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JESUS CHRIST PREACHING TO THE SPIRITS IN PRISON (1 PETER 3:19)

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Abstract

This article examined Jesus Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison (1Pet.3:19). This verse has been a subject of debate among scholars, with various interpretations suggesting different identities for the spirits in question and the time of the preaching. Some erroneous interpretations have confused the minds of the people to believe in the concept of post-mortem provision of salvation. This article explores the possible interpretations and implications of each theory, providing a comprehensive understanding of the passage in its historical and theological context. Adopting a hermeneutical approach, the paper attempts to examine the identity of the spirits in prison, the meaning of Jesus's preaching to the spirits, the time of the preaching, the role of the Holy Spirit and the significance of the passage for the early church. The paper affirmed that Hebrews 9:27 states that there is no second chance for the death of the unrighteous and therefore Jesus never goes to hell to preach to them. The paper reveals that 1 Peter 3:20 mentions the result of Jesus' preaching at the time of Noah with eight souls saved. The paper considered the implication to Christian theology that if the passage refers to Christ preaching to the spirits of the dead, it suggests the possibility of postmortem salvation. Such teaching goes against the biblical teaching that salvation can only be attained during one's lifetime on earth, not after death. Therefore the passage does not teach postmortem salvation. There is a great condition to have the right salvation biblically as indicated in Mark 16:15-16 and Acts 8:36-42 while one is alive not after death.

Keywords: 1 Peter 3:19, Spirits in Prison, Hermeneutical Approach, Postmortem Salvation, Biblical Salvation Conditions.

Introduction

The writing of 1 Peter took place during a period of persecution for Gentile converts. Still, academics concur that suffering is the central theme of that epistle. To further solidify and shape their faith in Christianity, Peter penned his first epistle. He tells his audience that even though they are being unfairly punished, they should instead view it as a test and trial of their faith, one that, if they persevere through to the very end, will result in their souls' redemption. Peter also reminds his audience of the divine essence and reason for their calling. He then exhorts them to lead holy lives worthy of their election into God's family.

Beyond that, Peter highlights the link between Christian servants and their masters as well as the relationship between the state and the church. Furthermore, First Peter makes inferences about the attire worn by Christian women, suggesting that they could represent Christ through their appearance. As a result, First Peter is an epistle that teaches practical Christianity and covers almost every topic under the sun. However, according to some academics, 1 Peter 3:19 is among the most difficult passages in the entire New Testament (Keown, 1986). It appears to support both the second-chance theory and the idea of life after death, or the immortality of the soul. Thus, academics have struggled with the text over time to understand what Peter. This paper aims

to give an insight into the meaning of Christ preaching to the spirits in prison, refuting the assertion that this passage can be used to prove that everyone who dies first goes to hell and then, in the case of the righteous, goes to paradise and that there is a second opportunity to one who dies.

Historical Context of 1 Peter

Following Pentecost, the fledgling church experienced persecution, even at the hands of the Sanhedrin (Bigg, 1975). As a result, the gospel expanded and Stephen's death occurred (Acts 3–4, 7–8). Acts also records that, before Saul's conversion, the church was persecuted by him (Acts 9). Furthermore, it appears that the Roman authorities were also complicit in the church's persecution in addition to the Jewish leaders. In actuality, Acts 18:2 records that Emperor Claudius gave the Jews of Rome the command to leave the city. As a result, Peter's letter is intended to brainwash the "newly Jewish converts" about Christianity (Church and Hist, 1972).

One of the most challenging New Testament passages to translate and then understand is First Peter 3:18–22. For instance, in 3:18, is the word "spirit" referring to the spirit of Christ or the Holy Spirit? Before the Flood, did Christ preach through Noah, or did He preach Himself after His crucifixion? (3:19). Was it demons in the abyss or humanity in Noah's day who were listening to this sermon (3:19)? Is salvation by faith alone in Christ taught in 3:20–21 or baptismal regeneration? (Katembo 1)

Exegetical and Theological Analysis of 1 Peter 3:19

Peter introduces the concept of suffering in 1 Peter 3:13–4:7, which is the context of 1 Peter 3:19. The final section of the text discusses how they prepared for the Parousia in 1 Peter 4:17. Chapter 3:18–22 compares the suffering of Jesus to the experiences of the Christians at the time. Therefore, 1 Peter 3:19 fits inside the

literary structure of 1 Peter strategically. 3:18–22, given that the topic of conversation is Christ's victory over persecution and death

Interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19

In doing the interpretation, one needs to be aware of two important details: the preacher's identity and the time of the preaching. After these facts are made clear, an explanation of the phrase "the spirits in prison" will follow.

a. **The Suffering of Christ** - Peter inserts in the middle of his discussion the theme of Jesus' suffering to inform the Gentile converts that their unjust suffering (for the name of Christ) is not peculiar to them. But even this Christ whom they followed did suffer once and for all as a sinner. Peter used this word to suggest the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross which brought to an end the Jewish sacrificial system in the temples for sin offering. Though Christ was sinless and faultless, He was treated as though He sinned: that sinners should be set free (1 Pet. 2:21–25).

Further, Peter inserts as the purpose of Jesus' suffering the justification of sinners: "just in place of unjust" (1Pet. 3: 18b). In essence, the righteousness of Christ covers for the unrighteousness of the sinner: which then makes the sinner appear as if he had never sinned, hence they become reconciled unto God. Thus Christ's suffering offered the restoration of a broken relationship between Divinity and humanity breached by iniquity. Beyond that, the suffering also caused the death of Christ. But to give the Gentile Christians hope, Peter quickly adds the concept of the resurrection; that Christ, though he died because of suffering and sin, was brought back to life through the aid of the Holy Spirit.

b. **The Agency of the Holy Spirit** - The Holy Spirit, in the context of Peter's discussion,

performs a dual function. First, the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead; second, through the Holy Spirit, the spirits in prison" were preached to (1 Pet. 3: 19). What Peter meant was, the same Power (of the Holy Spirit) which brought Christ back to life was the Power which accompanied the preaching of the gospel (cf. 1 Pet. 1: 12). In 3:19 Peter states "Jesus went." Some deduce from the verb *poreuomai* that Jesus went down to hell to the demons, especially as Peter quotes from Psalm 16:10, where David mentions that God will not abandon his soul in hell. However, the Greek term *poreuomai* (to go) does not indicate that Jesus descended to hell nor is the concept of hell found in 1 Peter 3 (Mueller 3). The very same verb *poreuomai* is used in verse 22, where it mentions that Jesus went into heaven. Within the same passage, it means his ascension. Therefore, it is out of point to talk about Jesus descending to hell. If hell is the place of the wicked ones, such a conclusion will suggest that Jesus spent some time in hell. It is important to note that, the Hebrew "Sheol" can mean "grave" or "the place of torment where wicked spirits go at death. It is best to understand the verb in the same way in both verses, namely Jesus ascended to heaven. Some of the church fathers were of the view that Christ preaching to the "spirits in prison" should be understood as Christ descending to the spirit world to preach to those who lived in Noah's time with the intent of bringing them to conversion (Campbell and van Rensburg 74). That would mean giving opportunity after death to those who once rejected the message of salvation. That automatically conflicts with the message in the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus, where it is deduced that no repentance in the grave (Luke 16:19-31).

According to Nwaomah and Poswa, Augustine's view was that the text refer to Christ preaching to Noah's contemporaries

before the flood and this he did through the person of Noah (2). This position was supported by Wayne Grudem (3-31). John Calvin was of the view that Jesus went to preach to those who repented before the flood to lead them from purgatory to heaven (Campbell and Rensburg 78-79), a position Nwaomah and Poswa called "the optimistic Clementine position" (2). Wahlen suggests that the preaching to spirits in prison was done by the Holy Spirit through Noah during the time before the flood (418-21).

The Spirits in Prison

The fact that the Holy Spirit assisted with the sermon has already been shown. The focus of the conversation is on the preacher's audience - "the spirits in prison." Regarding that expression, there are various ways to understand it. According to academics such as Nwaomah (13-14), "the spirits in prison" were evil angels. The Evil angels were those who copulated with humans and exacerbated the evils of the antediluvians, which brought about the flood (Dubis 220-21). Some scholars believe that the Antediluvians were in revolt, and these demons led the charge (Nwaomah 14). Hence, the understanding that the "spirits in prison" are the souls of Old Testament Christians that Jesus freed from the grip of death and took to heaven. (Campbell and van Rensburg 85-86). The message of Jesus' death and resurrection resonates with these people.

