APPENDIX

CHRIST PREACHING THROUGH NOAH: 1 PETER 3:19–20 IN THE LIGHT OF DOMINANT THEMES IN JEWISH LITERATURE

Near the end of chapter 3 in this first letter, Peter writes,

18 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; 19 in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, 20 who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

The difficulties of this passage have given rise to a number of interpretations, especially of the meaning of verse 19, in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison.

The issues where commentators differ, as already stated on pp. 165f., are at least these:

1. Who are the spirits in prison?
   — unbelievers who have died?
   — Old Testament believers who have died?
   — fallen angels?

2. What did Christ preach?
   — second chance for repentance?
   — completion of redemptive work?
   — final condemnation?

3. When did he preach?
   — in the days of Noah?
   — between his death and resurrection?
   — after his resurrection?

Among all the possible answers to those questions, the following five views have been the most commonly held (the italicized words indicate the identity of ‘the spirits in prison’ in each view):

View 1: When Noah was building the ark, Christ ‘in spirit’ was in Noah preaching repentance and righteousness through him to unbelievers who were on the earth then but are now ‘spirits in prison’ (people in hell).

View 2: After Christ died, he went and preached to people in hell, offering them a second chance of salvation.

View 3: After Christ died, he went and preached to people in hell, proclaiming to them that he had triumphed over them and their condemnation was final.
View 4: After Christ died, he proclaimed release to people who had repented just before they died in the flood, and led them out of their imprisonment (in Purgatory) into heaven.

View 5: After Christ died (or: after he rose but before he ascended into heaven), he travelled to hell and proclaimed triumph over the fallen angels who had sinned by marrying human women before the flood.

There are other views than these but they are usually different combinations of the details listed above (offering salvation to unbelieving people and angels, or proclaiming triumph over sinners and complete redemption to believers, etc.). For our purposes this list is sufficient.

The following discussion will argue for View 1 (Christ preaching through Noah when the ark was being built), a view which has received the support of very few commentators, and which is frequently dismissed in discussions of this passage because Augustine, who first proposed it, took in prison to refer to ‘the darkness of ignorance’ in which unbelievers lived—obviously a metaphorical (or ‘allegorical’, to use Dalton’s term) sense of ‘prison’ not intended by Peter. But this sense of ‘in prison’ is by no means essential to the view that Christ was preaching at the time of Noah, and a more common understanding (‘spirits in hell’) is certainly consistent with it (see below). The other common objection to this view is that it has no clear relationship to the context, but it will be argued that on closer inspection the context lends more support to this view than perhaps to any of the others.

Although most of the views mentioned above depend on backgrounds familiar to readers of the Bible generally, a word of explanation should perhaps be given regarding View 5. This view argues that certain extra-biblical Jewish traditions, especially the tradition in 1 Enoch about Enoch going and proclaiming a message of condemnation to disobedient angels, were well known to Peter’s readers. Therefore, when Peter said that Christ went and preached to the ‘spirits in prison’, his readers would immediately have recognized the allusion to 1 Enoch and known that Peter was portraying Christ as a ‘second Enoch’ who in a far greater way ‘went and proclaimed’ his victory over fallen angels, and announced to them, as had Enoch long before, that they were eternally condemned for their sin. The fact that they ‘formerly disobeyed’ is then understood to refer to the sin of angels who married human wives in Genesis 6:2, 4, a story well-attested in extra-biblical literature.

Dalton has performed a valuable service in his careful tracing of the history of different views, and in his gracious evaluation of those views which he rejects. Because his extensive arguments have convinced many scholars from a wide spectrum of theological positions, somewhat more interaction in the subsequent discussion will be with Dalton’s argument.

I shall consider the three questions mentioned above in the order given:

I. Who are the spirits in prison?
II. What did Christ preach?
III. When did he preach?

I. WHO ARE THE ‘SPIRITS IN PRISON’?

a. The meaning of ‘spirit’ (pneuma)
1. General meaning: angels or human spirits?

If the phrase ‘the spirits in prison’ appeared in the text without any further specification, it could refer either to human or to angelic spirits, depending on the larger context. This is because the word *spirits* (*pneumata*, plural, or *pneuma*, singular) both in the Bible and in extra-biblical literature can be used to refer to human spirits or to angels (or demons).

Examples of the word used to refer to a human spirit are found, for example, in Ecclesiastes 12:7 (‘and the spirit returns to God who gave it’ is a description of death; the LXX has *pneuma* here); Matt. 27:50 (Jesus ‘yielded up his spirit’); Luke 23:46 (‘Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!’); John 19:30 (Jesus ‘bowed his head and gave up his spirit’); Acts 7:59 (as Stephen was dying he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’); 1 Cor. 5:5; 7:34; 14:14; Heb. 12:23; Jas 2:26; cf. Num. 16:22; Josephus, *War* 7.185; etc.

Examples of the meaning ‘angel’ (or ‘evil angel, demon’) are found in Matthew 8:16 (‘he cast out the spirits with a word’); 10:1 (‘he gave them authority over unclean spirits’); 12:43, 45; Mark 1:23; Luke 10:20; Acts 23:8; etc.

2. Does pneuma, ‘spirit’, have a special meaning when used ‘absolutely’?

Those who understand the spirits in prison to be fallen angels (View 5 above) have claimed that the word ‘spirit’ is never used ‘absolutely’ (or without a ‘defining genitive phrase’) to refer to human spirits (the objection apparently originated with Selwyn, p. 199, and is repeated by Dalton, p. 147, and France, p. 269). Those who make this objection claim that *pneuma* is used ‘absolutely’ to refer to good or evil angelic spirits.

However, this is simply one example of an error in exegetical method which occurs frequently in Selwyn’s commentary—that of drawing conclusions about the meaning of words or phrases from insufficient data or from artificially created distinctions in style which really have no significant influence on the meanings of the words used. In this case, the objection is invalid for three reasons:

(a) *Pneuma* is used ‘without a defining genitive’ to refer to a ‘departed’ human spirit (the spirit which had left Abel after Cain killed him) in 1 Enoch 22:6 and again in 22:7; another example is found in 1 Enoch 20:6 (Gk. text). These examples are significant because Selwyn, Dalton, and France all emphasize 1 Enoch as the supposed background for this passage in 1 Peter. Other examples of *pneuma* used ‘absolutely’ of a human spirit are Ecclesiastes 12:7; Matthew 27:50 (Gk. text); John 19:30 (Gk. text).

(b) But the larger issue is not whether we can find examples of *pneuma* used without a ‘defining genitive’ (‘of men’, etc.) to refer to human spirits, for that is simply an artificial distinction. The real issue is whether the context specifies more clearly what type of spirit is meant. If by *pneuma* used ‘absolutely’ Selwyn and Dalton mean *pneuma* used with no further specification or definition from context, then it should be pointed out that no examples of *pneuma* meaning ‘angelic spirits’ have been found without further definition from context, either.

In fact, the three examples of an ‘absolute’ use cited by Dalton, p. 147—Matthew 8:16; 12:45; Luke 10:20—are all further defined by the immediate context: Matthew 8:16 mentions people who were ‘demon possessed’ in the previous phrase; Matthew 12:45 is in a paragraph where the subject had been defined as ‘an unclean spirit’ in verse 43; Luke 10:20 is in response to verse 17, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!’ These three are not instances showing that *pneuma* generally, without other indications
from context, means ‘evil spirits’—for all these instances have prior contextual specification.

But this is simply because of an obvious linguistic fact: *pneuma* has a range of meanings, and can refer to human spirits, to angelic spirits, to God’s Holy Spirit, etc. Because of this, there will always be a further specification of the type of spirit intended in context if the author wishes to communicate to the reader the sense in which he is using the term.

(c) Thirdly, 1 Peter 3:19 is not itself an example of *pneuma* used without further definition from its context, for the sentence itself defines further the kind of ‘spirits’ intended. They are spirits ‘in prison’ who ‘disobeyed in the days of Noah’ and who did so ‘while the patience of God was waiting during the building of the ark’.

