

18 As a reason why suffering for doing good is better than suffering for doing evil, Peter brings in the example of Christ, who himself suffered for doing good.¹⁶ In suffering in this way the Christian is identifying with Christ, and he or she will, according to Peter, also complete this identification in resurrection with Christ.

Peter has a number of points to make about Christ's suffering. First, it was unjust suffering. Using traditional Christian materials (scholars are agreed that traditional credal and hymnic elements are used in **3:18–24**, but arguments for a hymnic structure in part or all of this passage are not yet convincing) he points out that Christ suffered "once" (the tense of the verb reinforced by the adverb) just as they will only suffer once.¹⁷ Paul refers to this same fact in **Rom.**

¹⁶ Christ, then, becomes a test case, even a hard case (considering that people of that era could hardly be expected to see any good in crucifixion), as J. R. Lumby, "1 Peter III.17," *Exp ser.* 5/1 (1890), 142–43, argued long ago in the discussion of this passage.

¹⁷ There is a textual issue as to whether "suffer" (ἐπαθεν) or "died" (ἀπέθανεν) is the proper reading here. Both readings have strong manuscript support. "Died" could have been a shift to make the text read more like Paul in **Rom. 6:10** or **1 Cor. 15:3** and to clarify an original "suffering," while "suffering" could have been an attempt to conform the text to Petrine style ("suffer" is used 12 times in 1 Peter compared to seven times in Paul and 42 times in the whole NT, whereas all the Catholic Epistles use "die" only once, and **Jude 12**, out of III times in the NT) and the context (**3:14, 17; 4:1**). When thinking of a later scribe, it is more likely that the shift would be

6:10, where his argument is that sin has been once for all defeated (cf. **Heb. 7:27; 9:26, 28; 10:2, 10**). The reason Christ suffered was "on behalf of sins." This formula was well known from the sin offerings of the OT (**Lev. 5:7; 6:23; Ps. 39:7; Isa. 53:5, 10; Ezek. 43:21–25**)¹⁸ and NT explanations of the death of Christ (**Rom. 8:3; 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Thess. 5:10; Heb. 5:3; 10:6, 8, 18, 26; 1 John 2:2; 4:10**). It is the formula of substitutionary atonement, the death of the victim on behalf of the sins of another. Thus the traditional formula expresses the fact that Christ also suffered innocently, and not just innocently, but on behalf of others' sins.

Second, the suffering of Christ was "the righteous on behalf of the unrighteous." This not only is the theme of **2:21–22**, but also uses the vocabulary of **3:12, 14**, tying the passage together and making the parallel to the suffering Christians more obvious. Usually the NT follows Jewish usage and contrasts "lawless" (*anomoi*) or "sinners" (*harmartōli*) with "righteous" (*dikaioi*) (e.g., **Acts 2:23–24; 1 Tim. 1:9; 2 Pet. 2:8; Matt. 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32; 1 Pet. 4:18**; implied in many other passages), but on occasion the normal Greek idiom (e.g., **Xenophon, Mem. 4.4.13**, "The person

toward Paul than that the scribe would correct toward Petrine style. Furthermore, most texts with "died" also add, "on our (your) behalf" (ὕπερ ὑμῶν or ὑπερ ἡμῶν), a clarifying addition anticipating the next part of the verse. Thus we believe that these readings with "died" are secondary. Cf. F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Oxford, 1958), p. 167.

¹⁸ There is no difference between *περὶ* and *ὕπερ* in the following phrase, as the interchange in the passages cited shows.

observant of the law is righteous, but the law-breaker is unrighteous”) is used as it is here (e.g., [Matt. 5:45](#); [Acts 24:15](#); cf. [1 Cor. 6:1](#)). What may influence Peter’s choice of words here is not only the wider context and Greek idiom, but also [Isa. 53:11](#) where the Servant is spoken of as righteous: “by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities.” Because of this passage, “The Righteous One” was used as a title of Christ in the early church ([Acts 3:14](#); [7:52](#); [22:14](#); [1 John 2:1](#), [29](#); [3:7](#); possibly [Jas. 5:6](#)), and references to [Isa. 53](#) in [1 Peter \(2:22, 24, 25\)](#) make one suspect that it is being thought of here as well.¹⁹ Whatever the reason for the vocabulary, however, Christ’s substitutionary death for those who deserved death comes across clearly.²⁰

