

IS JAMES BEILBY'S POSTMORTEM OPPORTUNITY A HELPFUL APOLOGETIC
AGAINST THE PROBLEM OF THE UNEVANGELIZED
FOR THE EXCLUSIVIST?

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December 21, 2022

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Introduction

Postmortem opportunity (PMO)¹ is the theory that, after death, some (or all) who were not followers of Jesus in this life will be presented with the gospel and then have a chance to choose to become a follower of him. PMO is an area that has not received a great amount of attention recently, when compared with, say, universalism.² This could be because the Bible does not speak directly to a PMO for salvation. Or, given the Inclusivist views (defined below), there could just be less need for such a position. However, PMO potentially has apologetic value, and so the theory is worth a closer look. Consider, for instance, the criticism that God is unfair in allowing those who never hear the gospel to die and go to hell. If we as his followers care about the living lost who are en route to hell—and the evangelical emphasis on missions³ would certainly bear this out—then how much more would God who has the ability to make the gospel known to all people immediately care about them?

This paper looks at James Beilby's book, *Postmortem Opportunity*, to address two questions. First, can an exclusivist consistently hold to Beilby's version of PMO? The apologetic value of this, along with related issues, will be discussed below. And second, is Beilby's PMO a helpful apologetic tool? In the end, I conclude that *some* exclusivists may find PMO a helpful apologetic tool, though, as expanded on below, not all exclusivists will be comfortable with this

¹ Also called “postmortem evangelism,” “postmortem encounter,” and “divine perseverance.” In this paper the term “postmortem opportunity” will be used consistently.

² Gabriel Fackre and Clark Pinnock are two theologians who incorporate a form of postmortem opportunity.

³ Consider the money, time, and effort Southern Baptist churches alone send to International Mission Board, not to mention other missions sending and equipping organizations, such as Pioneers and Send International to name two.

approach. Ultimately, however, I find that a version of Molinism provides a better answer to the problem of evil than Bielby's PMO, while also having greater biblical support.

The Apologetic Problem Postmortem Opportunity is Attempting to Solve

The problem of evil has a long history. If God is all-good *and* all-powerful, then why is there still so much evil? An offshoot of this question is the problem of the unevangelized. Why should someone who has never even had the opportunity to respond to the gospel be damned when they die?

Various positions have sought answers to this problem. Some, such as Inclusivism, have removed the need for explicit gospel knowledge, while others (Universalists) claim God will save everyone in the end. Others, still, maintain that the problem is only *alleged*—yes, some are not saved, but God is still sovereign. Though, as Clark Pinnock notes, none of these positions are completely satisfying.⁴ Because even if one of these positions turns out to be true, they still “pit access against urgency. If we say there is equal access to salvation for all, including the unevangelized, we will be charged with eliminating the urgency of mission. But if we preserve the urgency, people will protest that this means millions will go to hell without any chance to avoid it.”⁵

This is the place Beilby's book, *Postmortem Opportunity*, sits in. “My first goal,” he writes, “is apologetic in nature. I want to provide what I think is a good answer to the question of the destiny of the unevangelized.”⁶ The central question of this paper is: As an exclusivist, is Beilby's theory convincing? And further, can it be useful apologetic against the problem of evil?

⁴ Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 150.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ James Beilby, *Postmortem Opportunity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2021), ix.

Defining Terms

Before moving into Beilby's theory, it is important to define a few terms. Beilby distinguishes between "Exclusivist" and "Restrictivist," the former requires "explicit faith in Jesus Christ" while the latter "denies universal accessibility of the gospel."⁷ In this paper, only the term "Exclusivist" will be used, and it will be defined as salvation "available only through personal knowledge of and commitment to Jesus Christ."⁸ What is often implied or stated in most Exclusivist positions⁹ is that any gospel opportunities will end at death. If the Exclusivist is holding to this claim in response to Universalism (which often posits some version of postmortem salvation¹⁰), then this is understandable. However, few Exclusivists specifically address this boundary (death) apart from defending against other larger views that incorporate it.¹¹ Inclusivism, for the purpose of this paper, holds to the necessity of Christ's atonement, but allows for salvation to come from either general revelation or other religions.¹² In other words, Christ's atonement is ontologically but not epistemically necessary.

⁷ From a private email correspondence with the author. He does define these terms in *Postmortem Opportunity* (page 23), but he is not as clear in his book.

⁸ Robert B. Stewart, "Can Only One Religion Be True? Considering This Question" in *Can Only One Religion Be True?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 4. Furthermore, the objective of this paper is to use the 'least common denominator' of what it means to be an Exclusivists. As such, this paper does not separate "Church Exclusivists" from "Gospel Exclusivists," etc.

⁹ It is important to note that there are quite a few varieties of Exclusivist positions. See Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation*, and Christopher Morgan, *Faith Comes by Hearing*.

