

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
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Another Look At The Phrase: “*He descended into Hell*” (Part I)

I mentioned when we first looked at this text that several different interpretations of these verses have been offered. There is the old view of “the harrowing of hell,” that between Christ’s death and resurrection, He went to hell and led to paradise the souls of the OT saints. There have been modifications of this view, such as that Christ went and proclaimed the gospel to those in hell, offering a second chance. And there is the increasingly more common view today that the preaching in view was done by Christ *through Noah* (cf. v. 20). And there are more. But let’s see what the text of these verses allows.¹

I. “FLESH” AND “SPIRIT”

We have to begin with the contrast between “in the flesh” and “in the spirit” in verse 18. Much discussion here focuses on the question of whether this refers to Jesus’ body and spirit or if “Spirit” should be capitalized, referring to the Holy Spirit. I think there is another connotation to the words altogether – a connotation evident both in NT and secular Greek.

In Phil. 1:24, Paul is considering the question of whether it is better to remain “in the flesh” or to die and go on to heaven. It is clear that “in the flesh” indicates “in this life” – human life, human existence. Again in Rom. 1:3-4, Paul contrasts the two states of existence of the incarnate Son: “weakness” and “power,” or human life with its limitations, and resurrection life. So also in 1Cor. 15:42ff, the “spiritual body” for Paul is the body of the resurrection. And in 1 Tim. 3:16, Jesus was “manifest in the flesh and justified in the spirit” – again a reference to His two states of existence. The same is true in Peter also. In 1 Peter 1:24, “flesh” simply means humanity in its fragile state. In 1 Peter 4:6, Peter contrasts the difficulties of believers in this life (“in the flesh”) with the blessedness of that life of the resurrection (“in the spirit”).

And in our text, this idea seems to fit best also. The translation “by the Spirit” does not allow for the parallel with “in the flesh.” Christ clearly was not put to death “by the flesh,” but He was put to death “with reference to” His human/earthly existence. Similarly, He was brought to life “with respect to” His resurrection/heavenly existence (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45).

The thought here is not that Jesus’ body died and His spirit revived. The thought is not (primarily) that He died but the Holy Spirit raised Him up, although this may well be implied. The thought, rather, is that Christ, in the sphere of His human limitations, died; but He rose to the sphere of that life of power and vindication. Simply put, Peter is saying that although Jesus died, He has also been raised to that life of glory and power.

II. “IN WHICH” WHAT?

Next to consider is the significance of the “in which” of verse 19. A quick glance at the English versions above shows a general lack of agreement of the translation: “by which,” “by whom,” “in which,” and “through whom.” The question is, what is the intended antecedent of this relative

pronoun (“which”)? Those who take “Spirit” in the previous verse to refer to the Holy Spirit naturally understand this as the antecedent of “which;” hence, the instrumental force “by whom” or “by which” or “through whom.” It was suggested above that the Holy Spirit is not primarily in view in the phrase. And “in which (spirit)” is a construction unknown anywhere else in the NT. However, in 1 Peter 1:6 and 4:4, *en ho* does have a broader sense, “in which state” or “in the course of which.”

But however the phrase is understood, the meaning remains much the same: Peter is speaking of Christ’s resurrection state. For this reason, I prefer the simplest translation: “*in which* (state) He went and preached.” Or perhaps, “in the course of which,” or “in the process of which.” That is, “in this life of resurrected power, Christ went....” Or perhaps, “in which coming to life Christ went....”

Last, the verb forms *put to death* and *made alive* are in the passive voice. From this we could infer that an agent (someone or something) put Christ to death and made him alive. For the first verb form Peter does not indicate an agent, but for the second he does: the person of the Holy Spirit.²

III. WHEN DID HE “GO”?

It seems clear enough that “in which also” closely associates “made alive” with “went and preached.” The preaching to the spirits, then, was done as a consequence of Christ’s resurrection. This, I think, is the plain indication of the words and grammar: “He rose to the life of power, and in this state He went and preached.”

