

been made of Christ's preaching ministry, much less proclamation that was directed toward any other group.¹⁰⁰

Another possibility is that καί could modify the main verb, ἐκήρυξεν, referring back to v. 18a ('Christ suffered... and he also preached').¹⁰¹ In this way, it would indicate that preaching represented an additional *item* on Christ's salvific agenda. The problem is that this requires v. 18b ('being put to death in the flesh and made alive in the spirit') to be understood as parenthetic, which is a difficult assumption to defend. Nevertheless, a slightly different way that καί could mark a further *activity* in the ministry of Christ is by connecting it with the entire participial clause (τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθείς). This, in fact, seems to be the most satisfactory construal in that it allows the participles to stand in a coordinate relationship ('he was put to death... made alive... and also went').¹⁰² What is more difficult to discern is whether this additional activity took place after the resurrection or before (see below).

Excursus: Preaching to the Spirits in Prison

Andrew J. Bandstra, "Making Proclamation to the Spirits in Prison": Another Look at 1 Peter 3:19', *CTJ* 38 (2003): 120–24; William J. Dalton, 'The Interpretation of 1 Peter 3,19 and 4,6: Light from 2 Peter', *Bib* 60 (1979): 547–55; idem, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18–4:6*, 2nd ed., AnBib 23 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989); John S. Feinberg, '1 Peter 3:18–20, Ancient Mythology, and the Intermediate State', *WTJ* 48 (1986): 303–36; Rémi Gounelle, *1 Pierre 3,18–20 et la descente du Christ aux enfers*, CaESup 128 (Paris: Cerf, 2004); Wayne Grudem, 'Christ Preaching through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19–20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature', *TJ* 7 (1986): 3–31; Sherman E. Johnson, 'The Preaching to the

¹⁰⁰ The second of these proposals does offer one potential way around this objection. Rather than having another group of spirits in mind, the Petrine author could be referring to the preaching undertaken by Christ during his earthly ministry: just as Christ proclaimed the gospel to sinners while on earth, he also preached to the spirits in prison following his resurrection. In this way, the author may be drawing upon the fact that the life of Christ would have been readily associated with the proclamation of the gospel. Working from this fact, he would then be moving on to explain how this ministry continued after Christ's death.

¹⁰¹ So, e.g., Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 107, 113.

¹⁰² So, e.g., Caffin 134; Johnstone 282–83; Huther 184–85; Spicq 136; Kelly 152; Bénétreau 207; Dubis 119; Forbes 124.

Dead', *JBL* 79 (1960): 48–51; Myong Il Kim, 'Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits in Prison in 1 Peter 3:19', *Reform & Revival* 23 (2019): 7–31; Paul-Gerhard Klumbies, 'Die Verkündigung unter Geistern und Toten nach 1Petr 3,19f. und 4,6', *ZNW* 92 (2001): 207–28; Charles Perrot, 'La descente aux enfers et la predication aux morts', in *Études sur la première lettre de Pierre. Congrès de l'ACFEB, Paris 1979*, ed. Charles Perrot, LD 102 (Paris: Cerf, 1980), 231–46; Chad T. Pierce, 'Reexamining Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits in Prison: Punishment Traditions in the Book of Watchers and their Influence on 1 Peter 3:18–22', *Henoch* 28 (2006): 27–42; idem, *Spirits and the Proclamation of Christ: 1 Peter 3:18–22 in Light of Sin and Punishment Traditions in Early Jewish and Christian Literature*, WUNT 2/305 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism: A Study of 1 Peter III.19 and Its Context*, ASNU 13 (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1946); Juan A. Santamaría, 'Un estudio sobre la soteriología del dogma del Descensus ad Inferos: 1 Pe 3,19–20a y la tradición sobre "la predicación de Cristo en los Infiernos"' (Ph.D. diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität [München], 2007)

A long history of debate surrounds the 'spirits in prison' referenced in v. 19.¹⁰³ Interpreters have reached differing conclusions regarding when and where this preaching occurred, the nature of the message that was proclaimed, and even the recipients to whom it was addressed. Before moving directly into the specific exegetical questions from which these disagreements arise, this excursus offers a broad overview of the history of interpretation to gain some perspective on where the interpretative conclusions ultimately end up. We will thus trace out three broad lines of interpretation, with references being given to the various offshoots of these views.

