

# Preaching to the Spirits in Prison

**1 Peter 3:17 - 4:6**

**Vernon G. Wilkins**

## Salvation from Destruction

### Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

*Robert Frost, 1920*

It seems Frost realised the destructive effect of the world's sin.  
Noah discovered this in his time and in his world too, as we shall see.

#### **Acknowledgement**

This paper has survived a certain amount of peer review so far, but, nonetheless, the views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and he and he alone accepts responsibility for them – particularly for anything inexact or unclear; any obvious omissions or faulty logic; and other follies and defects. Further peer review by qualified contributors would be welcome.

#### **Latest Version**

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# Preaching to the Spirits in Prison

## 1 Peter 3:17 - 4:6

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**1 Peter 3:17 - 4:6** <sup>17</sup> For [it is] better to *suffer* [for] *doing good*, if that should be God's will, than [for] *doing evil*.

<sup>18</sup> For *Christ* also [or: indeed] *suffered* once [i.e.: once for all time] for *sins*, [the] *righteous* for [the] *unrighteous*, that he might bring us [or: you] to God, being put to *death* [actually: he having been put to death] *in [the] flesh* but made *alive in [the] spirit*, <sup>19</sup> in which [or: whom] [omitted: also/indeed] he went [or: came (?)] and proclaimed [or: preached] to *the spirits in prison*, <sup>20</sup> [because] [they] formerly [this word is after *disobedient*] *did not obey* [actually: to [the] disobedient/unbelieving ones, agreeing exactly with *the spirits*], when God's patience waited in [the] days of Noah, while [the] ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, *were brought safely* [or: saved/rescued; a stronger word cognate with usual word for 'saved'] *through water*.

<sup>21</sup> *Baptism*, which corresponds ['antitype'] to this, *now saves* [usual word for 'save'] *you*, not [as] a removal of dirt from [the] body but [as] an appeal to God for a *good conscience* [i.e., cleansing], through [the] *resurrection of Jesus Christ*, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at [the] right hand of God, [with] angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

<sup>1</sup> Since therefore Christ *suffered* [same word as in 3:17,18] *in [the] flesh* [omitted: for us], arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has *suffered* [same word as in 3:17,18] *in [the] flesh* has *ceased from sin*, <sup>2</sup> so as to live for the rest of [the] time *in [the] flesh* no longer for *human passions* but for [the] *will of God*. <sup>3</sup> The time that is past suffices for *doing what the Gentiles want to do* [actually: the will of the Gentiles], *living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry*.

<sup>4</sup> With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same *flood of debauchery*, and *they malign you*; <sup>5</sup> but *they* will give account to him who is ready to judge [the] *living* and [the] *dead*. <sup>6</sup> For this is why [actually: For unto this] the gospel was preached [not the same word as in 3:19; here it's actually: it was evangelised] *even* [or: indeed (?preferable?) or: also] to [those who are] *dead*, that though judged *in [the] flesh* the way people are [actually: in relation to men], they might *live in [the] spirit* the way God does [actually: in relation to God].

(English Standard Version)

*Italicised [ ... ]* represents text not in the original, considered by the translators to be implied. Note that most of the definite articles are missing in the original text.

**Highlighted thus** above is text where the negative image of unrighteousness is in mind or (arguably) implied – either the characteristic of an unrighteous person, or of their behaviour (debauchery, and persecution of the righteous); or it denotes the death of Christ, the righteous for the unrighteous, in taking our unrighteousness upon himself on the cross (cf. 2:24).

**Highlighted thus** is text pertaining to the positive image of righteousness – either the characteristic of a righteous person, that is, saved by grace, or of the actual salvation of that person, or of the conduct of a righteous person (living for Christ and suffering for Christ).

**Underlined thus** are the five uses of 'in [the] flesh'; I argue later that both its *physical* meaning and its *spiritual* meaning are probably in mind. All emphasis above is mine.

## 1 Peter 3:18-22, translated word-by-word

18 ὅτι καὶ Χριστὸς	Because indeed/also Christ
ἅπαξ περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν	once-for-all-time concerning sins
ἀπέθανεν/ἔπαθεν	died/suffered
δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων	righteous [sing.] on-behalf-of unrighteous [pl.]
ἵνα ἡμᾶς/ὕμᾶς	in-order-that us/you [pl.]
προσαγάγῃ τῷ θεῷ	he-should-bring to-God
θανατωθεὶς μὲν σαρκὶ	having-been-put-to-death on-the-one-hand in-flesh
ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι·	having-been-made-alive on-the-other in-spirit/Spirit;
19 ἐν ᾧ καὶ	in whom/which indeed/also
τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν	to-the in prison spirits [pl., dat.]
<b>πορευθεὶς</b>	having-come/gone/journeyed/relocated/transferred
ἐκήρυξεν	he-preached/proclaimed/announced-to
20 ἀπειθήσασιν	disobedient/disbelieving-ones [pl., dat.] [agrees with 'spirits'. NB, <i>before</i> ποτε]
ποτε ὅτε	at-one-time/formerly when
ἀπεξεδέχετο	patiently-waited
τοῦ θεοῦ μακροθυμία	of-the of-God forbearance
ἐν ἡμέραις Νῶε	in days of-Noah
κατασκευαζομένης κιβωτοῦ,	being-prepared ark
εἰς ἣν ὀλίγοι	unto/into which few
τοῦτ' ἔστιν ὀκτὼ ψυχαί	that is eight souls
διεσώθησαν δι' ὕδατος.	were-saved through water.
21 ὃ καὶ ὑμᾶς ἀντίτυπον	Which indeed you [pl., acc.] antitype
νῦν σώζει βάπτισμα	now saves baptism
οὐ σαρκὸς ἀπόθεσις ῥύπου	not of-flesh removal of-dirt
ἀλλὰ συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς	but of-conscience of-good
ἐπερώτημα εἰς θεόν	appeal unto God
δι' ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ	through resurrection of-Jesus of-Christ
22 ὃς ἐστὶν ἐν δεξιᾷ [τοῦ] θεοῦ	who is in/at right-hand of-God
<b>πορευθεὶς</b>	having-come/gone/journeyed/relocated/transferred
εἰς οὐρανόν	unto/into heaven
ὑποταγέντων αὐτῷ ἀγγέλων	being-subject to-him angels
καὶ ἐξουσιῶν καὶ δυνάμεων.	and authorities and powers.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to make a suggestion for how we understand the preaching (*'he proclaimed'*) of Christ to the *'spirits in prison'* in 1 Peter 3:19. It's not one of the many usual suggestions, and is somewhat *'outside the box'*, so I alone take responsibility for it. I myself haven't seen this proposal in print, or ever heard anyone else make it, but surely someone somewhere somewhen somehow must have done so. Even if they haven't, I would like to stand by it as a suggestion, until such time as a score of expert Greek grammarians tell me I'm up the wall. Until then, the proposal outlined in this paper is of course provisional, but I myself am taking it seriously; I do hope others will too, and give it fair consideration.

In any event, I do not wish to insist on the conclusion of this paper, although I am an enthusiast for it. If a convincing rebuttal is proffered I shall not turn a hair. The aim of the exercise in considering this matter is not so much to find a finally satisfactory and unchallengeable solution to the enigma, but rather to get to the heart of Peter's message. In a nutshell, in this paper I suggest that the overriding impact of 1 Peter is that in Christ God's redemption-message came to a lost and spiritually dead world, and that the verses we are considering fit exactly into that category – the *'gospel mission'* of 1 Peter 3:19 is not something extra and odd and inexplicable or intriguingly debatable, but precisely the same gospel mission as is everywhere in scripture proclaimed, namely that of the salvation we have in Christ. *We* are (or were) the *'spirits in prison'*, and *'he went'* means none other than *'he went from heaven to earth'* (or *'he came to earth from heaven'*).

**1 Peter 3:18-20** <sup>18</sup> *For Christ also suffered/died once for sins, 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, <sup>19</sup> in/[by] which/whom he went/[came] and proclaimed/preached to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup> because/when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.*

The identity of the *'spirits in prison'*, and the nature, time and place of Christ's preaching to them, is much discussed, and a zillion words have been spilt on the subject. I'm aware of the huge variety of ideas that have been advanced, and of the obstacles in the path of a definitive answer – it's not an easy passage to understand. Amongst the difficulties faced are the textual variants that exist, some translation difficulties, and the questions of where phrases and clauses begin and end, what words and expressions are referred back to (or forwards to) by other words and expressions, what punctuation should be supplied (and where), and so on.

It's much debated as to the identity of the spirits referred to, and what time in history they were preached to, in Peter's mind; and as to the nature of the preaching: whether proclamation of judgement, or of victory, or (as I shall argue) of the gospel of salvation. This paper will not rehearse or address any of the various standard views, not at least in so far as to analyse claims made to support this or that standard view over others, or in so far as to deny that or this view against an allegedly more favoured one – it's all discussed in many a monograph and commentary. I shall just give a brief overview here of the various possibilities, for interest and reference.

