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The Who, What, How, and When of 1 Peter 3:19

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Who or what are the spirits to whom Jesus preached? What did Jesus preach? What does Peter mean by preaching? How did Jesus preach, and when did Jesus preach?

INTRODUCTION

First Peter 3:19 presents scholars with multiple interpretive challenges.¹ Space constraints prevent me from critically engaging the complicated reflections upon the verse in the history of interpretation. Instead, I simply attempt to answer some of the basics of the who, what, how, and when questions presented by v. 19. Who or what are the spirits to whom Jesus preached? What did Jesus preach? What does Peter mean by preaching? How did Jesus preach, and when did Jesus preach? My thesis is Peter suggests Jesus preached a sermon of defeat (what) by means of his death, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension (how and when) to all the rebellious angels in Gen 6:1–8 (who). I support this thesis with a succinct exegesis of v. 19.



1 PETER 3:19 IN CONTEXT

Peter wrote to Christians in the diaspora to encourage them to keep being faithful to Christ while suffering for their faith in Christ and/or while suffering as Christians (1:1–2, 6–7; 1:13–2:25; 3:13–5:19). 3:19 connects with 3:8–4:6 to form one unit. The section teaches that when Christians experience unjust suffering for Christ, they should imitate Christ's example by suffering for him in an honorable way, because he suffered injustice in an honorable way for them to bring them to God without repaying evil for evil (esp. 3:16–

¹ For a discussion of, interaction with, and a bibliography of the scholarship on 1 Pet 3:19, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, CSC (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 209–216; Craig S. Keener, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 269–275; Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005; 2nd edition published in 2022), 242–51. For recent scholarship on Holy Saturday, see Matthew Y. Emerson, *“He Descended to the Dead:” An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

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19). 3:19 most immediately links with vv. 17–18, which provide the reason for Peter’s command in v. 15 to set Christ apart in their hearts to give a defense to all for the hope they have in Christ when their (likely) unbelieving neighbors ask them about their hope in Christ.²

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To reiterate my thesis from above, Peter suggests Jesus preached a sermon of defeat (what) by means of his death, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension (how and when) to all rebellious angels (who) who fell in the days of Noah in Gen 6:1–8. I spend the rest of the article succinctly supporting this thesis with a concise exegetical analysis of v. 19. V. 19 is a relative clause, which the Greek prepositional phrase ἐν ᾧ (“by which”) at the beginning of the sentence supports. The clause ends in v. 19 with the Greek verb translated as “he preached” (ἐκήρυξεν). One could render the phrase in multiple ways,³ but I translate it as “by which.” I understand the antecedent of “which” in the clause to be Jesus’ death, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension stated in v. 18 (and in v. 22) instead of a reference to Christ, God, or the Spirit in v. 18.

In my view, the “which” (ὃ) in the phrase “by which” (ἐν ᾧ) in v. 19 is a grammatically neuter (neither masculine nor feminine) relative pronoun.⁴ Neuter relative pronouns can either refer to nouns (4:11) or to entire clauses and concepts (4:4). In my reading of v. 19, the phrase refers to the concepts of Jesus’ death and to his being brought to life by the Spirit in v. 18. Peter’s word choice for being brought to life (ζωοποιηθεὶς) in v. 19 supports that he refers to Jesus’ death and resurrection in v. 19 with the phrase “by which,” because every occurrence of a form of this verb in the NT refers to eternal life (John 5:21; 6:63; Rom 4:17; 8:11; 1 Cor 15:22, 36, 45; 2 Cor 3:6; Gal 3:21), because Peter refers to Jesus’ resurrection in 1:3, 21, and because he points readers to imitate Christ’s suffering in the letter so that they would inherit their eschatological reward of salvation when the resurrected and exalted/ascended Christ returns (1:5–2:25).