Third, the purpose of the suffering of Christ was “to lead you to God.” This expression is unusual, but while there is a large number of OT expressions that are similar (leading animals to God for sacrifice, [Exod. 29:10](#); [Lev. 1:2](#); [1 Clem. 31:3](#), bringing a person to trial or to court, [Exod. 21:6](#); [Num. 25:6](#); [Acts 16:20](#), or leading a person to God for ordina-

tion to some office, [Exod. 29:4](#); [40:12](#); [Lev. 8:14](#); [Num. 8:9](#)) as well as similar NT phrases (“access to God” in Paul, [Rom. 5:1](#); [Eph. 2:18](#); [3:12](#), and “way” in Hebrews, [4:16](#); [10:19–22](#), [25](#); [12:22](#)),²¹ Peter is creating a new metaphor, for no other NT writer has this active picture of Jesus leading the Christian to God. But it fits with Peter’s usual conception of the Christian life as an active close following of Jesus ([2:21](#); [4:13](#)). Jesus died in order that, so to speak, he might reach across the gulf between God and humanity and, taking our hand, lead us across the territory of the enemy into the presence of the Father who called us.

Fourth, the death of Christ did not destroy him, just as death will not destroy the Christian sufferer: “He was put to death with respect to the flesh, but he was made alive with respect to the spirit.” The flesh spirit contrast is found in several NT passages (e.g., [Matt. 26:41](#); [John 6:63](#); [Gal. 5:16–25](#); [Rom. 8:1–17](#)), some of which are, like this one, credal ([Rom. 1:3–4](#); [1 Tim. 3:16](#)). This contrast is matched with “put to death,” which obviously refers to the crucifixion of Christ, and “made alive,” which comparison with [John 5:21](#); [Rom. 4:17](#); [8:11](#); [1 Cor. 15:22](#), [36](#), [45](#) (cf. [2 Cor. 3:6](#); [Gal. 3:21](#)) reveals to be a synonym for “raise from the dead,” used in this passage alone of Christ. Thus Peter contrasts the death of Christ with his resurrection, the one happening with respect to the natural fallen human condition, the flesh, and the other with respect to God and relationship to him, the spirit.²² In other words, Peter is not con-

¹⁹G. Schrenk, “ἄδικος,” *TDNT*, I, 149–52; “δίκαιος,” *TDNT*, II, 182–91; H. Seebass and C.

Brown, “Righteousness,” *DNTT*, III, 360–62, 370–71.

²⁰ That there is a Jewish background to the idea of substitutionary atonement is clear: [2 Macc. 7:37–38](#); [4 Macc. 6:28](#); [9:24](#); [12:17–18](#); [17:22](#); [1QS 5:6–7](#); [1QS 8:2–3](#); [1QS 9:4](#); [1QSa 1:3](#). Yet Peter is not creating this concept from Jewish materials, as J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, pp. 149–50, admits, but using already formed Christian teaching.

²¹Cf. K. L. Schmidt, “προσάγω,” *TDNT*, I, 131–34.

trasting two parts of the nature of Christ, body and soul, a Greek distinction that would be read into this passage in the Fathers (Origen, *C. Cels.* 2.43; Epiphanius, *Haer.* 69,52),²³ but rather two modes of existence,²⁴ as an examination of the passages cited would show. Christ died for sin; therefore he died with respect to flesh, which in the NT is the mode of existence of unregenerate humanity.²⁵ But he died as a whole person, not simply as a body (another meaning of “flesh”). Christ was made alive (and note the *made* alive, for here as usual the action of the

²² As subsequent discussion will make clear, there have been several differing interpretations of this phrase: (1) he died physically, but continued living as a spirit, (2) he died in a physical body but lived in a spiritual body (cf. *1 Cor.* 15), and (3) he died with respect to the natural human existence but was resurrected with respect to the glorified human existence. Both (1) and (2) have the options of seeing the spiritual existence as referring either to an intermediate state before the resurrection or to the post-Easter state of Christ.

²³ Apparently C. Spicq, *Les Épîtres de Saint Pierre* (Paris, 1966), pp. 135–36, follows this interpretation, “Freed from the *sarx* which is weak, the new Adam is a ‘life-giving spirit.’” Cf. also to a degree A. M. Stibbs, *The First Epistle General of Peter* (Grand Rapids, 1959), pp. 141–42.

²⁴ Which is better than F. W. Beare’s “spheres of existence” (*The First Epistle of Peter*, p. 169). Cf. J. R. Michaels, *1 Peter* (Waco, TX, 1988), p. 204, who enunciates the modern consensus well.

²⁵ E. Schweizer and R. Meyer, “σάρξ,” *TDNT*, VII, 98–151, especially 131–34; G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 469–75.

