

Exegetical Paper on 1 Peter 3:18-19

NT6102 – Studying the Greek NT

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¹⁸ ὅτι καὶ Χριστὸς ἅπαξ περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἔπαθεν, δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων, ἵνα ὑμᾶς προσαγάγῃ τῷ θεῷ θανατωθεὶς μὲν σαρκὶ ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι·
¹⁹ ἐν ᾧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν,
(1Pe 3:18-19 NA27)

Since also Christ suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, in order that he might bring you to God, being put to death in the flesh, but being made alive in the Spirit, in which also going he preached to the spirits in prison. (Personal Translation)

The passage under consideration offers not a few significant difficulties to the exegete.

There are issues related to the textual variants concerning what exactly it is that Peter is saying Christ did and to whom he did it. There are issues related to the preaching of Christ mentioned in verse 19. Who did he preach to, what did he preach, and when did he preach it? All of these issues will be discussed in this paper (albeit only briefly).

Since also Christ suffered once for sins. “Since” (ὅτι) refers to what precedes, which is to encourage those who suffer as followers of Christ that it may in fact be God’s will that they suffer for doing right (3:17). In this righteous suffering, Peter’s readers must be reminded that it was Christ as the just who suffered unjustly for their sins, and there was finally a definite end to his suffering.

The verb ἔπαθεν is the controlling finite verb in the following clause. It is an aorist active indicative verb meaning, “he suffered” (ESV, NLT). The aorist appears to carry forward the action of Christ’s suffering but the adverb ἅπαξ modifies the aorist sense to make it a once for all function (similar to the usage of ἅπαξ in Hebrews 9:28) and is also for emphasis on the nature of the suffering.¹ There is a significant variant reading of this text that states that “he died” (ἀπεθαλέν – NAS, NIV) instead of “he suffered,” but the context suggests that

¹ David Alan Black, *It's Still Greek to Me: An Easy-to-Understand Guide to Intermediate Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 183.

unjust suffering is what the readers are identified with and not unjust death, especially given the καὶ (“also”) to explain the correlative relationship between what the believers are going through presently (and might suffer in the future) and what Christ went through.² Christ’s sufferings are in view in Peter’s mind as evidenced by the similar occurrence in 2:21 where Peter states that Christ “suffered” leaving an example to the believers.

It was for sins that Christ suffered, but not for his own sins. He suffered for the sins of the unjust though he himself was just. In light of the unjust suffering of Christ, Peter’s readers should take courage and not fear to suffer unjustly as well, knowing that Christ endured such for their sake. περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν here in 1 Peter lacks the article τῶν that is articulated in every other occurrence in the NT and LXX (see Lev.16:16, 25, 30, 34; Deut.9:18; 1 Kings 15:30; 16:13; Dan.4:27, 33; 1 John 2:2; 4:10) with the exception of Matt. 26:28; Hebrews 5:3; and 10:26. The prepositional phrase carries with it the sense of atonement and is used interchangeably with the same sense as ὑπὲρ (“on behalf of”). The suffering of Christ must not be understood as “merely a pattern for Christians, but as vicarious, as expiatory, and as making possible our access to God.”³ The precise effects “on sins is for the moment unexpressed,” though Peter will pick this thought up to further explain it in 4:1-2.⁴

Thus, Peter is emphasizing not simply that Christ’s death had atonement as its goal, but that even his suffering was on behalf of the unjust with the goal of reconciliation to God. Further, δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων are juxtaposed and both anarthrous in order to contrast the

² Note the textual evidence in the Appendix.

³ F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958; 3rd ed.: 1970), 167.

⁴ J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*. Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX Word Books, 1988), 202.

quality of each⁵ – the one who suffered and the one suffered for as well as to emphasize the atoning relationship of the suffering of Christ in relation to the ones whose sins are atoned for.

