1 Pet 3:19 Redux: Who Are The Spirits in Prison?

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Problematic “Gaps” in Biblical Interpretation

- Chronological
- Geographical
- Cultural
- Linguistic
- Literacy
- Supernatural
Steps of Explanation For Revelation

1. Study the intent of the author and why this book was written.
   - Study the immediate and broad context of the passage.
   - Pay attention to the details of the passage.

2. Read the book more than once (I usually read it about 5-10 times).
   - Observe the formation of words and the structure of the sentences.

3. Work with the Biblical languages (I usually print out the Scripture and use my tools to translate it).

4. Study the history and geography of the passage you are focusing on.

5. Observe the cultural significance concerning this book.

6. Review your work once more (I would say at least 2 times because it is good to be twice as nice)!

7. Then after all of this work, you can work with commentaries not for primary explanatory reasons but only to supplement or highlight points of the work that you have done.
For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison.
He was quickened, made alive, in the sepulcher. This quickening was made in the spirit, or with respect to the Spirit, that is, in the new glorified state, in which Christ, in His transformed and glorified body, lived, acted, and moved about, came and went as a spirit. In this spirit, in this new spirit-life, glorified and exalted, Christ, the God-man, according to His soul and body, retaining His flesh and blood in a glorified form, went forth, as our triumphant Champion, into the abode of the damned and of the devils, and there proclaimed His victory to the spirits in prison, that is, in hell, specifically to those who are further described. It was a part of the punishment which came upon the condemned and upon the demons in hell that they saw and heard Christ proclaim Himself as the Victor over death and hell, and were obliged to tell themselves that they might have partaken of this glory of the great Hero of mankind, if they had not deprived themselves of this blessing by their revolt against Him and by their unbelief.
A secret objection: Christ indeed might do this, but what is that to us? Indeed (faith the apostle) for Christ has showed his power in all ages both in the preservation of the godly, were they never so few and miserable, and in avenging the rebellion of his enemies, as it appears by the history of the flood: for Christ is he who in those days (when God through his patience appointed a time of repentance to the world) was present, not in corporal presence, but by his divine power, preaching repentance, even by the mouth of Noah himself who then prepared the ark, to those disobedient spirits who are now in prison, waiting for the full recompense of their rebellion, and saved those few, (that is, only eight people) in the water.
It can be argued from such passages as 2. Pet. 4:4-10; Jude 6; and reference to Gen. 6:1-8 that the spirits in prison are fallen angels, and that this interpretation is more consistent with the word *pneumata, spirits*, in Scripture without qualification. This would seem on the whole the best interpretation of a difficult passage, and the thought is then taken up again in v. 22 where Christ triumph is seen to be complete.
Some Commentaries
Jeremiah Study Bible

Spirits in prison may refer to a time when after His resurrection Jesus preached in person to the fallen angels who had rebelled against God to announce His victory over them and sin (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). Peter includes this note mainly to assure his persecuted readers that Christ is victorious over death and all powers, even Satan and his evil forces.
Christ descended into hell to declare His victory over death and all evil forces. His powers surpasses all others. Scripture does not teach that He offered these spirits a second chance for salvation. “It is enough if we know that Christ descended into hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and delivered them from the power of death and of the devil, from eternal condemnation from the jaws of hell. We will save our questions <and not curiously investigate> about how this happened until the other world. Then not only this <mystery>, but others also will be revealed that we simply believe here and cannot grasp with our blind reason” FC (Formula of Concord) Ep IX 4)
Summing Up These Explanations

- It is associated with Noah (that is Christ preaching through Noah to the rebellious people).
- It is associated Christ making a “victory march and proclamation” to the disobedient in hades (hell).
- It is associated with Christ making a victorious declaration to the rebellious angels who are chained awaiting eternal judgement.
- It is associated that Christ made proclamation to the godly spirits who were to be released from some spiritual prison.
- It is just a mystery that one cannot comprehend or explain.
οτι και χριστος απαξ περι αμαρτιων επαθεν δικαιος υπες αδικων ινα υμας προσαγαγη τω θεω θανατωθεις μεν σαρκι ξοοποιηθεις δε πνευματιεν ω και τοις εν φυλακη πνευμασιν πορευθεις εκηρυξεν
And that Christ once for all concerning sin (He) suffered, just for not just, in order that, He may bring (us) toward (the) God. Indeed (He) was (or having been) put to death in the flesh but made to life in the spirit, in which He went to make proclamation to the spirits in prison…
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Some Basic Historical Data of 1 Peter

• This epistle was more than likely written in Jerusalem.