Summarising the various proposed alternatives briefly, as to when and where Christ *'proclaimed'*, the following have been suggested and argued for (or argued against), though none without attendant difficulties: the occasion was (a) in the days of Noah, as the pre-incarnate Son of God, preaching a warning of impending judgement to a sin-ridden, godless world; or (b) after Christ's death, whilst his body was in the tomb, descending into Hades/hell to proclaim his victory over sin there; or (c) after his resurrection and before his ascension into

heaven; or (d) after his ascension. I shall suggest that the occasion is none of those, but rather the entire earthly mission of Christ, bringing the gospel of salvation to a lost and dissolute world.

Perhaps the most popular view currently is that in an otherwise unmentioned preaching mission, Christ went after his resurrection to proclaim his victory on the cross to the evil-spirit-world. Proponents of the other views will not permit this one to hold the sole high ground, however, and all views are argued for (and against) with vigour, but with considerable sincerity too on all sides. I'm certainly not saying that each of the standard views lacks any good argument in its favour, or that its proponents are not honourable in their point of view – there is considerable rationale for them all, which is why they are all variously held and with good reason and integrity. But there are also considerable difficulties with them all.

The view that the risen Christ proclaimed his victory is attractive in many ways, but to entitle 1 Peter 3:18-22 'Christ's Victory over Evil' has one major problem, in my view, amongst others, namely that neither the word 'victory', nor any similar vocabulary or phraseology, is present in this passage (unless it is seen by implication in v.22b). Rather, where the proclamation of something specific is mentioned explicitly soon after, it's the preaching of the 'gospel' (4:6), although it must be admitted that the 'preach' word is not present there – it reads, word for word, '*indeed to (the) dead it was gosselled/evangelised*'.

Likewise the more traditional view that 3:19 refers to Christ's alleged descent into Hades (the place of departed spirits, not the final hell of the damned) on his bodily death, where he preached to, and perhaps liberated from there, the deceased faithful (i.e., OT saints), but not the deservingly damned, does have some arguments in its favour (I won't rehearse them here). But this view, held by Rome and also within some dispensationalist circles, as with all the other views, has great difficulties. Incidentally, there is also no consensus of opinion on what the clause, '*He descended into Hell/Hades*', in the Apostles' Creed means, nor exactly when or why it was added to the creed, which originally had no such line.

As to who the spirits in prison were (or are), suggestions have been: the fallen angels; or demons/evil spirits; or the 'principalities and powers'; or the enigmatic 'sons of God' of Genesis 6:1-4 (though the identity of these is an equally vexed debate); or the spirits of sinful humans alive in Noah's day; or deceased unbelieving humans in hell or awaiting their judgement; or the deceased OT faithful destined for heaven; or various combinations of all these. My suggestion will be that the spirits in prison are, simply, none other than sinful human beings in all time, who are 'in prison' as described in Isaiah, to whom the gospel of salvation and liberation from prison is proclaimed in the coming of Christ to earth, in his ministry of the preached word, in his death for sin and his resurrection, and by extension in the subsequent proclamation of this gospel in all the world. And Peter wants his readers to know that they in particular are beneficiaries of Christ's preaching mission. Just as Christ came to commence his gospel preaching (e.g., Mark 1:1, and the verses quoted below about Christ coming/going to Galilee), so also after Christ's departure from earth the same gospel was preached to them in the apostolic mission.

**1 Peter 1:25b** *And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*

**1 Peter 1:12** *they ... preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven ...*

Suffice it to say that common to most theories is the suggestion that either back in Noah's day, or after his death or resurrection or ascension, Christ 'went' on some far from universal, but rather specific, particularly directed preaching mission, either in spirit or in his resurrection body, to preach judgement, or victory, or the gospel of the good news that he had died for

them, to the 'spirits in prison', whoever or whatever they were. I am daringly but undauntedly going to question all these standard understandings; here goes ...

### The idea in a nutshell

To cut straight to the main point, my suggestion is that the preaching to the spirits in prison of 1 Peter 3:19 doesn't refer at all to what Christ did either after his death, or back in the days of Noah; it refers instead to the entirety of his earthly incarnation, seen as a 'preaching mission' after the manner of Isaiah 61:1-2, fulfilled in Christ as *per* Luke 4:14-30 (see later).

And to that end, I suggest, and attempt to justify below, that 'πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν' in v.19 should be rendered 'he *came* and proclaimed', not 'he *went* and proclaimed'. From God's perspective Christ 'went' from heaven to earth; from our perspective, Christ 'came' to earth from heaven.

The result of my suggestion is that v.19 is no longer an obscure verse detailing an otherwise unrecorded event in Christ's ministry, introducing a new and strange idea. Rather it fits exactly and naturally with the plain gospel theme of v.18 (and of the whole letter). Further, it makes the 'spirits' referenced in v.19 none other than Peter's readers, together with all of sinful humanity, including we ourselves, hearing, through the word preached in the Spirit, the gospel that came to the world in Christ. Its relevance to our lives is thus just as clear as that of the rest of the passage and, indeed, of the rest of the letter.

Thus I shall suggest:

- that the predominant context of this difficult passage is the suffering (and holiness) of Christians, reflecting earlier references to such in 1:3-12 (especially v.6,7) and 2:18-25 (about servants suffering, including 2:24 which very much reflects 3:18); and subsequently in 4:12-19 and 5:6-11; and that the example of the sufferings of Christ are set forth as an example to and pattern for suffering Christians in all these passages (in chapter 1 it's at 1:10-12); and that a valid interpretation of 3:19-20 is more likely to bear upon the suffering of Christians than on something 'way off topic';
- that the difficult verses (3:19-20) are indeed just a few *within* a passage about suffering for Christ (all of 3:13-4:6); and that any interpretation of these verses that takes us into obscure territory divorced from the main context of suffering, while perhaps being not impossible, is not likely to commend itself if there is a more straightforward explanation that 'fits' the suffering context perfectly, as I shall show there is;
- that 3:19 and 4:6, both referring to the preaching of the gospel, albeit in differing terminology, do reflect each other (not all think so); and that because in 1 Peter throughout from beginning to end there is a strong emphasis on Peter's Christian readers having been gossiped (e.g., 1:12b,25), with glorious effect (e.g., 1:3-9; 2:9-10), it's not at all unreasonable to suppose that 3:19 and 4:6 refer also to the ordinary gossipping of ordinary people, not least those of the early Christian era, and Peter's readers in particular, rather than of other entities such as demons or long-dead contemporaries of Noah;
- that the word usually translated 'went' in 3:19 should rather be rendered 'came';
- that the two identical words 'πορευθεὶς' in v.19,22 are exactly parallel to each other, describing the 'return journey' of Christ: the coming of Christ to earth in his incarnation, followed by his going back into heaven at his ascension;
- that what Christ '*preached*' in spoken word, in his ministry, and in his saving death and resurrection, and subsequently through the apostles whom he commissioned for the task, and through all gospel preaching thereafter, was the gospel of salvation;

- that *'in the Spirit'* in v.18 exactly reflects the same usage in Luke 4:14 (*'in the power of the Spirit'*) with similar parallels at Luke 3:22, *'the Holy Spirit descended on him'*; Luke 4:1, *'full of the Holy Spirit ... led by the Spirit'*; and, Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah 61:1, *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me'*;
- that the subsequent preaching of the gospel by the apostles (and their successors, the church) exactly reflects Christ's preaching mission, being also *'in the Spirit'*, being commissioned by Christ himself with the promise of the power of the Spirit;
- that the reference to *'prison'* reflects Isaiah's use of that metaphor (and likewise that *'the dead'* in 4:6 refers to all sinners dead in their sin);
- that Peter, like Luke, was well familiar with the Isaiah parallels to the release-from-prison motif in 61:1-2 and 42:7, and to the theme of the Spirit being on the Christ in 11:2; 42:1; 48:16;
- that the adjective *'disobedient'* at the beginning of v.20, coming as it does before *'πότε'*, qualifies *'spirits'* in v.19, and doesn't belong as an implied verbal clause (the usual translation device) within the Noah reference in v.20;
- that the *'spirits in prison'* comprise sinful humanity;
- that the word *'because'* in v.20, inserted by the translators, would be better rendered *'just as'* or *'just like'* or *'as also'*;
- that the Noah reference is not there simply as an illustration, even a very good one; but rather, it's there because it is an, nay *the*, archetypal (and thus very first, and thus pattern-setting, grace-defining and redemption-introducing) narrative of salvation by-grace-alone through-faith-alone coming to mankind;
- that the Noah reference is also there because the God-forsaking derision of the on-looking world towards Noah is reflected in the maligning of Peter's readers by their own God-forsaking enemies;
- and that the *'rest'* motif in the Noah story fits perfectly with the *'rest'* motif in Isaiah, and that Peter and Luke know this full well.

