

## **Christ's Proclamation to the Dead: A Brief Look at 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6 in Context**

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<sup>3:18</sup> For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; <sup>19</sup> in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, <sup>20</sup> who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah...

### **The Theme of Proclamation and Preaching in 1 Peter**

The above, one of the most puzzling ideas in the whole Bible, occurs next to one of the most well-known: 'Always [be] ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you' (1 Pet.3:15). I've quoted this useful verse many times to remind myself and other Christians about such things as practicing our testimony so we'd be ready to share it with our non-Christian friends, understanding apologetics so we can explain Christian truth to them, etc. But little did I know how much this is a major theme in the letter as a whole, and how important this theme is to understanding this very curious mention about Jesus' proclamation to the dead just a few verses later.

In his introduction, Peter reminds his suffering audience in Asia Minor that their hope and profound transformation in Jesus has resulted in a *verbal* response, an outpouring of *words*: 'In this you greatly rejoice...so that the proof of your faith...may be found to result in praise and glory and honor' (1:6 – 7). This introduction already sets the tone. Peter desires to see their praise continue so that others would hear their words, and respond with faith. Peter reminds them about the Hebrew prophets of old, who longed to know more about the things they foresaw. But their prophecies 'now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things into which angels long to look' (1:12). Peter's community is privileged because the prophets' words were 'announced' to them, and given additional clarity by 'those who preached the gospel' concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The words 'announced' and 'preached' are significant here. This pattern of God's people hearing God's word, receiving it, proclaiming it, and then inviting a response from others lays the groundwork for Peter's later admonitions concerning their own proclamation, which must continue because the message must continue reaching more people.

After referring to the redemption available through Jesus' sacrifice (1:17 – 21), Peter quotes Isaiah 40 concerning the word of God. By doing this, Peter explicitly deals with the importance of this word of God being announced and moving forward. The Christians themselves benefited from this word: 'For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. For, 'All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.' And this is the word which was preached to you.' (1:23 – 25) This resulted in the Christians becoming 'living stones' in God's living Temple (2:1 – 5).

Unfortunately, the prophetic words of Scripture were given to Jews before, but many of them rejected that word (2:6 – 8). Those Jewish unbelievers who rejected Jesus serve as the negative example, to which the contrast is the Christian community made up of Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ. Peter quotes from the 'new Temple' prophecies of Psalm 118 and Isaiah 8 about God laying a new cornerstone for a new Temple. Many Jews did not respond positively to that word because they did not receive Jesus as the cornerstone of the new living Temple.

Significantly, the 'new Temple' of Christ's people would serve one of the roles the old Temple in Jerusalem served: to be the location of praise and testimony to God. The word is now given to the Christian community so that they would proclaim the excellencies of God: 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that *you may proclaim the excellencies of Him* who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.' (2:9 – 11) The titles once given to Mosaic Israel now fall onto Messianic Israel, those Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus. But the important point here is the link with verbal proclamation. Being God's chosen people again results in verbal proclamation of the word of God. This proclamation is precisely what – in Peter's view – those Jews who turned from Jesus and removed themselves from receiving the prophetic promises have lost the ability to do.

Peter desires that the virtuous suffering of the Christians lead to a change in *speech* among the Gentiles. ‘Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation’ (2:12). This change in speech from slander to glorification of God reflects the conversion of the Gentiles. Clearly, Peter desires that the Christian proclamation about Jesus, foretold by the Hebrew prophets, would continue penetrating the Gentile world.

Following encouragement about proper Christian love and honor towards Gentile rulers (2:13 – 17), masters (2:18 – 25), and husbands and wives (3:1 – 7), Peter summarizes his reason for saying these things by asking his audience to endure suffering (3:8 – 13). In this context, Peter gives the famous admonition to ‘always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you’, and cites a very curious example from Jesus’ own experience, who ‘made proclamation’ to the spirits of people who departed this earth long ago (3:19):

<sup>3:14</sup> But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. ‘And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled,’ <sup>15</sup> but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; <sup>16</sup> and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. <sup>17</sup> For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. <sup>18</sup> For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; <sup>19</sup> in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, <sup>20</sup> who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.

