

CHI-KIN LEI

1 Peter and Christ's Descent to the Dead in Its Early Christian Reception

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Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

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Macau, December 2024
Chi-Kin Lei

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A. The Aim

1 Peter 3:19, “Christ went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison” (ἐν ᾧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν),¹ is traditionally the major scriptural support for the doctrine of Christ’s descent to the dead² between his passion and resurrection (hereafter referred to as the “*descensus*”). Present scholarship, however, generally dissociates the two. The dominant interpretation, based on the Enochic tradition,³ assumes that 1 Peter 3:19 speaks instead of Christ’s *ascent* in proclaiming condemnation or victory over the fallen angels imprisoned in the lower heavens. It has been asserted that the association between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus* only began with Clement of Alexandria in the third century, and is thus to be viewed as a departure, if not corruption, from the original sense of the Scriptural text.

This book challenges such a dichotomy between the early reception of 1 Peter 3:19 in relation to the *descensus* and the current reading of 1 Peter 3:19 in relation to the Enochic *ascensus*. While conceding that 1 Peter 3:19, in its original sense,⁴ refers to Christ’s ascent, I argue that the subsequent association of the text with Christ’s descent should be seen as a continuous, organic development between Scripture and tradition rather than a mere departure from the original meaning of Scripture. Two core claims will be established in order to support this argument:

¹ All the NT texts in this book are my own translations, and all the original texts are taken from Nestle-Aland 2012.

² I deliberately use the more neutral term “dead” rather than “Hades/Hell” to avoid any Hellenistic baggage. Different locations such as Sheol, Hades, and Hell are included in my definition. The nuanced connotations of these place names will be discussed later in this chapter.

³ By “Enochic tradition,” I refer to a particular notion of Enochic myth to which 1 Peter is (allegedly) indebted. As will be seen, most scholars anchor this myth to *1 Enoch*, and to a lesser degree *2 Enoch* and other related texts (e.g., *Jubilees*), to speak of the fallen angels being imprisoned in the heaven and condemned by Enoch during his journey of ascent. I will further interrogate this term – “Enochic tradition” – later in this chapter.

⁴ By “original sense,” I refer to the meaning intended by the author or how the first readers would understand the text. The concluding chapter will further discuss the issue of “meaning” in biblical interpretation.

(1) Early antecedents of the association between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus* can be found before Clement of Alexandria in relation to an apocalyptic Petrine tradition, which was rooted in the first century and became increasingly prominent in the second century (chapter 3).

(2) The Alexandrian interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 in relation to the *descensus* should not be seen as a mere eisegesis but rather a sophisticated reading which is both traditional and innovative (chapter 4). Moreover, such a reading indeed originates from the line of the Enochic tradition by situating itself within the Tours of Hell tradition (chapter 5).

The merit of these claims will be obvious once the history of scholarship has been sketched concerning the relationship between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus*. This will reveal both the contributions of these previous engagements with the topic, as well as their problems which this book seeks to resolve.

B. State of Scholarship

It is important to emphasise that my purpose is not to give a full account of the long history of interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19; others have done this extensively.⁵ Our focus is rather on the history of *relationship* between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus*. Thus, our survey will begin with discussing how the two were associated with and dissociated from each other, followed by how present scholarship generally neglects the early reception of 1 Peter 3:19.

I. From the Pre-modern Period to the Enlightenment

The earliest explicit evidence of the association between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus*, as scholars generally agree, appears in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, who interprets the text as referring to Christ's preaching to the unbelieving souls in Hades.⁶ Subsequent writers such as Origen,⁷ Cyprian of

⁵ The history of interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 can be classified into three broad lines: 1) Christ descended into Hades after his death to preach there; 2) the pre-existent Christ preached through the person of Noah on earth; 3) Christ during his ascent proclaimed to the fallen angels imprisoned in the lower heavens. While the first view has the oldest history, the second view dominated the Middle Ages since Augustine, and the third view is the scholarly consensus since the latter part of the twentieth century. For a review, see e.g., Reicke 1946, 5–51; Dalton 1965a, 17–66; Grudem 1988, 203–239; Elliott 2000, 638–651; Pierce 2011, 2–20; Keener 2021, 268–272; Williams and Horrell 2023, 216–221.