The translation of our verses that I am heading towards is (showing the relevant amendments):

**1 Peter 3:18-20** <sup>18</sup> *For Christ also suffered once for sins, 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~~ Spirit,* <sup>19</sup> *in ~~which~~ whom he ~~went~~ came and proclaimed to the disobedient spirits in prison,* <sup>20</sup> *(just like ~~because~~) they formerly ~~did not obey~~, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved ~~brought safely~~ through water.*

In short, Christ's ministry in the power of the Spirit amounts to the bringing of the gospel to earth, delivering once for all God's promise to bring salvation from sin to a lost and hopeless world, and it's this that 1 Peter 3:19 is referring to. Of course it's the case that central to Christ's earthly ministry was his specific *'word ministry'*, and this is given full weight in the Bible. Indeed, at the very beginning of his ministry we read that after Christ's baptism and then temptation in the wilderness he returned to Galilee precisely to commence a preaching ministry, e.g.:

**Mark 1:14-15** <sup>14</sup> *Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God,* <sup>15</sup> *and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel".*

**Matthew 4:23** *And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching ... and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.*

**Mark 2:2** *he was preaching the word to them.*

**Luke 4:31-32** <sup>31</sup>... *he was teaching them on the Sabbath,* <sup>32</sup>*and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority.*

**Luke 4:43** ... *he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose".*

It's intriguing, then, to find in the midst of the above:

**Luke 4:36** ... *they were all amazed and said to one another, "What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!"*

or the parallel, **Mark 1:27** ... *"What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him".*

Even Christ's deliverance ministry is described as 'teaching'. Incidentally, we make no distinction between teaching and preaching; although the words are nuanced slightly differently in their usual semantic meanings, they describe the same activity. That is to say, when God's Word is taught it is preached (proclaimed), and *vice-versa*. Further, we must insist that the notion of 'preaching' in the Bible means there, synonymously, 'proclamation' (κηρυσσω, 'I proclaim'), and most definitely is not an activity restricted to up-front Bible exposition to a church gathering, as usage of the term 'preaching' in our day often seems to imply; rather, it's *any* gospel or Bible proclamation in *any* context. The description of a deliverance miracle as the 'teaching' of Jesus, whilst not amounting to cast iron proof, does provide interesting support for the notion that the whole ministry of Jesus can be described as a 'preaching mission'.

Nonetheless, the texts above demonstrate that Christ came to earth expressly on a preaching mission, which was subsequently extended at his own commissioning through the apostles and then their successors. My suggestion is that Peter knows this full well, and it's this that he references in 3:19. The verbal word-ministry of Jesus, plus his miracles, plus his sinless life, plus his commissioning of the apostles, etc., plus his death, resurrection and exaltation, all together amount in my view to the one big 'preaching mission' of Jesus Christ, referred to in Isaiah 61 and 1 Peter 3, and initiated in the power of the Spirit in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:16ff). And Christ's 'in the Spirit' preaching mission didn't stop there either. Rather, Christ at the end of his earthly ministry had commissioned his apostles to launch the gospel-preaching era of the Christian church, promising them the same power of the Holy Spirit to equip them, and thus the gosselling of Peter's readers must be considered as being very much a part of Christ's extended preaching mission. We are mindful of Christ's words:

**Luke 24:49** *"And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."*

**John 20:21-22** <sup>21</sup>... *"Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, even so I am sending you."* <sup>22</sup>... *Receive the Holy Spirit."*

**Matthew 28:18-20** <sup>18</sup>... *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."* <sup>19</sup>*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* <sup>20</sup>*teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

Observing, then, that the preaching mission of Christ is in Peter's mind, the view espoused in this paper thus entails the adventurous idea of replacing the 'went' of v.19 by 'came', so that



it reads *'he came and proclaimed to the disobedient spirits in prison'*. The reader may initially think this is rather foolhardy, going against the grain in this way. I'm going to do it, though, unflinchingly! A simple change of perspective is all that's necessary to make the leap from an obscure theological idea, that Christ somehow, somewhen, 'went' somewhere on a uniquely particular preaching mission, to what I suggest is the natural meaning of the text, as will be seen soon.

If v.19 refers to Christ *coming to* earth on his evangelistic mission, rather than *going* somewhere else *from* earth, then my main thesis follows very naturally – the main idea of the passage then is that Christ, in coming to earth and dying for sin, *'the righteous for the unrighteous'*, 'preached' the gospel of grace to the long-waiting world, just as many centuries beforehand grace had been brought to a handful of people for the first time after the fall, i.e. to Noah and his family, as an anticipation back then of the promised gospel of a much greater salvation, to come one day in Christ.

### **The main point of the passage**

Before we go on, let's just record that the main point of the passage is not, most definitely not, to give fuel for endless debate about fine points of abstruse theology. The passage was written to encourage Christians who are suffering for Christ, and indeed this is the main point of much of the letter. And the means of that encouragement here and elsewhere (such as in 1 Peter 2) is to remind the reader of the pattern set by Christ – the righteous faithfully suffering for the unrighteous – in other words, the pattern of the gospel. There is no invitation here to investigate some imagined preaching mission by Jesus to dead spirits during his sojourn in the tomb (or whatever).

It's intriguing how we can so readily gravitate towards an intellectually alluring, obscure debate about what is apparently (in the standard views) a very odd happening, and how we can become captivated by it; but how, in doing so, we can equally easily miss (a) the main point of the passage, which is to throw the spotlight on the gospel of grace, and the need for Christians to live *and suffer* by it, and (b) the pastoral usefulness of the passage, which on the proposal of this paper is manifestly evident.

This last point is important, I believe. The gospel is not the gospel to be understood in mind alone, but to be understood, believed and obeyed in transformed mind, heart and life. This is the entire purpose of Peter's writing this letter, as in, e.g., 1:15, *'as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct'*. The Christians he is writing to are experiencing persecution. He knows that the easiest way to avoid persecution is to compromise with the world. The choice facing the Christians under persecution is *either* endure it for Christ, *or* merge into the godless background of sinful humanity. Or to put it another way, *either* to live according to God's will (4:2c) *or* to live according to the will of man (4:3, which reads *'the will of the Gentiles'*, cf. 4:2b, *'for human passions'*, 4:4, *'flood of debauchery'*). Peter knows it's a hard choice; slipping back into the flood of debauchery is easy, but accepting suffering for Christ is hard, even if it is God's will.

It's interesting that in our passage Peter uses the term 'God's will' in the sense both of God's moral will (4:2c) and of God's providence (3:17) – and yet the two are not so far apart: both apply to a Christian. Acceptance of God's providential will (especially when it's hard, even more especially when it entails suffering) and acceptance of (and thus conformity to) God's moral will go hand in hand; rejection of God's moral will likewise goes hand in hand with rejection of God's providence – to say to oneself, "I won't accept suffering" entails, in practice, saying, "I won't accept God's moral will". No wonder, then, that Peter lays before his readers the example

of Christ. That is what he has been doing in verses prior to our passage (3:13-17, and earlier too); it's what he does after our passage (e.g. 4:12-19); it's what he is doing throughout our passage – and I humbly ask in this paper, Why should 3:19 be an esoteric exception? [Incidentally, God does not have two wills, just one; by 'moral will' and 'providential will' I mean those *aspects* of God's will, respectively. All attempts to discern two wills in God, such as the common bipartite 'prescriptive will' and 'permissive will' in God, attempting to solve the sovereignty-responsibility question in the Calvinism-Arminianism debate, are doomed to failure in my humble but honest opinion, and are perhaps just a futile attempt to impose Greek philosophy on biblical theology.]

### **A preliminary remark about the text**

Before we move on it may be worth pointing out that there are grammatical difficulties with the long single sentence of 3:18-22. This is generally acknowledged. The main verb is in v.18 ('*died/suffered*'), and everything else comprises subordinate clauses, some of which don't fit with each other well (not to the pedantic ear of a precise grammarian, anyway). Whatever translation one opts for, words have to be supplied or modified to make the whole sentence work in English. For example, the Bible translation above adds 'because' at the beginning of v.20, and also turns an adjective ('disobedient') there into a verbal clause. Finding that one has to do something of this nature is normal translation practice; but it should be observed that all the various readings of this passage have to do this – no one view is favoured or disfavoured over another in this respect.

### **The Baptism motif – cleansing and forgiveness; burial and resurrection**

It has been pointed out that in v.21 both the standard images of baptism are present, or at least implied, the two, that is, such as are regularly employed throughout the NT in references to Christian baptism. One is the image of cleansing and forgiveness as in:

**Acts 2:38** *Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins ..."*

**Acts 22:16** *"Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name."*

and the possible reference to, or allusion to, baptism in:

**Hebrews 10:22** *let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (cf. 12:24, 'sprinkled blood')*

The latter clause of 10:22 shouldn't be held to be a contradiction of Peter's '*not a removal of dirt from the body*', because Hebrews is using the idea as a metaphor, whilst Peter is stressing that an actual bodily washing is not in mind.

