

## The Spirits in Prison

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The Rare Book Division of the New York Public Library is home to one of the oldest globes in existence. Called “The Lenox Globe,” this 500 year old hollow copper ball, 4.4 inches in diameter, shows the world as it was thought to be in those early days of discovery. Across the unexplored territories of the Pacific, there is written a Latin phrase that translates into English as “Here Be Dragons.” No one is sure what prompted this phrase to be written there, but it served as a warning to seafarers of the dangers that may be encountered in charting unexplored territory and the caution that needed to be exercised.

The Bible can by no means be considered unexplored territory. In the two millennia since the New Testament was completed, this book has been studied, scrutinized, and analyzed by the world’s most brilliant minds. Still, in its pages one occasionally comes across choppy waters that pose certain danger for interpreters, and we must be cautious when we encounter them lest we fall prey to the Scylla of error and Charybdis of heresy. First Peter 3:19-22 might well be marked in our Bibles with the warning, “Here be dragons,” for it has proven to be one of the most difficult passages (if not THE most difficult) in all of Scripture to understand.

Peter acknowledged in 2 Peter 3:15-16 that Paul had written some things that were hard to understand and easily distorted. We find unintended humor in that statement when we consider that Peter wrote those words well after he had written 1 Peter 3:19-22, which are far more difficult to understand and interpret than anything Paul ever wrote. Martin Luther said of verses 19-22, “A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.”<sup>1</sup> Luther’s words should both encourage and caution us as we attempt to interpret this text.

Regardless of the difficulty of understanding this passage, we must remember that the Holy Spirit inspired these words, and He did so for our benefit. It is a God-breathed text; it is inspired, inerrant, and infallible. It comes to us, like the rest of Scripture, for our teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness that we may be adequately equipped for the service of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

There are several questions raised in these verses that interpreters have struggled to answer over the centuries. Who are the *spirits in prison*? What kind of *prison* are they in? When did Christ go to *make proclamation* to them? What did He proclaim to them?

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter & Jude* (trans. & ed. John Nichols Lenker. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 166.

These questions, and others which correlate to them, will keep an exegete sufficiently busy, but they are followed by another difficult issue in verse 22: In what way can *baptism* be said to *save* us?

The questions that arise in this text are perhaps outnumbered by the answers which have been proposed. Opinions of scholars are not in short supply, and they differ widely. One work states that “more than 90 variations of interpretation attempted by Christian scholars since the second century.”<sup>2</sup> So, how can the average Christian church-goer determine the meaning of this passage when it is clouded by such obscure language and surrounded by so many conflicting opinions? There are at least four keys for good Bible study that we have to employ when we tackle a difficult text like this:

1. **Original Intent:** The Holy Spirit intended one specific meaning for these words. Peter understood it as he wrote, and assumed that his original readers would also understand it. It cannot mean whatever we want it to mean. We must suspend judgment on its meaning until we have grappled with what the divine intent of the passage is.
2. **The Principle of Antecedent Scripture:** We use earlier texts to interpret later texts, not vice versa. While a later text can shed light on earlier texts by showing the further development or completion of an idea, Walter Kaiser says, “in no case must that *later* teaching be used exegetically (or in any other way) to unpack the meaning or to enhance the usability” of the earlier text.<sup>3</sup> For example, there is obviously a connection between these words and the account of Noah in Genesis. Peter and his original readers had Genesis when this epistle was written, but Moses and his original readers did not have First Peter when he wrote Genesis. So, it is acceptable for us to use Genesis to help us interpret this passage, but it would not be fitting for us to use First Peter (or any other later text) as the key to unlock the meaning of Genesis 6.
3. **The Principle of Difficult Texts.** We do not use hard texts to shed light on clear texts, but rather we do the opposite. We use the clear passages to help us interpret the hard ones. Are there passages in Scripture that have easily discernable meanings which would shed light on this one? If so, we must use them in our hermeneutics here. In our conclusion on the meaning of this passage, are we trying to read implications from this text into other texts which would otherwise be easily understandable in their natural sense without this one? This we must avoid at all costs.
4. **The Principle of Context.** Our interpretation of a particular text must take into consideration the rest of the information surrounding the passage in neighboring words, phrases, and sentences. Then the circle of context must be enlarged to consider the entire teaching of that particular book of the Bible, and then the whole Bible, in that order.

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<sup>2</sup> Study notes on 1 Peter 3:18-20 in *Believer's Study Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1991), 1770. While the *Believer's Study Bible* does not identify which portions were written by its contributing scholars, the Curriculum Vitae of David Dockery lists his contribution to this work as being the study notes on the General Epistles.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 140.

Using those key principles, and other rules of sound hermeneutics, we must set about to answer the perplexing problems of this passage. We do not need to consider ninety or more alternative interpretations, for they all essentially reduce to variations on three major perspectives:

- Preaching to the Dead in Sheol: On this view, between the death and resurrection of Jesus, He descended into Sheol (or Hades), the spiritual realm of the dead, to make a proclamation to those who died before His atoning work was completed.
- Preaching to Angelic Beings in “Prison”: On this view, Jesus went to a spiritual place of imprisonment (either between His death and resurrection or between His resurrection and ascension) to make a proclamation to the fallen angels there.
- Preaching to the People of Noah’s Generation: On this view, Jesus made proclamation “in the spirit” through the preaching of Noah in his own day to the people of his generation.

Each one will be considered in the sections following.

#### 1. Preaching to the Dead in Sheol, or Hades (The Sheol View)

The Hebrew word *Sheol* occurs 65 times in the OT. Sixty of those occurrences are in poetic passages. One characteristic of Hebrew poetry is the use of parallelism, in which a phrase is restated similarly or in contrast immediately before or after its occurrence. This occurs in approximately half of the occurrences of *Sheol*. Allen Moseley has noted that the most common term used in parallelism with *Sheol* is “death.” He writes, “*Sheol* and death are found in synonymous parallelism with one another 17 times.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, *Sheol* is paired five times with “the pit,” three times with “Abaddon,” (“a word that probably means something like ‘place of destruction’”)<sup>5</sup>, and three times in antithetical (or, contrasting) parallelism with the word “heaven,” or “heavens.”<sup>6</sup>

Based on a careful evaluation of the occurrences of *Sheol* in the OT, Moseley suggests that “this word actually has not one meaning, nor several, but two meanings in the Old Testament.”<sup>7</sup> First, we see that *Sheol* often is a reference to death. “Used in this way, *sheol* does not refer to the physical grave, nor to an abode for spirits, whether righteous or wicked. Instead, this is a general reference to the end of physical life. This is the most common way the word *sheol* is used in the Old Testament; it appears with this meaning 45 times out of the total 65 occurrences of the word.”<sup>8</sup> Moseley suggests that the second meaning of *Sheol* refers to hell. “It is the Old Testament term that refers to the permanent

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Sam. 2:6; 2 Sam. 22:6; Isa. 28:15,18; 38:18; Hos. 13:14 [2x]; Hab. 2:5; Ps. 6:6; 18:6; 55:16; 116:3; Prov. 5:5; 7:27; Song 8:6. Allen Moseley, “Sheol and Differentiated Destinies in the Old Testament.” Unpublished Faculty Lecture delivered in Chapel at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Moseley was kind enough to supply me with a transcript of this address.

<sup>5</sup> Job 26:6; Prov. 15:11; 27:20.

<sup>6</sup> Moseley.

<sup>7</sup> Moseley.

<sup>8</sup> Moseley.

abode of the ungodly. Hence, the translators for the Septuagint and the King James Version were on the right track in using *hades* and ‘hell,’ respectively, to translate *sheol*.<sup>9</sup> However, the Septuagint uses *hades* to translate *sheol* in some contexts in which it is clear that only a reference to death is intended, and the King James Version uses “hell” in the same contexts.”<sup>10</sup> For our purposes we shall use the word *Sheol* generally herein to describe “death” and *Hades* to describe the latter meaning of “hell,” the place of the unrighteous dead.