⁶ *Stromateis* 6.6; *Adumbrationes* on 1 Peter 3.19.

⁷ *De Principiis* 2.5.3; *Contra Celsum* 2.43; *Commentary on Matthew Series* 132; *Commentary on John* 6.35; *Homily on Luke* 14.21–22; *De Pascha* 146.

Carthage,⁸ Cyril of Alexandria,⁹ Athanasius,¹⁰ and Rufinus¹¹ similarly associate this text with the *descensus*. The *Peshitta* even renders the text directly as “He preached to the souls (ܠܢܦܫܐܝܝܡ) who were shut up in Sheol (ܫܥܘܠ).”¹²

It was Augustine in the fourth century who first openly rejected the association between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus*. Adopting a figurative reading, Augustine interprets the text as the pre-existent Christ preaching through the person of Noah on earth.¹³ Augustine’s position convinced many in the Latin Church and became the dominant view in the Medieval Latin Church. Thomas Aquinas, for example, follows Augustine’s interpretation to understand the “spirits in prison” as the wicked souls living in the mortal body during Noah’s time, and Christ preached to them through Noah.¹⁴

The Eastern Church of the Middle Ages, however, seemed to maintain the association between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus*. For example, we have already mentioned the *Peshitta* in the Syriac tradition. Other instances include Ephrem the Syrian, Aphraates, Maximus Confessor, John of Damascus, Joannes Zonaras, Theophylactus, and Nicephorus Callistus, all of whom may have been influenced by 1 Peter 3:19 when referring to the *descensus*.¹⁵

During the Reformation, there seemed to be a great uncertainty among Protestants regarding whether 1 Peter 3:19 should be associated with the *descensus*. Martin Luther plainly admits that he did not know what this text means.¹⁶ John Calvin, though affirming the association between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus*, reads the text spiritually that it was meant as an encouragement for the readers to remain faithful as they were surrounded by unbelievers.¹⁷ Later Protestant theologians, one way or the other, tend to avoid the *descensus* by paraphrasing or spiritualising the text.¹⁸

The Catholic theologians during that time, interestingly, departed from the Augustinian interpretation and went back to associate 1 Peter 3:19 with the *descensus*. This was probably an attempt to defend the teaching of Purgatory,

⁸ *Ad Quirinum* 12.2.27.

⁹ *Commentary on John* 16.16; *Commentary on Luke* 4.18.

¹⁰ *Letter to Epictetus* 59.5.

¹¹ *Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed* 28.

¹² My own translation. Original text taken from Kiraz 2020, which is a reproduction of the standard scholarly text in the 1920 BFBS edition.

¹³ Augustine’s *Letter* 164.

¹⁴ *Summa Theologica* 3.52.2.

¹⁵ See Reicke 1946, 32–35.

¹⁶ *Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter* in Luther’s Work 30:113.

¹⁷ *Commentary on the First Letter of Peter* 3:19. Interestingly, Calvin separates the spirits to whom Christ preached in verse 19 and the unbelieving spirits in verse 20 into two different groups. The former refers to the Old Testament saints, whereas the latter refers to the unbelievers.

¹⁸ See the examples in Reicke 1946, 40–41.

which had been opposed by the Protestants. For example, Robert Bellarmine in the late sixteenth century associates 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus*, but he suggests that Christ only preached to those who had converted prior to their death.¹⁹ This interpretation allows one to read the “prison” in 1 Peter 3:19 as some sort of Purgatory. Such a view generally dominated within the Roman Catholic Church in subsequent centuries.²⁰

In the seventeenth century, among the orthodox Lutherans there was a resurgence of the association between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus*. While attempting to eliminate any possibility of an intermediate state like Purgatory, they also rejected any notion of a post-mortem salvation of unbelievers. In this situation, 1 Peter 3:19 was read as referring to Christ’s proclamation of his victory in Hades.²¹

This resurgence of the association between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus* continued through the Enlightenment among Protestant writers with a particular emphasis on the salvation offered to the dead.²² This was probably due to the environment in which the concept of “universalism” was strong under the influences of a humanistic worldview, growing cultural interactions across the world, and the promotion of religious tolerance. It is unsurprising that the notion of a post-mortem salvation associated with the *descensus* would be appealing to many during that time.

