

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What are we to understand by the 'spirits that were in prison' referred to in I Peter iii, 19?

Commentators on this most difficult passage (verses 19–22) are agreed, at least, on one point—that there is scarcely another passage in the Bible that has suffered so much from oversubtle interpretation. It is impossible here to attempt any detailed exegesis of the text, and still less to give more than a hint of the history of its interpretation. Readers may be referred to two very full discussions, one by a Catholic, P. Urban Holzmeister, s.j., in his *Commentarius in Epistulas SS. Petri et Judae*, Lethielleux, Paris, 1937, pp. 295–354; the other by the present Dean of Winchester, Dr E. C. Selwyn, in his commentary, *The First Epistle of St Peter*, Macmillan, London, 1946, pp. 197–207 and 314–62. The best short treatment recently published is that by the Bishop of Namur, Mgr A. Charue, in the twelfth volume of *La Sainte Bible*, Letouzey and Ané, Paris, 1946, pp. 462–65. Cf. also J. Chaîne in his article 'Descente du Christ aux Enfers', *Dict. de la Bible, Supplément*, t. ii, columns 4 18 ff.

The main problem is: Who were the 'spirits in prison' of iii, 19? To this, as Dr Selwyn explains (pp. 316–17) three main answers have been given. (1) They were the wicked generation of men before the flood to whom Christ preached, before the Incarnation, through the lips of Noe and his predecessors. This interpretation is, on the face of it, extremely unlikely, though it was accepted by many older writers, including SS. Augustine and Thomas. (2) They were the fallen angels, to whom Christ preached judgement in person when He ascended into heaven; a variant of this view seeks to establish that Christ, when He descended into limbo, preached eternal damnation to the contemporaries of Noe (cf. Holzmeister, pp. 316–17). (3) 'The reference in iii, 18 ff, as in iv, 6, is to the dead, the preaching to the impenitent of Noah's generation affording a particular example of a much larger truth.' (Selwyn, p. 316.) This last is not merely the opinion accepted by most English-speaking commentators; it is the interpretation of the vast majority of modern Catholic writers who, in spite of individual points of difference on details, would agree, in Mgr Charue's words, that 'the dogma here professed by St Peter expresses a very simple truth—the application from the time of the sacred triduum (between Good Friday afternoon and Easter Sunday morning) of the merits of the redemption to the just under the Old Law'. Mgr Charue rightly insists, as do Chaîne, Holzmeister and other Catholic authorities, that the scriptural proof of Christ's descent into limbo is not confined to this passage in I Peter. Among other testimonies to the traditional doctrine of the *descensus ad inferos*, there is a striking reference in the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* (41–2), translated by M. R. James (*The Apocryphal*

New Testament, pp. 92-3): 'And they heard a voice out of the heavens saying: Hast thou preached unto them that sleep? And an answer was heard from the cross, saying, Yea.' M. Vaganay, the erudite editor of this apocryphal 'Gospel' concludes that so slight a resemblance to the canonical epistle is insufficient to prove any interdependence of the writings. But he adds: 'It only remains noteworthy that our evangelist, desirous of passing for the apostle Peter, should have inserted into his work an episode that finds its precise development in the first epistle of Peter'. (Cf. *L'Évangile de Pierre*, Gabalda, Paris, 1930, pp. 301-2).

JOHN M. T. BARTON.

What became of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom after Sargon's capture of Samaria?

I may be allowed to refer to my paper on 'Old Testament History to Alexander the Great' in the Cambridge Summer School volume on *The Old Testament*, Burns Oates, London, 1939, pp. 134 ff. 'Samaria fell in 722, and, following the practice of his predecessor Tiglath-Phalasar III, Sargon carried away a large portion of the population. He himself records the deportation of fifty chariots and 27,290 Israelites (text in Gressmann's *Altorientalische Texte zum alten Testament*, 1926, p. 348). The cuneiform texts tell us nothing about the destination of those carried into captivity, but there are letters and contracts of a later date (between 650 and 606) which make known the existence of Israelite signatories and witnesses from Kannu and Kar-A-U, towns in the same region as Ḥalaḥ and the Ḥabûr and the country of Guzana, and these signatories were doubtless the descendants of Israelites deported in 722.'

Sargon, as we know from the Bible, introduced, in place of the 'displaced persons' carried off into Assyria, convoys from Babylon, Kutha, 'Awwâ, Ḥamath and Sepharvaim; the newcomers brought their own gods with them, some of whom can be identified from the data given in the Bible. So Sochoth-benoth, introduced by the men of Babylon, is the same as Sarpanit, Marduk's consort. This process of introducing Mesopotamians into the Northern Kingdom was a gradual one, and from the mixed race of Israelites and Mesopotamians came the Samaritans, familiar to us from the books of Esdras and Nehemias and from various references in the New Testament.

JOHN M. T. BARTON.

The words of Christ 'Before Abraham was made, I am' (John viii, 58), are generally taken to involve a reference to the Divine Name in Exodus iii, 14 and hence to constitute a claim by Christ to Divinity. May we see a similar reference and claim in other passages where Christ uses this phrase 'I am' (usually translated as 'I am He')?

The phrase ἐγώ εἰμι is used in various ways in the Greek Bible. It is often used to give emphasis or to make an impression, and in this