¹⁰ Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 56–57, 147, 267–71, 368–69, 628, 905–06, 955, 1004.

¹¹ Ronald Nash is one who has addressed this directly, and he puts the burden of proof back on its adherents, as there is no direct Scriptural support for postmortem salvation. See his chapter "Restrictivism," in John Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1995), 134.

¹² Stewart, *Can Only One Religion Be True?*, 5.

As Beilby and many others have noted, the three-fold paradigm (Exclusive-Inclusive-Pluralistic) is incomplete and not always helpful.¹³ If his own views were put into this model, Beilby's PMO view would "end up in the Exclusivist camp."¹⁴ This is important to understand, because throughout *Postmortem Opportunity* he seems to shy away from this end, almost appearing to favor some form of Inclusivism. He writes: "While I end up rejecting this claim, I find Inclusivism to be a much better answer to the problem of the destiny of the unevangelized than either Restrictivism or Universal Opportunity."¹⁵ While Universalism posits that all will be saved, Beilby defines Universal Opportunity as all "in this life" will receive a salvific opportunity via "special revelation."¹⁶ He goes on to describe his view as an "amendment to Inclusivism."¹⁷ Though, at other points, he clearly states he is not an Inclusivist (or Universalist): "I believe that implicit faith is a response to (prevenient) grace and is such that a person might embrace a genuine saving relationship with God if it were offered to them [sic]. But I reject the idea that implicit faith by itself is sufficient for God to grant salvation to a person."¹⁸ And also: "I submit that one who responds to general revelation with implicit faith but fails to respond to Jesus Christ himself with explicit faith, is not saved."¹⁹ As is often the case with difficult

¹³ Stewart, *Can Only One Religion Be True?*, 5; Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 47; Morgan and Peterson, *Faith Comes by Hearing*, 19.

¹⁴ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* On the same page, he also notes: "I do not see my position as diametrically opposed to Inclusivism." Statements like this give pause because it is not always clear about what parts of Inclusivism he is referring to.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 262.

apologetic issues, there is usually an emotional component. Beilby recounts his own “coming back to faith”²⁰ during his college years, and the role a possible postmortem opportunity played in that. While he ultimately fits into the Exclusivist camp, part of his own crisis involved not being able to tolerate a form of that broad view.²¹ Perhaps this explains why he sometimes seems to favor Inclusivism while holding Exclusivist-leaning views.

Beilby’s version of Postmortem Opportunity

As noted above, Beilby is not a Universalist. And so his theory of PMO does not assume that *all* who die will ultimately follow Jesus or even simply be presented with a chance to follow him. Instead, it is only for those who have never heard (or understood) or for those who *could* never have heard (or understood).²² He illustrates this with six different personas. Each would be candidates for PMO.

Six Personas

First is George. He represents a mentally mature person who is geographically isolated from the Gospel. This could be someone today living in a remote part of the world, or someone who lived before Christ. Second is Baby Anna. Unlike George, she may be around believers, but she has not yet grown into the mental capacity to understand.²³ Third is Sam, a person with

²⁰ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 78–79. As illustrated below, Beilby defines “have never heard” not just auditorily, but also those who have not had the ability to hear (for reasons such as mental development or social/mental health).

²³ In his Christianity Today review of *Postmortem Opportunity*, Rhyne Putman makes an interesting comparison between Beilby’s theological method and his own, noting that the same way Beilby came to his PMO conclusion, Putman came to age-of-accountability conclusion. What both theories have in common is that neither is explicitly taught in Scripture.

cognitive disabilities that is unable to understand the message of salvation.²⁴ Additionally, he notes, while Anna and Sam may have “heard” the gospel in an audible way (cf. Rom. 10:17), they certainly would not have comprehended it. The three above make up the class of “unevangelized.”

The final three personas also experience barriers to the gospel, but they are what he calls “pseudoevangelized.” Kunta Kinte (the fictional character from the novel *Roots*) has heard the gospel, or a version of it, but it has come from slave-owners who have perverted it for their own ends. In other words, while he may have heard all the right words (or most of them), he *understands* these words based on the context of who is delivering them. That is, Jesus is not one who has come to save the lost (the true gospel) but is the one empowering his persecutors. Similar to Kunta Kinte is Misha. She also has a warped view of God, but it is primarily from those who claim to follow him. For instance, the God of the Bible may be true, but whenever she meets (and begins to trust) one of his followers, they take advantage of her and abuse her, and so as a survival mechanism, she has put up a perpetual defense against the message of the gospel, which she associates with her abusers. Finally, there is Rapunzel. She has heard a good version of the gospel by good people. And it is likely she will become a Jesus follower, until, through some unfortunate incident, she dies before she can make that decision.²⁵ Beilby admits that these last three (the “pseudoevangelized”) are “complex.”²⁶ One may add to that “controversial,” too.

