



On the Trail of the *Spirits in Prison*

TONY PAYNE *No part of the New Testament is more puzzling to modern readers than Peter's enigmatic reference to the 'spirits in prison'. Tony Payne is the latest in a long line of interpreters claiming to have the answer. Read on and see if you agree...*



MARCH 15, 2000

Reading the Bible can be an unnerving experience, for all sorts of reasons. It can upset our values and cherished beliefs. It can challenge our sinfulness. And it can shake the foundations of our worldview, even our Christian worldview. The First Epistle of Peter does all of these things at different points, but no more so than in the latter part of chapter 3.

We sail along, reading about the mutual duty of husbands and wives, and the necessity of continuing to do good, even if it causes us to suffer. We come to verse 18 with Christ dying as a substitute for our sins, and

find an interpretation that really did justice to the passage, rather than to be satisfied by one that was doctrinally acceptable but which seemed a less than ideal way to read what was actually there.

I share my process of discovery with you, the reader, in the hope that you will be as intrigued and energized as I was by these extraordinary verses, and that you will carefully sift through my proposal, and offer some feedback.

Isaiah in the air

The sentences in question read as follows in the RSV:

The walls shake a little, and we realise that we are not quite as much on Peter's wavelength as we thought we were.

things are still fitting nicely into our framework of Christian doctrine. Then, all of a sudden, Peter has Christ going to preach to some 'spirits in prison'. The walls shake a little, and we realise that we are not quite as much on Peter's wavelength as we thought we were.

This was certainly my experience, as I prepared some Bible studies on 1 Peter for Matthias Media's Interactive Bible Studies series. What to make of these famously mysterious phrases? How do they fit into what Peter is saying?

The process by which I came to the understanding outlined below was really the fruit of my own struggle to read the Bible well—that is, to

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

(1 Pet 3:18-20)

In his very useful little commentary in the Tyndale series, Wayne Grudem summarizes the five main attempts that have been put forward to explain these verses:

VIEW 1: *When Noah was building the ark, Christ 'in spirit' was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to unbelievers who were on the earth then but are now 'spirits in prison' (people in hell).*

VIEW 2: *After Christ died, he went and preached to people in hell, offering them a second chance of salvation.*

VIEW 3: *After Christ died, he went and preached to people in hell, proclaiming to them that he had triumphed over them and their condemnation was final.*

VIEW 4: *After Christ died, he proclaimed release to people who had repented just before they died in the flood, and led them out of imprisonment (in Purgatory) into heaven.*

VIEW 5: *After Christ died (or: after he rose but before he ascended into heaven), he travelled to hell and proclaimed triumph over the fallen angels who had sinned by marrying human women before the flood.¹*

Grudem himself favours View 1, as do a number of evangelical commentators. The dominant view among scholars generally today is View 5, mainly through the influence of E. G. Selwyn's commentary, and the research of W. J. Dalton.

There is not room here to examine each of these views in detail and point out their problems, suffice to say that, as I weighed each of them against the text, they all failed to satisfy. They either didn't account for key elements in the passage, or else strained credulity by the complexity and obscurity of the argument. View

¹ W. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: IVP, 1988), p. 204.



WHO WAS PETER WRITING TO?

The little section in commentaries on ‘Destination and readers’ is usually one of those dry and inconclusive sections that we skim straight past. In the case of 1 Peter, it is of some importance.

The most common view today is that the letter was written to a mixed audience of mainly Gentile character. This is a somewhat strange conclusion, considering the very strong evidence for it being written to Jewish believers.

For a start, Peter says as much in his opening sentence. His letter is addressed literally to the “elect exiles of the dispersion (or diaspora)”. The Greek word here (‘diaspora’) was and is the standard word for describing the scattering of Jews throughout the ancient world, beginning with the Assyrian and Babylonian deportations, and continuing down to the time of the New Testament. The Exiles of the Dispersion were those Jews who lived not in Israel, but all over the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Middle East. Many of them continued to see Israel and Jerusalem as their real and spiritual home, even travelling back for the major feasts. Interestingly, Jews from Pontus, Cappadocia and Asia are mentioned as being in Jerusalem for Pentecost in Acts 2, and are among the addressees of this letter from Peter.

It would make perfect sense for Peter, the apostle to the Jews, to be writing to these scattered Jewish believers in Christ, to encourage them to hold fast to their hope. And indeed the letter is filled with the kind of Old Testament imagery, quotations and allusions that make a largely Jewish readership seem very likely.