Some who hold to this first interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19-20, believe that at some time between the death and resurrection of Jesus, He descended into *Sheol*, a spiritual realm of all the dead (righteous and unrighteous), to make a proclamation to those who died before His atoning work was completed. Those who hold this view believe that Jesus was announcing to them that the believers of the OT era were now fully redeemed and released into eternal life, and also announcing to the unbelievers of the OT era that their condemnation was final.

Others do not believe that *Sheol* is an actual “place of the dead” but rather the state of death itself. According to them, only those occurrences of *Sheol* that have the sense of *Hades* or hell actually describe a “place” where the unrighteous dead dwell. Those who hold this view suggest that Jesus went to Hades only to announce the final condemnation of OT unbelievers.

The problem with both of these interpretations is that they overlook or disregard data that is present within 1 Peter 3:19-20. First, believers are clearly not in view at all, but rather those who were “disobedient.” This would eliminate any view that suggests Jesus made a proclamation to the righteous dead in whatever intermediate state they would be in. Similarly, the *Hades* view overlooks the fact that the text is not dealing with all the unrighteous dead of the OT era, but only those who were “disobedient ... during the construction of the ark.” If Christ went to Hades to announce condemnation to all unbelievers, it seems odd that only this particular subset of them is specified here.

Additionally, it is difficult to see how this view would fit into the context of the passage. Some have suggested that it is here to give a “chronology” of the events that took place following the death of Jesus. He was “put to death in the flesh” in His crucifixion, “made alive in the spirit” in His resurrection, but prior to His appearances to humanity, he went “in the spirit” to make proclamation to the spirits of the dead in *Sheol* or *Hades*, before finally going “into heaven” (3:22). This, in fact, does not present a pure chronology, but instead presents an order of events as A-C-B-D. To avoid this problem, some suggest that Jesus’ death was “only physical” but He remained alive “in the spirit” all the while, and in that living spirit, while He was physically dead, He made this proclamation to the spirits in *Sheol* or *Hades*. This presents more problems than it solves however, for it calls into question the completeness of Christ’s death (and thereby the completeness of the atonement for sin). This suggestion would not do justice to the phrase that Jesus was “made alive in the spirit” if He had in fact never died in the spirit. Neither does any

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<sup>9</sup> According to Moseley, LXX renders *Sheol* as *Hades* 60 of 65 times.

<sup>10</sup> Moseley.

variation of this view provide any practical benefit to the original readers of this letter. It does not accomplish anything on the whole scope of Peter's intent for writing this letter, which is to encourage weary believers who are experiencing harsh treatment for their faith.

Some who hold this view believe that Jesus went to Hades to offer a second chance of salvation to those who had died in unbelief. There are a multitude of passages, which are much clearer to understand than this one, which make certain the fact that there are no second chances for salvation after death. Among these are Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, Hebrews 9:27, and Hebrews 10:26-27. It would seem counterproductive for Peter to write a letter to encourage the persecuted believers in Asia Minor to be bold in their evangelistic efforts (e.g., 3:15) if their oppressors would be given another, more convincing, opportunity to repent and believe after they died.

For these and perhaps other reasons not discussed here, it seems best to abandon this first interpretation and look for something more satisfying.

## 2. Preaching to the Angelic Beings in Prison (The Angelic View)

Those who hold to this second view believe that sometime between the death and resurrection of Jesus, or perhaps as He ascended through the heavenlies, He went to a spiritual place of imprisonment to proclaim His victory over Satan and all of his fallen angels, or "spirits." Based on the Greek term used in 2 Peter 2:4, some have identified this place as *Tartarus*, the mythical place of torment in the underworld. Most English translations prefer to render the term as "hell" rather than the transliterated form.

In support of this view, it is argued that it fits the context by indicating when and where the "angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him" (3:22). If Peter intends to communicate in 3:19-20 that the proclamation made was a message of triumph over Satan and all of his demonic angels, it seems odd that he would single out those "who once were disobedient ... during the construction of the ark." Certainly, the fall of Satan occurred long before the building of the ark, but Scripture does not indicate whether other angels fell at various points in history or all at one time. So, a view that Jesus is preaching to *all* demonic angels and to Satan is unsatisfying.

Most who hold a variation of this interpretation do not believe that the proclamation was being made to Satan and all the fallen angels, but to a specific segment of that spiritual population who were "disobedient" during the "construction of the ark." These are believed to be those demons who, at one time in some indescribably way, took human wives to themselves and bore children with them. Those who are unfamiliar with this view will undoubtedly find it both strange and a bit creepy at first encounter, but it has a long history and is well argued by many who hold it. This has become probably the most popular interpretation of this passage. It is often presented undefended in Study Bibles, popular works, and commentaries for uncritical digestion. The roll call of scholars who hold this view is impressive, and certainly their popularity and reputations enhance the believability of this interpretation.

The antecedent claimed for this view is Genesis 6:1-4. This position asserts that the “sons of God” who married “the daughters of men” and had children with them in that passage are angelic beings. This is considered an abominable sin and a contributing factor to the judgment of the flood, perhaps the “straw that broke the camel’s back.”

It must be acknowledged that the proponents of this view have presented a cohesive argument that systematizes several passages of Scripture and offers a unified interpretation of them all. But it is not without major problems. Given that both 1 Peter 3:19-20 and Genesis 6:1-4 are hard texts (simply based on the wide divergence of opinions on both of them), we must ask if there are any easier texts that can be used to help us handle them. And we find that there are. Consider Matthew 22:30, and its parallel in Mark 12:25, in which Jesus says that angels “neither marry nor are given in marriage.” If angels do not marry, then this view is automatically disqualified. Proponents of this view counter by noting that in both of those passages, Jesus said, “angels in heaven” do not marry nor are they given in marriage, but this incident took place on earth. That seems to be an attempt to strain at gnats while swallowing an elephant, but for the sake of argument, we will consider it a moot point for the moment. We might consider the fact that “According to the author of Hebrews, angels are ‘spirits’ and do not have or appropriate actual physical bodies (Heb. 1:7, 14).”<sup>11</sup> We may anticipate a counterargument that the identification of angels as “spirits” in Hebrews actually furthers the angelic interpretation. It may be added that some passages in Genesis and other Scriptures feature angels who seem to appropriate physical bodies (though the actual nature of these “bodies” cannot be discerned from the available information in Scripture). Therefore this is perhaps a moot point as well in the discussion. We will also consider it beyond the scope of this paper to question whether there would even be sexual “compatibility” between angelic beings and humans.

A question that must be asked is, “Would the original readers of Genesis have understood the words of Genesis 6:1-4 to mean that angels had married human women?” Certainly, nothing that came before Genesis 6 would make that hypothesis plausible. Modern interpreters draw that interpretation from Job, which identifies angels as “sons of God,”<sup>12</sup> from extrabiblical literature like 1 Enoch, and from passages like 1 Peter 3:19-20, but we must remember that, while Moses’ generation may or may not have had access to Job, they did not have 1 Enoch, or 1 Peter to help them understand this.<sup>13</sup> We know for certain that they had Genesis 1 through Genesis 5. Therefore, using the principle of antecedent Scripture, we must consider what they would have most likely understood Genesis 6:1-4 to mean, and then use that to influence our interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19-20.

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<sup>11</sup> Paige Patterson, *A Pilgrim Priesthood* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 137.

<sup>12</sup> Patterson notes that “Sons of God” is used only four other times in the OT. When it is used, it always refers to “good angels,” not fallen angels. Patterson, 138.

