

## Who are ‘The Dead’ and When was the Gospel Preached to Them?: The Interpretation of 1 Pet 4.6

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The interpretation of 1 Pet 4.6 which sees ‘the dead’ as Christians who heard the gospel during their lifetime but who have since died is becoming increasingly widely accepted, especially in recent commentaries in English. William Dalton’s monograph *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits* has been influential in promoting this view. However, despite its current popularity, there are serious problems with this interpretation, especially in its dependence on assuming a primitive eschatological context for 1 Peter. The view of the verse as referring to a proclamation made to people already dead, on the other hand, is more plausible than recent commentators suggest, and can be defended against their criticisms.

### Introduction

Among the difficult passages in 1 Peter, two stand out as particularly enigmatic: 3.18–22 and 4.6. Paul Achtemeier describes the former as ‘the most difficult passage in the entire letter’, while the latter is also ‘replete with difficulties’.<sup>1</sup> Norbert Brox likewise refers to the sentence in 4.6 as ‘extremely difficult’: ‘Er gehört m. E. zu den nicht mehr sicher erklärbaren Texten des 1Petr und ist diesbezüglich noch dunkler als 3,19–22.’<sup>2</sup>

In his review of the history of interpretation of 1 Pet 4.6, William Dalton lists four different proposals.<sup>3</sup> The first is that the verse refers to ‘Christ’s preaching,

1 P. J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 240, 287.

2 N. Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief* (EKK 21; Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/Neukirchener, 1979) 196. Other commentators of course make similar comments, including, for example, E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1952) 314.

3 W. J. Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18–4:6* (2nd edn; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989) 51–60. I. H. Marshall lists three views, in a concise summary of the options, essentially omitting the second view in Dalton’s list (*1 Peter* [Leicester: IVP, 1991] 136–8). On the history of research (especially into 3.19) see also B. Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism: A Study of 1 Pet. III. 19 and Its Context* (ASNU 13; Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1946).

during the three days between his death and resurrection, to all the dead, thus offering to all those who had lived in pre-Christian times the grace of faith and conversion'.<sup>4</sup> This view, Dalton finds, only emerges clearly in 'the writings of liberal Protestants, in the middle of the 19th century' but has been widespread among commentators since then.<sup>5</sup> For sake of conciseness I shall refer to this interpretation as the 'already dead' view, since crucially the proclamation of the gospel is regarded as being made to people already (literally) dead when they heard it.

The second view listed by Dalton is that which takes the verse, as in the first interpretation, to refer to a proclamation of the gospel to the dead by Christ, in the time between (or immediately after) his death and resurrection, but one made only to the righteous of the OT. This is therefore a variation of the 'already dead' view, as summarised above. While Dalton rightly states that 'at the present moment, this interpretation seems to have been largely abandoned', a rather different version of it – one which in most ways fits with the fourth view, listed below – was proposed by J. Ramsay Michaels, in a commentary which appeared just too late for Dalton to discuss.<sup>6</sup>

The third view Dalton mentions is in fact 'the earliest to be explicitly proposed, going back to Clement of Alexandria',<sup>7</sup> and takes the text to refer to the proclamation of the gospel by early Christian apostles and missionaries 'to those who were *spiritually* dead'.<sup>8</sup> However, this is very widely agreed to be unlikely, with the preceding phrase in 4.5 ('the living and the dead') supporting the conviction that 'dead' in v. 6 must refer to the physically dead.<sup>9</sup>

The fourth view Dalton mentions, and the one which he supports, is that 'the dead' referred to in 4.6 'are those Christians, who heard the gospel preached on earth, but died before the writing of the epistle, that is, before the parousia, which

4 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 51.

5 Ibid., 52. E.g. Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits*, 202–10; *idem*, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude* (AB 37; New York: Doubleday, 1964) 119–20; L. Goppelt, *A Commentary on I Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993) 288–91; E. Best, *I Peter* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1971) 156–7; F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter* (3rd edn; Oxford: Blackwell, 1970) 182; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The First Epistle of Peter* (London: SCM, 1950) 90–1.

6 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 54. J. R. Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC 49; Waco, TX: Word, 1988); Dalton's revised second edition appeared in 1989, the first edition having been published in 1965.

7 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 55–6; Goppelt, *I Peter*, 288; Clement of Alexandria, *Fragments* 1.1.18 (ANF 2, p. 572: 'preached also to the dead' – to us, namely, who were at one time unbelievers'); Augustine, *Letters* 164.21 (NPNF 1, p. 521: "preached" in this life "to the dead", that is, to the unbelieving wicked').

8 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 51.

9 Cf. *ibid.*, 57; Goppelt, *I Peter*, 288; Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 196; P. H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 153.

was regarded as imminent'.<sup>10</sup> This interpretation, though 'a late-comer in the tangled scene of the interpretation of 1 Pet 4:6', has gained considerable support in recent decades, not least due to the influence of Dalton's monograph and, somewhat earlier, of E. G. Selwyn's commentary, which also promoted this view.<sup>11</sup> Again for sake of conciseness I shall label this interpretation the 'since died' view, as the crucial point is that the people in view heard the gospel during their lifetime and have since died.

The key debate at present, then, appears to be essentially between two views: one, the 'already dead' view, that the verse refers to a proclamation of the gospel to people already literally dead; the other, the 'since died' view, that the verse concerns the proclamation of the gospel, in the 'normal' manner, by the apostles, early Christian missionaries, or whoever, to converts who have since that time died.

Dalton presents both a critique of the views he rejects and also a positive case in favour of this latter interpretation of 4.6. One of his key arguments, developing points made earlier by Selwyn, is that the two passages, 3.18–22 and 4.6, in fact refer to quite different 'events' and should be interpreted independently, contrary to much exegesis which assumes a common topic.<sup>12</sup> In the case of 3.18–22, Dalton proposes, the meaning can best be illuminated against the background of the narratives in Gen 6–7 and their interpretation in Jewish tradition, especially in *1 Enoch*. The πνεύματα, then, are not the spirits of dead human beings, but are the supernatural angelic beings (or possibly their offspring), referred to in Gen 6.1–4, who were disobedient (3.20; see *1 Enoch* 6–16).<sup>13</sup> These disobedient spirits, according to *1 Enoch* 10 (e.g. v. 13), were locked up in prison, which is therefore where Christ went. And rather than this involving a 'descent', Dalton argues that it is most likely that the writer implies that it was on his post-resurrection ascent that Christ went to this prison. Again the background in the Enochic literature is significant: according to *2 Enoch* 7.1–4 the imprisoned spirits were kept in the 'second heaven'.<sup>14</sup> Like Enoch, according to the legends developed in the pseudepigrapha attributed to him, Christ made a proclamation (ἐκήρυξεν) to these spirits (1 Pet 3.19). This was not a proclamation of the gospel, for which the writer of 1 Peter

<sup>10</sup> Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 57; Selwyn, *First Epistle*, 337–9. Dalton also mentions the earlier work of F. Spitta (*Christi Predigt an die Geister* [Göttingen, 1890]) which suggested this view. On those who have since followed Dalton's view, see below.