This, of course, rules out the idea that it was Christ preaching through Noah. This spiritualized understanding doesn’t seem to fit well with the verb “went.” And as I said, the text closely associates the resurrection with the proclamation. On the other hand, there is no textual indicator associating the proclamation with the time of Noah. We would expect, if this interpretation were correct, to read something like, “He went and preached to the spirits who are *now* in prison.” But the “now” is not there. The timeframe of the proclamation is stated to be that of the death and resurrection of Christ. Moreover, in verses 20-21, Peter seems to be *contrasting* the present with the distant past. He is not thinking of an ancient proclamation but one which Christ has made only recently – in His resurrection.

IV. WHO ARE “THE SPIRITS”?

I take the *kai* here (“and,” v. 19) to have an ascensive force: “even.” “He went and preached *even* to the spirits in prison.” It does not seem that Peter is saying that Jesus preached to the spirits “as well as” to others (“also”). Rather, he seems to be saying that He went and preached “even” to these spirits; that is, His proclamation is universal and extends even to the remotest and most unlikely audience. This is what he makes explicit in v. 22; His lordship is universal, holding true even over the demonic realms. This is a point of emphasis common in Paul also (e.g., Phil. 2:10-11; Eph. 1: 21-22).

This leads me to disagree with the otherwise attractive view that these “spirits” are the souls of departed human beings (namely, those who perished in the flood). The souls of the departed are never referred to as “spirits,” except only in Heb. 12:23 where it is qualified significantly: “the spirits *of just men made perfect*.” Men *have* spirits, but they are not said to *be* spirits.

Very commonly, however, “spirits” is used to refer to angels and demons, as a glance at any concordance will show. This is particularly so in the Gospels in reference to demons. So common is this experience in reference to demons that this is how we instinctively understand the term normally. Unless there is some qualifier, we understand “spirits” to be demons.

But who are these demons? Peter associates them with the evil of Noah's day (v. 20). It is all but universally agreed that Peter's thinking here reflects some kind of influence from Jewish traditions, particularly as recorded in *1 Enoch*. There are detailed correlations that are evident between Peter's language and that of *1 Enoch*. There is an attempt there (*1 Enoch*) to explain the origin of demons in terms of the sins of the "sons of God" in Gen. 6. Their offspring (that is, the offspring of the formerly holy angels with the women of Noah's day) are called "giants," and this explains the existence of demons in the world today. It may, however, not be this complicated; some understand the "spirits in prison" to be those "sons of God" themselves.

C. F. Dickason points out:

"(1) Outside of Genesis 6 the exact term 'the sons of God' (*bene elohim*) is used only of angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). The references cited to support the other view do not use *bene elohim*. Angels are termed *elohim*, *bene elohim*, or *bene elim* because they belong to a class of mighty beings. (See pp. 62-63.) Most likely, then, the term should be understood as in other biblical usage as of angels.

"(2) The context presents the cohabitation as unusual, probably one of the causes for the flood. (Probably Genesis 6:1-4 presents the angelic cause and 6:5-6 the human cause.) So, then unusual relationships might be involved. We do not know the total powers of fallen angels. Matthew 22:30 does not exclude such cohabitation, but its point is that angels do not procreate among themselves. Furthermore, angels have taken human form and performed other human functions, such as eating, walking, talking, and sitting. Some angels were mistaken for men and were sought for homosexual use by the men of Sodom (Genesis 18:1-19:5).

"(3) What justification would we have for confining 'daughters of men' to ungodly women? The term could be a class designation for 'womankind,' in contradistinction to the class of sons of God or angelic beings. Further, it would seem strange to confine the supposed human marriages to those of godly men with ungodly women. Intermarriage between two strains of humanity would most likely include godly women with ungodly men (sons of men with daughters of God). But the text does limit the relationship.

