

Through Anabaptist Eyes

{ Word and Spirit: Interpreting the New Testament

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HOME BIBLE STUDY - 75 A.D.



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"I think Paul wants everyone to say what this verse means to you."

“Hermeneutics” from *hermeneuō* = “how we read, understand, apply, and respond to biblical texts.” It is the art and science of interpretation. It involves:

- ∞ Exegesis
- ∞ Contextualization (communicating the text’s significance for contemporary times)

Some basics of hermeneutics and exegesis

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Exegesis (from *exegeō*)= “the careful historical, literary, and theological analysis of a text”

Exegesis is:

- ∞ An investigation of the various aspects of a particular text
- ∞ A conversation with readers (ancient and modern)

Some basics of hermeneutics and exegesis

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Challenges to exegesis:

- Distance from the time of the original writings
- Distance from the culture of the biblical authors
- Geographical distance from the biblical settings
- Distance from the language of the original writings

Some basics of hermeneutics and exegesis

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¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits — ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand — with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

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1 Peter 3:18-22

“A wonderful text is this, and a more obscure passage perhaps than any other in the New Testament, so that I do not know for a certainty just what Peter means.”

--Martin Luther

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Starting with Clement of Alexandria (end of 2nd century):

The crucified Jesus descended to Hell and preached to the spirits of people who died in the days of Noah (some thought of this as an evangelistic message, others took it to be a message of condemnation).

An early interpretation of
1 Peter 3:18-22

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The *preexistent* Christ preached repentance to Noah's contemporaries through the person of Noah
(Augustine held this view but few do today).

Another early interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22

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Note the basic movement:

Christ's passion,
resurrection,
and glorification

Current thinking on 1 Peter 3:18-22

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Verse 18 seems to be a straightforward affirmation of the redemptive work of Christ.

Current thinking on 1 Peter 3:18-22

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Verses 19-22 are the challenge! These seem to be the basic questions in the passage:

1. When did Christ make his proclamation?
2. To whom did he make his proclamation?
3. What did Christ proclaim?

Current thinking on 1 Peter 3:18-22

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Trying to remove our biases, and paying attention to the way words are used more broadly in the NT, we may note:

1. Peter never speaks of a “descent,” although some assume he does in order to fill out their picture of Christ going to Hell.
2. Peter makes no mention of Hell (Hades, Tartarus, or Sheol)!
3. The place of dead people is never called “prison” in the NT.

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4. Christ proclaims (*kēryssō*) which simply means to make a pronouncement, rather than evangelizes (*euangelizō*).

5. The language of “spirits” who are imprisoned fits supernatural beings better than human beings (see 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6)

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Those imprisoned spirits figure prominently in extra-biblical writings, particular a book called 1 Enoch.

Enoch elaborates upon Gen 6:1-8, where angels take wives and produce a race of giants. It appears that God imprisoned these fallen angels.

Peter (and at least some of his readers) would have known the 1 Enoch tradition, even though it is foreign to us

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So, here's how we may answer the earlier questions:

1. "When did Christ make his proclamation?" Answer: **Sometime *after* the resurrection (not while in Hell!)**
2. "To whom did he make his proclamation? Answer: **Angels who are in prison, awaiting final judgment, due to their disobedience during the days of Noah. They are mentioned in Gen 6:1-4, but elaborated upon in a Jewish work known as *1 Enoch*.**
3. "What did Christ proclaim?" Answer: **His victory as well as the defeat and condemnation of those fallen angels.**

¹⁶ Towards an interpretation of 1 Peter
3:18-22

Verse 22 pictures Christ in the place of victory, at the Father's right hand

Towards an interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-22

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- ✎ New appreciation of the Apostle's Creed (e.g., Douglas Harink: "He was crucified, died, and was buried. He entered fully into the reality of death. On the third day he rose again from the dead.")
- ✎ An argument against some "second chance" theories
- ✎ Christ is the victor! (1 Tim 3:16)

Possible impact of the passage for contemporary readers

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⁶ Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great:

He appeared in the flesh,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.

1 Timothy 3:16

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Maybe we can take away at least these ideas regarding interpretation, especially of difficult passages:

↻ Biblical interpretation requires humility; no one knows everything!

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