Thus, sketching from the early third century to the Enlightenment, the relationship between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus* shifted back and forth between association and dissociation. This history began with a strong association with the Alexandrian school and moved to a dissociation inaugurated during Augustine’s time, though the Eastern Church seemed to maintain the position of association. From the Reformation down to the Enlightenment, however, the position of association regained its influence among both Catholics and Protestants for various reasons in different times. One may say that the relationship between 1 Peter 3:19 and the *descensus* was complicated, as the two neither sat easily with each other nor were divorced entirely from each other. The interpretive crux seems to lie in the choice between a literal reading in relation to the *descensus* and a figurative reading in relation to the pre-existent Christ. These two contradictory positions can be said to have permeated the long history of interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 from the pre-modern period to modernity. Only at the turn of the twentieth century, as we shall see, there emerged a new approach which eventually dissociates 1 Peter 3:19 from the *descensus* once and for all, and has become the scholarly consensus until today.

¹⁹ *Disputationes de controversiis*, ii, *De Christo*, iv, *De anima Christi*, ch. 12–16.

²⁰ See Reicke 1946, 43–44.

²¹ See the examples in Reicke 1946, 44–45.

²² See Reicke 1946, 47–49.

II. Towards Dissociation in Post-twentieth Century Scholarship

With the rediscovery of the books of Enoch in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth century,²³ modern scholars began to interpret 1 Peter 3:19 in light of the Enochic tradition. The first attempt to do this can be traced back to Friedrich Spitta's work, *Christi Predigt an die Geister*, published in 1890. Spitta was the pioneer to make use of the fallen angels tradition in relation to Genesis 6 as the background of 1 Peter 3:19. Although retaining the Augustinian interpretation that the pre-existent Christ preached through the person of Noah, Spitta understands the "spirits in prison" to be rebellious angels rather than human souls mainly based on *1 Enoch* (e.g., 15:6, 7, 10; 19:1; 60:10 ff.), and thus, Christ's "proclamation" was one of condemnation rather than salvation.²⁴ This shift of both the recipients and nature of Christ's proclamation is significant, as it laid the foundation for subsequent scholars to associate 1 Peter 3:19 with the *ascensus* rather than the *descensus*.

Karl Gschwind was among the first to read 1 Peter 3:19 in relation to Christ's ascent.²⁵ His monograph, *Die Niederfahrt Christi in die Unterwelt*, published in 1911, though focusing on the topic of Christ's descent generally, includes a long section on 1 Peter 3:19 in which he rejects its association with the *descensus*.²⁶ Many of his exegetical insights remain the norm in readings of this text by present-day commentators. Gschwind's major argument is to interpret the phrase ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι in verse 18 as Christ's bodily resurrection. The word πορευθεὶς in verse 19 would then refer to Christ's ascent rather than his descent, and Christ's proclamation to the spirit must take place during his ascent too. Furthermore, drawing from the Enochic tradition concerning the rebellious angels imprisoned in heaven (e.g., *1 En.* 15:8; 106:13; *Jub.* 10), Gschwind understands "Christ's proclamation to the imprisoned spirits" as one of victory over the fallen angels, resembling Ephesians 4:10 and 1 Timothy 3:16.²⁷ Thus, Gschwind's interpretation is wholly different from the traditional interpretation in terms of movement, recipients, and contents. Instead of a *descent* in which Christ preached salvation to human dead, the text is now interpreted as an *ascent* in which Christ proclaimed victory over rebellious angels.