3. ‘Spirits’ in 1 Enoch

It has been argued that for Peter’s readers the phrase ‘spirits in prison’ would automatically call to mind the use of *pneuma* in 1 Enoch to refer to ‘angels who sinned and were consigned to a place of punishment awaiting final judgment’ (Dalton, pp. 166–168). But even if one grants for the sake of argument that all of Peter’s readers had just finished reading 1 Enoch the night before Peter’s letter arrived, it does not follow that ‘spirits in prison’ would mean ‘fallen angels’ to Peter or to his readers.

The extant Greek sections of 1 Enoch use *pneuma* thirty-seven times. Of these thirty-seven times, the word is used twenty times to refer to angelic or demonic spirits. But it is used seventeen times to refer to human spirits (1 Enoch 9:10; 20:3, 6 [twice]; 22:3, 6, 7, 9 [twice], 11 [twice], 12, 13 [twice]; 98:3, 10; 103:4). We are therefore not justified in drawing from this data any firm conclusion about what Peter’s readers would have thought the phrase ‘spirits in prison’ meant.

Moreover, in some instances the human spirits of those who have died are seen to be bound or confined in a place of waiting until they face the final judgment (1 Enoch 22:3–13, which uses *pneuma* ten times in this sense; cf. 98:3), and could readily be said to be ‘in prison’.

4. Are the spirits ‘in prison’ now, or when Christ preached to them?

Although it might appear on an initial reading that ‘spirits in prison’ must refer to those who were incarcerated at the time the preaching took place, this is not necessarily the case. Verse nineteen could equally well be understood to mean ‘he preached to the spirits who are now in prison’, i.e. those who are spirits in hell at the time Peter is writing but who were formerly human beings on earth at the time of the flood. (NASB translates, ‘He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark.’) It is quite natural to speak in terms of a person’s present status even when describing a past action which occurred when the person did not have that status. For example, it would be perfectly correct to say, ‘Queen Elizabeth was born in 1926,’ even though she did not become Queen until long after 1926.

In fact, the great majority of commentators, no matter what view they take of 3:19–20, interpret 4:6 in similar fashion, understanding it to mean that the gospel was preached
to those who, at the time of writing, were now dead. It was declared to them in order that they might be saved from final judgment, even though they would not be spared dying. So 'the gospel was preached to the dead' in 4:6 means that the gospel was preached to 'those who are now dead' (at the time Peter is writing) even though they were alive on earth at the time the gospel was preached to them (see Commentary, pp. 178ff.). Therefore, in understanding 1 Peter 3:19–20, the possibility must be left open that 'he preached to the spirits in prison' means 'he preached to those who are now spirits in hell but who at the time of the preaching were human beings living on the earth'.

5. Conclusion regarding the phrase ‘spirits in prison’

We must conclude that by itself the phrase ‘the spirits in prison’ could refer either to human or to angelic spirits, and the larger context must be decisive. The term ‘spirit’ is used frequently to refer both to human spirits and to angelic spirits. Since the evidence from 1 Enoch is ambiguous, no clear conclusion can be drawn from it. Furthermore, the brief phrase ‘spirits in prison’ could mean either ‘spirits who were in hell when Christ preached to them’ or ‘those who are now spirits in hell but who at the time of Christ’s preaching were people on earth’. Thus, the phrase itself is not clear apart from further definition by its larger context. It is to an examination of this context that we now turn.

b. Evidence from four other defining phrases

The phrase ‘the spirits in prison’ does not stand by itself but is followed by four additional defining phrases:

- who formerly did not obey
- (better: ‘disobeyed’, see pp. 112f. and 167)
- in the days of Noah
- when God’s patience waited
- during the building of the ark

These four phrases, upon examination, all indicate that the ‘spirits in prison’ must be understood to be human spirits, not angelic spirits. This can be seen by an investigation of the biblical and extra-biblical evidence pertaining to these phrases.

1. Evidence for angelic disobedience

a. The sons of God in Genesis 6:2, 4

Those who favour View 5 above (the spirits in prison as fallen angels) point to the many places in extra-biblical Jewish literature where the ‘sons of God’ who married ‘the daughters of men’ in Genesis 6:2, 4 and begot children by them, are understood to be sinful angels who married human women. This understanding of Genesis 6 is frequent in extra-biblical literature, being attested in at least the following nine texts: Josephus, *Ant.* 1:73; Philo, *On the Giants* 6; *Q.Gen.* 1.92; CD 2.18; 1 Enoch 6.2, 6; 106.13–14; Jubilees 5.1; 10.1–6; 2 Baruch 56.12–15.

However, it is often not appreciated that such an interpretation of Genesis 6 is far
from uniform in Jewish tradition. The following list shows nine other texts where non-angelic interpretations are held:

While Philo himself calls these ‘sons of God’ angels in one place, he later calls them ‘good and excellent men’ (Q.Gen. 1–92). Moreover, the Targums and the Rabbinic literature are unanimous in viewing the ‘sons of God’ as human beings. Targum Onkelos on Genesis 6:2 and 4 reads ‘sons of princes’ (or great men, *rbrby*), and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan has the same. Targum Neofiti has ‘sons of the Judges’ (*dyyny*) in both verses.

Tosefta, *Sotah* 3.9a interprets ‘sons of God’ as men of the generation of the flood. In the Midrash Rabbah, they are understood as ‘sons of judges’ (*dyyn*) and as ‘leaders’ (Gen.R. 26.5 on Gen. 6:2, quoting Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, c. AD 140), or as the generation of men at the time of the flood (Num.R. 9.24, on 5:27). The Babylonian Talmud at *b.Sanh.* 108a understands them as men at the time of the flood. Symmachus translates Genesis 6:2 as ‘the sons of the rulers’ (*tön dynasteuontôn*).

Although this material is admittedly somewhat later than 1 Enoch and Jubilees, which are both to be dated in the second century BC, the citations from Philo and the Targums are certainly not irrelevant for New Testament exegesis—indeed, the Rabbinic material generally represents a stream of Jewish tradition which is certainly relevant as a background for New Testament studies. And the citations in this second group are diverse and frequent enough to give strong indication of the existence of a ‘non-angelic’ view of the ‘sons of God’ in Judaism, especially more orthodox Judaism, before or during the time of the New Testament.

Our understanding of this point is not crucial, for one could be convinced that Peter’s readers all thought that Genesis 6:2, 4 referred to fallen angels who took human wives and still hold that 1 Peter 3:19–20 spoke of human beings who disobeyed during the building of the ark. (Peter does not, of course, say ‘he preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed by marrying human women’ but rather ‘spirits … who disobeyed when the ark was being built’.) But this evidence is none the less helpful in showing that one cannot simply assume that the readers of 1 Peter had an ‘angelic’ interpretation of Genesis 6:2, 4 in their minds. Indeed, Peter would not have assumed an ‘angelic’ interpretation in his readers’ minds either, for no uniform interpretation of this passage can be demonstrated for the first century AD.

b. Other references to angelic disobedience

Even if there is no uniform interpretation of Genesis 6:2, 4 as involving the sin of angels, is there none the less other evidence in Jewish literature showing a common tradition of interpretation in which angels are said to have sinned ‘in the days of Noah’ or ‘when God’s patience waited’ or ‘during the building of the ark’?

Something near to this idea is found in Jubilees 10:4–5, where Noah, speaking of evil spirits (who are called ‘Watchers’), says to God, ‘You know what your Watchers … did in my days, and also these spirits who are alive. Shut them up and take them to the place of judgment.’

Then with reference to the reason for the flood, the Testament of Naphtali says that ‘the Watchers departed from nature’s order; the Lord pronounced a curse on them at the flood. On their account he ordered that the earth be without dweller or produce’ (*T.Naph.* 3:5). Here the flood is specifically said to have been caused by the sin of angels. In
addition, 1 Enoch 67:8–13 says that the waters of the flood will first become hot—to punish sinful angels—and then become cold—to punish sinful men.