<sup>12</sup> Selwyn, *First Epistle*, 313–62 ('each of the two passages admits of a satisfactory explanation separately' [p. 339]); Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 240; also W. J. Dalton 'The Interpretation of 1 Peter 3,19 and 4,6: Light from 2 Peter', *Bib* 60 (1979) 547–55; here 548.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. also Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits*, 90; Selwyn, *First Epistle*, 198–9.

<sup>14</sup> Enoch ascends through ten heavens in *2 Enoch* (see 22.1), and the text mentions seven heavens as having been originally created (30.2–3). Cf. also 2 Cor 12.2.

generally uses the verb εὐαγγελίζω (1.12, 25; 4.6; cf. 4.17), but was rather an announcement of Christ's victory and sovereignty, as the author acclaims it in 3.22.<sup>15</sup> This, Dalton suggests,<sup>16</sup> is more compatible with the interpretation of the same legends found in 2 Pet 2.4–10 and Jude 6, and also fits the context in 1 Peter:<sup>17</sup> the author is not concerned here with the proclamation of the gospel to the ungodly, but rather with the victory of Christ over all hostile powers and the sure salvation for those who believe (see 3.20–1).

When he turns to 1 Pet 4.6, Dalton suggests a quite different interpretation from that which he sees as explaining 3.18–22. Here it is quite clear from the context that the subject is dead human beings (νεκροί), not angelic or evil spirits, and that the *gospel* was proclaimed to them (καὶ νεκροῖς εὐηγγελίσθη). Dalton argues in this case that the dead 'are to be taken as those faithful Christians who heard the gospel in their lifetime but who, in the meantime, have died'.<sup>18</sup> He connects this with the apparent concern among some early Christians about those who had died before Christ's return (1 Thess 4.13–18) and with those who scoff at the promise of that coming (2 Pet 3.3–13).<sup>19</sup> The author's purpose, therefore, is to emphasise to the letter's oppressed recipients the promise of vindication for believers, despite their earthly experiences of hostility and, for some of their number, death.

Dalton's interpretation of both these passages has been broadly followed in most recent commentaries on 1 Peter in English (not always in direct dependence on Dalton), although Dalton himself is candid about the level of confidence that can be attained in the case of 4.6.<sup>20</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, for example, sees this as 'much the most attractive solution', citing Spitta, Moffatt, Selwyn and Dalton as its proponents.<sup>21</sup> Peter Davids, Paul Achtemeier, and John Elliott also argue for this interpretation of 4.6.<sup>22</sup> Michaels presents a variation on this view: he agrees with

15 Cf. also Selwyn, *First Epistle*, 200.

16 See Dalton, 'The Interpretation of 1 Peter 3,19 and 4,6'.

17 Cf. also J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1969) 156–7.

18 Dalton, 'The Interpretation of 1 Peter 3,19 and 4,6', 553–4; cf. *idem*, *Christ's Proclamation*, 225–41.

19 Dalton, 'The Interpretation of 1 Peter 3,19 and 4,6', 553–5; *idem*, *Christ's Proclamation*, 226–9.

20 'In all fairness, the notorious difficulty of the passage should be remembered. It is quite plain that not all difficulties will disappear in the interpretation proposed here' (Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 230).

21 Kelly, *Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 174.

22 Davids (*First Epistle*, 153–5) does so without reference to Dalton; Achtemeier (*1 Peter*, 286–91) and J. H. Elliott (*1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 37B; Doubleday: New York, 2000] 730–42) cite Dalton among various authors in mounting their own arguments for this view.

Dalton 'that "the dead" in v 6 are Christians who heard the gospel *in their lifetime*', but argues that this refers to 'the righteous of Israel's past' who 'are freely regarded as Christians before the coming of Christ'.<sup>23</sup> Michaels therefore combines aspects of the second and fourth views listed above, but crucially sides with the 'since died' view in rejecting the idea of any proclamation of the gospel to people already dead. The most awkward point of this suggestion is probably the requirement to take the verb εὐαγγελίζεῖν to refer to a proclamation of the gospel prior to the coming of Christ, despite the parallels Michaels notes in Heb 4.2, 6 and Gal 3.8, since the verb elsewhere in 1 Peter clearly refers to proclamation in the time of the letter's addressees (cf. 1.12, 25).<sup>24</sup> German commentators, as Dalton notes in the second edition of his monograph, have taken somewhat less account of his arguments and generally follow the 'already dead' interpretation of 4.6.<sup>25</sup>

My own view is that Dalton's arguments are much more persuasive in the case of 3.18–22 than in that of 4.6, hence the focus in this article on the latter passage alone.<sup>26</sup> I shall raise critical questions about the plausibility of the 'since died' interpretation of 4.6 supported by Dalton and developed in the major recent commentaries, and present some counter-arguments in favour of the view of 4.6 as a reference to the proclamation of the gospel to people already dead. Since the 'since died' view of 4.6 seems to be gaining increasingly widespread acceptance, it is important to draw attention to its weaknesses and to consider how far a different view might be more compelling.

### Primitive eschatology

A major and decisive difficulty with Dalton's argument is the attempt to interpret the text against a background similar to that reflected in 1 Thess 4–5, namely one in which the death of some believers before the anticipated return of Christ is a cause of anxiety. Selwyn had earlier suggested that the problem in view in 1 Pet 4.6 is the same as that alluded to in 1 Thess 4.13–18. Indeed, Selwyn saw extensive points of contact between the two epistles, which bolstered his theory concerning Silvanus's major role in the writing of 1 Peter.<sup>27</sup> Dalton likewise suggests that the 'context of thought [of 1 Pet 4.6] seems to be similar to that of 1 Thes

<sup>23</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter*, 237, my emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 22. E.g. Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 288–91; Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 196–201; H. Frankemölle, *1. Petrusbrief*, *2. Petrusbrief*, *Judasbrief* (NEB; Würzburg: Echter, 1987) 62–3; O. Knoch, *Der erste und zweite Petrusbrief; Der Judasbrief* (RNT; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1990) 110–11.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. D. G. Horrell, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude* (London: Epworth, 1998) 69–74, 77–80, where I broadly follow Dalton on 3.18–22 but not on 4.6.

<sup>27</sup> Selwyn, *First Epistle*, 338; cf. 9–17, 20, 365–466.