However, despite this powerful evidence for the nature of Peter’s readership, most modern commentators insist that the letter could not have been written to Jewish believers on the basis that the following verses in the letter don’t sound as if they are addressed to Jews:

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold... (1:18) and

Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy. (2:10) and

...Let the time that is past suffice for doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. (4:3)

Surely, it is argued, Peter would not say such things about his fellow Jews? Therefore the letter must be to Gentiles. However, these three references only echo what is said in the Old Testament of Israel.

2 Kings 17 describes the very cause of the Exile as being Israel’s penchant for following ‘worthless’ or ‘false’ idols and themselves becoming ‘worthless’—the very same word in the Greek Old Testament (*mataios*) as the one translated ‘futile’ in 1 Peter 1:18. According to the Old Testament, those who were exiled did indeed follow a ‘futile’ way.

Likewise, 1 Peter 2:10 is a direct quotation from Hosea 1-2, where God declares that on account of her sin, Israel is no longer to be called ‘my people’. Yet there would come a day, promises Hosea, when those who had been punished would once again be called ‘my people’.

Similarly, the suggestion that some of these Jews had engaged in pagan-style immorality and idolatry (in 1 Peter 4:3) is hardly shocking given that these offences were also regularly reported of Israel in the Old Testament, and were the cause (in part) of the Exile. It could almost be expected that these exiled Jews, who had lived in the midst of this pagan idolatry and immorality for generations, might have been guilty of sharing in it at some time in their past.

In short, none of the three supposedly ‘non-Jewish’ verses turn out to be very non-Jewish at all. Perhaps it is our strong modern anti-anti-Semitism that leads us to think it offensive to ascribe to Peter’s Jewish readers that which the Bible has no qualms in applying to Israel.

What is more, once it is recognized that the letter is in fact written to Jewish exiles, many parts of it open up and make a great deal of sense. **B**

5 seemed the best of a somewhat uninspiring range of options.

Might there not be a more straightforward way to understand what Peter was communicating to his readers? With this dissatisfaction in mind, I began to make some interesting observations.

The first was that **the key Old Testament context for Peter’s letter is the Exile**. We are alerted to this in the opening sentence, where Peter addresses himself to the ‘Exiles of the Dispersion’. This almost certainly means that its main audience was Jewish believers living throughout the regions listed in verse 1 (see sidebar). Peter’s letter to these descendants of the Exile is full of references to Old Testament promises for God’s exiled people: of them returning to claim their inheritance, of being made once more into God’s people, of the building of a new temple, of redemption and the forgiveness of sins, of the sufferings and glories of the Christ, and so on. Quotations and allusions to prophets such as Hosea, and especially Isaiah, abound.

This ‘Exile’ context surfaces again in 1 Peter 3:18, where Peter returns to the ideas of Isaiah 53 in describing how Christ was put to death as a substitute, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God.

Specifically, he is “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit”. Some commentators and translations, not liking the possibility that this sounds like a less-than-bodily resurrection, translate the last part of the sentence as ‘by the Spirit’. This is a possible translation, but only if you also translate the first half as ‘by the flesh’, since the two are obviously meant to run in parallel. It should be “killed *by* the flesh but made alive *by* the Spirit” or “killed *in* the flesh but made alive *in* the Spirit”. Either way is possible, the second being perhaps more likely,



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given that Christ is said then to go to some spirits and speak to them.

Here the difficulties really start. Who could Christ be preaching to? What sort of prison are they in? And what would he be preaching to them?

Here I made a **second important observation**. Given that the Exile and Isaiah are an important part of the background, what does 'Christ, spirit, preaching, prison' remind us of? Surely of Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound... (Isa 61:1)

their liberation.

Fine, I thought. After his resurrection in or by the Spirit, Christ is going to some spirits in a prison somewhere to tell them that it's salvation time, to say that it is time for freedom. This seemed to be where the verses and their background were heading, but I didn't like the direction. Was I doomed to end up at View 2 (above), in which Christ goes to dead people and gives them a second chance at salvation? This sounded doctrinally wobbly, to say the least.