²⁴ Beilby lists Sam as a separate category from Baby Anna primarily to draw attention to the need within the church to see these people as more than simply disabled. He leans on Amos Yong’s work (*Theology and Down’s Syndrome*, 2007).

²⁵ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 5–13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14. While he provides example cases of how someone can be pseudoevangelized, he acknowledges the difficulty of marking of boundaries for each (such as when one moves from pseudoevangelized to evangelized), but he does not provide any suggestion for what this boundary should be.

Beilby's PMO Argument

Stated plainly, because God desires all to be saved and since not everyone will have the chance in this life, God offers a PMO.²⁷ This happens somewhere after the moment of death and before judgment.²⁸ Beilby presents an abductive argument in two parts. The first is an overview of PMO itself, and the second is PMO in relation to Inclusivism.²⁹

1. God desires that all people be saved. (Premise)
2. Being saved requires having an opportunity to be saved. (Premise)
3. Therefore, God desires that all people receive an opportunity to be saved. (IBE³⁰ from 1, 2)
4. There are some who do not receive an opportunity to be saved in this life. (Premise)
5. There are no good, all-things-considered reasons to think that death is the end of salvific opportunity. (Premise)
6. Therefore, God desires that those who do not receive a premortem opportunity to be saved will receive a Postmortem Opportunity. (IBE from 3, 4, 5)
7. There are no good, all-things-considered reasons to think that God's desire to provide a Postmortem Opportunity will be thwarted or overridden. (Premise)
8. Therefore, we have good reason to believe that God will provide a Postmortem Opportunity to those who do not receive premortem opportunity. (IBE from 6, 7)³¹

Beilby acknowledges that his fifth point above is the most contentious. He provides scriptural support for this (below). And because of Beilby's own leanings, he has provided an argument that separates PMO from Inclusivism:

1. Implicit faith is salvific in the sense of being a favorable response to God's general revelation and prevenient grace.

²⁷ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 78–79.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁹ As noted above, Beilby is really not an Inclusivist, but he seems to lean in that direction from time to time. And so this second argument is made to make the distinction between PMO and Inclusivism clear.

³⁰ IBE stands for inference to the best explanation.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

2. But a favorable response to God’s general revelation is not sufficient by itself for salvation.
3. Consequently, God gives those who have merely implicit faith a Postmortem Opportunity to respond to the gospel with explicit faith and relational commitment.
4. Implicit faith that refuses to become explicit when given the opportunity is not salvific.³²

In premise 1 of his second argument above, he uses the term “salvific” when describing “implicit faith.” There are two important notes here. First, he never gives a concise definition to what he means by implicit faith, but he describes it as coming through general revelation and the Holy Spirit.³³ One gets the impression that, for Beilby, implicit faith is something like “almost there but not quite.” The Holy Spirit *is* at work, and God’s creation is evidently pointing a person beyond it to some higher intelligence, but at the same time, the person never gets to the specificity of the gospel as revealed in the Bible. Second, he uses premise 2 to further define what he means by salvific. While general revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit are helpful when it comes to salvation (“salvific”), they do not replace the gospel, hence, the PMO. He clarifies this in his fourth point.

A Sample of Beilby’s Scripture Analysis for PMO

PMO is not found in the Bible—something Beilby is quick to note. But neither, for that matter, is infant salvation³⁴ or the age of accountability.³⁵ The point is not that two wrongs make

³² Beilby, *Postmortem*, 263.

³³ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁴ Ronald Nash, “Restrictivism,” in John Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard*, 118.

³⁵ Rhyne Putman’s review of *Postmortem Opportunity* on Christianity Today online.

a right, but that Exclusivists do hold to some theological beliefs that come more from inference than exegesis. Below is a sampling of the biblical passages Beilby interacts with.

He begins first with Scriptural objections to PMO. The text “most commonly cited” against PMO-type views is Heb. 9:27:³⁶ “And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment.”³⁷ He first highlights Millard Erickson’s objection. In Erickson’s own words, the passage “seems to assume an *invariable* transition from one to the other, with no mention of any additional opportunities for acceptance.”³⁸ Next, Beilby adds Ronald Nash’s objection. Nash writes, “the judgment of each human reflects that person’s standing with God at the moment of death.”³⁹ A straightforward, plain reading of the text could lend itself to this. But concluding this dogmatically, as if the text requires it, seems to go too far. Philip Hughes writes that “the point our author [of Hebrews] is making is that men when they die do not die more than once,” which is why the rest of the sentence (found in 9:28) uses the picture of Christ dying once and that being sufficient.⁴⁰ Donald Guthrie is more specific, noting that “the words *and after death that comes judgment* are not intended to imply that judgment follows immediately after death, but rather that judgment is to be expected subsequent to death.”⁴¹ Beilby’s reasoning is in line with this. The primary point of the passage is not that there is no time between death and

³⁶ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 108.

³⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the New Living Translation (NLT).

³⁸ Millard Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved?*, 173 (Beilby, *Postmortem*, 108).

³⁹ Ronald Nash, *When a Baby Dies*, 43 (Ibid., 108).

⁴⁰ Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 387.

⁴¹ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 199.

judgment, but that death only happens once. “If this text is an argument against any particular position or belief,” writes Beilby, “it is reincarnation, not Postmortem Opportunity.”⁴²

Following this, he looks at Luke 16:19–31, Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus. This is potentially problematic because it presents a picture of the afterlife, but one with no mention of PMO. Siding with N. T. Wright and Robert Yarbrough, Beilby sees this not as a teaching about the afterlife (and so the fixed status at death), but about money and our responsibility in *this* life.⁴³ Jesus may not be teaching about the afterlife here, but it does not mean that the details he mentions about the afterlife are irrelevant or wrong. Along with Millard Erickson, Beilby agrees that secondary details within parables are not irrelevant a priori.⁴⁴ So do these secondary details present a challenge to Beilby’s PMO? He provides two reasons why they do not. First, the passage tells us that one cannot cross from hell to heaven or vice versa.⁴⁵ And second, the idea that one can see into heaven, notes Beilby, is not biblical but middle-age mythology.⁴⁶ Looking again at the parable, we know that Lazarus is in heaven, and so he must have had access to the gospel. And we also know that the rich man knew Lazarus in this life. So, it is not a stretch to assume that the rich man had access to the gospel. As a result, the rich man would not have qualified for Beilby’s PMO.⁴⁷ This is Beilby’s position, and it makes sense.

⁴² Beilby, *Postmortem*, 109.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Though, it does seem hard to understand why Jesus would never have referenced something as important as PMO, in Luke 16, or anywhere else for that matter.

Next is Luke 13:25 with Jesus' warning about the finality of the closed door: "When the master of the house has locked the door, it will be too late. You will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Lord, open the door for us!' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'" This is not a threat to PMO, says Beilby, but is instead an argument against "infinite opportunities to be saved" and the belief that a "superficial acquaintance with Jesus...is sufficient for salvation."⁴⁸ William Hendrickson, while not discussing PMO specifically, sees this passage as a picture "of the final judgment as it affects the lost."⁴⁹ If this is the case, and it seems to be, then Beilby's PMO can still work, and Luke 13:25 would not pose a threat to it.

The final objection this paper⁵⁰ will look at 2 Cor. 5:10: "For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body." Conversing again with Nash—who contends that, based on this passage, "physical death marks the boundary of human opportunity"⁵¹—Beilby replies that this conclusion depends on who Paul is talking to in the passage. If it is to all people, this is not a problem, because the "passage implies only that judgment includes premortem factors and to

⁴⁸ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 114.

⁴⁹ William Hendrickson, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 707.

⁵⁰ Beilby walks through several other passages, including 2 Cor. 6:2, Psa. 49, Rom. 1:18–20, and Rev. 20:11–15 (Beilby, *Postmortem*, 117–31).

⁵¹ Ronald Nash, "Is There Salvation After Death? The Answer to Postmortem Evangelism," *Christian Research Journal* 27, no. 4 (2004), 5, quoted in Beilby, *Postmortem*, 115.

claim that there could be no postmortem factors is an argument from silence.”⁵² But if Paul is speaking to believers only (as Beilby believes), then the issue is not about salvation but about rewards.⁵³ This seems right. In the passage, Paul writes that we will each “receive” whatever we “deserve.” If he were talking about salvation, then language about merit would be out of place. Paul Barnett also understands Paul to be talking to believers.⁵⁴ He sees that moment (“standing before Christ to be judged”) as “the occasion of the general resurrection of the dead” which “will bring the present aeon to an end.”⁵⁵ That is, the judgment referred to here is not something that will happen immediately after one dies (unless one’s death happens to coincide exactly with Jesus’ second coming) but would come sometime after. Philip Hughes again comments on this passage. The point Paul was making is that this reality should sober believers, knowing that we too will be held accountable for our actions.⁵⁶ The objection to Beilby’s theory based on 2 Cor. 5:10 (that there is no time for a PMO) can go both ways.

Next, he turns his attention to passages that could be taken in support of PMO. Here there are only three passages. First is Eph. 4:8–10:

That is why the Scriptures say, “When he ascended to the heights, he led a crowd of captives and gave gifts to his people.” Notice that it says “he ascended.” This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world. And the same one who descended is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens, so that he might fill the entire universe with himself.

⁵² Beilby, *Postmortem*, 115.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 274.

⁵⁵ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 115.

⁵⁶ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 180.