In order that he might bring you to God is offered as “the goal of Christ’s vicarious suffering” on behalf of the unjust.⁶ This second verb προσάγει is an aorist subjunctive that continues to explain the first verb ἔπαθεν by suggesting the goal of Christ’s suffering rather than that the action has in fact already finished. It contains a certain eschatological element, though the suffering is viewed as having been fully accomplished, the goal is yet to be fully attained. Just what exactly the goal of this “bringing” is remains unclear. There may be the idea of the Israelite cultic practice of the Levites being “brought” to God which would be in line with much of the other cultic language of Peter (Exo.29:4, 8; 40:12; Lev.8:24; 1 Pet.2:5, 9). There may also be the idea of simply being reconciled to and chosen by God from the alienation that is discussed at length throughout this epistle (1:1; 2:4, 6, 9; cf. Eph.2:18; 3:12; Heb.4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 12:22). The latter seems the preferable meaning given the context and in agreement with the conclusions of Bigg and Michaels.⁷

One further note concerning this clause is that ὑμεῖς is placed in an emphatic position to make clear that the readers of his epistle were particularly the ones whom Christ might bring/present to God.⁸ This reading suggests the very personal nature and concern of Christ in his suffering. He didn’t suffer for some abstract sense of reconciliation, but he suffered with the personal and specific aim of “you”. There is a textual issue of whether ὑμεῖς (NIV, NLT)

⁵ Maximillian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek: Illustrated by Examples*. Trans. Joseph Smith. (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), 55, 57.

⁶ John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*. Anchor Bible. (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 643.

⁷ Charles Bigg, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*. The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 160-161; and Michaels 203.

⁸ F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Trans Robert W. Funk. (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1961), 249.

should be read or whether ἡμᾶς (ESV, NAS), but the context (vss. 16 and 21) uses only “you” and thus “we” would be a rather awkward interpolation (even though Peter would understand himself to be included).

Being put to death in the flesh, but being made alive in the Spirit. What does Peter mean by this juxtaposing of the participles “being put to death” / “being made alive” and the dative nouns “flesh” / “spirit”? Peter here declares that Jesus in fact died, but he refers to Christ having been put to death “in the flesh” in the context of atoning suffering. This emphasizes the explanation of Christ’s suffering and its efficacy to accomplish the goal of reconciliation to God.

What does Peter mean by “flesh” and “spirit”? It seems that he means more than simply material versus immaterial, because while Christ certainly died in the body, he was also raised in the body. Certainly also, Christ’s spirit did not die, but his being made alive was more than a spirit resurrection. So what does Peter mean by “flesh” and “spirit”? It would appear that he is referring to the dative of respect of the “fleshly” and of the “Spirit” in relation to his atoning suffering. “The meaning of the two datives is thus shaped by the respective participles they modify. If ‘flesh’ is the sphere of human limitations, of suffering, and of death (cf. 4:1), ‘Spirit’ is the sphere of power, vindication, and a new life....Both spheres affect Christ’s (or anyone else’s) whole person; one cannot be assigned to the body and the other to the soul.”⁹ Being put to death in the flesh that is in the realm of the flesh or fleshliness, he was made alive in the Spirit. These are set against one another by conjunctions μὲν...δὲ in order to demonstrate the subordination of the first participial clause to the second and thereby demonstrate the superiority

⁹ Michaels 204-205.

of being made alive in the Spirit, however conclusive being put to death in the flesh might seem.¹⁰

In other words, he suffered to free from the sin of the flesh and free to the life of the Spirit. None of this interpretation necessarily excludes the notion of the bodily death of Christ and the bodily resurrection to a new spirit being, but this is not what Peter is speaking to. He is encouraging believers that are and might continue to suffer to know that Christ's unjust suffering will indeed reconcile them to God by destroying the fleshly and making alive in the Spirit. This thought is furthered by the passive function of the participles which suggests that the putting to death and the making alive rest in other hands. The one apparently in the world's, the other apparently in God's (though both remain unnamed in the immediate context).

Peter wants his readers to remember that while suffering and being put to death in the flesh may in the immediate seem to be in the hands of the unjust humanity, ultimately it is God that will accomplish both the work of putting the flesh to death and making alive in the Spirit, thus guaranteeing the work of reconciliation through Christ (2:17). This is thoroughly demonstrated through the substitutionary suffering of Christ and the vindication of Christ by the Spirit demonstrated through the resurrection from the dead and eventual redemption of all those who believe on him and are obedient to the preaching of the good news.

In which also going he preached to the spirits in prison. ἐν ᾧ (“in which”) is somewhat ambiguous in this context. To what antecedent does the relative pronoun ᾧ refer? Is Peter referring to the “Spirit” of verse 18, using it in a causal sense in reference to the entire preceding clause, or is he using it in a temporal sense? Elliot and Wallace seem to prefer the temporal sense and cite the other occurrences of ἐν ᾧ in First Peter as possible evidence (1:6;

¹⁰ Ibid., 205.