The other baptism image is of burial and rising to new life, as in:

**Romans 6:4** *We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

**Colossians 2:12** *having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

In passing, we remind ourselves that the cross and resurrection are constantly held together in the Bible. Countless other examples could be quoted from scripture; here is just one from Hebrews, which we visit in some detail later:

**Hebrews 13:20-21** <sup>20</sup> *Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant,* <sup>21</sup> *equip you with everything good that you may do his will ...*

This has some relevance for our study, because its theme concurs with Peter's (and that of much of Hebrews) – namely that Christians, following the example of Christ, should do the will of God – both the moral will of God (obedient living for Christ) and the providential will of God (including faithfully suffering for Christ). So it's no surprise that both the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ feature in biblical images inherent in baptism, namely both cleansing (the cross), and burial and resurrection (dying and rising with Christ).

Both these baptism images seem to be present in 1 Peter 3. The cleansing motif occurs fairly explicitly in the '*appeal to God for a good conscience*' contrasted with '*removal of dirt from the body*'. Clearly a spiritual rather than a physical cleansing is in mind. The motif of the dying and rising of the baptised Christian is present too, suggested in the reference to the resurrection of Christ at the end of v.21, and in the previous reference to Christ's dying and rising in v.18, and perhaps in the '*release from prison*' motif. Because both these ideas are present in the whole passage, one naturally asks, which one is Noah's salvation likened to? This is difficult to answer unless we assume, as we must, I think, that Peter is working with loose associations, not tight analogies.

The water in the flood narrative is a vehicle of judgement, symbolising death and destruction (as the sea often does in the Bible), but '*through*' which Noah is saved. From certain death, Noah is saved for '*new life*' after the flood subsides. Perhaps, therefore, one might deduce it's principally the dying and rising motif which Peter is concerned with – the water of the flood is hardly for cleansing, except in the sense that final judgement is ultimate cleansing – but it's not cleansing of the heart of a person, but the cleansing of earth. So why then is the personal cleansing motif explicitly mentioned in the baptism reference immediately following? As usual in biblical theology, it needn't be a matter of either/or. The archetypal example of Noah evokes, for Peter, the baptism analogy, as Noah was '*saved through water*'; and Peter knows his baptismal theology, with both its useful metaphors.

I shall assume, therefore, that loose associations are the best way of reading the text. Peter's mind has been occupied with the wonder of the cross and resurrection of Christ, particularly as an example to, and motivation for, suffering Christians. This evokes for him the wonder of the gospel which proclaims rest for the weary (see later) in every sense – he is surely thinking of Isaiah 61:1-2 and Genesis 5:29 (see soon on Noah). In turn he thinks of the archetype of Noah to whom grace first came in an explicit saving way. And this brings his mind to the symbol of Christian baptism, and thence to cleansing and forgiveness and transformed lives. Thus his heart is full of the need for Christians, and that means suffering Christians, living and dying for Christ in an exemplary way, mirroring the example of Christ.

### **The preaching mission of Christ**

I suggest there was never any good reason to see the preaching in 3:19 as having happened after Christ's death but before his resurrection, save only for the enigmatic line in the Apostles' Creed. The difficult v.19 follows mention of both the death *and* the resurrection of Christ; it doesn't follow mention just of the death of Christ. So if the order of events is thought to be sequential, then surely we should conclude that the preaching of Christ follows his

resurrection – and many commentators do. But then the reference to Noah is strange, unless Christ preached after his resurrection to the ‘sons of God’ of Genesis 6:1-4. The reason some commentators have gravitated towards the idea of Christ going after his death, but before his resurrection, and preaching to long-since-dead people (of Noah’s day, or of OT saints generally) is the strange expression, ‘*spirits in prison*’ (and it’s very strange on any reading), and the reference to Noah in the following verse. But I shall suggest that ‘*spirits in prison*’ means, quite simply, people dead in sin in any and every era, but with particular reference here to those of Christ’s own day and then subsequently of Peter’s, and that the reference to Noah, though very important, as I shall show, is restricted to v.20 alone. And I shall show that Noah appears there because Peter sees him as the archetype of salvation by grace alone.

I’m aware that some people think the preaching mission of Christ was indeed to the people of Noah’s day, but took place *in* Noah’s day – that is to say, the pre-incarnate Christ appeared (‘went’) in Noah’s day and warned the disobedient people then of coming judgement. I find this suggestion rather strained, as there is no other hint anywhere it may be the case. It has been given some legs by some commentators, one presumes, as the only alternative (as they see it) to the usual ‘post-cross’ or ‘post-resurrection’ preaching mission as most others see it.

### **Noah, the archetype**

Let’s suppose, not at all unreasonably, that Peter chooses to refer to Noah for the very particular reason of it being a prime example, perhaps Peter sees it as *the* prime example, certainly the *first* example explicitly stated, of salvation by grace in the Bible; the archetypal example, that is, of the grace of God, and that alone, effecting a comprehensive rescue from a very definite and otherwise absolute, final and universally deserved judgement. This is exactly how the Noah narrative should be construed, of course – it’s not merely a Sunday School story about saving animals (as, sadly, many a Sunday School has treated it). Noah is also an apt example of someone who, in obedience to God, stood apart from the debauchery of the sinful world around him, and consequently suffered derision and reviling by his contemporaries.

**Genesis 6:8-11** <sup>8</sup> *But Noah found favour [i.e., grace] in the eyes of the LORD.* <sup>9</sup> *... Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God ...* <sup>11</sup> *Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.*

The Noah reference, then, is important, because Peter wants his readers to see how *their* salvation by grace mirrors an archetypal example from scripture. He is also going to use the Noah example as a parallel to the important Christian symbol of baptism. My suggestion, then, is that v.18-19 summarise the mission of Christ coming to the world; then v.20 presents the Noah analogy; v.21 returns via the baptism analogy to the doctrine of salvation. All this is there to encourage Christians to live for Christ and to suffer for Christ without compromising with the world.

The word rendered ‘*proclaimed*’ in v.19 is indeed the usual word used for preaching or proclaiming the gospel, and there’s no doubt it should be read thus here. ‘Preaching’ in the NT is always simply proclamation of the truth of God’s word in any manner or form – it’s not tied to a pulpit, for example; it’s a big, positive word implying by its use that there is something well worth hearing, and which needs to be announced, taught, heard, believed, obeyed and acted upon. But understanding this word appropriately doesn’t favour or disfavour any one of the myriad treatments of our enigmatic v.19, including, if I may dare say so, mine. I suggest, though, that the view being espoused in this paper gives a much greater value to the term ‘proclaimed’ than others by virtue of the fact that the whole world is the audience of the ‘preaching’, which on my view is the entire mission of Christ. And, pertinently and poignantly,

Peter's readers had heard exactly the same preaching, as we read in 1:25b, quoted above. I suggest that my reading of the proclamation of Christ as being the preaching of the gospel to sinful humanity rather than to evil spirits or to just a very small group of long-dead humans, fits better by far with the readers of the letter being the pertinent case in Peter's mind.

**1 Peter 1:25b** *And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*

The translation difficulties (the details needn't concern us here) around the end of v.18, the beginning and middle of v.19, and the beginning of v.20, preclude a dogmatic assertion of an identification of the 'spirits in prison' with certain characters in (or before, or after) the Noah narrative (some say some, some say others). The equation is just about possible, one supposes, and many have thus supposed. But although the term 'spirits in prison' is unusual, I suggest it fits best as a recollection of OT controls such as Isaiah 42:7; 61:1 (see later). In other words, being 'in prison' is not unsurprisingly a Bible-metaphor for being captive to sin. True, this fits the disobedient in the times of Noah:

**Genesis 6:5** *The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*

This may explain further why Peter uses the Noah example – not only is Noah the prime example of God's saving grace in action, but Noah's world is the prime example of unrepentant, godless sinners and of the judgement that comes to such by God's hand. But it also fits mankind lost in sin, generally considered, in all time.

### **Christ's 'return journey'**

It might seem that a major difficulty of my suggestion is the word 'went' ('πορευθεῖς') in v.19. But I'm not dismayed by this. Those who, as I, have been subjected to learning NT Greek, however unsuccessfully, will know there are various words for 'go' and 'come', and that lexicons can well say of a Greek word – in particular, ἔρχομαι – that it means 'come, go' – either one or the other, that is, leaving the hapless student unclear as to which option to choose in any instance, save only to apply the general 'look at context' rule. I concede that our word, 'πορευθεῖς', and its cognates, is usually translated with 'go' words rather than 'come', but this shall not deter me from the suggestion that in 1 Peter 3:19 the translation 'came' gives the intended sense, rather than 'went', as I hope to justify in the following paragraphs.

Now, both 'coming' and 'going' involve a change of location, a journey from A to B, and whether it's best described as going or coming depends on one's point of view. If I travel some way to visit you, *your* household might say to you, "He came to see you", but *my* household might say to you, "He went to see you". Either family might have said, neutrally, "He journeyed to see you", or "He effected a transfer of location to see you"; not that this amounts to very picturesque speech, but you'll see the point – either 'come' or 'go' refers to a journey, or a 'transfer of location', or 'relocation', but whether we use 'come' or 'go' depends on from whose point of view we are perceiving it. [PS: reviewing this paper (2010) some years after its original conception (2006 in writing, but way prior to 2000 in thought), I have just done a trawl of some lexicons, and have quickly found mention, a little to my surprise, of the verb 'transfer' being a possible rendering of the Greek word used here in v.19. The same search has also yielded this equally intriguing possible rendering of the verb: 'pursue the journey one has commenced'. Needless to say, I am delighted to find such corroborative like-thinking!]