How is this passage a candidate for PMO support? Beilby is keying off the idea of Christ's preaching to the dead (further elaborated in the following passages). So the logic goes: If Christ is preaching to the dead, then there must be some kind of postmortem opportunity.

Looking at the Eph. 4 passage, Paul's picture of ascension (the metaphor of Christ conquering death and sin) is "relatively clear."⁵⁷ The issue comes in with Paul's editorial comment about the *descension*. While most conservative scholars follow Calvin's understanding of this being a reference to the incarnation, Beilby suggests that this would not make sense to the Ephesians.⁵⁸ Instead, taking into account their three-fold cosmology, one would not "descend" to the earth (where people live their lives), rather, "the phrase 'lower, earthly regions' was commonly used to refer to the underworld or Hades."⁵⁹ Though, "the point being made in Ephesians 4 is not soteriological, but christological," and so concludes Beilby: "what on the surface looks like a promising text for Postmortem Opportunity seems somewhat less promising after close analysis."⁶⁰

Next, he looks at 1 Pet. 3:18–20:

Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit. So he went and preached to the spirits in prison—those who disobeyed God long

⁵⁷ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 141.

⁵⁸ Harold W. Hoehner in *Ephesians* takes the view that "descension" is of Christ to the earth. A. Skevington Wood in "Ephesians" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* can see both options as viable, "descension" as the incarnation and as Christ's descent into Hades.

⁵⁹ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 142. He leans on Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* (Baker, 2010); C.E. Arnold, *Ephesians, Power, and Magic* (Cambridge, 1989); and W. Hall Harris, *The Descent of Christ* (Baker, 1998), which walks through patristic thinkers who had a similar understanding.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 142–43.

ago when God waited patiently while Noah was building his boat. Only eight people were saved from drowning in that terrible flood.

Here Peter speaks of Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison who were disobedient during the days of Noah. This is a very difficult passage to interpret.⁶¹ Beilby lays out four possible interpretations, ultimately preferring the last one. The first interpretation understands "he went and preached" to be the preaching of *Enoch* not Jesus. The primary problem with this view is its lacking textual evidence.⁶² The second option is that Noah himself, during the time he lived, was the one doing the preaching. Beilby disregards this, due to the "well known doctrinal formula of crucifixion, death, descent, resurrection, and ascension" which "mak[es] it very difficult to see the descent as anything other than the descent of Christ into Hades."⁶³ In his commentary on 1 Peter, Wayne Grudem sees this second option as a possibility, given the implied similarities between Peter reader's context and Noah's context.⁶⁴ On the whole, though, this reading feels forced. For instance, was it Noah or God's Spirit that preached while Noah was building the ark? And why was there no mention of any of this preaching in Genesis 6–9?

The third option Beilby evaluates is that Jesus preached to the sinful angels. This approach, Beilby notes, is "probably the most common among contemporary exegetes and interpreters."⁶⁵ Edwin Blum is one who favors this view, believing that "the best explanation is

⁶¹ Terrance Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 221. Beilby admits the same, pointing his readers to a slew of others who have already done the work: *Ibid.*, 144n19.

⁶² Beilby, *Postmortem*, 145.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶⁴ Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 160–161.

⁶⁵ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 147.

that the ‘spirits’ (*pneumata*) are fallen angels,” though he does not give a reason for why he believes this way.⁶⁶ Beilby sees a few problems with this view, though. First, Peter’s word for “spirits” is sometimes used for humans, not angels.⁶⁷ This, to Beilby, opens the question that it could be dead humans Jesus is preaching to. Grudem agrees here, that these in question “must be understood to be human spirits, not angelic spirits”⁶⁸ Beilby lists other problems he sees with this interpretation: “this view forces an awkward interpretation of the word for ‘preached’” which he notes “is consistently used to refer to evangelistic preaching;”⁶⁹ this preaching would have only been proclaimed to *some* of the angels, though “their sin is long past and they have already received judgment;”⁷⁰ and finally, per Beilby, this pattern “ignores the fairly clear...christological formula of crucifixion, death, descent, resurrection, and ascension present in 1 Peter 3:18–22.”⁷¹ Another objection to add to this would simply be: Why would Christ go and preach to the angels at all? Contra this view, Simon Kistemaker believes that these “spirits” are not human souls but are “supernatural beings,” which he sees is more consistent with other passages, such as Rev. 20:7 and 2 Peter 2:4.⁷²

⁶⁶ Blum, Edwin, “1 Peter,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, volume 12, edited by Frank E. Graebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 242.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Grudem, *1 Peter*, 211.

⁶⁹ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 147.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 148.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Simon Kistemaker, *James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1987), 142–43.

