

## 1Peter 3:18-21 (Commentary)

Arichea, Daniel C., and Eugene Albert Nida. *A Handbook on the First Letter from Peter*. UBS Handbook Series. New York: United Bible Societies, 1980.

Two sets of antitheses appear at the end of this verse: put to death—made alive; physically—spiritually (literally “in the flesh—in the spirit”).

*Put to death* refers to Christ’s death on the cross, with people as the implicit actors, and *made alive* refers to his resurrection, with God as the implicit actor (that is, God raised him from the dead; compare [John 5:21](#); [6:63](#); [Rom 4:17](#); [8:11](#)). In a number of languages it may be advantageous to change the passive expressions *was put to death* and *made alive* to active, for example, “people put Christ to death” and “God made Christ alive” or “God caused him to live.”

A harder thing to resolve is the meaning of the antithesis “in the flesh—in the spirit.” Several interpretations are possible. (1) The dative here may be taken as a dative of instrument, and “spirit” is then taken to refer to the Holy Spirit (compare *GECL*). The difficulty of this interpretation is that while it fits the second part of the antithesis, it does not fit the first part, for one cannot say “Christ was put to death by the flesh.” (2) Flesh and spirit may be taken as two parts of the person of Christ, the former referring to his body, and the latter to his spirit or soul, or even more pointedly, the former referring to his human nature, and the latter to his divine nature. This interpretation, aside from the fact that it introduces something which is quite foreign to the New Testament (that is, nowhere in the New Testament is it asserted that a person has an immortal soul), creates many translational problems, for while one can say that Christ’s human nature was put to

death, one cannot go on and say that his divine nature was made alive. (3) A third interpretation is possible, which is taking the datives here as datives of reference, denoting spheres of existence. This would mean that while Christ was put to death in the sphere of the physical, he was made alive in the sphere of the spiritual. To put it another way, after his resurrection, Jesus Christ is no longer physical, and what he is, is defined by the term “spiritual.”

If one does not preserve the parallelism in the two related expressions *put to death physically* and *made alive spiritually*, then it is of course possible to render the last part of verse 18 as “people put to death Christ’s body, but the Spirit of God made him live again.” If, however, one wishes to preserve the parallelism, and this certainly seems to be an important element in the context, then the translation of *physically* and *spiritually* provides certain serious complications, for a number of languages have no such abstract expressions as “physically” and “spiritually.” Sometimes *physically* may be expressed as “in terms of having a physical body” or “as far as possessing a physical body is concerned.” *Spiritually* may then be translated as “as far as being a spirit is concerned” or “in terms of being a spirit.” It is, of course, essential in translating *spiritually* to avoid any term for “spirit” which would suggest a demon or some mischievous sprite.

If one adopts the third type of interpretation, namely, when Christ was put to death he was a physical being, but after he was raised from the dead, he became a spiritual being, one

may translate “when people caused Christ to die, he was a human being; but now that God has caused him to live again, he is a spirit.”

Verses 19–22 are very difficult to interpret, so much so that many interpreters take these verses as intrusions into the thought of the passage. Some others argue that these verses are taken from the book of Enoch, and that “Enoch” was inadvertently omitted in the text, with the result that “Christ” was written in as the subject instead. Accordingly, some translations have restored Enoch as the subject (for example, *Mft* “It was in the Spirit that Enoch also went and preached to the imprisoned spirits ...”). There is, however, no manuscript evidence for such a textual change, and therefore it is quite dangerous to accept it. Even if it can be proved on literary grounds that these verses are an intrusion (or perhaps a later addition) to the passage in question, that would not excuse the translator from taking seriously the whole passage as it now stands. A more difficult approach, yet the only legitimate one for the translator, is to try to discover the meaning of these verses in the light of the letter as a whole, and particularly in the light of its immediate context, and to deal with translational problems accordingly. It is with this in mind that the comments below are made.

### *1 Peter 3:19*

*In his spiritual existence* is literally “in which,” referring either to the whole of verse 18, that is, during his death and resurrection, or more specifically to the immediately preceding phrase (that is, “in the spirit”). If this sec-

ond one is taken to be the meaning here, then the way to translate it depends on how one understands “in the spirit.” For example, if one understands “in the spirit” to mean “by the Spirit” then “in which” is also translated accordingly (for example, *GECL* “in the strength of this Spirit”). If, however, “in the spirit” is understood in the way the *TEV* interprets it, then the translation of “in which” will likewise be affected. Many translations are ambiguous at this point (for example, *Phps* “in the Spirit,” *JB* “in the spirit,” *Brc*, Knox “in his spirit”).