²³ Yet a recent edited book traces the reception of the Enochic texts and traditions before the so-called "rediscovery" of the Enochic books in the modern era. The results show that "Enoch" was indeed never "lost" but preserved in a global scale with various forms at least since the fifteenth century. See Hessayon *et al.* 2023.

²⁴ Spitta 1890, 21–28.

²⁵ P. J. Jensen was another pioneer (even earlier than Gschwind) to read 1 Peter 3:19 in relation to Christ's ascent. His work, however, is in Danish and therefore remains unknown to many scholars. See Jensen 1903.

²⁶ Gschwind 1911, 14–144.

²⁷ See especially Gschwind 1911, 111–143.

This line of interpretation is basically how current commentators would read 1 Peter 3:19.

Gschwind's interpretation, however, did not immediately gain acceptance in the first half of the twentieth century and indeed did not receive much attention.²⁸ While willing to consider the fallen angels tradition as the background of 1 Peter 3:19, most commentators around this period retained the idea of Christ's descent into Hades.²⁹ For example, Bo Reicke, although recognising that 1 Peter 3:19 could refer to Christ's ascent, argues that one must not presume a strict chronological order in the text, and thus, a descent reading should be maintained.³⁰ Moreover, Reicke suggests that the "imprisoned spirits" to whom Christ proclaimed refer to fallen angels, but the possibility of human souls is not excluded.³¹ Regarding the content of Christ's proclamation, Reicke leaves the question open by saying that it is not the concern of the author of 1 Peter.³²

Rudolf Bultmann was among the few who accept the possibility that 1 Peter 3:19 refers to Christ's ascent.³³ His position, however, is slightly peculiar in that a distinction is made between the meaning of the original form and the meaning of the redacted form. As Bultmann argues, 1 Peter 3:19 represents a more primitive source which refers to Christ's ascent, whereas 1 Peter 3:20 is the addition of a later redactor who misunderstands the context to mean Christ's descent into Hades.³⁴ In other words, the original sense of 1 Peter 3:19 is Christ's ascent, but the redacted sense of the text is Christ's descent. Thus, although Bultmann is open to the ascent reading of 1 Peter 3:19, in his view the notion of a descent is somehow expressed by the redactor.

It was not until William Dalton that the ascent reading of 1 Peter 3:19 begins to dominate scholarship. This is mainly due to his dissertation, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18–4:6*, published in 1965.³⁵ While conducting a thorough study on 1 Peter 3:18–4:6 with multiple approaches (e.g., textual criticism, lexical study, grammatical-structural analysis,

²⁸ See Reicke 1946, 46; Dalton 1965a, 47–48 on how Gschwind's work was neglected during this time.

²⁹ Gunkel 1907, 561–562; Knopf 1912, 147–154; Jeremias 1949, 194–201; Reicke 1946, 117–118; Beare 1947, 144–147; Selwyn 1947, 198–200; Schweizer 1949, 79–81; Windisch 1951, 71–72; Schelkle 1961, 104–108.

³⁰ Reicke 1946, 117–118.

³¹ Reicke 1946.

³² Reicke 1946, 121.

³³ Bultmann 1947, 1–14. Another is Schlier 1930, 15–17; Werner Bieder leaves the question open regarding whether the text refers to a descent or an ascent. See Bieder 1949, 109.

³⁴ Bultmann 1947, 4–5.

³⁵ A second, revised edition was published in 1989. In addition, Dalton has written a number of articles on 1 Peter 3:19, see Dalton 1964, 322–327; Dalton 1965b, 1195–1200; Dalton 1968, 11–37; Dalton 1979, 547–555; Dalton 1984, 96–106.

and background tradition), Dalton's major contribution is perhaps to situate 1 Peter 3:18–4:6 within the literary context of the whole letter, as previous scholarship has tended to view this section as an interpolation or a digression.³⁶ As Dalton argues, the proclamation of Christ's victory over the fallen angels during his ascent functions as an encouragement for facing persecution, which Dalton takes as the overall purpose of 1 Peter.³⁷ In this case, any notion of Christ's descent into Hades to preach salvation to the dead would be a discouragement and thus runs counter to the aim of the epistle.³⁸