Beilby then moves on to the interpretation of 1 Pet. 3:18–20 that he prefers: Jesus was preaching to the dead in Hades.⁷³ He presents four reasons in support of this view: this interpretation has “Jesus as the one doing the preaching, not Enoch or Noah;”⁷⁴ the word for ‘preached’ (ἐκήρυξεν) becomes more natural;⁷⁵ “the descent of Christ into Hades fits the Christological formula perfectly;”⁷⁶ and this view is consistent with Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:24).⁷⁷

Objections to this view raise the natural question: Why would Peter single out just those during Noah’s time for Christ’s preaching? Beilby notes C. E. B. Cranfield’s reply that these people represented the worst of the worst, and so *a fortiori*, if they can be saved, anyone can.⁷⁸ A second objection highlights Peter’s use of a form of κηρυσσω (passing on information) in 1 Peter 3:19 instead of ευαγγελιζω (a proclamation of the gospel). But Beilby notes that κηρυσσω has precedent for presenting the gospel (“dozens of times in the New Testament”).⁷⁹ And finally, other objections surround the problem of the second chance. But Beilby notes that these

⁷³ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 148–49.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The First Epistle of Peter* (London: CSM, 1950), 85, cited in Beilby, 150.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

objections are just a misunderstanding of his version of PMO.⁸⁰ There is one final problem that will be treated below, together with Beilby's last support passage.

The final passage Beilby looks at that could potentially support PMO is 1 Pet. 4:6. Here Peter, discussing the coming judgment, says, "this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does" (ESV). Beilby looks at three options for who the "dead" in the text are. First, the dead could be the "spiritual dead." Per Beilby, however, this view does not work as long as *καὶ* means "even" (as the ESV and NIV translate it). If Peter is already talking about the spiritually dead then the *καὶ* "makes no sense," writes Beilby, "for it would seem that the spiritually dead would be exactly the people who would need to receive the gospel."⁸¹ Beilby does not elaborate on his reason for why "even those who are dead" "makes no sense" to him to be the spiritually dead, but if he is reading the first clause ("this is why the gospel was preached") as referring already to the spiritually dead, then adding "even to those who are dead" could seem redundant. Therefore, it appears he's seeing *καὶ* as providing additional information, namely, that the dead cannot be the spiritually dead but rather the physically dead. Both Kistemaker and Grudem call into question the past tense usage of "was preached," with Grudem noting that "preaching to the spiritually dead was still happening when Peter was writing; it was not something confined to the past."⁸²

⁸⁰ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 149–151. Also: "Let me say unequivocally that if the theory of Postmortem Opportunity amounts to a second chance to those that have had a viable first chance, then it should end up on the scrap heap of theological theories. There is no second chance" (218).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁸² Grudem, *1 Peter*, 172; Kistemaker, *James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude*, 163.

The second interpretive option Beilby offers for 1 Peter 4:6 is that the dead were believers in this life who have since died. He spends most of his time focused on the NIV's "egregious . . . overstepping" of adding "now" so that the verse reads "even to those who are *now* dead."⁸³ For Beilby this betrays the NIV translator's bias that there is no postmortem opportunity. But if one were to remove the NIV's "now," does the passage support the view that the dead were believers in this life? Grudem, as with the NIV translators, understands Peter to be talking about believers who have died.⁸⁴ But he does not see a need to add the "now." Going back to the beginning of verse six, "The word *this*," writes Grudem, "refers back to the subject of the previous sentence, the final judgment."⁸⁵ So verse six could be rephrased to read something like "Because of the coming or final judgment, this is why the gospel was preached, even to believers who have since died." The logic being, just because a believer dies does not mean he or she has not been saved from the ultimate death, Hell. Edwin Blum also agrees, leaning more into the context of persecution that Peter's readers would be experiencing.

The Good News was proclaimed (*euengelistiche*) to those (Christians) who are now dead (*nekrois*, same word as in v.5). Even though pagans might condemn Christians and put them to death in the realm of the flesh (*sarki*), yet in God's judgment there will be a reversal. Christians will live (*zosi*) in a new realm—namely, in the spiritual realm.⁸⁶

The last interpretation, and the one Beilby appears to favor, is that Peter is simply talking about those who have physically died.⁸⁷ These are not believers. Beilby counters the belief (such

⁸³ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 152.

⁸⁴ Grudem, *1 Peter*, 170.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Blum, Edwin, "1 Peter," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, volume 12, edited by Frank E. Graebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 245.

as Grudem's⁸⁸) that this would offer the dead a "second chance" opportunity, because, as outlined above, his version of PMO is for those who have not heard (or been able to understand). Beilby goes on to write that this view "offers a justification for God's judgment of the living and the dead."⁸⁹ This would mean that God is not just in sending a sinner to hell *unless* they are presented with an opportunity to accept God's grace. But does a person go to hell because they did not accept God's grace, or because they sinned against him?