But what does *in his spiritual existence* refer to? Does it refer to the resurrection, or to the ascension, or even perhaps to a time prior to the incarnation? The answer to this question is dependent on how one interprets the clause *he went and preached to the imprisoned spirits*. When did this occur? And who are these *imprisoned spirits*? Furthermore, what did Jesus preach: salvation or condemnation?

These questions are not easy to answer, and many scholarly treatises have been written dealing with this matter. For the purposes of a Translator’s Handbook, it is impossible to go into all the details of the arguments. All that can be done is to give a brief summary of the various possible interpretations, in order to lead one to a better understanding of the passage and to translate it more meaningfully. Briefly, then, these various positions are listed below.

A. When did Jesus go and preach to the imprisoned spirits?

1. Some time before the incarnation, that

is, it was the pre-existent Christ who did the preaching.

2. Between his death and resurrection.
3. During or after his ascension.

Favoring No. 1 is the fact that the pre-existence of Christ is mentioned more than once in the New Testament (for example, [John 1:1](#) and following; [Phil 2:6, 7](#)). However, it seems to be foreign to the passage which has as its starting point not the incarnation, but the suffering of Jesus Christ.

Favoring No. 2 is that it is somewhat in logical sequence, since Christ's death is mentioned in verse [18](#), his resurrection in verse [21](#), and his ascension in verse [22](#). Furthermore, there are other references in the New Testament which support the idea that Jesus did something between his death and resurrection (for example, [Acts 2:25](#) and following; [13:35](#); [Rom 10:7](#); [Matt 12:40](#)). Arguing against it are two things: (1) it breaks the sequence of events, since the resurrection is already mentioned in the last part of verse [18](#); and (2) it is necessary to interpret *in his spiritual existence* as different from *made alive spiritually* in verse [19](#), not to mention the problem of positing a spiritual existence to the dead Jesus prior to his resurrection. However, those who favor this position counter that Peter may have been using a creedal text here, and the positioning of events is dependent not only on logical sequence, but perhaps primarily on the demands of literary form. This second alternative seems to be the most logical and natural, considering the whole structure of the passage.

Favoring No. 3 is the fact that resurrection is mentioned in verse [18](#), and the preaching must necessarily come after that (but see argument above). Furthermore, the Greek verb for *he went* is the same verb used in verse [22](#) for the ascension, and it must also be interpreted this way in verse [19](#). There are, however, two arguments against this. First, the verb is primarily neutral, indicating simply movement which is either up or down; besides, in verse [22](#) the verb is qualified by "to heaven," a qualification which is absent in the present context. Secondly, the verb here is in the aorist tense, indicating a specific action at a particular place and time; if the preaching occurred during the ascension, one would perhaps expect a participle, indicating a process.

#### B. Who are *the imprisoned spirits*?

1. The fallen angels mentioned in [Genesis 6:1-4](#) (compare [Gen 6:2](#) "the sons of God"). Favoring this is the description of these spirits in [20a](#), as those who had not obeyed God ... *during the days that Noah was building the boat*. Furthermore, these fallen angels are understood in intertestamental literature (for example, the book of Enoch) as prototypes of heathen rulers, and Christ's preaching to them would inculcate in the minds of Christians that they too should proclaim the gospel to pagan rulers of their own day.

2. The people during Noah's time, that is, all the people who perished during the flood. These people are singled out because of the belief which was current in Judaism at that time, that these people were the worst sin-

ners, for whom no hope of salvation is possible (compare *Mishnah Sanhedrin 10.3* “The generation of the flood have no share in the world to come, nor shall they stand in the judgment”). Accordingly, that Christ preached to them is a manifestation of the universal nature of the salvation that he offers, a salvation which touches everyone, including the worst sinners. This message would indeed be a very encouraging one for the Christians of that time, who were facing all kinds of difficulties arising out of their relationship with their pagan neighbors. These people are by no means without hope; on the contrary, there is a distinct possibility that through the life of believers, these unbelievers may be led also to have faith in Jesus Christ, a possibility which is already mentioned more than once in the letter (for example, *2:12*; *3:1*). The idea of the dead listening to the gospel and even reacting positively to it is found in other parts of the New Testament. A good example is *Philippians 2:10*, where Paul, describing the response of creation to the exalted Christ, writes, So that all beings in heaven, and on earth, and *in the world below* will fall on their knees in honor of the name of Jesus” (*TEV*, boldface added). One other example is *John 5:25* ... *the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear it will come to life* (*TEV*).