• Was written to a Jewish believers who believed Jesus was the Messiah (Peter is an apostle to the Jewish people c.f., Gal. 2:8)

• Written to those Jewish believers who were “aliens scattered abroad” (*the diaspora* 1 Pet. 1:1).

• More than likely written during the time of the start of the Early church (35-40 A.D).

• There was more than likely intense persecution that was happening during this time (c.f., 1 Pet. 1:6; 3:13-4:1-6; 4:12-19; 5:6-11)
The Main Themes In 1 Peter: Conduct and Attitude

• Their conduct and attitude is observed in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Chap. 1:1-12)

• Their conduct and attitude in light of their former way of life (1:13-25).

• Their conduct and attitude in light of living among the Gentiles (2:1-12).

• Their conduct and attitude in living with one another and suffering at the hands of unreasonable people (2:13-25-3:1-12).

• Their conduct and attitude of suffering for the sake of Christ (3:13-4:1-19).

• Their conduct and attitude concerning the elders who oversee the flock of God (5:1-5).

• A reminder to humble themselves under the hand of God (this is again in light of their suffering (5:6-11).
Let Us Observe The Immediate Context of this Passage

- Peter asks a rhetorical question to his audience (v. 14)
- Peter begins to discuss “suffering for the sake of righteousness” (v. 15)
- Peter tells them to have a ready defense (word), with gentleness, reverence, and a good conscience (deed) so those who accuse will be shamed (v. 16)
- Peter then issues an argument: It is better to suffer for doing right rather than doing wrong (v. 17)
- Peter, as evidence brings up the ministry of Christ in His first advent (v. 18)
For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit...
42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; 43 it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; 44 it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. 45 So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. 47 The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. 48 As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. 49 Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly (1 Cor. 15:42-49 NASB emphasis mine).

Question: Does this mean Jesus (i.e., the last Adam) has no body?

Answer: No. Paul clarifies this in the proceeding verses.
Now We Come To Verse 19

...in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison

This word in the Greek is the word κηρύσσω which means “to proclaim, to herald” (Occurs 60 times in the NASB)

This word is associated mainly with speaking or proclaiming a message. Mostly concerning the gospels.
| **Concerning John the Baptist (the physical kingdom of God):** | Now in those days John the Baptist came, **preaching** in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt.3:1-2 NASB) |
| **Concerning Jesus (the physical kingdom of God):** | Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and **proclaiming** the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. (Matt 4:23 NASB) |
| **Concerning Philip and the Gospel of Christ (the forgiveness of sins):** | 4 Therefore, those who had been scattered went about **preaching** the word. 5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. (Acts 8:5 NASB) |
| **Concerning Peter’s ministry and the Gospel of Christ (forgiveness of sins to Cornelius):** | And He ordered us to **preach** to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." |
| **Concerning Paul’s ministry and the Gospel of Christ (The forgiveness of sins to the Gentiles):** | For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was **preached** among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not yes and no, but is yes in Him. |
...in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison.

This word in the Greek is the word φυλακή means “to watch and keep guard” which comes from the word φυλάσσω meaning “to observe, watch, guard, and even avoid.” (Occurs 45 times in the NASB)

In every single instance except one this word always refers to a physical prison for human beings. The time where is not used as a physical prison (Babylon) is concerning unclean spirits, and Satan being released from the abyss (i.e., Rev. 18:2; 20:7).
Some examples of how φυλακή is used

**Concerning John the Baptizer:** For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip (Matt.14:3 NASB).

**Concerning Saul (before he became Paul):** But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. (Acts 8:3 NASB).

**Concerning the adversity of the apostles:** But in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger…(2 Cor. 6:4-5 NASB)

**Concerning the Church of Smyrna in Revelation:** 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10 NASB).

**Concerning Satan and the Abyss:** When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison (Rev. 20:7 NASB).
So what are we to make of this word?