Father in raising him from the dead is assumed) because of his relationship to God; therefore he was made alive with respect to the spirit, the mode of existence of the regenerate or those pleasing to God.²⁶ It is not that the spirit or soul of Christ was dead and that it alone was made alive, nor that Christ took leave of the flesh, but that in the resurrection life of his whole person, body as well as spirit, he took leave of further identification with sin and thus of the further need to die (he suffered once); he now lives as a resurrected person in the mode of existence in which Christians, even before resurrection, can participate, body and soul, although their complete participation awaits “the redemption of the body” (cf. *Rom.* 8 above).²⁷

19 Peter now inserts into the normal credal order an expansion; namely, it was in this latter mode of existence, that of the spirit, that Christ “went and preached to the spirits in prison.” The minute one writes this Petrine phrase, he is aware that this passage is exceedingly difficult. First, “in the spiritual mode of existence” is represented in Greek by an adverbial relative, *en hōi*. One would

²⁶ E. Schweizer, “πνεῦμα,” *TDNT*, VI, 332–455, especially 428–30, 438–42; J. D. G. Dunn, “Spirit,” *DNTT*, III, 701–702, 705.

²⁷ This interpretation, of course, rejects the idea that “in the spirit” refers to an intermediate existence of Christ between death and resurrection and thus also rejects the idea that the preaching of the following verses is something that he did *before* his resurrection, the older concept of the “harrowing of hell.”

expect a relative to refer back to the nearest noun agreeing with it, and thus to translate it “in the spirit,” but would this mean that Christ traveled *as* a spirit or *by means of* the Spirit?²⁸ The former is unlikely if the interpretation of 3:18 given above is correct, for no spirit existence separate from bodily existence is mentioned. The latter would suddenly introduce the Holy Spirit, which is not impossible given the Spirit’s transporting people in biblical and extrabiblical literature (e.g., Ezek. 8:3; Acts 8:39; Rev. 4:1–2), but in a construction such as this that would be unusual, for it appears suddenly to twist the meaning of “spirit.” More likely the interpretation is that Peter is using the construction in a general sense such as “in which process” (Selwyn) or “in his spiritual mode of existence,” that is, postresurrection (Kelly).²⁹ This interpretation agrees with Peter’s other uses of the expression (1:6; 2:12; 3:16; 4:4), none of which stands in a clear relationship to an antecedent and all of which refer to a general situation.

It was, then, in his postresurrection state that Christ went somewhere and preached

²⁸ For example, Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh, 1965), p. 171; A. Schlatter, *Petrus und Paulus nach dem ersten Petrusbrief* (Stuttgart, 1937), pp. 137–38, respectively.

²⁹ E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London, 1947), pp. 197–98; J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, p. 152. Cf. L. Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, p. 247, and C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 131–32. See BAGD, p. 261, for a range of meanings for this expression.

something to certain spirits in some prison. All these terms call for an explanation.

A number of alternative interpretations have been given. (1) The spirits are the souls of the faithful of the OT and the “prison” is simply the place they remained awaiting Christ, who proclaims his redemption to them;³⁰ (2) the spirits are the souls of those who died in Noah’s flood, who are kept in Hades, and who hear the gospel proclaimed by Christ after his death and before his resurrection (or heard the gospel in the days of Noah before being put in “prison”);³¹ (3) the

³⁰ J. Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: Hebrews/I Peter/2 Peter*, trans. W. B. Johnston (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids, 1963), pp. 292–95. This explanation breaks down in two places: (1) Calvin must take “prison” in a nonhostile sense, and (2) he has to explain ἀπειθήσασιν in v. 20 as not applying to these spirits, which is most unlikely. Calvin is insightful in putting the preaching after the resurrection of Christ, although he sees Christ as doing this through the Spirit and not in person.

³¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, “An Interpretation of I Peter iii.19 and iv.6,” *ExpT* 69 (1957–58), 369–72; and E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, trans. J. Marsh (London, 1955), 133–34 [*Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Stuttgart, 1948⁴), 113–15]; H.-J. Vogels, *Christi Abstieg ins Totenreich und das Läuterungsgericht an den Toten* (Freiburg, 1976), as well as Beare, Goppelt, Windisch, and Wand among the commentators. Most recently the idea of Christ’s preaching to human beings in the time before the flood by means of the preaching of Noah has been defended by W. Grudem, *1 Peter (TC)* (Grand Rapids, 1988), 157–61 and 203–39, a rather significant appendix since it forms 16 percent of the commentary.