Contrary to this position, Menezes and Papaioannou observe that the myth of the sons of God being watcher angels marrying humans is based on a misunderstanding of Genesis 6:1-4. They propose taking into account the fact that the sons of God are Seth's descendants who obeyed God, while the sons of men are Cain's disobedient descendants. Additionally, Jesus himself declared that angels do not get married (2). That means this understanding of watcher angels is not a biblical notion (Nwaomah 16). Others believe that the spirits incarcerated are

disembodied souls because they are the spirits of people who perished in the flood. Jesus therefore preached repentance and forgiveness to them at the time of his death (Mueller 3). According to Mueller, the proclamation of Jesus (Acts 9:20), the gospel (Matt 9:35), the kingdom of God (Acts 28:31), and the call to repentance (Matt 4:17) are all referred to as *kerusso*. Wahlen rightly observes that the word *kerusso* is used in the New Testament almost exclusively to refer to preaching and also that in this context it is connected to Noah, whom the author elsewhere refers to as a preacher of righteousness (420). In addition to 1 Peter 3:19, the terms "to go" and "preach" are also used in the Gospel of Mark, namely in the commission to the Twelve in Matthew 10:7 and the Great Commission in Mark 16:15, as well as in Jonah 1:2 and 3:2, when Jonah was instructed to go and preach a word of judgment to Nineveh. Jesus comes out of the grave, and on his way to heaven, he addresses the fallen angels, and the demons, and proclaims good news to his followers and judgment to the demons (3). While these theories sound interesting, each has its deficiencies and contradictions.

Mueller's theory that "the spirits in prison" were corporeal souls to whom Christ preached after His death is incompatible with the sentence's logic and organization. In verse 18, Peter says that although Jesus died on the cross to atone for sins, the Holy Spirit raised him from the grave. As a result, the Christ to whom Peter alludes in verse 19 cannot be the dead Christ but rather the Living Christ. Thus, the sermon did not conclude with His death. Additionally, since Mueller asserts that Jesus spoke to the dead's souls when he was dying and it is proven that Christ did not preach at death, this refutes Mueller's second assertion that the spirits imprisoned were the souls of the dead. Besides this, the Bible states that there is no second chance after death, as it is appointed for man to die once after that is judgment (Heb. 9:27).

Nwaomah asserts that fallen evil angels were the spirits housed in the jail, in which Jesus announced his triumph (16). Dalton supports this idea as he mentions that the ascension of Jesus to heaven was a proclamation of the victory of Christ. He that Peter was paralleling the thought in the book of Enoch, where the disobedient angels were in prison in the lower heavens (157-58).

In order to respond to Nwaomah's conclusion, it is necessary to determine if the expression is literal or symbolic. If the former, it is crucial to remember that ghosts are not contained behind jail walls. Spirits and the jail are both expressions, so one cannot interpret one as actual and the other as symbolic. Therefore, the phrase does not always refer to a "prison" or "guard"; it can also refer to the hour of darkness (Ekpendu 26) or the period of the night between sunset and sunrise that is split into four watches of three hours each (Matt 14:25; 24:43; Mark 6:48; Luke 12:38; Mark 13: 35). It also denotes dusk or darkness as a result. The issue still stands, nevertheless, and has several interpretations in the New Testament: spirit or life-giving breath (Matt. 27: 50), the immaterial aspect of man (1 Cor. 5: 3; Col. 2: 5; 1 Thess. 5: 23; Heb. 4: 12), or the individual (Rom. 8: 16; Phil. 4: 23). One might infer from the previous translation that "oneself" is tied to people. Translation is thus now possible "as people in darkness." Disobedience is what defines the darkness (1 Pet. 3:20a). The idea that the preaching was done to the fallen angels of the Antediluvians who led the revolt also contradicts the fact that demons cannot be saved because of the irrevocable character of their choice (Slick 1). Even though Nwaomah is of the view that Jesus' preaching was that of announcing his triumph, still, it is doubtful if Jesus will have to descend to the abode of the wicked so that they know his victory.

The Time of the Preaching

There are controversies regarding the time of the preaching just as there exist arguments on the spirits who were the objects of the preaching. Some people believe that before or after his resurrection, Jesus proclaimed triumph over the fallen angels who sinned in the time of Noah (Keener 694). The weakness of this view is the assumption that the fallen angels were the sons of God who married the daughters of men in Genesis 6:4 (Nwaomah 5). According to Beare Jesus preached to the wicked who perished in the flood at some point after his resurrection (172).