Furthermore, Dalton traces more extensively an Enochic tradition that speaks about the sins of the angels in relation to the flood narrative of Genesis 6, using it as the background to interpret 1 Peter 3:19. The texts drawn by Dalton are mainly from *1 Enoch* 6–21; 65–67; 106–108, along with several related texts such as the *Damascus Document*, *Jubilees* 5, and the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, all of which associate the fallen angels with the Noahic flood.³⁹ He also refers to *2 Enoch* 7:1–3; 18:3–6 to further discuss the location to which Christ went during his ascent. As Dalton argues, the fallen angels are often understood to be imprisoned in the lower spheres of heaven, the realm between the divine and the human worlds. Such a tradition, as Dalton suggests, serves as an interpretive clue to understand Christ's journey in 1 Peter 3:19.⁴⁰

Regarding the content of Christ's proclamation, Dalton originally thought of a condemnation. In the second edition of his dissertation, however, he changed his view to neither condemnation nor salvation. He argues that the author is interested in the victory of Christ rather than the destiny of the fallen angels.⁴¹

Dalton's influence on subsequent scholarship on 1 Peter 3:19 cannot be overstated, as many commentators in the latter half of the twentieth century followed the same line of interpretation as Dalton.⁴² All of them, though with minor differences (e.g., the content, the exact time and location of Christ's proclamation), agree that 1 Peter 3:19 should be read in light of the Enochic tradition to speak of Christ's ascent to proclaim to the fallen angels, thus

³⁶ Even Gschwind, who reads 1 Peter 3:19 in relation to Christ's ascent, limits his discussion on the verse itself and its immediate context.

³⁷ For the overall purpose of 1 Peter, see Dalton 1965a, 93–108.

³⁸ Dalton 1965a, 108–109. The result of my analysis on Clement's exegesis of 1 Peter 3:19 challenges this presupposition. See the section of *Excursus: Post-mortem Salvation and Paraenesis* in chapter 4.

³⁹ Dalton 1965a, 163–176.

⁴⁰ Dalton 1965a, 181–183.

⁴¹ Dalton 1989, 48–49.

⁴² Kelly 1969, 152–156; Brox 1979, 169–175; Michaels 1988, 205–211; Davids 1990, 138–141; Marshall 1991, 122–128; Achtemeier 1996, 252–262; McKnight 1996, 214–217.

excluding any notion of Christ's descent.⁴³ Nevertheless, there remained a number of scholars who continue to associate the text with Christ's descent to proclaim to either human dead or fallen angels.⁴⁴

Entering the twenty-first century, almost all commentators would read 1 Peter 3:19 in relation to Christ's ascent.⁴⁵ For example, John Elliott interprets 1 Peter 3:19 as Christ's post-resurrection ascent to proclaim condemnation on the fallen angels.⁴⁶ As Elliott argues, ἐν ᾧ in verse 19 should be taken as a temporal conjunction which describes the occasion of Christ's proclamation to the spirits, i.e., during his resurrection state as expressed by ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι in verse 18.⁴⁷ Elliott also interprets πορεύθεις in verse 19 in connection with the same word, πορεύθεις, in verse 22, the latter of which clearly describes an ascent.⁴⁸ Furthermore, following the line of Dalton, Elliott traces extensively an Enochic tradition which associates the sins of the fallen angels with the Noahic Flood in Genesis 6. He anchors this tradition mainly on *1 Enoch* 1–36, supported by other texts such as *2 Enoch* 1–68 and *Jubilees* 7, all of which mention the fallen angels in relation to the Flood.⁴⁹ Using such a tradition as the background of 1 Peter 3:19, Elliott interprets ἐκήρυξεν as Christ's condemnation of the disobedient angels.⁵⁰