Except for one place in 1 Peter (3:4), “Spirit” always refers to the Holy Spirit in the letter (1 Pet 1:2, 11–12; 3:18–19; 4:6, 14). To strengthen the point about the Spirit’s role in the resurrection of Christ in v. 19, the reader can look elsewhere in the NT. While scholars disagree on many things in Rom 1:4, including whether Paul refers to the Holy Spirit, a plausible reading of the verse is he mentions the Holy Spirit in relationship to Jesus’

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of NT texts are mine, and quotations of Jewish literature come from James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (New York: Double Day, 1985).

³ “in which,” “by which,” “in whom,” or “when.”

⁴ The relative pronoun “which” in Greek can be masculine or neuter in form.

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resurrection since he calls him “the Spirit of holiness” in a context where he clearly mentions Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Thus, 1 Pet 3:19 refers to Jesus being put to death by means of crucifixion and being raised to live by means of the Holy Spirit.

The prepositional phrase “by which” in v. 19 modifies the verb “he preached” in the sentence “he preached to the imprisoned spirits.” In this regard, the phrase explains how Jesus preached to these spirits. Proverbs 1:21 and 8:1 personify wisdom as preaching to those who will listen to her with the same verb (κηρύσσω) that Peter uses in 1 Pet 3:19. If Peter likewise uses the verb metaphorically to personify Jesus’ death, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension, he teaches that Christ’s preaching took place in the form of an event, namely, by the cross, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension, not with a sermon between the time of his death and resurrection (3:19). My reading does not deny the historical possibility that Jesus preached to the spirits by means of a descent into hell between his death and resurrection, but my argument is that’s not what 1 Pet 3:19 teaches. Instead, Jesus’ proclamation in 3:19 was a proclamation of judgment and death to the fallen angels from Gen 6:1–8. First Enoch 12:4–5 strengthens this interpretation saying “At that moment the Watchers (angels) were calling me. And they said to me, ‘Enoch, scribe of righteousness, go and make known to the Watchers of heaven who have abandoned the high heaven, the holy eternal place, and have defiled themselves with women, as their deeds move the children of the world, and have taken unto themselves wives: They have defiled themselves with great defilement upon the earth; neither will there be peace unto them nor the forgiveness of sin’” (parenthesis mine).⁵

Readers may point to 1 Pet 4:6 to challenge my reading of 3:19 since there Peter says Jesus preached the gospel to the dead with the Greek verb εὐηγγελίσθη (“to be announced as good news”). However, I interpret 4:6 to mean that Jesus preached the gospel to those who were alive before they died during his ministry but who were dead when Peter wrote the letter since 4:1–5 states that Jesus will bring to account in the Day of judgment both the “living ones and the dead ones” who lived contrary to his gospel. Besides, the verb εὐηγγελίσθη (“to be announced as good news”) in 4:6 takes the statement “that they would be judged by the flesh, on the one hand, with respect to men, but, on the other hand, they would live by the Spirit with respect to God.” 4:6 suggests Jesus preached during his ministry the good news of the kingdom to those who would suffer before they died, reminding them that a Day of judgment would come to all who reject his gospel of the kingdom (cf. Matt 5:1–7:21).

First Peter 3:22 supports the viability of my reading of 3:19 when Peter uses the exact same participle πορευθείς (“in that he went away”) as in v. 19 in reference to Jesus’

⁵ Keener, *1 Peter*, 275.

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exaltation at God's right hand in heaven and with respect to all the "angels," "authorities," and "powers" being subjected to him "in that he went away" (πορευθεὶς) into heaven (v. 22). Peter's remarks about Jesus' exaltation/ascension in v. 22 follow his comments in v. 21 about the "resurrection of Jesus Christ." Therefore, in vv. 21–22, Peter fastens Jesus' death, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension to his remarks in v. 19.