4:13–18, in the setting of a lively expectation of the imminent coming of the Lord'.<sup>28</sup> More recently, Elliott also asserts that the 'situation envisioned [in 1 Pet 4.6] is thus similar to the situation presupposed in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 4:13–18)'.<sup>29</sup>

The first problem for this view is the simple but rather crucial fact that there is no evidence of a concern about Christians who have died before the parousia in 1 Peter. Dalton admits: 'The problem of the Thessalonians about Christians who have died does not arise explicitly in 1 Peter.' But he then rather weakly suggests: 'Yet the background is very similar.'<sup>30</sup> Paul Achtemeier, while favouring Dalton's interpretation of 4.6, also concedes that 'there is no indication in the immediate context of this verse, or in the letter as a whole, that this [concern for Christians who had died] had been a problem for the Christians in Asia Minor'.<sup>31</sup> Dalton's attempt to shed light on this verse by looking to the arguments of 2 Peter against those who live wickedly and deny the parousia faces two problems.<sup>32</sup> First, just as there is no explicit concern in 1 Peter about the issue faced in 1 Thessalonians, so there is also no evident concern in the letter about the delay or non-occurrence of the parousia, although 1 Peter does express the eschatological hope that this day is near (1.5; 4.12, 17).<sup>33</sup> Second, Dalton conflates two distinct problems; a concern about the fate of believers who have died prior to an expected parousia is not the same as a concern about whether this parousia is going to occur at all, in the near (or even distant) future. The former concern is based on the notion that someone who has died might have missed out on the salvation to be attained at the parousia; the latter does not see the death of some Christians as in itself problematic, but rather faces the obvious problem that the considerable delay of an event expected soon leads to doubts about whether it will ever materialise. One is the issue of concern in 1 Thessalonians, the other in 2 Peter; but neither is evident as a concern in 1 Peter.

As Richard Bauckham has suggested, the problem that 2 Peter addresses could plausibly arise near the end of the first Christian generation, sometime around 80–90 CE when virtually *all* of the first generation of believers had died.<sup>34</sup> The problems which 1 Thessalonians addresses are quite different, and only make

<sup>28</sup> Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 58; cf. 226–8.

<sup>29</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter*, 734.

<sup>30</sup> Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 228.

<sup>31</sup> Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 290.

<sup>32</sup> Dalton, 'The Interpretation of 1 Peter 3,19 and 4,6', 553–5.

<sup>33</sup> Pace D. C. Parker, 'The Eschatology of 1 Peter', *BTB* 24 (1994) 27–32, who attempts to show that an imminent future eschatological expectation is not present in the letter.

<sup>34</sup> R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC 50; Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 158. Cf. 2 Pet 3.4, and the reference to the time when 'the fathers fell asleep', generally taken as a reference to the first, founding generation of Christians.

sense in the earliest years of the Christian movement, when the death of *any* member of the first-generation community might be perceived as a problem – have such people therefore missed out on the salvation imminently expected?<sup>35</sup> The denial of the resurrection at Corinth, some years after 1 Thessalonians,<sup>36</sup> could of course reflect a view that ‘the dead in Christ have perished’ (1 Cor 15.18), though it seems more likely that the Corinthians denied only the idea of future resurrection, and not immortality itself (cf. 1 Cor 15.29). In any case, there is no evidence that denial of the resurrection was an issue for 1 Peter.

A serious problem for the ‘since died’ view of 1 Pet 4.6, then, is whether 1 Peter could possibly be early enough to be contextualised in a scenario like 1 Thessalonians. Dalton is clear that 1 Peter should indeed be interpreted in the context of ‘the eschatological expectations of the primitive church’,<sup>37</sup> recognising that this requires an early date for 1 Peter (how early he does not specify).<sup>38</sup> He finds the evidence overall to favour the letter’s authenticity and (thus) relatively early date. Selwyn also argued for a relatively early date (63–64 CE).<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, even an authentic 1 Peter written in the early 60s is too late to plausibly reflect the scenario presumed by 1 Thessalonians, where the time gap between Christ’s resurrection and his parousia is believed to be so short that the deaths of even some of the first believers causes surprise and concern. Even 10 or 20 years marks a significant extension of this timetable.<sup>40</sup>

The problem is even more acute for commentators such as Achtemeier and Elliott, who favour a similar view to Dalton, but take 1 Peter as a pseudonymous

35 Cf. the arguments of G. Lüdemann, *Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles: Studies in Chronology* (London: SCM, 1984) 201–61, that the situation presupposed by 1 Thess 4.13–18 must be significantly earlier than that assumed in 1 Cor 15.51–2, even though the latter still has a sense of imminent expectation (‘we will not all die . . .’).

36 On Lüdemann’s view, there is a gap of around 8–11 years between the two epistles; more conventional chronologies suggest around 3–5 years (see Lüdemann, *Paul*, 262–3, etc.).

37 Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation*, 226.

38 Ibid., 58 n. 38: ‘If 1 Peter is a late document, then it would be difficult to use 1 Thessalonians to elucidate it. But if 1 Peter is an early document, in which the many references to the imminent coming of the Lord are taken realistically, then its affinity with 1 Thessalonians is obvious.’ For Dalton’s views on the authorship of the epistle, see *Christ’s Proclamation*, 77–91.

39 Selwyn, *First Epistle*, 62.

40 Lüdemann proposes c.41 CE as the likely date for 1 Thessalonians, thus challenging the usual view of around 49–51. John Knox broadly agrees with Lüdemann’s scheme, but suggests that 43 is the earliest realistic date for 1 Thessalonians and Paul’s mission at Corinth (J. Knox, ‘Chapters in a Life of Paul – A Response to Robert Jewett and Gerd Lüdemann’, in B. Corley [ed.], *Colloquy on New Testament Studies* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983] 339–64, here 357–61). See further D. G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996) 73–4, in support of this early dating.

composition written in the last quarter of the first century.<sup>41</sup> While Dalton recognises that his proposal can only stand on the basis of an early date for 1 Peter, Achtemeier and Elliott reject the arguments for an early date and for Petrine authorship without perceiving the difficulty this thus creates for their favoured interpretation of 4.6. The basic point is simply expressed by Goppelt, who dates 1 Peter between 65 and 80, somewhat earlier than Achtemeier and Elliott: 'the death of Christians before the parousia is for the generation of 1 Peter no longer a pressing concern, as it was for the Thessalonian church'.<sup>42</sup> Since such a concern is neither explicitly evident in 1 Peter nor plausible at its likely time of composition, serious questions are raised over a key foundation of the 'since died' view.

