



Are Spirits in Prison angels or people?

First we look 1 Peter 3:18 in an accurate and unprejudiced translation:
For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit... (RSV).

The first sentence is one of the most succinct statements of core Christian faith in the entire Bible. But what does that last part mean?

Some earlier scholars held that the “spirit” here is Christ’s divine nature, but modern commentators all recognise that this amounts to reading later theological concerns back into the New Testament.

Many hold that Peter is speaking of the survival, with increased vigour, of Christ’s divine (or divine-human) spirit, after the death of his body. It is argued that “flesh” and “spirit” refer to two separable parts of Christ. However, in Greek the expression “made alive” (*zoopoiethis*) can apply only to what has been lifeless, dead, and this is particularly obvious here, where there is a direct contrast to being “put to death” (Greek *thanatotheis*).

Clearly, then, Peter is referring to Christ’s *resurrection*. In the New Testament, the verb *zoopoiein* is used routinely in this sense, as a virtual equivalent to *egeirein*, “to raise up”.¹ As Kelly explains: “Here the contrast...is between Christ’s death and resurrection.... The verb for ‘make alive’...is virtually synonymous with ‘raise from the dead’....”²

Furthermore, “flesh” and “spirit” do not refer here to two parts of Christ or of human nature. “In fact the flesh-spirit distinction which we meet in the NT...is completely OT in inspiration and has nothing to do with the Greek, ultimately Platonic, dichotomy of soul and body....”³ Nor is it likely that the “spirit” here is the Holy Spirit, although that interpretation would accord with the resurrection (Rom. 8:11).

Most likely, “flesh” and “spirit” refer to “the whole Christ regarded from different standpoints”.⁴ In fact, they refer to two contrasting planes of existence, earthly and divine, one before Christ’s death, the other after His resurrection.⁵ It was at His resurrection, as Paul says, that Christ “was vindicated in spirit” (I Tim. 3:16) and “became a life-giving spirit” (I Cor. 15:45).⁶ Other recent commentators concur.⁷ C. E. B. Cranfield explains: “...it means that, while the body of Christ that was crucified was subject to the frailty and limitations of an ordinary human body, the body that was raised is no longer subject to such limitations....”⁸ Christ, who once lived and died subject to all the limitations of human existence, now lives on the plane of God Himself.

I Peter 3:19-20a:

...in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah... (RSV).

First, we need to note that *there is no reason to link this proclamation with the preaching referred to in I Peter 4:6*. There, the word for “proclaimed” is *euangelidzo*, which certainly means, “to preach the Gospel with a view to conversion”, while here it is *kerusso*, a more general term. And I Peter 4:6 makes no reference to “spirits”. Much confusion has resulted from assuming the two passages are talking about the same thing.

Second, given that verse 18 is talking about Christ’s resurrection, there can be no doubt that *this proclamation was made by Christ after His resurrection*, not while He was dead! “In which”, in Greek, could mean “on which occasion”, or “in which mode of existence”, or possibly “in the course of which”. In any case, it naturally implies a journey following the events of verse 18. The way that “he went” (v.19) is picked up again in verse 22 (“has gone into heaven”⁹), after the reference to “the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (v.21), implies that the same post-resurrection sequence is in view. An important parallel is I Timothy 3:16, which envisages Christ appearing to angels after His resurrection, though prior to His being enthroned in glory. Finally, until Christ was raised from the dead, what was there to proclaim? The resurrection is integral to the whole Gospel (Col. 2:12-13; I Pet. 1:3, 3:21) and to Christ’s victory over evil powers (Eph. 1:20-23, I Pet. 3:20): “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (I Cor. 15:17)!

Departed spirits of preceding human generations is most unlikely

Now, *third*, who or what are these “spirits” (Greek: *pneumata*)? Ever since Clement of Alexandria (c.190 A.D.), it has been common to hold that they are the departed spirits of preceding human generations, especially perhaps of the generation of Noah’s flood (representing the worst sinners of all). However, this is most unlikely.