<sup>13</sup> The dating of Job is difficult to determine. On the basis of the name Eliphaz the Temanite in Job, some have linked Job to the days of Jacob and Esau. Esau is said to have had a son named Eliphaz, who was the father of Teman (Genesis 36:11). If these two occurrences of Eliphaz point to the same man, and if Job was written around within several hundred years of his own lifetime, then the Exodus generation may have had this writing available to them.

We are certainly thankful in our day for the brilliant invention of chapter and verse numbers, but we must not forget that they did not occur in the original texts. The chapter divisions as we know them date from the thirteenth century, while our present verse divisions came even later, in the sixteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Jesus gives us an idea about how passages were located and cited prior to these innovations in Mark 12:26, which might be literally translated, “Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the one about the bush . . . .” Jesus was citing Scripture by means of its cohesive units of thought. So our question is, would those original readers have understood Genesis 6:1-4 to be the introductory section for the flood narrative that follows it, or would they have understood it as a conclusion to something that came before? Put another way, if Peter is citing Scripture the same way Jesus did, where would they have found the beginning of the story about “the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark”? Using the literary features of Genesis, this passage would likely begin with our modern 6:9, where the repeated section marker, the Hebrew word *toledoth*, occurs.

Moses uses the Hebrew word *toledoth* as a marker of new literary sections ten times in Genesis. Waltke notes that following the prologue (1:1-2:3), the writer of Genesis “introduces ten new divine initiatives in salvation history with a *toledoth* heading (i.e., “the account of the line of X”) and transitions linking these developments.”<sup>15</sup> These are found in 2:4 (with a concluding transition in 4:25-26); 5:1 (with a concluding transition in 6:1-8); 6:9 (with a concluding transition in 9:18-29); 10:1 (with a concluding transition in 11:1-9); 11:10 (with a concluding transition in 11:26); 11:27 (with a lengthy concluding transition from 23:1-25:11); 25:12 (with a transition coming perhaps prior to this section in 25:1-11); 25:19 (with a concluding transition in 35:23-29); 36:1 (with a concluding transition in 37:1); and 37:2 (with 46:2-50:26 forming a transition into the book of Exodus).<sup>16</sup>

The account of the line of Adam through Cain (Genesis 4:17-4:24) rounds off the first *toledoth* unit, which began in 2:4. While there are “high marks” in this period of history, including innovation in farming, music, and metalwork, the story draws to an end with a note about the increasing degradation of humanity in its fallen condition. We find the lamentable story of Lamech, the first man recorded to have had multiple wives (4:19), thus violating God’s ordinance of marriage (2:23-24). Not only was Lamech a polygamist, he also surpassed the wickedness of Cain by committing murder and boasting of his sin (4:23-24).<sup>17</sup> The birth of Seth is introduced as a transition from the first to the second *toledoth* section.

Chapter 5 begins with another *toledoth* and gives the family lineage of Seth’s descendants down to Noah. The remarkable feature of this section is the long lifespans of these people. The oldest of them, Methuselah, lived 969 years; the youngest to die was

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel P. Fuller, “Chapters and Verses – Late Comers”. Accessed online at [http://documents.fuller.edu/ministry/berean/chs\\_vss.htm](http://documents.fuller.edu/ministry/berean/chs_vss.htm). October 28, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Waltke, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Whether Lamech murdered one or two people is a question of whether 4:23 is intended to be interpreted as a parallelism. It should also be noted that his murder(s) occurred in cold-blooded excess of what the situation warranted. He killed a man “for wounding” him; a boy “for striking” him (4:23).

Noah's father, Lamech, who lived 777 years. Like the section before, we see some "high marks" in the development of Seth's line. Most notable is the account of Enoch, whose death is not recorded. He was taken by God in a unique way (Hebrews 11:5 says that he did not see death) after he had lived 365 years (5:21-24). In another parallel with the preceding *toledoth* unit, this passage also ends with a description of the continuing depravity of humanity (6:1-8).

According to Genesis 5:4, Adam had other sons and daughters besides just Cain and Seth, and they assuredly had children, grandchildren, and so on, of their own. Their stories are not told here, unless somehow Genesis 6:1-4 summarizes it. Making use of the antecedent Scriptures of Genesis 1-5, one can easily see how the original readers might have understood "sons of God" to refer to men in general, while "daughters of men" would refer to women in general. They would draw this understanding from the creation account in which Adam, the man, was made by God (2:7), and Eve, the woman was made from the man (2:21-22). Genesis 6:1-2 may therefore essentially be saying that the normal way of life in that day was men and women marrying (perhaps corrupted principles of marriage, *a la* Lamech, are in view with the phrase "they took wives for themselves, *whomever they chose*"), and having children (6:4). In fact, Jesus describes "the days of Noah" in this very way in Matthew 24:37-38 and Luke 17:26-27. In both of those passages, Jesus says that the days of Noah were characterized by eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage. Could Jesus have been paraphrasing Genesis 6:1-4 when He said this? It is certainly a strong possibility.

This approach to Genesis also allows for a natural reading of Genesis 6:3-4. Perhaps because of the rapid and exponential growth of the human population, and/or the increasing wickedness of humanity, 6:3 may be an indicator that God will limit lifespans from the long ages recorded in Genesis 5 to a length of around 120 years of age, which we see as a general upper range of human lifespan with few exceptions almost immediately following the flood. Of course, no harm is done to any view of this passage to see it referring instead to the timeframe before the flood will come.<sup>18</sup>

Many proponents of the angelic view believe that the *Nephilim* of 6:4 are the offspring of angels and humans, but they often disagree concerning the nature of these beings. However, if we do not take an angelic view of 6:1-4 the straightforward wording of 6:4 actually explains who the *Nephilim* are. They are defined as "the mighty men who were of old, men of renown." These are the great figures of biblical history whose stories have unfolded in the first five chapters.

With Genesis 6:1-8 concluding the *toledoth* unit that began in 5:1, a new section begins in 6:9 which focuses on Noah, the building of the ark, the coming destruction, and the salvation of Noah and his family. Genesis 6:9 marks the beginning of the Scripture portion that Peter's readers would have likely associated with "in the days of Noah during the construction of the ark." While we cannot reconstruct with precision the exact understanding that the original audience of Genesis would have had of 6:1-4, based on

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<sup>18</sup> The only advantage evident to me in holding to a "lifespan" interpretation of the 120 years is that it corresponds to the lifespans of those found in Genesis 5.



the principle of antecedent Scripture, the scenario set forth here seems far more plausible than a theory of angelic cohabitation with human women.<sup>19</sup>

It is argued by the proponents of the “angelic” interpretation that the intermarriage of angels and women was a contributing factor to God’s judgment in the flood. If this is so, it would appear that God’s judgment was misguided. In Genesis 6:5-7 and 6:12-13, God specifies that it is the sinfulness of humanity that precipitates the flood, not the wickedness of angels. The flood is explicitly stated to be a just judgment in response to the reality that “the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” So great was human wickedness that “the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.” Thus, God sovereignly determined to “blot out man whom I have created from face of the land.” It was because of “all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth” that the Lord said “I am about to destroy them with the earth.” Nowhere in this passage does God say anything about bringing destruction upon the earth because of the sin of angels.

Also, it should be noted that Peter says the “disobedience” of these spirits took place “during the construction of the ark,” which is plainly not when the sons of God and daughters of men were marrying and having children, whatever those phrases mean. If Genesis 6:1-4 refer to a specific act or series of events that precipitated the flood, then they occurred prior to the building of the ark, not “during the construction.”