Chad Pierce adopts a similar line of interpretation to read 1 Peter 3:19 in relation to Christ's ascent. Following Elliott, he interprets ἐν ᾧ in verse 19 as a temporal conjunction and links πορεύθεις to the ascension of Christ in verse 22.⁵¹ Pierce's major contribution, however, is that he attempts to broaden the identity of the "imprisoned spirits" to include both humans and angels. By tracing even more extensively the development of the fallen angels (and giants) tradition in early Judaism and Christianity (e.g., *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, the *Book of Giants*, *Pseudo-Eupolemus*, *Jubilees*, *2 Baruch*, *3 Baruch*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Tobit*, *Sirach*, *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Sibylline Oracles*, and Philo), Pierce argues that there was a conflation of traditions in which sins and

⁴³ Wayne Grudem, although excluding the *descensus* from 1 Peter 3:19, follows the Augustinian interpretation to read the text as the pre-existent Christ preaching through the person of Noah. See Grudem 1988, 164–170. This view is generally not accepted in present scholarship.

⁴⁴ Spicq 1966, 136–140; Best 1971, 140–145; Schrage 1973, 106–107; Vogels 1976, 88–141; Calloud and Genuyt 1982, 182; Goppelt 1993, 256–263.

⁴⁵ Klumbies 2001, 208–217; Senior 2003, 101–104; Schreiner 2003, 184–190; Jobes 2005, 242–245; Donelson 2010, 112; Dubis 2010, 120–121; Schlosser 2011, 226–228; Wright 2011, 81–82; Forbes 2014, 123–126; Marcar 2017, 550–566; Strawbridge 2020, 101–107.

⁴⁶ Elliott 2000, 637–710.

⁴⁷ Elliott 2000, 652.

⁴⁸ Elliott 2000, 653.

⁴⁹ Elliott 2000, 697–705.

⁵⁰ Elliott 2000, 660–661.

⁵¹ Pierce 2011, 219–222.

punishments can be applied to angels or humans.⁵² In other words, there is no one single Enochic tradition but rather recasting of traditions. Thus, regarding the recipients of Christ's proclamation in 1 Peter 3:19, Pierce suggests that both angels and humans could possibly be in view to express Christ's victory over all forces of evil.⁵³

Two recent commentaries on 1 Peter also interpret 1 Peter 3:19 in relation to Christ's ascent in light of the Enochic tradition. Gerald Wagner and François Vouga understand 1 Peter 3:19 as referring to Christ's resurrection event, arguing that the participle *πορευθείς* and the verb *ἐκήρυξεν* do not represent a temporal sequence of Christ's journey to the underworld, which, as they suggest, was an interpretation that only began with Irenaeus.⁵⁴ Moreover, Wagner and Vouga refer to *1 Enoch* (e.g., 10:1–6; 13; 13:1–10) as the interpretive background, though they think that the exact identity of the “spirits in prison” in verse 19 is irrelevant to the author of 1 Peter.⁵⁵ Regarding the content of Christ's proclamation, Wagner and Vouga suggest that the main thrust of the letter is about winning the Gentiles rather than anyone's condemnation, implying that Christ's message should be an announcement of salvation.⁵⁶

Another commentary is by Craig Keener, who interprets 1 Peter 3:19 in connection to 3:22 to refer to Christ post-resurrection ascent.⁵⁷ Regarding the identity of the “spirits in prison,” Keener follows the scholarly consensus to rely on the Enochic tradition (e.g., *1 Enoch*, *Jubilees*, and *2 Baruch*),⁵⁸ interpreting them as fallen angels in relation to the flood narrative of Genesis 6. In this case, Christ's proclamation is one of judgment rather than salvation.⁵⁹

The most recent commentary on 1 Peter by Travis Williams and David Horrell, surprisingly, somehow returns to the traditional reading of 1 Peter 3:19.⁶⁰ Arguing that the interpretation in relation to the fallen angels tradition is not as convincing as many have imagined, they tend to interpret the “spirits in prison” as disembodied human souls awaiting for punishment, though the exact location of this prison need not be specified.⁶¹ Moreover, while accepting the

⁵² See the survey of different sources in Pierce 2011, 58–175.