(a) Wherever *pneuma* (“spirit”) occurs in the Bible without some word or phrase to show that the spirit belongs to human beings,¹⁰ the word almost always means a supernatural angelic being or demon. Examples are: Matt. 8:19, 12:45; Mk 1:23; Lk 10:20; Heb 1:7, 14; Rev 1:4; etc.¹¹ The same holds true for all Jewish literature written in Greek contemporary with the New Testament. “There is no trace of *pneumata* being used absolutely to connote ‘departed spirits’.”¹² Now, there is no such qualifying word or phrase here in I Peter. *The Living Bible, the Good News Bible (TEV)* and the translation of J. B. Phillips are all very misleading here. The Greek does not say, “the spirits...of those who...did not obey”, but “the spirits...who did not obey”, as in *RSV, NRSV*, etc.

(b) Peter does not divide human nature into a body plus a separable “soul” or “spirit” elsewhere. This conclusion is reached independently by both J. N. D. Kelly and E. Best. For example, on I Pet. 2:11, Kelly writes: “Here, as in the other passages where he uses it, soul denotes the man himself, considered as a living being or person...”¹³

We conclude that these “spirits” are not human at all, but angelic beings

So we conclude that these “spirits” are not human at all, but angelic beings (as in I Tim. 3:16).¹⁴

This is altogether confirmed by II Peter 2:4-5 and Jude 6, which refer to rebellious angels, punished by God with imprisonment, just as in I Peter 3. Just like I Pet. 3, II Pet. 2 goes straight on to refer to the time of Noah’s flood. Even the number of people saved in the ark is mentioned in both cases! Undoubtedly, all three passages refer to the same incident and surely no one would ever have thought otherwise without the contaminating influence of Platonist presuppositions.¹⁵

The “spirits” to whom Christ preached, therefore, are fallen, rebellious angels.

Fourth, the “scene” of this event is not the world of the dead at all. Despite Is. 24:22, Rev. 1:18 or Apocalypse of Baruch 23:4, the realm of the dead is only rarely described as a prison in Jewish literature. II Peter 2:4 calls the place where these spirits are confined “Tartarus” (translated “hell” in NRSV). Now, in Greek literature Tartarus is an abyss beneath the underworld, not for humans, but for fallen immortals. However, we cannot be sure precisely what Peter means. Some Jewish writings have these fallen angels imprisoned in the “depths of the earth” (Jubilees 5; I Enoch 10, 88); others, westward in a chaos, or anomalous fiery abyss beyond heaven or earth (I Enoch 18-21); others, in the second heaven (Testament of Levi, II Enoch 7). In the opinion of both Kelly and Fitzmyer, II Peter, Jude and I Peter all probably refer to the heavenly regions. In any case, this is not an underworld of departed human souls!

What is really impressive is that, unlike much non-biblical literature of the time, these Scriptures are quite reserved and unspecific on where these “spirits” are. The geography of the spirit world, as such, is of no concern. In any case, surely such concrete and spatial language as “prison” and “eternal (note) chains” is largely figurative when applied to “spirits”.

Finally, what of the proclamation of Christ itself? Many have assumed that Jesus here is evangelising the dead. Upon this various doctrines have been built: for example, the doctrine of a “second chance” after death, for those unrepentant in this life. However, we have established that the audience is not departed human souls at all, but rebellious angels. It has been noted already, that the Greek word here for “made a proclamation”, *kerusso*, does not necessarily mean, to evangelise. It can be quite general (e.g. Lk 12:3, Rom. 2:21, Rev. 5:2). Still, in the New Testament it does usually mean, “to preach the Gospel”.

Christ is proclaiming the Gospel of His triumph over evil and death to these rebellious spirits

It seems reasonable to conclude, that Peter is depicting Christ proclaiming the Gospel of His triumph over evil and death to these rebellious spirits, not so much in the hope of converting them, as in order to confirm to them, both their own defeat and the salvation of humanity, through Himself.¹⁶ This prepares the way for the emphasis on the subjection of all angelic authority to Jesus in I Peter 3:22.

To sum up, I Peter 3:18-19 does not speak of Christ in disembodied form preaching to departed human spirits between His death and resurrection. It speaks of the resurrected Christ announcing the salvation He has accomplished

for all humanity, and His triumph over Satan, to rebellious angels who are under restraint pending the final judgment.