The "spirits" in v. 19 are the ones who hear Jesus' preaching. "Spirits" often refer to demonic spirits in the NT (Matt 8:16; 12:45; Mark 3:11; 5:13; Luke 10:20; 11:26; Acts 8:7; 19:12–13). First Peter 3:20 identifies these "spirits" as those who were disobedient in the days of Noah in Gen 6:1–8. The phrase "in prison" describes "spirits" in 1 Pet 3:19. They are "imprisoned spirits." In the light of Peter's remarks in vv. 19–20 about the disobedience of the spirits "in the days of Noah," Peter likely means Christ preached to those rebellious angels who fell in the days of Noah, had sexual relations with women, and who precipitated the flood (Gen 6:1–8). This reading of Genesis 6 is not clear from the Genesis narrative itself. Yet, more than one Second Temple Jewish text (e.g., 1 Enoch 6:2; 19:1; 106:15; Jubilees 10:8) and at least two Jewish Christian texts (Jude 6 and 2 Pet 2:4) assume the reading that the sons of God in Genesis 6 refer to rebellious angels.⁶ Second Temple Jewish literature also describes those bound for judgment as imprisoned in chains (1 Enoch 54:3–6; 2 Baruch 56:12–13),⁷ and it calls these angels from Genesis 6 demons (e.g., Jubilees 10:1–8).⁸

Jude says these rebellious angels are "kept in eternal chains" because they did not stay in their proper place (Jude 6). These "spirits" are "imprisoned spirits" because they are reserved for eschatological judgment. Both Second Temple Jewish texts (1 Enoch 10:13; 18:14; 21:10; Moses_Test. 8:2) and NT texts use the language of imprisonment to describe the eschatological doom of those bound for God's wrath in the Day of Judgment (2 Pet 3:7; Rev 20:1–15). Hence, if my above analysis is correct, once we interpret 1 Pet 3:19 vis-à-vis 3:18, 20–22, then we are on strong exegetical grounds to assert Christ's victorious cross, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension are likely the moment when he preached to the "imprisoned spirits," who are bound for eternal judgment, about the certainty of their judgment, because Jesus' death, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension at God's right hand were how and when God subjected all demonic powers, authorities, and angels to the risen Christ (v. 22).

⁶ See also 1 Enoch 16:1; 19:1; 1QM 10.12; 12.8–9; 1QH5.25; 9:13. Keener, *1 Peter*, 273–74, pointed me to these primary texts.

⁷ Keener, *1 Peter*, 273, n. 59.

⁸ 1 Enoch 15:8, 31; Testament of Job 27:2–3; 1QM 13.2, 4; 11–12; 14:10; 15:4; 1QH 11.19; 25.6; CD 12.2. Keener, *1 Peter*, 273 and Schreiner, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, 210–214, pointed me to these Jewish texts.

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CONCLUSION

In this short article, I've argued that Peter suggests Jesus preached a sermon of defeat (what) by means of his death, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension (how and when) to all rebellious angels (who) who fell in the days of Noah in Gen 6:1–8. I offered a succinct exegesis of selected primary texts to support my thesis. The practical question is: so, what? Why should this matter? There are many reasons, but I offer two: one a theological reason and another a practical reason.

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Theologically speaking, I propose that Jesus' proclamation of the judgment of fallen angels and demons by means of his death, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension demonstrates that he is our sovereign Lord and Christ who deserves the worship of the entire creation and who deserves the entire creation to show him complete allegiance as the sovereign Lord of the universe. Practically speaking, I suggest that Jesus' sovereign lordship over the demonic forces of evil and above all authorities should motivate Christians to persevere in our faithfulness to Christ in the face of all powers opposing both Christ and us as we suffer for our faith in him, because, just as he conquered all demonic powers and authorities, so also we have conquered them in Christ. We too have already begun to reign with him over them both now and in the age to come because of his death, resurrection, and exaltation/ascension. All the evil powers, demons, angels, and authorities are being kept for the Day of eternal judgment by Jesus' defeat of them, but Christ's salvation is currently being kept in heaven for all followers of him to be experienced now and to be revealed to us by means of his purifying of us through suffering for our faith in him when Jesus returns so that we will remain faithful to Christ and inherit our eschatological reward as we suffer in this world as followers of him (1:3–9).

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