

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

Schreiner, Thomas R. *1, 2 Peter, Jude*. Vol. 37. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003.

Intense controversy over the text begins with the next phrase and continues through v. 21. We will take the text a phrase at a time and try to sort out what Peter was saying. We have a contrast between two phrases, “He was put to death in the body, but made alive by the Spirit.” The contrast between the flesh and S/spirit in the New Testament is a common one.<sup>273</sup> The RSV renders the contrast differently, understanding the two dative nouns to be datives of sphere, “being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (cf. also NRSV, NASB).<sup>274</sup>

This translation could support the interpretation that Jesus was put to death in his body but lived in terms of his human spirit. Other scholars argue that the point is that Jesus was put to death in the realm of flesh but was brought to life in the spiritual realm (cf. HCSB).<sup>275</sup> Still another possibility is that the two dative nouns “flesh” and “spirit” (*sarki* and *pneumati*) are both datives of agency. According to this view Jesus was put to death *by* human beings (the flesh) and was brought to life *by* the Spirit. Before attempting to resolve this issue, we can make some progress by establishing what is clear in the

<sup>273</sup> Matt 26:41; Mark 14:38; Luke 24:39; John 3:6; 6:63; Rom 1:3–4; 2:28–29; 7:5–6; 8:4–9, 12–13; 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 7:1; Gal 3:3; 4:29; 5:16–19; 6:8; Phil 3:3; Col 2:5; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 9:13–14; 12:9.

<sup>274</sup> The view that they are datives of reference (so Selwyn, *First Peter*, 196; Kelly, *Peter and Jude*, 151) does not differ remarkably from the idea that they are datives of sphere.

<sup>275</sup> E.g., France, “Exegesis in Practice,” 267; cf. Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 134; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 645–46.

text. A contrast exists here between death and resurrection of Christ. The participle “being put to death” (RSV, *thanatōtheis*) obviously refers to the death of Christ, showing specifically *how* he suffered (cf. *epathen* earlier in the verse). The participle “being made alive” (literal translation, *zōopoiētheis*), on the other hand, refers to the resurrection of Christ. The verb refers to the resurrection in a number of texts in the New Testament (John 5:21; Rom 4:17; 8:11; 1 Cor 15:22, 36, 45; cf. also Eph 2:5; Col 2:13).<sup>276</sup> Elsewhere in the New Testament the death and resurrection of Christ are also communicated in the same text (cf. Rom 4:25; 8:34; 14:9; 1 Thess 4:14). We can be confident, therefore, that Peter did not envision Jesus merely living in the interval between his death and resurrection in terms of his human spirit. He thought here of Christ’s resurrection from the dead.<sup>277</sup>

Most scholars try to explain the verse by understanding the dative nouns “flesh” and “spirit” in the same way. Either both nouns are understood to refer to the person of Christ, both his body and spirit, or both nouns are understood to refer to a realm, so that the realm of the flesh and the realm of the spirit are in view. Or both nouns are con-

<sup>276</sup> The verb is used eleven times in the NT and in eight out of the eleven instances refers to resurrection, but only here to Christ’s resurrection. A. T. Hanson wrongly concludes that if the text refers to the resurrection, then the resurrection is not a bodily one (“Salvation Proclaimed: I. 1 Peter 3.18–22,” *ExpTim* 93 [1982]: 101).