One theory, which can be traced as far back as the second century,¹⁰⁴ maintains that between his death and resurrection (traditionally known as the *triduum mortis*), the immaterial soul of Christ went to the underworld where he preached to the souls of dead humans.¹⁰⁵ Within this group, proponents are divided over what was preached and the group to whom the message was directed. The vast majority maintain that Christ proclaimed a message of

¹⁰³ Some of the more thorough reviews of research on this topic, see Holzmeister 306–51; Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 7–51; Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 27–66; Campbell and van Rensburg, 'History of Interpretation', 73–96.

¹⁰⁴ This view is first attested in Alexandria. For a discussion of the early Alexandrian interpreters who adopted the theory, see Santamaría Lancho, 'Un estudio sobre la soteriología', 158–353.

¹⁰⁵ Another group of interpreters maintains that this journey was made shortly after his resurrection in a glorified body (see, e.g., Wiesinger 236–54; Huther 179–88; Burger 249).

salvation to the generation of Noah that perished in the flood,¹⁰⁶ although other recipients have also been posited.¹⁰⁷

Many interpreters who maintain that the passage refers to Christ's descent have been uncomfortable with the notion that salvation might be extended to the dead who did not take advantage of the opportunity to respond to that offer while they were alive. Their concerns arise from NT statements that are thought to negate the possibility of postmortem conversion (see Luke 16.26; Heb 9.27). The way that passages like these are reconciled with Christ's ministry among the dead is through the postulation of different types of messages. According to some, Christ proclaimed a message of rescue and release for the righteous dead, whether they be the saints from Israel's past¹⁰⁸ or the wicked from the time of Noah who repented just before drowning in the flood waters and who thus had to wait in purgatory to remit their sins.¹⁰⁹ Others maintain that a message of condemnation was directed at those who refused to accept the preaching of Noah.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Among ancient and medieval interpreters, this view was held by Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.6.38–39; Origen, *Princ.* 2.5.3; *Cels.* 2.43; Athanasius, *Ep. Epict.* 5; Cyril of Alexandria, *Comm. Jo.* 16.16; *Comm. Luc.* 4.18; St. John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa* 4.29. Among more recent interpreters, this view has been espoused by Pott 116–17; Steiger 2:208–33; de Wette 42–43, 46–48; Alford 365; Plumptre 131–32; Caffin 133–34; Cook 204, 206–207; Mason 420–21; Beck 191–96; Kühl 219–33; von Soden 154–58; Monnier 173–83; Bigg 162–63; Weiss 319–20; Blenkin 77–78; Cranfield 102–104; Schneider 83–84; Spicq 136–39; Beare 171–73; Valentine 109; Schelkle 104–108; Frankemölle 59; Goppelt 255–63; Perkins 65; Feldmeier 202–206; Green 121–34; Vahrenhorst 155–59; Wagner-Vouga 124–25; cf. Galot, 'La descente du Christ', 471–91; König, *Die Lehre von Christi Höllenfahrt*; Giesen, 'Hoffnung auf Heil', 108–30; Külling, *Vom Gericht zur Gnade*, 47–67.

¹⁰⁷ These options include: all of the wicked dead from before the time of Christ (e.g., Thompson 95; Knoch 100–103; Ostmeyer 73–74), fallen angels (e.g., Hart 68), or fallen angels and the wicked who perished during the time of Noah (e.g., Seethaler 48).

¹⁰⁸ Among ancient interpreters, this view is represented in the Jeremiah logion [= Justin, *Dial.* 72; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.204; 4.22.1; 4.33.1, 12; 5.31.1]; Gos. Pet. 10.4; Easter Homily of Hippolytus (possibly). Among modern interpreters, this view is represented in Calvin 113–16; Bloomfield 718–19; cf. Schöttgen, *Horae hebraicae et taludicae*, 1043; Johnson, 'Preaching to the Dead', 49.