Some exegetes argue that Jesus’ self-presentation before the dead was only to condemn them and not to offer them salvation. To support this idea, the case is made that the phrase ‘made proclamation’ carries a different meaning from ‘preached.’ However, Peter is clearly capable in this very letter of using a variety of words and phrases to communicate the same concept (e.g. announced, preached, proclaimed), thus strongly suggesting that the semantic distinction is meaningless. Furthermore, Luke uses the two words synonymously, sometimes in the same sentence or two (cf. Acts 4:2; 8:4; 9:19 – 20; 10:37; 13:5; 13:24; 13:38), and Paul uses the verb form ‘proclaim’ synonymously with ‘preach’ (Col.1:23; 1 Th.2:9; 1 Tim.3:16) and the noun form ‘the proclamation’ synonymously with ‘the preaching’ (2 Tim.4:7; Ti.1:3), which supports the idea that Peter can do the same. Finally, it must also be noted that Peter refers a second time to the same event:

<sup>4:6</sup> For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.

In 4:6, the intended result of Jesus’ descent into ‘Hades,’ as it were, is explained: that those human beings who died in the flood, might nevertheless choose spiritual life upon meeting Christ. In other words, Jesus’ proclamation to the dead was not simply to condemn them. He offered them a real choice to respond to him, and to ‘live in the Spirit.’ While we should not assume that all did, for reasons I offer below, the fact that Jesus did appear to them and preach to them is important for understanding the character of God.

The thematic and conceptual ties are important to the overall argument of 1 Peter. Peter parallels the proclamation that happened among the dead and the proclamation that happens among the living. He makes this parallel because he is reminding the suffering Christians that their proclamation must continue. Holding Jesus up as the example of one who proclaimed his gospel even unto his death means that God can certainly call Christians to do the same. Interestingly, Peter also has in mind the parallel between the effective ministry of the dying Christ and that of the Christians. Christ’s suffering led to death, but his death only enhanced his ability to preach, this time to a new audience: the dead! Similarly, the Christians’ suffering could lead to their death as well, but if they die virtuously, their death will further advance their proclamation among the living. Christians fearful of death might have argued that their removal from the world of the living would eliminate their testimony, thus making death a potential weakness in Peter’s argument. Rather, virtuous death strengthens the argument. This is a challenging perspective for the suffering Christian, but a useful one if we ask God for the courage and strength to live in it!

If, as some argue, Jesus' proclamation to the dead did not offer them a real choice to choose him, not only would exegetical violence be done to 4:6, but the larger parallel would be drained of its importance entirely. For if Jesus' death did not advance and further the proclamation of God's word and offer of salvation, then why bring it up at all? Jesus' death would not be an effective point of comparison; it would lose its significance towards inspiring Christians to suffer for the sake of greater Christian proclamation, even to death. We would be making Peter out to be a rather poor architect of ideas. But if Jesus' proclamation to the dead did offer them a real choice, then the link between 3:19 and 4:6 reads easily without any forced rupture, and the overall conceptual parallel between the proclamation of the suffering Jesus and that of suffering Christians remains intact, brilliant, and inspiring.

### **Broader Theological Implications**

In the Old Testament, God responded to certain human choices by taking human life. Those acts include the flood of Noah (Gen.7 – 8), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.18), the slaying of the Egyptian firstborn (Ex.12), the death of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu (Lev.10:1 – 3), the slaying of disobedient Israelites (Num.11:1 – 2), the earth opening under Korah and his rebellion (Num.16), the conquest of Jericho and the Canaanites (Gen.15:16 – 21; Josh.1 – 7), and the slaying of Uzzah who touched the ark of God (2 Sam.5). Many readers of the biblical record respond to God's acts of destruction with confusion, hesitation, and outright rejection of a God who would act this way. Skeptics claim that the portrayal of God in the Old Testament is inconsistent with the portrayal of God in the New. Some Christians – primarily those who believe in the penal substitution atonement theory and view God as a western lawgiver – claim that this portrayal reveals a God of meritocratic and punitive justice, whose mercy becomes all the more merciful when understood against the backdrop of God's absolute right to act this way. To them, the resolution to this issue is quite straightforward.