spirits are the fallen angels of [Gen. 6:1ff.](#) and the prison is where they are kept bound and hear the proclamation of judgment by Christ (or a call to repent given in the days of Noah);³² (4) the spirits are the demons, the offspring of the fallen angels of [Gen. 6:1ff.](#), who have taken refuge or been protected (rather than been imprisoned) in the earth and the proclamation is that of Christ's (post-resurrection) invasion of their refuge;³³ or (5) the spirits are the fallen angels, but the preacher is Enoch, who proclaimed judgment to them.³⁴

³² First proposed by F. Spitta, *Christi Predigt an die Geister* (Göttingen, 1890), this position has been followed by many commentators (including Selwyn and Hauck), and J. Jeremias, "Zwischen Kartfreitag und Ostern," *ZNW* 42 (1949), 194–201; B. Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism* (Copenhagen, 1946); W. J. Dalton, "The Interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6: Light from 2 Peter," *Bib* 60 (1979), 547–55; *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits* (Rome, 1965). Spitta puts the preaching in the days of Noah; most others put it after the death of Christ.

³³ J. R. Michaels, *1 Peter*, pp. 205–11. Michaels is far from dogmatic about this interpretation, the previous one appearing to be his second choice. But he correctly notes that it fits the idea of the kingdom of God and its invasion of the demonic sphere, which previously was presumably a protected (or at least uninvaded) area.

³⁴ E. J. Goodspeed, "Some Greek Notes," *JBL* 73 (1954), 91–92. This interpretation includes the idea that Enoch was originally in the text, but is not totally dependent on that conjectural emendation. Cf. his *Problems of New Testament Translation*. B. M. Metzger, *Chapters in the History of New Testament*

In order to decide among these alternatives, we need to examine the meaning of each term in context in the light of its linguistic background. "Spirits" in the NT always refers to nonhuman spiritual beings unless qualified (as, e.g., in [Heb. 12:23](#); see [Matt. 12:45](#); [Mark 1:23, 26](#); [3:30](#); [Luke 10:20](#); [Acts 19:15–16](#); [16:16](#); [23:8–9](#); [Eph. 2:2](#); [Heb. 1:14](#); [12:9](#); [Rev. 16:13, 14](#)).³⁵ Thus one would expect it here to mean angelic or demonic beings. Were there then spirits that were disobedient in the days of Noah? A reading of [Gen. 6:1–4](#), especially as used by Jews of Peter's day, makes it clear that these "sons of God" were associated with Noah and interpreted as angels who had disobeyed God and were subsequently put in prison. In [1 Enoch](#), for example, Enoch sees a place of imprisonment and is told, "These are among the stars of heaven that have transgressed the commandments of the Lord and are bound in this place" ([21:6](#)).³⁶ Here, then, we have an event that includes all the elements to which Peter refers, spirits (angels,

Textual Criticism (Leiden, 1963), pp. 158–59, traces this conjecture back to William Bowyer in 1772.

³⁵ Normally deceased humans are referred to as "souls" (ψυχή), not as "spirits" (πνεῦμα) (e.g., [Rev. 6:9](#)), and two of the examples usually listed as showing that "spirit" can at times mean "deceased human spirit," [Dan. 3:86 \(LXX\)](#) and [1 Enoch 22:3–13](#), use "soul" as a clarifying term, indicating that "spirit" alone was not considered clear enough.

³⁶ See further [1 Enoch 10–16](#); [21](#); [Apoc. Bar. 56:12–13](#); [Jub. 5:6](#); [6QD 2:18–21](#); [1QGenApoc 2:1, 16](#); [Test. Naphthali 3:5](#); [2 Enoch 7:1–3](#). The NT knows of this tradition, for [Jude 1:14–15](#) and [2 Pet. 2:4](#) both refer to the tradition enshrined in [1 Enoch](#).

stars, Watchers, and spirits are used interchangeably by 1 Enoch) that were disobedient (“transgressed the commandment of the Lord”) and were therefore put in prison (“This place is a prison house of the angels; they are detained here forever,” 1 Enoch 21:10), all of this happening with relation to the days of Noah.

Christ, then, journeyed to this prison, which 2 Pet. 2:4 describes as Tartarus (cf. Rev. 20:1–3), but along with Jude 6 gives no spatial location, unless Tartarus itself serves to locate it in the netherworld.³⁷ While there he “preached” to these spirits. In the NT the Greek term *kēryssō* normally refers to the proclamation of the kingdom of God or the gospel (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:27), but it does on a few occasions retain its secular meaning of “proclaim” or “announce” (e.g., Luke 12:3; Rom. 2:21; Rev. 5:2). Furthermore, while Peter refers to the proclamation of the gospel clearly four times, he never uses this verb to do so.³⁸

³⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, pp. 155–56, locates this in the second heaven and thus as part of the ascent of Christ, but while 2 Enoch does identify this as the location, 1 Enoch and other literature locate the place on the earth, in the West, or under the earth. There is no real reason to pick 2 Enoch’s location over those of other literature, although Kelly is correct that καταβαίνω would serve better than πορεύομαι in describing a descent into a netherworld, and a location in the second heaven would fit nicely into the geography of an ascent into heaven.