¹⁰⁹ This view was originally put forth by Bellarmine, *Disputationes de Controversiis*, 541–63. It was subsequently adopted by numerous interpreters, esp. among Roman Catholic scholars (e.g., Estius 545–46; Bengel 71; Bisping 174–77; Vrede 136–38; Felten 110; Holzmeister 346–51; Heupler 623; Willmering 1179).

¹¹⁰ So, e.g., Calov 1505–1507; Lenski 160–69; cf. also Eckhard, *Tractatus de descensus Christi*; Cramer, *De descensus Christi*; Zezschwitz, *Petri Apostoli de Christi*; Frings, 'Zu 1 Petr. 3,19 und 4,6', 75–88.

A second explanation of the identity of the spirits in prison extends back to the time of Augustine. This theory arose out of a question posed to Augustine by Euodius, a friend and fellow bishop. Noting that the passage seemed to refer to Christ's proclamation of the gospel in Hades, which (it was assumed) would have therefore been emptied of all its inhabitants, Euodius asked for Augustine's interpretation of the passage.¹¹¹ In his reply, Augustine noted a significant question that he had about the traditional explanation that Christ preached the gospel in Hades:

If the Lord when He died preached in hell to spirits in prison, why were those who continued unbelieving while the ark was a preparing the only ones counted worthy of this favour, namely, the Lord's descending into hell? For in the ages between the time of Noah and the passion of Christ, there died many thousands of so many nations whom He might have found in hell.... Or if he preached to all, why has Peter mentioned only these, and passed over the innumerable multitude of others? (Augustine, *Ep.* 164.2; trans. Cunningham).

This issue did not lead Augustine to doubt that Christ actually descended into Hades following his death, for various other passages seemed to him to teach this idea (e.g., Acts 2.24, 27). What it did was provide Augustine with a basis for rejecting a universalist reading of this passage which allowed for post-mortem conversion.¹¹² However, Euodius' letter, as well as the indications Augustine gives about the various interpretations of the text that were current when he wrote, also show the existence of the view that this text refers to a post-mortem offer of salvation to the dead, leading (potentially at least) to the emptying of hell.¹¹³ As an alternative to this view, Augustine hypothesised

¹¹¹ Augustine, *Ep.* 163 (414 CE—the letter of Euodius to which Augustine replies in *Ep.* 164): 'Who are those spirits (*qui sunt illi spiritus*) in reference to whom the Apostle Peter testifies concerning the Lord in these words: "Being put to death in the flesh, but quickened in the spirit, in which also He went and preached to the spirits in prison?" giving us to understand that they were in hell (*hoc inserens quod in inferno fuerunt*), and that Christ descending into hell, preached the gospel to them all, and by grace delivered them all from darkness and punishment, so that from the time of the resurrection of the Lord judgment is expected, hell having then been completely emptied' (trans. Cunningham).

¹¹² See Augustine, *Ep.* 164.4. Elsewhere, the idea that all of the dead were granted spiritual life when Christ descended to Hades is described as heretical by Augustine (see *De Haeresibus* 79). Others had similar problems with this view (see John Chrysostom, *Hom. Matt.* 36–37 [PG 57:416]; Pope Gregory I, *Epistolarum* 7.15 [PL 77:859–60]).

¹¹³ Pace Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 52, who suggests that this view only emerges in 'the writings of liberal Protestants, in the middle of the 19th century'. See further Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 131–33; Horrell, *Becoming Christian*, 96–97.

that the πνεύματα might refer to human beings who received the message of the gospel during their lifetimes. More specifically, he suggested that during the time when the ark was being constructed, the pre-existent Christ preached a message of salvation through Noah. Their imprisonment was thus a metaphorical way to describe their state of darkness and ignorance apart from Christ. This view, which avoided universalism and post-mortem conversion, has since been adopted (and adapted) by various interpreters.¹¹⁴

While this proposal was popular during the time of the Reformation, a variation was suggested by Luther. Rather than focusing specifically on the flood generation, Luther understood those who rebelled during the time of Noah as analogous to those who reject the message in the present. He allowed for a more universal message related to the redemption of humanity. That is, Luther understood this passage to teach that, after Pentecost, Christ brought/brings a message of repentance and salvation to all individuals (Jews and Gentiles), who are in bondage to sin (cf. Isa 42.7; 49.9; 61.1), through the preaching of the gospel.¹¹⁵ In this way, the main clause (τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεῖς ἐκήρυξεν) and the relative clause (ἀπειθήσασιν κτλ.) are thought to refer to the human race, but at different time periods.