Christ's triumph is ours also!

Here, Peter is encouraging Christians to be faithful under persecution and temptation. Those who suffer for Christ's sake, he says, are blessed, for He Himself, the Righteous One, has suffered for them and through Him they belong to God. Around about is the world, indifferent to God, hostile to Christ's followers, licentious (4:3-4), idolatrous, under the sway of satanic evil (5:2). Possibly this tragic state of affairs is traced here, in part, to the influence of the fallen angels of Genesis 6. But through Christ's sacrificial life, death and resurrection, evil's root is cut. Through Him, by faith and baptism (5:19), Christians can and will have total victory over evil and death (also 5:8-11). Christ's own triumph has already been proclaimed to the uttermost bounds of creation. So let us maintain, fearlessly and humbly, our witness to Him (3:14-16). Christ's triumph is ours also!

References

E.g. John 5:21; Rom. 4:17, 8:11; I Cor. 15:22; Eph. 2:5. [↔]

J. N. D. Kelly, A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude, p.150. [↔]

J. N. D. Kelly, p.151. [↔]

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Just as, for example, in Isaiah 31:3, the level of the divine is described as "spirit" and the level of the human, or animal, is described as "flesh" [↔]

See also Rom. 1:4. [↔]

J. A. Fitzmyer: "The word sarx [flesh] here does not mean 'body' (in contrast to his soul), nor even 'humanity' (in contrast to his divine pre-existence), but Christ's earthly human condition (contrasted with his risen state)... The pneuma [spirit] does not mean Christ's 'soul' or his 'divine pre-existence'...." ("The First Epistle of Peter", in The Jerome Bible Commentary, p.367). E. Best: "...when spirit is opposed to flesh in the NT the opposition of divine Spirit to human existence is intended.... Christ died in the human sphere but was made alive and continues alive in the sphere of the Spirit" (First Peter, p.139). [↔]

C. E. B. Cranfield, The First Epistle of Peter, London: S.C.M. Press, 1950, p.84. [↔]

The verb is the same in Greek. [↔]

E.g. "your spirit" (Phil. 4:23), "the spirits of just men" (Heb. 12:23). [↔]

In Matt. 14:26, Lk 24:37 and Lk 24:39, it probably means "ghost". [↔]

E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1947, p. 199. Also J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, p.154. [↔]

J. N. D. Kelly, p.105. [↔]

So E. Best (with some hesitation), J. N. D. Kelly, J. A. Fitzmyer (all already cited). Also, e.g., K. S. Wuest, *First Peter in the Greek New Testament*, Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1947, p.100; A. M. Stibbs & A. F. Walls, *The First Epistle General of Peter*, London: Tyndale, 1959, p.145; W. J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits*, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965; D. H. Wheaton, "I Peter", in *The New Bible Commentary*, 1977, p.1244; etc. [↔]

The incident is that originally recounted in Genesis 6:1-4, where the "sons of God" are undoubtedly angels, not humans (compare Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7; commentaries on Genesis by D. Kidner [1967], G. von Rad [1972], etc.). The very brief Genesis account became the basis for much speculation in Jewish literature prior to, and contemporary with, the New Testament (e.g. Jubilees 5, 10; Apocalypse of Baruch 61; Testaments of Reuben and Naphtali; I and II Enoch). Most notably, I Enoch elaborates at length on the lust and disobedience of these angels: they "transgressed the Word of the Lord" (I Enoch 106; compare I Pet 3:20). It tells of their imprisonment in fiery darkness and maintains Enoch proclaimed their doom to them (I En. 12, etc.). Yes, the word "spirits" is used of them (I En. 12, Jubilees 5). I Enoch traces all wickedness in the world to these fallen angels. Of course Peter and Jude are not necessarily taking all of this on board! The Bible is far more reticent. However, these spirits are clearly regarded as notoriously antagonistic to God, and it was because their story was so well known, that Peter did not need to explain himself more fully. [↔]

So A. M. Stibbs, J. A. Fitzmyer, J. N. D. Kelly. [↔]

Source: [Afterlife](#)