Supporting my take on this word, that it should be translated 'came' rather than 'went', seen from earth's perspective, is the other occurrence of 'πορευθεῖς', '*he has gone*' in v.22, where it's exactly the same word morphologically. Actually, in both instances it's a participle – 'having

gone', 'having come', 'having journeyed' or 'having transferred/relocated'. If in v.22 the word means 'went back to heaven' (and it does indeed), then my translation of v.19 ('came from heaven') makes the two uses parallel to each other, the second completing the expedition, or 'return journey', that Christ embarked upon in his incarnation. 'He came from heaven to earth' ... 'he went from earth to heaven' is an entirely natural way to read this pair of uses of the word 'πορευθεῖς', I suggest, and more so than the rendering, 'he went' (to the departed spirits, or wherever) followed by 'he went' (to heaven), entailed by the more common explanation of v.19, where the two 'goings' don't parallel one another at all.

If I'm right that Christ's entire incarnation, from his birth through to his ascension, and subsequently, is well described as a 'preaching mission', and I shall justify this soon below, then it's no surprise that the commencement of that mission should be mentioned in v.19, followed by its conclusion in v.22. We can then render the whole return expedition thus, 'Having come from heaven, he preached ... Having gone back to heaven, he sits – task completed'. *'It is finished'* (John 19:30), Christ declared on the cross; *'he has done it'* (Psalm 22:31), David prophesied. The finished task, of course, the completed work of Christ, is the salvation of the world by his death for sin, as clearly implied in 1 Peter 3:22, and as declared in this verse from Hebrews (to pick just one), that makes clear Christ's final exalted position:

**Hebrews 1:3b** *After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high ...*

**1 Peter 3:21-22** <sup>21</sup> ... *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,* <sup>22</sup> *who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God ...*

Furthermore, that Christ's earthly work was begun at his incarnation ('he came'), and finished at his ascension ('he went'), is reflected in the encouragement Peter gives to his readers, that their suffering too will one day be finished. In his letter he prominently reminds them that their suffering will end and they will be taken to glory. Or to put it another way, using Peter's own terminology, the gospel brings *hope* (see especially 1:3-9,13,21; also 4:12-13).

I have two notable allies in this – names of far greater renown than mine will ever be. No other than Saint Jerome in his Vulgate translation rendered the verse, *'In quo et his, qui in carcere erant, spiritibus veniens praedicavit'*, where *'veniens'* means 'coming' in Latin. Jerome was followed by the original Wyclif translation from Jerome's Vulgate into Middle English. This rendered 1 Peter 3:19 as *'... to hem that weren closid to gydre in prisoun he comynge in spirit prechide'* (original version, with the Purvey revision – *'... he cam in spirit ... prechide'* – following suit). To these eminent scholars we can add the self-exiled translators of the Rheims-Douay Bible, whose rendering of the verse in the Challoner revision is: *'In which also coming he preached to those spirits that were in prison'*. It would not be unreasonable to assume that these translators knowingly and deliberately chose to employ the 'coming' rather than the 'going' understanding of 'πορευθεῖς'. Nonetheless, it is not only the ancient language lexicons that should determine this matter, but also the Hebrew mindset, to which I turn.

In our modern, self-orientated age, our tendency in the West is naturally to see things from our own point of view. That's why we, earth-bound as we are, when we come across the English translation 'went' in v.19, find it difficult readily to read it as denoting Christ's *coming* to earth. So we conclude with barely a thought that some strange 'going away' from earth is meant, reading 'went' as from our point of view, and off we go on a search for some very odd post-death or post-resurrection or pre-incarnate mission of Christ's spirit. But the less self-obsessed, more objective ancient Hebrew (together with Jerome, Wycliffe and the Rheims scholars) would, I suggest, more readily see it differently. Suppose for the sake of argument that we come across not 'went' but 'came'. It then makes perfect sense – we wouldn't dream

of taking it as meaning anything but ‘Christ came to earth preaching’, seen from *our own* perspective. ‘Went to earth preaching’ would be the natural rendering seen from a *heavenly* perspective. ‘Relocated (or journeyed) in order to preach’ would be a rendering from a neutral perspective, though it reads rather awkwardly.

My suggestion then is that v.19 does refer to Christ’s coming to earth on his entire gospel ‘preaching’ mission, i.e., his incarnation, encompassing his life of preaching and miracles, then his death, resurrection and exaltation and the apostolic mission. If this is so, then seen from *our* perspective, we expect v.19 to read, ‘*in which he came and proclaimed ...*’ But from *Christ’s* (and his heavenly Father’s) own perspective in his pre-incarnation heavenly home, the translation which is there in the usual English versions of the Bible, namely ‘*in which he went and proclaimed*’, is thoroughly appropriate. This understanding is against the usual grain, but I offer the suggestion nonetheless, undaunted. I’m suggesting that ‘went’ in v.19 (as it appears in English translations) means he ‘effected a transfer of location’, or ‘relocated’, from heaven to earth, or, from his point of view, ‘he *went* to earth’, to engage in the mightiest preaching mission of all time – namely, to ‘proclaim’ in both word and deed the gospel (cf. Mark 1:14) of grace alone through his cross alone, before finally returning, same word ‘*προρευθεῖς*’ again, to his heavenly home, his task completed. Once we see all this, it’s clear that all confusion is removed by the simple expedient of translating the word as ‘came’ – ‘*he came and proclaimed to the spirits in prison*’. This is not rewriting the text; rather, it’s a revised understanding of the original intent of the text, as I believe it to be.

### **The living and the dead**

Let’s look now at the ‘living, dead, dead, live’ quartet in 4:5-6. The clause ‘to judge the living and the dead’ appears, of course, in the Apostles’ and the Nicene Creeds, the expression there originating, no doubt, from our 1 Peter 4:5. Our familiarity with these creeds lends itself to our tendency automatically to read the clause as referring to people who are alive and dead *physically*; at least that’s how the creeds are usually understood. The matter of those who are alive and those who are dead physically, each experiencing exactly the same judgement or salvation at the return of Christ as the other, with no distinction between the ‘living’ and ‘dead’ categories whatsoever, is well dealt with in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, of course. We must remember that Peter has made a comparison between, on the one hand, Noah and the worldwide disobedience of his time and the rescue by grace of ‘*a few*’ then, and, on the other hand, the people he is addressing in his own time. So it’s perhaps natural to think that in v.5 he may be saying that both those long since dead (as in Noah’s day), and those alive now (Peter’s readers, and those who are maligning them), are going to be judged alike. And it would certainly be true.

But one difficulty with understanding ‘living’ and ‘dead’ like this (i.e., *physically* living/dead) is that in v.6, although ‘dead’ there can be taken to refer to people of Noah’s time, and thus now physically dead, the verb ‘live’ in v.6, in the clause ‘*they might live in the Spirit*’ (or ‘*live in spirit*’), doesn’t and can’t mean, plainly and simply, ‘live’ physically – it means ‘live spiritually’. Yes, it refers to the earthly life of a Christian, but the point is that through the gospel of Christ a person can be brought from a ‘fleshly’ life heading for judgement to a ‘spiritual’ life, a life ‘in the Spirit’, saved from death for eternal life. Let me then make the tentative and bold suggestion that all four words are meant to denote (at least) *spiritual* life and death. The verses would then read something like:

**1 Peter 4:5-6** [...] *but they will give account to him who is ready to judge both those who are alive spiritually and those who are dead spiritually. For this indeed is why the gospel was preached to those who are dead spiritually, so that though judged*

*as the sinful, in-the-flesh people that they are (like all people generally), they might be made alive spiritually, i.e., saved by grace like Noah – alive with the spiritual life given by God himself.*

This rendering certainly works handsomely, and does so consistently well through all four uses of the living/dead words. Having said that, it's entirely possible that we don't in fact have to choose between the *physical* sense of the words living/dead and the *spiritual* sense – it could be both/and rather than either/or.

What I mean is that Peter is addressing the Christians of his day who are suffering for Christ – virtually the entire passage (and letter) is addressed to, and about, them; but he has also thought fit to look back to the first and otherwise prime example of God's salvation by grace alone in action – Noah and his family saved from judgement. Could he therefore be 'playing' with the idea of living/dead, in the sense of a figure of speech 'playing' with concepts? Yes, I think so. Peter is aware that he has looked back to long dead people, some saved from judgement in restored life, some judged in highly terminal death; but he is addressing people who are now very much still alive, both physically *and* spiritually (they are his contemporary fellow Christians). So consequently he is also acutely aware that he is writing about a much more serious 'living/dead' differentiation between people – not just those long since dead, contrasted to people living in his own time; but the spiritually dead mockers ('*they malign you*', 4:4), in contrast to the spiritually alive Christians. So I suggest (without being too dogmatic) that Peter may be knowingly punning here; but, nevertheless, the most serious point he makes is what differentiates a Christian, suffering for Christ and living for Christ, who will survive the coming judgement, from the unrighteous, unrepentant, proud, mocking sinner who will face judgement.

