

A GLANCE AT SOME OLD PROBLEMS IN FIRST PETER

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FOR decades now, after a period of neglect, 1 Peter has been targeted by many commentaries, articles, and special studies. Accompanying this new surge of interest has been a fascination with the celebrated problems of interpretation in 3:19 and its immediate context. With the thought of deriving benefit from some of the recent discussion of these problems and possibly encouraging further consideration of them, several have been chosen for brief review here.

I. *A Question of Syntax*

The first problem has to do with the interpretation of ἀπειθήσασιν in 3:20. It is often taken as an attributive adjective participle going with καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν in v. 19—and without explanation or defense. As Grudem says, ". . . our minds are cluttered by English translations which say 'who formerly disobeyed'."¹ The point is that the participle here does not look at all like an attributive or substantive participle, but it looks for all the world like an adverbial participle. It surely does not conform to the normal rule for attributive participles. Here is the rule, as Burton states it: "An Attributive Participle when used to limit a noun which has the article, stands in the so-called attributive position, i.e., between the article and the noun, or after an article following the noun; but when the participle is limited by an adverbial phrase, this phrase may stand between the article and the noun, and the participle without the article follow the noun."² In the present case, in which no known exception to the rule applies, the noun that our participle modifies has the article, and according to rule the participle instead of being anarthrous should have the article too—if it is to be translated by a relative clause and interpreted as attributive. However, if it is to be taken as an adverbial participle, it "logically modifies some other verb of the sentence in which it stands, being equivalent to an adverbial phrase or clause denoting time, condition, concession,

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter* (Tyndale NT Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 238.

² Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (3d ed., 1898; repr. Grand Rapids: Kregel, n.d.) 166.

cause, purpose, means, manner, or attendant circumstance."³ Of these possible adverbial interpretations, the one which seems to suit the context best at 3:19-20 is temporal: "when they formerly disobeyed." Taking into account normal Greek usage, Grudem finds "grammatical considerations open at least the possibility and perhaps the strong probability that we should translate *apeithesas in pote* in 1 Pet 3:20 adverbially—'when they formerly disobeyed'."⁴ No valid objection can be raised, he holds, against the temporal interpretation because another note of time follows, for this is not unexampled, even in 1 Pet 3:20 itself.⁵ Rather, one might judge that the further note of time tends to support and confirm the temporal interpretation of the participle.

If we are to translate ἀπειθήσασιν as adverbial and as temporal, with the meaning "when they formerly disobeyed," the implications for the interpretation of the entire passage can be of arresting significance. One of the most important questions raised by the whole passage is, When did the preaching occur? When did Christ go and make proclamation? The answer would appear to be: Not in the period between our Lord's death and resurrection. Not at the time of the resurrection or later. But far back in the days of Noah before the world was first destroyed.⁶

II. The Interpretation of ἐν ᾧ

These words at the beginning of v. 19 have often been taken as introducing a relative clause. A popular choice for their antecedent has been πνεύματι at the end of v. 18, with allowance at times; compare Selwyn,⁷ for a somewhat broader base. Clowney comments, "The Greek phrase which the NIV renders through whom (3:19) means 'in which'. It may refer directly to the word 'spirit' or it may be more indefinite, 'in which time'. If it is the latter, the preaching spoken of must have taken place after the resurrection. . . . If, however, 'in which' refers to 'spirit', then the preaching of the Spirit of Christ through Noah remains a possibility."⁸

Another fascinating possibility has attracted Reicke. He proposes that ἐν ᾧ should be taken as a "relative adverb serving as a conjunction."⁹ He maintains that there are problems of logic and language connected with the

³ Burton, *Syntax*, 169.

⁴ For a grammatical comment on 1 Pet 3:19, see Robert Hanna, *A Grammatical Aid to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 426.

⁵ Grudem, *1 Peter*, 236.

⁶ For additional support for this viewpoint, see Grudem, *1 Peter*, 230-39.

⁷ E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (2d ed.; London: Macmillan, 1947) 315.

⁸ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester and Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1988) 159.

⁹ Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1946) 108.

relative clause construction. He finds, furthermore, numerous examples in the NT of the adverbial-type usage, with several occurrences in 1 Peter itself.

ἐν ᾧ, when used as a circumstantial expression, is capable of various interpretations, among them temporal, causal, and instrumental. Among the possible renderings are: *at which time, when, while, whereat, thereat, on which account, therefore, wherefore, for this reason, and because of*. The interpretations most worthy of consideration here, according to Reicke, are the temporal and the causal, but he judges that "the causal interpretation does not, on the whole, give any clearly logical connection."¹⁰ Perhaps a brief survey of the broader Petrine context will give us a clearer impression of whether it is fruitless to seek for a causal connection; indeed, whether a causal interpretation might not illumine the passage.