"(4) Why are the unusual and famous offspring of this union designated *nephilim*, translated by the Greek Septuagint as *gigantes*, rendered 'giants' in the King James Version? The basic idea of the Greek term, however, is not monstrous size, but 'earth-born' (*gegenes*) and was used of Titans, who were partly of celestial and partly of terrestrial origin. The Hebrew term *nephilim* means 'fallen ones' and designates the unusual offspring of the unholy union. The same term is used in Numbers 13:33 of the sons of Anak in Canaan who seemed of great size, but the Genesis reference seems to be monsters of mixed natures.

"(5) Without Genesis 6 referring to angelic beings, it is impossible to find the supposed well-known judgment of God upon angels who sinned peculiarly and are especially bound (2 Peter 2:4-5; Jude 6-7). Several factors must be noted here. First, their peculiar sin is compared in Peter and in Jude with sexual perversions as in Sodom and Gomorrah. Second, the time and sequence of mention connects this angelic sin closely with the flood. Third, if the sin were the original fall of angels with Satan, all evil angels, not just some, would be bound. Further, there would be no biblical explanation for Satan's angels now being loose (as demons), and Satan himself would be expected to be bound since the Fall.

"(6) The language of both 2 Peter and Jude seems to describe the very type of unusual sexual sin that would have been involved. In 2 Peter the author sets forth the sure destruction of false teachers whose chief characteristics involve a denial of Christ's redemption and right to rule and a devotedness to sensual satisfaction (2:1-3, 12-15, 18). As mentioned, it is significant that here as well as in Jude the angelic sin is compared with sex perversion, as in Sodom and Gomorrah.

“The language in Jude is pointed. The phrase ‘since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh’ (v. 7) should most likely be understood as a description of the angels’ activity which is compared with Sodom and Gomorrah. The angelic sin would be ‘gross immorality’ further defined as going after ‘strange flesh,’ understood as a flesh they did not have. These same angels are described in Jude 6; they ‘did not keep their own domain [*archēn*, place of assigned authority and activity], but abandoned their proper abode [*idiom oikēterion*, ‘peculiar place of residence’].’ Instead of remaining in their usual state and residence, they invaded a new state and residence to commit gross immorality with alien flesh. No other angelic sin or human sin can begin to be described in this amazing and unparalleled fashion. Genesis 6 offers the only biblical solution when we take ‘the sons of God’ as fallen angels or demons.”³

CONCLUSION: E. G. Selwyn in his classic work makes this observation, “The form in which St. Peter presents the thought of the universality of Christ’s triumph as the Redeemer of all things differs in certain details from what we find in St. Paul and elsewhere; and to those differences and the reasons for them we shall return in a moment. But that his mind is moving in the same realm of ideas seems to me overwhelmingly probable. The double “going” which we find in St. Paul (Rom. x. 6-8), Eph. iv. 8-10, cf. 1 Pet. iii. 19, 22), the triumphal processions of captives following Christ’s conquest of the angelic powers (Eph. iv. 8 (Ps. lxxviii. 19), i. 21, Col. ii. 15; cf. 1 Pet. iii. 22), the proclamation of Christ in the spiritual realm (Eph. iii 10) – all these are ways of expressing the fundamental fact and the all-embracing range of Christ’s victory over death and the powers of evil; and they are all found in the Petrine passage before us, and were all relevant to the purpose of his Epistle. In its main lines, that is to say, St. Peter’s teaching here is not something new or unfamiliar: what is peculiar is the form in which he presents it and the use which he makes of it.”⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ I have adapted my friend Fred Zasper’s analysis of this text and used it as a template. Fred maintains a very helpful website: www.BiblicalStudies. This one is from 1994 *Christ’s Message to the Spirits in Prison: An Analysis of 1 Peter 3:18-19*. Fred is best known as the author of *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Crossway, 2010).

² Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Peter and Jude* (Baker Book House, 1987) p. 140.

³ C. F. Dickason, *Angels Elect & Evil* (Moody Press, 1995) p. 244.

⁴ E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (rpt. Baker, 1981) p. 326.