### Literary context

Leaving aside questions over the eschatological scenario that is envisaged, another key argument of Dalton, Achtemeier, Elliott and others is that their proposed interpretation makes best sense of the verse within its immediate and wider context in the letter, taking into account 1 Peter's pastoral intentions and theological emphases. 'Only on this view', Howard Marshall writes, 'does the verse make sense in the context.'<sup>43</sup> It is suggested that the literary context provides crucial support for the 'since died' interpretation, and renders highly implausible the view that 4.6 refers to a universal proclamation of the gospel to the dead. (Since, on Dalton's view, 3.18–22 and 4.6 refer to quite different events, the scenario of 3.18–22 should not influence the reading of 4.6.) The main concern of the letter, it is pointed out, is to encourage Christians suffering hostility for their faith to persevere, with confidence in their 'living hope' (1.3).<sup>44</sup> The immediate context leading up to 4.6 specifically stresses 'the contrast between the unbelieving pagans and the Christians', concluding, Dalton says, 'with the condemnation of the pagans'. Thus, he suggests, 'surely we would expect the preaching of Christ and the eschatological life of 4:6 to refer to the vindication of Christians'.<sup>45</sup> Achtemeier similarly interprets the significance of 4.6 in its context: 'Christians, who had suffered not only the obloquy of their contemporaries but also the fate of death that seemed to demonstrate the fruitlessness of the life of self-denial they led (v. 4), may nevertheless look forward to vindication in the final judgement.'<sup>46</sup> Elliott also

41 See Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 1–50 (80–100 CE); Elliott, *1 Peter*, 118–38 (73–92 CE). This view of the date and authorship of the letter is widely held among recent exegetes (cf. Elliott, *1 Peter*, 138 n. 47).

42 Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 289.

43 Marshall, *1 Peter*, 139. Cf. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 60.

44 Cf., e.g., Elliott, *1 Peter*, 734; Kelly, *Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 174–5.

45 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 228.

46 Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 290.



affirms that '[t]he point of 4:6 is not the universal judgment and salvation of all but the vindication of oppressed believers'.<sup>47</sup> For Elliott, 'the notion of a second opportunity for repentance and life offered to those who died before Christ . . . is thoroughly inconsistent with the theology, ethics, and aim of 1 Peter as a whole'.<sup>48</sup> The possibility of a 'second chance', Elliott asserts, 'would contradict clearer statements in the letter (1:3–4, 3:10, 4:5, 18; and 5:8) and would hardly be an encouragement for suffering addressees in the present'.<sup>49</sup>

Certainly Dalton, Elliott and Achtemeier are right to point to 1 Peter's general concern to encourage Christian believers suffering hostility in their 'pagan' environment: there is much in the letter that serves as a reminder of the sure and certain hope that awaits those who have placed their faith in God (1.3–9; etc.). However, as suggested above, it seems unlikely that the author of 1 Peter would need to assure his readers specifically that those who had died, negatively judged by their contemporaries, had not missed their salvation but would inherit life: there is no indication that the readers of 1 Peter doubted this. More particularly, we need to consider whether this is the likely function of v. 6 in its immediate context. Many commentators agree, though they vary in the ways in which they stress this, that v. 6 provides a supporting reason for the statement made in v. 5 – hence the γάρ in the introductory phrase, which most exegetes see as linking v. 6 with what precedes, while εἰς τοῦτο points forward to the ἵνα clause.<sup>50</sup> This means, as Michaels notes, that v. 6 is something of a 'postscript' rather than a central point in this paragraph.<sup>51</sup> If, then, the point of the verse is primarily to support the statement in v. 5 – that God stands ready to judge the living and the dead – then the immediate context could just as well lead us to see v. 6 as a statement about the universal announcement of the gospel as to see it as a promise of vindication for dead Christians: God can justly judge all people, both the living and the dead, since the gospel has been announced to all, to the dead as well as to the living.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, while Dalton is right to insist that 3.18–22 and 4.6 describe

<sup>47</sup> Elliott, *1 Peter*, 742.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 731.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 733. Elliott refers here to Best, *1 Peter*, 156, who cites these texts as indications that 'in the letter death apparently settles the fate of men'.

<sup>50</sup> E.g. Selwyn, *First Epistle*, 214; Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 231; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 286–7 et al. Michaels, *1 Peter*, 236, notes the precise parallel in Rom 14.9. Elliott, *1 Peter*, 731, sees the whole phrase εἰς τοῦτο γάρ as 'supporting a preceding point', on analogy with 1 Pet 2.21.

<sup>51</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter*, 225: 'In its context this verse is merely a postscript to the phrase, "the living and the dead", with which v. 5 concludes.' Cf. p. 235: 'merely a footnote to v. 5'.

<sup>52</sup> Cf., e.g., Knoch, *Petrusbrief*, 110: 'Die Absicht der Aussage ist deutlich: Ein gerechtes Gericht über die Toten ist nur möglich, wenn sie auch wußten, worauf es vor Gott ankam und so die Möglichkeit hatten, sich zu entscheiden.' Also Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 199; C. Spicq, *Les Épîtres de Saint Pierre* (Paris: Gabalda, 1966) 147.

different events and that 4.6 should not be interpreted directly in the light of 3.18–22, nevertheless 3.18–22 does show that the author of 1 Peter conceives of a proclamation made by the crucified and risen Christ in a realm other than that of the world of living humanity. This adds plausibility to the view that 4.6, while describing a different event, may also refer to a proclamation somewhere other than in the realm of the living.

This interpretation of the verse would not by any means run as counter to the theology of 1 Peter as Elliott claims. Despite the general concern of the letter to reassure suffering Christians, other aspects of its message are also noteworthy. There is the clear concern to urge believers to 'do good', an ethical imperative which is motivated in a variety of ways.<sup>53</sup> This motivation includes, significantly, a stress upon the *impartiality* of God's judgment (1.17; cf. 2.23; 4.17–18) which serves as a warning, even a 'threat', to believers.<sup>54</sup> Also significant is a deliberate reticence about specifying the fate of unbelievers. Certainly the author is clear that the sinful practices that characterise τὰ ἔθνη (4.3) are such as to incur the (negative) judgment of God. But he nowhere depicts their condemnation as a foregone conclusion, neither, *pace* Dalton, in 4.1–6 ('the condemnation of the pagans'; see n. 45 above), nor, *pace* Elliott, by explicitly excluding the idea of a 'second chance' (see n. 49). The verses cited by Elliott and Best as 'contradicting' this idea – 1.3–4; 3.10; 4.5, 18; 5.8 – all refer to the value of the believers' faith, or to the need to turn from evil and do good, but they nowhere rule out the possibility of conversion and salvation for sinners, before or after death, nor do they specifically exclude the idea of a 'second chance' (this is simply not an issue to which they refer). Moreover, it is not necessarily a 'second chance' that 4.6 has in view, even on the 'already dead' view: if, as Best suggests, 'the preaching of 4:6 is envisaged as having taken place once only in the past it would not suggest to persecuted believers that they [or their pagan opponents] would have a second chance after death'.<sup>55</sup> It is also relevant to note that the author displays some optimism about the possibility that the believers' testimony may lead their sinful contemporaries to realise their errors and acknowledge God, even if this does not occur until the day of God's final coming in judgment and salvation, ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ἐπισκοπῆς (2.12 [cf. Isa 10.3]; 3.1–2; 3.15–16; cf. 2 Pet 3.9). And rather than declare the fate of the believers' opponents as sealed, he shows a certain 'reluctance to fasten in detail on the fate of the ungodly', apparent in 3.12, 3.16, 4.5 and 4.18.<sup>56</sup> Most notable here is 3.12, the concluding part of arguably the pivotal OT quotation in the letter (Ps

53 See further L. Thurén, *Argument and Theology in 1 Peter* (JSNTSup 114; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995).