Other Christians, including myself, believe that there is an underlying unity in God's character from Old Testament to New, but struggle to understand how these acts of God align with the claim that Jesus reveals the full character of a loving God. For if God is at the fundamental level a God of meritocratic-punitive justice, then there is a certain consistency in that explanation. After all, God did not have to show love, mercy, and grace at all; He could have wiped out humanity and creation at the fall. But if strict meritocratic justice is the core characteristic of God, then love, mercy, and grace are *accidental* to who God is. How then is it possible to say that God is *love*? The challenge arises when we as Christians say that love is the core characteristic of God, that love is not accidental to God but *fundamental*. If we say *that* about God, how can we make sense of these Old Testament episodes? From my experience, skeptics and non-Christians object to these because they sense an inconsistency between the apparent portrayal of God in the Old Testament and the Christian claim that God is love.

A number of often unexamined assumptions lie behind these claims. Although the scope of this essay does not cover the nature of hell and the nature of the human heart, those questions must be examined more closely, for the view of hell as 'locked from the inside' as articulated by C.S. Lewis and the entire Eastern Orthodox communion is different from the view of hell among Western Catholics and Protestants, where God throws people into hell against their will to punish them eternally for offending his honor and justice. So the question must be phrased rather precisely: In the Old Testament, did God's sudden taking of human life remove all possibility of those people choosing Jesus/God? Must a person confess Jesus and have a saving understanding of Jesus before death in order to be accepted by Jesus into his presence? This understanding of 1 Peter 3:19 helps us unearth one of the major ones. Some assume that when God took human life in the Old Testament, that He was also taking away their ability to choose Jesus, under the assumption that a decision for Jesus must be made during one's earthly life.

This examination of 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6 helps us understand at least one such incident in Old Testament history in another way. It serves a secondary and weaker role – though still perhaps significant – in our ability to extrapolate further about other incidents and indeed, the character of God. The answer to the primary question of those killed by the flood is: No, God did not immediately consign them to hell. No, God was not taking away all possibility of choice. Yes, they still had a choice to receive Jesus, which was offered when Jesus descended into Hades after his death to make his proclamation there to them. On the secondary question, perhaps this idea can be extended to others who were slain by God in the Old Testament time period. This direction is suggested, but by no means settled, by 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6. When God took away people's lives in the Old Testament generally, He did so punitively, yes, but also in part to *preserve* their ultimate choice. Perhaps He took their lives before they were fully hardened against Him.

If C.S. Lewis and the Eastern Orthodox understanding of the human heart is correct, then human beings are capable of experiencing torment in the very love of God because we choose lies, sin and false selves. As God loves us, He loves the true self that He created and knows. This frustrates those who want to deny their need for Jesus. So God cannot be other than Who He is. He cannot help but continue to love the unbeliever and call to them continually, even in hell. But to the unrepentant, the very love of God has become an annoyance, a repugnant presence, and a terror. God Himself will be an unwanted stalker. But this view preserves the possibility of asserting, in a canonical analysis, that God is love at the core of His character, as opposed to God being meritocratic justice at the core of His character, but only loving by an arbitrary and unnecessary choice. Again, this brief analysis of 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6 do not give us enough information for us to say this, but it keeps the door open for such a statement.

## Appendix A: Debate in a Facebook Post About Interpreting 1 and 2 Peter Together

<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10166143810380058&set=a.10155735688215058>

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This is the Saturday and Sunday where Western Christian tradition celebrates two things: On Saturday, Jesus went down to Sheol (Hebrew for “the grave”) to “preach the gospel to the dead” (1 Peter 4:6; Ephesians 4:9; Romans 10:7). Jesus pursued into the grave all those who died before he died, to give them the chance to choose him.

On Sunday, Jesus rose in his resurrection body to triumph over sin, death, and the powers.

Here is an amazing song sung by the early Christian community, dated to before the very early date of 125 AD, which celebrates Jesus’ pursuit into the grave of those who died. It comes from a collection of songs called “the Odes of Solomon.” So named because the Book of Psalms are attributed to King David, because he wrote the plurality of them. Solomon was the immediate son and heir of David. But in a deeper and higher way, Jesus was the greatest and final Son and Heir of David. So, the Christians called this new set of songs “the Odes of Solomon.”

Ode 17 is one of the odes which use the startling convention of speaking from the first person as Jesus himself (at least Odes 8, 10, 15, and 42 do this, and possibly 9 as well).