A key to Peter's thinking about God's revelatory action through the OT prophets is found in 1 Pet 1:10-12:

Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them did signify, when he testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed that not unto themselves but unto you they did minister the things which are now reported unto you by those who have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven.... "

According to Peter, then, the Holy Spirit testified beforehand through the prophets to the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. This testimony was to the prophets in general. In the period just before the flood, Noah, the preacher of righteousness (2 Pet 2:5), would have been, it would seem, the chosen bearer of the prophetic testimony. Noah's unbelieving and notoriously sinful contemporaries did not take too seriously the message about a messiah's sufferings and the following glory in some vague time to come, especially as it was accompanied by an unwelcome call to repentance. After all, who could guarantee that what Noah predicted would ever come to pass? Did he have infallible knowledge about things to come? Noah, of course, did not have infallible knowledge himself. But the Spirit of Christ, who had given Noah and the prophets their testimony, knew that the sufferings and the glory of the Savior were absolutely certain, had been irrevocably determined in the counsels of God, and without question would come about in their appointed time. The prophecy was based on reality yet to be realized, but as certain as the will and plan of God.

It will be noted that Peter calls the Spirit in 1 Pet 1:11 "the Spirit of Christ." The close interworking between the Holy Spirit and Christ can provide an explanation for this designation. Peter furnishes a striking example of this in Acts 2:33. In his address on the Day of Pentecost, he declares that prophecy has been fulfilled concerning Christ, that he has

¹⁰ Reicke, *Disobedient Spirits*, 113.

undergone suffering and entered into glory. He has now received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, and he stands behind the coming of the Holy Spirit and the phenomena of the day. He is said to have shed forth or poured out what was then seen and heard. In 1 Pet 1:12 he would likewise seem to be behind the coming of the Holy Spirit from heaven to work in the NT preachers who spoke of the accomplished sufferings of Christ and the glorious events that had followed. Small wonder then that Peter in 1:11 calls the Holy Spirit, given to Christ in a special way after his sufferings and entrance into glory, nothing less than the Spirit of Christ. Who then stands behind the prophecies of Noah and the other prophets? No one less than the Spirit of Christ. No one less than Christ himself. It is therefore far from implausible that when Peter speaks of Christ's going and preaching (v. 19), he is referring to the activity of the Spirit through Noah.

Now, in 3:18-20, writing more than thirty years after Pentecost, Peter reflects again on the sufferings of Christ and the glories that followed them. These were the actual occurrences that had been declared in advance by the Spirit of Christ, sent by Christ, through Noah and the other prophets. Their message was grounded, although from a human point of view, prophetically, on historical reality. Could Peter be saying to us in 3:18-19: Here is the unshakable basis for our faith. Here in these words I have recorded how we are brought to God, what is the historical factuality on which the prophetic message was grounded, the foundation, the temporal cause which our eternal God had established before he made time and the world?

If we give $\epsilon\nu \hat{\omega}$ causal force and take the cause to be the redemptive events mentioned in v. 18, we obtain a satisfactory logical connection with the context. Christ's preaching, we have already noticed in our first section, was apparently in the days of Noah. The causal reference here provides the grounds for something that had previously happened. The historical redemptive acts mentioned in v. 18 form the basis for the prophetic disclosure of those acts. The Spirit given to Christ as a consequence of his having completed the work that was given to him to do is appropriately referred to by Peter as conveying the message of the redeemer's sufferings and glory to OT prophets. Not that a forward projection would be impossible. Indeed, in 1:12 the Spirit sent from heaven is said to have worked with the NT preachers of the Word. But, as we have noticed, Peter seems to date Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison not between Christ's death and resurrection or later, but in the days of Noah. Here as in all predictive prophecy, the will of God is a determiner of reality and prophecy is reflective of and based upon the reality to come.

God's sovereign control over all things, including time, and the unity of his will make it possible to bring the past and the future in close relationship to one another. Christ's salvation applied not only to the NT period but also to the OT period and the elements of the saving gospel message were prophetically disclosed before they occurred.

Do some persons question God's concern for those who lived prior to Christ's coming? Have some of them postulated a preaching visit of Christ to Hades after his death, including in some cases an offer of the gospel to spirits confined there? All such questioners should realize that Christ had already visited the sinners of Noah's day and preached to them not in Hades but while they were still alive—before the door to repentance had closed.