There is one feature that both the Sheol and angelic views have in common which bears on our consideration of 1 Peter 3:19-20. Both of these interpretations seem to provide some justification for a statement that is found in the Apostle’s Creed. Certainly there have been many who have attended church and wondered at the following phrase as they recited the Creed: “*he descended into hell.*” Many pastors have been regularly asked this question by congregants: “When did Jesus descend into hell?” Most often, the answer to this question includes a reference to 1 Peter 3:19-22. Indeed, if Jesus actually descended into hell, then this verse may contain the most data in the entire Bible about it. But the question needs to be asked, “Did Jesus descend into hell?” The Apostle’s Creed was not written by the Apostles, and it is not inspired Scripture, therefore it would not be heresy to suggest that it contains errors. Perhaps this single phrase has been the reason that recitation of the creed has been omitted in many churches, including most Baptist churches, because there is some question about its meaning and truthfulness.

These questions of the meaning and truthfulness of “he descended into hell” (the *decensus*) takes a temporary backseat, however, to another question—the question of its authenticity. The Nicene Creed and Chalcedonian Definition were written at specific times by particular ecumenical councils. The Apostle’s Creed, unlike them, took shape gradually over the course of some 500 years (c. AD 200-750).<sup>20</sup> Students of the Creed are often surprised (and perhaps a little relieved) to discover that the phrase “descended into hell” was not found in any of the early versions of the Apostle’s Creed. It was nearly 200

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<sup>19</sup> This view is explained in more detail by John Sailhamer in “Genesis”, (Expositor’s Bible Commentary 2; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 75-79.

<sup>20</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 586.

years after the first formulation of the Creed that the phrase first appeared in one of two versions written by Rufinus (A.D. 390). Prior to Rufinus, the *decensus* had only appeared in a Creed used by the Arians (A.D. 360), a heretical group who denied the deity of Christ.<sup>21</sup> When Rufinus used the *decensus*, he did not intend it to mean that Christ actually went to the place we would call “hell.” He understood the phrase to mean that Christ had descended into the grave, perhaps understanding *inferna* as something akin to the Hebrew *Sheol*. It seems redundant to say that Christ was “crucified, dead, and buried, he descended into the grave,” but we cannot speculate what Rufinus’s intentions were in including the phrase. We do know that this is what he understood the phrase to mean. Neither can we speculate why Rufinus wrote two versions of the creed, one with the *decensus* and one without, but we know that the Roman form that he preserved did not contain it.<sup>22</sup>

After Rufinus, the *decensus* does not appear in any form of the Creed until 650 AD when it appeared in the *Sacramentarium Gallicanum*. So, prior to 650, the only occurrence of the *decensus* was in a Creed that was not preserved, and which was penned with the understanding that the *decensus* referred to the burial of Christ, not His descent into hell. Therefore, we can conclude with Grudem who writes, “At this point one wonders if the term *apostolic* can in any sense be applied to this phrase, or if it really has a rightful place in a creed whose title claims for itself descent from the earliest apostles of Christ.”<sup>23</sup> We must also wonder if the fanciful attempts to interpret 1 Peter 3:19-20 through the centuries have been attempts to undergird a statement in the Creed which most likely should be omitted. It seems that if we would eliminate the *decensus* from the Apostle’s Creed (which would do no violence to the Creed, given its historical development), we would have less reason to see a *decensus* in 1 Peter.

It is hopefully evident at this point that the first two interpretations of 1 Peter 3:19-20 under consideration bear serious flaws that should caution, if not prevent, us from holding them. There is a third alternative which appears to be subject to fewer objections.

### 3. Preaching to the People of Noah’s Generation (The Noahic View)

An ideal interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19-20 will take the immediate context into account; it will be shaped by easier to understand passages; it will be based upon the antecedent Scriptures, rather than trying to shape those earlier texts by the use of later ones; it will fit comfortably with the context of the passage, the book, and the whole Bible; and it will offer practical benefit Peter’s reader’s in their historical circumstances. The third alternative seems to satisfy all of those criteria.

On this view, the spirits in prison are those human beings who were disobedient in Noah’s day “during the construction of the ark.” This view would see Jesus preaching to them, not in their current state of imprisonment, but during the days in which they lived. He preached to them “in the spirit” (or perhaps, “in the Spirit”) through the human

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<sup>21</sup> Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 2.46 n.2.

<sup>22</sup> Grudem, *Systematic*, 586.

<sup>23</sup> Grudem, *Systematic*, 587.

agency of Noah in his own day. As Noah, who is called in 2 Peter 2:5 “a preacher of righteousness,” proclaimed the truth of God to them, it was actually Christ Himself preaching through him.

A helpful step in biblical exegesis is the construction of what some have called a structural diagram, a block diagram, or a syntactical display. In this display, subordinate clauses and phrases are shown in relation to the independent clauses and main ideas that they support.<sup>24</sup> In such a diagram, the exegete must wrestle with the connections that exist between words, phrases, clauses, and sentences in the text. As one attempts to diagram this portion of Scripture, the question arises, “What does the phrase ‘in the days of Noah’ modify?” It could modify “who were once disobedient”; it could modify “when the patience of God kept waiting”; or it could modify “He went and made proclamation.” Certainly, on any view, both the disobedience and the patient waiting occurred “in the days of Noah.” But, it must modify one statement, it cannot modify them all. Those who hold this third interpretation find that the phrase “in the days of Noah” well answers the question of “when” Jesus “went and made proclamation.”

The phrase, “He went and made proclamation” is modified by three statements in the passage. “In the days of Noah” answers the question of *when* He went and made the proclamation. “To the spirits now in prison who once were disobedient” answers the question of *to whom* He went and made proclamation. “In the spirit” (3:18) answers the question of *how* He went and made proclamation, evidenced by the flow of thought from 3:18 to 3:19, “... made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation.”

To understand the sense of Christ preaching “in the spirit,” we must consider the fuller meaning of the phrase Peter uses in 3:18. The distinction between “in the flesh” and “in the spirit” in 3:18 is the same that Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 15. That which dies, Paul says, is a “perishable body”, but that which is raised is an “imperishable body” (15:42). He says “it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (15:43-44). Paul uses these distinctions to describe the resurrected bodies that believers in Christ will have at the resurrection, but prior to this, he indicates that Christ is the “first fruits” (15:23). In other words, our resurrected bodies will be like His, just as His fleshly body was like ours. It may help us to think of the resurrected body of Jesus in terms of His “glory.” At the transfiguration (Matthew 17; Mark 9; Luke 9), the inner circle of disciples saw the glorious form of Christ breaking through His physical body. This is the glory of which Jesus spoke in His prayer in John 17:5, saying, “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself.” This glory was not some new form of existence, but rather it was “the glory which I had with You before the world was.” In that spiritual, glorious form, Christ eternally existed before the incarnation. And it was in that “state” (for lack of a better word) that He went and made proclamation to the disobedient spirits, the unbelieving and wicked generation of humanity, in the days of Noah.

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<sup>24</sup> Information on constructing these diagrams can be found in Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 99-103.

There are indications in clearer texts that Peter understood that Christ preaching “in the spirit” through the preachers of the OT. In 1 Peter 1:10-11, he writes, “As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time<sup>25</sup> *the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted* the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.” In 2 Peter 1:21, Peter speaks of the ancient prophets as “men *moved by the Holy Spirit*” who spoke, not “for”, but “*from God*.” Thus, this view is perfectly in keeping with Peter’s understanding of how prophets and preachers of righteousness in the OT era were mouthpieces of the Triune God.