⁵³ Pierce 2011, 237–238.

⁵⁴ Wagner and Vouga 2020, 123–124.

⁵⁵ Wagner and Vouga 2020, 124–125. As they say, “Die Logik der petrinischen Argumentation ist aber so stringent, dass es für das Verständnis unerheblich ist, wer genau in einer möglichen Vorlage mit den ‘Geistern im Gefängnis’ bezeichnet war.”

⁵⁶ Wagner and Vouga 2020, 125.

⁵⁷ Keener 2021, 270.

⁵⁸ See the many sources cited in the footnotes in Keener 2021, 274–275.

⁵⁹ Keener 2021, 275.

⁶⁰ Williams and Horrell 2023, 212–241.

⁶¹ Williams and Horrell 2023, 221–238. In the summary of that whole section (pp.292–294), however, they remain open to the possibility that the “imprisoned spirits” could refer to angels, though they think that humans are more likely. In fact, regarding the exact identity

possibility that Christ's proclamation to these spirits could happen before his resurrection, they again leave open the question of when this event occurred.⁶² In this case, they conclude that "it is difficult to be sure – given the lack of explicit indication in the text – whether the journey depicted in v. 19 is a 'descent' of Christ (between death and resurrection), or rather a journey of 'ascent'," though the final destination in verse 22 is definitely the heaven.⁶³ Regarding the content of Christ's proclamation during his journey, they think that it is about the preaching of the gospel rather than a condemnation or announcement of victory in general.⁶⁴ Thus, Williams and Horrell have problematised the current consensus on 1 Peter 3:19 and adopted many elements of the traditional reading of this text. But still, they do not fully return to the descent reading of 1 Peter 3:19, but in many cases refuse to draw definite conclusions and leave room for ambiguity.

Finally, although our primary focus is on 1 Peter 3:19, a few words must be said about 1 Peter 4:6, which will be considered in a supplementary way. Indeed, how one interprets 1 Peter 3:19 will often influence how one may interpret 1 Peter 4:6, and vice versa.⁶⁵ 1 Peter 4:6 says: "For this reason, the gospel has been preached even to the dead" (εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ νεκροῖς εὐηγγελίσθη). Dalton summarises four interpretive options in history:⁶⁶ 1) Christ preaching salvation to all the dead during the *descensus*; 2) Christ preaching salvation to the Old Testament saints during the *descensus*; 3) the gospel was preached to those who were spiritually dead on earth; 4) the gospel was preached to those who had received the gospel on earth but died before 1 Peter was composed. David Horrell further summaries this history into two main streams, namely, the "already dead" view and the "since died" view.⁶⁷ As the labels indicate, the first view interprets the "dead" in 1 Peter 4:6 as *already* dead when the gospel was preached to them (hence options 1 and 2), whereas the second view interprets the "dead" as those who have died *since* they heard the gospel on earth (hence option 4).⁶⁸

of these imprisoned spirits, they acknowledge that "there is still more that needs to be discovered before this conclusion can be confirmed." (pp.234)

⁶² Williams and Horrell 2023, 239.

⁶³ Williams and Horrell 2023, 288.

⁶⁴ Williams and Horrell 2023, 241.

⁶⁵ It appears that the scholarly choice of whether 1 Peter 3:19 is associated with the *descensus* is often linked with the choice of whether 1 Peter 4:6 is associated with the *descensus*.

⁶⁶ Dalton 1965a, 42–51.

⁶⁷ Horrell 2013a, 75–77. Also see Williams and Horrell 2023, 338–352.

⁶⁸ Option 3 (the gospel preached to the spiritually dead) has very few supports in modern scholarship. Yet Clement of Alexandria, who interprets 1 Peter 3:19 in relation to the *descensus*, surprisingly takes this view in his *Adumbrationes* on 1 Peter 4:6. We will discuss Clement's view in chapter 4.

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