However, Jewish tradition does not uniformly link the sin of angels with the flood. This sin is more frequently put in the days of Enoch and Methuselah, two and three generations before Noah (Jubilees 4:22, cf. 4:20, 20:8), or in the time of Jared, four generations before Noah (1 Enoch 6:6 [Greek text]; 106:13). While a difference of two to four generations may seem insignificant to the modern reader who may have only a vague idea of the genealogy leading to the birth of Noah, it would certainly matter to the authors or readers of these writings, for they go into great detail when narrating the events of the lives of people like Enoch, his son Methuselah, his grandson Lamech, and his great grandson Noah.

More significantly, even in these three texts which make a connection between angelic sin and the flood, there is no mention of two elements which Peter specifically mentions—God patiently waiting (for repentance), and the disobedience which occurred ‘during the building of the ark’.

One final strand of evidence for the idea of angelic sin as a background to 1 Peter 3:19 might be found within the New Testament itself: it might be argued that 2 Peter 2:4–5 (and perhaps Jude 6) connects the sin of angels and consequent judgment with Noah and the flood, or perhaps with the sin concerning ‘the daughters of men’ in Gen. 6:2, 4.

However, this conclusion cannot be sustained after a closer look at 2 Peter 2:4–7, for there in the same sentence Peter mentions not only angelic sin and the flood, but also ‘the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah’ and the rescue of Lot (vv. 6–7). Yet Peter hardly thinks the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah happened at the same time as the flood! This means that, far from seeing events such as angelic sin and the flood as contemporaneous, he is simply picking out three separate examples of sin and judgment from the Old Testament to emphasize that judgment on sin will come and that God will save the righteous from it (vv. 9–10).

Jude 6 is even less persuasive. It mentions angelic sin and judgment on angels, but does not specify the sin except for a general statement that angels ‘did not keep their own position’ (a probable reference to rebellion against God’s authority). And there is no connection with the time of the flood but rather the following sequence:

v. 5 exodus from Egypt; judgment on unbelievers (Exod. 14; Num. 14)
v. 6 sin of angels; judgment
v. 7 Sodom and Gomorrah; judgment (Gen. 19).

No chronological connection is implied; Jude, like Peter, simply selects three noteworthy examples of judgment from the Old Testament. In neither text is there an implication of angelic sin at the time of the flood, or of angelic sin with human women.

Nevertheless, if there were no other references indicating a tradition of human disobedience just before the flood, these three pseudepigraphal texts which briefly mention angelic disobedience in a general way, though not precisely parallel to Peter’s statement about the spirits in prison, might still be thought to provide a helpful background against which Peter’s readers would have understood 1 Peter 3:18–20. However, before such a conclusion is drawn, it is necessary to examine the evidence for a tradition of human, not angelic, disobedience ‘during the building of the ark’.
2. Evidence for human disobedience

a. Who disobeyed ‘during the building of the ark’?

(i) Old Testament evidence
The Old Testament narrative indicates that there were human beings who disobeyed God ‘when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark’, but there is no indication of angelic disobedience during that time (cf. Gen. 6:5–7, 12–13).

Though there are different views on whether Genesis 6:1–4 refers to the sin of angels when it talks about the ‘sons of God’ (see above), there can be no dispute that the entire section immediately preceding the command to build the ark (Gen. 6:5–13) clearly emphasizes human sin, and human sin alone, as the reason God brings the flood upon the earth. God is not sorry that he has made angels, but that he made man (v. 6). He does not decide to blot out fallen angels, but man (vv. 6, 13); it is not the violence and corruption of angels which arouses his anger, but the violence and corruption of man (vv. 5, 11, 12, 13).

At this point it could be objected that human disobedience is sometimes seen as having been caused by prior angelic disobedience, and that therefore the two are closely connected. While this connection is made in some extra-biblical literature, it is certainly not a uniform interpretation, and it is clearly not a connection made in the biblical text itself. In addition, 1 Peter 3 speaks not of those who disobeyed long before the flood (as angels did), but of those who disobeyed precisely when the ark was being built.

(ii) New Testament evidence
In the New Testament, 2 Peter 2:5 mentions Noah as a ‘herald of righteousness’ in the midst of ‘the world of the ungodly’. Similarly, in Matthew 24:37–39 and Luke 17:26–27 Jesus clearly emphasizes human disregard of impending judgment in the days of Noah. Furthermore, he says that a similar situation will occur again: ‘As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man …’ (Matt. 24:37). In this context, the warning about the need for human watchfulness, and the parallels with activity in the days of Noah, mean that human disobedience in the days of Noah is clearly in view. Once again, angelic disobedience is never specifically connected with the judgment of the flood itself.

(iii) Extra-biblical evidence
The Sibylline Oracles, 1.171–172, say that the people who heard Noah’s exhortations to repentance from their wicked life mocked him: ‘When they heard him they sneered at him, each one, calling him demented, a man gone mad’ (this mocking occurs in the middle of Noah’s sermon about their sins, after the ark has been built: note lines 190–191, 205). Similarly, the Babylonian Talmud at b.Sanh. 108b says that those watching Noah ‘derided him’, saying, ‘Old man, what is this ark for?’ Genesis Rabbah 30.7 (on 6:9) says that Noah was mocked by those who watched him build the ark. They despised him and called him ‘contemptible old man’. Moreover, when Noah cut down trees to build the ark and told them a flood was coming they responded, ‘It will come only on your father’s house.’ In Ecclesiastes Rabbah on 9:14 (sec. 1), when Noah warns the people, ‘Tomorrow a flood will come, so repent’, they refuse to listen and mock him, ‘If punishments begin they will begin with your house’. These specific citations quite clearly speak of human disobedience ‘while the ark was being built’, and should be seen in
contrast to the total absence of references to angelic sin during the building of the ark.

Furthermore, Jewish literature frequently mentions human, not angelic sin, as the reason why God brought the flood on the earth. The texts are too numerous to cite here but it is sufficient to give the references: Targums Onkelos, Pseudo-Jonathan, Neofiti, and the Fragmentary Targum on Genesis 6:5 and 6:11–13; Gen.R. 26.5 (on 6:2); 26.7 (on 6:4); 28:8 (on 6:7); 31.1–5 (on 6:13); 31.6 (on 6:13); Eccl.R. on 2:23, sec.1; Num.R. 5.3 (on 4:18); 9.18 (on 5:21); 9.24 (on 5:27); b.R.H. 123; b.Sanh. 108a; Philo, Q.Gen. 1.99, 100; 2.13; Abr. 40–41; Josephus, Ant. 1.74–75, 98; CD 2.20–21; 1 Enoch 65.6, 10–11; 67.8–10; 2 Enoch 70.4–8; 3 Enoch 4.3; Jubilees 5.2–4, 7–9; Apocalypse of Adam 3.3; Pseudo-Philo, Biblical Antiquities, 3.2, 6; Sib. Or. 1.130–131, 150–179; 3 Maccabees 2:4. And the phrase ‘the generation of the flood’ is used frequently in Rabbinic writings as a paradigm of extreme human wickedness: Mishnah, Sanhedrin 10:3; Eccl.R. on 2:23, sec.1; SongR. on 1:4, sec.3; Num.R. 9.18 (on 5:21); 14.6 (on 7:54); 20.2 (on 22:2), etc.

All of these texts (forty-five listed here, from every strand of Jewish tradition) must be seen in contrast to the slight evidence of a tradition of angelic sin at this time: one text (Jubilee 10:4–5) which mentions angelic sin in Noah’s day and two (T.Naph. 3:5; 1 Enoch 67:8–13) which say angels were punished at the flood (one of which, T.Naph. 3:5, also says the earth was made ‘without dweller or produce’ because of angels’ sin). Not one text from any strand of Jewish tradition mentions angels disobeying ‘during the building of the ark’. The overwhelming weight of extra-biblical tradition—as well as the biblical evidence itself—emphasizes human sinners, not angels, as the most likely to be meant by Peter’s phrases, *who formerly [disobeyed] … in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark.*

b. For whom was the patience of God waiting?