Arguing against this second position is that there is very scanty linguistic evidence regarding the use of “spirits” for dead people, or for the surviving part of a person after death. In the New Testament, this sense appears only in *Hebrews 12:23* (*TEV the spirits*

*of good people*).

3. Angelic beings in general. Linguistically, this can be supported by the use of “spirits” for supernatural beings (for example, “evil spirits,” as used in the Gospels). But arguing against it is the reference to the time of Noah.
4. Both the fallen angels and the disobedient people during Noah’s time, or in other words, a combination of 1 and 2.

It might be noted that many translations do not make any adjustment at this point, thus allowing for any or all of the above possibilities to be understood. Those who want to be more definite make it clear that no. 2 above (that is, “spirits—dead people”) is their preference, as can be seen by their rendering of verse 20 (for example, *TEV the spirits of those*; *Phps, Brc* “the spirits of men”).

#### C. Where did Jesus preach?

1. In the lower regions, that is, “Sheol” or “Hades,” the place of the dead. This would be the natural and logical preference of those who interpret “spirits” as referring to people. “Sheol” is sometimes spoken of as a prison house (compare *Rev 18:2*; *20:1–7*; *2 Peter 2:4*). This position is also possible even if one takes “spirits” to refer to the fallen angels, since there is enough support from the New Testament and from intertestamental literature that fallen angels are bound and confined in “the depths of the earth (*Jubilees 5.6*), in a place characterized by darkness (*1 Enoch 10.4, 5*; compare *Rev 20:3*, where Satan is thrown into the pit). Those who prefer this position would also favor the position that it

was between his death and resurrection that Christ preached to these spirits in prison.

2. In the upper regions, which is the logical preference for those who hold that Christ preached to the spirits during his ascension. For discussion of this point, see above.

Most translations, either unconsciously or deliberately, leave this matter ambiguous, by translating the verb *went* as a neutral term, without indicating either the direction of the movement or the actual place where Jesus preached.

D. What did Jesus preach?

1. He preached judgment. If “the spirits in prison” are taken to be the fallen angels who in turn are prototypes of the rulers of the heathen, then the effect of the preaching would be to declare that their power for evil has come to an end. This would give quite an encouragement to the Christians who were being persecuted by their pagan neighbors, for they would come to realize that ultimately the powers of evil have no dominion over them, that in fact they are the real victors even though at the moment they are an insignificant and persecuted group.

2. He preached salvation. The linguistic argument for this position is that while the word for *preached* is a neutral term for any proclamation or pronouncement, yet in the New Testament, it is almost always used in the sense of the proclamation of the Good News. If the spirits in prison are taken to be the generation of Noah who in turn are prototypes of the vilest and most desperate human

beings, then the very fact that the gospel was proclaimed to them would give the greatest encouragement to Christians to proclaim also the Good News to the heathen around them, for they too can be touched by the love of God and the message of salvation.

As shown above, either interpretation is relevant to the context and the purpose of the letter in general. Again, we might note that most all translations leave this particular verb ambiguous. Those who make adjustments do it in favor of the second alternative (for example, *GECL* “proclaimed the good news to them”).

*In his spiritual existence* may perhaps be best translated as “as a spirit” or “as one who is a spirit.”

While it is true that in some languages one can use a rather neutral term for *preached*, for example, “spoke to” or “told about,” it is frequently necessary to indicate the nature of the content. Therefore, one may choose either “spoke about how God would judge people” or “... how people would be judged” or “told the Good News to” or “told how God would save people.”

The *imprisoned spirits* may be rendered as “those spirits who were being guarded.” Since the majority of scholars seem to assume that the *imprisoned spirits* are the disembodied spirits of people, it may be legitimate to be somewhat more specific in identifying the *imprisoned spirits*, for example, “the spirits of those people who are being kept for judgment.”

*1 Peter 3:20*

For *the spirits of those*, see discussion above. The word for *had not obeyed* is the same word translated *do not believe* in 3:1, and in its positive form translated “believe” in 2:7. The verb does not have an explicit object, but God is meant and this is made clear in some translations (for example, *TEV, Brc*).

