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Descent into Hell

Two curious passages in 1 Peter have been the subject of much speculation.

1 Peter 3:19–20

First Peter 3:19–20 indicates that Christ was made alive in the spirit after his death and made a proclamation to spirits that had been imprisoned from the days of Noah. Different interpretations have been offered for what this might mean.

Preaching to Deceased Humans

An ancient tradition of the church holds that Jesus descended spiritually into the world of the dead during the interim between his crucifixion and resurrection (cf. Rom. 10:7; Eph. 4:9–10). This tradition is developed in several apocryphal writings and is referenced by one line of the Apostles' Creed, a fourth-century confessional statement that asserts, "He descended into hell" (or, in some versions, "to the dead"). In some traditions, the purpose of this descent is construed as being to deliver righteous persons from the Old Testament period who were waiting on God to be vindicated, but in 1 Peter proclamation to the disobedient is emphasized (3:20). Thus the purpose envisioned here could have been to preach the gospel to condemned sinners from the age of Noah and give them a chance to be saved.

Preaching to Disobedient Angels

A completely different interpretation of the passage suggests that the imprisoned spirits are not deceased persons but rather are disobedient angels. Specifically, they are the “sons of God” who in the days before the flood mated with earth women and produced a race of giants, as reported in Genesis 6:1–4 (a story expanded on in numerous Jewish apocryphal writings, especially 1 Enoch). If this is the case, then 1 Peter may be reporting that Jesus visited the place where these troublesome spirits are imprisoned (whether in heaven or hell—the text does not say) to confirm God’s final victory and triumph over them. The point would be to emphasize Jesus’s power over cosmic forces (cf. 3:22).

The second interpretation is preferred by the great majority of scholars today.

1 Peter 4:6

First Peter 4:6 alludes to the gospel being preached “even to the dead.” Again, two different interpretations have been offered: this could be a reference to the tradition of Jesus visiting the underworld to deliver or evangelize persons from the Old Testament period (as indicated above); or it might simply be a reference to the gospel having been preached to persons who are now dead but who will live again (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13–18).

Whatever interpretations of these two passages are adopted, both testify to what theologians sometimes call the “temporal universality”

of Christ's action: what Jesus did had consequences for the past as well as for the present and the future.

Bibliography

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