…in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison

This word spirit is used 519 times in the Bible! Some of the ways it is used is to refer to the inner man, the Holy Spirit, the attitude one has (i.e., a “spirit of pride”), demons, one’s emotional state (i.e., his spirit was troubled), etc. These are to name a few.

I am convinced Peter is using this word intentionally to discuss the quality of one who is in Christ.
1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; 2 this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

4 Nicodemus said* to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." 7 "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Paul says that Jesus became a “life giving spirit.” Again Jesus has a physical body, but the quality of His nature in His body has changed. Paul uses this to speak to the quality if Christ.
42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; 43 it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; 44 it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. 45 So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. 47 The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. 48 As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. 49 Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.

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Concerning any person coming as believer with instruction: If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. (1 Cor. 14:37 NASB).

Concerning those saints caught in a trespass: Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. (Gal. 6:1 NASB).

Concerning the Jewish believers: And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 6:4-5 NASB).

Each of these words (associated with the 1 Pet. 3:19 and 1 Cor. 15) are discussing the quality of the believer (they are spiritual because they are spirit)!
Exhibit C: A part of verse 19?

in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, 20 who once were disobedient.

This phrase is found three other places. All associated with unbelief contrasted with those who have the faith.

Concerning the Gentiles: For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience (Rom. 11:30 NASB)

Concerning Israel: And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? (Heb. 3:18 NASB)

Concerning Rahab: By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace. (Heb. 11:31)
39 One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" 40 But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" 43 And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."
I am convinced Peter is using this word “spirits” as a *qualitative* term to describe believers who have been made alive in spirit by Christ (much like Paul described Jesus as becoming a “life giving spirit” by His resurrection.)

I am convinced the type of *prison* that Peter is referring to is a *physical* prison human beings are kept in. Based on the how the word is used throughout the Scriptures there is no reason to presume otherwise.

I am convinced that the *proclamation* has to do with ministry Jesus had *after* His resurrection (c.f., Acts 1:1-3; 1 Cor. 15:3-8).

I am convinced that those who were disobedient are *not* discussing Noah. But those who did not believe during the time Jesus proclaimed those things to them (they did not believe the word of God but at that time).

I am convinced this fits the natural flow of the passage of verse 18ff: Christ’s death for sinners, physical resurrection, proclamation to those around Him, ascension, etc.)
Trying It All Together

I am convinced this fits the themes of Peter’s letters also: Christ’s suffered—He was resurrected. He is now an example to those who are in prison to endure suffering, because they will be glorified and the judgment of God will commence.

Noah also had to endure wickedness (c.f., Gen. 6:5-7), in which God saved Noah through the water by the ark that God commanded Noah to build.

Peter then discusses baptism…that is that Noah believed God, and His conscience was clean (in other words he did not have to be judged with the world). Similarly, the Christian has been baptized by the Holy Spirit, believes God’s word, and believes we will be saved from the wrath of God also.

Peter is making the case in this epistle how a believer lives and conducts themselves within a wicked world. (there are parallels similar to what God told the Israelites as they were in Babylon (c.f., Jer. 29:1-7).

This would be a wonderful encouragement for the saints who were being fiercely persecuted at this time to show that God is still faithful to them.
The Explanation

Peter is giving *two* separate examples

One from that time period and one from the Old Testament. Due to the suffering of Christ there were many who were saved by His proclamation after He resurrected. These same people who believe now are in prison not because they are suffering because of what they did wrong, but they are suffering for Christ!

The other example is Noah, who lived in a wicked world and endured it for a time. But was saved from the judgment of God because He believed in His word.
What We Addressed

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