2:12; 3:16; 4:4).¹¹ The difficulty with this reading is that it may in fact make more of the temporal sense than is warranted. It would seem more likely that either the “Spirit” or the whole preceding clause is in view.¹² It is thus “in the Spirit” that Christ preached to the spirits in prison, just as all the prophets did and all who proclaim the good news (see 1 Pet.1:12). This may be the sense in which the conjunction “also” (καὶ) is being used here.

There are many difficulties with this verse that should be discussed. Wayne Grudem proposes three primary questions in regards to the preaching of Christ mentioned here that must be answered in order to ascertain the meaning of the passage: whom did Christ preach to, what did He preach, and when/where did He preach it?¹³

Several explanations who is being referred to by the clause “the spirits in prison” are that they are Old Testament saints long since dead, or of all those who died prior to Christ’s coming, or even antediluvian fallen angels. The difficulty with the first and second reading is that the context states clearly that they were those who were disobedient in the days of Noah building the ark (3:20). This would exclude any generic sense of OT saints as well as anyone else not alive in the days of Noah, since it refers only to those who were disobedient in the days of Noah’s building of the ark. The third explanation is implausible because it implies far more than the context would permit since it seems to be speaking to and about humans and not angels. The context declares that it is only to those that were alive in the days of Noah building the ark that were disobedient. This is a very small group that heard the preaching of Christ.

¹¹ Elliot 652; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1996), 343.

¹² Beare takes the former view – 170; while Michaels takes the latter view – 205.

¹³ Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 157-158..

What then did Christ preach to “the spirits in prison”? The verb ἐκήρυξεν is another aorist active indicative that moves the action along, but the function here is that of a completed work since the context states that this “preaching” was done in the days of Noah building the ark (3:20). In the New Testament, the term κηρύσσω refers to preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ, but this is the only occurrence of this term in Peter. The sense would then not be a preaching of judgment with no call to repentance, but would be a clear call to repentance and faith.¹⁴

When did Christ preach to “the spirits in prison”? Several suggestions have been made concerning the timing (as well as the location). One suggestion is that this occurred between the death and resurrection of Christ and that Christ descended to hell to preach to the spirits there. The difficulty with such a reading is that it means Christ’s preaching in hell was only to a very few persons (see previous comments) who were disobedient in the days of Noah. Why would Christ only preach to them? Another difficulty with this interpretation is that it would either necessitate salvation from hell as possible (which the Scriptures seem to clearly refute) or else that Christ only preached judgment and did not actually give an offer of salvation. If Christ preached only judgment to these disobedient “spirits in prison” then what comfort is this to the reader’s of Peter’s epistle? This also excludes the notion of these “spirits” being demonic, since there is no sense in telling his readers that Christ preached to demonic spirits that are in prison.

Another suggestion is one proposed by Augustine that Christ in the Spirit preached in the person of Noah in the days of his building the ark.¹⁵ Thus Christ through the person of Noah was preaching the good news of salvation to those who were disobedient and failed to enter the ark.

¹⁴ Contrary to Michaels conclusion on page 210.

¹⁵ Wayne Grudem, “He Did Not Descend Into Hell: A Plea For Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles’ Creed.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34/1 (March 1991), 110; contra the conclusion of Bigg 162.

Also, extra-biblical writings that Peter’s readers would likely have been familiar with suggest that Noah suffered for this preaching, which further confirms the context of suffering unjustly but being vindicated and reconciled to God in the end. This proposal has the benefit of agreeing with the context of preaching that is through others, but as Christ proclaimed in the Spirit. It also fits the context of salvation offered to humankind. This sense may be more readily understood if “the spirits in prison” are those who are *now* “in prison” (as the NAS reads) rather than those who were in prison while Christ preached. This explanation seems most in agreement when taken into consideration with the statements of 1 Peter 1:11 and 2 Peter 2:5.

Perhaps also, this might further explain the usage of the aorist passive participle πορευθεὶς (“going”). The passive suggests that this was something that was done *to* Christ just as the two other passive participles in this passage θανατωθεὶς and ζωοποιηθεὶς. Also, it should be noted that all three adverbial participles are in the nominative masculine singular which connects them to Christ and makes him the focus. This binds the whole narrative together by emphasizing that *Christ* was acted *upon*, but remained faithful throughout all of the suffering on our behalf and thereby is victorious and will make us victorious with him if we will bear under unjust suffering for his sake. The reading of verse 19 might then read, “In the Spirit he went and preached to the spirits (who are now) in prison (but who formerly had disobeyed in the days of Noah)”. Peter wants his readers to know that they will ultimately be vindicated and reconciled to God, but they must faithfully endure for the present for his sake and for the sake of those who might themselves also be reconciled to God.