- <sup>1</sup> Then I was crowned by my God,  
    And my crown was living.
- <sup>2</sup> And I was justified by my Lord,  
    For my salvation is incorruptible.
- <sup>3</sup> I have been freed from vanities,  
    And am not condemned.
- <sup>4</sup> My chains were cut off by His hands,  
    I received the face and likeness of a new person,  
    And I walked in Him and was saved.
- <sup>5</sup> And the thought of truth led me,  
    And I went after it and wandered not.
- <sup>6</sup> And all who saw me were amazed,  
    And I seemed to them like a stranger.
- <sup>7</sup> And He who knew and exalted me,  
    Is the Most High in all His perfection.
- <sup>8</sup> And He glorified me by His kindness,  
    And raised my understanding to the height of truth.
- <sup>9</sup> And from there He gave me the way of His steps,  
    And I opened the doors which were closed.
- <sup>10</sup> And I shattered the bars of iron,  
    For my own shackles had grown hot and melted before me.
- <sup>11</sup> And nothing appeared closed to me,  
    Because I was the opening of everything.
- <sup>12</sup> And I went towards all my bound ones in order to loose them;  
    That I might not leave anyone bound or binding.
- <sup>13</sup> And I gave my knowledge generously,  
    *And my resurrection through my love.*
- <sup>14</sup> And I sowed my fruits in hearts,  
    *And transformed them through myself.*
- <sup>15</sup> Then they received my blessing and lived,  
    And they were gathered to me and were saved;
- <sup>16</sup> Because they became my members,  
    And I was their Head.
- <sup>17</sup> Glory to You, our Head,  
    O Lord Messiah. Hallelujah. (*Odes of Solomon 17:1 – 17*)

Ode 17 speaks of Jesus loosening the bindings of the 'bound ones' (v.12). We, the children of Adam and Eve, have been bound by graveclothes, because of the deeper binding: We have been bound in the corruption of sin in our very human natures.

Jesus shares his 'resurrection' – that is, his new humanity – with these 'bound ones': 'I gave my knowledge generously and my resurrection through my love' (v.13). As Jesus shares his new humanity with his followers, he plants new life and transformation in them: 'And I sowed my fruits in hearts, and transformed them through myself' (v.14).

I received the face and likeness of a new person,  
And I walked in Him and was saved.

Ode 17 refers to the disciples' failure to recognize the identity of the resurrected Jesus (Lk.24:13 – 34; 24:37; Jn.20:11 – 16; 21:12) in v.6, even down to the 'amazement' with which the disciples responded to him, and even offered an explanation in v.4.

Jesus says, 'I walked in [the Father] and was saved.' Jesus was saved. This shows how categorically the early Christians did not believe in penal substitutionary atonement. Salvation is not 'from God,' or 'from divine retributive justice,' as if Jesus needed saving 'from God.' Salvation is from the corruption of sin in human nature, the mortality and death that God imposed as a limit, and the powers that be, which support the Empire, human and demonic. And in that sense, yes: Jesus needed saving, too. Jesus 'was saved.'

Jesus says he saved and raised others 'through myself' and 'through my love.' The phrase 'through myself' is remarkable because the new life and transformation come through sharing in the ontological personhood of Jesus, by his Spirit. They do not come through the psychological rationale of debt-forgiveness and relief as in penal substitution.

Jesus united human nature with divine nature in his one person, and then shares himself by the Spirit. Jesus, in and through himself, redeemed human being and reconciled human nature with God, and what Jesus worked out in himself the Spirit works out in us. Reception of this 'blessing' results in 'life' in the Johannine sense: 'Then they received my blessing and lived, and they were gathered to me and were saved' (v.15).

Jesus was also 'justified' (17:2). Ode 17:2 and Ode 31:5 also refer to Jesus himself as being 'justified': 'His face was justified / Because thus His Holy Father had given to him' (31:5). We are justified because Jesus was justified.

Again, this early Christian material shows how thoroughly the early Christians did not believe in penal substitutionary atonement. Lutheran and Reformed theologians typically argue that the believer is 'justified' because of one or both of the following. Christ died to absorb the divine retributive justice that God would have poured out on her or him; this is understood as God imputing sin onto Christ for our sakes, at his cross. This is paired with an imputation in the opposite direction: God imputes onto us the merits of Christ's lived, human righteousness. 'Justification' is thus considered to involve a legal double imputation that only pertains to us, not Jesus. But remarkably, Ode 17 and Ode 31 speak of the Messiah Christ Jesus himself being 'justified.' In fact, as far as Ode 17 and 31 are concerned, Jesus was 'justified' per se at his resurrection.