<sup>277</sup> Rightly France, “Exegesis in Practice,” 267–68; Davids, *First Peter*, 136–37.

strued as datives of agency, so that Christ was killed in the body by the “flesh” (i.e., human beings), and he was raised by the Holy Spirit. We can eliminate the first option because the text speaks of the resurrection of Christ, not of his human spirit. The second interpretation is ruled out by v. 19, for it hardly makes sense to say that Jesus “went” (*poreutheis*) and preached to the imprisoned spirits in the spiritual realm. But neither is the last option credible. It is doubtful that the singular “flesh” (NIV “body,” *sarki*) refers to human beings. The NIV’s interpretation that it refers to Christ’s body is much more probable. The deadlock can be broken if we recognize that the two dative nouns are not used in precisely the same way; the first is a dative of reference, and the second is a dative of agency. Christ was put to death with reference to or in the sphere of his body, but on the other hand he was made alive by the Spirit. Interestingly, the parallel in [1 Tim 3:16](#) should be interpreted similarly. Jesus “appeared in a body” (*en sarki*, lit., “in the flesh”) and “was vindicated by the Spirit” (*en pneumatī*). I think the NIV’s interpretation is correct here, and it is likely that the two nouns though preceded by the same preposition are to be rendered differently (cf. also [Rom 1:3–4](#)). The message for the readers is clear. Even though Jesus suffered death in terms of his body, the Spirit raised (cf. [Rom 8:11](#)) him from the dead. Similarly, those who belong to Christ, even though they will face suffering, will ultimately share in Christ’s resurrection.

**3:19** Before examining the details of this verse, the main interpretations that have

been proposed will be summarized.<sup>278</sup> Luther wrote, “A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.”<sup>279</sup> It should be noted that the main features of the various views are sketched in for the sake of clarity, and the differences of opinion among those who share the same view are not explained. First, Augustine, and since him many others, understood the text to refer to Christ’s preaching through Noah to those who lived while Noah was building the ark.<sup>280</sup> According to this view, Christ was not personally present but spoke by means of the Holy Spirit through Noah. The spirits are not literally in prison but refer to those who were snared in sin during Noah’s day.<sup>281</sup> If this view

<sup>278</sup> For a more detailed history of interpretation, see Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, 7–51; Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 15–41.

<sup>279</sup> Luther, *Commentary on Peter & Jude*, 166.

<sup>280</sup> Augustine, *Letter*, 164; J. S. Feinberg, “[1 Peter 3:18–20, Ancient Mythology, and the Intermediate State](#),” *WTJ* 48 (1986): 303–36; J. H. Skilton, “[A Glance at Some Old Problems in First Peter](#),” *WTJ* 58 (1996): 1–9.

<sup>281</sup> Some understand the spirits to refer to those who perished during the flood (Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, 102; id., “[1 Peter iii.19 and iv.6](#),” 370) or those who perished before the coming of Christ (cf. Kelly, *Peter and Jude*, 153; E. Schweizer, “[1. Petrus 4, 6](#),” *TZ* 8 [1952]: 78). Clement of Alexandria thought the reference was to righteous men and women who preceded Christ (*Strom.* 6.6.46–47), while other church fathers may have identified the spirits as the righteous of the OT (Ignatius, *Magn.* 9:2; Justin, *Dial.* 72:4).

is correct, any notion of Christ descending into hell is excluded. Second, some have understood Peter as referring to Old Testament saints who died and were liberated by Christ between his death and resurrection.<sup>282</sup> Third, others understand the imprisoned spirits to refer, as in 4:6, to the sinful human beings who perished during Noah's flood. Christ in the interval between his death and resurrection descended to hell and preached to them, offering them the opportunity to repent and be saved.<sup>283</sup> Most of those who adopt such an interpretation infer from this

<sup>282</sup> So Calvin, *Catholic Epistles*, 114. Cyril of Alexandria teaches that Jesus grants a second chance to those who did not sin grievously while on earth. See *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*, ACCS (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 107-8. The view of Severus of Antioch is ambiguous. It could be interpreted to refer to release from hell only to those who had already believed in Christ, or alternatively he may be teaching a second chance for those in hell (see *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*, ACCS [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000], 108).