Regarding the timing of the sermons, Peter does not leave his readers in the dark. He gives us pointers and clues in 1 Peter 3:20 that clarify our understanding of the spirits incarcerated. Peter adds that in addition to their lack of faith, God was patiently waiting for them to convert from their immoral behaviour. Not to be forgotten is the time that God showed His loving patience to the disobedient or spirits imprisoned "in the days of Noah." This argues against the claim that the preaching was done during Jesus' time in the grave, as the scriptures plainly state that they were delivered during Noah's time, as in the days.

Accordingly, the spirits in captivity were alive individuals before the flood rather than disembodied souls who perished as a result of it (Gen. 6:1-13; Matt. 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-27). God then gave Noah the order to build an ark to save his family and the many types of living things when the people kept rebelling against Him (Gen. 6:14-7:24). This means that Peter is purposefully attempting to clarify things and is aware of the time allusion (Hauffe 79).

If he meant to convey that Christ talked to the spirits "now" in prison through Noah, it would be exceedingly illogical to omit the temporal adverb and leave the listener to make up the time shift as he carefully guides them through his chapter. Peter states plainly that the

sermons were delivered "while Noah was still constructing the ark" (1 Pet. 3: 20c). The use of the nun, which is a contrast between "then" and "now" is made by the use of the temporal adverb and the one in verse 21. Therefore this adverb indicates that the disobedience of the spirits occurred prior to their imprisonment and thus prior to Christ's proclamation. It also illustrates that disobedience can only be tolerated for a time before it is punished (Hauffe 87-88). Of all the individuals who lived during Noah's time, only eight were spared from certain death by the deluge because they subscribed to the theory that the world will end in a flood (Gen. 7:1,7; 1 Pet 3:20d; 2 Pet. 3:6). This indicates that Jesus was in Noah teaching the message that condemned those who rejected it to eternal damnation. Right from the fall of man, God has been working to restore man to his glorious position. The preaching of Noah was not of himself, but what God worked through him.

Theological Relevance of 1 Peter 3:19.

First of all, the theology of suffering and justification is presented in 1 Peter 3:19 and throughout the entire epistle. A crucial component of the Christian life is suffering, which serves to solidify and purify believers in their professed faith. Indeed, Christians ought to view their suffering as a kind of trial. In addition, Christ Himself underwent suffering as a sinner to atone for our sins, providing us with a model to imitate (1 Pet. 2: 21-22). Therefore, Christ ought to serve as our role model and source of comfort for modern Christians while they endure pain.

Second, the theology of death and resurrection is also included in the text. Death may follow suffering, but for a Christian who died in faith in Christ, death does not mean the end. Thus, the everlasting hope of the resurrection should encourage Christians to cling to their faith till the end. Indeed, it will be a powerful witness to those who are not part of the Christian faith.

Third, the text has some theological allusions to sin. Disobedience is considered by any Christian who disobeys the voice of God through His servants and apostles. And when a person disobeys, their heart is chained to great immorality and iniquity, making their insatiable desires feel imprisoned. Christians ought to live in the light that God has given via His Word, which is the only thing that can keep us upright and within the bounds of righteousness.

Fourth, the Grace theology is presented in this text. God does not judge a disobedient generation of people right away; instead, He offers offenders an opportunity to turn from their ways so that when He does act in the end, He will be justified. Furthermore, Christians nowadays shouldn't see God's apparent delay in judgment (like in the Parousia) as laziness; rather, He is merely showing us the same grace He showed Noah to prevent everyone from perishing (1 Pet. 3: 20; 2 Pet. 3: 9).

Fifth, the baptismal theology is emphasized in the text. Our salvation depends on our baptism. It is a symbol of both new life in Christ and death in our old way of existence (1 Pet. 3: 21; Rom. 6: 1-7). Therefore, in addition to giving up their sin and walking in holiness, Christians who are baptized should also consider baptism to be more than just a ritual or tradition.

Sixth, the concept of post-mortem salvation is not biblical. The Bible emphatically teaches that it is appointed for man to die once after which comes judgment (Heb. 9:27). If one believes Jesus preached salvation message to the spirit in hell to repent, that would conflict with this plain passage.

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