

Interpreting 1 Peter 3:19-20

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Generally, the interpretation of this passage falls to one of two sides: one which understands the passage to teach that Yeshua descended to Hades or Hell during the time He was in the grave, and the other which denies that He descended during this period.

Below is the way each of the phrases in the verses would be interpreted by these two schools of thought.

I. Yeshua descended to the place of the departed unbelieving dead (Hades) during the time between His death and resurrection.

Verse 19 - (various ways the words are interpreted by those who believe Yeshua descended into Hades while His body was in the tomb)

“in which”

(1) a temporal term speaking of the time in which Messiah went and preached. That is, the “in which” is referring us back to verse 18 and to the death and burial of Yeshua. “in which” = “during which,” that is, during the time between His death and His resurrection.

(2) a reference to the spirit (or Spirit) of verse 18 — That is, Messiah went and preached *in the Spirit* as opposed to the earthly ministry He conducted while alive on the earth. “in which” = “in the Spirit”

“He went”

Messiah went locally to the place of the departed spirits, a place where those who reject the gospel go after death. “He went” = “He descended to Hades”

“And made proclamation” (preached)

(1) Messiah went and preached judgment to those who had been disobedient in the days of Noah. He preached their final and absolute, and eternal judgment.

(2) Messiah went and preached the gospel which He had accomplished on the cross to those who had been disobedient in the days of Noah, in order to give them a second chance to receive the truth.

(3) Messiah went and preached the gospel of the victory of His work on the cross, in order to bring the final message of judgment upon those who had rejected Noah's message, which must have included the promise of the Messiah (Gen 3:15).

(4) Messiah went and preached the gospel He had accomplished in His death as a song of victory to those who were disobedient in Noah's day but turned in repentance just prior to their death in the flood. (but cf. Matt. 24:38)

“to the spirits (now) in prison

(1) These spirits are the departed souls of the Nephilim of Genesis 6:4 (Nephilim is a Hebrew word that is unknown as to its true meaning. It may be “giant” in physical stature, or “great” in terms of political power.)

(2) These spirits are the evil angels of Gen. 6 (the phrase ‘sons of God’ is interpreted by some as meaning angels who co-habited with mortal women, their offspring being the ‘giants’ of Gen. 6:4).

(3) These spirits are the departed spirits of all who were unbelievers in Noah's day and thus fell under the wrath of God in the flood.

“prison”

Hades; Hell; the place of the unbelieving wicked who have died.

Other verses appealed to in support of this interpretation: Eph. 4:8-9; 1 Pet. 4:5; Matt. 12:40

2. Messiah did not descend to the place of the departed dead (Hades) during the time between His death and resurrection.

“in which”

The spirit (Spirit) mentioned just prior in verse 18. That is, Messiah went to preach “in the Spirit” as opposed to the time in history when He came incarnate in the flesh to preach the gospel of the kingdom. He was preaching by means of the Spirit during the days of Noah.

“He went”

Messiah went, *in the days of Noah*, long before He was born a babe in Bethlehem, and preached to the people who lived during that time. (These appearances of Messiah before His incarnation are referred to as “Christophonies”)

“and made proclamation (preached)”

Messiah, in Noah's day, preached the gospel. Perhaps not in such a full revelation as now is given to us, but none the less He preached the gospel of righteousness through faith, the same gospel Abraham believed (cp. Rom. 4; Gal. 3:8).

“to the spirits (now) in prison”

That is, Messiah preached to those people who lived at Noah's time but who are now, on account of their rejection of the gospel message, in prison. (In this interpretation great stress is laid on the concept of *now* in prison. The word “now” is not actually in the Greek text, but is strongly suggested by the construction of the sentence. Note that the NASB has included the word “now” in the text, but has put it in italics to show that it is interpretive).

“prison”

Hades; Hell; the place of the wicked who have died. Yeshua went, by means of the Spirit, and through pre-incarnate manifestations (Christophonies), preached to the people of Noah's day. Those who rejected the message of the Gospel, and were therefore destroyed in the flood, are *now* kept in Hades = Hell, awaiting the final judgment.

Conclusion

The notion that Yeshua descended to the place where the spirits of the departed unbelievers reside during the three days His body was in the tomb was taught very early in the emerging Christian Church. It is contained in one version of the Apostles' Creed. Yet such a teaching finds no basis in the Scriptures. The 1Pet 3:19 passage is better understood to mean that it was the Spirit of Messiah who, through "preachers" such as Noah, and through pre-incarnate appearances of the Messiah (e.g., the Angel of the Lord), warned the people of Noah's day regarding their sin and their need for repentance.

The impetus for the doctrine that Yeshua went to Hades during the time of His burial was the desire to give the people of the flood a "second chance." Some within the early Christian Church had a difficulty with the wrath of God as displayed in the flood, especially since the doctrines of the early Church taught that salvation by Yeshua's death was something that the "Old Testament" people anticipated but regarding which they had less the complete understanding. It seemed unwarranted for God to destroy the people of the earth in the flood if, in fact, they had deficient knowledge of the salvation that was yet to be accomplished by the death and resurrection of the Messiah. The early Church Fathers therefore formulated a teaching that through the descent of the Messiah to Hades during the three days of His burial, a "second chance" was given to all who perished in the flood.

But the Scriptures give no indication of "second chances" regarding salvation. Hebrews 9:27 says: "... it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." Moreover, an essential cornerstone of Paul's understanding of the Gospel is the statement Moses makes regarding Abraham in Gen 15:6, "Then he [Abraham] believed in Adonai; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." For Paul, the same saving faith granted to Abraham was that in which he likewise participated and which he proclaimed to his generation. Thus, the whole idea of Yeshua descending to Hades to give those who perished in the flood a "second chance" is contrary, not only to the general tenor of the Scriptures but to the specific revelation of the Gospel throughout the Scriptures. Now is the day of salvation. Those who die in unbelief will perish.