That the ‘spirits in prison’ are further stated to be those *who … [disobeyed] when God’s patience waited,* strongly suggests that God was waiting for them to repent, otherwise there would be no point in Peter’s mentioning God’s patience. Furthermore, the word *apekdechomai,* ‘waiting’, has the nuance of hopeful or expectant waiting for something to happen.

The ‘angelic’ interpretation of this passage does not seem appropriate here, because neither the Old nor New Testaments teach that fallen angels ever have a chance to repent (cf. 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). But if Peter is referring to human beings who disobeyed, the statement is entirely consistent with repeated instances, throughout the Bible, of God’s patient waiting for repentance before bringing judgment (Gen. 6:3; Ps. 103:7–12; 106:43–46; Hos. 11:8–9).

In extra-biblical Jewish literature also, God’s patience is specifically connected with the years leading up to the flood. Targum Neofiti on Genesis 6:3 reports God saying to Noah, ‘Behold I have given you 120 years, hoping that they might do repentance.’ The same idea is repeated in Targum Onkelos, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, and the Fragmentary Targum on Genesis 6:3. Mekilta, Shirata 5:38–39 (on Exod. 15:5–6) says that God gave an extension of time ‘to the generation of the flood that they might repent’. The Mishnah (Aboth 5.2) says that all the generations from Adam to Noah continued to provoke God, thus making known how ‘long-suffering’ God is, until he finally brought upon them the water of the flood. Similar statements about God’s waiting for men to
repent are found in Gen.R. 32.7 (on 7:10); Num.R. 14.6 (on 7:54). And Philo (Q.Gen. 2.13 on Gen. 7:4, 10), in discussing the delay of the flood, says that God ‘grants repentance of sins … in order that when they see the ark … they may believe the announcing (to kerygmati) of the flood … and that they may turn back from impiety’.

Thus, with respect to the background for Peter’s phrase when God’s patience waited, the extra-biblical literature gives frequent and diverse witness to God’s waiting for human repentance, but it is entirely silent regarding any waiting for angelic repentance—something the New Testament even seems to deny as a possibility (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6).

c. Noah as a preacher to his generation

There remains one further strand of extra-biblical Jewish tradition relevant to the background of biblical interpretation against which Peter was writing his letter. This concerns a widespread testimony to Noah’s efforts as a ‘preacher of righteousness’. Of course, this evidence is of primary value merely to confirm the conclusions of the two previous sections that (a) it was humans who were thought to be sinning at that time, for they are the ones Noah tells to repent, and that (b) God’s patience is waiting for the repentance of the human beings to whom Noah preaches. But the fact that Noah is frequently said to be a ‘preacher’ of repentance and righteousness to those around him during the building of the ark should at least prompt us to consider the possibility that when Peter speaks of preaching ‘to the spirits in prison, who formerly disobeyed … during the building of the ark’, he is in some way alluding to the preaching activity of Noah, familiar to his readers from Jewish tradition.

What is interesting is the frequency with which Noah is called a ‘preacher’ or ‘herald’ using the word keryx and related words, all of which are cognate to keryssō in 1 Peter 3:19 (Christ ‘preached’ to the spirits in prison). For example, in the early material from the Sibylline Oracles, Book 1, we find that lines 150–198 contain two long speeches by Noah calling for repentance from those around him and warning that the flood was coming. In fact, Sib. Or. 1.128–129 records God as commanding Noah, ‘Proclaim repentance to all the peoples … so that all might be saved.’ The verb for ‘proclaim’ is keryssō, the same verb used in 1 Peter 3:19.

Philo’s use of the cognate noun kerygma to refer to warnings about the flood has just been cited (see above). Josephus does not use this term of Noah, but he says that Noah ‘urged them to come to a better frame of mind and amend their ways’ (Ant. 1.74, referring to human sinners).

In connection with Noah’s preaching, Gen.R. 30.7 (on 6:9) quotes Rabbi Abba (3rd century AD?) as saying, ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, said, “One herald arose for me in the generation of the flood, and this was Noah.” ’ (The word for ‘herald’ used here is kārōz, an Aramaic loanword from Gk. keryx, cognate to keryssō in 1 Pet. 3:19; cf. BDB, p. 1097.) Other examples of Noah’s preaching are found in Eccl.R. on 9:14, sec. 1; b.Sanh. 108a, 108b.

Moreover, in early Christian literature we read, ‘Noah preached repentance and those who obeyed were saved’ (1 Clement 7.6), and that Noah proclaimed a ‘new beginning to the world’ (1 Clement 9.4). In both cases Clement (writing in AD 95) uses keryssō to speak of Noah’s preaching activity.

It is also relevant here to notice that Noah is called a preacher, ‘herald [or, keryx] of
righteousness’ in 2 Peter 2:5.
Thus, there is a widespread Jewish and early Christian tradition about Noah’s activity as a preacher to those around him before the flood. And Peter’s verb kēryssō and its cognates are used with surprising frequency in these traditions, even once by Peter himself.

3. Conclusion from a survey of background material

When Peter defined the ‘spirits in prison’ as those ‘who disobeyed in the days of Noah when God’s patience waited during the building of the ark’, it is very unlikely that he would have expected his readers to identify them as disobedient angels. There is no evidence in biblical or extra-biblical literature which suggests that disobedient angels fit these characteristics.

Our conclusion is that the ‘spirits in prison’ are the human beings who disobeyed at the time Noah was building the ark and who were destroyed in the flood. This conclusion can be avoided only by disregarding the crucial defining phrases in 1 Peter 3:20.

c. Additional note: can we assume that Peter’s readers knew 1 Enoch?

There is one further consideration which may appropriately be mentioned here. Those who take the ‘spirits in prison’ to be fallen angels must argue that 1 Enoch, the primary location of a detailed story about angelic sin and subsequent imprisonment, was widely known in the ancient world, so widely known that Peter could allude to a section of 1 Enoch without mentioning the work by name and still assume (if he wished to communicate effectively) that all his readers scattered throughout four provinces in Asia Minor would understand the allusion and interpret his sentence correctly in light of that allusion. (I have argued above that even if 1 Enoch were that widely known, readers would not automatically think of angels when they read the phrase ‘spirits in prison’. As we saw, even in 1 Enoch there are human as well as angelic spirits imprisoned and waiting judgment, and there is human as well as angelic disobedience, with the human sin coming nearer the time when God’s patience was waiting during the building of the ark. Nevertheless, this question is still relevant, since it speaks to a major part of Dalton’s argument.)

It seems that we must entertain serious doubts about whether 1 Enoch was that widely known, and whether Peter would have been justified in making such an allusion. It is one thing to agree that Jude 14–15 quotes 1 Enoch by name and does so in a way in which even readers who have never heard of 1 Enoch can still understand the force of what Jude is saying. It is quite another thing to say that Peter would allude to 1 Enoch without mentioning it by name, and would do so in such a way that readers who were not familiar with 1 Enoch would be completely unable to understand Peter’s meaning. Yet this is what advocates of the ‘preaching to fallen angels’ view must claim.

Against this claim must be put the fact that 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. In a recent introduction to 1 Enoch, E. Isaac writes:

Information regarding the usage and importance of the work in the Jewish and Christian
communities, other than the Ethiopian Church, is sparse … It seems clear, nonetheless, that 1 Enoch was well known to many Jews, particularly the Essenes, and early Christians, notably the author of Jude.

Yet this statement says nothing about whether it was known at all among Gentiles in Asia Minor—indeed, it implies that we have no positive evidence which would indicate such knowledge. 1 Enoch is cited or alluded to by several early Christian writers from the second century AD onward, but once again that gives 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 this book. Yet if this crucial fact must simply be assumed rather than demonstrated by those advocating the view that Christ preached to fallen angels, then it must be seen as an additional fundamental weakness in the position.