*These were the spirits of those* may require some restructuring, for example, “these spirits belong to those persons who ...”

*When he waited patiently during the days that Noah was building his boat* is literally “when the patience of God waited in the days of Noah, in the days of the building of the ark.” Here “patience” is personified (compare [Rom 2:4](#)), that is, it is spoken of as if it were a person (compare [Gal 3:8, 9](#); where “scripture” is also personified). Of course it is not “patience” that waited, but God who waited patiently. This is an allusion to [Genesis 6:3](#) “Then the Lord said, ‘My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years’” (*RSV*). In its original context, 120 years refers simply to a person’s life span, but rabbinic teaching has interpreted it to mean that God lengthened the life expectancy of people in order to give them an opportunity to repent. This rabbinic exegesis seems to be echoed here. The purpose of God’s waiting is therefore a positive one: it is to give these *spirits* an opportunity to repent and be spared God’s judgment (compare [1 Peter 3:19](#)). But also included is the idea that God does not wait forever; he waited only until Noah had

finished building the boat, which was designed as a means of escape from judgment. As long as the boat was under construction, there was still time for people to obey God. This interpretation would allow *when* to be translated “while” (for example, *NEB, NAB*). It was probably from this understanding that the ark in later times became a symbol either for the church or the cross.

A strictly literal translation of *when he waited patiently during the days that Noah was building his boat* might suggest that God’s only concern was for Noah to get on with the building of the boat. In reality, of course, God’s patience relates to his attitude toward people, and it may be necessary to make this meaning explicit, for example, “God waited patiently for people to repent during the days that Noah was building his boat” or “God was patient and did not judge people during the days that Noah was building his boat.”

Rather than *during the days that Noah was building his boat*, it may be better to translate “during the time that Noah was building his boat.” A specific reference to “days” might mean that God was patient only during the daytime but not at night.

The rest of the flood story in [Genesis 6–9](#) is glossed over, except for the information that only a few, that is, eight people, were saved from the flood. (*People* is literally “souls,” but used here in the sense of human beings.) This information accents both the intensity of God’s judgment and the greatness of his love. His judgment was intense against those

who were given all the opportunity to repent, but did not, as shown by their refusal to enter the boat which would have led them to safety. (*In the boat* is literally “into the boat,” which includes the act of entering the ark and by the very act enjoying the benefit of the ark’s protection.) Only eight people responded—Noah and his wife, their three sons Ham, Shem and Japheth, and their wives. This is a solemn reminder to the Christians that while they were a very small minority, yet they too, like Noah and his family, would be spared God’s judgment.

But the greatness and universality of God’s love is also accented by the number 8, which at that time came to be understood in Christian circles as signifying perfection, replacing the number 7. This significance was probably given to the number 8 because of the Christian practice of designating the Lord’s Day (Sunday) as the eighth day of the week. And since the passage now in question is probably a part of the baptismal liturgy, and the rite of baptism was normally administered on Sunday, the number 8 attains double significance. If the number 8 can be understood in this manner, then Noah and his family represent the completeness of those who are going to be saved from God’s judgment through the new ark, that is, the cross of Christ or the church.

The subject expression *The few people in the boat*, followed by the qualification of that expression within dashes, namely, *eight in all*, may require certain restructuring or expansion, for example, “there were only a few people in the boat—there were just eight in

all” or “... there were just eight of them.” If one wishes to emphasize the meaning of going “into the boat,” one may translate the last part of verse 20 as “there were only a few people who went into the boat, just eight people.” Such an introductory expression may then be followed by a relative clause, for example, “... there were just eight people who were saved by the water.”

*Were saved by water* is literally “were saved through water,” with God and not water (a sense which the *TEV* might convey) or the ark (compare *JB*) as the implicit agent of salvation. “Through water” is in itself ambiguous, since “through” can either be a dative of instrument or a dative of location. If “through” is taken in an instrumental sense, then the meaning is that Noah and his family were saved by means of the water, since it was the water of the flood which carried the ark to safety. The reference to baptism in verse 21 seems to favor this interpretation. Some translations clearly indicate this interpretation (for example, *GECL* “the water carried them and saved them”; *SPCL*: “were saved by means of water”).