Ode 17 unquestionably ties 'justification' to resurrection. The speaker is 'crowned by my God' with a crown that 'was living' (v.1). The 'justification' connected to this crowning involves an experience of 'salvation' that 'is incorruptible' (v.2), which refers to resurrection. The odist celebrates new freedom (v.3), and even a new appearance (v.4 – 6), which sounds remarkably like the resurrection appearances of Jesus when he was not recognized by his closest disciples. And so on.

If 'justification' is grounded in resurrection, then it arguably does not sit on top of an exchange between God the Father and Jesus in which some punitive, retributive transaction occurred between them. Something else is at work – something not between divine persons, but within the person of the God-man, Jesus Christ. Jesus had become the true Israelite who circumcised his heart and purified his human nature (Deuteronomy 10:6; 30:6); Jesus had become the truly human one who perfected his humanity by his faithfulness (Hebrews 5:7 – 10).

## **Comments**

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### **Le Falanke:**

As for the Gospel being preached to the dead in 1st Peter 4:6. 2nd Peter 2:4 – 22 illuminates what happened.... Except for the elect, the rest were like dogs who returned to their vomit and stayed in the everlasting darkness waiting for final judgement and the Lake...

### **Mako Nagasawa:**

On the relation between 1 Peter and 2 Peter, your argument is untenable.

1. Peter wrote Letter 1 to a specific audience in Asia Minor that was going through a specific experience: persecution. Peter apparently wrote Letter 2 as a general letter, more closely related to Jude.
2. The logic of 1 Peter is to encourage Christians to keep preaching and testifying, despite the persecution. Jesus is a great example not only because a virtuous death preaches (a major theme of 1 Peter), but because even when Jesus died, he got to preach to more people. And Jesus' preaching gave them a real choice to receive his life, as indicated by the rest of the verse: "that though they are judged in the flesh as people, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God." You are suggesting that Jesus didn't give them a real choice, when Peter says they did. You are also suggesting that Peter wanted to motivate persecuted Christians, and tries to use an example that goes totally sideways.
3. The logic of 2 Peter is "participation in the divine nature" (2 Pet.1:4) and human being – human becoming in the positive. So 2 Peter disproves your assertions about what Ode 17 expresses. Jesus' uniqueness does not rule out our his planting life, virtues, etc. in us by his Spirit (2 Pet.1:5 – 11); Jesus' uniqueness undergirds his very doing so. You are making a false dichotomy there.
4. The logic of 2 Peter is also an exploration of human being – human becoming in the negative. People who do not allow Jesus to purify them, as Jesus purified his own humanity in his transfiguration (2 Pet.1:16 – 18), become more and more corrupted by sin until they become "slaves of corruption" (2 Pet.2:19). But you are conflating physical mortality en toto with the moral conditioning of becoming a slave of corruption. But that is flawed reasoning. And you know it: Because God took Moses' life, too, and a bunch of other people's lives, but was Moses a slave of corruption?
5. Since you seem eager to discuss 2 Peter, please explain how you understand 2 Peter 2:1 – 2. "But false prophets also appeared among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves." PSA advocates have a hard time explaining that one. I'd like to see how you do.

### **Le Falanke:**

Mako Nagasawa again, deal with the text. 2 Peter 2:1 – 3 continues the topic from 2 Peter 1:16 – 21 on prophecy. It's non-sequitur.

2 Peter 2:4 onwards talk about those condemned angels and the dead, which is what 1 Peter 3:19 – 20 and 1 Peter 4:9 deals with.

1 Peter 3:19 – 20 deals with spirit and those of the time of Noah.

2 Peter 2:4 – 22 deals with angels and those of the time of Noah and more...

In the end, the 2 Peter 2:4-22 concludes in vs. 22... these angels and those who sinned in ancient past, returned to vomit like dogs.

It helps me understand... Jesus went down there, and except for the elect... the rest continued to be recalcitrant.