### **In flesh, in spirit**

Let's have a look now at the five uses of '*in the flesh*'. The first two (3:18; 4:1a) refer to Christ's death on the cross. Certainly the expression connotes physical suffering, but arguably it also connotes the spiritual suffering entailed by its being a sin-bearing death (2:24) – again, not either/or but both/and. The third use (4:1c), close on the second, applies to those who are in Christ, saved by his grace. The construction used in v.1 makes the 'suffering' of the Christian '*in the flesh*' exactly parallel to the suffering of Christ '*in the flesh*'. We must ask, therefore, is physical suffering meant in 4:1c (because the context of the whole passage is 'Christians suffering for Christ'), or is it the 'spiritual dying' entailed by a Christian's conversion that's meant here; the spiritual death, that is, symbolised by baptism, entailed when the saved person 'dies' to sin? Or is it again both/and, not either/or? Again, I see every reason for both meanings being in mind because of the exact parallel with Christ's suffering. In respect of any Christian, that is, their dying to sin ('*ceased from sin*'), symbolised in baptism, entailed in their repentance and faith towards Christ, goes hand in hand with a life lived accordingly ('*ceased from sin*'), which entails suffering for Christ.

The fourth use (4:2), following close on the third and in the next clause, plays with both the meanings too. Clearly, it refers here basically to the human, physical life of the saved person, but the issue is whether the human, physical life will be lived '*for human passions*' (i.e., a life that's fleshly in the sense of sinful), or lived '*for the will of God*' (i.e., a spiritual life, seeking God's will alone, '*ceased from sin*'). Is Peter again punning thus? I see no reason why not. As in the previous section, Peter's most serious point is, again, the characteristic of a life saved by grace in contrast to the unsaved life heading for judgement.



The fifth *'in the flesh'* continues the play on words. 4:6 reprises the idea of the gospel being preached to the dead (cf. 3:19). Given that Peter has drawn the reader's attention to the saving of Noah, it could possibly, and perhaps at one level does, refer to the gospel of salvation having been brought to him and his family those centuries earlier, that is, preached to those now physically (*'in the flesh'*) dead. But surely this can't be its prime meaning here, especially in view of the final clause of v.6, *'that ... they might live in the spirit as God'*. It's unlikely, I suggest, that this final clause of v.6 refers to Noah's 'resurrected' life renewed after the flood subsided.

Rather, I suggest, the prime meaning of this fifth *'in the flesh'* is spiritual; that is to say, the verse indicates that the gospel of Christ *'was preached'* to the spiritually dead in exactly the sense I am suggesting in this paper; that is, preached in the incarnation of Christ – his life, preaching, death, resurrection and exaltation, and then the apostolic mission, brought to the imprisoned spirits of 3:19, or to put it another way, all of sinful humanity. Allow me, then, to make my case for this identification of the *'spirits in prison'*.

### **The spirits in prison**

Consider again this small portion of our text:

**1 Peter 3:18-19** <sup>18</sup> *For Christ ... put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,*  
<sup>19</sup> *in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.*

We have concluded that Peter may well be playing with words in this passage, punning here and there, taking words and concepts in two different meanings, intending both to be inferred by the reader. E.g., we have seen how terms such as *'in the flesh'* and *'living'* are taken at both the physical and the spiritual levels. Perhaps he's doing the same thing with *'in spirit'* too at the end of v.18, as follows: *'in spirit'* may mean first that Christ rose again spiritually, but also that none other than God the Holy Spirit was instrumental in the resurrection (an assuredly biblical idea). And if so, then the ensuing clause must refer to the Holy Spirit as well, in which case *'in which ...'* should perhaps be rendered *'in (or by) whom ...'* (as often noted in marginal comments in the English translations); it would then read, *'in the Spirit, in/by whom he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison'*. NB, the presence or absence (depending on textual variant) of the definite article before *'spirit'* is immaterial – either meaning may be inferred either way; the definite article can be somewhat loosely applied in Koinē Greek, and certainly is in this passage where most definite articles are missing.

Now we remember that I am suggesting, with some confidence, and yet provisionally and not too dogmatically, that this refers to the entire incarnation of Christ, seen as a *'preaching mission'*. Well, I believe I may have Luke on my side! It's not nearly well enough known that Luke knows his prophet Isaiah through and through. Consider, for example this well-known episode in which Jesus of Nazareth launches his mission in Nazareth, reading from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue (the quotation here is explicit and stated as such, but it's abundantly obvious in many hints, allusions and shorter quotations that Luke is well aware that Jesus of Nazareth perfectly fulfils the prophecies of Isaiah):

**Luke 4:16-21** <sup>16</sup> *And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.* <sup>17</sup> *And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,* <sup>18</sup> *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me [‘anointed’ = Christ, or Messiah] to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,* <sup>19</sup> *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* <sup>20</sup> *And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant*

and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”.

cf. **Isaiah 61:1-2** <sup>1</sup> *The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me [= ‘Messiah-ed me’] to bring good news to the poor; 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; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn ...*

My suggestion, then, is that Peter knows his Bible. He is perfectly aware of Isaiah 61, and quite possibly aware of Jesus having quoted this passage in Nazareth, applying it to himself. Peter knows that ‘in prison’ is one of a myriad of metaphors used in the OT to describe the world in rebellion against God, disobedient, proud, mocking – yet not precluding the possibility that here and there, under the grace of God ministered by his Spirit, there may be one or two who find ‘favour’ (grace) and yearn for and find God’s promised redemption. That’s why God’s gospel is proclaimed to the ‘spirits in prison’, so that some might be saved from judgement and destruction. And thus we have in the OT a gospel from God, announced by Isaiah and many others, ‘proclaimed’ or ‘brought’ to ‘the poor’ (another such metaphor amongst others in Isaiah 61) – a gospel that is no other than the gospel, God’s gospel, the good news of Christ. On our hypothesis, it’s a very natural and easy step to conclude that Peter in 1 Peter 3:19 is referring to this very gospel, brought and proclaimed to the waiting world in the person of God’s Son Jesus Christ.

The ‘in prison’ metaphor occurs elsewhere in Isaiah, in passages which, as seen below, have echoes also of the grace, salvation and Spirit motifs (which I highlight in various ways hereafter):

**Isaiah 42:1-9** <sup>1</sup> *Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. <sup>2</sup> He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; <sup>3</sup> a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. <sup>4</sup> He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.*

<sup>5</sup> *Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: <sup>6</sup> “I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, <sup>7</sup> to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. <sup>8</sup> I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. <sup>9</sup> Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.”*

**Isaiah 49:8-9,13** <sup>8</sup> *Thus says the LORD: “In a time of favour I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped [saved] you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, <sup>9</sup> saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear’” ... <sup>13</sup> Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! for the LORD has comforted [saved] his people and will have compassion on his afflicted. [‘helped’ and ‘comforted’ are both salvation words]*

cf. **Psalm 146:7-8** <sup>7</sup> *[The LORD] executes justice for the oppressed ... gives food to the hungry ... sets the prisoners free* <sup>8</sup> ... opens the eyes of the blind ... lifts up those who are bowed down ... loves the righteous.

It's interesting that Luke expressly notes, several times, and not only in Luke 4:18 above, that Jesus commenced his ministry in the power of the Spirit, just as Isaiah the prophet declared the same thing in Isaiah 42 and 61 quoted above. E.g.:

**Luke 3:21-22** <sup>21</sup> *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened,* <sup>22</sup> *and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."*

**Luke 4:1,14** <sup>1</sup> *And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil ...* <sup>14</sup> *And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee ...*

Compare this messianic prophecy:

**Isaiah 11:1-6** <sup>1</sup> *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.* <sup>2</sup> *And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.* <sup>3</sup> *And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear,* <sup>4</sup> *but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.* <sup>5</sup> *Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.* <sup>6</sup> *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.*

This strengthens the suggestion that Peter, like Luke, understands 'in spirit' in v.18 as 'in the Spirit'. NB, Luke is also intensely interested in the power and filling of the Holy Spirit in Acts.

### **The spirits in prison**

Ok, so we've concluded that although the expression 'in prison' is somewhat unusual in 1 Peter, it's most easily seen as an echo of the Isaiah 'in prison' motif. It needs to be acknowledged, though, that the word 'spirits' of 1 Peter 3:19 is unusual too. The plural word occurs many times in the NT, of course, in the sense of 'evil' or 'unclean spirits'; this predominant use has led some people to conclude that in 1 Peter 3, too, it's evil spirits who are the audience for Christ's preaching. But this interpretation arguably doesn't seem to work in any other respect, there being no other indication in the passage that evil spirits are in mind (unless in v.22b). And it doesn't seem relevant to the principal theme of Christians suffering for Christ. It would fit (but without other corroboration) with a possible victory theme to the passage, but I have argued against that on the grounds of lack of victory terminology.