A third explanation of this passage, which has become quite popular in more recent scholarship, is that Christ preached a message of his triumph to the fallen angels and/or their demonic spirits who rebelled during the time of Noah and who were imprisoned by God awaiting judgment. This view understands the primary influence on the Petrine author to be the Watchers tradition that developed from the legend in Gen 6.1–4, especially in the literature and stories associated with Enoch (esp. in 1 Enoch), and then disseminated

¹¹⁴ Among medieval interpreters, this view was held by Bede 102–104; Walafrid Strabo, *Glossa ordinaria Epist. I B Petri* 3.19 (PL 114:686); Martinus Legionensis, *Expos in Epist. I B Petri* (PL 209:235). Among modern interpreters, this view has been held by Gerhard 466; Macknight 480–81; Besser 277–82; Webster–Wilkinson 44; Demarest 189–91; Barnes 176–79; Fausset 508–509; Hofmann 124–34; Williams 50–57; Wohlenberg 106–15; Barbieri 69–70; Grudem 203–39; Picirilli 179–83; Powers 122–24; Warden 182–87; cf. Bartlett ‘Preaching to the Spirits’, 601–21; idem, ‘Preaching to the Spirits’, 333–73; Cowles, ‘Christ Preaching’, 401–20; Kelly, *Preaching to the Spirits*; Feinberg, ‘1 Peter 3:18–20’, 303–36; Erickson, ‘Opportunity for Salvation’, 131–44; Skilton, ‘Some Old Problems’, 1–9; Lai, ‘Holy Spirit in 1 Peter’, 246–62.

¹¹⁵ Luther 188–92. It appears, however, that his view later changed, for in his commentary on Genesis he identifies these spirits in prison as the wicked who repented just prior to the flood (see Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:217). Others have already understood the spirits in prison to be all unconverted people who hear the message of the gospel (e.g., Grotius 94–95; Leighton 2:201–16; Brown 2:463–75; cf. also Thomas, *Apostle Peter*, 214, 216–17). To justify this reading, proponents commonly appeal to passages like Eph 2.17 and Acts 26.23, which indicate that Christ himself can be said to have preached even if it is through some intermediary.

in various forms thereafter.¹¹⁶ According to this story, the Watchers were a group of angels—described in Gen 6.2 as ‘sons of God’ (בְּנֵי-הָאֱלֹהִים/oἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ)—who came down to earth to have sexual intercourse with human women. As a result of this union, a race of giants was born. These giants ravaged the earth, forcing God to send the angels Michael, Sariel, Raphael, and Gabriel down to remedy the situation. As punishment for their sexual exploits (as well as for introducing strange arts to humanity), the Watchers were imprisoned and held in chains. Along with this, their offspring, the giants, were slain. This was not the end of their havoc, however. The spirits that departed the bodies of the giants stayed on the earth, becoming ‘evil spirits’ and oppressing humanity thereafter.

After 1 Enoch was ‘rediscovered’ in Europe during the late eighteenth century (with translations being made in the early nineteenth century), it was natural that some biblical scholars around this time would draw connections with this text. The first to identify the πνεύματα in 1 Pet 3.19 with the fallen angels described in 1 Enoch was Spitta (1890). According to Spitta, the pre-existent Christ preached to the fallen angels at the time of Noah.¹¹⁷ This view represented an admixture of Enochic tradition with the Augustinian hypothesis. Others, however, separated these views, claiming either that this preaching to fallen angels took place in the underworld between the death and resurrection of Christ,¹¹⁸ or in the heavenly realms between Christ’s resurrection and ascension to heaven.¹¹⁹ In support of this latter perspective some point to the depictions of the imprisoned spirits as kept in the ‘second heaven’

¹¹⁶ On the use of 1 Enoch by the Petrine author, see Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation*; Coblenz Bautch, ‘Peter and the Patriarch’, 19–21; Pierce, *Spirits and the Proclamation of Christ*. The connection with the Watchers traditions is generally assumed within scholarship more broadly (see, e.g., VanderKam, ‘1 Enoch, Enochic Motifs’, 62–63).