Having answered *when, to whom, and how* Christ “went and made proclamation,” we may ask *what* He proclaimed. Here, the text is silent. We are not given the content of His proclamation. The sense of *kerusso* and its derivatives can indicate that He was proclaiming the unquestionable fact of the soon coming judgment and the destruction of that entire generation, but it is also used in the NT to describe evangelistic preaching for a response. We don’t have much here to help us choose between the two options, with the possible exception of the phrase, “when the patience of God kept waiting.” While this is far from an explanation of what Jesus preached through Noah, it appears to modify “who once were disobedient,” answering the question of *when or under what conditions* they were disobedient. While they were disobedient, God was patiently waiting. So, what were they disobeying? Perhaps they were disobeying the message of Christ through Noah. And for what was God patiently waiting? It may well be that He was awaiting their obedience! Is it possible that a wholesale repentance and return to God in faith would have forestalled the flood? It happens elsewhere, most notably in the days of Jonah, so we cannot say that it would be inconsistent with the character of God. Or it may well be that God was waiting, not for a wholesale return to faith and obedience, but giving opportunity for *any* such response from humanity. The rain had not yet come, the ark had not been completed, and the door had not been closed. It is no stretch to envision Christ preaching through Noah that any who would turn to God in repentance and faith would be welcomed into the ark of salvation.

Surely, God, who knows everything, knew that only “a few, that is, eight persons,” would be “brought safely through the water” (1 Peter 3:20). Yet, because He is a gracious and compassionate God, He patiently waited, giving opportunity for salvation. But according to His divine timetable, the day finally came in which “those that entered, male and female of all flesh, entered as God had commanded him; and the Lord closed it behind him.” The window of opportunity for faith and repentance had been closed and, with it, the door of the ark. Only eight human beings, Noah and his three sons and their wives, were inside when that door closed.

Before diving into the applicability of this interpretation to those of Peter’s day, and the practical outworking of it in the life of the contemporary believer, we must pause and consider if there may be any objection to this view. After all, the question is not “Does it work?” but “Is it right?” The most obvious objection to it would likely deal with other passages that are often cited together with this one to support the angelic interpretation. If

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<sup>25</sup> A better rendering here is perhaps, “what times or manners of time” instead of “what person or time.”

we opt for a Noahic interpretation, what do we do with 2 Peter 2:4-5, Jude 6, and most importantly, Genesis 6:1-4. I have already treated the question of Genesis 6:1-4 under the consideration of the angelic view. Using the principle of antecedent Scripture, we find that it is neither necessary for us to hold an angelic view of that text, nor is it likely that this was its intended meaning. If Genesis 6 is the antecedent Scripture that informs 1 Peter 3, 2 Peter 2, and Jude 6, then removing an angelic implication from Genesis 6:1-4 also removes the necessity of finding support for that position in those verses.

Those who hold to an angelic interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 and 1 Peter 3:19-20 will seek to link the angels in 2 Peter 2:4 with the “ancient world” in 2 Peter 2:5. On that view, the angels who were not spared when they sinned are those who were involved with the women of the “ancient world” before the flood. However, Peter’s point here is much easier to understand if we do not assume that Genesis 6:1-4 describes angelic and human intermarriage. Without that assumption, the natural reading of 2 Peter 2 would indicate that Peter is warning of coming judgment based on three OT precedents: the condemnation of fallen angels, the condemnation of Noah’s generation, and the condemnation of Sodom and Gomorrah. Peter is also using these examples to indicate that God’s judgment comes with a promise of redemption. In the “ancient world”, Noah and seven others were “preserved,” and in Sodom, Lot was “rescued.” Based on these antecedent Scriptures, Peter is able to encourage his readers that “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment” (2:9). An angelic interpretation is not necessary to rightly understand the meaning of this passage, and it may even obscure what would otherwise be a plain reading of the text.

Coming to Jude, if it is assumed that there is an angelic and human cohabitation going on in Genesis 6, then the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah in Jude 7 appear to be a parallel iniquity with those angels. After describing the judgment upon “angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode” in verse 6, Jude says in verse 7, “just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.” The words “just as” and “in the same way” would appear to indicate that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah and neighboring cities was the same as the sin of angels. That sin is described in verse 7 as “gross immorality” and going after “strange flesh.” We understand clearly from Genesis 19 that a major factor in the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah was their unbridled sexual immorality that expressed itself in one way through an attempted homosexual gang rape. Genesis 19 records that the men of Sodom demanded to “have relations” (literally, *know*, a frequent euphemism for sexual intercourse in the OT), with the men who were visiting Lot. We know that those men were, in fact, not men, but “two angels” (Genesis 19:1). Therefore, the connection can be made that “just as” the Sodomites desired to have sexual relations with the angels, the “angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode” (verse 6) must have been guilty of the same iniquity, “in the same way.”

While this is persuasively argued, and appears *prima facie* to be convincing, there are several key differences that have been overlooked. First, the men of Sodom did not know that Lot's visitors were angels. They wanted to have relations with "the men who came to you tonight" (Genesis 19:5). Therefore, the "strange flesh" that they sought was not that of another created species, but that of the same species and the same gender. It is "strange flesh" in the same sense that Paul speaks of exchanging "the natural function for that which is unnatural" (literally, *against nature*) in Romans 1:26-27, describing "indecent acts" of homosexuality. This would hardly be similar to Genesis 6:1-4, even if an angelic interpretation was accurate there. Even if we granted an angelic interpretation of Genesis 6, we would have there a case of angels successfully seducing human women into marriage and procreation. This is a stark contrast with Genesis 19, in which human men unsuccessfully sought to engage "wickedly" (19:7) in forceful sexual acts with those whom they thought were merely other human men. These are some ways in which these two scenes are not "just as" one another. These events did not occur "in the same way," even if we assume an angelic interpretation for Genesis 6.

Without assuming that Genesis 6:1-4 describes an angelic cohabitation, we would never draw a line of connection between Jude 6 and Genesis 6. There is no hint of the flood in that entire book, with the possible exception of the prophecy of Enoch in Jude 14, which will be discussed below. The most natural reading of the text would indicate that Jude is stringing together a series of warnings about God's judgment based on historical precedents: unbelieving Israel in the wilderness; angels who rebelled with Satan; Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them. "Just as" in verse 7 does not indicate that the sin of the Sodomites and their neighbors was the same as that of the angels in verse 6, but that the judgment they incurred is the same. "In the same way" would indicate that that "the cities around them" were guilty of the same sin as Sodom and Gomorrah: "They (the neighboring cities) in the same way as these (Sodom and Gomorrah) indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh" (Jude 7). Though the events recorded in Genesis 19 took place only in Sodom, judgment was brought upon "Sodom and Gomorrah ... and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities" (Genesis 19:24-25).

With this as our understanding for these verses, Jude's point in the passage is not obscured but clarified. He is warning that "these men" (identified in Jude 4 as ungodly persons "who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ") have committed a sin that is comparable to three OT examples (Cain, Balaam, and Korah, verse 11), and they will surely face the same judgment as of three other OT examples (unbelieving Israel, fallen angels, Sodom and Gomorrah, verses 5-7).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> It has been well noted that Jude is fond of "combinations of threes." Harrison notes "some of the more obvious examples" of this pattern: the combination of mercy, peace, and love in verse 2; the three examples of judgment in verses 5-7; the three examples of sin in verse 11; the threefold classification "of those who need help" in verses 22-23. Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 404.

As stated above, the only *possible* connection to the flood in the days of Noah that can be found in Jude comes from the reference to the prophecy of Enoch in Jude 14-15. The connection can only be made if we assume that the judgment prophesied by Enoch pointed to the flood, which occurred within a few generations of his lifetime (Enoch would have been Noah's great-grandfather on the genealogy of Genesis 5). By just examining the verses of Jude in their context, it would appear that Jude's intent in appealing to this prophecy is to warn of a judgment that is yet to come, not the judgment that came in Noah's day. But, is that what Enoch intended when he spoke this prophecy? This is a thornier question to answer.

