (Col 2:10, 15), and these are the wicked spirits in the heavenly realms that God’s people have to wrestle with (Eph 6:12). Having considered all of these it is the position of this paper that these evil angels who fell from heaven with Satan are the “spirit in prison” that Peter mentions in 1 Peter 3:19. Further, the prison in which they are in represents their state of conquest and reservation for judgment as also seen in 2 Pet 2:4, Jude 6 and Revelation 20:1-3. And the proclamation

⁵⁹ Ibid, 220-221.

⁶⁰ Campbell and van Rensburg, *A History of the Interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22*, 85-86.

⁶¹ Watson, *First and Second Peter*, 90.

⁶² Menezes and Papaioannou, *Ministry*, 21.

by Jesus is the certainty of the triumph over these evil spirits and their cohorts accomplished by the resurrection of Jesus.

An objection to this conclusion could be: Why is it that these spirits are said to have been disobedient in the days of Noah? A careful reading of 1 Peter 3:20 suggests that disobedience is mentioned as an explanation of the identity of the spirits and not an explanation of when Christ made proclamation to them. The reference to time of Noah seems to be provided here as an illustration of the longsuffering of God towards humanity even in disobedience and the certain triumph of God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus (Col 2:15), over the malevolent spirits instigating the disobedience of humanity to God. Thus, Peter here asserts that at his resurrection Jesus proclaims victory over the evil angels that prompted the wicked generation that brought about the judgments of God in the generation of Noah. This judgment also prefigures the eschatological judgement over work of demonic spirits (see 2 Pet 2:1-4; cf. Rev 16:13-14). It is this victory that Peter encourages the suffering audience of his First epistle to delight in and find motivation for endurance. Perhaps, it is this vein that Jobes observes:

Therefore, suffering unjustly for doing good is evidence that one is on the right side of the eschatological divide. Unjust suffering for doing good, as God defines good, means that one is living out that pledge to God taken at baptism for a lifetime devoted to serving him. Just as Christ's unjust suffering led to his vindication, Peter encourages his readers that the unjust suffering they experience will not be the final word, for they have already been vindicated when Christ arose from death.⁶³

⁶³ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 235.

Summary and Conclusion

It is legitimate to ask, what then is the importance of such a difficult portion of Scripture to the life of a Christian today? This study of 1 Peter 3:18-22 presented Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension brought forth an encouragement to churches that struggled with persecution. Among the various options of interpreting the text, the "spirits in prison" are best understood to be evil angels who have always been at work but Peter emphasizes their work in the generation that lived before the flood. The text moves from Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and triumph over evil spirits. The prison represents a state of awaiting judgment and Jesus' proclamation is that of victory and exaltation over them even though he had suffered at the Cross. The importance of the study has been seen in that it shows God will exalt those who suffer for right doing and encourages Christians today in that Jesus Christ has already proclaimed victory over the evil forces that they are contending with. Jesus' triumph and exaltation over evil spiritual powers assures Peter's recipients that as they suffer for doing good their ultimate triumph over the spiritual powers that are behind their persecutors is made certain. That Jesus suffered, was raised, and ascended in victory is assurance that the persecution of his followers on earth will not be the end, but will be followed by their vindication when Jesus comes to raise the dead in Christ. Those who face persecution for Christ today and those who are persecuted just prior to the second coming of Christ can be heartened by the message of Peter, that triumph follows suffering for right doing.

Sources

- Achtermeier, Paul J. 1 Peter, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996).
- Bauer, Walter. A Greek-English Lexicon of the Greek New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BDAG), trans. and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. by Fredrick W. Danker, 2001.
- Beare, F.W. The First Epistle of Peter, 3rd ed (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1971).
- Campbell, Douglas N. and van Rensburg, Fika Janse, "The History of the Interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22," *Acta Patristica Byzantina* 19 (2008).
- Dubis, Mark. 1 Peter, A Handbook on the Greek Text (Waco TX, Baylor University Press, 2010).
- Feinberg, John S. "1 Peter 3:18-22, Ancient Mythology, and the Intermediate State," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986).
- Forbes, Greg W. 1 Peter, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2014).
- Grudem, Wayne A. "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19-20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature," *Trinity Journal* 7 (1986).
- Grudem, Wayne A. 1 Peter (Leicester: Intervarsity, 1988).
- Gregg, Brian H. "1 Peter," in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
- Hillyer, Norman. 1 & 2 Peter, Jude, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books).
- J. Dalton, William Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6, 2nd ed. (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989).
- Jobs, Karen J. 1 Peter, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).
- Keener, Craig S. The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).
- Keener, Craig S. 1 Peter (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021) e-book, "Christ's Example: 1 Peter 3:18-4:6"
- Kelly, John N.D. A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1969).
- Köstenberger, Andreas J. Benjamin L. Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer, *Going Deeper With New Testament Greek: An Intermediate Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016).
- Matthewson, David L. and Emig, Eloide Ballantine. *Intermediate Greek Grammar: Syntax for Students of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).
- Menezes, Edcarlos and Papaioannou, Kim. "Preaching to the 'Spirits in Prison': A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-22," *Ministry*, June 2019

- Metzger, Bruce M. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed. (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994).
- Mueller, Ekkehardt. "1 Peter 3:18-22," accessed 03 June 2021, <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/1-peter-318-22/>.
- Reicke, Bo. *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism: A Study of 1 Pet III:19 and its Context* (Kobenhaven: Ejnar Munkgaard, 1946).
- van Rensburg, Campbell. *A History of the Interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22*.
- Wahlen, Clinton. "Who Are the 'Spirits in Prison' to Whom Christ Preached?" in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gerhard Pfandl (Silver Springs, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010).
- Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondevan, 1996).
- Watson, Duane F. and Callan, Terrance. *First and Second Peter, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.