¹¹⁷ Spitta, *Christi Predigt an die Geister*; cf. Baldensperger, *Die messianisch-apokalyptischen Hoffnungen*, 18. Other temporal variations of the fallen angel thesis exist as well. For instance, Fink (‘Use and Significance’, 37–38) maintained that Jesus’ spirit preached to the evil angels during the three hours when his body hung on the cross.

¹¹⁸ Those who have held this view include: Knopf 147–54; Gunkel 281–83; Selwyn 197–201, 314–62; Hauck 69–70; Stibbs–Walls 142–43; Margot 62; Best 139–46; Schrage 106–108; Schweizer 73–75.

¹¹⁹ Those who have held this view include: Fitzmyer 366–67; Kelly 152–56; Wheaton 1244; Blum 242; Davids 138–41; Hiebert 240–44; Bénéteau 230–32; McKnight 215–17; Achtemeier 245–46; Boring 140; Waltner 128; Elliott 648–50; Senior 102–104; Jobes 243–45; Hartin 42; Charles 338–41; Prigent 104–105; Donelson 112; Witherington 184–89; Keating 89–93; Schlosser 214; Osborne 225–26; Vinson 175–77; Watson 89–91; Schreiner 210–16; Keener 270–75; cf. Gschwind, *Die Niederfahrt Christi*; Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation*; Bandstra, ‘Making Proclamation’, 120–24.

(2 En. 7.1–4; 18.4). Although most claim that this involved a message of condemnation and judgment, there are some who allow for the possibility that Christ extended a message of salvation even to this evil group.¹²⁰ Combinations of these views have also been suggested. Some interpreters have proposed that the πνεύματα refer to wicked humans and fallen angels.¹²¹ In such scenarios, the message of Christ could then consist of both salvation and condemnation.¹²² Among modern interpreters, Dalton's work has been particularly influential (especially among commentators in English) in promoting the view that the proclamation of Christ was not to dead humans but to these imprisoned angelic spirits, and was a message delivered during Christ's post-resurrection ascension journey, and was not a message of salvation but an announcement of Christ's victory over all hostile powers and spirits (cf. 3.22).¹²³

* * *

The immediately following words, τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν, raise questions about how we should understand the identity and location of the spirits to whom Christ made proclamation. Related to their identity, the key question is whether they are (dead) humans or rather some kind of supernatural (angelic/demonic) beings. A number of arguments have been put forward on both sides, and the evidence is somewhat more balanced than many have acknowledged. We will begin by addressing the case in favour of the fallen angels hypothesis.

One consideration to which appeal is frequently made is the fact that ψυχή was the term most commonly employed for the souls of disembodied humans, whereas πνεῦμα regularly described spiritual beings such as angels or demons.¹²⁴ But as important as this lexical nuance may be, it is not sufficient to rule out human souls as the intended referent here because of the overlap between these

¹²⁰ See, e.g., Robinson 1342–43.

¹²¹ See, e.g., Windisch 71; Reicke 109–11; cf. Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 52–59; Hanson, '1 Peter 3.18–22', 102–103; Klumbies, 'Die Verkündigung unter Geistern', 215–17.

¹²² See Klumbies, 'Die Verkündigung unter Geistern', 217–18.

¹²³ Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*; broadly followed, e.g. (though sometimes without direct reference to Dalton), by Kelly 153–57; Davids 139–41; Achtemeier 254–62; Boring 137–39; Elliott 651–62; Richard 158–59; Jobes 243–45; Harink 99–101.

¹²⁴ So, e.g., Davids 140 n. 35; Elliott 657; Senior 102; Vinson 175; Donelson 112.