The source of this question is a subject of significant historical importance. Many early Christians did not recognize the book of Jude as canonical on the basis of his usage of uninspired writings, specifically *The Assumption of Moses* in verse 9 and *1 Enoch* in verses 14-15. So, there are at least three pressing issues that must be resolved: 1) Did Jude use uninspired writings to support his argumentation? 2) If he did, must we accept all that is written in those books as being entirely true accounts? 3) If Jude used these works, how does this affect our understanding of 1 Peter 3:19-20 and Genesis 6:1-4?

In answer to the first question, most scholars are agreed that Jude did make use of *The Assumption of Moses* (or something akin to it) in verse 9 and *1 Enoch 1:9* in verses 14-15. Since the issue of the *Assumption of Moses* and the argument over the body of Moses is well beyond the bounds of this discussion, we will leave that one aside for another day and consider it only under the broader umbrella of Jude's alleged use of spurious documents. The question of whether or not Jude used *1 Enoch* has a direct bearing on our discussion. The Book of Enoch (as it is sometimes called) has a confusing history, coming into the form in which it can be read today over a period of over 300 years (c. 300 BC – AD 100). Since most are agreed that the early portions of *1 Enoch*, known as "The Book of the Watchers," are among the older writings, it is entirely possible that both Jude and his audience were familiar with this writing. But, does Jude "cite verbatim several lines from *1 Enoch*"?<sup>27</sup> Upon reading a majority of commentaries, one will likely conclude that he does, but when we turn to the actual document itself, we see that there are some differences. While there is a sameness of substance and a strong similarity of wording, this is hardly "verbatim." In fact, it would be impossible to argue that case at all, since the only surviving complete manuscript of *1 Enoch* is in the ancient Ge'ez language of Ethiopia. While fragments have been found in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, it would be impossible to compare Jude with *1 Enoch* and know that we are looking at a document available to Jude when he wrote. It may be just as plausible to argue that, as *1 Enoch* was taking its final form, an editor borrowed from Jude to give credence to the work.

If Jude did not gain this information from *1 Enoch* (a case which we have not, and I would suggest that we cannot, prove), then we are left to wonder where he received his information. This should be a minor issue for Christians who believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture, for whether he made use of an apocryphal or pseudepigraphal work or not, the ultimate source of anything that he or any other biblical writer recorded

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<sup>27</sup> David deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 25.

is the Holy Spirit. Jude is not an exception to the statement in 2 Timothy 3:16 that *all Scripture is inspired by God* (or “God breathed” as in the NIV). This means that the words which are recorded are endorsed by God as being truthful. Indeed, Jude could have made the same point by appealing to any number of canonical OT passages. This being the case, it becomes secondary at best to determine whether or not Jude drew this information out of 1 Enoch, for if he did, he did so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as he wrote. But Scripture shows us repeatedly that God is able to reveal His truth directly to those whom He chooses to write inspired Scripture. Jesus promised the Apostles that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things, bring to their remembrance all that Jesus said to them (John 14:26), guide them into all truth, and disclose to them what is to come (John 16:13). These promises seem to speak of the Holy Spirit’s work in inspiring Scripture. An obvious OT example is Moses’ account of creation and the transmission of the Law. In the NT, Paul writes of the Egyptian magicians Jannes and Jambres (2 Timothy 3:8), though they are not named elsewhere in Scripture. Paul also records some words of Jesus that are not elsewhere written down (Acts 20:35), or perhaps had not yet been recorded elsewhere (1 Corinthians 11:23-32, which may have been written prior to any of the Gospels. In 2 Peter 2:5, Noah is described as “a preacher of righteousness,” but this is not recorded in any other Scripture portion. In each of these cases, what we find in the text could be the unmediated revelation of the Spirit of God through inspiration. So, if the Lord has directly revealed to Jude something that was spoken by Enoch, it would not be an unparalleled phenomenon.

Neither would it be unparalleled for the Holy Spirit to inspire a text that cites other literature which is not inspired. In Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill he quotes from the Greek poet Aratus (Acts 17:28). Elsewhere, Paul also alludes to pagan poets and prophets, such as in 1 Corinthians 15:33 and Titus 1:12. Paul may have done this because he was aware that his audience was familiar with these sources. Similarly, perhaps Jude was aware of the familiarity of his audience with *1 Enoch* and the *Assumption of Moses*. Jude was combating false teachers within a predominantly Jewish congregation. It could be that these false teachers were corrupting the “faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3) by the use of uninspired apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings. Jude therefore may be using their own sources to indict and convict them. Whatever the case, he wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and was therefore guarded from error.

All truth is God’s truth. Whether Jude is quoting Enoch’s actual words, or if he is quoting from the book of 1 Enoch (which may or may not contain the actual words of the man Enoch),<sup>28</sup> the words which are written are true and validated by numerous other biblical passages. In conclusion on this matter, it may be overstated and prematurely assumed that Jude quoted “verbatim” from 1 Enoch. Even if he did, this does not present a problem for the inspiration of that text.

The problem that arises out of this question is, if Jude did quote from 1 Enoch (which we are not required to admit), then is the rest of 1 Enoch to be considered a true account?

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<sup>28</sup> When Jude says that “Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied,” he could mean that Enoch said this, or that the book of 1 Enoch says this. The difference is not unimportant, but the answer to that question has no bearing on the truthfulness of the statement.



The importance of this question to the interpretation of the 1 Peter 3:19-20 cannot be overstated. If Jude did quote from 1 Enoch, then we must face the fact that in that text, the judgment being prophesied was not an eschatological judgment still to come, but the judgment of the flood. Moreover, 1 Enoch records *at length* a vivid account of the intermarriage between angels (who are called “the Watchers”) and humans and their progeny (who are incorrectly identified as the Nephilim of Genesis 6:4). It connects this with the judgment in the days of Noah and describes the present state of those condemned angels as being in prison. If Jude has given credence to a portion of 1 Enoch, then must we take the whole of it, including the account of the Watchers, as truth?

The short answer to that question is, “No.” Even those who hold to the angelic interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 and 1 Peter 3:19-20 and appeal to Jude and 1 Enoch for support do not hold that all that is recorded in 1 Enoch is truthful. Maxwell Coder, in the same volume in which he argues at length for a connection between Jude 6 and Genesis 6:1-4, says concerning 1 Enoch, “The book of Enoch is a patchwork of writings by various unknown persons at various unknown times. It contains fanciful and legendary material, some of it quite ridiculous.”<sup>29</sup> Ironically, Coder insists that the attribution of Jude 14-15 to 1 Enoch is an “unwarranted assumption,” saying further that no “attack upon Jude will succeed in showing that he took any part of his epistle from such a volume.”<sup>30</sup> In so saying, Coder effectively removes a load-bearing plank from his own platform of interpreting Jude 6 as angels cohabiting with humans (further illustrating the hermeneutical gymnastics one has to perform to hold such a view on any of these passages). Karen Jobes, who bases much of her argument for an angelic view of 1 Peter 3:19-20 on the Watchers account in 1 Enoch, admits that it is “bizarre,” and “an embellishment of the mysterious story of Gen. 6:1-4.”<sup>31</sup> So even though Jobes appeals to the account for support of her view, she dismisses the truthfulness of it. As the saying goes, “with friends like this, who needs enemies?” It seems we would belabor the point by citing those who reject any dependence on 1 Enoch, when those who appeal to it have already undercut its reliability. Therefore, just because we have the Holy Spirit’s apparent endorsement of the truthfulness of the substance of 1 Enoch 1:9 in Jude 14-15, we do not need to draw lines connecting 1 Enoch to Jude 6, or further employ 1 Enoch in unlocking the mystery of 1 Peter 3:19-20. If the rule of hermeneutics is to use clear passages of Scripture to guide our interpretations of the unclear, it would be a grievous violation to use an even more unclear passage of an unscriptural book to guide us in our interpretation of an unclear text of Scripture.