<sup>283</sup> Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude*, 104; "The Interpretation of I Peter iii.19 and iv.6," *ExpTim* 69 (1957-58): 369-72; Goppelt, *I Peter*, 258-60. Cf. Wand, who suggests that such mercy is likely extended to all who have lived (*Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 111-12). Fink suggests the unusual view that Jesus' spirit preached victory over the spirits in prison during the three hours that he hung on the cross ("Use of *en hō* in I Peter," 37-38). Hanson adds that mercy was offered during this interval to both human beings and evil angels ("I Peter 3.18-22," 102-3). For a survey of the early church tradition of Jesus' descent into hell, see Elliott, *I Peter*, 706-10.

that God will offer a second chance to all those in hell, especially to those who never heard the gospel. If salvation was offered to the wicked generation of Noah, surely it will also be extended to all sinners separated from God. Fourth, the majority view among scholars today is that the text describes Christ's proclamation of victory and judgment over the evil angels. These evil angels, according to [Gen 6:1-4](#), had sexual relations with women and were imprisoned because of their sin. The point of the passage, then, is not that Christ descended into hell but, as in [3:22](#), his victory over evil angelic powers.<sup>284</sup>

I believe the last option is correct and will attempt to explain why in what follows.<sup>285</sup> In

<sup>284</sup> McCartney essentially accepts this view but argues that Peter appealed to a legend to point to Christ ("The Use of the Old Testament in the First Epistle of Peter," 175-76).

<sup>285</sup> This is still the view of the majority of commentators. See Selwyn, *First Peter*, 198-200; Achtemeier, *I Peter*, 245-46; Kelly, *Peter and Jude*, 152-56; Elliott, *I Peter*, 648-50; Davids, *First Peter*, 138-41; D. E. Hiebert, "The Suffering and Triumphant Christ: An Exposition of I Peter 3:18-22," *BSac* 139 (1982): 146-58; A. J. Bandstra, "'Making Proclamation to the Spirits in Prison': Another Look at I Peter 3:19, CTJ 38 (2003): 120-21. Michaels argues that the "spirits" are the offspring of evil angels (i.e., the evil spirits often mentioned in the Gospels). He understands the "prison" to be their refuge, which Jesus declares now, as a result of his death and resurrection, to be under his sovereignty. The point is that the powers are now domesticated (*I Peter*, 206-10). It is unclear, however, that Peter distinguished between the evil spirits of the Gospels and the imprisoned spirits, especially if

the discussion that follows, the second and third view will be combined since both teach that Christ liberated people from confinement between his death and resurrection. First, the idea that Christ spoke by means of the Spirit through Noah suffers from a number of problems. First, it does not explain adequately the participle (*poreutheis*) translated “went” in v. 19 and “has gone” in v. 22. In v. 22 it is clear that it refers to Jesus’ ascension to God’s right hand, showing that it is a postresurrection event.<sup>286</sup> The word “went”

the prison denotes their confinement to the earth and inability to cohabit with women after their sin. Further, that φυλακή refers to a place of refuge is unattested in the literature (so Davids, *First Peter*, 141, n. 39). Even if the term bears that meaning in some instances, the similarity to 2 Pet 2:4 and Jude 6 suggests that the meaning is not “refuge” here (so McCartney, “The Use of the Old Testament in the First Epistle of Peter,” 170). If the imprisoned spirits refer to all demons and the imprisonment is metaphorical, this would also handle Feinberg’s objection that it seems strange that Christ would proclaim victory over only *some* angels (“1 Peter 3:18–20,” 329, 333). If the reference is metaphorical, we also need not trouble ourselves over the place in which the spirits were imprisoned since the tradition includes under the earth, to the ends of heaven and earth, and in the second of the seven heavens (see “1 Peter 3:18–20,” 270–71). France rightly remarks, “Christ went to the prison of the fallen angels, not to the abode of the dead, and the two are never equated” (“Exegesis in Practice,” 271).