³⁸ The verb εὐαγγελίζω appears in 1:12, 25; 4:6 and the noun εὐαγγέλιον in 4:17; κηρύσσω appears only here in Petrine literature, although κήρυξ does

Although the NT never speaks of anyone’s evangelizing spirits, it does speak of the victory of Christ over spirits (e.g., 2 Cor. 2:14; Col. 2:15; Rev. 12:7–11; cf. Eph. 6:11–12, which implies the same, and Isa. 61:1; Jon. 3:2, 4 in the LXX). Moreover, 1 Enoch also has a proclamation to spirits in prison (16:3), and it is a proclamation of judgment. Thus it seems likely that this passage in 1 Peter refers to a proclamation of judgment by the resurrected Christ to the imprisoned spirits, that is, the fallen angels, sealing their doom as he triumphed over sin and death and hell, redeeming human beings.³⁹

appear in 2 Pet. 2:5 in a reference to Noah as a proclaimer of righteousness. If this reference to Noah is seen as evidence for the preaching being to antediluvian people (despite the many problems in relating 1 Peter to 2 Peter), one should note that it is Noah, not Christ, who is referred to, it is certainly “in the flesh,” not “in the spirit,” and it is in a work that shows clear knowledge of the Enochian literature and thus the story of the imprisonment of the Watchers. That 1 Peter refers to Christ rather than Noah as the proclaimer vitiates Grudem’s argument that the issue is witness within a situation of persecution (i.e., in 1 Peter, in contrast to 2 Peter, Noah says nothing, nor is there any reference to his being persecuted).

³⁹ We recognize that those who argue that the proclamation must have been that of the gospel (and thus an offer of salvation) have the majority of uses of κηρύσσω in the NT on their side, but (1) as shown above, the more general meaning does exist in NT literature, (2) context rather than statistics must determine which meaning is intended in any given passage, and (3) the interpretation taken here

20 It is precisely this contrast between the spirits and human beings that occupies the next step in the argument. The angels were “disobedient” to God (while not totally clear in [Gen. 6](#), it is very clear in [1 Enoch 6](#)), and with them in the time of the deluge the majority of people. But God did not immediately destroy them, for he was patient (“when the patience of God waited”).⁴⁰ [Gen. 6:3](#) was interpreted in Jewish tradition as an indication of this patience (so Targ. [Onk.](#)), or, as the Mishnah says, “There were ten generations from Adam to Noah, to show how great was his long-suffering, for all the generations provoked him continually until he brought upon them the waters of the flood” ([m. Aboth 5:2](#)). Furthermore, the ark was itself presumably some time in building,⁴¹ so there is a further

fits the overall theology of the NT better (cf. above, where victory over the spirits, not their redemption, is the NT teaching). See further R. T. France, “Exegesis in Practice,” in I. H. Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, 1977), p. 271.

J. R. Michaels lessens this problem by citing the proclamation of the kingdom by Jesus as a proclamation of victory over spirits, but he weakens his argument when he then takes an unusual meaning for ἐν φυλακῇ, that is, “in refuge” or “in a place of safety.” Not only would this be unique in the NT, but neither the NT nor Jewish apocalyptic sees the earth as a place of safety for the demonic.

⁴⁰ The Greek term is μακροθυμία rather than ὑπομονή, which can be used synonymously, as in James, but often in Christian tradition has the sense of patient endurance (often of suffering) rather than simply patience or, as our word is often quite literally translated, “long-suffering.”

indication of patience even after judgment was decided upon ([2 Pet. 2:5](#) adds that Noah was preaching throughout this time).⁴²

On the other hand, in contrast to the spirits, eight people were saved (Noah, his three sons, and their wives). Although they were only “a few,”⁴³ they formed the righteous remnant of the time. And these were saved “through water,” which captures the image of the ark passing through the water of the flood.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Up to a hundred years has been fitted into the Genesis chronology ([Gen. 5:32](#) and [7:6](#) give the limits), but the two references appear to belong to two different traditions (the former belonging to a genealogy and the latter coming after the separating colophon in [Gen. 6:9](#)), so one cannot tell how early in Noah’s life the command came nor how late.