The view that Peter could be talking about a PMO seems like a stretch. Consider verses four and five: "Of course, your former friends are surprised when you no longer plunge into the flood of wild and destructive things they do. So they slander you. But remember that they will have to face God, who stands ready to judge everyone, both the living and the dead." The very context is that these "former friends" would be presented with the gospel by virtue of the transformed believer's life. As such, if Peter *did* believe in some form of a PMO, it would not be the one Beilby is arguing for, because these unbelievers were (presumably) presented with the gospel during their life.

The lingering problem for using both 1 Peter 3:18-22 and 4:6 as support for the theory of PMO is that neither passage has a clear meaning. Both are highly contested, and, as many commentators will admit, there's nowhere near a clear consensus on what each is teaching.

⁸⁷ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 154. He does not explicitly say this is the view he favors, but it is the only view that works with PMO, and the objections he lists (155-56) are directly counter to this third view.

⁸⁸ Grudem, *1 Peter*, 172.

⁸⁹ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 154.

Looking back at the difficulty of these texts, especially the 1 Peter passages, Beilby writes, “If postmortem salvific opportunity is not ruled out, are these texts anywhere near as difficult?”⁹⁰ Per the slew of other commentators that have written on the 1 Peter passages, the apparent answer is *yes*. Many are not dealing specifically with PMO, and yet, it seems a bit rare to have two commentators agreeing on what these passages are meaning.

Can an Exclusivist consistently hold to Beilby’s Postmortem Opportunity?

Possibly. There are at least five concerns that can be raised by the Exclusivist. The first is the lack of clear Scriptural teaching. Basing doctrine on Scripture is a serious and good guideline.⁹¹ But, as noted above, this is not unprecedented. Many Exclusivists believe in infant salvation and the age of accountability. Of course, an infant who has never heard (or understood) the gospel is not the same as a mentally mature person who has. But it does illustrate the point: for serious issues where we do not have a clear teaching from Scripture, there is precedent for inferring an implied conclusion. However, given that there is not a clear biblical case to be made for PMO, one should treat it cautiously.

The second issue is the commitment to death being the last opportunity for salvation. This is necessarily a nuanced answer, because Scripture never says something as clear as “death is the end of salvific opportunities.” Instead, we have passages like Heb. 9:27 (as discussed above) which tell us that judgment comes after death, not that it comes *immediately* after death with nothing in between. Is this an argument from silence? If one believes that there could be a PMO, then this passage could leave some room for it. But if a PMO is not one’s starting point,

⁹⁰ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 167.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

then it is unlikely this passage would lead one to conclude that there is a time for a PMO in-between death and judgment.

The third issue is that PMO is a minority opinion. This is less about Exclusivism and more about the wisdom of looking to precedent and tradition. Beilby discusses this at some length, dedicating an entire chapter to it.⁹² The early church was a mixed bag on this issue, which could be due to it still developing key bits of theology. Added to that, different eras had different challenges and needs to be discussed. It was not until Augustine, who “cast a long shadow on the Christian church,” that the church largely began to reject any kind of postmortem opportunity.⁹³

The fourth issue is the concern that PMO may become a slippery slope to Universalism. Beilby also writes an entire chapter on this. Per Beilby, Universalism is neither exegetically sound nor in line with his own PMO theory. He believes in the “finality and irrevocability of postmortem decision,” noting that this happens once and God will not continue to provide additional PMOs.⁹⁴ As a result, it is “most likely” there will be some in hell.⁹⁵ To adopt Beilby’s theory of PMO is not to take a step toward Universalism (the belief that all will eventually be saved).

Finally, does believing that God will offer a PMO reduce the urgency of missions? Put another way, should we reduce our emphasis on sharing the message with the lost and just let them qualify for a PMO? As Beilby notes, this misunderstands the purpose of salvation, which is to be with God. “The choice to postpone commitment in this life reveals that what is desired is

⁹² Beilby, *Postmortem*, 168–211.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 317.

not relationship with God, but the eternal benefits that come with being a Christian.” This works for both the believer as well as the would-be-evangelized.⁹⁶ For the believer, it helps clarify that the motivation for evangelism is not to get someone to heaven but to help them have a relationship with God. The sooner one has this relationship, the better their existence will be. For the would-be-evangelized, the same reasoning holds.

In conclusion, most Exclusivists will have a problem with at least one of the above five concerns. However, if one is comfortable with the above implications, then *yes*, one can be an Exclusivist and consistently hold to Beilby’s theory of PMO.

Is Beilby’s PMO a Helpful Apologetic Tool for the Exclusivist?