**Mako Nagasawa:**

“again, deal with the text” says the man who can’t process the fact that God took Moses’ life but didn’t condemn Moses to hell. Of course 2 Pet 2:1 – 3 continues the topic from before. But Peter says that Jesus’ atoning work is somehow still applicable to the false teachers who deny Jesus. How can Peter say that if he believed, as you do, that God was only saving “the elect”?

**Le Falanke:**

I think my main point is that when you exegete 1 Peter 3:19-20, 4:9, Ephesians 4:9, Psalms 68, etc... the passage in 2 Peter 2:4 – 22 tells us what happened when He descended. That passage needs to be examined to properly conclude this narrative.

Just IMHO. Not sure why you need to get angry and reserve yourself Gehenna.

**Mako Nagasawa:**

Wrong. See above. And especially: “But you are conflating physical mortality en toto with the moral conditioning of becoming a slave of corruption. But that is flawed reasoning. And you know it: Because God took Moses’ life, too, and a bunch of other people’s lives, but was Moses a slave of corruption?”

**Le Falanke:**

1 Peter 3:19 – 20 deals with spirit and those of the time of Noah.  
2 Peter 2:4 – 22 deals with angels and those of the time of Noah and more...

Hebrews talks about Moses n’ others who had faith in God.

But the rest in this darkness, that Jesus went to, were described with 2 Peter 2:22 “It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A dog returns to its own vomit”, and “A pig, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.”

**Mako Nagasawa:**

Even if Peter believed that all the human victims of the flood and the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah had no chance of receiving Jesus (which I do not believe, see below for why) when Jesus went to them, that sure leaves a lot of other people in Sheol. An enormous number. Those two groups barely scratch the surface of the total population in Sheol. And among those include Egyptian children, many Midianites, many Canaanites, certain Israelites like Aaron’s oldest two sons, Uzzah, etc. God definitely took their lives. But did it mean God consigned them to hell, as if they had no further choice to make about Jesus? I argue not.

Which is why Moses is such a significant counterfactual to your view. Your handwaving about Moses shows the weakness of your case and your resistance to Scripture itself. Moses himself said that God was angry with him (Dt.3:26). Let me underscore: That was \*divine anger\*. And Scripture is clear that God took Moses’ life as a result (Dt.34). Yet God brought up Moses in some way to stand by Jesus’ side (Mt.17). And Moses is not just one guy who should be treated in isolation, textually or theologically. He is the archetypal guy who stood for the Sinai covenant, and all the Israelites who stood within the Sinai covenant. That matters. So even if God took some Israelites’ lives in a direct way (Aaron’s sons, Uzzah, etc.), or if God simply let them die (first gen Israelites; all the Hebrews 11 folks; etc.), it doesn’t rule out the possibility that they had a choice when Jesus encountered them in Sheol. For Moses and Elijah stood by Jesus, and they represent a duality: those asleep in Sheol (under the earth) and the only one taken up in a chariot of fire (in heaven); as much as they represented “Torah” and “Prophets” or anything else.

So when Peter talks about angels and humans, his main point is that God is working out an eventual separation, and it’s an analogy. And these are common stock stories teaching the principle of God working out a separation.



Jesus also used those stories as analogies, and his point was also God working out a separation through opposition. But notice that Jesus applied that analogy to his immediate situation over true vs. false messianic kings, and \*not\* the situation of the early church over true vs. false teachers. Jesus compared his arrival at Jerusalem as king (“the coming of the Son of Man” a la Daniel 7:13 – 14) to the flood of Noah and the destruction of S/G at the time of Lot (Lk.17:26 – 30), saying that Israel will be divided by his coming just as in those past events (Lk.17:31 – 37). These stories served as common stock material.

When Peter talks about the fallen vs. unfallen angels, yes, the fallen angels’ destinies do seem to be final as they are put somewhere (2 Pet.2:4). But the angels do not qualify as the humans who “though they are judged in the flesh as people, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God” (1 Pet.4:6). So you’re making a category mistake by conflating angels to humans.

In Christian tradition, angelic nature and human nature are categorically different, as shown by how our choices impact our natures differently: Angels seem to make one choice for or against God, which then becomes fixed in their natures. Humans, by contrast, do not make only one choice; we make many, and human becoming takes longer because up to the point where we meet Jesus face to face, we are capable of repenting.