⁴² The parallel with 2 Peter is interesting, for there is the same order of judgment on the angels and then the salvation of Noah, a similar concept of proclamation, and a parallel to apocalyptic judgment in [3:5–7](#), but see footnote [48](#) above for some of the problems in using 2 Peter to interpret 1 Peter.

⁴³ Cf. E. F. F. Bishop, “*Oligoi* in 1 Peter 3:20,” *CBQ* 13 (1951), 44–45, who argues—without Hebrew or Aramaic evidence—from Arabic that “few” here and in [Mark 8:7](#) indicates a number between 3 and 10. One thinks rather that it means few in comparison with the population of the world. We should further note that the ὀλίγοι here refers to ψυχαί. The shift from πνεῦμα in the previous verse to ψυχή in this clear reference to human beings is another indication that Peter is distinguishing disobedient angels from obedient people.

⁴⁴ The picture is clearly that of passing through the water, not of the water as the means of salvation.

The stage is now set to draw the analogy together. Like Noah these Christians are a small, persecuted minority surrounded by a majority that is disobedient to God and, if Peter follows Pauline theology at this point,

That is, διὰ is used with the genitive, not with the accusative. Furthermore, the point is underlined by using διασώζω rather than σώζω, which [Hermas](#) uses in a similar context in [Vis. 3.3.5](#). An alternative translation is that of D. Cook, “I Peter iii.20: An Unnecessary Problem,” *JTS* 31 (1980), 72–78, who prefers, “into which a few, that is, eight persons, came safely through water.” This translation, he argues, takes not just εἰς in its normal sense, but also the passive of διασώζω ... εἰς. Furthermore, the idea that Noah and his family escaped through the water (which was already on the ground) into the ark is the way a typical Jewish interpreter would take [Gen. 7:6–7](#), which not only mentions the flood first, but notes in Hebrew that Noah entered the ark *m³nê mê hammabbûl*, “from the face of the waters of the flood.” Thus, while this later appeared in the *Midrash Rabbah* (“R. Johanan said: He lacked faith: had not the water reached his ankles he would not have entered the Ark” [[Gen. R. on Gen. 7:7](#)]), the haggadic expansion there is simply a deduction from the normal literal way a first-century rabbi would read that text. This interpretation, of course, fits well with the Christian’s passing through water to safety in baptism. Yet while it is extremely attractive, it fails to take into account that parallel to δι’ ὕδατος in [3:20](#) is δι’ ἀναστάσεως in [3:21](#). Thus while not so grammatically neat, Peter’s thought seems to view the water as a means of salvation to Noah, not as what he escaped through to safety, just as the resurrection of Christ is the means of salvation to believers who identify with it in baptism.

led controlled by disobedient spirits. But Christ’s triumphant proclamation and the citation of the narrative of the deluge remind them that they will be the delivered minority just as Noah and his family were, which is surely comforting in a time of suffering.

21 Furthermore, they have already experienced salvation in the same way Noah did, namely by passing through water to safety, the water of baptism (cf. the similar analogy in [1 Cor. 10:1–2](#)). With this reference Peter both draws the readers’ experience close to that of Noah and produces one of the most difficult verses in the NT.

He begins by referring back to the salvation through water experienced by Noah.⁴⁵ Baptism is an “antitype” of this event.⁴⁶ The

⁴⁵ The relative ὃ is probably original, for not only is it found in most of the early manuscripts, but if the other readings (ὡς in some versions and no relative or particle in \mathfrak{P}^{72} and Sinaiticus) were original one could hardly imagine their being altered into a more awkward reading, while correcting this one to a smoother reading would be quite normal scribal practice. The natural way to take this relative is as referring to its nearest antecedent, water, although it is possible that like the relatives in [1:6](#), [2:8](#), and [3:19](#) it could refer to the preceding event as a whole, not just to the water. The fact that he must explain later that it is not the outward washing that saves makes the reference to water itself more probable.

⁴⁶ This assertion itself is debated. B. Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude* (New York, 1964), p. 106, sees ἀντίτυπον as an adjectival modifier of βάπτισμα: “Just this [is the] analogous baptism [that] now saves you.” (Cf. his *The Disobedient Spirits and*

concept of type and antitype is also found in Paul (Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 10:6, 11) and Hebrews (8:5; 9:24; cf. Acts 7:44); Peter refers to it as if he thought it were a familiar concept to his readers. In NT usage, *typos* (type) indicates, on the one hand, (in Hebrews) the perfect or real sanctuary in heaven of which the one made by Moses was a copy or shadow. On the other hand, it designates (in Paul) the correspondence in history in which an OT event pre-shadowed a NT one. Since God is the same God in the two Testaments, one would expect a continuity of action. This idea comes out clearly in 1 Cor. 10, in which the water and manna of the wilderness prefigure the Lord's Supper, and the Red Sea and cloud prefigure baptism. Paul goes on to argue that the OT is thus a warning so that Christians will not repeat *all* the OT events. Peter likewise sees a correspondence between baptism and the OT, but with Noah, not the Red Sea. As with Noah, so now salvation separates the few