There are a handful of uses of the plural word in 1 Corinthians and 1 John where the spirits of prophets are meant, people speaking, or purporting to speak, in God's name, and where discernment as to authenticity is imperative in the church congregation. But Peter doesn't seem to be using the term thus. In Revelation (and perhaps once in Hebrews) the word 'spirits' refers several times to apocalyptic ministers of God – hardly Peter's intended meaning – or (again) to demons or the spirits of prophets (once). In Colossians a different Greek word refers to elemental world principles opposed to Christ.

This leaves just a handful of uses of the plural *'spirits'* in the English Bible where the word refers to the spirits of people – God's people – and we'll look briefly at these to see if they shed light on Peter's use; they're the only other verses to compare Peter's *'spirits'* with. On a couple of occasions in the book of Numbers (16:22; 27:16) the LORD is addressed as *'the God of the spirits of all flesh'*, in contexts where Moses (and God) is concerned for the *spiritual* health of God's people. We shall see this to be significant. Likewise there are two uses, the only uses of the plural *'spirits'* now remaining to be considered, both in the same chapter of Hebrews, at 12:22-23 (discussed shortly), and:

**Hebrews 12:9** *Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of *spirits* and live?*

These verses occur in a section of Hebrews (from 10:19 to the end of the letter) dealing with faith and its implications for Christian living, and includes the famous *'cloud of witnesses'*, a list in Hebrews 11 of OT saints who kept faith with God against the prevailing godlessness of the world, often in the face of dreadful persecution. There are a number of interesting similarities between this section of Hebrews and 1 Peter, not least the theme of remaining faithful to Christ under persecution. Other points of contact include the themes of Christ suffering in the *'flesh'*, the blood of Jesus, bodies washed (figuratively) and consciences cleansed (Hebrews 10:22 was referred to above), hospitality, Christian love, Christ as shepherd, Christ at the right hand of God, God's house, priesthood, Christians being finished with sin, the will of God, and Noah (see shortly), to name some.

Like the Numbers verses, Hebrews 12:9 concerns the spiritual health of the Christian believer, disciplined by God through the harsh vicissitudes of the Christian life. In the absence of other parallels suggesting something else, I tentatively aver that our 1 Peter 3:19 uses *'spirits'* in broadly the same sense. That is to say, countless human souls are lost souls, without God and without hope in their disobedience; it has always been thus, just as it was thus in the days of Noah. But the gospel of Christ can rescue those souls from death, just as God's grace rescued eight *'souls'* from the destruction of the flood, and also rescued Peter's readers. Spiritually dead people (*'spirits in prison'*) can come alive in Christ.

The gospel of Christ proclaims, then, that although man *'in the flesh'* (in earthly life) is man *'in the flesh'* (in sin) – another *'double take'* on a Bible word – God cares for the spiritual state of the lost soul of man enough to offer in his grace a way back from death to life. This is the heartbeat of our passage in 1 Peter, with its cleansing and resurrection themes. Whereas our earthly fathers disciplined us caringly for the good of our earthly lives, Hebrews says, so God our heavenly Father disciplines us caringly for the good of our spiritual lives. This Hebrews verse is certainly, in context, an example, albeit one of very few, where the plural word *'spirits'* clearly indicates the spirits of actual living Christian people, or, equivalently, their souls – Christians considered from the point of view of their spiritual lives. And this theme too throbs at the heart of Peter's concern (as well as Hebrews' concern). I venture to suggest, then, that there is in this Hebrews verse some legitimisation for the idea that Peter too is thinking of the spiritual lives of real people in 1 Peter 3:19. It's not proof, of course, that my reading is right, but it's certainly evidence that my view can't be excluded. And it fits perfectly. The Hebrews and 1 Peter verses parallel one another magnificently.

### **Noah's salvation**

Of course, Peter's *'spirits in prison'*, before being released by the gospel, are people not yet under grace; they're disobedient towards God, in sin, in darkness, in death. And yet this is the

case for every one of God's people, in both the OT and the NT, before God's grace is proclaimed to them, reaches them, plucks them from the world and saves them. Noah was the prime example once, as a foretaste of the grace to come in Christ. Peter now writes to the Christians to assure them that God cared for them, spirits in prison, enough to save them, so that they can join with the *'the spirits of the righteous made perfect'* (Hebrews 12:23); that is, those made righteous by God's grace in the OT, and listed in Hebrews 11 as the heroes of faith. The third in that list, and the first, indeed the only one of the list, of whom it is said explicitly that he was justified by faith, is Noah:

**Hebrews 11:7** *By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*

All these people of faith are justified by faith, of course, as 12:23 (see below) makes clear. Elsewhere, and more than once, it's most emphatically stressed that the mighty Abraham was justified by his faith. It's interesting then that here it is Noah so described. Or to put it another way, God's grace to Noah back in the time of the flood rescued him from destruction and for his restored life on earth; but it was God's grace in Christ, and Noah's faith in the Christ who was to come, that rescued Noah for eternity as a member of God's universal church. And what goes for Noah applies equally to the entire list of the heroes of faith. One other example in the list of heroes is Rahab, worth quoting here because of the way her rescue from destruction, by her faith, is similar to Noah's rescue from destruction by his faith, and especially in view of an interesting vocabulary similarity with 1 Peter 3, namely the word *'disobedient'*:

**Hebrews 11:31** *By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient ...*

And so we come to the second occurrence of 'spirits' in Hebrews, which almost certainly has a more specific referent, namely the cloud of witnesses of the previous chapter:

**Hebrews 12:22-23** <sup>22</sup> *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect ...*

Hebrews 11:40 (below) makes it clear that the heroes of faith of the OT only find their salvation in Christ, in common with all Christians. What went before, in the OT, was only a foretaste, just as Noah's salvation in particular was a foretaste, or a type, of the *'better'* salvation to come. So *'the spirits of the righteous made perfect'* (12:23) are the spirits of the heroes of faith, made righteous by the free grace of God in Christ, even though they lived long before, and believed a promise of a future salvation, in Noah's case a better salvation even than the one he experienced at the time of the flood. Could such a *better* salvation be conceived, given the dramatic salvation he and his family experienced? Hardly, it might be thought, but we must believe otherwise – Noah, as also the whole cloud of witnesses, indeed trusted in something much greater than God's saving grace in their own time; they awaited, and trusted God for, redemption from their sins, that is, God's saving grace in Christ, along with all Christian believers, in the then far future – a redemption that would come through the promised Messiah:

**Hebrews 11:39-40** <sup>39</sup> *And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup> since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.*

Note that Hebrews 12:22-23, quoted above, follows on from a parallel negative statement (*'You have not come ...'*), where it's emphasised (12:18-21) that the Christians being addressed haven't come to Mount Sinai, with its tangible terror, but (v.22) *'you have come ... to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem'*, where the universal church (*'assembly'*) of Christ has her rightful eternal dwelling place. This initiates a number of references in the remainder of the letter to this heavenly city, such as this verse where the *'reproach of Christ'* (that is, suffering for Christ after the pattern set by Christ himself, cf. Hebrews 11:26; 13:13; 10:33) is still very much the context:

**Hebrews 13:14** *For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.*

Likewise Abraham, *'in the land of promise, as in a foreign land'* (11:9), *'was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God'* (11:10). And it is said of all the heroes of faith, that:

**Hebrews 11:13-16** <sup>13</sup>*These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. <sup>14</sup>For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup>If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup>But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.*

What all this goes to show is that Hebrews and Peter, and indeed the witness of the entire Bible, encourage Christians to have the long-term view, waiting in Christian hope, looking forward to the heavenly homeland as a prime motive for steadfastly living for Christ and suffering for Christ in this life in a fallen, godless world.

Before we leave this section of Hebrews, with its intriguing similarities with our 1 Peter passage, we must note that Noah gets a second mention, albeit not by name:

**Hebrews 12:25-29** <sup>25</sup>*See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. <sup>26</sup>At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." <sup>27</sup>This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. <sup>28</sup>Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup>for our God is a consuming fire.*

The expression *'shook the earth'* might sound an odd way of referring to Noah's flood, but it clearly does mean this; and it was certainly, as related in Genesis 7, a very violent episode in geological history, when (7:11) *'the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened'*. God's covenant with Noah, namely that such wholesale destruction will never happen again during earth's existence, holds firm, because God's promises always do. Thus there will only be one single wholesale destruction again (*'Yet once more'*), and that's the one that will happen on the last Day, when Christ returns to judge the earth. On that day, the entire universe will be *'shaken'* and thus destroyed, as we learn elsewhere, such as in both 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and in 2 Peter, where there is again a clear reference to the time of Noah:

**2 Peter 3:3-7** <sup>3</sup>... scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. <sup>4</sup>They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." <sup>5</sup>For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, <sup>6</sup>and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. <sup>7</sup>But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the ungodly.

cf. **2 Peter 2:4-5,9** <sup>4</sup>For if God ... <sup>5</sup>... did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly ... <sup>9</sup>then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgement ...