Diagram of Passage

¹⁸ ὅτι...Χριστὸς...ἔπαθεν
καὶ

ἅπαξ
 περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν,
 δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων,
 ἵνα ὑμᾶς προσαγάγη
 τῷ θεῷ
 θανατωθεὶς μὲν σαρκὶ
 ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι·
 ἐν ᾧ καὶ... πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν
 τοῖς... πνεύμασιν
 ἐν φυλακῇ

Appendix

NA27 lists 8 cases of textual variation in 1 Peter 3:18, and this appendix addresses the second one. The first clause reads ὅτι καὶ Χριστὸς ἅπαξ (περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἔπαθεν) – translated literally reads “Since also Christ once ‘suffered for sins’” (with the reading in question contained within single quotations). There are six readings that are as follows: 1: “for sins he suffered”; 2: “for sins he died”; 3: “for sins on behalf of you he died”; 4: “for sins on behalf of us he died”; 5: “for you on behalf of sins he died”; 6: “for sins of us he died”. The NA27 editors have chosen the first option. Manuscript evidence can be seen below. The number in square brackets after each manuscript comes from the rating of Aland and Aland.¹⁶

Variant based on ε π α θ ε ν

1. π ε ρ ι α μ α ρ τ ι ω ν ε π α θ ε ν – B [I] P [III] *Majority* [V]

Variants based on α π ε θ α ν ε ν

2. π ε ρ ι α μ α ρ τ ι ω ν α π ε θ α ν ε ν – Vulgate^{st.ww}; Cyprian

3. π ε ρ ι α μ α ρ τ ι ω ν υ π ε ρ υ μ ω ν α π ε θ α ν ε ν – P⁷² [I] A [I] 1241. 1505 *al*

4. π ε ρ ι α μ α ρ τ ι ω ν υ π ε ρ η μ ω ν α π ε θ α ν ε ν – P⁷² [I] α(*) [I] A [I] C^{2vid} [II] L [V] 0285 [II].

33 [II]. 614 [III]. 630 [III]. 945 [II]. 1241 [I]. (1505) [III]. 1739 [I]. *al* Syriac^h Coptic^{boharic} (L 81 *pc*: ε π α θ ε ν)

5. π ε ρ ι υ μ ω ν υ π ε ρ α μ α ρ τ ι ω ν α π ε θ α ν ε ν – Ψ [I I]

6. π ε ρ ι α μ α ρ τ ι ω ν η μ ω ν α π ε θ α ν ε ν – C^{*vid} [II] *pc z*
 Vulgate^{clementine} Syriac^{peschitta};

Clement^{latin} Augustine

Readings 2 and 5 have minimal support and therefore should be rejected.

Readings 3, 4 and 6 have the strongest support of the variants based on α π ε θ α ν ε ν , but only significantly differ as to whether Christ “died” for “us” or “you”. The difference between υ μ ω ν and η μ ω ν is largely negligible because “in later Greek [they] had the same pronunciation.”¹⁷ This reading for “he died” has very strong external support even in comparison to “he suffered”. Metzger proposes that because of the “presence of the expression

¹⁶ Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, Revised and Enlarged (Eerdmans, 1989), 159-162.

περι αμαρτιων, scribes would be more likely to substitute
 απεθανεν for επεθανε than vice versa.”¹⁸
Reading 1 has strong external support, but not the strongest. It does however have the strongest
 internal support since the verb πασχω occurs eleven other times in First Peter and
 αποθνησκειν does not occur anywhere else in the epistle. In addition, the idea
 shifting suddenly from suffering to dying then back to suffering seems less likely than that the
 verbal idea remain the same throughout. Further, the atoning emphasis of the preposition
 υπερ in readings 3, 4 and 6 is inherent already in the preposition περι.¹⁹ Thus reading
 1 is the preferred reading since it best explains the other readings and seems less likely to have
 been altered from the more expected readings of 3, 4, and 6.²⁰

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¹⁷ Bruce M Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. 2nd ed (United Bible Societies, 1994), 623.

¹⁸ Ibid., 623.

¹⁹ Beare 168.

²⁰ Beare 167; Metzger 623; Michaels 195; contra Bigg 159.