Christian Baptism, pp. 149–72.) On the other hand, E. G. Selwyn, *First Peter*, p. 203, refers ἀντίτυπον to the people, “and water now saves you too, who are the antitype of Noah and his company, namely the water of baptism.” O. S. Brooks, “1 Peter 3:21—The Clue to the Literary Structure of the Epistle,” *NovT* 16 (1974), 291, argues that one should move the period to get, “a few, that is, eight people were saved through water, which even in reference to you (is) a pattern. Baptism now saves you, not as...” This latter translation is unlikely in that it must take ὑμᾶς in two different ways (“in reference to you” and “saves you”). The distance between βάπτισμα and ἀντίτυπον makes it less likely that the latter is used adjectivally, as Reicke posits.

who are saved from the majority who will experience judgment (cf. 4:3ff.); furthermore, salvation is experienced now through water just as it was by Noah.⁴⁷

“Baptism ... now saves you” is Peter's point, and baptism saves “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” that was already referred to in 3:18–19. Just as in 1:3, it is the union with the resurrected Christ that is salvific, as Paul similarly argues in Rom. 6:4–11 and Col. 2:12, using a baptismal analogy.⁴⁸ But that raises the question as to *how* baptism saves. Peter clarifies carefully, although his thought is so compressed that it is hard for us at this distance to decipher. Still, we can see that he makes two points.

First, while baptism does consist in a washing in water, it is not this outward washing (“the removal of dirt from the body”) that is salvific. The water does not have a magical quality; neither does the outward ritual.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ See further L. Goppelt, “τύπος,” *TDNT*, VIII, 246–59; *TYPOS* (Grand Rapids, 1982), especially pp. 152–58.

⁴⁸ Grammatically the phrase “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” follows here. It is the grammatical parallel to “through water” in 1:20, although here we have an active verbal construction (baptism saves) rather than a passive one (few were saved).

⁴⁹ The language is a little unusual, for “flesh” (σὰρκός) is used for body, as it also is in a similar ritual context in Heb. 10:22, and “putting off” (ἀπόθεσις), found only here and in 2 Pet. 1:14 in the NT, is used instead of a verb for washing. J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, pp. 161–62, following W. J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits*, argues that this language would fit better with

Second, baptism saves through a pledge or “answer to God” from a “good conscience.” The first term is the more critical, but unfortunately appears only here in the NT. Two translations are possible. The one relates it closely to its verbal root and argues that it means “request” and therefore “the request of a good conscience from God.” Baptism is therefore a call to God for purification (cf. [Heb. 10:22](#)).⁵⁰ The other points to uses of the term for oracle or decision ([Sir. 33:3](#); [Dan. 4:17](#) in Theodotion) and its second-century use for “pledge” or a formal answer to questions placed by another. In this case baptism is a response to God in answer to questions placed by the baptizer (e.g., “Do you commit yourself to follow Christ?”). That this latter is more probable appears in that some Jews also made pledges at their initiation into a community (e.g., in the Dead Sea Scrolls [1QS 1–2](#); [1QS 5:8–10](#)), that this is the way the Fathers understood the passage, that the NT gives hints of such questioning ([Acts 8:37](#); [1 Tim. 6:12](#)), and that this fits the expected thrust of the passage (i.e., not the outward washing, but the inward pledge).⁵¹

circumcision and thus contrasts circumcision with baptismal confession. Since neither circumcision nor any other Jew-Gentile issue appears in 1 Peter and since [Jas. 1:21](#) uses a verb from the same root for putting away filth in a context in which circumcision is impossible, this interpretation appears unlikely.

⁵⁰ L. Goppelt, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, pp. 258–60;

H. Greeven, “ἔρωτάω,” *TDNT*, II, 688–89.

⁵¹ G. T. D. Angel, “Prayer,” *DNTT*, II, 879–81; E. Best, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids and London, 1971), p. 148; C.