It is now evident that Jude 14-15 does not need to come into consideration at all for our interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19-20. However, in a large number of reference works, this line of argumentation is used to advance the angelic view. Karen Jobes, in an otherwise stellar commentary on 1 Peter, devotes eight pages to viewing 1 Peter 3:19-20 through

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<sup>29</sup> S. Maxwell Coder, *Jude: The Acts of the Apostates* (Everyman’s Bible Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1986), 85.

<sup>30</sup> Coder, 85.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Jobes, *1 Peter* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 243.

the lens of 1 Enoch.<sup>32</sup> She insists that “it no doubt provides the background to 1 Pet. 3:19-20.”<sup>33</sup> As stated above, Jobes is not willing to recognize the account in 1 Enoch as a truthful record, nor does she claim that Peter endorses the truthfulness of the material. She says, “The fact that Peter neither refers to Enoch nor quotes from 1 Enoch shows that he is not interested in accrediting or exegeting 1 Enoch but is simply using a tradition that would have been familiar to his readers.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, on her view, when Peter says that Christ went and made proclamation to spirits in prison, he is confident that his readers will understand that he is referring to the angels who married human women in Genesis 6:1-4, on the basis of their familiarity with 1 Enoch. She is making several assumptions. First, she is assuming that Genesis 6 both intends to and was understood to teach, the angelic position. We have argued at length that it does not. Second, she is assuming that Peter’s readers were sufficiently familiar with 1 Enoch to recognize it as the bridge between this passage and Genesis 6 and to unlock the meaning of both.

Were Peter’s readers familiar with 1 Enoch? If Paul used pagan poets to connect with his audience on the basis of their familiarity, and if Jude used 1 Enoch for the same reason, then there is certainly no harm in Peter doing the same thing. We cannot prove that Jude in fact used 1 Enoch at all, and it would be even harder to demonstrate *why* he used it if he did, outside of the fact that Holy Spirit inspired the inclusion of this information in Jude’s epistle. Granting, for argument’s sake, the possibility that Jude was familiar with 1 Enoch and knew that his audience was familiar with it, could the same be said for Peter’s audience? They were contemporaries so, from a strictly historical standpoint, there is no problem with the document existing in the lifetime of Peter’s readers. But would they have had access to it, and would they have likely been familiar with it? Jude’s audience was, on the majority view, largely (if not entirely) Jewish and likely located in Palestine.<sup>35</sup> Therefore it is likely that some or all of them had encountered some of the material found in 1 Enoch. Peter’s audience, however, is a little harder to identify. While some scholars have concluded that the readers were predominantly Jewish, others have argued they are predominantly Gentile. Interestingly, both cases are made using material within the letter itself. Such divergent arguments may actually help us discern that the Christians to whom Peter was writing were a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile believers. While Peter identifies them as residents of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (all of which are regions of Asia Minor, modern day Turkey), he says that they are “aliens” there, having been “scattered throughout” these regions. Where did they come from and how did they come to be scattered there? While there are differing opinions, Karen Jobes has presented a compelling case that they once had been residents in Rome (perhaps under the pastoral ministry of Peter there), but they had now been scattered across Asia Minor. This scattering occurred for two reasons: they had been kicked out of Rome, possibly because of an uprising concerning their faith in Christ; and

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<sup>32</sup> Jobes, 243-251.

<sup>33</sup> Jobes, 243.

<sup>34</sup> Jobes, 245.

<sup>35</sup> Jude does not identify his audience geographically or ethnically, but most scholars have reasoned from material within the letter that they were likely predominantly Jewish Christians who probably lived Palestine.

they had been transplanted to Asia Minor as the initial colonists of Roman cities there.<sup>36</sup> If that scenario is accurate, then it is not certain that either the Jewish or Gentile believers to whom Peter wrote would have been familiar with 1 Enoch at all.

It is less than certain that Peter's readers would have been familiar with 1 Enoch on any possible theory of their composition or background. Grudem writes, "even though 1 Enoch is quoted in Jude 14-15, no one has ever demonstrated that 1 Enoch was that widely known or even familiar to the great majority of churches to which Peter was writing."<sup>37</sup> According to E. Isaac, "Information regarding the usage and importance of the work in the Jewish and Christian communities, other than the Ethiopian Church, is sparse."<sup>38</sup> If Peter's readers were originally from Ethiopia, this would be a strong link between them and 1 Enoch, but no such theory of their origins have ever been put forth. While "several early Christian writers from the second century AD onward" either cite or allude to 1 Enoch, there is "no reason to think that it was known by Peter's readers in the first century who were far removed both geographically and culturally from the Palestinian Jewish origins of the this book."<sup>39</sup>

Suppose for a moment that the readers of 1 Peter were aware of Enoch, perhaps even that "all of Peter's readers had just finished reading 1 Enoch the night before Peter's letter arrived."<sup>40</sup> Would their familiarity with 1 Enoch lead them to understand that the "spirits in prison" mentioned by Peter refer to the Watchers of 1 Enoch? Perhaps, but it is also possible that they would not instantly make that connection. In the available Greek fragments of 1 Enoch the word that Peter uses, *pneuma* (translated as "spirits" in English), is used 37 times. In 20 of those occurrences, the word refers to angelic beings, but 17 times it refers to human spirits. In some of those cases, the human spirits of the dead are described as being bound or confined in a place of waiting until the final judgment.<sup>41</sup> So, some readers may just as easily draw a different conclusion by comparing 1 Peter and 1 Enoch.

Additionally, had Peter's audience just finished reading 1 Enoch, they would recall that the sin of the angels described therein is said to have occurred in the days of Jared (Noah's father), not in the days of Noah, and certainly not during the construction of the ark. They would also not likely see the significance of the waiting patience of God if they were basing their understanding on 1 Enoch. What was God waiting for? Certainly He was not waiting for the repentance of the angels, so the most natural understanding of that phrase, with or without 1 Enoch as a background, would be that God was patiently waiting for sinful humanity to repent and believe. With these considerations, while we cannot be certain that Peter's readers had no knowledge of 1 Enoch, we are well warned against assuming that 1 Enoch was the essential hermeneutical key for Peter's epistle.

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<sup>36</sup> See Jobes, 1-57. I have summarized her argument in my introductory essay on 1 Peter, which can be accessed online at <http://ibcgso.org/MP3s/1%20Peter%20Background.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Grudem, *1 Peter* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary 17; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 230.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Grudem, *1 Peter*, 230.

<sup>39</sup> Grudem, *1 Peter*, 231.

<sup>40</sup> Grudem, *1 Peter*, 217.

<sup>41</sup> Grudem, *1 Peter*, 217-218.

This brings us to an even more important point. Assuming for the sake of argument that Peter's readers were familiar with 1 Enoch (which is not immediately evident), we should ask with Grudem, "is the usual nature of the New Testament writings such that knowledge of a specific piece of extra-biblical literature would have been required for the original readers to understand the meaning ... of a specific passage?"<sup>42</sup> We must confess that this is not "the usual nature of the New Testament," nor is there a single example where this could be demonstrated. The most obvious candidates would be those in Jude, but even there one could read Jude's words and understand them without any knowledge of the extrabiblical literature from which the account of Moses' burial and Enoch's prophecy may have been drawn. The meaning of both is plain in the immediate context. The only material that New Testament writers assume their audience to have knowledge of is the Old Testament (and perhaps in some cases other books of the New Testament which had already circulated). Extrabiblical literature is never a necessary key for interpreting canonical writings. Yet this is the crux of the argument for many who hold the angelic interpretation. After recognizing the difficulty of interpreting 1 Peter 3:19-20, Jobes says, "The original readers, likely more familiar with the Enoch traditions than we, would probably not have been so mystified."<sup>43</sup> One can infer from her statement that neither the average reader in our day nor the ancient reader who had no access to 1 Enoch would be able to understand Peter's words without some knowledge of 1 Enoch. This is an alarming assertion. On that logic, Christians in that day and this one would need to be acquainted with a potentially unlimited number of "religious writings" in order to understand God's Word. I am confident that not even Jobes herself would want to make that claim, but she comes dreadfully close to it in her appeal to Enoch as the key to unlocking the mysteries of 1 Peter 3.