So you assume that the Flood and S/G serve as direct examples of those peoples’ final, final destinies. But they do not. They serve as limited analogies of the principle of God working out a separation through opposition. For example, Peter draws out the story of Lot and his separation from Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Pet.2:7 – 8), comparing S/G to the false teachers (2 Pet.2:1 – 3), and their sin-soaked desires (2 Pet.2:10 – 22).

However, unlike Jesus, and even Genesis itself, Peter uses the stories to discuss desires and destiny, and how desires will lead to destiny in an even deeper way than the previous stories of Genesis suggested. The window of knowledge has expanded due to Jesus’ transfiguration and resurrection. Lot’s inner world is curiously not explained by Genesis 19 itself, or even Jesus himself. Nevertheless, Peter’s practical lesson is that God worked with Lot’s desires, and conscience (2 Pet.2:7 – 8), and Lot was “greatly distressed and troubled” regarding S/G. Because Lot’s desires opposed theirs, says Peter, Lot separated from them. Of course, to those Christians who find themselves surrounded by false teachers who teach emotional and sexual self-indulgence, the lesson is certainly to follow one’s conscience and separate in opposition.

But Peter says that people are sinning in deeper and more extreme ways than before. Peter says that in his day, humans are becoming animals. The dog and pig who return to their own vomit are those false teachers or their false disciples (2 Pet.2:22). Not in Noah’s day, nor in Lot’s, were humans becoming less human, and more like “irrational animals, creatures of instinct” (2 Pet.2:12), which eventuates in them becoming vomit-eating animals v.22. Not of Noah’s generation, nor of Lot’s, does Peter say, “For if, after they escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are entangled again in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2 Pet.2:20 – 21). Noah’s generation and the residents of S/G didn’t know Jesus, his way of righteousness, or “the holy commandment.” But these did. So not only are they more accountable; their moral behavior is somehow objectively worse. Peter says his situation now as worse than in the days of Genesis.

Historically, this is also likely. Noah’s generation was violent, and was menacing Noah and his family, the only family of faith left at the time (Gen.5 – 6). Sodom and Gomorrah were tribal city-states who inverted hospitality and used rape as a weapon against “outsiders” (Gen.19), and menaced the family of Abraham and Sarah. Were the false Christian teachers worse than this? Very likely, yes. The false teachers Peter describes show the hallmarks of Gnosticism: far prioritizing the soul over the body, to the point where the body is unimportant, so Gnostic teachers allow the desires of the body to take the uppermost priority. They trafficked in a self-indulgent epicureanism. So yes, the false teachers of Peter’s day were worse than the opponents of the family of faith in Genesis.

For Jewish-Christian followers of Jesus who know the human-animal boundaries from Genesis 1 to say that humans are in danger of becoming animals, that is a terrifying negative destiny for the journey of human being – human becoming. Peter is introducing an insight here. It extends beyond how Genesis relayed its own story, and even how Jesus deployed it in Luke 17.

Peter shows us that in light of Christ, the punishment for sinning has been truly unveiled. It no longer comes externally, like floods and fires. It is fully internal. The punishment for sinning is the desire to sin even more. There is a “punishment” under which the unrighteous are kept “until the day of judgment, especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority” (2 Pet.2:9 – 10). It is the very process of becoming less human and more animalistic. They are becoming, and in some cases, perhaps have already become, “slaves of corruption” (2 Pet.2:19). It is self-blinding, such that they will experience “utter darkness” (2 Pet.2:17), though all around them be the light of Jesus’ purified and transfigured humanity (2 Pet.1:16 – 18), and the bright light of divine fire which will burn away the dross of corruption from the good creation, loosing it and setting it free (2 Pet.3:10). In Genesis, the flood and the fire were external to people. But now in light of Christ, the punishment for sin is purely internal to people. The punishment for sinning is the desire to sin more. At some point in each person’s life, sin becomes an absolute addiction. For God created us to be like Him, and that includes being co-creators of ourselves on the level of our desires and human nature. So in the journey of human being – human becoming, our destinies are the result of our desires, who are shaped by our choices for or against Jesus.

So did Peter believe that the people consumed by the Genesis flood and fire already reject Jesus when he pursued them into Sheol? No. Peter does not know that. That is simply not what Peter means by using the Genesis stories as a backdrop analogy. Which means that they did not for sure reject Jesus in Sheol.