54 Ibid., 113.

55 Best, *1 Peter*, 156–7; thus Best argues that the 'already dead' view of 4.6 can be defended against this objection.

56 Michaels, *1 Peter*, 182.

33.13–17 LXX).<sup>57</sup> Having followed the LXX text very closely in 3.10–11, the author quotes the LXX precisely in 3.12 (= Ps 33.16–17 LXX) but deliberately (one must surely assume) omits the concluding phrase ἐξολεθρεῦσαι ἐκ γῆς τὸ μνημόσυνον αὐτῶν ('to destroy the memory of them from the earth').<sup>58</sup> Thus the author of 1 Peter can hardly be said to focus consistently on the vindication of believers and the condemnation of unbelievers: there is a clear tendency to avoid definite statements regarding the latter.

Since 4.6 seems to provide justification for the statement about God's readiness for universal judgment of the living and the dead, and since an emphasis on God's impartial judgment of all and a reticence to declare as to the final fate of unbelievers are apparent elsewhere in the letter, it is by no means clear that the literary context speaks in favour of the 'since died' interpretation. On the contrary, on the 'already dead' interpretation, while the verse remains enigmatic, it would cohere well with its immediate and wider literary context.

### The grammar of 1 Pet 4.6

Certain aspects of the Greek of v. 6 are particularly relevant to the discussion here. And given the obscurities of the text, we do well to share Dalton's candid acknowledgement that difficulties remain for any of the interpretations proposed, including his own.<sup>59</sup> For example, as Dalton concedes, it is somewhat unnatural to take the phrase καὶ νεκροῖς εὐηγγελίσθη to mean that the gospel was preached to people who since hearing it have died.<sup>60</sup> The καί in particular, here meaning 'also', or 'even', suggests something rather distinct or different from the usual proclamation to the living. Kelly, moreover, while following Dalton's interpretation, suggests that the aorist here implies a 'definite occasion', which fits ill with his view that what is implied here is the proclamation of the gospel (over a period of time in various places) to converts who have since died.<sup>61</sup> Also a 'severe problem' for Dalton's view is the fact that since the phrase 'the living and the dead' in v. 5 has a

<sup>57</sup> My research student Susan Woan, studying the use of the OT in 1 Peter, has highlighted the key role this quotation plays in 1 Peter, e.g. in 'The Janus Factor – An Exploration of the Role of Psalm 34 in 1 Peter' (unpublished paper presented at the Old Testament in the New Testament Conference, Hawarden, 2001). To a strictly limited extent this revives Bornemann's thesis regarding the centrality of Ps 34 to 1 Peter, though many aspects of Bornemann's case remain implausible; see W. Bornemann, 'Der erste Petrusbrief – eine Taufrede des Silvanus?', *ZNW* 19 (1920) 143–65.

<sup>58</sup> This phrase is included in the citation of the same section of Ps 34 in 1 Clem 22.6 and was later added to some MSS of 1 Peter.

<sup>59</sup> Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 230 (quoted above; see n. 20).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Kelly, *Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 173; cf. 174.

general reference, we should expect the same to be true of 'dead' in v. 6: '[i]t seems quite arbitrary to limit the dead of 4:6 to the Christian dead'.<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, however, there are at least two potential difficulties for the view that the verse refers to a proclamation made to those already dead at the time. The first concerns the passive verb ἐὺηγγελίσθη. If this passive is personal<sup>63</sup> – 'he [Christ] was proclaimed' – then the difficulty is whether it is possible to regard the proclamation as having also been made by Christ, as is generally assumed on the 'already dead' view (cf. the explicit naming of Christ in 3.18–19). It is possible that the author thinks of other agents as those who announced the gospel to the dead, but this would be a speculative solution. The idea that Christ proclaimed the good news about Christ may seem awkward; but it is not perhaps as awkward as Dalton suggests.<sup>64</sup> If Christ can announce his own victory to the imprisoned spirits in 3.18–19 then the idea of Christ announcing the good news about himself to the human dead is no less plausible. It is also certainly possible to treat the verb as an impersonal passive 'good news was proclaimed', even though the impersonal passive is uncommon in the NT, in which case the problem disappears.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, this is proposed by a number of commentators, including some who take the 'since died' view.<sup>66</sup> Either way, this does not seem an insuperable difficulty.

The second difficulty concerns the interpretation of the two subjunctive verbs in the ἵνα clause. This remains the most difficult point for the 'preached to the dead' interpretation. Dalton firmly asserts: 'the grammar of the passage requires that the action of the verbs in both the μέν and the δέ clauses should follow that of the main verb'.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Eduard Schweizer declared this to be the real crux,<sup>68</sup> at least for those who support the interpretation that sees the gospel as proclaimed to those who had already died, since on this reading the judgement 'in the flesh' – the negative judgement of their human contemporaries

62 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 59; cf. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 290. However, Dalton addresses this issue on p. 237.

63 As is argued by Selwyn (*First Epistle*, 214), Dalton (*Christ's Proclamation*, 232–3) and others. Dalton cites 1 Tim 3.16 as a parallel supporting this view.

64 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 233: 'Actually, if Christ is the subject of "was preached", then we are surely justified in concluding that the preaching was not done by Christ himself but by others.' Cf. also Best, *1 Peter*, 155.

65 Cf. Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 288 n. 56; Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 232; BDF, 72 (§130). Dalton describes this use as 'very rare in the New Testament', citing only BDF in support, where the claim is in fact that '[t]he impersonal passive ... is not common in the NT'. Goppelt and Dalton cite Rom 10.10 as the only relevant NT parallel to the impersonal use of the passive.

66 E.g. Elliott, *1 Peter*, 732; Davids, *First Epistle*, 154 with n. 20 (both of whom take the 'since died' view); also Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 288.

67 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 240.

68 E. Schweizer, '1. Petrus 4, 6', *TZ* 8 (1952) 152–4; here 153.

(κατὰ ἀνθρώπους)<sup>69</sup> – must have preceded the evangelisation. In that case, as Schweizer notes, ‘dann muß man übersetzen, wie wenn κριθέντες dastünde’.<sup>70</sup> Schweizer’s solution is to regard the ἵνα as causal rather than final, such that it can designate ‘eine in der Vergangenheit liegende Ursache’. Thus he suggests that past (judgement) and future (life) can be implied after the same conjunction, as in his translation: ‘Darum nämlich wurde auch Toten verkündet, weil sie zwar nach Menschenweise im Fleisch gerichtet wurden, nach Gottesweise aber im Geist leben sollen’.<sup>71</sup> Yet reading the ἵνα as causal is difficult,<sup>72</sup> as a sense of purpose seems so clearly to link ‘the gospel was proclaimed’ with ‘in order that they might live’.