Since the passive expression *were saved by the water* must be made active in a number of languages, it may be possible to translate *were saved by the water* as “God saved them by means of the water” or “God rescued them by means of the water.”

If “through” is taken in a local sense, then the meaning is that Noah and his family were saved from the water; they escaped from the water of the flood into the safety of the boat.

This would also mean that the reference to salvation in verse 21 is primarily a negative one: the water of baptism represents the death of Christ and the evil life which one leaves behind at baptism. This local sense is found in some translations, for example, *Phps* “were saved from the flood”; Knox “found refuge as they passed through the waves.”

If *by the water* is to be understood in a locative sense, then the passive expression *were saved by the water* may be rendered as “God saved them through the water” or “God saved them from the flood” or “God saved them as they passed through the water” or “... over the water” or “... floated on top of the water.”

Some, however, make a case for deliberate ambiguity here, and many translations, whether deliberately or not, preserve the ambiguity.

#### *1 Peter 3:21*

Peter now moves from the past to the present—from the events which occurred during the days of Noah to their meaning and relevance to the present situation of the recipients of the letter. Accordingly, he takes a portion of the past events which he has just mentioned and interprets it as a *symbol pointing to* (literally “antitype”) a part of the Christian experience. In doing this, he is simply following a practice prevalent among New Testament writers (and other biblical interpreters of that time) of taking things, events, and people in the Old Testament and interpreting them as types or symbols corresponding to things, events, and people in the present. The “type” foreshadows the “anti-

type,” that is, it is an imperfect symbol of a reality which is now revealed fully in the Christian faith. Examples of the application of this exegetical practice abound in the New Testament, for example, Adam—Christ (*Rom 5:12* and following), Elijah—John the Baptist (*Matt 11:14; 17:12*), Jonah—Christ (*Luke 11:29–32*), Israel in the Wilderness—Christian sacraments (*1 Cor 10:1–11*).

Here the question that needs to be asked is what is the “type” and what is the “antitype”? In other words, what does *which* in the *TEV* refer to? There are at least three possibilities.

1. The “type” is the water of the flood, and the “antitype” the water of baptism. Thus in the same way that Noah and his family were saved by means of the waters of the flood, so also the Christian is saved by the water of baptism (*JB, Brc* “That water was the symbol to which the water of baptism ... corresponds”). The *TEV* seems to have this meaning as primary, since the antecedent of *which* is water in the end of verse 20.

2. The “type” is the whole series of events mentioned in verse 20, that is, the building of the ark, their entry into the ark, and their being saved. In this case, the antitype is not water alone, but the whole process of baptism (compare *Phps* “And I cannot help pointing out what a perfect illustration this is of the way you have been admitted to the safety of the Christian ‘ark’ by baptism”).

3. Some interpreters take Noah and his family as the “type” and Christians as the “antitype.” The sense of the verse then would be that since Noah and his family were saved by

means of water, so the Christians, as the anti-types of Noah and his family, are also saved by means of the water of baptism. This interpretation is made possible by understanding “which” to be in apposition to “you” rather than to *baptism*. The Greek grammatical construction allows for this way of interpreting the verse; however, no translation (as far as we know) has opted for it.

It probably needs to be stressed that it is very necessary for adjustments to be made in the translation, in order to make clear what Peter is referring to. As it is, many translations are ambiguous and unclear at this point (for example, *RSV* “Baptism which corresponds to this ...”; *Mft* “*Baptism the counterpart of that*” [boldface supplied]). As is so frequently the case when one translates from one type of language to another, it is almost impossible to preserve ambiguity. Therefore, the reference of *which* must be made relatively clear, for example, “the water refers to baptism” or “what happened to Noah and his family refers to baptism.”

*Was a symbol pointing to* may, as already suggested, be rendered in some languages merely as “refers to,” but in some instances a somewhat more figurative expression may be appropriate, for example, “is a kind of picture of” or “reminds one of” or “is in many ways similar to” or “may be thought of as like.”

In place of a noun such as *baptism* many languages require a verbal expression, for example, “... is like being baptized.”