<sup>286</sup> Cf. also Kelly, *Peter and Jude*, 155–56; Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 159–61; France, “Exegesis in Practice,” 271; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 257–58; Richard,

seems out of place and strange for those who defend the Augustinian view, for Christ does not really go anywhere if he preaches “through” Noah. There are instances in the New Testament where the word “went” (*poreuomai*) refers to the ascension of Christ (Acts 1:10–11; John 14:2, 3, 28; 16:7, 28), while it nowhere refers to his descent into the underworld. We also noticed in v. 18 a clear reference to the resurrection of Christ. The “going” in v. 19, therefore, also most naturally refers to what is true of Christ’s resurrection body. It is obviously the case that Christ did not need his resurrection body to preach through Noah by means of the Spirit. Indeed, the reference to Christ “going” in v. 19 demonstrates the implausibility of the first view since it is difficult to understand how Christ needs to “go anywhere” if he speaks only through the Holy Spirit. This piece of evidence alone shows the first view is implausible. Second, the word “spirits” (*pneumasin*) fits much more plausibly with a reference to angels than to human beings,<sup>287</sup> for “spirits” (*pneumata*) in the plural almost without exception in the New Testament refers to angels.<sup>288</sup> The only place in which the term

*Reading 1 Peter, Jude, and 2 Peter*, 158–59.

<sup>287</sup> So most commentators (e.g., Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 145–50; Selwyn, *First Peter*, 198; Best, *1 Peter*, 142; Kelly, *Peter and Jude*, 154; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 207; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 255; “1 Peter 3:18–20,” 269–70; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 657). Reicke thinks the primary reference is to angels, though human beings are also included (*The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, 52–70).

<sup>288</sup> Cf. Matt 8:16; 10:1; 12:15; Mark 1:27; 3:11; 5:13; 6:7;

clearly refers to human beings is [Heb 12:23](#), and in that instance the addition of the word “righteous” (*dikaiōn*) removes any doubt that human beings are in view. The normal use of the plural “spirits” points toward angels, not human beings.<sup>289</sup> Further, though, the word “prison” (*phylakē*) is often used to denote the place where human beings are held on earth (e.g., [Acts 5:19](#); [8:3](#); [2 Cor 6:5](#); [11:23](#)), but the word is never used to denote the place of punishment for human beings after death.<sup>290</sup> The term is used in [Rev 20:7](#), however, for Satan’s confinement for one thousand years (cf. [Rev 18:2](#)). That the evil angels are imprisoned is clearly taught in Jewish tradition (*1 Enoch* [10:4](#); [15:8](#), [10](#); [18:12–14](#); [21:1–10](#); [67:7](#); *2 Enoch* [7:1–3](#); [18:3](#); *Jub.* [5:6](#)).<sup>291</sup> Finally, it is difficult to see

[Luke 4:36](#); [6:18](#); [7:21](#); [8:2](#); [10:20](#); [11:26](#); [Acts 5:16](#); [8:7](#); [19:12–13](#); [1 Tim 4:1](#); [Heb 1:14](#); [12:9](#); [1 John 4:1](#); [Rev 16:13–14](#); cf. [Heb 1:7](#). On four occasions πνεύματα appears to refer to spiritual gifts ([1 Cor 12:10](#); [14:12](#), [32](#); [Rev 22:6](#)) and four times in Revelation to what I believe is the Holy Spirit ([1:4](#); [3:1](#); [4:5](#); [5:6](#)).

<sup>289</sup> Michaels rightly objects that Feinberg’s view requires that the spirits were embodied when they heard Christ preach through Noah, though they are now disembodied (Feinberg, “1 Peter 3:18–20,” [320–21](#), [330](#)). But this requires that the text move back in time, and no indication of such is supplied in the text (Michaels, *1 Peter*, [210–11](#)). The same point is rightly made by Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, 96–97.

<sup>290</sup> Rightly Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, 53, 66–67; Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, [157–59](#); Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, [256](#); Elliott, *1 Peter*, [657–58](#).