The difficulty with this phrase is eased to some degree by the widespread agreement that the μέν ... δέ construction ‘indicates that the first half (μέν) is to be understood as subordinate to the second half (δέ) and hence carries a concessive force’.<sup>73</sup> As Ceslas Spicq remarks, the first half of the phrase, which he translates ‘ayant été jugés ...’, ‘n’est qu’une parenthèse’.<sup>74</sup> This view of the relation of the two parts of the phrase may also be indicated by the choice of tenses, κριθῶσι (aorist) and ζῶσι (present), if we follow Stanley Porter’s view of the aorist as the ‘background’ tense, generally used of actions regarded as complete, and of the present as the ‘foreground’ tense, generally used of actions regarded as ongoing.<sup>75</sup> Regarding the ‘judgment’ phrase as parenthetical also avoids the strange notion that the gospel was proclaimed to the dead ‘in order that they might be judged ...’.<sup>76</sup> Thus even Dalton translates: ‘In order that though judged in the flesh in the eyes of people they might live in the spirit in the eyes of God’.<sup>77</sup> The crucial question then is whether the concessive, parenthetical half of the phrase can legitimately be taken as having occurred prior to the evangelisation, the purpose of which is clearly that the dead ‘might live in the spirit’. Since the ‘judgment’ part of

69 Perhaps implying the idea that death itself was regarded as (negative) judgment, from a human perspective (so e.g. Kelly, *Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 172); cf. Wisd 3.1–4, to which many commentators point in connection with this verse.

70 Schweizer, ‘1. Petrus 4, 6’, 153; cf. Beare, *First Epistle*, 182.

71 Schweizer, ‘1. Petrus 4, 6’, 153.

72 Note Dalton’s critical remarks (*Christ’s Proclamation*, 240 n. 96).

73 Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 287; cf. Michaels, *1 Peter*, 238, and many others.

74 Spicq, *Épîtres de Saint Pierre*, 147. Cf. Selwyn, *First Epistle*, 215, who also regards it as ‘parenthetical’.

75 S. E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (2nd edn; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994) 23, 29, 35. This seems preferable, especially in view of the fact that the verbs are subjunctive in mood, to Elliott’s suggestion that the aorist tense of κριθῶσι implies ‘an event of the past’ (*1 Peter*, 736).

76 As in KJV, and cf. Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 197; note the critical comments of Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation*, 239 nn. 94–95.

77 Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation*, 236, 239.

the phrase seems so clearly to be parenthetical, the judgment being a matter of human perspective,<sup>78</sup> and since the real weight of the purpose clause falls entirely on the second part of the phrase, 'so that they might live', this does indeed seem plausible, as many translations imply.<sup>79</sup> While this would indeed have been clearer had the author used an aorist or perfect participle instead of the subjunctive κριθῶσι, the μέν . . . δέ construction together with the distinction of tenses may give us enough grounds for accepting the idea that the judgment occurred before the evangelisation, if this can be shown on other grounds to be a plausible reading of the verse.

### NT theology

Further arguments against the 'already dead' interpretation of 1 Pet 4.6 are said to derive from the wider context of NT theology. There are several points raised in this connection. One is that if the gospel was preached to the dead this would seem to imply a 'notion of disembodied souls in Hades' which 'is a view of the afterlife quite absent from the NT'.<sup>80</sup> Another is that 'the idea of preaching to souls in the world of the dead (apart from this text under discussion) is due to later speculations and has no roots in the New Testament . . . the normal meaning of the term, "preach the gospel", would imply the possible conversion of these souls. Such an idea is alien to the rest of the New Testament, which insists on this life as the arena where eternal life is decided.'<sup>81</sup> Achtemeier mentions two further points: if the proclamation of the gospel to the dead is meant to justify God's universal judgment, then 'what of those who have died *since* the advent of Christ without hearing the gospel?' And 'if v. 6 refers to the final judgment, there will be no condemnation involved in it . . . That is once more an idea quite foreign to the NT, where the final judgment is a time of separation of good from evil.'<sup>82</sup>

The last two points can perhaps be dealt with briefly. It is quite possible that the author of 1 Peter has in mind some proclamation of the gospel to the dead – meaning (perhaps) all those who had lived and died before Christ – without considering the question concerning those who came afterwards, in the era when the gospel was announced on the earth. Other NT authors envisage the gospel as

78 Or even brought about by the Christians' Gentile accusers, as Elliott suggests (*1 Peter*, 735–8); cf. also Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 237.

79 E.g. NRSV, which renders κριθῶσι as a pluperfect: 'though they had been judged in the flesh . . . they might live'. RSV and Dalton's translations etc. allow this interpretation in English, though without necessarily implying it.

80 Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 289.

81 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 234–5; also Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 289.

82 Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 289.

having been ‘fully proclaimed’ (Rom 15.19; cf. 10.18),<sup>83</sup> and proclaimed indeed to ‘all creation’ (Col 1.23),<sup>84</sup> and think in terms of corporate groups or types of people, without raising our questions about the possible fate of each individual at different or subsequent points in time (Rom 11.25–6). Concerning the apparent absence of condemnation from the final divine judgment in v. 6 a number of comments may be made. The author does not actually declare that *all* the dead will ‘live in the spirit’ but only that this is the purpose of the proclamation of the gospel; the extent of a response, if any, is not specified. This actually fits well with the tendency of the author of 1 Peter, as noted above, *not* to specify the fate of unbelievers, nor to fasten on the details of their condemnation. And the idea that God’s *purpose* is to provide for the salvation of all is by no means absent from the NT, Rom 11.25–36 being probably the clearest expression of it.<sup>85</sup>

In response to the point concerning the absence from the NT of the idea of ‘disembodied souls in Hades’ it may first be noted that the author of 1 Peter does not actually specify the form or the place in which ‘the dead’ are envisaged. Nevertheless, even if we grant that the thought may be of ‘disembodied souls in Hades’ this conception of life beyond death (but before the final day of judgment and resurrection) is by no means as ‘absent’ from the NT as Achtemeier suggests. The reference to Hades as the location of the dead in Luke 16.23 is relevant, though Luke would here support Achtemeier and Dalton’s other point, namely that post-death conversion is an impossibility (cf. Luke 16.26). The picture in Rev 20.13 is, however, rather different: ὁ θάνατος καὶ ὁ ᾄδης ἔδωκαν τοὺς νεκροὺς τοὺς ἐν αὐτοῖς, καὶ ἐκρίθησαν ἕκαστος κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν. Here Hades is the place of the dead *prior* to the final judgment, the outcome of which may or may not prove favourable to the dead: death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire, along with ‘anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life’ (Rev 20.14–15). Moreover, according to David Aune, the conception of ψυχή in Revelation is of ‘an essence which differs from the body and is not dissolved by death’; the ψυχή is ‘(presumably) disembodied’ (see Rev 6.9–11; 20.4–6).<sup>86</sup> In Revelation, the ‘souls’ of those martyred for Christ’s sake are not in Hades but beneath the altar of God, that is, in heaven (or one of the heavens of Jewish cosmology), but they are in something of a special category. As we have already seen, ‘the dead’ – that is, οἱ

83 Cf. Best, *1 Peter*, 157.

84 Spicq, *Épîtres de Saint Pierre*, 146, regards this as without doubt the best parallel to 1 Pet 4.6a.

85 Cf. also John 3.17. Spicq, *Épîtres de Saint Pierre*, 147, comments on 1 Pet 4.6: ‘le but de l’intervention suprême du Christ n’est pas de juger et de condamner, mais de donner la vie éternelle. . .’ and cites the parallel in John 3.