Furthermore, a hermeneutical and to some extent theological question arises for the modern interpreter: 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 (not the historical origin, but the meaning) of a specific passage? Is there any other text in the New Testament where readers simply would not have understood the meaning of the passage unless they were familiar with some extra-biblical text? I, at least, am unaware of one.

The reason this is seldom if ever the case is not far to seek: the New Testament writers were writing in order to communicate clearly with wide audiences of diverse backgrounds. In such a situation, they could of course assume knowledge of the Old Testament, for that was the ‘Bible’ for all Christians. But other than that, there was no one piece of literature which they could assume to be familiar to all their readers. And if they could not assume that, then it would seem to be irresponsible if they had ever written something which required knowledge of another piece of literature in order to be understood.

Of course, for the modern interpreter extra-biblical literature frequently provides information which gives more precise understanding of specific details about the force of a passage, and in many passages (as in this one) it can provide additional certainty about the correctness of an interpretation. But advocates of the ‘fallen angels’ view are claiming more than either of those things: they are claiming that a knowledge of the content of specific parts of 1 Enoch is necessary today (and, by implication, was necessary for the original readers) if one is to come anywhere near a correct understanding of the force of the passage.

On the other hand, and again in favour of the ‘human disobedience’ view, we must consider the fact that the New Testament authors regularly assume a knowledge of the Old Testament on the part of their readers. In the case of 1 Peter 3:19–20 that means that the Old Testament background must be given greater weight in evaluation of the reader’s understanding than any background derived from extra-biblical literature. And for readers with only the background of the Old Testament, a reference to disobedience when God’s patience waited, during the building of the ark would not be ambiguous, needing to be explained by acquaintance with extra-biblical literature. The phrases would be understandable and they would point unmistakably toward human beings who sinned during the time of Noah.

Who then are the ‘spirits in prison’? A vast preponderance of biblical and extra-
biblical literature seems to require the conclusion that they were not sinful angels but human beings who sinned while Noah was building the ark.

II. WHAT DID CHRIST PROCLAIM?

The citations regarding Noah’s preaching which were quoted in the previous section indicated a frequent use of Peter’s verb kēryssō in connection with Noah’s preaching which called people to repentance and faith. This is not a necessary meaning of kēryssō, for the word simply means ‘to proclaim’, and the specific message proclaimed must be understood from other elements in the context. However, it must be noted that the verb is very commonly used in the New Testament and the LXX to refer to evangelistic preaching—preaching the gospel of Christ, or calling people to repentance and faith. Moreover, Peter’s use of the related noun (kēryx) in 2 Peter 2:5 must be taken as very significant. Whether one understands this verse to mean that Noah preached righteousness, or that Noah was a righteous preacher (a less likely but grammatically possible view), in either case it is Noah’s preaching of repentance to those around him which is in view. Furthermore, it was noted earlier that the phrase ‘when God’s patience waited’, in connection with ‘who formerly disobeyed’, strongly suggests that this preaching calls for repentance on the part of those who are disobeying—otherwise the mention of the patience of God ‘expectantly or eagerly waiting’ would be without point.

If only a proclamation of condemnation were in view (as Dalton argues), Peter would have had to make that clear by further specifying it within the context. The contextual markers suggesting a preaching of repentance are too strong on the other side. Therefore, if Peter had wanted to state something like View 3 (Christ proclaimed final condemnation to people in hell) or View 5 (Christ proclaimed final condemnation to angels in hell), he would have needed to say something like ‘proclaimed condemnation’ (katakrima) or ‘proclaimed judgment’ (krisin), otherwise his meaning would not have been understood by his readers.

Furthermore, if the preaching of condemnation is meant, it is difficult to explain in a satisfactory way why final condemnation was proclaimed only to these specific sinners (or fallen angels) rather than to all who were in hell. Why were only those who disobeyed during the building of the ark singled out? Of course they are viewed, both in biblical and extra-biblical literature, as especially ungodly sinners, yet this still does not explain why they alone receive this decisive condemnation at the time of the turning-point of all history, the death and resurrection of Christ.

It could be replied that they are mentioned by Peter as representative of all fallen angels (or all sinners). But if Peter had meant ‘all’, why did he just mention some? To know that he intended these to be representative of ‘all’, the reader would need some indication such as ‘to all those like the spirits in prison who disobeyed when … (etc.)’ or ‘to the spirits in prison who formerly disobeyed … and to all like them who have sinned … (etc.)’. But since there is no such indication, it is better to understand Christ’s preaching to be only to those specifically mentioned.

View 4, which holds that Christ proclaimed the completion of redemption to Old Testament believers, also does not do justice to the context. The mention of ‘prison’ and disobedience, as well as the waiting of the patience of God, and the comment that only eight were saved, all point to preaching directed to sinners who need repentance, not to
righteous saints waiting to hear a glad cry of victory. Once again, with so many contextual indicators pointing in the other direction, had Peter meant that the preaching proclaimed Christ’s victory, he would have had to specify the fact by writing ‘proclaim victory’ (*nikos* or some similar term); in the absence of such specification Peter’s readers would not have inferred that sense for ‘preached’. Furthermore, there is again no convincing reason why the proclamation of the completion of redemption should be made only to those spirits who disobeyed during the building of the ark, instead of to all Old Testament believers. Thus, the content of the proclamation is best understood to be a proclamation to sinners of their need to repent and trust in God.

This meaning is most suitable to the larger context of 1 Peter 3 as well. The entire section from 2:11 up to this point has been concerned with living as Christians in the midst of an unbelieving world, and Peter has frequently called attention to the need for a good witness to unbelievers who are hostile toward his Christian readers (see 2:12, 15; 3:1–2, 15–16). Especially relevant is the call to witness in 3:15–16 (‘be ready always to give an answer’, AV) which provides the immediately preceding context to 3:19–20.

**III. WHEN DID CHRIST PREACH?**

The previous discussion has concluded that the spirits in prison are people who disobeyed during the time of Noah, and that the preaching directed to them called them to repentance. These conclusions, if correct, rule out Views 3, 4, and 5, listed at the beginning of this discussion. However, they would nevertheless be consistent with both View 1 (Christ preached through Noah at the time the ark was being built) and View 2 (Christ preached between his death and resurrection, giving those who disobeyed before the flood a second chance for salvation). A decision in favour of one of these views can be taken if it is possible to establish the time at which the preaching took place.

*a. The connection between verse 18 and verse 19*

The time of Christ’s preaching in verse 19 can only be determined after understanding the last phrase of verse 18, *being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit*, and, in the light of that, the sense of *in which* (*en ho*) at the beginning of verse 19.

*Being put to death in the flesh* indicates the fact that Jesus’ ‘flesh’ or physical body was put to death (so *NIV*: ‘He was put to death in the body’). Although ‘flesh’ (*sarx*) has a considerable range of meaning, whenever ‘flesh’ is contrasted to ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*), as here, the contrast is between physical, visible, transitory things which belong to this present world and invisible, eternal things which exist in the unseen ‘spiritual’ world of heaven or the age to come. An example of such a contrast occurs at 4:6: ‘In order that though judged in the flesh like men [i.e. they died physically], they might live in the spirit like God [i.e. they might gain spiritual life in heaven].’ (Cf. also Matt. 26:41; Mark 14:38; John 3:6; 6:63; Rom. 8:4–6, 9, 13; 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 7:1; Gal. 3:3; 4:29; 5:16–17; 6:8; Col. 2:5; 1 Tim. 3:16, which is somewhat parallel in content to 1 Pet. 3:18; and Heb. 12:9, Gk. text.)

In the light of this contrast, *made alive in the spirit* must mean ‘made alive in the eternal, spiritual realm, in the realm of the Spirit’s activity’. Here it refers specifically to Christ’s resurrection, because ‘made alive’ is the opposite of ‘put to death’ in the
previous phrase. ‘In the spiritual realm, the realm of the Holy Spirit’s activity, Christ was raised from the dead.’