We detect, then, a further clue as to why Peter chose to use the Noah narrative as an illustrative archetypal example in 1 Peter 3:20. Peter is encouraging Christian believers to stand firm under persecution and trial. And this is precisely what Noah did. Against the mocking of the scoffers, Noah stood his ground and remained faithful. Noah's God is able to keep his Christian saints faithful too until Christ's return.

### **Noah the bringer of comfort**

Not only is Jesus' ministry 'in the Spirit', but Simeon's is too (not to forget Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1), in a passage worth quoting because it reminds us that the salvation which Christ had come to bring was frequently couched in terms of **comfort** (here 'consolation') – here in Luke, several times in Isaiah, and not forgetting (and surely Peter hadn't forgotten either) that 'Noah' means, it is said, 'comfort' or 'rest' or 'help' (rest in the sense of relief from an anguished life, help in the sense of providing that longed-for comfort and rest).

**Luke 2:25-40** <sup>25</sup>Simeon ... was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. <sup>26</sup>And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. <sup>27</sup>And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, <sup>28</sup>he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, <sup>29</sup>"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; <sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation <sup>31</sup>that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" ... <sup>40</sup>And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favour of God was upon him.

**Genesis 5:28-29** <sup>28</sup>When Lamech had lived 182 years, he fathered a son <sup>29</sup>and called his name Noah [= rest, relief, comfort], saying, "Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed this one shall bring us relief [i.e., rest] from our work and from the painful toil of our hands."

This verse reflects (and intimates the reversal of) God's curse:

**Genesis 3:17-19** <sup>17</sup> "... cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; <sup>18</sup>thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup>By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

The account of Noah is one of the most well-known of Bible stories, but what he is most known for is, of course, the flood and the ark. What he is hardly ever remembered for is the promise attached to his name, in that first reference to him in Genesis 5:28 quoted above. Perhaps, though, this is the most important thing to remember. 'Noah' is, in fact, an abbreviated version of the Hebrew word translated as 'comfort' in various places, such as:

**Isaiah 40:1** *Comfort, comfort my people ...*

**Psalm 23:4** *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Perhaps we could read these as 'Noah, Noah my people' and 'your rod and your staff, they Noah me', to emphasise that Noah's salvation in Genesis 6 encapsulates and enacts God's promise to bring his salvation-through-grace, echoed later in these many recollections and proclamations by God's spokesmen of the gracious nature of their God. We tentatively conclude, then, that there is a salvation motif present in the very name of Noah. At his birth Noah becomes the only person in these early Bible chapters to have an explicit explanation of his name, given to him (in Genesis 5:29 quoted above) with his father Lamech's express intention that he would signal a reversal of God's curse. I find myself reminded of Jesus' invitation:

**Matthew 11:28-29** <sup>28</sup> "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

The 'yoke' of Christ is the very opposite of the shackles of sin's prison. Again, here, we see the salvation of the gospel of Christ couched in terms of rest. It's noteworthy that the very next passage in Matthew is the account of Jesus in the cornfields on the Sabbath (= rest!), where it's emphasised that Christ's 'rest', which is of course a perfect fulfilment of God's promise to bring Sabbath rest to his people (another prominent theme of Hebrews, as at 4:1-9, <sup>1</sup>... the promise of entering his rest still stands, ... <sup>3</sup> For we who have believed enter that rest, ... <sup>9</sup> So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God'), is again the very opposite of what the Pharisees had turned Sabbath observance into – not 'rest', but wearisome burden, or, perhaps 'prison' (interestingly, the multitude of prescriptions and proscriptions of the Pharisees were known in their day as an enclosing fence). But God's promised 'rest', or redemption, is precisely the theme of the entire Bible, focused eventually in God's Christ. It's no surprise, then, that Luke 2:40, quoted above, 'the favour of God was upon him (Christ)' is foreshadowed in:

**Genesis 6:8** <sup>8</sup> But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD.

It's no exaggeration to say that in a very real sense Noah is a type of Christ. Through Noah salvation comes to the world by God's grace (favour) being upon him, as a type of the one who was to come – and this salvation is manifested in Noah's own time in the flood/ark narrative; and thus the latter event is itself a type of, or God's earnest of, the redemption which is to come in Christ. Then ultimately God's salvation comes to the world through Christ by God's grace (favour) being on him (Luke 2:40). The parallel is clear. If we initially wondered why Peter chose to mention Noah, then we need wonder no longer. Peter thinks of Noah because he is the archetypal example of God's great redemption in Christ foreshadowed, and for the first time acted out, in a real and very dramatic 'salvation through judgement' event. And as we have observed, Peter (and with him Luke) is mindful also of Isaiah's thoroughgoing messianic prophecy.



In the Luke 4 Isaiah quotation, and in Isaiah 61 itself, both quoted above, it's noteworthy that 'proclaiming' the good news is equivalent to 'bringing' the good news – at least, that's how Luke saw it. I did boldly claim that Luke is on my side, and it's at this exact point: my principal thesis is that '*proclaimed to the spirits in prison*' in our 1 Peter 3:19 refers to the entire incarnation of Christ and the subsequent apostolic gospel mission seen together as Christ's 'preaching mission'. Well, Luke clearly agrees (or, rather, Christ himself does, as reported by Luke); Luke renders Isaiah's '*to bring good news to the poor*', which in Isaiah 61 is the earthly mission of the Messiah, as '*to proclaim good news to the poor*', which for Luke is the Messiah's entire earthly mission as fulfilled in Christ. If Luke quotes Isaiah 61:1,2 as '*... to proclaim good news to the poor ... to proclaim liberty to the captives ... to "Noah" all who mourn*', then surely we accept as legitimate Peter's paraphrase, '*proclaimed to the spirits in prison*', followed by a recollection of Noah. Yes, I think Peter has Isaiah 61 in mind.

Also, the reader won't have failed to see how the notion of God's *favour* or *grace* pervades all this. 'Proclaiming/bringing the good news' for Isaiah and the quotation in Luke is the same as 'proclaiming the year of the Lord's/LORD's *favour*'. The gospel is the good news of God's grace in Christ. The last clause of Luke 4:40, '*And the favour of God was upon him*' must surely mean first that as Jesus grew up his heavenly father was with him in every respect, preparing him for his earthly ministry. But could it also convey the notion that God's grace to the world, God's saving grace, was 'on' Jesus, vested in him, ready to be brought through his ministry to the hopeless and restless world? I suggest so. It was certainly true of Noah himself, who was prophesied at his father's naming (Genesis 5:29) to be, prospectively, a saviour figure; Noah, that is, on whom also was God's *favour* (Genesis 6:8, quoted above); Noah, whom God used to bring salvation, by his grace, to a few. Noah as a type of Christ, in a significant way, is an intriguing notion. What is absolutely certain is that in Noah we find a type, indeed the archetype, of God's grace saving a few from terminal judgement, and this is a feature of all the texts we have examined above.

## Conclusion

My suggestion is that in this passage, Noah is indeed very important – a prime example, and the first example, of salvation by grace alone; and not only an example, but one which supplies the helpful analogy of baptism, the symbol of repentance and faith towards Jesus Christ. But Noah is referenced in v.20 and in only that verse. v.19, like v.18 and the verses previous to that, and v.21 and all the verses following, are about Peter's readers, Christians saved by grace alone through the gospel. The whole passage has the aim of encouraging Christians to know just how radically Christ has changed their lives (from death to life, from debauchery to the will of God, from '*in prison*' to free). And to encourage them consequently to live and suffer for Christ faithfully, without returning to and compromising with the degraded, dissolute standards of the world.

Terms such as '*spirits in prison*' and '*dead*' denote disobedient, proud, debauched lives without Christ, mocking the Christians, refusing to repent, and heading for judgement. Terms such as '*alive*' mean alive in Christ, alive spiritually, saved by grace. Christ's incarnation through to his death, resurrection and exaltation, is described in v.19, and again in 4:6, as a preaching mission – an intriguing but wonderfully obvious and fitting description when you think about it. Here is the passage again, based on the same translation as above, but amended here and there in line with the suggestions of this paper:

**1 Peter 3:17 - 4:6** *For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.*

*For Christ indeed suffered once-for-all for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, he having been put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit, in whom indeed he came and proclaimed to the disobedient spirits in prison; (just as) formerly, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.*

*Baptism, correspondingly, now saves you, not a removal of dirt from the body but an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God; angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*

*Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh for us, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.*

*With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge those who are alive (spiritually) and those who are dead (spiritually). For this is why the gospel was indeed preached to the (spiritually) dead, that though judged in the flesh in relation to men, they might live in the Spirit in relation to God.*

—ooOoo—

**Apology**

Apologies for this panel and its verbiage – the site it was downloaded from, created in Oz, hosted in US, requires it, I'm afraid, for usual safeguarding reasons.

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This paper is entirely the work of me the creator/author. If at any stage I have expressed any idea in a way closely similar to the way anyone else has expressed a similar idea, then this is entirely coincidental and unknown to me at time of writing.

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