86 D. E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (WBC 52B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 404, quoting Thayer’s Lexicon, and citing *Diogn* 6.1–9; *Wisd* 3.1. J.H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889) 677.

λοιποὶ τῶν νεκρῶν as Rev 20.5 puts it – are indeed depicted as in Hades, awaiting the final judgment.

That leaves us with the final objection, that any idea of post-death conversion is foreign to the NT. There are indeed NT indications that such conversion is regarded as impossible (Luke 16.26) – although, *pace* Dalton, Heb 9.27 does not explicitly make this point<sup>87</sup> – just as some NT authors regard (re)conversion after apostasy as impossible (Heb 6.4–6). But there are some, admittedly enigmatic, NT references which should be considered in this connection.<sup>88</sup>

One such reference is 1 Cor 15.29 (οἱ βαπτίζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν).<sup>89</sup> There have been many different attempts to explain the curious practice Paul alludes to here, the details of which are likely permanently to elude us, but there are good grounds on which to conclude that it is some form of vicarious baptism.<sup>90</sup> In a monograph on the subject Mathis Rissi argued that the specific idea of such a form of baptism was unlikely to have been derived directly from either a Jewish or a pagan background, but that what does come clearly from this 'Vorstellungswelt' is the belief 'dass eine Beeinflussung des Schicksals der Abgeschiedenen durch Lebende möglich ist'.<sup>91</sup> The well-known parallel in 2 Macc 12.43–5, for example, does not relate to the act of baptism specifically, but rather shows that the fate of the dead (at the future resurrection, which is the crucial point for Paul) could be affected positively by the actions of the living ὑπὲρ νεκρῶν (2 Macc 12.43–4).<sup>92</sup> Having acknowledged the Corinthian practice as a form of vicarious baptism, Rissi struggles to discern a form in which Paul could possibly have countenanced this 'magical' rite, given a rather orthodox Protestant reading of a Paul for whom baptism could only reflect an appropriation by *faith* of what has happened in the death and resurrection of Christ. Rissi therefore proposes that this baptism was undertaken on behalf of those who had believed but died unbaptized, a form of vicarious baptism that Paul could tolerate.<sup>93</sup> This solution, however, arises more

87 Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation*, 235. However, this verse does not actually concern itself with the possibility or otherwise of post-death conversion, which it rules neither out nor in, but only with the assertion that human beings only die once and that after death comes judgment, thus supporting the author's point that Christ only need die once to deal with sin once and for all (vv. 25–8) and when he comes again will come as bringer of (final) salvation. For Hebrews, of course, conversion can happen only once, whether one is thereafter dead or alive: apostates cannot reconvert (Heb 6.4–6).

88 For a fuller treatment of this subject, see the recent monograph by J. A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (Oxford: OUP, 2001) 33–47.

89 Neither Dalton nor Achtemeier makes any reference to this verse.

90 See most recently N. H. Taylor, 'Baptism for the Dead? (1 Cor 15.29)', *Neotestamentica* 36 (2002), forthcoming.

91 M. Rissi, *Die Taufe für die Toten* (ATANT 42; Zürich, Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1962) 65.

92 See *Ibid.*, 59–62; Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 26–30.

93 Rissi, *Taufe für die Toten*, 68–92.



from the awkward conjunction of the apparent practice of vicarious baptism and a Paul seen as a proponent of Protestant orthodoxy than from the evidence of the text.<sup>94</sup> Richard DeMaris's valuable study of the Corinthian custom stresses the contemporary preoccupation with the world of the dead and with seeking to ensure the safety and welfare of the deceased; he rightly warns against attempts to remove the 'magical' or 'superstitious' aspects of the ritual.<sup>95</sup>

The crucial point in this context is that the Corinthians' baptism for the dead is a practice that is believed to make some difference to the fate of the dead, to effect or ensure their transfer to salvation. This is, of course, somewhat different from the notion of the dead having an opportunity to respond to the gospel – the kind of idea that may be hinted at in 1 Pet 4.6 – but it is relevant enough to cast considerable doubt over Dalton's assertion that notions of post-death conversion/initiation are entirely absent from the NT. Also relevant are other NT texts that may indicate an emerging belief that the universal proclamation of the gospel encompasses more than the realm of living humanity. Col 1.23 has already been mentioned, with its acclamation of the gospel's announcement to 'all creation' (ἐν πάσῃ κτίσει), and Eph 4.8–10 may also be pertinent, with its reference to Christ's descent εἰς τὰ κατώτερα.

More crucial still is John 5.25–9, which Dalton nowhere mentions.<sup>96</sup> Even if 'the dead' in v. 25 are those who are spiritually and not physically dead, this can hardly be true of those who are in their graves and will hear the Son's voice (πάντες οἱ ἐν τοῖς μνημείοις, v. 28).<sup>97</sup> Nor can these be only the righteous or believing dead, since they face the prospect either of life or of condemnation (v. 29). Indeed, this

94 Other solutions, such as that supported by A. C. Thiselton (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NIGTC, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000] 1242–9), namely that people are being baptised 'for the sake of' their dead (Christian) relatives, so that they can be reunited with them when they too die, also seem too dominated by the concern to align this practice with Christian orthodoxy. And J. R. White's recent attempt to further Murphy-O'Connor's suggestion that 'the dead' here are the apostles, Paul included, seems even less convincing as a reading of the text (J. R. White, "Baptized on Account of the Dead": The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in its Context', *JBL* 116 [1997] 487–99).

95 R. E. DeMaris, 'Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology', *JBL* 114 (1995) 661–82, here 680. His suggestion that this rite functioned as a means of ensuring that community members made a safe transition from the world of the living to that of the dead, however, probably underplays the role of baptism as an initiatory rite. Cf. Taylor, 'Baptism for the Dead?'

96 Nor, curiously, does Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*. Selwyn, on the other hand, treats the passage at some length, arguing that it does imply that the 'message of salvation . . . would reach the dead and secure entrance for such as believed it into eternal life', though he does not see this as the message or concern of 1 Pet 4.6 (*First Epistle*, 346–54).

97 So, e.g., C. K. Barrett (*The Gospel According to St John* [London: SPCK, 1955] 218–19) sees v. 25 as a reference to the spiritually dead but vv. 28–9 as referring to the physically dead.

passage forms a significant parallel to the thought of 1 Pet 4.6, on the 'already dead' interpretation.