<sup>291</sup> For a survey of this tradition see Elliott, *1 Peter*, [697–705](#).

what relation preaching through Noah has to the present context. Nothing else in these verses emphasizes that the Petrine readers were also to preach to their contemporaries.

The view that Christ offered salvation to those who died in the flood suffers from some of the same weaknesses as the first. Such a view also reads the term “spirits” to refer to human beings, but we have seen that this is unlikely. If Christ descended into hell before his resurrection, the word “went” seems superfluous when used of Christ’s “spirit.”<sup>292</sup> If the journey below is placed after the resurrection, at least Christ has a body with which to make the trip. This interpretation has another fatal problem. It makes no sense contextually for Peter to be teaching that the wicked have a second chance in a letter in which he exhorted the righteous to persevere and to endure suffering.<sup>293</sup> Indeed, we have seen in many places throughout the

<sup>292</sup> The view that Christ descended into hell has a long history. Those supporting such a view, however, vary in terms of their understanding of the text as a whole. See Justin, *Dial.* [72:4](#); Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.6.45–46; Athanasius, *Ep. Epic.* 5:26–27. So also Beare, *First Peter*, 145–47; S. E. Johnson, “The Preaching to the Dead,” *JBL* (1960): 48–51.

<sup>293</sup> Elliott rightly says that such a view “would be completely inconsistent with the outlook of 1 Peter, which envisions divine judgment according to one’s deeds ([1:17](#); [4:17–18](#)) and condemnation of the disobedient ([2:7–8](#); [4:17–18](#)).... And any notion of a possibility of conversion or salvation after death would seriously undermine the letter’s consistent stress on the necessity of righteous behavior here and now” (*1 Peter*, [661–62](#)).

commentary that eternal life is conditioned upon such perseverance. All motivation to endure would vanish if Peter now offered a second opportunity after death. The benefit of braving suffering is difficult to grasp if another opportunity to respond will be offered at death.

The best solution, therefore, is that the verse proclaims Christ's victory over demonic spirits after his death and resurrection.<sup>294</sup> The evidence supporting this view is impressive. First, as we have seen, the word "spirits" almost certainly refers to angels (evil angels in this context). Second, the notion that the spirits are imprisoned fits with Satan's imprisonment in *Rev 20:7*. Third, *Gen 6:1–4* may possibly provide the reason for the spirits' punishment: their sexual relations with women. Such an interpretation of *Gen 6:1–4* is debated of course. But fourth, this interpretation was standard in Jewish literature in Peter's day (see *1 Enoch 6–19, 21, 86–88; 106:13–17; Jub. 4:15, 22; 5:1; CD 2:17–19; 1QapGen 2:1; T. Reu. 5:6–7; T. Naph. 3:5; 2 Bar. 56:10–14*; cf. Josephus, *Ant. 1.73*).<sup>295</sup> The impact of this tradition is explained further in my commentary on *Jude 6* and *2 Pet 2:4*.<sup>296</sup> Some scholars

<sup>294</sup> Cf. Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 184–86.

<sup>295</sup> For a brief synopsis of this tradition see Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 171–75.

<sup>296</sup> Dalton argues that evidence from *2 Peter* indicates the author understood *1 Pet 3:19; 4:6* to refer to the proclamation of victory over angels and the preaching of the gospel to human beings who have since died respectively ("Light from *2 Peter*," 551–55). This constitutes early evidence in support of the interpretation offered here. See also Dalton's com-

doubt that Peter was influenced by such a tradition. Because of space constraints I can make only a few comments. Whatever one's understanding of the literary relationship between *Jude* and *2 Peter 2*, it is clear that the texts are very similar. We know that *Jude* was influenced by *1 Enoch* (cf. *Jude 14–15*). Hence, it is to be expected that in v. 6 *Jude* relays an interpretation that is quite similar to the basic understanding of *1 Enoch*, though he does not ratify every detail of *Enoch's* view. It is quite implausible that *2 Pet 2:4* should be interpreted differently from *Jude 6* since the texts share the same tradition. Further, those who believe in the Petrine authorship of both *1* and *2 Peter*, as I do, have all the more reason to think that *1 Pet 3:19* draws on the same tradition. Indeed, as I note in the commentary on *Jude*, the understanding of the text in the New Testament and Jewish tradition probably is in accord with the meaning of the text in *Gen 6:1–4*.

