

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	113		Gary L.W. Johnson
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Another Look At The Phrase: “He descended into Hell” (Part II)

Our texts are, as S. D. F. Salmond noted long ago, “among the dark oracles of the New Testament, the unsolved if not insoluble problems of its interpretation. On the first of these a little library has been written, only to leave it almost as much the subject of debate as before. It has been taken as one of the primary proof-passages for the dogma of the Descent to Hell or Hades – a dogma to which a place of extraordinary importance is given in some systems of theology. Ideas involving theological issues of novel character and far-reaching moment have been found in it. Theories of the liberation and elevation of the saints of pre-Christian times, of a penal endurance of God’s wrath by Christ as man’s representative, of a purgatorial detention and purification of souls, of a judicial manifestation of the Redeemer to the impenitent dead, of opportunities of repentance and an offered gospel in the world of the dead, have all been thought to obtain some warrant from it. The most discordant constructions have been put upon its general drift and its particular terms. These are too many to enumerate, not to say to discuss, here. None, not even the best and most cautious of them, can be said to have been entirely successful. There are some scholars, indeed, who have ventured to speak of the difficulties of the passage as rather created by its interpreters than inherent in itself. But the greatest exegetes and theologians have been precisely those who have felt these difficulties most acutely, and have been least positive in their expositions. To Luther, for example, it was so dark a saying that he confessed himself baffled by it, and inclined to different views of its meaning at different periods of his career. Those most versed in the history of its exegesis, and most competent to grapple with its grammatical problems, are the least certain about their conclusions, and the first to confess that it remains at the best a question of the proportion of difficulty that is left by competing interpretations.”¹

V. WHERE IS THE “PRISON”?

In any case, we still must try to identify the “prison” *phulake*. Actually, *phulake* can be understood either negatively or positively; that is, either as a “prison” or as a “refuge.” The word simply indicates a guarded place or a place of protection. It is often associated by interpreters with either the realm of the dead or with hell itself, a place of punishment. But again, the word itself does not tell us that. It may indicate either a place of confinement or a place of protection. It is a “refuge.” The only other place in the NT where *phulake* is used in reference to demons or “spirits” is Rev. 18:2, and there it has the sense of “refuge, place of protection” for these demons.

But is there any sense in which we could think of evil spirits “in a place of refuge?” There is. This world order is commonly spoken of as the domain of Satan. It is his territory, as it were. This was the great significance of Christ’s first coming and His miracles of casting out demons and so on. It was an invasion of Satan’s realm. This world was his domain, his refuge. And in fact the demons made reference to this on one occasion. When Jesus commanded them to depart from the Gadarene, they cried in fear that He had come to torment them “before the time” (Matt. 8:29).

It seems easy enough, then, to understand Peter as describing Jesus making proclamation, in His resurrection state, to the demonic hosts who rule over this age.

VI. WHAT DID HE “PROCLAIM”?

The message Jesus preached, then, was clearly not good news! It was bad news! His resurrection into the realm of power and glory was a firm declaration even to the spirit world that their place of “refuge” could no longer be considered a safe one. Their space had been invaded, and they (v. 22) must bow to Christ’s lordship over them. His message was a proclamation of triumph. To them, a message of bad news.

VII. WHEN DID HE MAKE THIS PROCLAMATION?

Notice that verses 19-21 seem to be parenthetical; they digress from the “story line” which is picked up again in v. 22. Notice also that both verses 19 and 20 speak of Jesus “going” (*poreutheis*). In v. 22, the “going” is obviously Jesus’ ascension. The progress is chronological. Christ died, rose, and “went,” thus making “proclamation” of His universal dominion over all, even the demonic hosts.

CONCLUSION: I understand, then, the “proclamation” to be in the resurrection/ascension itself. It is precisely this which announced to the demons that their world had been ravaged, and that Christ is Lord, and that they are subject to Him. I think this gives due consideration to all the details of the text and allows the simplest understanding of the words. The “harrowing of hell” idea, and the idea of “Christ preaching through Noah” are ideas that must be imported into this text; they do not come out of it.

ONE FINAL CONTEXTUAL NOTE

So how does all this fit in context? Peter has been dealing with the sufferings of Christians at the hands of the world. He no doubt sees behind it all the activities of Satanic forces. But not to worry – Christ also suffered at their hands, and as our example. Moreover, He has invaded their very own realm and has emerged triumphant over them. Even they are subject to Him. Peter wants to assure “you” that your enemy will not survive forever; he is a defeated foe.