If this interpretation is true, then the salvific aspect of baptism arises from the pledge of oneself to God as a response to questions formally asked at baptism. But this answer must be given from a good conscience. A half-hearted or partial commitment will not do, although it might fool people. It is the purity of the heart toward God that is important.⁵² This pledge, even in its most sincere form, however, would not be efficacious without the external objective

Spicq, *Les Épîtres de Saint Pierre*, pp. 141–42; J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, pp. 162–63; B. Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, pp. 182–85. J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London, 1970), p. 217, even suggests, following C. F. D. Moule, that the term may indicate a specific moment in the initiation ceremony. A similar suggestion is made by D. H. Tripp, “*Eperōtēma* (1 Peter 3:21): A Liturgist’s Note,” *ExpT* 92 (1981), 267–70, but with the twist that he believes that the noun means an adjuration by God (εἰς θεόν) to leave non-Christian behavior and follow Christian standards, to which the candidate presumably replied with a ὁμολογία. This explanation is less likely, partially because of the unusual way it must take εἰς θεόν, and partially because it makes the adjuration the saving event, and thus ethicizes an otherwise eschatological context.

⁵² J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, p. 163, argues for an objective genitive, that is, “the pledge to maintain a right moral attitude.” His arguments are not convincing, and this interpretation appears to import a legal conditionality into a text that is about how commitment to Christ has delivered them, which would hardly give them the confidence the author is trying to instill.

means of salvation to grasp onto, that is, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

22 As Peter began his digression with Christ (3:18–19), he now finishes it with Christ, whose resurrection is the means of salvation (3:21) and who now reigns in heaven. He makes three statements about Christ, all of which are traditional and thus credal in nature. It is no accident that two of them are found in the Apostles' Creed: "He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty."

The first statement is that Jesus "is at the right hand of God." The root of this statement is in Ps. 110:1, which the early church interpreted christologically. The wording itself is found in Rom. 8:34, and the sense occurs in Acts 2:34; 5:31; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:11; 12:2. The meaning of the statement is clear: Jesus now reigns, for he sits in the place of power.

The second statement, "having gone into heaven," is implied in the first, and it indicates the ascension that followed the resurrection of Jesus. The words also occur in Acts 1:10 in association with other ways of describing the ascension.⁵³ Peter probably cites the ascension for two reasons: (1) it was traditional to mention it alongside the resurrection (3:18) and the session at God's right hand, and (2) in ascending Christ passed triumphantly through the sphere of the princi-

⁵³ Cf. B. M. Metzger, "The Ascension of Jesus Christ," in *Historical and Literary Studies, Pagan, Jewish, and Christian* (New Testament Tools and Studies 8) (Leiden, 1968), pp. 77–87.

palties and powers over which he now reigns.

Thus the third statement declares Christ's present reign over "angels and authorities and powers." This is also derived from Ps. 110:1, along with Ps. 8:6, for if Jesus is now seated in the place of power, his enemies must be under his feet. The idea that the affairs of this world are controlled by various spiritual forces has a background in Jewish literature (1 Enoch 61:10; 2 Enoch 20:1; Asc. Isa. 1:3; Test. Levi 3:8) and is common in Paul (Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24–27; Eph. 1:20–22; 2:2; 6:12; Col. 2:15). Either these powers or Satan as the arch-power is seen as the force behind evil, idolatry, and persecution (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Cor. 10:19–21; Rev. 9:20),⁵⁴ and thus the power behind the suffering of the Christians to whom Peter is writing. In ascending Jesus goes through the "air" or the heavens (Jews variously conceived of seven or three heavens and placed these powers at various levels in those heavens) triumphantly and sits by God the Father enthroned over them. Peter is well aware (as

⁵⁴ These powers in 1 Peter are not necessarily seen as all evil. Thus the angels could be good or fallen angels. Yet in Paul all the references to the powers imply they are evil; therefore one would suspect that they probably are here as well. C. D. Morrison, *The Powers that Be* (London, 1960); G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers* (Oxford, 1956); G. H. C. MacGregor, "Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of Paul's Thought," *NTS* 1 (1954–55), 17–28; J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, 1972), pp. 135–62; H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, PA, 1972).

is Paul in [1 Cor. 15](#)) that while Jesus may now sit and potentially control the powers, he has yet to bring them all decisively into subjection (cf. [5:8](#), where the devil can still hurt Christians). But this already not yet tension is found throughout the NT. That is why some of the passages cited refer the victory over the powers to the cross, some to the resurrection and ascension, and some to the future return of Christ, for what was potentially won at the cross began to be exercised in the resurrection and will be consummated in the return of Christ. Depending on one's viewpoint, each author would focus on one or the other of these aspects. Yet even with the temporal tension, this credal confession is still comfort to the Christians. They are suffering as Christ suffered, but in baptism they are also joined to the resurrected, reigning Christ. The ability of the powers to afflict them now through their persecutors is not the last word; the reign of Jesus Christ is.

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