Thus I did what I had been taught to do in such situations by a wise mentor in Bible reading—suspend judgment and keep investigating. And this led me to interesting observation number 3—that **the tricky words of**

available, but a fudge nevertheless. There was no avoiding the fact that what 4:6 was describing sounded remarkably similar to what was happening in 3:18-19, viz, something being preached to the dead/spirits in prison. In 4:6 it is unquestionably gospel preaching that is on view, the proclamation of the News of Christ's victory over death, leading to new life for those who hear. In 3:18 it is Christ who dies in the flesh but is made alive in the spirit; in 4:6 it is the hearers of the gospel who having been judged in the flesh like men, are made alive in the spirit like God.

Curiouser and curiouser, as they say. The flow of thought continues from 1 Peter 3:18 through to 4:6 without a break. At the beginning of that

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The anointed one of the Lord goes in the spirit to preach the gospel, proclaiming, among other things, liberty to captives and opening of the prison to those who are bound. (This of course is the passage that Christ himself quotes in Luke 4 as a kind of summary of his forthcoming ministry.)

With Isaiah so heavily in the air, it seemed fairly obvious (to me, at least) that this prophetic promise of Isaiah 61 was being referred to in some way in 1 Peter 3:19. Yet if this was the case, the preaching of Christ to the spirits in prison was the proclamation of their release; it was the good tidings that the time has finally come, the year of the Lord's favour, the time of

1 Peter 3:18-19 are very similar to the equally tricky words of 1 Peter 4:6:

For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God.

In order to get around how strange this sounds, some modern translations insert the word 'now' before 'dead'—that the gospel was "preached even to those who are now dead" (i.e. it was preached to them while they were alive, but they have since died; so the NIV). Inserting the 'now' seemed to me to be a clever fudge, and perhaps the best fudge

section we have Christ dying in the flesh, being made alive in the spirit, and then preaching to spirits in prison; at the end, we have a reference to preaching to the dead (this time making explicit that it is a preaching of the gospel), with the result that the hearers participate in the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection, and are themselves given new life.

All of this confirmed in my mind that Isaiah 61 was the background to 1 Peter 3:19, that the preaching of Christ was a declaration of liberation to spirits (i.e. to dead humans) who had until that time been locked in some sort of prison. But who could these 'spirits' be? And what was the



prison? Is this purgatory we're talking about? Should I convert to Roman Catholicism and purchase some indulgences while I was at it?

The rest of the puzzle

I then remembered another piece of wise advice from another Bible reading mentor: 'Don't immediately think systematic theology; think biblical theology first'. In other words, rather than reading every verse of the Bible the same way, and slotting them into our doctrinal framework, we need to take note of how the Bible itself unfolds. We need to observe where we are in the story of the whole Bible, as we interpret each verse and integrate it into our thinking.

In this instance, the systematic

wished to discover (in 1:10-12) had finally come. It was all there: the glorious eternal inheritance, the worldwide ruling Christ, the redemption, the new temple, the holy nation, the royal priesthood, being reconstituted as God's people, and so on.

But what of those who died still waiting for the promise? What of those Old Testament people of the Exile who disobeyed God and were punished, but who died before God's promises to them of glorious salvation and restoration were fulfilled in Christ? All the promises of Isaiah were certainly made to them: that though they had been cast off and punished by the Lord, and received double for all their sins, yet in God's amazing mercy, there would one day

their disobedience and waiting for the promised redemption, that Christ goes and preaches? He would proclaim the gospel of Isaiah 61 to them, that the time has finally come. Now, through the eternal Spirit, Christ has come to die for sins (including those committed under the first covenant), to proclaim the year of God's favour, to bring to fulfilment all the promises that the Old Testament people of God heard and believed, but did not at that time receive.

In other words, I realised that the passage wasn't about purgatory, or about having a second chance in hell, but about the fulfilment of biblical history (what is commonly called a 'salvation-historical event'). This made more sense. Peter is refer-

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(or doctrinal) categories I was thinking about were: 'How are people saved?' and 'What happens to people when they die?' and 'Is there such a thing as purgatory?'. But rather than jumping straight to those questions, I realised that I should first be asking 'How does this verse fit into the Bible story as a whole?' and 'What is Peter referring to?'

It was at this point that another piece of the puzzle clicked into place. 1 Peter is addressed to 'Exiles of the dispersion', announcing to them that all the great promises surrounding the Exile had now at last been fulfilled in Christ. The time that the prophets themselves had so earnestly

been redemption and salvation.