Finally, such a view of the text, as I already have argued, makes best sense of *1 Pet 3:19* in its own context. The two uses of the participle (*poreutheis*) "went" in v. 19 and "has gone" in v. 22 most naturally refer to Jesus' exaltation. That it involves his exaltation is specifically taught in v. 22, where he is at God's right hand. Moreover, this interpretation understands the "spirits" of v. 19 to be another term for the "angels, powers, and authorities" in v. 22. In both cases evil angels are in view. Indeed, in both instances Christ's victory over them is featured. In v. 19 he proclaims

mentary on the impact of Jewish tradition (*Proclamation to Spirits*, 163–71).

his victory over them as the crucified and risen Lord, and in v. 22 he subjects them to himself as God's vice-regent. If this view is correct, we can eliminate the interpretation that Christ preached in the interval between his death and resurrection.<sup>297</sup> Again we note that the words "spirits" and "prison" fit most naturally with this interpretation. The greatest difficulty for such a view is the word "preached" (*ēkryxen*). Usually this term refers to the preaching of the gospel, and such a definition fits better with the first two interpretations than with this one.<sup>298</sup> The word can be used, however, in a neutral sense (cf. [Rom 2:21](#); [Gal 5:11](#); [Rev 5:2](#)).<sup>299</sup> Context is decisive in defining the meaning of terms. Usually in the New Testament what one "heralds" is the gospel, but in this instance victory over demonic powers is heralded.<sup>300</sup> Such an

understanding does not impose an alien meaning on the word, and it harmonizes with the emphasis on victory in this text (cf. [Col 2:15](#)). Further, this fits with Enoch's role in [1 Enoch 12:4](#), where he goes and tells (*poreuou kai eipe*) the Watchers that they will be judged.<sup>301</sup> Another objection that can be raised is, Why would Christ proclaim his victory over only some angels, so that his victory is heralded only over the angels who sinned by having sexual relations with women? The question is an excellent one, though we must recognize that we cannot answer every question raised in difficult texts. It is possible, however, that the angels who sinned as recorded in [Gen 6:1–4](#) represent all the evil angels.<sup>302</sup> Still, the text does not answer this issue definitively, and so unanswered questions remain.

Virtually every element of the verse has been discussed except for the phrase "through whom" (*en hō*).<sup>303</sup> The phrase could

<sup>297</sup> The notion that Christ preached between his death and resurrection has been widely held. See Beare, *First Peter*, 145; Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, 116–18; Best, *1 Peter*, 140; Cranfield, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, 103–4.

<sup>298</sup> Many scholars believe the gospel was proclaimed by Christ either personally or by means of the Holy Spirit through Noah. E.g., Best, *1 Peter*, 144; Grudem, *1 Peter*, 160. Some argue that Christ only announced salvation to Noah's generation, OT saints, or all the righteous (cf. Spicq, *Les Épîtres de Saint Pierre*, 138). Reicke gives cogent arguments, defending the view that Christ rather than Enoch did the preaching (*The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, 98–100).

<sup>299</sup> So Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 150–57; Selwyn, *First Peter*, 200; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 260, 262; France, "Exegesis in Practice," 271; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 659–62.

<sup>300</sup> Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 186–91.

<sup>301</sup> Cf. Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, 64; Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 166; France, "Exegesis in Practice," 270. But Reicke does not draw the same conclusion as Dalton and France regarding πορευθείς (see p. 65 in Reicke). Where Christ proclaimed this victory is debated. See the discussion in Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 177–84.