In choosing a word for *baptism* it is important to select an expression which will not be con-

troversial, in the sense that it specifically excludes particular forms of baptism employed by different church traditions. In general, the tendency has been to borrow some form of the word *baptism* either from English or some other modern language or from Greek itself. In this way a more or less neutral term may be employed which diverse church traditions may interpret in various ways, depending primarily upon the particular mode of baptism which may be practiced. Of course, there are situations in which an indigenous term is widely used by people of different traditions and which might potentially be misleading, but which in reality provides no problems of usage. For example, in one of the areas of Latin America an Indian language uses an expression which means literally “to enter the water.” One would assume that this would be an essentially immersionist term, but in reality it was first used by Roman Catholics, later by Presbyterians, and is now generally employed by all Christian groups in the area. In other words, the term has lost its particular literal significance and has simply become a generalized expression for the rite of baptism, irrespective of the particular forms involved. When an indigenous expression is to be employed for rendering *baptism*, it is usually relevant to emphasize two important factors: (1) the matter of a ritual and (2) the use of water (without specifying how much or under what circumstances and by what means). For example, in a number of languages *baptism* is translated by an expression which means essentially “water ritual” or “a rite by means of

water.”

At any rate, it is this “antitype,” whatever it is, which *now saves* them. *Now* may refer to the new dispensation as contrasted with the old, that is, the era of Christ and his church as contrasted to the time before Christ or more specifically, to a definite time, that is, the time of the administering of the rite of baptism.

For *saves*, see [1:5](#) and [1:9](#). Here it may refer either to being rescued from the power of sin and being brought into a proper relationship with God, or to the final salvation mentioned in [1:5](#). The tense of the verb (present) favors the former of these two alternatives.

The text as it stands makes *baptism* (or the water of baptism) as the agent who saves. A careful reading of the whole verse, however, indicates that *which now saves you* should perhaps go with *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ* at the end of the verse (compare [1:3](#)), and the *TEV* has made this clear (compare *Brc* “It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ that makes this saving process possible”; *NEB* “It [baptism] brings salvation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”). Understood in this manner, baptism is clearly not the agent but the instrument of salvation (for example, *NEB* “water of baptism through which you are now brought to safety”), and the implicit agent of salvation is God (compare [1:3–5](#)). To express it in another way, it is because Christ is risen from the dead that baptism becomes an instrument through which God can make known his saving activity. If Christ were not raised, then baptism remains only a symbol

not of life but of death. But since Christ is indeed raised from death, then the Christian is also enabled to rise from the water of baptism into a new life (compare [Rom 6:1–11](#)).

In order to avoid translating the clause *which now saves you* in such a way as to make baptism itself the agent of salvation, it may be important to indicate that baptism is a means rather than a direct agent, for example, “it is by means of being baptized that God now saves you.” In some instances it may be better to combine the last clause of verse [21](#) with the expression *which now saves you*, for example, “by means of being baptized, God now saves you through Jesus Christ’s being raised from the dead” or “... saves you in view of the fact that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.” One may then introduce a description of what baptism involves.

The meaning of baptism is now explained, first negatively and then positively. Negatively, *it is not the washing off of bodily dirt*, which literally is “not as a removal of dirt from the flesh.” “Flesh” has many meanings in the New Testament (compare [1:24](#) and [3:18](#)). Here it is used in the sense of physical or human body. The whole expression simply signifies making the body clean in a physical sense (*NEB* “washing away bodily pollution”; *Phps* “mere washing of a dirty body”; *SPCL* “cleaning the body”).

The negative description of baptism may be rendered as “baptism does not mean washing off dirt that clings to the body” or “in speaking about being baptized, we are not talking about washing dirt from the body.”

Some scholars see a contrast here between Christian baptism on the one hand and the Jewish practice of circumcision and the rites of mystery religions on the other, which put emphasis on outward ritual cleansing. It is against this outward emphasis, sometimes with utter disregard for the inner significance of baptism, including its ethical implication, that Peter is protesting against. Accordingly, he goes ahead and mentions a positive aspect of baptism, namely, *the promise made to God from a good conscience*. For *conscience*, see verse 16. The word for *promise* is *eperōtēma*, which has the normal meaning of “question,” and this is the basis of the RV “interrogation of a good conscience.” Taken this way, the clause may refer to questions addressed to the person being baptized, together with his answers (compare KJV “the answer of a good conscience towards God”).

However, it is not at all clear that this is what is meant here. Accordingly, two other possibilities of translating *eperōtēma* need to be explored. The first is taking it with the meaning of “making a request for” (compare [Matt 16:1](#); [Psa 136:3](#)), and this is the basis for the [RSV](#) “an appeal to God for a clear conscience” (compare [Mft](#) “the prayer for a clear conscience before God”).