These Old Testament Israelites of the Exile died and went down to the place of the dead, to the darkness of Sheol, still longing for the promised salvation. This was their prison. It may seem a little odd to us to imagine dead people going anywhere else but 'heaven' or 'hell'; but in the Old Testament, Sheol is simply the place where the dead people go. It is not a positive place, in that death is not positive, but it is not normally described in the same terms as the fiery torment of hell or 'gehenna', which Jesus refers to in the Gospels.

What if it is to these spirits of the Old Testament exiles, punished for

ring to the way that God's salvation has finally been achieved, even for those who died before they saw it. Although they had been judged in the flesh as men, and gone down to the spiritual prison of Sheol, yet God remained faithful to his promise. In the fullness of his time, the Christ came to die for their sins, to win their release, and to proclaim to them the year of the Lord's favour.

Two apparent obstacles

At this point, I was becoming just a little excited. This was sounding promising. However, two obstacles remained in my path.

The first was to check whether this



reading of the verses made sense in the light of what Peter was saying overall. The passage as a whole is about the importance of continuing to do what is good and right, even if the result is suffering. In this context, the reference to the spirits in prison (as I was understanding it) would work well as an encouragement to Peter's readers that God is always faithful, and that even death is no barrier to the fulfillment of his promise. The exiles of long ago suffered and died waiting for their redemption, yet they in no way missed out on God's promised salvation. In the same way, Peter's readers may take courage that even though they may suffer greatly, and even be killed (i.e. 'judged in the flesh as men'), yet in Christ they will be made alive. There-

fecter of faith, is the promise fulfilled. And in Hebrews 12 we see the heavenly Zion, in which the spirits of "just men made perfect" gather round God's throne (Heb 12:23). Those who waited long for the promise have now been brought to their inheritance.

So much for context. But that left one other minor obstacle, and that was what all this had to do with Noah. Does not 1 Peter 3:20 say that the disobedience took place in the time of Noah, in which case how could he be speaking about the exiles? And even if he was speaking about the former disobedience of the exiles, what does that have to do with Noah?

It firstly depends on how you punctuate verses 18-19. If punctuated as follows (which is quite possi-

but it happened. That this should then put Peter in mind of Noah is not surprising, since it is one of the classic Old Testament instances of God judging, and yet in the midst of it working salvation, and promising future blessing. This may not seem like an obvious connection for us to make, but it was so for Peter because **it is also the connection that Isaiah himself makes in Isaiah 54**, as he addresses the situation of the exiles:

"Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be put to shame; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.

For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.

For the LORD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God.

For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer.

"For this is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you.

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you." (Isa 54:4-10).

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fore, they should continue to do what is good, and be prepared to suffer for doing what is right, knowing that salvation comes via judgement.

In many ways, the flow of thought is reminiscent of Hebrews 11 and 12. In that passage, we read of the heroes of Old Testament faith who died still waiting for the promise.

And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (Heb 11:39-40)

Only in Jesus, the pioneer and per-

ble), the disobedience itself is not placed in the time of Noah:

He was killed in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which he also went and preached to the spirits in prison, who had formerly disobeyed while God's patience was waiting. In the days of Noah, during the building of the ark which held just a few, that is eight souls, they were saved through water...

In his forbearance, God patiently waited with his rebellious people, and finally brought about their redemption. It happened through the fires of judgement, both theirs and Christ's,

The lonely View 6

Thus, out of all this observing, investigating and pondering, View 6 was born:



After Christ died and was raised in triumph, he went and proclaimed to the spirits of the Old Testament exiles, imprisoned in the darkness of Sheol, that the time of their salvation and liberation had finally come. Following Isaiah's lead, the example of Noah is invoked as a further encouragement that God will deliver and bless his people in the midst of judgement and destruction.

This seemed to make good sense of each element of the passage in its

context, to fit with Peter's overall message, to resonate with the Isaianic context that is so prominent in the letter, and to contradict no other part of Scripture.

At this point in my journey of discovery, I had every reason to feel exhilarated. It was the joy of discovery, of seeing afresh how God's word fits together, and of pondering God's power and faithfulness in keeping his ancient promises. However, the exhilaration was matched with an equally strong feeling of uneasiness.

That feeling came from the realisation that I knew of no-one else anywhere in the world (or in Christian history for that matter) who also held this view.

And so I consign that uneasiness now to you, the reader, with the request that you either join me in the loneliness of View 6 (thus rendering it less lonely), or else point out to me the glaring hole in my argument to which too much study has made me blind. **B**