<sup>302</sup> See the discussion in n. 284.

<sup>303</sup> Some scholars believe the original reading was Ἐνώχ and that scribes accidentally introduced an error through haplography. See, e.g., E. J. Goodspeed, "Some Greek Notes: IV; Enoch in 1 Peter 3:19," *JBL* 73 (1954): 91–92. The reading has no manuscript support, and a reference to Enoch does not cohere with the rest of the context (see Reicke, *The*

be construed as temporal<sup>304</sup> (cf. 2:12; 3:16; see also 1:6 and 4:4, where the phrase probably is causal).<sup>305</sup> Or it could be construed as a general antecedent and be translated “wherein,” thereby,” or “thus.”<sup>306</sup> Others take the antecedent to be the neuter noun “spirit” (*pneumati*).<sup>307</sup> This last view is the most likely. If one understands the latter to refer to sphere, then Christ goes in the spiritual sphere, and this could even occur before his resurrection;<sup>308</sup> but as Achtemeier observes it is difficult to see how this understanding coheres with Christ going in his resurrection body. It is preferable to see the antecedent as “spirit” and to understand the dative clause as instrumental.<sup>309</sup> According to

*Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, 94; Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 134–36; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 253–54).

<sup>304</sup> So Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, 103–15; Fink, “Use of *en hō* in 1 Peter,” 36–37; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 652; Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 170.

<sup>305</sup> Defending a causal reading is Skilton, “Some Old Problems in First Peter,” 4.

<sup>306</sup> Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 255–56.

<sup>307</sup> Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 137–39. France sensibly argues that this refers to the activity of the risen Christ (“Exegesis in Practice,” 268–69). Feinberg thinks that Christ as a spirit, without his body, preached either through Noah (“1 Peter 3:18–20,” 318) or after his death and before his resurrection (cf. Beare, *First Peter*, 144–45). Kelly identifies the antecedent similarly, but he adopts the view that Christ proclaimed victory over demonic spirits after his resurrection (*Peter and Jude*, 152–56).

<sup>308</sup> So O. S. Brooks, “1 Peter 3:21—The Clue to the Literary Structure of the Epistle,” *NovT* 16 (1974): 303.

this view, Christ by means of the Holy Spirit went and proclaimed victory over the imprisoned spirits.<sup>310</sup> This interpretation explains the “also,” for the Spirit not only raised Christ but also empowered him to herald victory.<sup>311</sup>

**3:20** The interpretation of v. 20 depends, of course, on how v. 19 is understood. I have already argued that the imprisoned spirits in v. 19 refer to the angels who sinned by cohabiting with women in accordance with Gen 6:1–4. Such angels “disobeyed long ago.” The participle “disobeyed” (*apeithēsasin*) should be understood as causal, explaining why the spirits were imprisoned.<sup>312</sup> The disobedience, as Jude 6 and 2 Pet 2:4 also explain, is their transgression of boundaries God established, with the result that they engaged in sexual relations with women. Another confirmation of the proposed interpretation is the reference to Noah, since the incident between the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” (Gen 6:1–4) immediately precedes the flood narrative. Indeed, it is quite plausible to understand the sin in Gen 6:1–4 as the climax of sin, the enormity of sin now being great enough to justify the extermination of all humanity.

<sup>309</sup> Rightly Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 252. Michaels observes that a temporal interval between vv. 18 and 19 is preserved in almost all the interpretations proposed for ἐν ᾧ̄ (*1 Peter*, 205–6).

<sup>310</sup> We should not see a reference here to Christ’s human spirit.

<sup>311</sup> Again Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 253.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 262. Skilton takes it as temporal (“Some Old Problems in First Peter,” 2).