The second is taking *eperōtēma* as a contractual term, describing the act of the person being baptized as he pledges his loyalty to God and promises to obey him. Most modern commentators and many translations take this last meaning as primary.

There is, however, no agreement whether the

genitive construction should be taken as subjective or objective. If the former, then the meaning would be “a pledge to God from a good conscience” ([TEV](#), [Brc](#), [JB](#)); if the latter, then the meaning would be “a pledge made to God to maintain a good conscience.” It must be noted that many translations which take *eperōtēma* with the meaning of “appeal” interpret the objective genitive here (for example, [Mft](#) “the prayer for a clear conscience”; [GECL](#) “we ask God for a good conscience”; [SPCL](#) “asking God for a clear conscience”; but compare [NEB](#) “the appeal to God by a good conscience”).

In view of the grammatical and lexical ambiguities in the phrase *the promise made to God from a good conscience*, there are a variety of ways in which this expression may be rendered, for example, “but baptism means that we make a promise to God from a good conscience” or “... that our good conscience may promise God” or “... promise loyalty to God.” In this context *a good conscience* may be rendered as “our knowing that we do not have guilt.”

If, of course, *a good conscience* is the goal of the believer’s appeal to God, then one may translate “baptism means appealing to God in order that we may have a good conscience” or “... that we may know that we do not have guilt.”

### [1 Peter 3:22](#)

This last verse in this section describes the ascension and exaltation of Christ. *Has gone to heaven* recalls the verb (he went) in verse 19. If in verse 19, the verb refers to Christ’s going

down into the place of the dead, here it refers to Christ's going up into heaven to be with God. *Is at the right side of God* (literally "right hand of God") is a metaphorical expression referring to the bestowal of the highest dignity, honor, power, and even the highest function, which in this case is *ruling* with God. *Angels and heavenly authorities and powers* taken together include all spiritual or superhuman beings which in Judaism were believed to be able to influence and affect human life. The fact that they are now subject to Christ emphasizes his absolute power over all spiritual forces, both on earth and in heaven. Such a message would have had tremendous meaning for that handful of Christians who, because of the difficulties they were encountering, could have easily doubted or forgotten that Christ has indeed been and continues to be victorious over all evil powers.

If it is necessary in verse 21 to alter somewhat the order, especially of the last clause, then it may be important to begin verse 22 as a separate sentence and make Jesus Christ the subject, for example, "Jesus Christ has gone to heaven ..." In a number of languages any expression concerning "going to heaven" must indicate direction, for example, "going up into heaven," and *heaven* may often be translated as "the abode of God" or even "where God dwells."

Even though the expression *at the right side of God* is essentially figurative in meaning and refers to a favored position, it is generally necessary to keep the literal form in view of the fact that in so many contexts the "right

side" is contrasted with the "left side," though of course in some cultures it is the left side that is the side of honor rather than the right side. This may require some type of footnote to indicate clearly the significance of the "right side" in the Semitic tradition. However, in some languages *at the right side of God* is rendered as "at the honored side of God" or "at the place of honor beside God."

A literal rendering of *God, ruling over all angels ...* might mean that only God is spoken of as ruling over all angels. The meaning, of course, is that Christ is the one who, at least together with God, rules over all angels and heavenly authorities and powers. It may therefore be important to introduce the final participial phrase of verse 22 as a separate sentence, for example, "there he rules over all angels and heavenly authorities and powers."

In a number of languages *angels* are spoken of as "messengers from heaven" or even "heavenly messengers."

There may be some difficulties involved in a strictly literal translation of *heavenly authorities and powers*, since this might suggest authorities and powers which were actually in heaven as the abode of God. Such *authorities and powers* are also spoken of as being "in the sky," and therefore it may be more satisfactory in this context to speak of "authorities and powers in the sky." In reality, of course, the Greek text itself does not have a word specifically corresponding to *heavenly*. These *authorities and powers* were simply the supernatural forces which were believed to affect the lives of people, either for good or for ill.

Sometimes, therefore, *heavenly authorities and powers* may be rendered as “those spirits in the sky who have authority and power.” In some languages, however, the addition of “in the sky” would imply that these beings have no authority over the people here on earth. In these languages, *heavenly authorities and powers* may be rendered as “supernatural beings who have authority and power” or “spiritual beings who have authority and power.”