Post-NT Christian texts also indicate an interest in the idea of the gospel being proclaimed to the dead.<sup>98</sup> While Dalton connects 1 Peter with primitive Christian eschatology, distancing it from these 'later speculations', the widely accepted dating of 1 Peter late in the first century makes the early context less plausible and the later connections more likely. The *Gospel of Peter*, for example, which most scholars date to the second half of the second century, possibly earlier,<sup>99</sup> records a dialogue between a voice from heaven and the cross which emerges from Christ's tomb following three men coming out from it (two having entered): 'And they heard a voice out of the heavens crying, "Have you preached to those who sleep?", and from the cross there was heard the answer, "Yes"' (*Gos. Pet.* 10.41–2).<sup>100</sup> The Shepherd of Hermas refers to the apostles and teachers who 'having fallen asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, preached also to those who had fallen asleep before them (τοῖς προκεκοιμημένοις) and themselves gave to them the seal of the kerygma (τὴν σφραγίδα τοῦ κηρύγματος)' (*Sim.* 9.16.5). There are clearly differences between these various depictions and that in 1 Pet 4.6, and there may be no direct link between them. Nonetheless, these traditions indicate that the idea of the gospel being proclaimed among the dead was by no means alien to the thought-world of early Christianity.<sup>101</sup>

### Conclusions

This article has not sought to deal with every significant aspect of 1 Pet 4.6. I have not, for example, discussed the meaning of the balancing phrases κατὰ ἄνθρώπους and κατὰ θεόν, partly because they are not especially crucial for the arguments pursued here, and partly because there is now widespread agreement that they refer to the two spheres or perspectives from which judgment on the one hand and life on the other emerge: according to human standards/according to God's standard.<sup>102</sup> Nor have I discussed in detail whether 'the dead' the author has in view should be assumed to be a universal and all-encompassing category or one restricted to certain of the dead, though the universal scope implied in v. 5 would speak clearly for the former. I have focused rather on what seems to me a

98 See further Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*; Taylor, 'Baptism for the Dead?'

99 J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 150.

100 Quoted from Elliott, *ibid.*, 156–7.

101 For further evidence in support of this point, see Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, who argues that the general principle that joining the saved community was only possible before death 'was slow to develop and not universally accepted in the Christian movement's first four hundred years . . . Many early Christians were able to retain their sense of God's justice while allowing for the possibility of posthumous salvation for non-Christians' (p. 3).

102 See e.g. Michaels, *1 Peter*, 238; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 288; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 734–9.

key issue concerning this verse, namely whether it should be taken to refer to a proclamation of the gospel made to people already dead at the time or one made to people (specifically Christians) who have since died.

Despite its current popularity, especially in recent commentaries in English, there are reasons why the view proposed by Selwyn and Dalton is implausible. A crucial weakness concerns a central and key feature of this viewpoint, that 1 Peter responds to an issue of anxiety similar to that addressed in 1 Thessalonians, an issue arising in the context of primitive Christian eschatology and concerning the deaths of some Christians before the parousia. This is implausible as a background for 1 Pet 4.6 firstly because the letter shows no clear signs of such a concern and secondly because the letter can hardly have been early enough for such a scenario to be imaginable.

On the other hand, the arguments raised against the view that the verse describes a proclamation of the gospel made to 'the dead' are by no means as decisive as is often suggested. There remain some difficulties in construing the Greek in this way, but there do for the Selwyn–Dalton view also. And the 'already dead' view, as I have labelled it, can be seen as plausible within the context of 1 Peter, the NT and early Christianity more widely.

Within the context of the letter, and of 4.1–6 more specifically, there are good grounds for regarding 4.6 as providing a supporting explanation which relates to the preceding verse; thus there is a contextual reason why a comment on the (still enigmatic) proclamation to the dead, as well as the living, should be apposite. And other verses in 1 Peter, which emphasise the impartiality of God's judgment, show optimism about the possibility of the Gentiles' conversion, or reveal a marked reticence about specifying the fate of those who are currently unbelievers, also add to the picture within which the 'already dead' interpretation of 4.6 may make sense. The description of the proclamation to the spirits in 3.18–22, while it is rightly seen to depict a different event from that in view in 4.6, adds further plausibility to the notion that the author of 1 Peter may conceive of proclamations being made other than in the realm of living humanity.

Elsewhere in the NT, despite the comments of Dalton and Achtemeier, there are indications of precisely the views that would be congruent with the 'already dead' interpretation of 1 Pet 4.6: the picture of the dead in Hades awaiting judgment, the possibility of post-death initiation and salvation. It may be that the very picture suggested here for 1 Pet 4.6 is also implied in John 5.25–9. Various ideas about a proclamation to the dead are also present in a variety of early Christian writings, adding further plausibility to the idea that they are reflected here in 1 Peter.

There are, then, good reasons to reject or at least to doubt the 'since died' view, and reasons why the 'already dead' view is a good deal more plausible on historical and exegetical grounds than Dalton and others suggest. Elliott is no doubt

right to point out that the idea of a universal proclamation of the gospel to the dead has been favoured for 'dogmatic' reasons,<sup>103</sup> but he fails to note that dogmatic convictions have also influenced the rejection of this reading of the verse. While liberals may be inclined to favour the interpretation that opens the possibility of post-death conversion and universal salvation, other interpreters may object to this reading precisely because it appears to countenance these possibilities. In any case, this verse hardly provides secure ground for a theology of human salvation; it neither specifies clearly the extent of the proclamation to the dead nor declares the outcome of it, and as in the case of 1 Cor 15.29 remains in many ways enigmatic, as Brox has rightly stressed.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, on the 'already dead' reading the verse is more of an enigma than on Dalton's reading, the resulting clarity of which is an attractive feature. If the verse does refer to an announcement of the gospel to the human dead there remains so much we do not know: who made the announcement and where, to how many of the dead, and with what result? But given that the NT and other early Christian literature gives us so many glimpses of diverse and (to us) enigmatic beliefs and practices – 1 Cor 15.29 being a key example – the fact that so much remains mysterious on the reading of 1 Pet 4.6 defended here may in fact be another point in its favour.

103 Elliott, *1 Peter*, 731: 'The interest in a possible correspondence between 3:19 and 4:6 appears motivated more by dogmatic than by exegetical concerns; namely, a desire to find here a biblical expression of the universality of salvation . . . .'

104 Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief*, 197–8: 'Man steht zunächst recht ratlos vor der Aussage über die Predigt an die Toten und noch viel ratloser also vor den vielen Erklärungen, die sie gefunden hat . . . Fast alles bleibt an ihr unklar, bis auf den Punkt, daß eine Predigt an Tote gemeint ist, die nicht vor, sondern nach deren Tod stattfand. Wer wann gepredigt hat, wo gepredigt etc., bleibt ungesagt. Wir kennen, im Unterschied zu Ps-Petrus und seinen Lesern, nicht die zugehörigen frühchristlichen Vorstellungen.'