Let us consider a hypothetical first century Christian, perhaps a Gentile from Rome, who has been transplanted recently to Asia Minor. Let's call him Petrophilus.<sup>44</sup> He has been under the preaching of Peter at some point in his life, and he's heard and/or read significant portions of the Old Testament. One day, a courier comes to his church with a letter from Peter. Petrophilus listens intently to the reading of this letter, perhaps after the service he reads it with his own eyes. Keep in mind, Petrophilus has never heard or read the contents of 2 Peter or Jude. He has never been taught anything about 1 Enoch. Here's the question: what does Petrophilus understand 1 Peter 3:19-20 to teach? He will understand it to have some reference to Genesis and the account of the flood. Should he turn to or inquire about that passage, without any influence from 1 Enoch or other extrabiblical traditions or writings, will he come away understanding that a destructive judgment has come because of angelic dalliance with human women? I suggest that he will not. He will understand Peter to be saying that in Noah's day, when all of Noah's contemporaries were wicked unbelievers, God made a way of salvation available through the ark that Noah was commanded to build. While Noah was building, Christ was preaching through him in the spirit, calling those unbelieving sinners to salvation before

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<sup>42</sup> Grudem, *1 Peter*, 231.

<sup>43</sup> Jobes, 243.

<sup>44</sup> "Friend of Peter"

the judgment came. But they did not repent, and as a result, they are now imprisoned eternally in hell. And Petrophilus will be tremendously encouraged by this!

Our imaginary Petrophilus and his fellow believers in Asia Minor are the targets of hostility when Peter writes them. While it would be a stretch to say that they were experiencing the full pogrom against Christianity that the Roman Empire launched later under Nero and his successors, Peter speaks frequently throughout the letter of their adverse circumstances. In fact, the verses immediately prior to our problematic portion are concentrated on these realities. Peter speaks of suffering “for the sake of righteousness,” intimidation, slander, reviling, and suffering “for doing what is right.” Two times their unjust suffering has been compared to that of Jesus Himself (2:21-24; 3:17-18). In the midst of the distress of their “various trials” (1:6), Peter encourages them to keep their behavior excellent (2:12), to submit to every institution of human authority (2:13), to “patiently endure” their unjust suffering (2:20), to not return evil and insult in kind but with blessing instead (3:9), and to always be ready “to make a defense to everyone who asks” them to give an account for the hope they have in Christ (3:15). As they do this, they will be encouraged beyond measure to know that Jesus, in His glorious Spirit, is preaching through them to the wicked people of their generation just as He did through Noah while the ark was being constructed. As God patiently waited for the hearts of the wicked to turn in that day, He patiently waits in their own day, withholding judgment and giving opportunity through the witness of the divinely empowered church for the people of their day to be “put to shame” (3:16), silenced of their ignorant folly (2:15), caused to “glorify God” (2:12), “be won” (3:1), and ultimately be saved (3:21).

How many will come to saving faith? God knows, but He has not made it known to the church. Their task is to live for Christ and allow Him to speak through them until the day comes when God closes the door of opportunity just as He closed the door of the ark. In Noah’s day, “a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through the water.” These believers may, like Noah and his family, continue to be a minority in their culture, but as Christ speaks through them, others will have the opportunity to be saved.

For modern Christians, the message is the same. Just as Christ spoke through Noah to the unbelievers around him, and spoke through Peter’s readers in Asia Minor, we have the assurance that He will speak through us as we live for Christ and share His message with the world around us. They may be hostile toward us, but God is patiently waiting for them to turn and believe. The door of salvation remains open until the day that judgment comes. It may be that only a minority will be saved, but the offer is for everyone. Christ speaks through us, calling a disobedient and unbelieving people to Himself.

At last we come to verse 21 and the issue of baptism that “now saves you.” Like many other statements in the passage, this one has a history of debate, confusion and misunderstanding. Obviously, if we appeal to clearer texts in Scripture, we would reject any notion that the baptism of a lost person would make that individual a saved person. We need to point no further than to Ephesians 2:8-9 which says very clearly that it is by grace that we are saved, through faith, and not by works. Baptism is a work. It cannot save. But, like Noah’s ark, baptism is a picture of our salvation. Our salvation is not

merely a washing in water, “the removal of dirt from the flesh,” but it is rather “an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” On the basis of Christ’s complete atonement in His death and resurrection, disobedient unbelievers are offered the opportunity to have their sins forgiven and to be covered in the righteousness of Jesus Christ – to be transformed by receiving from God “a good conscience” as a gift of His grace. Therefore, when one receives Christ by faith and turns from sin, he or she is saved by grace through the atoning sacrifice of Christ and His glorious resurrection.

That transaction of grace is both pictured and professed through the ordinance of baptism. As the new believer is buried beneath the water, we see a picture of the death and burial of Jesus, and the death and burial of our old way of life. Coming up out of the water, the resurrection of Jesus, the new life a believer has in Christ, and the hope of a coming resurrection unto eternal life are displayed visibly. Therefore, when Peter says that “baptism now saves you,” he is comparing the picture of salvation we see in baptism with the picture of salvation we see in the ark. Baptism saves as the ark saved. The ark is not ultimately what saved Noah. God’s grace saved Noah. Noah found *grace* in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8), and was thereby *saved* before the first raindrop fell. That saving grace was “proved” or “demonstrated” when he built and boarded the ark. Baptism is not ultimately what saves us. God’s grace saves us through Jesus Christ. Like Noah, in Christ we have found grace in the eyes of the Lord. This saving grace is “proved” or “demonstrated” initially as we go through the water of baptism (the first step of a lifetime of obedience), depicting the transformation of life and the good conscience God has given us through our risen and glorified Lord.

Jesus is now “at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to him” (3:22). We who have believed upon Him for salvation will join Him there as we pass through the waters of death and are raised up to life everlasting. For the spirits who are now imprisoned, it is too late. They have heard the message of salvation and rejected it. Their imprisonment is eternal. But for those who are alive and have ears to hear, Christ speaks through His church offering saving grace for all who will receive Him. The alternatives are quite simple. Believe upon Christ and join the ranks of Noah and the Church around His eternal throne, or continue in disobedience and disbelief and join the spirits who are now in prison.

We began this lengthy discussion on this problematic text with an illustration concerning the Lenox Globe, that medieval sphere that was marked with a warning: “Here Be Dragons.” We have now circumnavigated the expansive sphere of this text and found that the dragons are not so frightening after all. What we have here is not like the Lenox Globe, but rather like the Psalter Map of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. When one looks at that magnificent map the arresting feature is the Lord Jesus Christ, enthroned over the entire world and attended to by His angels, with the dragons as His footstool. This is the picture we see in this text. Christ is at the center of it all. Our attention should be captivated by Him, not by the dragons of difficult sayings. Those words exist by His inspiration, and they ultimately point us back to Him. He is not obscured by them but is exalted through them. We see Him high and exalted over all angels, authorities, and powers. And we see Him still working in this world through His people, extending the offer of salvation

through their mouths. So, while some stand afar off warning us that, “Here be dragons,” we can draw near to God through these words and say, “Dragons there may be, but exalted over them is our Lord Jesus Christ, who is alive evermore and speaks through us in this generation. Turn to Him and be saved!”