The NIV translation, ‘but made alive by the Spirit’ (similarly, AV), is also possible grammatically: there is no distinction in Greek between ‘spirit’ and ‘Spirit’, and the form of the term here (dative case) can be translated either ‘in’ or ‘by’. It would, however, be somewhat unusual if the same grammatical structure used in parallel parts of the same sentence were meant to be understood differently (i.e. put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit). Moreover, a different grammatical construction (hypo with genitive, as in 2 Pet. 1:21, ‘moved by the Holy Spirit’; also in 1 Pet. 2:4; 2 Pet. 1:17; 3:2) would have been more normal—and certainly clearer—if Peter had wanted to say ‘made alive by the Spirit’.

If this be the correct understanding of put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit in verse 18, the phrase ‘in which’ at the beginning of verse 19 should be understood to refer back to ‘in the spirit’ in verse 18 as meaning ‘in which (spiritual) realm Christ preached to the spirits in prison’.

This does not necessarily mean ‘in the resurrected body’, but rather ‘in the realm of the Spirit’s activity, the eternal, spiritual realm’ (the realm in which Christ was raised from the dead, v. 18). It might be argued that en ho (‘in which’) in verse 19 means ‘in the new eschatological age, the realm of the Holy Spirit’s characteristic activity after Christ’s resurrection’. This would be evident, one might say, from the fact that the New Testament authors often use pneuma, ‘spirit’, in this strongly eschatological sense.

However, while such a sense for pneuma is common in Paul, it is not clearly the case in Peter’s writings. Non-eschatological uses of pneuma include 1:11 (‘the Spirit of Christ’ speaking in OT prophets) and 2 Peter 1:21 (‘men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’). And Peter’s frequent emphasis on the reality of the unseen ‘spiritual’ realm (see 1:4, 8, 12; 2:5; 3:7, 12, 22; 4:14; 5:5, 8) makes it likely that ‘in which’ (spiritual realm) just means in the unseen dimension of existence, in the ‘spiritual’ world.

Selwyn (pp. 197, 315, 317) maintains that ‘in which’ (en ho) cannot refer to ‘in the spirit’ in verse 18 because there are no other instances in the New Testament where a relative pronoun has as its antecedent an ‘adverbial dative’. He regards this grammatical difficulty as the ‘most serious of all’ (p. 317) the objections to the view that Christ was preaching through Noah before the flood. However, in spite of Selwyn’s claim, there are several ‘adverbial datives’ in the New Testament which serve as antecedents to a relative pronoun:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Rel. pronoun</th>
<th>Adverbial dative antecedent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acts 2:8</td>
<td>which (hē)</td>
<td>in his own language (tē idia dialektō)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eph. 2:2</td>
<td>which (hais)</td>
<td>in your trespasses and sins (tois paraptōmasin kai tais hamartiais hymōn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eph. 2:3</td>
<td>whom (hois)</td>
<td>in the sons of disobedience (tois huiois tēs apeithēias)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2 Pet. 1:4 which (ὥν) to his own glory and excellence (idia doxē kai aretē) (Sinaiticus, A, C, etc.)

2 Pet. 3:1 which (hais) in all his letters (pasais epistolais)

Thus Selwyn’s objection is not valid. However, it would be unpersuasive even without these examples, because it is exegetically illegitimate to demand parallel examples which are so narrowly specified that one would not expect to find many, if any, examples. (It would be similar to saying that ὥν, ‘of whom’, in 3:3 cannot refer to ‘wives’ because there is no other example of a relative pronoun taking as its antecedent an articular feminine plural vocative—a claim that would be harder to disprove by examples than this one, in fact!) Nothing in the nature of New Testament Greek requires that relative pronouns only take antecedents that function in their own clauses in certain ways and not in others. Thus Selwyn has based his exegetical judgment on an artificial distinction which has no real significance in the actual use of the language.

We are now in a position to examine the two major interpretative possibilities as to when Christ preached to the spirits: sometime after his death (or resurrection), or during the time of Noah.

b. Between his death and resurrection—or after his resurrection

In favour of the view that the preaching occurred between Christ’s death and resurrection, or perhaps even after his resurrection, is the fact that Christ’s death and resurrection are mentioned so specifically in verse 18, which immediately precedes this section. Peter seems to be connecting Christ’s preaching to the spirits in prison quite closely in time with his being ‘put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit’ (v. 18).

However, this observation loses much of its force when one realizes that elsewhere in this letter Peter quite often uses a word or idea at the end of one section as a springboard to an entirely new section which has a distinctly different subject. He does this regularly by using a transitional relative pronoun (‘who’ or ‘which’), sometimes with and sometimes without a preposition in front of it.

This is seen in the Greek in 1:6 (‘in which you rejoice’, marking a transition to the discussion of suffering); 1:8 (‘whom having not seen’, marking a transition to the discussion about present fellowship with Christ); 1:10 (‘concerning which salvation’, marking a transition to the discussion about OT prophets); 2:4 (‘to whom coming’, marking a transition to the discussion of the church as the new people of God); 2:22 (‘who committed no sin’, marking a transition to a discussion of Christ’s sufferings and redemptive work); and 3:21 (‘which also now saves you’, marking a transition to a discussion of baptism). Note the same kind of transition, but to less distinct material, also in 1:12; 3:3; 3:6b; 4:4 and 5:9. This frequent stylistic device throughout 1 Peter means that one simply cannot argue that the phrase ‘in which’ at the beginning of verse 19 means that this verse must be continuing the same subject or the same line of thought (or the same chronological sequence) as verse 18—Peter uses this literary device too frequently when changing to a distinct subject.
Furthermore, it is hard to see that the view that Christ proclaimed the message of salvation to the spirits in prison sometime after his death on the cross really suits the context. Peter is exhorting his readers to be faithful witnesses for Christ even if they should have to suffer. But if he then proceeds to tell them that even the worst sinners in all history, the generation of the flood, can be given another chance to repent after they have died, he would then be defeating his purpose in writing: what need would there be for believers to endure suffering now if those who refuse to become Christians now because of the cost involved can repent after death? And what point is there in enduring suffering as a Christian now if there is another chance to be saved after death?

Moreover, it is difficult to explain why only sinners who disobeyed during the building of the ark are given another opportunity to repent. Why not others as well, especially those who had no chance to hear the warnings to repent? Furthermore, the idea of a chance of salvation after death is difficult to reconcile with other parts of the New Testament (cf. Luke 16:26; Heb. 9:27). It is unlikely that Peter’s view on a matter of such importance would have differed fundamentally from that of the rest of the leadership of the early church.

These considerations leave us with View 1: the preaching to the spirits in prison was done at the time when Noah was building the ark.

c. At the time of Noah

1. Could Peter have thought this?

In consideration of View 1 (Christ preached through Noah when Noah was building the ark), one must ask if it was possible for Peter to conceive of Christ preaching through Noah. This certainly seems possible in the light of the fact that Peter calls Noah ‘a herald (or, preacher) of righteousness’ (2 Pet. 2:5), and in the light of the fact that Peter understands the ‘spirit of Christ’ to have been active during the Old Testament period, moving the prophets to predict ‘the sufferings of Christ and the glories that were to follow’ (1:11, NIV). In the light of this, although Peter does not specifically describe Noah as a prophet, it would not be difficult for him to think of the spirit of Christ as active in him as he preached to the flood generation.

2. Relationship to the larger context (especially 1 Peter 3:13–22)

a. Christ preaching through Noah

One objection which Dalton makes to View 1 is that it has no clear link with its larger context. However, the opposite is actually the case. If we understand Peter here to be referring to Christ preaching through Noah, then the passage functions well in the immediate context of 3:13–22 and in the larger context of the whole letter. In fact, there are several remarkable parallels between the situation of Noah before the flood and the situation of Peter’s readers.