The answer to this comes down to how one answers these two questions: First, is this theory internally consistent with the apologist’s other views? To hold that death closes off any chances of salvation while making allowance for a postmortem opportunity would clearly not be helpful. (Likewise, to hold unexamined views, such as *why* one believes death marks the final opportunity, is equally unhelpful.) And second, what is the alternative? If one’s answer to the question of ‘What of those who have never heard?’ is underdeveloped, then Beilby’s PMO *may* be a helpful apologetic tool. But there may be better approaches still. Instead of positing a theory with scant scriptural support, would not an approach that both provides a solid apologetic response to the problem of evil while also relying on God’s revealed Word be preferable? One consideration for this is a form of Molinism that relies on God’s middle knowledge. Natural knowledge consists of everything that is logically possible, or all that *could* happen. Free

⁹⁶ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 223. And he quotes Lesslie Newbigin to further make this point: “The deepest motive for mission is simply the desire to be with Jesus where he is, on the frontier between the reign of God and the usurped dominion of the devil.” Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Seasons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 129 (229).

knowledge is all that *will* actually happen (also called foreknowledge). And placed logically in between the two is middle knowledge, or what *would* happen. A biblical example of God’s middle knowledge would be 1 Sam. 23:6–13. In this passage, King Saul, hunting for David, learns he is hiding in the city of Keilah. Once David was aware that Saul knew where he was, he prayed to God for direction, asking specifically if the leaders of Keilah will betray him. And God tells David, “Yes, they will betray you.” As a result, David escapes and Saul does not come to the town and so the leaders do not ever betray him. Commenting on this passage, William Lane Craig notes,

If God’s answers...were taken as simple foreknowledge, we must conclude that his answers were false, since what was predicted did not happen. But if the answers are understood as indications of what would happen under certain circumstances, then they were true and serve as proof of God’s middle knowledge.⁹⁷

There are various strands of Molinism: “Calvinistic Molinists, Arminian Molinists, and Mere Molinists.”⁹⁸ It is the latter which I am suggesting here. Mere Molinism is based on two ideas. First, “humans sometimes have limited libertarian freedom” and “God has middle knowledge.”⁹⁹ In his book, the closest Beilby comes to discussing middle knowledge is what he calls “middle knowledge universal opportunity.”¹⁰⁰ While he himself is not persuaded, he does admit, this theory could “go a long way to providing a satisfactory answer to the problem of the

⁹⁷ William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 132.

⁹⁸ Timothy Stratton, *Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 231.

⁹⁹ Stratton, *Human Freedom*, 239.

¹⁰⁰ While the name is called “universal opportunity,” it really means that all who *would* respond to God are put in a position *to* respond.

destiny of the unevangelized.”¹⁰¹ But for Mere Molinism to be a superior alternative to PMO, it must have a strong biblical basis.

Is Mere Molinism Biblical?

As indicated above, there are two key tenets to Mere Molinism. The first posits that humans sometimes have libertarian free will. Throughout the Bible we see what appears to be human choice. Personifying wisdom, Proverbs 1:23–24 reads: “Come and listen to my counsel. I’ll share my heart with you and make you wise. ‘I called you so often, but you wouldn’t come. I reached out to you, but you paid no attention.’” Jesus speaking to his disciples tells them, “But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted!” Speaking to different churches, Paul writes “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31); and “For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don’t use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love” (Gal. 5:13).

The second tenet of Mere Molinism is that God has middle knowledge. In addition to the 1 Sam. passage above, see Jesus’ comparison between Korazin and Bethsaida to Tyre and Sidon, “For if the miracles I did in you had been done in wicked Tyre and Sidon, their people would have repented of their sins long ago” (Matt 11:21b). William Lane Craig comments on this verse: “Here Jesus himself declares that if his miracles *had been* performed in certain cities which did not in fact repent, they *would have* repented.”¹⁰² Jesus speaking again to his disciples, describes the state of those in the world: “They *would not* be guilty if I had not come and spoken to them. But now they have no excuse for their sin” (John 15:22, emphasis added). When on trial before

¹⁰¹ Beilby, *Postmortem*, 93.

¹⁰² Craig, *Only Wise God*, 132.

Pilot, Jesus responds: “My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers *would* fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36, emphasis added).

When comparing the scriptural support of Beilby’s PMO to the scriptural support for Mere Molinism (that is, both humans sometimes having libertarian freewill and God’s middle knowledge), what stands out is the unambiguous nature of the second set of passages. As a result, we can affirm scriptural support for Mere Molinism much more prevalent than for PMO.

Does Mere Molinism Provide the Exclusivist with a Response to the Problem of Evil?

The long answer to this question could easily fill several books (and then some). But the short answer is *yes*, based on two key reasons. First, neither of the two tenets of Mere Molinism directly contradict the Exclusivist concerns outlined above. As such, adhering to Mere Molinism is not at risk of conflicting with one being an Exclusivist. Second, if God does possess middle knowledge, then he will know who would choose to follow him if presented with an opportunity, and because he is sovereign, he can so orchestrate the world that would allow for those people to have salvific opportunities. This solution alleviates the need to go beyond scripture, as Beilby’s (potentially) does, while providing an apologetic answer to those who never have the opportunity to hear the Gospel.

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