The reference to God's patience fits with the reference to Noah and his preparation of the ark. The Lord could have wiped out the human race instantly and recommenced his plan with Noah. Instead God demonstrated his patience while Noah built the ark, presumably giving human beings an opportunity to repent during this interval (cf. [Rom 2:4](#); [3:25](#); [Acts 14:16](#); [17:30](#)). Some might object that God's patience toward humans eliminates any reference to angels, but we need to recall that the angels sinned with human beings, so that the fate of human beings and angels becomes entangled in the one event. It is also likely that Peter reflected on God's patience toward the angels as well ([Gen 6:3](#)), for there is no evidence that God immediately judged the angels for their sin. He allowed them to commit sin with women, and it seems that some time elapsed before he responded in judgment.<sup>313</sup>

The judgment of the flood that destroyed all is prominent in the text, but so also is the salvation of the few. Peter emphasized that only a "few" (*oligoi*) were saved (cf. [Matt 7:14](#)) from the flood. Indeed, the number of those who were rescued was only "eight." The text literally reads "eight souls," but we should understand the word "souls" (*psychai*), as elsewhere in Peter ([1:9](#), [22](#); [2:11](#), [25](#); [4:19](#)), to refer to human beings as whole persons, not to the immaterial substance.<sup>314</sup> Indeed, the latter view would be incredibly strange here since the point of the story is that they did

<sup>313</sup> Cf. the discussion in Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 204–5.

<sup>314</sup> Rightly Michaels, *1 Peter*, 213.

not perish in the flood, which would hardly call to mind the idea that only their "souls" were preserved. Some in the history of interpretation have been tempted to understand the word "eight" symbolically.<sup>315</sup> Any symbolic reading is mistaken in this instance, for Peter thought of the eight persons who literally survived the flood: Noah, his wife, their three sons, and their wives (see [Gen 7:13](#); cf. also [6:18](#); [7:7](#)). An application is intended, of course, for Petrine readers. They were also sojourners and exiles on earth, a small community beset by opponents who mistreated them.<sup>316</sup> They should not be discouraged by the smallness of their numbers but must remember that God now extends his patience to all, but the day of judgment is coming in which their opponents will be ashamed and they will be vindicated. Hence, the appeal to Noah and God's patience reminds them to persevere. If God preserved Noah when he stood in opposition to the whole world, he will also save his people, even though they are now being persecuted.

A pattern or type between Noah's day and the experience of the Petrine readers is also established with reference to salvation. The

<sup>315</sup> Kelly, e.g., sees a reference to the eighth day as Christ's resurrection and the baptism of believers on Easter (*Peter and Jude*, 159). He falls prey to reading later church history into 1 Peter at this point. For a similar attempt to read the text symbolically, see Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, 140–41.

<sup>316</sup> Rightly France, "Exegesis in Practice," 272; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 213; Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 190; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 265.

eight saved in the ark were saved physically, of course. Their physical preservation points toward the eschatological salvation that has now dawned in Jesus Christ (cf. [1 Pet 1:10–12](#)). Indeed, even in Genesis the physical is bound up to some extent with the spiritual, for those who perished in the flood were destroyed because of their sin, and Noah was preserved because he found favor with God (cf. [Gen 6:8, 12–13, 18](#)). The preposition used in Greek with the verb “were saved” (*diesōthēsan*) usually means “into” (*eis*). It is difficult to see, however, how it can retain that meaning here, for it does not make much sense to say that they were saved “into the ark.” We should understand the preposition as the [NIV](#) does to refer to salvation “in the ark.”<sup>317</sup>

<sup>317</sup> So Dalton, *Proclamation to Spirits*, 207; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 212; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 264; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 665. Elliott rightly observes that εἰς was being used for ἐν in the NT period. Against D. Cook, “[1 Peter iii.20: An Unnecessary Problem](#),” *JTS* 31 (1980): 73, 75. Cook thinks Peter was reflecting on [Gen 7:6–7](#) and conceives of Noah and his family entering into the ark from the waters of the flood that had already begun to inundate the land. Grudem also opts for the translation “into” (*1 Peter*, 161).