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ENDNOTES

¹S. D. F. Salmond, *The Biblical Doctrine of Immortality* (rpt. Klock & Klock 1984) p. 456. The great Old Testament commentator Franz Delitzch categorically rejected the view that this referred to the sons of Seth mingling with the daughters of Cain: “The following reasons however are decisive against this ethic comprehension of the two notions. (1) Though the notion of the fatherhood of God does indeed make a faint start towards obtaining beyond its theocratic limitation to Israel (Ex. iv. 22; Deut. xiv. 1, xxxii. 5; Hos. ii 1) an ethical and general human significance (see especially Ps. lxxiii. 15, not however Prov. xiv. 26, which must be explained according to Prov. xx. 7 and the like), yet this extension and deepening goes neither in the Old nor the New Testament so far, that *bānôṭ* and *hā’ādām* could in the prosaic style of historic writing mean children of God and daughters of worldly men. Such a view is here refuted by the context itself, for (2) after *hā’ādām* has been used in ver. 1 of the human race without any secondary meaning, it is inconceivable that *bānôṭ* should signify women belonging to that portion of mankind which was alienated from God, and not to the human race in general. Hence it seems that we must really assume, with Kurtz and others, that a sexual intercourse of angels with women is here related. It was thus that Jude in his Epistle, ver. 6 sq., in agreement with the book of Enoch, understands the matter; for *toútols* ver. 7 refers back to angels, the unnatural sin of the men of Sodom, who burnt with lust towards angels, being compared with the unnatural sin of angels, who were in love with women.” *A New Commentary on Genesis* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1975) p. 224.

On the other side, the noted Dutch Old Testament scholar G. ch. Aalden calls Delitzch’s position “untenable,” and it is “unmistakably clear that it refers exclusively to the world of human beings” *Genesis: Bible Student’s Commentary* (Zondervan, 1981) p. 153. Bruce Waltke, one of my professors at Westminster, who has written perhaps the best commentary on Genesis, notes that “The interpretation that sees this designation as referring to royal tyrannical successors of Lamech finds historical support in an ancient Jewish interpretation that the “sons of God” were nobles, aristocrats, and princes who married girls

outside their social status and took great numbers of them into their harems. M. Kline broke fresh ground when he modified “sons of God” to mean “divine” kings. In his view, these tyrants, a continuation of the cursed line of Cain, were supposed to administer justice, but instead they claimed for themselves deity, violated the divine order by forming royal harems, and perverted their mandate to rule the earth under God. Their offspring, he further notes, were the Nephilim-heroes (*nepīlīm, gibbōrīm*, 6:4), “evidently characterized by physical might and military-political dominance” (see Gen. 10:8-10). This interpretation best explains “any of them they chose” (6:2). For example, Pharaoh took to bed whom he would (12:10-20), and so did David (1 Sam. 11). It also fits the immediate context of the Flood, the theme of Genesis, and connects the reference to the Nephilim and heroes in 6:4 to 6:1-3. However, the meaning “divine rulers” is somewhat questionable, whereas “angels” is well established. In addition, Kline’s interpretation is recent and seems to undercut the interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 and Jude 6-7. The best solution is to combine the “angelic” interpretation with the “divine king” view. The tyrants were demon possessed. Gispens avers: “The text presents us with men who are controlled by fallen angels.” Their perverted psyches allowed this entrance of the demonic. Eichrodt asserts, “God’s power operates ... within the evil which has been begun by the perversion of the creature’s will.” *Genesis: A Commentary* (Zondervan, 2001), p. 116. Delitzsch concludes along similar lines, “This leads to something like possession, and we must let the matter rest.” *Op. cit* 226.

Derek Kidner, in his very helpful commentary, writes: “*The sons of God* are identified by some interpreters as the sons of Seth, over against those of Cain. By others, including early Jewish writers, they are taken to mean angels. If the second view defies the normalities of experience, the first defies those of language (and our task is to find the author’s meaning); for while the Old Testament can declare God’s people to be His sons, the normal meaning of the actual term ‘son of God’ is ‘angels,’ and nothing has prepared the reader to assume that ‘men’ now means Cainites only. Possible New Testament support for ‘angels’ may be seen in 1 Peter 3:19, 20; also in 2 Peter 2:4-6, where the fallen angels, the Flood, and the doom of Sodom form a series that could be based on Genesis, and in Jude 6, where the angels’ offence is that they ‘left their proper habitation.’ The craving of demons for a body, evident in the Gospels, offers at least some parallel to this hunger for sexual experience. But where Scripture is as reticent as here, both Peter and Jude warn us away. We have our proper place as well! More important than the detail of this episode is its indication that man is beyond self-help, whether the Seth-ites have betrayed their calling, or demonic powers have gained a stranglehold. *Genesis: An Introduction & Commentary* (IVP, 1967). Francis Schaeffer follows Kidner in his *Genesis in Space and Time* (IVP, 1972) p. 125. Walt Kaiser, one of my professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School has a lengthy discussion on the various views. He rejects the view that angels were in view, but his objections are dealt with admirably by both Delitzsch and Waltke in my opinion. cf. W. C. Kaiser, P. H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, M. T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of The Bible* (IVP, 1996) pp. 106-108.