III. Flesh and Spirit Contrasted

Readers of the NT have been puzzled at times by statements that seem to indicate that our Lord has become something that he already had been before. For example, in Matt 28:18, Jesus says: "All power has been given unto me in heaven and on earth." The reader asks, "Did he not have all power previously?" In Acts 2:36, Peter says: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made that same Jesus whom you have crucified both Lord and Christ." One inquires, "Was not Jesus both Lord and Christ already?" Other verses raise similar questions. The answer to these questions will be found in a right understanding of 1 Pet 3:18. At the close of that verse Peter writes: *θανατωθεῖς μὲν σαρκὶ ζωοποιηθεῖς δὲ πνεύματι*. Here we have a balanced structure that contributes substantially to the interpretation. For example, in their tight parallelism we expect both *σαρκί* and *πνεύματι* to be used in the same way. Mounce claims that the translation in the NIV, "*in the body . . . by the Spirit*," has two faults:

First, the words "body" and "spirit" are parallel and should be translated in the same manner (both are in the dative case and the NIV's "in the body . . . but . . . by the Spirit" is misleading). Second, the capital S on "Spirit" interprets the word to mean the Holy Spirit. In other words the clause is made to say that Jesus died physically but was resurrected by the Holy Spirit. While this theology is certainly orthodox, it is not what the text actually says. Flesh and spirit represent two spheres of existence or two successive conditions of Christ's human nature.¹¹

More than one writer refers to Rom 1:3-4 for light on 1 Pet 3:18. Very helpful treatments of the Romans passage have been provided by Geerhardus Vos, John Murray, and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. Murray notes that the Romans text has often been interpreted as dealing with differing aspects of or elements in the constitution of the person of the Saviour. Sometimes the distinguished aspects have been thought to be within the human nature of Christ, the physical contrasted with the spiritual. By others the distinguished aspects have been regarded as the two distinct natures in the person of Christ, the human and the divine, "flesh" designating the former and "Son of God . . . according to the Spirit of holiness" the latter.¹²

¹¹ Robert H. Mounce, *A Living Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 56.

¹² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 6.

Murray, however, holds that "there are good reasons for thinking . . . that the distinction drawn is that between 'two successive stages' of the historical process of which the Son of God became the subject."¹³ He says further that Paul deals with "some particular event in the history of the Son of God incarnate by which he was instated in a position of sovereignty and invested with power, an event which in respect of investiture with power surpassed everything that could previously be ascribed to him in his incarnate state."¹⁴

Marked off in 1 Pet 3:18, as in Rom 1:3-4, would be two successive stages in our Lord's messianic work. These different stages are reflected also in such verses as Matt 28:18 and Acts 2:36, which were mentioned earlier. The second stage, introduced by the resurrection, was "one all-pervasively conditioned by pneumatic powers."¹⁵ The *πνεύματι* in 1 Pet 3:18 accordingly refers not only to the resurrection, but also to the state of power that followed it.

Here we also have prophecy fulfilled—prophecy given by the Spirit of Christ through Noah and others who had served as voices for the prophetic word. In word and in life they showed the power and the triumph of him who was to bring his people to God, who would bring his sheep of all the ages back to the shepherd and bishop of their souls.

In Noah's day, in Peter's day, and whenever and wherever the people of God are called to suffer for doing what is right, the powerful words of 1 Pet 3:18 can bring power and triumph to their souls. The truths that are expressed with captivating beauty in this verse should remind them of the redemptive sufferings of Christ and of the following glories of the Savior, of his conquest over death in his own resurrection and in the certainty of theirs, and of their present vital empowering union with him in his death, resurrection, and his present exaltation.¹⁶

IV. The Spirits in Prison

". . . by whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison" (1 Pet 3:19). Who were these spirits in prison? Some say that they were the sinful men of Noah's time. Although they were not then in any physical prison, they have been confined after their death—they are spirits now in prison. Another view, which has obtained a wide hearing today, is that the spirits in prison are fallen angels, supposedly referred to in the opening verses of Genesis 6 as sons of God. The preaching, it is held, was not done

¹³ Murray, *Romans*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 77-143.

in Noah's day, but later, either between the time of the death of Christ and his resurrection or after the resurrection.