(1) Noah was in a small minority of believers surrounded by a group of hostile unbelievers (who were perhaps even persecuting him). The readers are also a small minority and are surrounded by hostile unbelievers who make the threat of persecution very real (3:13–14; 4:4).
(2) Noah was righteous (Gen. 6:22; 7:5; 2 Pet. 2:5). Peter exhorts his readers to be righteous in a similarly difficult situation (3:10–12, 13, 16–17; 4:1–3).

(3) Noah witnessed boldly to the unbelievers around him, preaching repentance and warning of judgment soon to come (cf. 2 Pet. 2:5, 9). Similarly, Peter exhorts his readers not to fear (3:14) but to bear witness boldly (3:15–16), even in suffering if necessary (3:16; also 4:16), in order to bring others to God—just as Christ was willing to endure suffering in order to bring us to God (3:18). Peter also sounds a clear warning of judgment to come (4:5, 17–18; cf. 2 Pet. 3:10) which makes the reader’s situation prior to judgment similar to that of Noah.

(4) Christ, though he was in an unseen ‘spiritual realm’, was preaching through Noah to the unbelievers around him (3:19–20). Similarly, Christ is working in an unseen spiritual way in the lives and hearts of Peter’s readers (3:15; cf. 1:22; 4:11, 14). Thus, Peter by implication is reminding his readers that if Christ was preaching through Noah he certainly is also preaching through them as they bear witness to the unbelievers around them.

(5) In the time of Noah, God patiently awaited repentance from unbelievers, but finally did bring judgment. Similarly, at the time Peter is writing, God is patiently awaiting repentance from unbelievers (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9) but will certainly bring judgment on the unrepentant (4:5; cf. 2 Pet. 3:10).

(6) Finally, Noah was rescued with a few others (3:20). Similarly, Peter reminds his readers that they too will be saved, even if their numbers are few, for Christ has certainly triumphed (3:22), and they will share in his triumph as well (4:13, 19; 5:10; cf. 2 Pet. 2:9).

The attractiveness of View 1 is thus enhanced by its clear compatibility with the context at several points. It fits well with Peter’s purpose of encouraging suffering believers that they need not fear to be righteous and to bear faithful witness to the hostile unbelievers surrounding them, for Christ is at work in them as he was in Noah, and they, like Noah, will certainly be saved from the judgment to come.

In fact, it is the remarkable similarity between the situations of Noah and of Peter’s readers which best explains why Peter, in reaching back to the Old Testament for an encouraging example, selects the incident of Noah preparing the ark. Far from being surprising or unusual, this example is contextually quite appropriate.

b. Contextual difficulties with Dalton’s view

The appropriateness of this view in the context gives another argument for the superiority of View 1 over View 5 (Christ’s proclaiming victory over fallen angels). For on the basis of View 5, the compatibility with context would not be nearly as great.

For the sake of argument, let us for the moment assume that Christ’s preaching to the spirits in prison refers to his proclamation of condemnation to fallen angels, either between his death and resurrection or after his resurrection from the dead. And let us assume that the background in 1 Enoch claimed by Dalton and others is correct, so that Christ imitates and fulfills the pattern established by the preaching of condemnation to fallen angels by Enoch. The fact that Christ proclaimed his victory would then function, in a general way, as an encouragement to believers who were being persecuted. Thus, on Dalton’s view, there is a connection with the larger context.
There are, however, several points at which the connection is imprecise or inconsistent. First, on Dalton’s view Christ proclaims his triumph over fallen angels or evil spirits. Yet while Peter does mention the devil’s opposition to believers (1 Pet. 5:8), the letter as a whole, and the immediate context, focus upon human, not demonic, sources of persecution (3:13–16; 4:3–4; etc.). Moreover, in the one place where Peter does mention the devil’s activities, he draws attention not to his past defeat, but to his present dangerous activity as he ‘prowls around like a roaring lion’ (5:8).

Second, the parallel to the readers’ situation is not close since neither Christ nor Enoch (in 1 Enoch) are being persecuted any longer by those to whom they proclaimed final condemnation, unlike Peter’s readers who, at the time of writing, are still being persecuted.

Third, although Enoch and Christ, according to this view, both went to declare condemnation to angels in hell, the readers would not find an example for imitation in that, for they certainly would not travel to hell and proclaim condemnation to sinful angels.

Fourth, witnessing to unbelievers, which is a major emphasis of Peter in this passage (3:14, 16–17; cf. ‘bring us to God’ in v. 18), is not really furthered; one does not encourage the preaching of repentance to sinful men by calling to mind two examples of the proclaiming of final condemnation to sinful angels!

3. The translation ‘when they formerly disobeyed’

One final consideration in favour of View 1 is that it makes possible a grammatically preferable translation of ‘formerly disobeyed’ (apeithesasin pote) at the beginning of verse 20. The phrase is usually translated ‘who formerly disobeyed’, but there is no separate word for ‘who’ in the Greek text; this translation depends on understanding the participle apeithesasin as an adjectival participle modifying ‘spirits’ in the previous verse. The difficulty with understanding it this way turns on a technical point in Greek usage.

In order to make it clear that he wanted the phrase to be understood as an adjective modifying ‘spirits’ Peter should have written, according to the normal standards of Greek usage, tois apeithesasin, putting the definite article in front of the participle (and thus putting it in ‘attributive position’). This is ordinarily necessary for adjectives (including participles) which modify articular nouns (nouns which have a definite article).

Thus, BDF, sec. 270, says,

An attributive adjective (participle) when used with an arthrous substantive must, as in classical, participate in the force of the article by taking an intermediate position … or, if placed in postposition (to which the participle with additional adjuncts is especially susceptible), it must have its own article [italics mine].

BDF gives two types of exceptions to this rule:

(a) (BDF, sec. 269) A noun with two or more adjectives or adjectival phrases need not have all of them between the definite article and the noun (which may become awkward), and those following the noun need not have the article, but only when needed for emphasis or to avoid ambiguity.

One example of this is genomenēn in Acts 13:32. But note that in all the examples
given in BDF, there is little chance of ambiguity because the adjective (or participle) immediately follows the noun and is not separated by an intervening main verb as in 1 Peter 3:20.

(b) (BDF, sec. 416) Supplementary participles following verbs of perception or cognition (knowing, seeing, hearing, etc.) do not have the definite article. Examples are Mark 5:30; Luke 10:18; 2 Peter 1:18.

But apart from these categories where the absence of the definite article is allowed there do not seem to be any clear examples in the New Testament of anarthrous participles (participles which lack the definite article in front of them) which have anarthrous antecedent (i.e. an antecedent with a definite article) and which are adjectival (in that they modify the noun which is their antecedent). Even among the examples which fall in the categories of exceptions noted by BDF, in most cases the anarthrous adjectival participle will follow immediately after the noun it modifies, and 2 Peter 1:18 (with the verb of perception 'we heard') is the only example, even from those in the exceptional categories, where I found the participle separated from its antecedent by the main verb of the sentence, as it is in 1 Peter 3:19–20. Thus there may be no clearly parallel example anywhere else in the New Testament which would justify the translation 'who formerly disobeyed'.

The difficulty of translating it this way is felt by at least one grammar, which refers to the participle in 1 Peter 3:20 as 'unclassical' (MHT 3, p. 153), and 'not good Greek' (MHT 4, p. 129).

On the other hand, the usual way of translating anarthrous participles in the kind of construction found in 1 Peter 3:19–20 is to understand them adverbially (as modifying the verb in the sentence, rather than the noun which is their antecedent). Such adverbial participles may be translated in several different ways according to the context. Thus, if the context allowed it, a very proper grammatical translation of apeithesasin pote might be ‘because they formerly disobeyed’ or ‘although they formerly disobeyed’, or ‘when they formerly disobeyed’: in each case the phrase would modify the verbal idea ‘preached’.