Finally, the late Merrill F. Unger, one of the noted Old Testament scholars of the 20th century, summarized the matter this way, “Isaiah 43:6 is often cited as disproving the contention that the ‘sons of God’ in the Old Testament describes only angels, whether good or bad. But it hardly seems convincing, inasmuch as the expression there implies ‘sons of Jehovah,’ an entirely different term, and refers to the future regathering of the godly remnant of Israel. It does seem that the term ‘sons of Elohim,’ the mighty Creator, characterizes those who were created directly by the divine hand, and not born of other beings of their own order. Hence Adam’s designation as a ‘son of God’ (Luke 3:38); also the designation of those who are born again of the Spirit of God (John 1:12).

“Again, if the ‘sons of God’ are simply pious Sethites who mixed with the Cainites, the prominent question is left unexplained as to why their progeny should have been ‘giants,’ mighty heroes who were of old, ‘men of renown.’ The Revisers’ obvious dissatisfaction with the Authorized Version’s rendering of ‘*nephilim*,’ obviously leaves the difficulty unanswered. The Septuagint translators’ rendering of the expression by ‘giants’ (*gigantes*) seems clearly an indication that they thought of the *nephilim* in this passage and its only other occurrence in Numbers 13:33 as the offspring of the sons of God (angels) and the daughters of men (mortal women); for the basic idea of the Greek term is not monstrous size, which is a secondary and developed meaning, but *gegenes*, ‘earth-born,’ and employed of the Titans who were partly of celestial and partly of terrestrial origin. These monstrous beings of mixed birth rebelled against their father Uranus (Heaven), and after a prolonged contest were defeated by Zeus and thrown into Tartarus.

“There is no doubt that the Authorized Version misunderstood the Septuagint in translating *nephilim* by ‘giants,’ for the form of the Hebrew word denotes a plural verbal adjective or noun of passive signification, certainly from *naphal*, ‘to fall,’ so that the connotation is *nephilim*, ‘the fallen ones,’ clearly meaning the unnatural offspring which were in the earth in the years before the flood, ‘and also after that’ (Num. 13:33) ‘when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men’ (Gen. 6:4). There is no doubt, either, that the mention of the great stature of the *nephilim*, the sons of Anak, in the evil report which the ten spies brought of the land of Canaan (Num. 13:33), together with the Septuagint rendering, *gigantes*, suggested the translation ‘giants.’ The real and original idea in the mind of the ancient translators, however, may well have been ‘fallen ones’ or monsters of mixed human and angelic birth, who, like the rebellious Titans, were exceedingly wicked and violent, so that ‘every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually’ (Gen. 6:5).

“Again, if the intercourse between the ‘sons of God’ and the ‘daughters of men’ were merely marriage between the Sethites and the Cainites, it seems impossible to explain adequately certain New Testament passages, and the reason why some fallen

angels are imprisoned and others are free to roam the heavenlies. Peter vividly describes the crime of certain of these spiritual beings, which seems to refer to a second and deeper apostasy than their complicity in Satan's primeval insurrection. The sin of these more daring rebels deprived them of freedom and positions under Satan as principalities, powers, rulers of this darkness, and wicked spirits in the heavenlies (Eph. 6:12), and resulted in God's casting them down to Tartarus, delivering them 'into pits of darkness to be reserved unto the judgment.' And what is noteworthy, the whole divine punishment stands in the closest and most significant connection with the times of Noah, and the cataclysm of the flood (II Pet. 2:4-5). Jude even more pregnantly portrays the enormous wickedness of these fallen angels when he says they 'kept not their own principality, but left their proper habitation,' and as a divine punishment are 'kept in everlasting bonds under darkness.' And what is also arresting, their heinous crime would seem to be akin to the unnatural vice of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen. 19:5) – fornication of an abnormal character, going after 'strange flesh,' which might possibly point to cohabitation with beings of a different nature (Jude vv. 6-7).

“Since they chose to leave their own realm and to break the bounds and God-ordained laws of two worlds, to work havoc and vicious confusion, God wiped out the results of their disorder with a flood, and dashed them down to the lowest dungeons (Tartarus) to deprive them forever of the opportunity of causing further derangement. The region of their imprisonment appears to be a more doleful and terrible place of confinement than Hades, and is clearly distinguished from Gehenna (Rev. 19:20; 20:10). In Greek mythology Tartarus was a dismal abode, as far beneath Hades as earth is below heaven, and significantly considered the prison-house of the Titans.

“While bearing in mind some of the difficulties which beset the view that the sons of God are pious Sethites, it must not be supposed that the 'angel theory' is not vexed by serious questions. Whether or not they are grave enough to be fatal to its tenability ought to be decided very discriminatingly. It must ever be remembered in dealing with Genesis 6:1-4, that, as James Orr says, 'It is not easy to be certain as to the interpretation of this strange passage.' *Biblical Demonology* (Scripture Press, 1952) pp. 48-50.