It is not our purpose here to review in detail the considerations advanced for or against these views or any other interpretation. That would be in itself a profitable study, and there is much information readily available on that score.¹⁷

It is our intention (not really original with us) to suggest that all who participate in the controversy about the identity of the spirits in prison would benefit from taking account of the office and endowment of the apostle Peter and of the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit in him. In agreement with Christ's teaching about the OT, he would not have given to apocryphal writers the respect and authority he gave to the inspired books. He, furthermore, had been called to be an apostle, had been trained by Christ, had seen his works, and heard his words, and had been commissioned by him. He had been a witness of the Lord's suffering and of the fact of his resurrection, and could even call himself a partaker of the glory that was to be revealed (5:1). He was one of those through whom Christ continued after his ascension to teach and to minister (see Acts 1:1-2). As the Spirit of Christ spoke through the OT prophets, so he now worked through Peter (see 1 Pet 1:12). Christ had promised to Peter and the other apostles that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things and would bring all things to their remembrance which he had told them (John 14:26). He promised also that the Spirit would guide them into all truth (John 16:13). With the exalted Lord helping him, and the Holy Spirit leading him, with the God-breathed Scriptures of the OT to instruct him, Peter was not likely to succumb to cunningly devised fables or to be led astray by the speculations and fancies of uninspired men. This would not prevent his making some use of their writings when appropriate, but it would preclude his endorsing as true any erroneous elements that they contained. This should aid us, for example, in assessing Peter's relationship to *1 Enoch*.

Dalton is convinced that "This tradition of *1 Enoch* is what we would expect from 1 Peter, dependent as it is on the primitive Jewish-Christian teaching of the Church at Jerusalem."¹⁸ We have noted above some of

¹⁷ For a sampling, the reader is referred to such works as the following: William Joseph Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits* (AnBib 23; Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1989) 160-76; R. T. France, "Exegesis in Practice," in *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I. Howard Marshall; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 269-70; John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, Appendix A, "The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men (Gen 6:1-4)" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 243-49; John S. Feinberg, "1 Peter 3:18-20, Ancient Mythology and the Intermediate State," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 303-36; see especially pp. 320-25; William Henry Green, "The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, 5 (1894) 654-60; Wayne A. Grudem, 1 Peter, 203-39.

¹⁸ Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 176

Peter's major reliances, and we would note here, lest there be any confusion, that the primary element in the teaching of the church at Jerusalem was the teaching of the apostles, including Peter (Acts 2:42). After the great turning to the Lord on the Day of Pentecost, the new converts continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles, such as is summarized in 1 Cor 15:1-11. Through God's grace Peter, though not perfect, maintained a rock-like loyalty to the faith once for all delivered to the saints and to the Lord who had charged him to feed his sheep. He faithfully preached the gospel in the Holy Spirit sent by Christ from heaven (1:12).

V. *Another Hearing for Augustine?*

Traver in his Th.M. thesis seeks to provoke or encourage those who still hold to Augustine's interpretation of 1 Pet 3:19.¹⁹ According to Augustine, as previously mentioned, Christ's going to preach took place in the days of Noah (3:19). This view was dominant for more than a thousand years and is still alive in its main thrust today. However, in recent years it has met with formidable competition, and is not always given a full and satisfactory hearing. At times objections are stated against it without giving them any adequate testing. Dalton, however, does grant that Augustine's interpretation is not devoid of real merit, but he nevertheless judges that "despite this, the theory is quite unacceptable. . . . The 'going' of Christ can hardly be understood of the divine activity in the OT. 'The spirits in prison', likewise, cannot be understood of the living contemporaries of Noah without indulging in an unreal allegorization foreign to the thought of 1 Peter. One may add that . . . there is no understandable link with the context."²⁰ Goppelt similarly comments: "According to Augustine the spirits in prison are the unbelieving contemporaries of Noah, who were held in the prison of sin and ignorance. To them the Spirit of the preexistent Christ (1:11) preached through Noah. But this allegorization is contrary to the scope of the context...."²¹ Traver, although not himself endorsing the Augustinian position, is eager to have it well represented. He would like to see a more cohesive presentation of its merits. Excellent studies have been made since he offered this challenge that have provided robust support for the Augustinian viewpoint. The impression that one obtains from even a few samplings such as we have attempted in this paper is that there are both obvious and latent strengths in that interpretation, stripped of allegorizing. It is surely a bit too soon to close the books on Augustine.

¹⁹ Barry A. Traver, "Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits" (Th.M. thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980) 146.

²⁰ Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 43-45.

²¹ Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on I Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 256.

After a painstaking study of 1 Pet 3:18-22, Feinberg concludes:

. . . it is highly improbable that 1 Pet 3:18-22 has anything to do with Christ preaching to dead people, evil angels, or in an underworld. If Scripture does teach anything about an underworld, one cannot demonstrate so from 1 Pet 3:18-22. Consequently, whatever one wants to say about biblical teaching concerning the intermediate state, he must say it on the basis of some other passage than this one!²²

²² Feinberg, "I Peter 3:18-20," 336.

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