Such adverbial modification of a sentence by a participle is clearly possible even when the antecedent of the participle is a noun which is not the subject of the main verb (this is the case in 1 Pet. 3:20). The following examples are fairly close parallels to 1 Peter 3:20.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark 16:10 (v.l.)</th>
<th>penthousi</th>
<th>temporal: ‘while they mourned’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John 1:36</td>
<td>peripatounti</td>
<td>circumstantial: ‘as he walked’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts 7:2</td>
<td>onti</td>
<td>temporal: ‘when he was in Mesopotamia’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts 7:26</td>
<td>machomenois</td>
<td>circumstantial: ‘as they were quarrelling’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts 8:12</td>
<td>euaggelizomenō</td>
<td>temporal: ‘when he preached’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acts 11:17  
*pisteusasin*  
temporal: ‘when we believed’

2 Cor. 5:14  
*krinantas*  
causal: ‘because we are convinced’

Heb. 7:1  
*hypostrephonti*  
temporal: ‘when he was returning’

These grammatical considerations open at least the possibility and perhaps the strong probability that we should translate *apeithesasin pote* in 1 Peter 3:20 adverbially—‘when they formerly disobeyed’.

Now in the light of the preceding discussion the translation ‘when they formerly disobeyed’ would fit the context well. And it must be said that it is not merely grammatically possible, but it is grammatically preferable to the translation ‘who formerly disobeyed’.

It could be objected that it is unlikely that the participle has a temporal sense (‘when’) because the next phrase gives a further indication of time, namely, *when God’s patience waited*. The presence of a further temporal clause would then make a temporal sense for *apeithesasin pote* unnecessary and perhaps even redundant.

However, against this, there are other instances of similar constructions which have two or more time references in succession. Examples are found in Colossians 3:7 (with a combination of aorist and imperfect tenses which parallels 1 Peter 3:19–20 quite closely); Philo, *On the Cherubim* 58; *On the Decalogue* 58; *On the Special Laws* 3.1; cf. Epistle of Barnabas 7.9 (manuscripts aleph, V read *pote*). In fact in 1 Peter 3:20 itself there is already more than one time reference: *when God’s patience waited*, then *in the days of Noah*, then *during the building of the ark*. The addition of ‘when they formerly disobeyed’ to this sequence would not be awkward or difficult to understand. Moreover, ‘formerly’ (*pote*) is helpful in making Peter’s meaning clear, for it immediately indicates to the reader that the ‘disobeying’ is not at the same time as Peter is writing but is at an earlier point in time, ‘formerly’.

The translation ‘when they formerly disobeyed’ also answers the objection by Dalton (p. 148) that if Peter had meant to speak of spirits of persons who disobeyed he would have written *pneumasin tôn apeithēsanτon*, ‘spirits of those who disobeyed’. If our understanding is correct, Peter wrote exactly what he meant to say, namely, that Christ preached to the spirits who are now in prison but he did so ‘when they formerly disobeyed’.

4. Remaining objections

a. The verb poreutheis (‘went’)

There remain some other objections to this view. First, Dalton (p. 35) objects that the verb poreutheis (‘went’) cannot be used to describe Christ’s divine activity at the time of the Old Testament. But this objection is not a strong one, because the Old Testament often talks about a divine activity of God in terms of God’s ‘going’ to a certain place
(Gen. 3:8; 11:7; 18:21; etc.; cf. 1 Cor. 10:4, which speaks of Christ following the people as they travelled through the wilderness). Moreover, the same verb (poreuomai) is used in 1 Peter 3:22 to speak of Christ’s going into heaven. In fact, the use of poreutheis in 3:19 is necessary for Peter’s purpose, for if Peter had just said that ‘in the spiritual realm’ Christ ‘preached’, it might suggest a distant activity of speaking out of heaven, whereas ‘he went and preached’ implies more personal involvement in going to the place of the hearers and therefore preaching through Noah.

b. The sequence death-resurrection-ascension

It might also be objected that the sequence died ... made alive ... has gone into heaven in 3:18–22 shows that the events coming between verse 18 and 22 must occur between Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

Someone making such an objection might argue that three aorist participles show the structure of the passage: thanatōtheis (‘died’) and zōopoītheis (‘made alive’) in 3:18, and poreutheis (‘having gone’) in 3:22. Therefore (one might conclude) the aorist participle poreutheis (‘going’ or ‘having gone’) in 3:19 must fit within this structure and must refer to some event between Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

In response, we can certainly agree that there is a clear connection between died and made alive in 3:18; since both are aorist participles in adjacent phrases in the same sentence, and since their linkage is made explicit by the men ... de (‘on the one hand ... on the other hand’) construction in this part of the sentence.

It is quite another matter with who has gone into heaven, however. It comes not in an adjacent phrase but sixty words (or ten clauses) after made alive in the spirit. Ordinary readers (and listeners) would naturally settle on a sense for poreutheis, ‘he went’, which was suitable to its immediate context in 3:19 long before they reached ‘having gone into heaven’ in 3:22. And not every event between 3:18 and 3:22 occurred between Christ’s resurrection and ascension on any account (note ‘days of Noah’ and ‘baptism now saves you’ as parenthetical items). Even in 3:22 itself such a suggested sequence is not followed, because is at the right hand of God is placed before who has gone into heaven, though in a chronological listing of Christ’s activities the idea of going into heaven would come first, and being at God’s right hand would come second.

So the idea of a sequence in the aorist participles should not be seen as a strong argument against the ‘Christ preaching through Noah’ view, but as an argument that may carry weight for readers who somehow ‘see’ the passage in that perspective. It must be said that such a structure is not made explicit by any clear contextual pointers, nor is it required by the context. Such a sequence may have been Peter’s intention, but it probably was not. And even if it was, 3:19 can still be understood as a parenthetical statement outside the chronological sequence (just as 3:20–21).

Furthermore, the mention of Christ’s ascension in 3:22 is probably better accounted for by the fact that it is the naturally sequential event to include after the mention of Christ’s resurrection at the end of 3:21 (not the end of 3:18).

Lastly, Peter’s frequent use of a relative pronoun to introduce a new subject (see above, p. 238) indicates that there is a strong possibility that there is no clear chronological sequence in this section. Certainly it must not be insisted upon if other factors in the context point in another direction.
c. Why did Peter not say that Christ preached ‘through Noah’?

Finally, one might wonder why, if this was indeed Peter’s meaning, he did not make it clearer by simply saying that Christ ‘preached through Noah to the spirits in prison when they formerly disobeyed’. We cannot, of course, say with certainty why an author did not say something else. But we should realize at least that Peter’s readers, with native-speaker ability in Greek, would have heard in his words the sense ‘when they formerly disobeyed’ much more readily than we do, especially since our minds are cluttered by English translations which say ‘who formerly disobeyed’. In addition to this grammatical factor, the abundance of extra-biblical testimony to Noah’s preaching to rebellious unbelievers during the building of the ark would have made the sense proposed here much more readily understood. In fact, if we could have asked any first-century Jew or Christian the question, ‘Who preached to those who disobeyed in the days of Noah, while the patience of God was waiting during the building of the ark?’, there would certainly be only one answer: it was Noah who did this preaching.

To a group of Christians who had such an understanding of the biblical narrative, Peter then wrote that Christ preached to the disobedient people of Noah’s time. It might not have been asking too much of his readers to expect them to realize that he meant that it was through Noah that Christ did this preaching. In short, the sentence may not have been as obscure to the original readers as it has long seemed to subsequent interpreters.

IV. CONCLUSION

Our conclusions on this passage may now be expressed in an extended paraphrase: ‘In the spiritual realm of existence Christ went and preached through Noah to those who are now spirits in the prison of hell. This happened when they formerly disobeyed, when the patience of God was waiting in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.’

In its context, this passage thus functions (1) to encourage the readers to bear witness boldly in the midst of hostile unbelievers, just as Noah did; (2) to assure them that though they are few, God will surely save them; (3) to remind them of the certainty of final judgment and Christ’s ultimate triumph over all the forces of evil which oppose them. This passage, similarly understood, can provide similar encouragement to Peter’s readers today.¹